ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

DEC. 22

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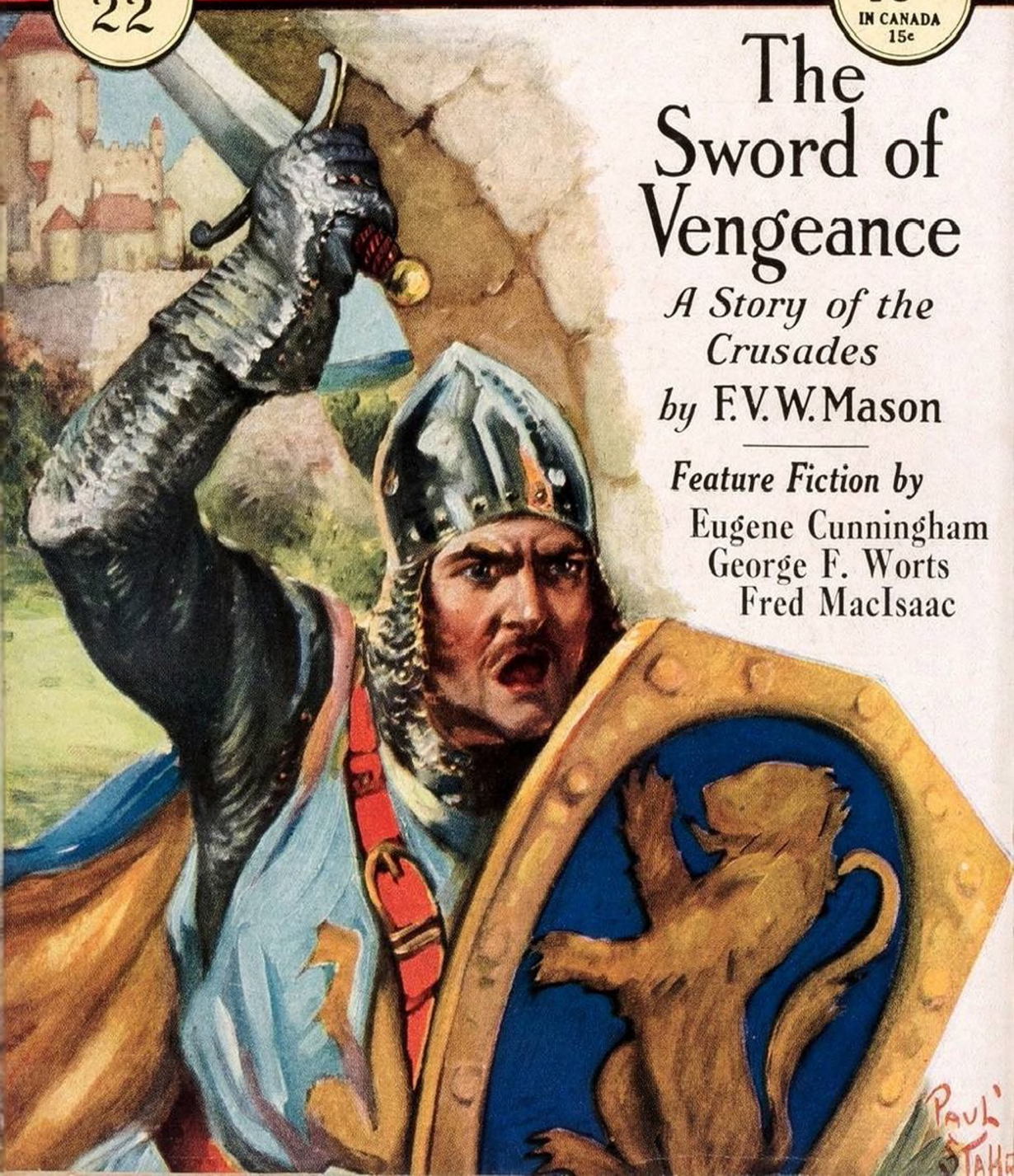

The Sword of Vengeance

A Story of the Crusades

by F.V.W. Mason

Feature Fiction by

Eugene Cunningham
George F. Worts
Fred MacIsaac

PAUL STAHR

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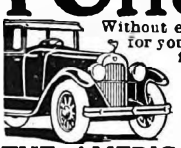

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ALL-STORY WEEKLY

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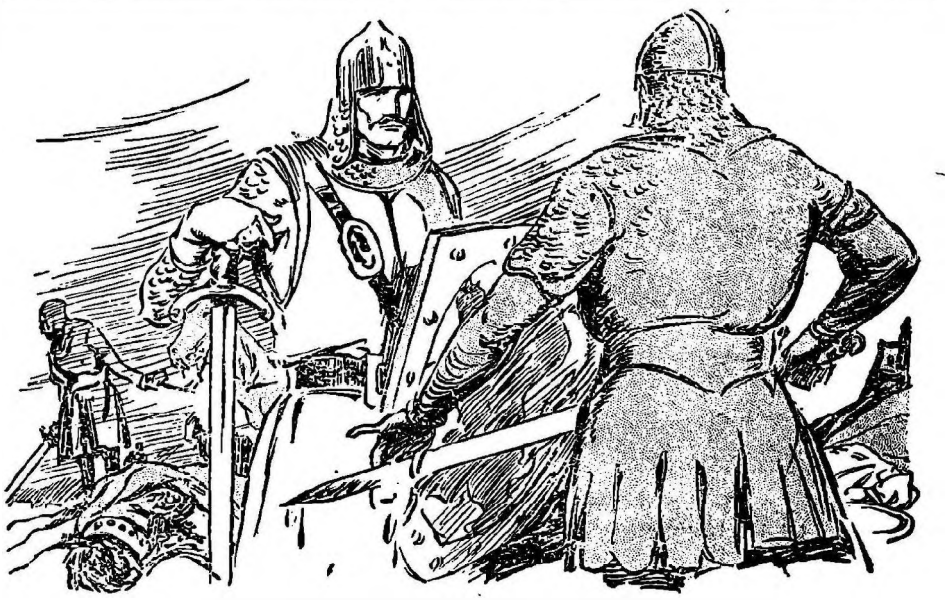


"One knightly thief the less," grunted the veteran

The Sword of Vengeance

The shadow of Saladin's scimitars darkened the ill-fated Kingdom of Jerusalem while Crusaders fought among themselves and Sir Leo rode on a strange and bitter mission

By F. V. W. MASON

Author of "Useless." "The Trail of Mr. Solingen." etc.

CHAPTER I.

A KNIGHTLY CRUSADER.

SIR LEO DE COFFYN pulled up his wiry charger with a jerk, and leaning forward over the scarred leather of his saddle's pointed pommel, listened to the sounds which floated up from the olive-shaded valley below.

A few paces behind him, a long-limbed sergeant, clad in a stained, brown leather suit and sturdy, square-toed boots, followed his master's example. His fleshless, scar-seamed face lit beneath the shadow of his rounded casque as the sound of steel rasping on steel rose above a chorus of muffled cries, which appeared to come from a

low built Arab inn. The yellow mud walls of the hostel glowed brightly in the early morning sunlight.

The sergeant sat silent upon his sturdy brown gelding and fingered the haft of a battle-scarred ax, while his pale gray eyes fixed themselves on Sir Leo's threadbare but muscular shoulders. The knight's light blue surcoat fluttered gently in the morning breeze.

"A small bicker, 'twould seem," murmured the knight at last. "Come, Diccon, perchance there's some small honor to be gained down yonder."

"Some small rap i' the sconce more likely," muttered the sergeant under his breath. "There's a woman in this, I'll wager. Women and woe, woe and women—one and the same," he sighed gustily.

Sir Leo touched the tall gray stallion he bestrode, and setting a peaked steel casque with a nose piece upon his dark red hair, he loosened his long-bladed sword in its chafed and dented scabbard. A smile of anticipation parted his wide, generous mouth as he trotted down the gentle slope to where the inn stood sheltered beneath the lofty limbs of a cedar.

While the two riders drew near the outcry became louder, as a stream of struggling men eddied out of the door, the sun flashing on their weapons as they parried and slashed.

"Hah!" chuckled Sir Leo as he saw that three were pitted against a single swordsman. "We'll e'en even the odds, Diccon!" Suddenly, as a black cloak flapped in the morning sunlight, the English knight's eyes narrowed. The sergeant spurred up, his face was dark with anxiety.

"My lord," he called, "let be! Let be! See, one attacker is of the Temple! Think, my lord, your mission—'twill be fatal to raise them against us." But Sir Leo shook his head and rode on until he reached the edge of the dusty inn yard.

Reining in with a suddenness that threw his charger upon its hocks, the threadbare knight drew his sword, and with an imperious glance at his follower, dismounted and flung himself silently into the mêlée. As a compass needle seeks the north, so the English knight made at the ominous black-bearded figure wearing the sinister surcoat. A hard, thin smile appeared on his sun-darkened face as the Templar wheeled to cross swords.

"Ha!" grunted the man in black. "Would you battle with the Brotherhood? So be it! Your blaspheming soul shall fly to the claws of the Foul Fiend for your meddling." He stepped forward, his deep-set eyes ablaze, and aimed a vicious cut at Sir Leo's head; but with a dexterous twist he turned it aside.

Meanwhile, the sergeant had engaged the third combatant, an ill-favored man-at-arms who wielded a Turkish scimitar instead of a good Frankish blade. The sergeant caught his adversary's descending point on the haft. "You'll have to do better," mocked Diccon. "Puff not so hard, and sweat a little."

Grimly silent, a few yards away the English knight parried his somber opponent's thrusts with a quick turn of the wrist, and stepped in close, his face, for an instant, not a foot distant from that of the furious Templar.

"Nay, not so fast, child of Baphomet," Sir Leo laughed lightly, "you'll tire yourself!" Goaded into a berserk fury, the Templar showered a hail of blows, which, catching Sir Leo unprepared, drove the smile from his lips. Quarte, tierce, sixte—it seemed as though the black-cloaked warrior's sword had a hundred darting points and edges, all thirsting for the English knight's body.

THE Templar's broad, flat face lit in a grin of anticipated triumph, and his malignant blue eyes blazed nearer as he pressed forward relentlessly.

As they lunged to and fro, slashing,

feinting and parrying, the dust from the inn yard rose in choking clouds. Twice the larger and more powerful man in black nearly succeeded in crushing the slight but more active English knight beneath flail-like cuts. But each time Sir Leo sprang swiftly backward and escaped destruction by a finger's breadth.

A third time the militant monk surged forward by sheer weight of blows, and this time there was no room for Sir Leo's retreat.

A great two-wheeled peasant cart, laden with corn, had been left in the inn yard for the night and blocked further retreat. Sir Leo saw the danger from the corner of his eye, warned by a grin of triumph on the Templar's bearded features. Somewhere in the sunlit inn yard a man cried out in mortal agony. Was it Diccon? He would have given much to look, but the Templar's unrelenting pressure made even a cursory glance plain suicide.

With hot, sticky sweat rolling from beneath his quilted gambeson into his eyes, the English knight studied his opponent's features as they twisted into a snarl of exertion, at the same time feeling for the Templar's sword point with his.

Suddenly the warrior monk, judging that Sir Leo could no longer retreat, whirled up his sword, stepped back and struck with all the might of his huge frame. With the effort, his lips parted over his teeth like those of a famished jackal.

As that fateful strip of steel flashed skyward, the English Crusader's sword darted out with the swiftness of a snake's tongue. The point of his gray-blue blade flickered under the Templar's arm just at that point where his heavy hawberk of closely-sewed steel rings afforded no protection. When the Templar's blow descended, it fell weakly, its strength departed, with only the urge of gravity activating it.

As the point clicked among the manure-speckled cobbles of the inn yard, the Templar stood stock-still, hands clenched convulsively on the handle of his long, cross-guarded sword, while his great blue eyes stared in blank surprise and the color ebbed from his bloated cheeks.

Sir Leo remained motionless, his blood-tipped sword held ready and his gaze never wavering from the man before him. A full minute the Templar stood as though paralyzed, then a trickle of blood dripped from his wide nostrils down over his blond mustache and fell with a distinct pattering sound into the dust about his mailed feet.

Then something gave way inside of the Templar's body, allowing the knight in black to crash heavily to earth. He quivered a moment with his sweat-bathed face nuzzling the dirt, and his thick fingers opening and closing jerkily.

Diccon came running up aghast, with his long-handled ax dimmed with blood. In consternation he stared while Sir Leo stirred the dead man with his foot to make sure that life was gone.

"Quick, my lord!" he gasped. "Let us on! 'Tis a Templar you have slain."

Faint amusement stirred the English knight's lips as he saw that Diccon, who feared not man nor fiend, had gone white.

"He dies like any other man. One arrogant dog the less," he remarked.

"The horses, my lord?" There was a world of entreaty in the grizzled veteran's look.

But Sir Leo shook his head. "Nay, not for all the Templars in the world. Wouldst miss the breakfast which awaits us yonder?"

Surrounded by a ring of frightened and curious Arab servants and stable boys, the man to whose rescue Sir Leo had come was driving back his obviously doomed enemy under a shower of sword cuts. Like shimmering windmills of steel the two swordsmen's weapons sparkled, throwing bright flecks of light against the dingy inn

wall and in the faces of the breathless onlookers.

Diccon, resigned to a delay, stood resting, his hands crossed on the handle of his long-shafted ax, following the battle with his amber colored eyes and pushing back his stout, dully shining headpiece with a great hairy hand. Ever and anon he would nod approvingly as the two fought with a degree of skill that comes only with years precariously spent in a land where death swiftly overtakes the unready and the inept.

AT last the swordsman with whom Sir Leo had joined forces was able to drive the edge of his long Norman blade into his enemy's neck, severing the jugular vein and shearing through the flesh until the edge met the spinal column. The stricken man flung both hands to the wound and fell earthward. His casque came off and went rolling, bounding across the courtyard with a brittle clatter.

Quite calmly the victor, who seemed to be well past middle age, stooped and plucked a golden chain from the fallen man's neck, then he spat into the contorted, red-streaked face and turned to the English knight. The English Crusader stood thoughtfully cleansing his sword on a handful of straw plucked from the great solid-wheeled peasant cart which had so nearly caused his downfall.

"One knightly thief the less," grunted the veteran. "Good sir, I am much beholden to you; pray accept the thanks of one who quits this Godless land of God forever." He smiled a gaunt, tired smile, and held out a hand from which he peeled back the worn leather of a mailed mitten.

"I am Ugo de Montmiraille, knight of Aquitaine." He drew his bony hand across the skirt of the olive-green surcoat which covered his rusty, warworn coat of chain armor, and removed sundry spots of blood.

Still dangling the chain of gold, whose luster was horribly dulled, the French Crusader stepped forward and extended his hand. Sir Leo took it and pressed it firmly, while his keen blue eyes studied the other's emaciated features.

"'Twas naught," he replied. "Had they been but two 'gainst you I would not have ventured to lend my feeble aid. But by my halidome, Sir Ugo, your swordsmanship would earn you a fortune in heavy golden byzants of the slothful Greek, Andronicus."

A new interest flickered in Sir Ugo's saturnine face. "Ah, say you so?" He appeared to weigh the idea. "At the court of Byzantium? But methought 'tis Alexius II who reigns through his mother?"

"Such changes in government are over easy in the city of Constantine," replied the Englishman, "and for that same reason does Emperor Andronicus now offer many golden byzants to those who can wield a sword but half as well as you."

The French knight nodded moodily until, by chance, his eye fell on the trio of crumpled figures lying so flatly in the dust. About them a throng of pot-bellied, naked Arab urchins crowded, wide-eyed, shuffling nearer and nearer as their curiosity outgrew their fear. One of them reached out his foot and dabbled a dusty big toe in a widening lake of bright scarlet.

Sir Ugo's eyes narrowed as they rested upon the motionless bulk of the Templar who lay half enveloped in his tumbled black cloak. The scarlet cross stitched to his shoulder was dimmed with white smears of dust.

There was something appalling in the dead silence which had fallen upon the cessation of fighting. Behind the inn a woman burst into unrestrained wailing.

"*Aie, aie,* they have slain a Templar. *Aie!* Woe is us, woe, woe is us!"

"Your kindness to me is like to cost you dear," said Sir Ugo and shook

his head deliberately, as, with a gentle rushing sound, he slid his sword back into its scabbard.

"You had better come with me, Englishman. There is nought to be gained in this cursed County of Kerak save a bad end and a dog-disturbed narrow grave. Take the advice of one who has fought up and down the Holy Land for twice ten years. Go back!"

There was no mistaking the Frenchman's kindly concern for his benefactor. Once more he studied the English knight's face as Sir Leo stood, lost in thought, with his mailed legs wide apart and his muscular arms folded over the travel-stained blue surcoat which hung to his knees.

SIR UGO saw a face not young, not old, burned to a deep shade of copper by years spent beneath the pitiless skies of Syria. On the firm upper lip was a short, reddish mustache trimmed close in defiance to the custom of the day. His coif of damascene mail was thrown back, its folds emphasizing a long, square jaw which conformed to the general ruggedness of typically Saxon features, which, though hard and with the stamp of disillusion in them, had not yet lost an innate humor.

Down the left cheek ran a long white scar which lost itself in the abundant copper-tinted hair hanging in tumbled profusion to his ears. The nose piece of his dinted but brightly-polished steel cap was thrown up on its hinge, revealing a high, narrow nose. Of course the Englishman's eyes were blue, blue as the turquoise set in his dagger handle.

At length the English knight met the other's eye and smiled. "No," said Sir Leo. "I thank you for your counsel, but we must keep on. I have a—well, call it a mission: a double mission."

There was a manifest anxiety in the old warrior's eye as he again regarded the dead Templar about whom flies from the stable were already buzzing in wide circles.

"You'll not last a se'nni't," he warned. "You know how heavy lies the hand of the Temple hereabouts?" He made a wry face. "You've felled one of their chaplains, evil-living robber though he was. Not a hand i' the country but will be raised against you."

Sir Leo's nose wrinkled in disgust. "It troubles me not a whit." He cast a contemptuous glance at his late enemy and turned on his heel toward the crowded door of the inn. "'Tis not the first of the arrogant tyrants I've met," he stated. "It was at Tyre," he chuckled reminiscently. "Aye, that near to cost me my life. So see you, my conscience twinges me not at all."

In round-eyed astonishment the French knight stared at one who could speak so unconcernedly of that sinister power, which, unseen, ruled the tottering Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem.

Sir Leo passed his arm through that of the other, and, pulling off his helmet, led the way into the cool of the inn, while Diccon calmly walked over to the fallen trio and, drawing a curved dagger, fell to cutting off the gold buttons which, in defiance to the rules of his order, adorned the fallen Templar's jerkin.

The French knight was not easily to be dissuaded.

"Nay, Sir Leo, but you must come with me—"

Slowly Leo's red head turned, and his eyes narrowed as he rapped out one short word:

"*Must?*"

Impatiently the other shook his head. "Nay, take no offense; I speak but for your good, as I am much beholden to you." He sank rather heavily to a rough oak bench and rested his elbows on the table. That he was tired and dispirited was plain to see.

"Do you not see the danger? Think, man; the Templars own this countryside body and soul. No one would dare to give food or shelter. Though they

hate the Order greatly, yet their fear is greater. Now mark you"—Sir Ugo raised an impressive hand—"hardly had your sword passed through yon Templar's heart when his body knave galloped off posthaste. *Nom de St. Gille,* look there!"

The veteran stabbed a gnarled forefinger at a window across the low-ceilinged room. Through it could be seen the valley sloping down to the desert sands far below. Over the white, winding road hung a pillar of dust, at the apex of which could be seen a horseman riding away at an extended gallop.

"WITHIN the hour, Sir Roger Moncarnet, prior o' their castle, at the end of this valley, will have the tidings, and then, my bold friend, you can never escape." Sir Ugo shrugged and threw his palms outward, so that his mail jingled softly. "You'd better come with me as I have said. My horse is good, and by fast riding we should gain the oasis of El Jedjin before dusk. Yonder I know a Sheyk who will shelter us."

He lowered his voice and fixed his hollow, almost macabre eyes on those of the impassive Englishman. "I tell you—the Templars know many weird and strange ways of putting one to death."

Sir Leo Coffyn stared at the fly-blown ceiling a moment. "I thank you, Sir Ugo," he said softly. "I know your advice is kindly meant—think not that I scorn it. None knows better than I—" his lips quivered at the recollection, and the scar suddenly blazed scarlet on his cheek—"what the Temple can do. But I must on; I carry letters from Count Raymond."

Sir Ugo glanced up.

"Of Tripolis?"

"The same."

"Ah, there's a warrior wise with years. And whither bound, Sir Leo?"

"To the Sieur de Courçon, chatelain of Mont Saint Joie."

It was as though a dagger had pierced the dark-faced Frenchman. He started violently, then crossed himself quickly twice, and his fingers fairly flew through the devout motions. Had he not been so astounded he would have seen that the face of the Englishman darkened as he uttered the words "De Courçon."

"What? Amalric de Courçon?" he gasped.

With a subdued interest manifest on his features, Sir Leo broke the round loaf of bread which had been set before him and drew a short dagger and deliberately cut off a square.

"Why, yes—Sir Amalric de Courçon, vassal of Reginald de Chatillon," he replied, "who, I am told, is by way of being a bit of a knave."

"But know you well of this De Courçon? God's benison!" growled the veteran. "He is a monster, a satyr, a follower of Beelzebub, a child of Barran Sathanus, a—"

"Anything else?" inquired Leo, and neatly severed the limb of a cold fowl which the trembling Arab landlord put before him.

"*Pardieu!* You'll not be so calm once you're within the gray walls o' Mont Saint Joie!" The Frenchman drummed on the table with agitated fingers. "You are indeed mad to take service with that—that debauched and decadent lord. I tell you I'm no tender maiden mine own sel', but God forbid I practice the deviltries o' that haunted glutton Amalric and his white, soulless daughter.

"I tell thee, man"—he leaned over the crumb-dotted table—"they are such monsters of iniquity as would make the accursed Mohammed pale with envy!" And so having spoken, Sir Ugo sat back with smoldering eyes.

Before making reply, Sir Leo tossed the wing bone he had been picking back over his shoulder to the dusty floor, where a dozen ribby curs waited in furtive-eyed silence. With a chorus of yelps they fell upon the morsel, and

snarled so lustily that Diccon rose from his seat by the door and used his broad foot vigorously.

Sir Leo drained an earthenware flagon of sour native wine and set the vessel down with a gentle thump. But for all his assumed carelessness, the English knight's lips had set themselves in a thin, hard line.

"Indeed? I see my tarry at Mont Saint Joie will not be without interest." He licked his fingers, then wiped them clean with a piece of bread.

Scarce believing that the man opposite could be in his right senses, Sir Ugo de Montmiraille sat with his gray-bristled jaw agape.

"'Tis a mighty fortress, and its walls are high," he continued. "So high that strange things take place within, and no one the wiser. Many, many souls have p e r i s h e d there, though perchance their bodies are not yet dead."

HAVING finished his frugal breakfast, Sir Leo shook his plentiful red hair and settled back comfortably, apparently giving his whole attention to the anxious man before him, but keeping none the less, a sharp lookout down the valley.

"And of this De Courçon's daughter?" he inquired with studious carelessness. "Is she fair?"

Sir Ugo's grim mouth twisted into a loose laugh and he caught up a leathern cup of wine before making reply.

Across the room Diccon's features relaxed and a new light sprang into his pale eyes. Much of his manifest concern departed as a slender Arab girl with delicately tattooed cheeks and chin entered bearing a long-necked jar of wine. She cast lingering glances at this warlike figure seated near the door, and smiled shyly as she poured the ruby fluid, then, with a tinkle of gold wire earrings, she slipped out of sight again, her bare feet pattering softly on the hard earthen floor.

"De Courçon's daughter?" resumed the French knight. "Is she fair? Aye, like a lily bending over the Loire; beauteous she is as Venus's self, white as snow, with hair the color of burnished copper—only a shade lighter than your own. Tall and stately, but"—the expression of Sir Ugo's hard old face altered swiftly—"as cruel as Roman Messalina!

"Why, man, 'tis said she drinks the blood of babes, and thus keeps her unholy beauty. Aye, and men fall mad as the Assyrian king for the love of her; 'tis common knowledge that the shields of her fallen lovers range the length of the west wall of the armory!"

"She at least hath the merit of persistence," remarked Leo in a thoughtful tone.

He turned abruptly to look down the valley, while his fingers toyed idly with a great steel buckle which fastened his belt.

The older man's face resumed its tired expression as he wiped his mouth on the grease-spotted skirt of his surcoat. He sighed and straightened up.

"Alack," he said, "I see you are resolved to go into the lion's mouth. I pray God that He will keep you safe, for, *pardieu*, it was a kindly act you did to save for me my little wealth." He touched a slender pouch at his belt. "But verily, I say, it is safer by far to tweak the beard of the great Saladin himself than to put foot into the curséd keep of Mont Saint Joie!"

He arose and readjusted his coif with care. "And now, sir knight, I ride. On me, as well, falls the vengeance of the Temple, and"—he shivered visibly—"I wot full well the fate o'ertakes those who scorn its powers." He turned once more. "Be not headstrong, Sir Leo," he pleaded.

"Think, man—in an hour there'll be no escape from their clutches. You are no foolish lad of twenty. *Nom de St. Gille!* No good s o l d i e r rushes in against odds a thousandfold too great. Look! The horses are saddled and by

the door. Will you not come? Together we can make great fortune 'mongst the Byzantines. I tell you, naught but despair, torture and death await you if you linger. For the last time, will you not come?"

"No," replied Sir Leo gravely. "I thank you, but I must go on. There are reasons why I must on to Mont Saint Joie."

A moment the two gripped hands, then Sir Ugo's charger was led champing to the door, a ragged Arab boy dangling at the bridle as he sought to hold the nervous animal steady.

Without another word the French knight mounted, to the faint jangle of his chain armor, and settled into the saddle. Then, with a sharply executed salute, he turned and spurred off down the road at a steady, space-eating canter which threw clouds of powdery white dust high into the blazing Syrian sunlight.

In a moment he was but a shadowy outline.

CHAPTER II.

THE BLACK-ROBED TEMPLARS RIDE.

WHEN the French knight had disappeared and the pall of dust raised by his mount had drifted earthward, Sir Leo's expression changed from one of unconcern to one of deep thought. It wrinkled his forehead in a frown. His several years spent in the precariously existing Kingdom of Jerusalem had not been passed without achieving a wholesome respect for the all-powerful Templars. Too well he knew that when aroused they spared not manner or means of visiting swift destruction on those who defied their will.

A moment he stood with bowed head meditating on the doorstep, his muscle-corded fingers playing with the guard of a brass-handled dagger. Then the Arab landlord sidled up, his fat, sweating features twisted into a grin.

His hand fluttered to the dirty turban which crowned his bulletlike head, then touched his heart. He waited in silence, but Sir Leo, absorbed with his thoughts, did not see him.

"My lord has eaten?" he ventured with a deep bow.

Sir Leo merely nodded, and stared absently down the valley which he would shortly descend.

"Then the Protector of the Oppressed will require his horse?" There was patent alarm in the innkeeper's hurried tones. "The road to El Kubak is long, and hereabouts the sun beats cruelly at midday. 'Tis wise to waste no time. By reasonable haste your lordship should reach the wells of Kubak. I will—"

"Peace, windbag," said the Englishman, and turned back into the worn and scarred doorframe. "I go in my own good time."

But with distracted gestures the landlord broke into a torrent of supplications.

"*Aie! Aie!*" he wailed. "The Riders in Black will assuredly burn the inn over my head. *Aie!* Assuredly they will slay us all and cast our bodies to the kites and to the dogs of the street!"

His anguished, tear-filled eyes rolled in the direction of the fly-covered corpses in the sunlit yard. They were already commencing to bloat beneath the fierce sunlight.

Sir Leo halted, then beckoned the sergeant who sat eating mightily in a corner, quite surrounded by a group of dark-skinned, pot-bellied children. The native urchins watched the veteran's repast with wide, awe-struck eyes.

"Yes, my lord," he mumbled, and choked down a mouthful of bread and honey as he snatched up his steel cap and sprang to his feet.

"Make fast ropes to the heels of yonder wretches," directed the knight; "then mount your animal and drag them down the road to the shade of those olive trees." He turned to the tearful landlord. "And you—stop

your bawlings and set the servants to erasing the mark, else your hide is like to stretch on yonder wall before sundown."

While Diccon hastened to carry out Sir Leo's commands, the Crusader picked up his leather-scabbarded sword and replaced the conical steel helmet upon his red head. He then delved into the purse which dangled at his broad, bossed belt, and drew forth a handful of coins. There was among the pieces a marked scarcity of silver and gold.

Without stopping to count, he tossed a handful of coppers on the greasy table and strode to the doorway, where he paused as Diccon imperturbably mounted his horse and rode slowly off, dragging the stiff-armed corpses behind in a welter of dust. After him pattered a dozen seminaked Arabs, who drew olive and cedar branches over that grim trail, under direction of the chattering, shrill-voiced innkeeper.

SOME twenty minutes later the knight and his follower galloped off down the road and left the inn and its apprehensive occupants far behind.

"Master?" Diccon's deep voice had in it a ring of anxiety, and his pale eyes beneath the shadow of his headpiece were roving continually to and fro. "We ride to Kubak?"

"Nay." Leo laughed shortly. "'Tis the first place the Temple-bred dogs will search for us. We'll tighten our girdles and circle past the village into the desert. 'Twill be a trifle hot, perchance, but be no worse than we have met a hundred times." He paused and seemed to ponder. "Well, Diccon," he said at length, "what think you this Mont Saint Joie will be like?"

"Being i' the border, my lord," replied the grizzled sergeant thoughtfully, "we should find the garrison of some account. I've heard the Lord de Chatillon hath some rare men at arms, veterans of a thousand skirmishes 'gainst the blaspheming Saracens. Of my Lord de Courçon I know little, save old men at arms have said that in his youth his strength was as of three; no lustier fighter was there in the chivalry of King Baldwin when he o'erthrew the hordes of Zangi."

The two were trotting in a course parallel to the Kubak road which wound in a leisurely fashion in and out among a double row of barren, rock-crested hills. When the valley walls came closer and afforded no protection from surprise, Sir Leo turned his horse sharply to the right, and, hitching the strap which fastened his long, pointed shield to his saddle, put the strong-limbed gray stallion at the slope.

With powerful plunges the animal scrambled upward, scattering small torrents of stones, which, dislodged by his hoofs, went rolling and bounding downward, to fall onto the road below.

Once on the crest of the hill, the voyagers halted and studied the valley with care, while the hot desert wind ruffled the manes of their heavily-breathing chargers, and whipped Sir Leo's dull blue surcoat, so that the yellow leopard embroidered on its front seemed to stir with life.

"See anything, Diccon?" On Sir Leo's brown face was a certain grim humor, as he turned to the man at arms who sat his horse with the motionless rigidity of an iron figure. But the sergeant's eyes flickered up the length of the winding valley at their feet like heat lightning on a summer's night.

"I see what my lord sees," he replied at length, and shifted his wiry frame so that the saddle creaked. "I see two columns of galloping men. They are well armed; I see their lance pennons flashing i' the sun."

"Aye," muttered Leo. "They of the Temple do not tarry." So saying, he swiftly wheeled his horse to descend into the valley below. "Aye, nor must we linger, if we are to find the shelter

of Mont Saint Joie, for I fear me the stones loosed by our horses' feet as we climbed the slope will betray our course."

With the name of that stronghold, so sinisterly described by the French knight, Leo found himself dwelling again and again on one sentence from Sir Ugo's discourse:

"Fair as a lily bending above the Loire! But debauched and cruel as Roman Messalina."

As the gray cantered easily along, he fell into a reverie, while his shield rubbed gently against his knee. In his mind's eye, he painted a series of sketches depicting the sunset-haired daughter of that turbulent Amalric de Courçon. But as quickly as he created them, he destroyed the figments in perplexity. Her power must indeed be great, he mused, no wonder poor Hubert— At the thought, his hand clenched the handle of his turquoise-studded dagger.

SUDDENLY the sergeant reined in and with a low cry pointed to the same heights they had recently quitted. On the skyline was outlined a group of restless horsemen whose sable cloaks and flashing weapons left no doubt in the English knight's mind as to who they were or what they sought.

Even as the two riders watched, the pursuers poured down the inner slope like a dark stream; there must have been not less than twenty or thirty in their number.

"Let them follow," grunted Diccon. "These horses'll leave them naught but dust to fight with."

The mind of his master, however, was not so assured, as he reflected that it was now well over a week since the animals had quitted well-filled mangers at Bethlehem. They had come fast and far, bearing men well over average weight in addition to the not inconsiderable burden of their riders' equipment. So it was with anything but a confident air that Sir Leo swung his long legs backward and touched the gray with the spur.

At the contact the nervous Arab blood in the stallion revolted, and only the slower, heavier English strain with which it was mixed prevented the gray from a burst of energy-wasting temper. As it was, he settled at once into a long, powerful stride that set Leo's sword clanking rhythmically and made the wind flirt with the deep red locks which strayed from beneath his twinkling helmet.

Almost at his side rode Diccon, swaying his long body to the shorter gallop of his powerful bay gelding. Every once in awhile he turned in the saddle and studied the pursuing cavalry.

Neither men wasted breath in conversation, but kept full attention on the winding track along which they galloped. It abounded in treacherous dips and razor-edged rocks which could, in a moment's time, send man and beast crashing down. Thus they rode, for a full hour, while the swelling necks of their mounts creamed with sweat, and their own bodies became clammy with undried perspiration.

Due to the deviousness of the paths they followed, they lost sight of that ominous force which clung to their tracks with the tenacity of leeches.

The nature of the valley commenced to change as the gentle olive-green slopes rose with increasing abruptness. Jagged outcrops of dark-hued basalt crept nearer and nearer to the track, necessitating sharp turns around which nothing could be seen. It made heavy going and caused the lathered horses to slip with increasing frequency. Once, Diccon's gelding stumbled heavily to its knees and the sergeant, cursing desperately, was barely able to wrench him up.

"*Dieu de Dieu!*" panted Sir Leo, and turned his flaming face to the rear. "More of this and we'll leave our ribs for a jackal's supper." But the going

became worse and worse, so that the two had, perforce, to pull up their horses and stumble along at a walk over the dull red stones which cast an eye-searing heat upward.

Suddenly, the road, if so that miserable track could be called, wound upward and back upon itself, giving the fugitives a view of the valley down which they had fled.

As they looked back, a gasping cry of surprise burst from the throats of both weary, thirsty men. Their pursuers had gained incredibly! Leo watched them, hurrying forward over the treacherous footing at top speed, utterly reckless of almost certain falls and mischances.

Even as they looked, a knight riding a huge yellow barb fell with a sickening force as his mount wedged a hoof among the rocks. From above, they could see the fallen Templar quite clearly as he struggled to free himself, his black robe tangled in the kicking charger's harness. The other knights neither drew rein nor paused to dismount, but spurred on with an iron fixity of purpose.

As the cavalcade rounded a turn, one of the men below caught sight of the fugitives, and raised a fierce, ringing view-halloo, which was instantly taken up by the others. Diminished by distance, the sound came floating up like the impatient cry of a wolf pack that sees its doomed quarry just ahead.

AT that ominous sound, a light sprang into the Englishman's blue eyes. He uttered a laugh as he snatched a short, gold-mounted horn from his belt.

"Nay, my lord," gasped Diccon. "The minutes flee. The Templars close up. See!"

But Sir Leo turned deliberately, facing the blinding heat of the valley. "Courtesy for courtesy," he laughed hollowly. "We'll e'en return their *beau geste*. And beside, our poor beasts will be the better for a breathing."

He passed his tongue over sun-split lips and set the short amber-colored horn to his lips with a flourish. While his horse's ears flattened in protest, he sounded three clear notes, which went winging down to the depths.

Astounded, the Templar pack reined in and halted, staring up half in fear of a cunningly devised ambush.

While the echoing crags played weird fanfares, Sir Leo lowered his horn, wheeled, and with Diccon at his heels plunged on in a race to which he felt there could be but one ending. His brow darkened as he timed the trembling, leg-weary stride of his gray stallion.

"Your horse?" he called over his shoulder, as the tired beasts scrambled heavily over a dried river bed.

"He goes yet strongly, my lord," panted Diccon cheerfully, but his pale eyes were anxious. "Should he fall, I pray you tarry not for old Diccon. The parchments must reach Mont Saint Joie; said you not so?"

To this Sir Leo uttered a short laugh and turned forward to guide the gray onward, over a plain which suddenly appeared among the heights. It was barren of house or habitation of any kind, save for the blackened, flame-scarred walls of what had once been a lordly Arab palace. Stark stumps of olive and date trees rose drearily about the sand-choked walls, mutely testifying to the flight of life and fertility from that once smiling plateau.

"There shows the hand of De Courçon," thought Leo. As they pounded wildly by the silent ruin he wondered anew, now that he would never see her, how the lovely and exotic daughter of the evil lord looked.

"*Pardieu,*" he reflected, as the gray's posterns flickered over the yellow soil, "I fear me poor Hubert will ever be unavenged. A murrain on that lovely temptress!"

Their gasping charges lumbered

along with much diminished speed as they left that desolate plateau at their backs and plunged again up a tortuous maze of rock defiles which rose in forbidding grandeur on either side.

Though desperately spurred, the sergeant's bay began to lag, and neither the merciless goading nor lacing with the whip could keep him up with the stallion. A gap opened between master and man and widened swiftly, until Sir Leo, glancing around, saw what had befallen.

His heart sank, for not until that moment had he quite abandoned hope of eluding the grim, vengeance-thirsty Templars who rode on their track. But not a fork in the road appeared, nor even a wilderness of bowlders among which the fugitives might hide.

"The Templars," he mused, as he drew rein, "know strange ways. No, God's Rood! They'll never have me living." Into his mind involuntarily swarmed a host of tales, memories, rumors concerning what befell wretches luckless enough to be haled into the strongholds of the Temple.

Slower and slower struggled the bay gelding, his bloodshot eyes staring wide. Two flaring, scarlet nostrils proclaimed his utter inability to last much farther.

A thin smile crossed Diccon's face, and his hairless eyelids narrowed as a booming cry of triumph rang down the torrid gorge from behind.

"Fly, Sir Leo, fly!" he implored, waving forward his broad hand. On his sweat-bathed features was a deep appeal. "The gray is yet strong."

But the stallion slowed, fighting the bit, as the English knight held him in.

"Nay, Diccon, that can I not do." As he galloped, Sir Leo reached up and pulled the coif of his hawberk over his head. "We have campaigned too much together. We'll e'en gallop till the gelding falls, then, *pardieu!* We'll try a go among these rocks to escape. Failing that, we'll make, God willing, such an end that the Brotherhood of Kerak will find many a vacant stool at their evil conclave."

THE chase now plunged into a gorge more deep, more sheer, than any before, its high walls cutting off the merciless sunlight for a space and shedding in its stead a lustrous blue shadow. Escape from it there was none.

Just as the foundering bay galloped leadenly into the opening, there came a rattle of hoofs behind, and a tall rider, astride of a long-limbed black thundered into view. Upon catching sight of the two he stood in his stirrups, and with a triumphant yell drew his sword.

As he did so, another black-cloaked horseman plunged into sight, then another and another. It seemed that the pass behind was choked with foaming horses and fierce, brown-bearded knights who dashed forward, with the reflected light from above rippling on their naked swords and fluttering pennons.

"*Pour Dieu! Pour Dieu!*" the Templars lifted their battle cry.

They were not twenty horses' lengths behind, when the road down which the doomed men were fleeing took a sharp turn.

"Diccon," shouted Leo, "leap off when we turn the corner!"

An overhanging wall of rock rose sharply perhaps twenty yards ahead, and toward it dashed the fugitives, with the raging Templars—now sure of triumph—at their heels.

"*Pour Dieu! Pour Dieu!*" they howled.

"*Pour Dieu! Dieu,*" wailed the echoes in answer, as though a hundred malicious demons mocked the triumphant war cry.

Utterly cool, Sir Leo judged the distance left to them and wrenched loose his shield which bore on its battered blue face a rampant yellow leopard. His right hand pulled free the sword and at the same moment he slid

his right foot from the stirrup, preparatory to leaping off.

The corner was now not a dozen feet ahead; from the tail of his eyes, Leo saw Diccon's ax swing upward and heard the rattling gasps of his dying mount. Ten feet, eight, five—the corner!

He swung sharply right, and uttering his war cry of *"Recte Factis! Recte Factis!"* shifted his balance. *"Recte—"*

The shout died in his throat and his glazing eyes stared open. Behind him he heard Diccon's horse crash heavily to earth with a dull grating noise, allowing the man at arms to leap free with nothing to spare. Diccon whirled back his ax and ran around the corner.

Then he, too, saw, and stood as a man paralyzed, for there, in a deep column, rode a body of men in white surcoats, with flaming crosses of red on their mailed breasts. They stared wide eyed at the two sweat-gleaming figures who waited with wildly heaving breasts and fierce, hunted eyes.

A feeling of unutterable relief filled the hopeless Englishman's brain as he descried that silent white array and recognized it as a troop of Hospitalers on the march. Hospitalers who hated Satan himself not worse than the Brethren of the Temple!

WHILE the thunder of the Templar charge grew loud, Sir Leo whirled to the astounded Hospitalers.

"To the rescue!" he shouted in clear ringing French. *"Saint Jean! Saint Jean!"* As he uttered their war cry the utterly amazed knights in white spurred forward.

Louder rang the Temple war cry. *"Pour Dieu! Pour Dieu!"* and at that hated sound, the swords of the Hospitalers rippled out like a wave breaking on a moonlit beach.

In an instant the foremost Templar had dashed madly around that fateful corner, his gaunt bronze face eager as that of a questing hawk. He threw himself heavily back in his leather-bound saddle with a mad effort to stop the course of his racing black war horse. But the pace was too great and he charged with terrific momentum and a shouted *"Pour Dieu!"* straight into the serried ranks awaiting him.

Ere Leo knew it, the whole Templar troop was engaged, hacking, thrusting and parrying as the Hospitalers, fiercely joyous to find their deadly enemies surprised and on jaded horses, closed in. The Templar numbers increased quickly as the slower and weakened riders in the pursuit caught up to the mêlée, which rang appallingly loud in the narrowness of the defile.

A giant Templar chaplain with a pointed, blue-black beard, rode at Sir Leo with sword poised. Leo seemed to see nothing but his smoldering jet-black eyes lowering to either side of the nose piece of his undecorated helmet. With a strange fascination, Sir Leo noted flecks of foam on his adversary's beard and saw the throbbing muscles of his powerful neck.

Then it was slash, swish, and a grinding tremor along Leo's blade as he parried, sank under the sword point, and dropped with feline swiftness on the sweat-bathed neck of his prey. He dashed aside the warrior-priest's second slash and drove his point full between those glittering eyes.

"Saint Jean!" *"Pour Dieu!"* shouted breathless, gasping voices.

Swirling clouds of rock dust arose, shutting from Leo's sight all but the nearest combatants, revealing now a dripping sword, now a mail-clad head with gaping mouth and staring eyes.

The uproar changed from high-shouted war cries to deep, brief grunts, sudden screams, and now and again piercing squeals as some horses felt steel entering his flesh.

At last, as he struggled in the dust cloud, a hand wielding a mace materialized from behind and struck Sir Leo a glancing blow on the shoulder

that bowed him sick and dizzy over the cantle, so that he swayed helplessly and seemed to float free from his body, while the gorge and all in it spun weirdly about. Then, quite suddenly, everything faded into a shimmering red mist.

CHAPTER III.

THE DYING HOSPITALER.

FOR some time Sir Leo seemed to hover in an intangible substance which at last commenced to dissipate, giving him once more the use of his eyes. Terrible was the sight which greeted his returning consciousness. The narrow space between the walls of rock was strewn with awkwardly-sprawled figures which lay as though hurled from a great height. Everywhere they dotted the rocky ground, with steel-covered arms and legs limply outthrust.

Leo stiffened as he caught the sound of approaching footsteps, and through that red mist which closed in again the Crusader groped feebly for his sword, but his desperately fumbling fingers encountered nothing but smooth-worn stones and bits of rock.

Nearer came the ominous tread, while Leo made desperate efforts to see who was bearing down upon him. Then, while his nerveless hand plucked at his dagger, a strong arm slid beneath his shoulders and a cascade of blessed, soothing water poured over his eyes and into his slack jaws.

With that cooling draft, the veil before his eyes lifted sharply, so that he once more could see with clearness. Peering up, his look encountered the anxious, blood-streaked face of Diccon.

"Ten candles shall burn before the shrine of the blessed St. John," muttered the old man-at-arms. "I feared that ye were sped, my lord, what wi' the smears on your surcoat and the dints i' your casque."

Sir Leo struggled to a sitting position and passed a shaking hand over his eyes.

"Good old Diccon," he whispered. "How fared you in the bicker?"

"Not ill, my lord, not ill," the sergeant replied, with his anxious eyes traveling the length of the disabled knight's body.

"'Twas a merry set-to I had with a squat, yellow-faced knight. Hard pressed I was, but as luck would on it, his beast stumbled, and ere he could recover my ax found his ribs. When he saw 'twas no noble had sped him, he laid enough curses on my head to break the back o' the best camel i' the camps o' the infidel Saladin."

During the sergeant's discourse, Leo's eyes wandered back and forth, noting with grim pleasure that many more black-robed riders lay tumbled in the dust than horsemen whose surcoats were white.

To one side of the stricken field stood four horses, their trailing bridles and lathered sides proclaiming the exertions they had made. One of them was badly slashed, with a long dripping wound marring the whiteness of his crest. He stood motionless with sunken eyes and low-hanging head, patiently waiting for that steady ebbing tide to bring him shuddering to earth.

Of the remaining three, two had evidently belonged to Hospitalers, or so Leo judged by the smoothness of their coats. The saddle of one of them had slipped awry, and hung with dangling stirrup touching the ground. The third was apparently in the last stages of exhaustion, and stood breathing with long rattling gasps which kept a mace, which was fastened by a strap to the empty saddle, bumping against the stirrup leather.

When the English knight, supported by his sergeant's leather-covered arm, staggered uncertainly to his feet, the three unwounded horses cocked their ears and gazed across the gorge with humid, bewildered eyes.

"And the Templars fled?" gasped Leo, when at length the earth ceased to trip violently beneath his feet.

"Aye, with the Knights of St. John hot on their steps," replied Diccon, as he stooped and recovered his dark-bladed ax.

Then from among the heap of dead came a feeble voice, crying in a strange tongue.

Steadying himself on his sheathed sword, Leo picked his way over the rounded white stones and glassy-eyed corpses until he came upon a Hospitaler who lay face down, with blood slowly oozing from a hideous wound at that point where the shoulder sets into the throat.

His feeble breath whistled audibly through his partially-severed windpipe and told, with the bluish-white pallor which tinged his face, that his Crusade was almost at an end.

"HE'S all but sped, my lord," murmured Diccon impatiently. "Yonder are fresh horses. Had we not best mount? They may return—" He turned his hairless face to glance down the gorge.

"*Pardieu,* no," snapped Sir Leo. "Here is one who is sorely stricken. You've campaigned the world over; see if you can recognize the poor wretch's speech."

Obediently, the sergeant bent over the stricken Hospitaler, stooping low to catch the wounded man's faint whisper. Then he not ungently turned the stricken face upward and exposed a scarlet splotched surcoat on which the red of an embroidered cross mingled with the stain.

Diccon poured into the pale lips a little water from a bottle which lay by the Hospitaler's side, and almost immediately the wounded knight's voice grew stronger.

"'Tis Hungarian he speaks, my lord," informed Diccon. "Their outlandish tongue has no fellow in the whole of Christendom."

"Water, water!" whispered the dying man in French. Diccon tilted the flagon once more.

"*Merci.*" The Hungarian's eyes opened slowly and his bearded high-cheeked face regained a hint of color.

"I am soon gone," he murmured. "Who art thou that did call upon St. John?"

"Leo de Coffyn," replied the Englishman, low-voiced. "A poor knight of England. Is there aught I can do to ease your soul?"

As Diccon wiped away the clotted blood from the Hospitaler's face, Leo saw the face was handsome beneath the curling golden beard, which, by the laws of his order, the soldier-monk must wear.

The sergeant ripped a cloak from a fallen Templar and folded it beneath the Hungarian's ghastly head.

"Aye," he whispered. "But first tell me where you fare. 'Tis an evil land this, thieves and Templars abound—"

"Why," said Leo, and his face grew dark. "I have a mission at the Castle of Mont Saint Joie. My brother—"

The English knight broke off as the Hospitaler uttered a blood-stifled cry, and with twitching fingers traced the sign of the cross from shoulder to shoulder and from death-dewed brow to blood-stained breast.

"God's benison!" gasped Leo. "What have I said? I pray you pardon me!"

On the Hospitaler's face was drawn a mask of livid hatred, and the dying eyes were lit with a strange light. He clutched the English knight's wrist with a grip of steel.

"Ah—at last!" the Hungarian's voice came weaker, as if all his pitiful store of remaining strength were expended in his blazing eyes. "Swear by the oath of the Saxons—swear that you will carry out the last request of one who would have reigned a king among his people but for"—he faltered and spat darkly upon the white rock

dust—"a demon in the guise of Venus's self."

A fierce pleading was written deep upon the Hungarian Hospitaler's face. A pleading so earnest that Sir Leo could not question, but merely nodded.

The dying man, with that strength which comes to a flame about to sink into darkness, raised himself upon an elbow and with his right hand clenched at the narrow strip of sky above, spoke in a strong, clear voice.

"Swear on the Cross of Our Lord that you will encompass"—he choked —"the death of—of that beauteous harpy." He faltered, then seemed to gather himself for a final effort. "Swear that you will slay that lovely Jezebel. Harken not to her arts—she could deceive God's angels themselves —but swear—to thrust thy sword through her smooth white body." He sat bolt upright, with his eyes, terrible eyes, fixed upon Sir Leo. "Her name is—"

"Yes?" whispered Leo, and bent forward.

"Jocelyn de Courçon."

There was a sudden rush of scarlet which filled the speaker's mouth, and with his hand yet clenched, the Hospitaler fell back heavily.

IN silence the two Englishmen crossed themselves, then drew the dead man's hands together.

"And now, my lord," said Diccon, "we had best mount and be off. They of the Hospital are like to be ill-pleased with us."

The sergeant strode over to the horses, which, far from attempting to flee, seemed rather to welcome him. The wounded white horse moved not a bit, but stared dully at the widening pool of red between his quivering forelegs.

While Diccon straightened the saddle on a golden bay mare which bore the accouterments of the Hospitalers, Sir Leo looked about for the gray stallion which had borne him so well. Diccon's brown gelding he quickly found, lying among the bowlders where it had fallen, but nowhere to be seen was that worn caparison bearing the golden leopard.

With a sigh, Sir Leo clambered heavily into the saddle of the bay and numbly fastened his shield in place; then, with a last look at the silent fallen, he turned the mare's head down the defile.

At the edge of the ring of corpses he passed the Hungarian, lying with his hands crossed as became a good Crusader. At the sight, he seemed to hear the dead man's voice.

"Jocelyn." Was it fancy, he asked himself, or had the Hospitaler's voice softened in the midst of his anathema, softened as he said that one word, "Jocelyn"?

But when they had gone but a little farther, the thought that he knew not where they were, nor how they had come, suddenly drove further conjecture from Sir Leo's mind.

Presently the mountain range through which they had fled dwindled into bare, red foothills which rose like molten mounds under the late midday sun, casting waves of heat that struck like mace blows on the faces of the two weary, harried fugitives.

Below lay the Wilderness of Kedemoth, stretching away, league over league of arid, lifeless clay. The only track in sight was the one down which they had come, and that was closed to them.

A moment master and man regarded each other, and in that look each knew the desperation of their plight. Without a word, Sir Leo wheeled slightly to the left, and set a course skirting the forbidding range of glowing rock. Only the sound of the horses' hoofs crunching dryly on the hard baked earth broke the silence, as their wavering blue-black shadows crept on beneath them.

So, for two, perhaps three hours, the Englishmen rode automatically, dis-

mounting ever and anon to rest their mounts, and gasping painfully in the fearful torture of the heat.

As the sun's rays became less vertical and the shadows longer, the country ahead showed no sign of life or water.

"When shall we rest, my lord?" panted Diccon, whose scarlet face was twisted into a shining mask of incarnate thirst.

"When we reach yonder hillock. In the shadow of the rocks there, shall we rest." And with dragging feet they marched on until, just as they neared a group of massive bowlders, there came a sudden shrill shout.

"Allah! il-il-Allah Akbar!"

Sir Leo, looking swiftly up, beheld an avalanche of dark-faced, white-robed horsemen, who urged their plunging horses down the steep bank which had hidden them from view.

That they were Saracens Leo knew at first glance, but his heart sank when he discerned, as they drew near, that they were of the barbaric Seljuk tribes —fanatics of the fanatics, and spearhead of Saladin's Moslem hordes.

Hope of life departed, and with a muttered prayer, he drew his long sword for the third time that eventful day.

Just once did he raise his war cry, then he found himself, back to back with Diccon, hemmed in by a circle of yelling, thrusting horsemen, whose black, forked beards and hawk-like faces proclaimed them to be, as Sir Leo had feared, merciless mercenaries.

For a brief space of time he parried and slashed desperately, then the ring narrowed, and, with the suddenness of an arrow's flight, he felt himself stricken to earth, while an infernal voice wailed in his ears, "Jocelyn, Jocelyn!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Queer Musical Instruments

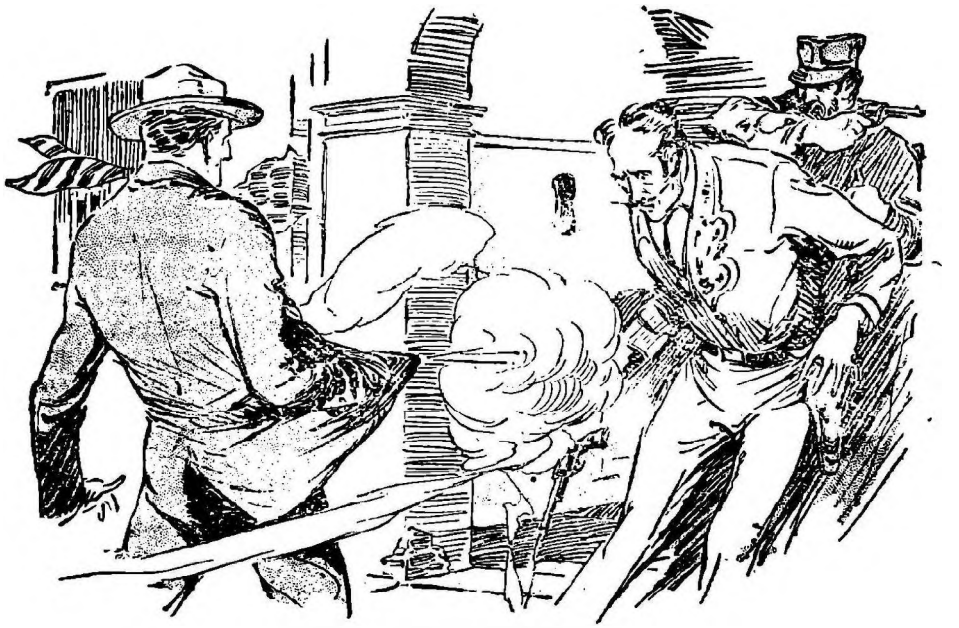
THE balalaika is often heard on the radio, but few listeners know exactly what kind of an instrument it is, and many confuse it with the cymbalon. This queer combination of the guitar, mandolin, zither and bagpipes is the ancient national instrument of Russia.

It is a whole orchestra in itself when properly played, but it requires years of practice and a natural talent for music to handle it harmoniously. Played by an amateur it emits all kinds of discordant wails, groans and wheezes. With the advent of the German concertina to Russia the balalaika became obsolete, but was resurrected under Czar Alexander II, when a Russian archæologist revived it with the assistance of a large grant from the Russian government.

In the hope of restoring interest in the only real native musical instrument of Russia, the Czar ordered the balalaika furnished to every orchestra in the imperial guards. After his death its popularity waned, as it was too difficult to play, but since the Russian revolution it has been revived in other lands as a novelty.

Another obsolete Russian instrument is the doma, introduced by the Gauls and adopted by the Tartars, and still another is the goussle, a large instrument of the spinet type, even older than the two-thousand-year-old balalaika, and still more difficult to play.

During the reign of the last Czar it was said that there were only six men in Russia who could perform on the goussle. *Minna Irving.*



Bob fired through his coat pocket

Notches

The tropics search out a man's weakness and try to destroy him—and Anacaya had all but ruined Bob Maynard when his greatest test came

By EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

BOB MAYNARD came stumbling out of the shop of Simon the Saddler in that unpleasant state which lies between cold sobriety and the first mellow glow of drunkenness. He stood scowling up and down the Street of the Stars, on which Simon's shop was set, then went lurching along the stone sidewalk toward the main plaza of San Andres. He was in a surly humor, which prevented any feeling of gratitude toward the saddler.

It had been purest chance that he loafed in a corner of the shop when a country client of Simon came in with a great gourd of *guaro*. He should have been grateful that Simon invited him to share the gift of the range boss. But he was not.

"Never saw two such tanks as Simon and that range boss!" he snarled to himself. "I could have snatched up that rum while they were guzzling. For if ever I needed anything on this earth, I needed to get plastered to-day! Blind, ory-eyed, *non compos* drunk! And they killed a good three-fourths. Now, if I don't get some liquor—"

He stopped a moment to run over the list of his acquaintances here in the capital. Then shook his head. Not only had he lain around San Andres for seven months, going steadily down the grade as his money gave out, sponging off both foreigners and natives for food and drink, but this was the second time he had so fallen. Two years before, he had been known up and down the republic of Anacaya as a mining engineer second to none.

He had landed with a crash, that time. Five months of loafing and sponging, then he had straightened up and for ten months had been his old efficient self, as manager of the ancient Central Mine. Seven months ago, Don Ricardo Guerra had fired him.

"For drunkenness—save the mark!" Bob Maynard said now to himself, as he thought bitterly of that day. "For drunkenness, and I hadn't touched a drop for ten months."

He looked down at his wrinkled, dirty ducks. The soles were coming off his oxfords. He knew that his uncut hair poked through holes in his broken Panama. For perfect contrast to his shabbiness, Len Smith, the Standard Oil representative, came round a corner and almost ran into Maynard.

"Len, I'm certainly glad to see you," Bob Maynard said quickly, before Smith could move past him. "I was just going to look you up. I've got an idea and if you'll stake me to a little—"

"Listen, Bob," Smith said uncomfortably, "I have been as good a friend as you've had in Central America. But if you want frank talk—I'm done. All your friends are. We've given you up. So long as you acted like—well, like a white man, we were willing to ram our hands into our pockets and contribute. But you're just a beachcomber now and you know it.

"You haven't got an idea. You were lying. You want a dollar or so, to get drunk on. Bob, for decency's sake, why don't you make a stab at straightening up? Go up and hit some of the mines. You got back on your feet the other time—"

"And will you tell me what it got me?" Bob Maynard demanded savagely, sobered for the moment. "I did climb out of the whisky-barrel. I threw the bottle out of the window and I hung to the top of the pole for ten of the dryest months you ever heard of. I'm so constituted that I can't drink in moderation, like some of you. It's all or nothing with me. So it was nothing.

"I took that ancient, decrepit Central Mine of Guerra's and made it pay better than many a far richer mine, because I knew my stuff! I—I admit I had certain hopes there. It was no secret to you; you stopped with me in the manager's house and kidded me about—Elena. And then—"

"Bob," said Len Smith, more uncomfortably than ever, "I admit that you did that, with the mine. But—old Don Ricardo Guerra said he had to let you go because you broke your pledge to him. He said you *didn't* stick up the pole."

"He lied, without knowing it! I know how it was worked. Joe Gomez was my classmate at Boston Tech. I know Joe from the back. He was mad about Elena. He planted half-bottles of whisky in my bungalow and saw that Don Ricardo stumbled onto them. But the old man was too fair to take that as conclusive evidence.

"Then I came down one night with ptomaine poisoning; dam' near died. And Joe Gomez strewed bottles over my floor until it looked as if I'd wrecked a distillery. Don Ricardo took it for D. T.'s, and out I went on my ear. Elena sneered at me as I left the place."

He shoved his grimy hands into the pockets of his jacket and looked contemptuously at his one-time intimate. And he had the level eyes of the equal. He kept that pose for long enough to shoulder past Smith. But before he had gone two squares he had slumped. And when the thud of hoofs in the early dusk came to his ear, he looked upstreet, then dodged like a frightened rabbit into a doorway and hugged the obscurity.

SAN ANDRES, and all Anacaya, was in the hands of the Barretas, successful revolutionists. Alfonso, called "The Hairless," was president. But his younger brother, "El

Tigre," was minister of war, and it was El Tigre who ruled the country. Now, as Bob Maynard shrank into his sheltering doorway, a troop of smart hussars came by, stocky Anacayans in sky-blue, on matched black geldings. Bob had no need to recognize the sardonic yellow face of their leader. That was El Tigre's guard.

Farther back he shrank; almost held his breath. Only the day before, El Tigre had threatened to have the American derelict taken to the border and kicked across it by his soldiery as an undesirable. Then the guard was past. Back to Bob floated the voice of El Tigre, careless, musical, in a snatch of song:

"A woman to love; a bottle of wine;
A song to sing; a game to play—
And not with fat friar or haughty king
Would I change lots—"

That glimpse of the all-powerful minister of war brought to Bob abrupt picture of Elena Guerra. He stood once more on the sidewalk, staring blindly after the departing cavalry. But it was Elena he saw, slim, quick-moving, with black hair that held blue glints; scarlet-mouthed, owning the deepest violet eyes Bob Maynard had ever looked into. Vassar graduate; as American as if Powell Street in San Francisco had been her lifelong promenade. Exquisite; utterly and heart-wrenchingly desirable; as scornful, always, of "Maynard the Cask," as if he had been a leper.

She was in San Andres, now. She and her father, that fine old Spanish gentleman, Don Ricardo. And to Bob Maynard had drifted bits of backstairs gossip: how El Tigre Barreta, seeing Elena enter church, had himself gone in for the first time in many a year—[illegible]ot to worship. El Tigre, whose rule here, to-day, was comparable to a Nero's Rome; who reached out grasping, never-slipping hands for whatever he desired.

"What was it Simon said, that El Tigre told him?" Bob Maynard said aloud. "'In this life I desire but two things: the round, round arms of lovely women, and the lives of my enemies.'"

The Hotel Gran Française in San Andres was the gathering place of the foreign colony. There was a roofed and tunnel-like passageway leading from the Street of the Stars to the patio, the open square around which the hotel was built. Bob ducked into this passage and went softly down to its end. He stopped in the mouth of it to look into the palm-shaded, flower-studded garden. It was well-lit, the patio. Tables were in its center, grouped to make a rude horseshoe, for greater intimacy.

Bob stared curiously. Now, why the unusual number of Americans, British, Frenchmen, Italians, Germans? There was that fat-necked pig, Monty Groce, obviously half-seas over, sitting as always he tried to sit, in the commanding position. He was all grins. He waved his highball glass in a mocking gesture. Then Bob understood.

The national oil-concession that half of these men, oil scouts all, had been trying to secure, each for his own company, was now granted to Mundo Oil, Consolidated, employers of Monty Groce. Congress in special, secret session had passed the bill. It had been signed by Alfonso Barreta. It was now in Monty Groce's possession and he was celebrating—which meant, rubbing it into the losers.

"Yah!" he said chivalrously. "You birds thought you were go-getters. But you didn't read far enough into the book. Takes Yours Truly to handle these *colorado maduro* politicians. Of course, I'm sorry as all hell there weren't lots of concessions. Then you'd all have a chance. But there was just one and it was your hard luck that I needed it."

Bob Maynard forgot that he was a vagabond. His lip curled contemptuously. That big blowhard. Cheap sport. Howled like a stuck pig if he

dropped fifty at craps. But if he won, then he was the skillful gambler.

THEN Bob's thirst, roused to a flaming pain by sight of the glasses on the table, pushed out thought of Groce. He looked swiftly around. Papa Gaspard, owner of the Française and Bob's relentless creditor, was not in sight. There was a vacant chair at this end of a table; safely inconspicuous.

He slid across and into it. On the other side of the table a mountainous, gray-haired, pink-faced man turned small slate-gray eyes upon the newcomer. Almost imploringly, Bob looked at Vidal Capps and without change of expression, the old timber buyer looked away.

A *mozo* set a rye highball before Bob, without formality. It vanished in one swallow before the waiter could turn away. Silently, Bob held up his finger.

The *mozo* nodded and paddled off, to return quickly with another. Bob made two drinks of that, and when the third came he could sit looking at it with pleasant anticipation.

The whisky warmed his empty stomach. He was braced to an illusion of equality with these men here. He was pushed back over the gutter of his vagabondage; back to the days before his first slip, when he had been full member of that fraternity of lean, brown, hard-bitten men who keep the wheels moving below the Rio Grande. Caution was completely killed by his third drink. He toyed with its successor and listened with half-mocking, half-tolerant smile to Groce. The oil scout was telling of two bandits he had met the week before, in the back-blocks; of chasing them both.

A devil of perversity waked in Bob. Whisky always roused it. He was impelled to show himself as good as any there. Len Smith, the Standard Oil man, had given a very novel of battle, murder and sudden death, in two clipped paragraphs when Bob laughed and drew eyes to himself:

"I've seen the Yaquis, too, Len. But they don't compare with the breed of marauder current in Manchuria when I was a cub. Bunch stalked our party, one night. I woke up with two stinking hairpins standing over my very bed. Startled me, at first. Then I jerked this old .45—"

Awkwardly, with lack of familiarity, of skill, patent to those who watched, he hauled from a hip pocket a white-handled cowboy six-shooter. He set the glasses jumping as he slammed it down on the table. He indicated two notches in the bone grips.

"Well!" cried Monty Groce, getting up unsteadily to glare down the table. "The story changes. Last time you got drunk and told about those notches. it was two Lacandones in Peten. That time, the Française was donating your drinks. But since then Gaspard heaved you out. Who's buying your drinks tonight? Not I! Gaspard! Gaspard! Your cadging friend's back again. And I'm not responsible for his liquor, either!"

Papa Gaspard came trotting furiously into view. He glared like an outraged poodle at Bob Maynard, shaking a forefinger at him.

"Peeg!" he snarled. "You slink in my good house to worry my customers! Maynard the Cask! Already, you owe me much moneys which I shall never have. Cesar! Pedro! To the street with this—this *cochon!* But wait! Pay for the drink you have had!"

Dumbly, with shamed tears coming to his eyes, Bob Maynard stood, looking vacantly up the table. He saw Monty Groce's malevolent face, the thick lips curling in anticipation. He looked down and there at his fingertips was a five-peso bill. Vidal Capps's hand had not seemed to move, but that was a way of the huge man. Awkwardly, Bob pushed the bill farther toward the center of the table, snatched up his Colt and stumbled out.

He heard no sound, but on the dark sidewalk outside a hand gripped his arm. He turned fearfully, expecting the hotelkeeper's servants. But it was Vidal Capps.

"A damned sorry business, for a man of your caliber!" the huge timber buyer wheezed in his emotionless voice. "Why the hell don't you snap out of it? There's no better man of your game between El Paso and the Horn, when sober. Now, I've seen you crash twice. What was it the last time, at the Central? Elena Guerra?"

Dumbly, Bob nodded. Vidal Capps regarded him steadily. He was a queer stick, this canniest of all the concession-hunters of Central America. What he thought or planned was always impossible to guess.

"Well, you've got your revenge on her to-night," he said slowly. "She wouldn't marry you and—El Tigre isn't apt to marry her—"

"What?" cried Maynard. His shaking hand closed like a steel clamp on Capps's huge forearm. "What d'you mean? El Tigre hasn't actually carried her off? I heard he boasted that she was to be next, but—"

"Not yet. But that will come soon. Queen of his harem, up in the ministry, she will be. You haven't been sober long enough to hear of El Tigre's lawsuit with Don Ricardo? He claimed that they had an arrangement, whereby Don Ricardo was to sell him that Paso Robles mahogany tract, at about four cents on the dollar. Don Ricardo denied even discussing the matter with him. So El Tigre sued, and lost. He expected to. That was merely a move in his real game. He claimed that in the course of the trial Don Ricardo had called him a liar—which was so. And which was the truth.

"So he challenged Don Ricardo to a pistol-duel and, at four thirty to-day, while you were drunk with the pigs somewhere, I presume, they met outside of town. You hadn't heard?

"Don Ricardo, a shaky old man, who had never fought a duel; who couldn't hit a barn on the wing, with a shotgun. El Tigre, the best pistol-shot, barring only old Lee Christmas, in the six republics. It was murder. El Tigre laughed when Don Ricardo's bullet went feet wide. He laughed—and shot the old man deliberately through the heart. Don't know why I should trouble to tell you this; tell Maynard the Cask anything—"

"IT'S impossible! Incredible!" Bob mumbled stupidly. "Why, I saw the old man only a couple days ago. I—"

"Only a couple days ago," purred Vidal Capps. "Dear me! What sort of hat was he wearing? Had he had luncheon? Will it be sunny to-morrow, d' you think? Who'll be the next Republican Senator from Texas? We must get to the bottom of this. If you saw him only two days ago, it's of course impossible that he was killed to-day.

"You young idiot! This was cold, premeditated murder. Don Ricardo, alive, could call upon some influential friends up and down the republic, for assistance. He was the girl's only protector. For none of Elena Guerra's admirers had, or have the courage the Lord Almighty incorporated in the constitution of the common louse!"

"It's that I can't see him dead," Bob said hopelessly. "He was my best, my only friend, for all that he listened to that sneaking liar, Joe Gomez, and fired me for breaking my pledge to him—which I hadn't done."

"You'll find his body at his town house, 66 Calle Principal," Vidal Capps assured him acidly. "Why you should be surprised at this, I don't know. You have witnessed twelve or fourteen of these 'affairs of honor' of El Tigre's. And several very mysterious assassinations, since the Barretas climbed into the saddle. If you don't know that Alfonso is a mere figurehead, El Tigre

the real ruler and Alfonso scared stiff of him, then you have been drunk as a pig in an alley!"

Bob Maynard stood with clenched hands, staring at the dim walls over the way, without seeing them. He spoke slowly, between his teeth:

"Drunk as a pig in an alley is precisely what I've been. There's a weak streak in me. I know it, I can't do a damned thing for my own sake. There has to be some one in the background to work for it. It was Elena Guerra when I heaved the bottle behind me and made a show-place of the worn-out Central Mine. But I never got to first base with her. She looked at me always as if I'd been dragged from a sewer. When Don Ricardo fired me, she said that she had expected me to break my word."

"She's still in their house, Maynard. The funeral's to-morrow: a very quiet affair at dawn. El Tigre has the house watched. Feeling sure of his mouse, the cat isn't forced to move over-soon. He'll wait until, perhaps, to-morrow night. Sooner would be a bit too thick for even San Andres and our yellow Nero. Well?"

"I've got to think! I've got to think!" Bob muttered, to himself.

He went stumbling off and Vidal Capps drew a twisted stogie from his pocket. His slaty eyes were narrowed as he lit the stogie. He shook his head:

"What's that roll to be, Dice? A natural—or a puny little crap? It would be poetic justice, Don Ricardo, if, by dying, you righted the wrong you did that boy."

For two hours Bob stumbled unseeingly around the deserted streets. Something he must do, but what? What could he do? He came at last to the town house of Don Ricardo. There were men lurking in doorways across from it. With infinite pains he reached a side passage which had a door opening upon another passage by which one gained the patio. He halted in the patio and looked upward at the balcony which encircled the second floor; upon which bedrooms opened.

He knew the old man's room, for he had more than once been a guest in this house. There was a thin blade of light showing now, under Don Ricardo's door. He went up the stairs to the balcony and slipped into this room. There was a chair beside the bed, and he sat down to look at the peaceful face of the murdered man. Or was it peaceful?

As he stared, Bob had the illusion that Don Ricardo had but closed his eyes, the better to concentrate upon his sharp dilemma. He could have sworn, too, that the waxen lids lifted a little, and that Don Ricardo regarded him with narrowed and analytical gaze.

Now, what could he do? Warn Elena of El Tigre's all-powerful hand, which as surely overhung this house as if it covered a rabbit warren? Surely Don Ricardo had guessed as much as any one of the Minister of War's plans. Surely Elena now understood her situation.

What could he, a penniless outcast, offer her of protection? He could not even beg from his own kind a single meal, a single drink. He stared down at Don Ricardo. If only the old man had killed that snake.

His eyes widened slowly. His hand went back to the hip pocket into which he had rammed the Colt. Then his mouth twisted. He and Don Ricardo, as killers, were about equally efficient. Those two notches, of which he had told so many tales, had been on the pistol when he purchased it of a wandering Texan, three years before.

But he nodded to Don Ricardo:

"Trust me!" he said. "I'm going to help—if I can."

GOING toward the door, the broken sole of his oxford caught on a grass rug and he stumbled. He went on out. As he passed Elena's door he stopped and looked at it.

Suddenly it swung open, and there,

framed in that rectangle of yellow light, the girl stood, staring at him. He thought that her face was like gray paper for color. But the violet eyes, so deep that they seemed black tonight, were steady. It came to him flashingly that the Vassar graduate, the Americanized girl, had vanished. Here was *la grande señorita*—the lady of a race of Spanish hidalgos.

A light flickered in her eyes, but was gone so swiftly that he thought himself mistaken. The scarlet mouth twisted, but straightened instantly to a thin line. She regarded him with the expression he knew so well and remembered so vividly: analytical, suspicious, challenging, all in one.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded evenly.

"I heard of—this thing. I had to come. Don Ricardo was wrong, once. He believed that I had broken a pledge made him. I had not, but he honestly believed I had. I counted him the best friend I had in the world. I had to come. Too, I heard of El Tigre's reason."

"Maynard the Cask!" she said slowly in a tone that stung. "Still he clings to the story of his ptomaine poisoning. Instead of gratitude toward the man who took him from the gutter and blindly, foolishly, trusted him, when none other would, he feels that he was wronged. But he is magnanimous! He will come to the house of that dead man and say how charitable he is."

"I said nothing of the sort!" Bob snapped angrily, straightening. "I feel nothing of the sort. I counted him my best, my only friend, whatever he felt toward me. I came in through the side passage. I came in past secret police. They are all around the house."

Her face went whiter still. One slim hand came up to claw the thin silk over her breasts. Then she lifted her chin defiantly:

"I know his thought, El Tigre's. He has put guards about the house. But I am in no danger. My plans are made for getting away from the capital—escaping him."

"You think that Joe Gomez can spirit you away," Bob nodded, intuition supplying the answer. Her face, control it as she might, still told that his guess was right.

"I said only that my plans are made. What they may be is nothing to you."

Openly she looked him up and down, red underlip curling, from his bare, shaggy head to the broken, once white oxfords on his sockless feet. Then her eyes came back to his puffy stubbled face.

"Ptomaine poisoning again," she said stingingly. "The same trouble that you had at El Central."

Bob hardly heard her. He was picturing with inner eye José Gomez. For an instant red jealousy flared up in him. Gomez was of her own race; he was handsome; he was a passable engineer. And that he loved her insanely there was no doubt. For he had committed a dozen underhand strokes to remove Maynard, his rival, from the field.

"In a sense," he nodded, "you are right. There is no reason for your telling me your plans. No reason that you should consider me now, when you never considered me then, when I had a right to be considered. When I was—"

He looked down at himself, up again at her.

"When I was a man! I am not expecting consideration."

He fought back his jealous envy of Gomez as he tried to weigh José fairly, impartially, considering him here only as the tool to save Elena. And he knew Gomez well; in the days when José had been his rival, he had considered his second in command most carefully.

Only with the most incredible blind luck could Gomez come into San Andres, known partisan of Don Ricardo as he was, and take the girl out past a

swarm of secret police and soldiers—men to whom El Tigre's whim was everything and law, morality, anything else, utterly nothing. Gomez was not too persistent, not too brave. He would always prefer looking for the easy path, to sticking upon a hard one.

ELENA watched him setly. Slowly her thin, dark brows drew together in a puzzled frown. The red mouth softened. But when he faced her, and into his eyes leaped yearning, she gave no sign that she saw. As for Bob, he was rememorizing every idolized detail of her face. He lifted a shoulder and she remembered the gesture as his habitual one. She frowned.

"I'm going now," he said. "If Joe gets your message by dawn, he'll need a full day to arrange anything. So it will be to-morrow night at the very earliest before you can expect him. I have an idea. It may make things easier for you and for Joe. But, to-morrow, at the funeral, keep close to your friends. Don't give El Tigre any opportunities. I most conceivably may fail in what I am thinking of. Good-by!"

"I—you—what do you mean to do, Bob?"

Then she marked again the puffy face, the bloodshot eyes; caught the strong odor of guaro and of whisky from his breath.

"For whatever you do, I am, of course, most grateful."

Bob nodded. He understood the contempt very well. He slipped outside and stood at the end of the side passage. The dark group of watchers across the street he found. But he slid noiselessly along the wall and had reached the corner before a man popped from a doorway and peered into his very face. Bob mumbled something and went on. The spy let him go, but stood looking after him.

Bob went back to the Gran Francaise. The passage and the patio alike were dark. He went upstairs and to Vidal Capps's door. He knocked softly on it until Capps answered, then slipped inside. He moved over to squat beside the bed, where Capps's huge figure showed against a window like a silhouette of Buddha.

"I want some help from you," Bob said. "I want a bath and a shave and some clean clothes. I'll want breakfast to-morrow morning. And one long drink—then. It will amaze you, of course, but I'm not begging! I'll trade you this famous double-notched .45 for what I want."

"Why do you want these things?" wheezed Capps. He leaned a little forward in the darkness, as if trying to probe through to Bob's face.

Bob laughed softly.

"*Porque? Porque!* Why? Because! Ask me no questions and I'll promise you that you'll not regret granting me this small favor. And this old gun's worth thirty dollars gold, so you'll not lose financially."

"All right," said Capps abruptly. "Switch on the light. I'll slip down and borrow some clothes from Len Smith; you two are of a size."

Bob took the outfit Capps brought back. He went to the bathroom, and when he came back, half an hour later, he found the big timber buyer with a brown Durham cigarette in a mouth corner, squinting down at the white-handled .45.

"Makes a hell of a difference," Capps complimented him. "Would hardly know you had ever been beach combing. I—hope you stay this way, Bob."

"Don't worry," Bob returned with a tight grin. "I think I can promise you that I will for the rest of my life. I expect to take just one more drink from now until the moment I cash in. That will be to-morrow morning. Well, I'll see you at breakfast time."

He looked down smilingly at himself. Len Smith had contributed white silk shirt and blue four-in-hand tie; a

suit of starched brown linen; white silken hose and buck oxfords; a stiff straw hat. Bob nodded to himself, picked up the white-handled gun and went out. Downstairs, he drew a chair into a dusky corner of the patio and sat down. As his eyes grew used to the gloom, he saw something standing on a table. He studied it until he saw that it was a bottle of Scotch whisky. The *mozo* had forgotten to take it away.

"To think that *I* have achieved a mental state, an—isolation from what I was this afternoon, that permits me to look upon that Black-and-White and keep my seat!"

It was the strangest night of his life. For his mind worked with a clarity he had never experienced; and this sense of isolation from his own past and from everything around him persisted. He was hardly conscious of the passage of the hours. The first gray light of dawn came; it spread and banished the night. Looking upward he could see over the roof of the hotel the truncated cone of the old woman. From the volcano's crater rose a thin plume of vapor, snow white.

Still, Bob did not move. Still he stared ahead with small smile.

VIDAL CAPPS came down shortly after seven. That imperturbable man almost lifted sandy brows at sight of Bob.

"You're an early worm!" he wheezed. "Lucky no birds are around—tall, yellow birds. Ready for breakfast?"

"Quite," nodded Bob. "But first—"

He got up, a thought stiffly; went over to the tall round bottle of Scotch. Vidal Capps watched with eyes invisible while Bob's slightly tremulous hands were busied with bottle and glass. Bob drained a tall three fingers and set the glass down.

"As I said last night, I believe that's my last drink. It will have to do me."

As the table *mozo* brought in the peeled green oranges, each skewered on a fork, Bob commandeered pencil and paper from his host. Very calmly he began to write:

MY DEAR ELENA:

He stopped there for an instant. Odd that here he sat, on the morning of what amounted to his day of execution, writing "love's first message and its last"; using, for the first time, even so colorless an endearment as that!

I know that last night if you hoped for anything you hoped to hear me say that I should challenge El Tigre to a duel. You hardly expected this of me, for you never expected anything of me.

And even if you had asked me point-blank to fight a duel with him, I must have answered that this would end only in my death.

For he is too deadly with the pistol. I am barely passable. I know that you have heard how I claimed to have cut two notches on my Colt for two men I had killed. But I am done with barroom romancing to-day. Those notches were on the pistol when I bought it, second-hand.

So, a challenge to El Tigre was and is out of the question, from the standpoint of effectiveness, if nothing else. I have a plan which promises more. Joe will, I hope, be very successful in whatever course he undertakes. But I cannot trust him. Not to the extent of giving up my own plan, which, if I have luck, will make Joe's help unnecessary to you.

By the time you read this, I shall be either successful or the reverse. Either way, I must repeat what I said last night, about Don Ricardo being my best friend. I certainly owe him this effort I'm making. Still it isn't wholly on that account that I roll the dice to-day. Not wholly for his sake. Not—he hesitated a long two minutes here, while the *mozo* set before him coffee and hot milk and French rolls and eggs—not even mostly on his account. If you will think of our days at El Central, of what you must know that I wanted to say to you, you will understand.

Good-by,
ROBERT MAYNARD.

He sat smiling at the sheet while he

ate breakfast. Then he bent to it and added a postscript:

It was *not* ptomaine poisoning last night. But at the mine—it was!

Other guests of the Française came into the patio and looked askance at Vidal Capps's guest. But Bob was beyond noticing them as more than vague shapes, while he ate mechanically. It would be soon, now; very soon. He was going out to kill a man; going out to kill El Tigre Barreta. The sentence singsonged in his brain, over and over. He was going to kill El Tigre, and he would not survive his victim five minutes. Could not. He felt as if he walked wrapped in a fog; all these well-known faces, everything was hazy, far-away.

"You've always bragged about your *mozo*," he said to Vidal Capps, rousing himself a little. "You've claimed he could wriggle through a knothole if you told him to do that. Now, will you guarantee that he can slip past El Tigre's spies and put this note in Elena Guerra's hand? All right, then. I'm going to stroll about town a bit. You'll hear of me soon."

He went out, still in that old haze. On his left, a half dozen blocks distant, was the Plaza Principal, walled in by the cathedral and neighboring palaces of government. On the west side was the white palace of the President, with that of the Minister of War adjoining. Early as it was, Bob was jostled by merchant and trader and army officer, for the forenoon is the time of business in Central America. As he reached the broad portico of the Ministry of War, El Tigre Barreta's hussar guard debouched into the street a few blocks down.

THERE was a stocky infantryman pacing his beat across the portico. He ported arms as Bob climbed the steps. But he was not proof against the perfect, smiling ease of this immaculate American.

"It's all right, my friend," Bob assured him in Spanish. "The minister expects me." Then he pushed on by, going neither slow nor fast.

Voices from just within the door reached him as he neared the entrance.

"Yes, excellency, both I and all my men know him well—as do the alleys of the capital, *por Dios!* But, so far, he has not been seen in his usual haunts. We will have him inside the hour, however. Morales leaned from a doorway last night and saw him plainly. But there was no order for his arrest then. It was not until your excellency suggested it that I thought of his having been in the Guerra house."

"Bring him directly to me." This was El Tigre's voice, in answer to the chief of the secret police. "And bring him, Gomez. Bring him quickly. Else—"

El Tigre, tugging at a white glove, yellow face thoughtful, came through the big doorway. Beside him was the Minister of Police, an individual who was the superior of that chief of secret police who had just received his orders and vanished. The pair were out on the portico before they saw Bob Maynard, who stood easily, with hands in the pockets of his linen coat, regarding them.

"Why—it is the man himself!" cried El Tigre. Then white teeth flashed beneath small, spike-pointed black mustache. "This is most kind, my dear beach comber! You hear that I—am interested in your visits of last night. You hurry to find me and put yourself at my service. Is it not kind, friendly, Soto?"

The Minister of Police was a stolid soul. He nodded blankly, heavy face moveless. El Tigre grinned catlike, his shako'd head a little on one side as he studied Bob Maynard, who in his turn smiled slightly at the man he had come to kill. Bob spoke softly:

"Ye-es, I knew Morales recognized me last night. I came to call on you, as you say. With thought of doing a

kindness, a service—but not precisely as you have said, Barreta. You are called the most expert pistol shot in the republic. A duel with you is death—for the other party. But if I could not challenge you, I saw another way. Here, now, the odds are evener."

"What do you mean?" snapped El Tigre. His black eyes were narrowed and watchful, snake steady. They were both speaking English, and, from the Minister of Police's puzzled face, Bob thought that this went over his head.

"I mean that you and I have come to the end of the trail this morning. You will not leave this portico alive. Nor shall I, in all probability. I've decided, Barreta, that the good of the country demands your execution. I'm willing to trade my life for yours, to do that job—killing you."

El Tigre's hand was at his patent leather belt, close to the pearl butt of his long .38 revolver. He snatched at it; jerked it out twinklingly and leveled it with snarling flash of teeth in twisted mouth. Bob fired through his coat pocket. Miss! El Tigre's bullet fanned his very face.

Bob fired again, and El Tigre, forehead fairly blown out by the dum-dummed .45 slug, fell sidewise against the Minister of Police and spoiled that official's shot at Bob. Twice more Bob flipped back the hammer, acting mechanically, instinctively. He saw the Minister of Police crumple as if in protection, over El Tigre's body. From behind him came the soar of a rifle as he hauled the white-handled gun from his pocket and looked vaguely at the two notches on the butt, notches which now had a meaning that none could doubt.

He turned, having seen a black splotch leap out on the white marble front of the palace. The sentry was frantically loading his ancient single-shot Remington. Bob heard sounds and saw things about him, as if they were far away.

"Here, this 'll never do," he muttered to himself. "He'll load that dam' yellow-belly yet and try another pot shot at me. Got to stop that."

He stepped over to the excited sentry and rapped him over the head with the .45's barrel. The sentry dropped; and some one rushed up the steps like a charging elephant and seized Bob's arm. Bob let the Colt drop. It was all over now. El Tigre Barreta was beyond troubling Elena. Joe Gomez could jog into town at his leisure. And Maynard the Cask had achieved this. It was more than he had expected to have on the credit side when his time came.

"All right," Bob mumbled stupidly. "I surrender. I killed El Tigre. I admit it."

"SNAP out of it, you young idiot!" Vidal Capps rasped in his ear. "Come on! This way! Across the portico and jump down."

He half carried, half shoved Bob to the portico's end, and lifted him over the balustrade. They landed on the lawn, and Vidal Capps had Bob instantly by the arm again. Across the grass and up the steps of the presidential palace. Vidal Capps merely snapped his fingers at the sentry here and they were by. Into the entry hall, where the benches were filled with job-hunters and favor beggars.

Two sentries stood before a great rosewood door. Like the outer guard, these men seemed to know Vidal Capps. They presented arms, and unceremoniously he threw open that door and dragged Bob inside.

President Alfonso Barreta sat behind a huge rosewood desk. He was as yellow of face as had been his brother. But also, he was sinisterly, repulsively hairless. He had a hand mirror and a pocket comb, and he was making the motions of combing his shiny, eggshell bald skull. He looked up quickly, his cloudy, lashless black eyes those of a cunning, startled animal.

"Ah, hallo, hallo!" he said to Capps, in an Oxonian accent weird to be coming from that yellow face. "What's up, old boy?"

"Double the guards at the doors. Give orders to admit nobody!"

"Revolution!" gasped Alfonso Barreta. He jabbed a button and an officer popped in from a rear room and was gone with the order before the bell's echoes had died.

"Revolution, eh?" he cried. "I will not be taken—"

"No-o, not a revolution. You're quite safe, Mr. President. But about three minutes ago El Tigre tried to kill this boy. He's one of my timber scouts. Your brother resented Maynard's attentions to—Elena Guerra."

"But, my de-ar old fellow!" smirked Alfonso. "I know El Tigre. You know El Tigre, Capps, my good friend. You know that I do not pretend to control him. Besides, even if El Tigre tried, he did not succeed, eh? The boy is yet alive. That, my de-ar Capps, is obvious. I can do nothing with my brother."

"Nor anything for him. Maynard had to kill him in self-defense. Killed Soto, too. Soto fired at him after El Tigre had fired and missed and dropped dead."

"Killed El Tigre? Impossible! Killed El Tigre!"

Then the first flicker of amazement died, and to Bob Maynard, staring dully and wondering what this play was all about, it seemed that into the cunning little eyes, and over the mobile yellow face, came the faintest shadow of pleasure.

"No, it's quite possible. Listen! The hussar guard has arrived. They'll feel like raising hell at first. El Tigre was their idol. But I'm putting this boy under your protection. As you said: I know El Tigre; you know El Tigre. We both know what a violent, lawless temper was his. I assure you that Maynard's action was thoroughly justified. *I* assure you."

"But, my de-ar Capps! This is the devil of a mess! To kill the Minister of War and the Minister of Police. Oh, *Dios mio!* I cannot interfere. This is a matter for the civil judiciary. There must be a formal trial. Assurance to the people of my country that the laws of the republic—"

BOB still stood apathetically. He felt like one already dead. Vidal Capps had proved quick-witted; he had saved him from immediate death at the hands of those soldiers outside. But even Vidal Capps, with all the influence he was said to possess, and wield, could do no more. In any Barreta-controlled court, his death was as certain as if Capps had not interfered.

"I'm asking this as a favor!" Capps interrupted Barreta in surprised tone. "Didn't you understand that? Just as a small favor, between good friends! And what does it amount to? A sheet of paper, a half dozen lines scribbled on it: full pardon to Robert Maynard for any offense that has been or may be charged against him, in connection with his act of self-defense, of justifiable homicide, which resulted in the death of Joaquin Barreta, sometimes known as El Tigre, Minister of War.

"Your signature—aren't you *El Presidente?* Certainly you are! Ten minutes ago, Alfonso Barreta, ten minutes ago you were not ruler of Anacaya. Now, thanks to this boy, you are!

"Now, of the price my outfit pays for those El Toro government timber lands, you cut with nobody. More! We have argued a bit over the price. *Bueno!* I grant your argument. An even four millions, not three-nine."

"You are right! My de-ar Capps, you are always right! It would be unjust to submit this young man to the tortures of a trial. I have decided, having heard the evidence. I will write him the pardon. I will write also a proclamation addressed to the people,

explaining the details of the affair. What is that pounding on the door? Those accursed hussars of El Tigre's—"

But it was one of the sentries, very apologetic. A lady.

But the lady was past him. No eyes had she for the august presence of Anacaya's ruler. Bob Maynard, who found it hard to come back out of the shadow of death, stared at her. White faced, with violet eyes blazing, she seemed of a piece with all of this phantasy.

"Bob! Oh, Bob, dear!" she panted. "I saw outside—what you have done. You—they didn't hurt you? They didn't? Are you sure? But they will—"

"On the contrary, Miss Guerra," wheezed Vidal Capps very dryly, "the President, having heard the facts of the case, has decided that Bob acted in self-defense and is in no degree blameworthy. He—we retire now to the inner study to write a proclamation to that effect. Your excellency!"

Left alone, Bob stared down at her. She was so close to him. He had never seen, except in his craziest dreams, *that* expression on the clear face. Analysis, suspicion, challenge, all were vanished. Hardness was gone. She was like a little, little girl, looking trustfully up at him. One slim hand crept up to catch his shoulder, as if that were the most natural thing in the world.

"Oh, Bob, dear, I read your letter twice before I understood—understood what you must mean to do; and understood, too, how I had always misunderstood. I ran from the house like a mad thing. Instinct, I suppose, brought me here and—I saw them. Mr. Capps was right about Barreta's pardon?"

"Quite!" Bob nodded dryly. He was wholly across the line now; entirely a living man again, and finding it a world very much worth the while of any man.

"He's now writing out the pardon, and pocketing an unexpected hundred thousand. As soon as he's finished the pardon and hidden the money, he's going out to register terrific grief over the unavoidable death of El Tigre Barreta. But you and I—well, what matter? So long as, now, forever, it *is* you and I?"

THE END

Crusoe's Island

WHY Robinson Crusoe ever left his island is a mystery when one considers the matter in the light of recent investigation. In fact, a Frenchman who was likewise shipwrecked there, some forty years ago, has refused to leave because of the life of ease afforded by the place.

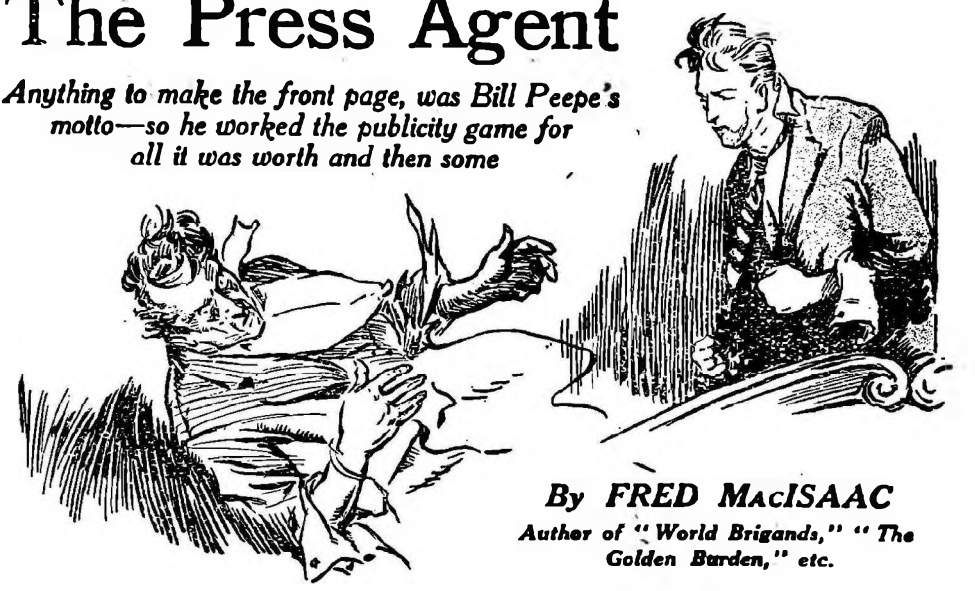
From London comes the report of a recent survey of Juan Fernandez Island, the abode of Alexander Selkirk, the original Robinson Crusoe. The report says that the island is a veritable paradise, it being one of the most fruitful spots in South America. Every imaginable plant grows and thrives there.

Selkirk only spent four years on Juan Fernandez Island, but his successor, the Frenchman, has voluntarily increased the record tenfold and appears to be willing to keep it up. The present king of Crusoe's island appears to have solved the question of the high cost of living in a wise manner.

Guy Rader.

The Press Agent

Anything to make the front page, was Bill Peepe's motto—so he worked the publicity game for all it was worth and then some



By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "World Brigands," "The Golden Burden," etc.

Novelette—Complete

CHAPTER I.

BILL PEEPE'S IN TOWN!

AT seven o'clock of a dark and stormy morning Bill Peepe was awakened by the Pullman porter who violently dragged the blanket which covered Bill until he wasn't covered at all.

"Hey, you, quit that," he protested furiously.

"Sorry, boss, dis is de third time I awakened yo', sah, and in 'bout five minutes dey'll yank this heah train out to de yards."

"Is this Boston?"

"Yes, sah."

"Well, why didn't you say so before!"

Five minutes later, Bill Peepe stumbled off the Pullman only partially dressed, and completed his toilet in the station washroom. It was awful to be waked up at seven in the morning, awful to arrive in Boston on a raw, dank, dismal November day, awful to be representing Robert Hammond, the classic actor, instead of a rip-roaring musical comedy; and particularly awful to be broke.

Before leaving New York, Bill had been present when ivory cubes were rolling on a green table, and they had rolled wrong. His fifty-dollar advance was gone, his diamond ring was gone, and he would have lost his railroad ticket if the proprietor of the game hadn't refused to accept it, insisting upon his immediate departure for his train.

Bill Peepe regarded his doleful countenance in the mirror of the station washroom. He needed a shave. His blue eyes were a bit bleary, and even at his best he was not handsome. However he had youth, though he didn't feel exuberant about it. He was thirty-three; he had earned good money for years and hadn't yet saved a cent; he was a horrible example of why men go wrong, and, he reflected, he was going to be a different fellow in the future.

When he was washed and combed he felt a little better. After all, Boston was an old stamping ground of his, and he was the press representative of

Flo jumped up on the sofa and brazenly rooted for her man

the great Shakespearean actor, Robert Hammond.

He had a couple of bags and a "cut trunk," a trunk full of newspaper cuts of Robert Hammond. On the Boston newspapers were a number of good old pals each one of whom would loan a fellow a five-spot. And most likely he had credit. What the dickens? All would be well.

He picked up his bags and leaped into a taxi.

"Grand Union Hotel," he directed.

At the hotel he waved his hand to the starter.

"Pay the taxi and bring in my bags," he said airily. To the clerk he extended the glad hand of greeting though he had never seen this fellow before.

"Old Bill Peepe's in town," he announced. "Representing Robert Hammond, the greatest actor in the world, who comes to the Trimount Theater next week. Give old Bill a very nice cheap room and a bath that runs hot water, and send up my bags and here's the check for my trunk."

"Right you are, Mr. Peepe," smiled the clerk. "Want to go up?"

"Later. Just now I want to see if your combination breakfasts have the flavor as of yore."

"I'll say they have, Mr. Peepe. By the way, my wife is interested in Shakespeare."

"She will have her chance, brother. Old Bill Peepe knows his friends and he writes passes with both the right and left hand."

The penniless Mr. Peepe then entered the dining room and consumed a mountain of griddle cakes flanked with young sausages and deluged in maple syrup; and he gave the waiter a pass for the show in lieu of a tip. This matter having been attended to, he went to his room and turned in for three hours in order to make up for the repose he hadn't got on the train.

HE was awakened by his telephone bell. "Hello," he roared.

"I bet I woke you up," said a soft and laughing voice on the other end of the line.

"It's a pleasant awakening, darling," he cooed.

"Oh, you recognized my voice."

"Instantly, sweetheart. Who the deuce are you?"

"I'm Flo Rivers."

"Hello, Flo," he said uncertainly.

"Oh, you don't remember me."

"Well, I'm kinda dopey this morning; just got in on the sleeper."

"I was a chorus girl in 'Glorious Gladys' two years ago."

"Oh, yeah? What's on your mind, babe?" His tone had changed and she sensed that his cordiality was waning.

"I wondered if I might see you for a few minutes."

"Are you in the hotel?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll be dressed in ten minutes and I'll open the door. Come on down to 242."

"Oh, thank you," she said gratefully.

"Now who the deuce is Flo Rivers," he mused as he dressed. "I s'pose I know her, I know 'em all. Well, let's hope she's easy on the eyes."

He finished dressing and left his door ajar. In the Grand Union Hotel it was perfectly *comme il faut* for a lady to call on a gentleman in his room or vice versa provided the door was open. If it happened to slam the house detective came up and put them both out.

"May I come in?" asked the telephone voice.

"Enter, fair one," he invited.

Flo Rivers entered. He inspected her appreciatively, but without recognition. Miss Rivers was a small, blond girl with a round rosy face, a pair of round blue eyes, much yellow hair—her own, too—and a delectable figure. Her mouth was small and her chin was dainty, and her smile was wistful and appealing.

"Oh, you don't remember me," she wailed.

"How could I ever forget you? It's wonderful of me to do it," said Bill.

"I guess it's probably because I was only seventeen and my mother traveled with the show and so I never went out much to parties."

"That was it," he declared. "I was always noted for keeping away from stage mothers. Where is the old lady now?"

"She died a year ago," said Flo, and her big eyes filled with tears.

"Why, you poor baby," he cried with ready sympathy and he took her little white hand and patted it. "And I bet you're in trouble now."

She nodded. "I saw you at breakfast," she said. "I was so worried I couldn't sleep and I went down to breakfast early. I was going to speak to you then, but I lost my nerve."

"Well, darling, tell papa the worst."

"I'm in hock for the hotel bill," she said dolefully. "I don't know what I'm to do."

"My belief that you called me up because you always loved me is now laid away in lavender," he sighed. "How large is the hotel bill?"

"Thirty dollars. I wondered if you would lend it to me and the fare back to New York."

"What you going to do when you get there? Get a jŏb?"

"No, but something will be sure to happen in New York."

"Sit down, delightful. Park your dogs on that chair, use my furniture as though it was your own. Listen to me now. My wealth at this moment is zero. I didn't have coin enough to tip the Pullman porter. I nerved my way into the hotel and I'll have to eat all my meals here because it's the only place in town where I don't have to pay cash. Of all the men in this fair city you had to make your appeal to the only one who didn't have a sou marque."

"OH," said Flo. "Oh." The second "oh" was a little squeak which indicated a flood of tears was *en route*.

"Dam the torrent," he commanded. "With your looks and my brains this

isn't a desperate situation in the least. Are they going to fire you out of the hotel?"

"Yes. I have to leave to-night."

"Well, we've still got all day. I suppose you've already hocked your junk."

"Yes."

"How did you get into this mess anyway?" he demanded. "Are you alone here?"

"It was like this," said Flo pecking at her eyes with a wisp of a handkerchief. "I came over six weeks ago to play the lead in a stock company. It was a very bad company in a suburban theater, but I had beautiful rôles, only they never paid me anything at all and I worked six weeks and then they shut up shop."

Bill Peepe laughed the ironical laugh of a press agent thinking about actors. "Dress them up as beautiful as you like, they are still boloney," he observed. "Nobody else in the world except an actor would work six weeks without getting a cent. It's a mistake to pay actors, anyway; give them good parts and they'd pay you. How long have you been a legit? You look like a regular chorine."

"This was my first legitimate engagement," she admitted.

"And it was a lulu. My Lord, how desperate you must have been when you tackled me. You probably never got a how de do from me in the old days."

"I knew you had a kind heart," she insinuated.

"No matter how dumb they are, they can catch fish," he stated. "Well, Desirable, go back to your hiding place and remain on call. I'll put the old bean to work on your situation and see how I can get you a roll. By the way, poor old Bill is busted. Will you pay him a commission on what he gets you?"

"I should say I would," she declared. "And I'm going to kiss you now for being so good to me."

"Purse your ruby lips," he commanded. "There, baby. It was very nice. Maybe I'll be around for another one sometime. Trot now. Out you go."

Flo started away obediently, but paused at the door. "I just know everything is going to be all right now that you are here," she declared.

"Banana oil," he retorted. "Slide, Flo, slide."

Observing that there lay upon the doorsill a copy of a Boston morning paper he read it while he shaved. He saw that the President said that the country was never so prosperous and that the cotton mills of Fall River had shut down. He noticed that France was going to pay her debt to the United States if proper arrangements could be made and that the Army football team expected to lick Notre Dame. And then he saw that P. Milton Moulton, the richest man in New York, had just left Boston, after a visit to his son, P. Milton, Jr., who was a senior at Harvard.

By and by he descended into the lobby and, leaning in front of the desk, he recognized Percival Gower who was managing director of the Grand Union. It was desirable that he get some cash money from the hotel, but Mr. Gower was familiar with the methods of press agents of traveling shows, and hence most unlikely to loosen up. Bill was lucky not to be asked to pay his bill day by day. Gower nodded to him curtly.

"Whom are you representing this time, Peepe?" he asked.

"Robert Hammond, the Shakespearean actor."

"That ham?" he scoffed.

"I won't argue with you. On the contrary, I'm going to save your life."

"Yes?"

"There is a very beautiful little girl staying here named Flo Rivers."

"Until to-night," said Gower. Gower was a fat man, but not the good-natured type of fat man. He might be

described as a rogue elephant. "That doll baby is into us for over a week and she goes out to-night."

"What?" exclaimed Bill Peepe. "You're going to chuck her out? She told me she was leaving but I thought she was just changing her hotel. I was going to suggest that you keep her here, pay her to stay if necessary—and you were going to throw her out. I'll say I'm saving your life."

Gower rubbed his bald head with his right hand and patted his paunch with his left. He eyed Peepe dubiously.

"Pay her to stay? Think I'm crazy?"

"Just as your hotel was going to break onto the front page of every paper in the country," sighed Bill. "You'll make the front page, but how! How, I ask you?"

"Come on, Bill," urged Gower, who was now intensely interested. "What's up?"

"What did you ever do for me?" demanded Bill. "Go on and chuck her out."

"No, I won't. What's the story?"

CHAPTER II.

WELL HEATED AIR.

"YOU never did anything for me so why should I save your life? However, slip me fifty bucks and charge it to the Robert Hammond company. If you don't think the story is worth it I'll give you back the money."

"Give this robber fifty dollars," Gower directed the cashier.

"All right," said Bill as he pocketed the cash. "Did you see in the paper to-day that P. Milton Moulton was in town?"

"Yes. He stayed at the Ritz."

"He came to town to see his son who is a senior at Harvard; and the reason he came to see his son is upstairs in this hotel."

"Miss Rivers?" demanded Gower.

Bill nodded. "Miss Rivers is engaged to J. Milton, Jr. Old man Moulton yesterday offered Flo one hundred thousand dollars to give up his son and heir. The girl you are going to chuck out to-night refused the hundred thousand dollars."

"You don't say so," exclaimed the hotel proprietor.

"And why did she refuse? Because she knows she can get five hundred thousand. The letters alone are worth a half a million."

"Upon my word!" gasped Gower.

"J. Milton Moulton, Jr., has defied his father," continued old Bill Peepe. "He says that he loves Flo and intends to make her his wife even if the old man disinherits him; but between ourselves, Flo made quite an impression on the old boy and it looks as though everything was coming out all right. She's an unusual girl."

"Yes, indeed," said Mr. Gower. "A very sweet, very beautiful little lady."

"And if you should throw the fiancée of J. Milton Moulton, Jr., out in the snow, what a fine hunk of tripe you'd turn out to be!" remarked Bill. "About to-morrow or next day the papers are going to get this romance and how they will eat it up."

"I'll change Miss Rivers to a suite and tell her to draw on us for any cash she may need," said Gower. "I'm much obliged to you, Peepe, for tipping me off to this."

"I always liked you, Gower," lied Bill.

He left the hotel manager still marveling at the romance and not at all realizing how utterly romantic it was.

"Got to see that Dumb Dora and tell her not to be surprised at anything, and to keep her mouth shut no matter what happens," he said to himself as he hurried to the elevator.

As the elevator mounted, so did his admiration for the yarn he had just invented, this entirely unpremeditated coup. It was nothing less than genius, he assured himself. When he began

his conversation with Gower he had no purpose other than pass the time of day and make a touch.

Although he had read of the visit of J. Milton Moulton to his son at Harvard while he shaved, it had made no impression upon him at the time, and then, suddenly, he had been inspired to present to the hotel proprietor a very plausible explanation of the visit of the great man to Boston. It had boomed the stock of Flo Rivers, and got him an advance of fifty dollars as easy as falling out of an airplane.

One of the things which had never troubled Bill Peepe during his career was his conscience. Early in life he had possessed a complete set of principles, but he had mislaid them and hadn't found it out yet. If Bill had happened to find a pocketbook containing ten thousand dollars and the card of the owner, he would have thrown the pocketbook away, torn the card up, and put the ten thousand in his pocket with never a qualm.

He would not commit a murder, he would not steal outright except from his employer via the expense account, he would not play a dirty trick on anybody who had never done such a thing to him—and that was about all there was to his code.

Lying was not a sin, it was his profession; drinking was not a sin, it was his greatest pleasure; and his avocation was handing girls a line and failing to make good. Old Bill Peepe is the villain in this story, but he was a likable rogue, and he had a very kind heart. When he had money in his pocket he could not resist a hard luck story, he never passed a beggar without giving something, and he was always good to dumb animals—in which category he placed Flo Rivers.

THERE were only two kinds of girls in Bill's category: dumb, in which class went the innocent, sweet, and unsophisticated; and "live," which consisted of the wise-cracking, hard-living and heavy-drinking women in the profession.

This Rivers kid had appealed to him for aid, and, lacking the wherewithal to settle her bill and send her back to New York to starve to death or fall into bad hands, he had fixed her for life with a few well-chosen words. Only her own stupidity could spoil things.

He tapped on the door of Room 647, a small room minus a bath, and it was opened a crack by Flo. Her eyes were red. Weeping? Was it possible she lacked confidence in old Bill?

"Moon of my delight," he proclaimed. "You are saved. Presently the manager of this hotel will be up to see you and ask you if you would kindly move into a suite without extra charge. And if you need any money, just sign a card at the desk. Better start with a hundred and give me half."

"I—I can't believe it," gasped the Botticelli infant. "How did you do it?"

Bill pushed into the room and seated himself on the bed, from which he grinned at her like a Cheshire cat.

"As a magician pulls a live rabbit out of a tall hat, I gave Gower a song and dance about you that made you his most popular guest. It's a positive gift the way I think of things."

"But what did you say?" she demanded, her eyes shining with excitement.

"Um." He looked at her dubiously. "I suppose you go to church on Sunday and say your prayers and all that sort of thing?"

"Why, certainly. Don't you?"

Bill looked confused. "Well, er, not recently. But I think I had better not tell you what I said. The less you know about it the safer."

"Just a minute," said Flo. Upon her cherubic countenance the light of intelligence wrote itself and Bill recollected that this girl had been astute enough to appeal to him, although she

hardly knew him. Maybe she wasn't so awful dumb. "If you told the manager untruths, you must not expect me to back them up. I don't care what happens to me, I am not going to do anything dishonest."

He reflected. "'Sall right," he said. "You don't have to back me up. When they come round asking you questions, you deny everything. Tell them you don't know what they're talking about, that you never saw the guy in your life. That's the line you'd follow anyway, even if my pipe-dream was true."

"Would you mind speaking in plain English?" she demanded. "Who is this person I never saw in my life? What is this pipe-dream?"

"Never mind, beloved. Don't bother your little head. When they take your trunk into a suite, you just tell them you don't understand their kindness; and if they offer you money, take it, but assure them you don't know when they will get it back; and just sign an agreement with me as your manager to pay me fifty per cent of your earnings for three years."

"Isn't that an unfair percentage?"

"It would be, Delectable, if you could get any earnings by yourself. I'm going to create about ninety-five per cent of your value so I'm cheating myself when I only take fifty."

"All right," she said. "My own efforts have brought me to this pass. I'll sign."

Peepe drew a notebook from his pocket, tore off a leaf, scribbled a few words of agreement, and handed it to her with a pencil. She signed.

"Your first job is an extra in the Robert Hammond Shakespearean Repertory Company, opening here next week," he said. "You get twenty-five, and you can keep it all. I'll only cut in on the big money. I bet you have some lovely pictures of yourself, sweetness."

"Yes, some that are pretty good."

"Give them to papa, that's a darling. I'm going to put them in the papers."

Flo opened her trunk and drew out a pile of glossy finished professional prints from which Bill selected a dozen.

"Farewell," he said. "When I come back I'll find you in parlor, bedroom, and bath. Have faith in your Uncle Bill Peepe. Faith moves mountains."

Flo placed herself between him and the door. "Bill," she pleaded, "is this very terrible, this thing you've put out about me?"

He regarded her waggishly. "Terrible! Say, it's highly flattering. The best is none too good for my artists."

"I will not be a party to anything, er, you know—"

"You ain't invited to any party," he grinned. "You get just as mad as you like and call me all the names you like and deny the truth of the story. The more you deny it the less they'll believe you!"

BILL PEEPE went back to his room, got out his portfolio of dreary clippings and press stories about Robert Hammond, thrust into it a half a dozen pictures of the star and the pictures of Flo Rivers, and started to make the rounds of the newspaper offices.

The performers in Hammond's company were as nearly anonymous as it was possible for actors to be and be alive. When Bill left New York the last words of the great tragedian had been:

"Don't you plant any pictures in the papers but mine. If they ask you for pictures of the leading woman, say you haven't got any."

Mr. Hammond for years had been the victim of the partiality of newspaper dramatic editors for female photographs. When they did consent to run his solemn visage in their layouts they always made him about the size of a postage stamp and attached him to the bottom of a nearly nude photograph of a chorus girl in the Follies.

Hammond did not precisely like this. In common with all the legitimate actors at the Lambs' Club, he thought the practice scandalous, and that there ought to be a law.

In defiance of his orders, Bill Peepe produced photographs of Flo Rivers in the various newspaper offices and asked innocently: "Would you rather have a picture of this little girl who has just joined our company, or of Robert Hammond?" The choice was unanimous in favor of Flo, as old Bill knew it would be.

It was his belief that in the course of the afternoon certain excited city editors would phone the dramatic editors and ask if they happened to possess pictures of an actress named Flo Rivers. But if he personally delivered the pictures to any city editor, he would place his forefinger against the side of his nose when the story drifted in and smell an overripe mouse.

It is on his knowledge of editorial psychology that a press agent rises or falls, and Bill Peepe was a master craftsman.

Gower was going to confide in the hotel press agent during the morning; the hotel press agent was going to tip off a reporter on some afternoon journal; and the story would break big in all the morning papers.

It is so deeply engraved in the minds of editors that rich college students ask indiscreet questions in letters to beautiful young actresses, and that the fathers of the students thereupon make the actresses rich beyond their dreams of avarice, that a denial from J. Milton Moulton, Jr., that he had ever set eyes on Flo Rivers, and a denial from Flo Rivers that J. Milton Moulton, Jr., was on her list of acquaintances wouldn't bother the editors a bit.

The romance of the lovely young actress and the richest college student in the world was too wonderful to be suppressed. Denials were to be expected. Given pictures of both parties, and rewrite men who had read Elinor Glyn, glorious illustrated stories would appear.

But in what respect would this benefit Flo Rivers or the astute Bill Peepe?

Well, the breath of life to the show business is publicity, any kind of publicity. On the strength of the publicity which Flo would receive from the unauthorized and unwarranted coupling of her name with J. Milton Moulton, vaudeville and motion picture men and musical comedy managers would offer her jobs at large salaries whether she could do anything or not.

If the Moulton family acted rough about the matter and accused Flo Rivers of blackmailing them, and actually brought her to trial and convicted her, the managers would be waiting after she served her jail sentence with offers ten times as great as they would press on her if the Moultons ignored the publicity.

From Bill's standpoint, if she lost she would win; and with her beauty no jury would convict her, especially as she could prove she had never personally made any claims on the Moultons. And Bill had an agreement that Flo must pay him fifty per cent of what she earned for the next three years.

When Bill returned to the hotel he was met in the lobby by the very fat Mr. Gower, who drew him to one side and whispered in his ear.

"Listen," he said, "I'll never cease to be grateful to you for the tip you gave me. We hardly got Miss Rivers moved into an attractive suite when J. Milton Moulton, Jr., strolled into the office and asked to see her. He's up there now."

If Mr. Gower hadn't been so excited himself he must have seen the strange effect this information had on old Bill. Mr. Peepe turned pale as a ghost, staggered, and almost toppled over.

"Are—are you sure it's young Moulton?" he demanded. "Did he give his name?"

"Certainly I'm sure. I know him by sight and he gave his name."

"You didn't say anything to Flo about what I told you?" he stammered. Had Flo summoned the victim of his canard by phone and thus sunk it before it learned to swim?

"Certainly not," replied Gower indignantly.

"Well, I'll be hanged," he muttered.

CHAPTER III.

BILL GETS THE BREAKS.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY may turn out a very bad football team and trail Yale on the water a shocking proportion of the time, but there is no question that it is the favorite educational institution of the men of great wealth in America, and it must be credited with accepting the presence of students like J. Milton Moulton, Jr., with a remarkable degree of equanimity.

J. Milton was known as Joe by his few intimates. He was a senior, and he had a room on the top floor of Hollis, an old brick building dating from Revolutionary times and lamentably lacking in modern improvements. From his windows he looked down upon the historic yard "where the good and the great in their beautiful prime have musingly trod" as the song "Fair Harvard" puts it.

He was a grave young man of twenty-four, three years older than most of his classmates, because after graduating from prep school he had lived abroad for three years with his mother, who was in ill health. When his mother died in Switzerland he had returned and matriculated at Harvard at the request of his father, who had all the honorary degrees that the college could give to one man.

His conduct as a student had been exemplary. That he would graduate *summa cum laude* was a foregone conclusion. He was tall, too thin for a football player, too awkward for baseball and adept only in skiing, which is a very minor sport at Harvard. He had a clean-cut intellectual face with a rather large nose, a pointed chin, and studious brown eyes.

J. Milton Moulton had spent an afternoon in his son's rooms, which were the ones the great man had occupied when he was a student at Harvard; and they had walked about the yard, visited various professors, and dined in Boston at the old Touraine, after which his private car had taken the famous banker back to New York.

According to the yellow journals, there is a Gold Coast at Harvard where revels occur that are a disgrace to young American manhood and orgies that compare favorably with the best that were ever thrown by Lucullus. The college authorities have never been able to prove these charges, but if such things did occur they had never been countenanced by Joe Moulton. His hobby was the drama, and he devoted his spare time to writing plays.

He had written a comedy called "The Great Idea" during the past summer and, curious to see how it would play, he had arranged through an agent to have it produced by the Roxbury Theater stock company a few weeks before.

It was against his wishes to permit the newspaper world to know that the son of J. Milton Moulton was producing a play, so "The Great Idea" was supposed to have been written by Arthur Littleton, and as Arthur Littleton he had spent much time at the theater working with the company, rewriting and revising.

It was a very bad company and gave a bad performance of "The Great Idea," but it enabled Moulton to learn that he had written a bad play. It had cost him five hundred dollars to persuade Rex Flannigan, the director, to produce it; and Moulton charged that off to profit and loss. About the only thing that he considered a gain from the enterprise was the acquaintance of Miss Florence Rivers, a

delicious-looking ingénue, but a terrible actress. Her personal ingenuousness, charm and affability had impressed him very much.

The stock company staggered on for a couple of weeks after "The Great Idea" had been laid in its grave and Moulton had gone back to college and tried to forget, but he couldn't forget little Flo.

SHE had seemed to like him, she had been very sorry for the failure of his play, and she had been most contrite over her own inability to act the heroine, who was a most emotional person. She was the only girl he had ever met who hadn't been dazzled by the fact that he was going to be the richest man in the world. Flo would have been dazzled too, had she known it, but, as things were, she thought merely that Arthur Littleton was a very nice boy.

All his training and traditions were against friendships with women of the theater, and Moulton knew that his father would disapprove strongly of his acquaintance with the little stock actress, so for several weeks he had throttled the impulse to see her again. He only yielded now because, the company having failed, it might be possible for him to do something for her. At any rate he cut a noon lecture and took the subway to Boston—yes, he rode on the subway—boldly entered the Grand Union Hotel and sent up his name.

The name meant nothing to the girl, but, assuming it had something to do with the miracle which had moved her from a bathless room to parlor, bedroom and bath, she said she would see him. Thus what seemed too utterly utter to old Bill Peepe was, in fact, very simple and logical. Bill, however, was ignorant of the explanation as yet. It looked as though a monkey wrench had been thrown into the machinery of his plot.

And while he stood there trying to fathom the mystery, there came out of the elevator a blond vision in a pale blue street dress with lots of white fur on it and a saucy little blue toque, which smiled pleasantly at Bill and passed on toward the exit, followed by a tall young man in a brown English ulster.

Bill jerked his thumb after the man. "That him? That young J. Milton Moulton?"

"It certainly is," said Gower. "Evidently they have determined to defy the old man. They are a fine-looking couple. Wonder where they are going."

With a remnant of his old spirit Bill answered:

"Probably to a good hotel to lunch."

"IT'S good to see you again," sighed Moulton when they were seated at a table at the Ritz.

"And I'm so glad to see you," Flo told him. "I thought you had forgotten me, naughty man." This sounds rather crass in type, but illustrated by Flo's blue eyes—ah, that's different!

"And will you forgive me for calling myself Littleton when my name is Moulton?"

"What's in a name?" quoted Flo. He eyed her. Apparently the darling didn't set any more store by the name Moulton than she had by Littleton. To her the man and not the name mattered. His heart warmed.

Without being a fool, Flo was singularly ill informed regarding the news of the day, as her perusal of newspaper was confined to the murders, scandals, and dramatic notes, in which she differed not much from most other nineteen year old girls. The name J. Milton Moulton would probably have suggested money to her, but plain Joe Moulton—that wasn't as pretty a name as Arthur Littleton.

"I just heard that the stock company had gone out of business," he said. "It occurred to me that, er, maybe, er—is everything all right?"

"Why, yes. I stayed over a few

days, but I'm going back to New York soon."

"I wish you were staying longer," he voiced.

The lovely eyes looked him squarely. "Why?"

"Well, I could see something of you."

She looked reproachful. "We were such good friends while the play was on that I thought you might look me up. I gave you my address. It's been weeks since I have seen you."

"I had a lot of studying to do," he stammered. How could he tell her he had kept away because she was an actress? It wasn't true, because she wasn't an actress—what this girl had done to his poor heroine!

"Anyway, I'm glad you came today."

"I was afraid you might be in some money trouble; those stock companies have a way of failing to pay the performers. However, you are well located at the hotel. That's a nice suite."

"Fair," said Flo indifferently. Suddenly she bowed and smiled, her eyes looking over the left shoulder of her *vis-à-vis*. Her recognition was for a young man who had entered the dining room and was following the head waiter in their direction. Moulton turned jealously. He saw a very thin, rather shabbily dressed person, with a shock of black hair, a lantern jaw and a pair of mad blue eyes.

"An actor?" he demanded.

"No," said Flo, "a manager. How do you do, Mr. Peepe?"

Old Bill, for it was he, paused at their table, as surprised as if he had not trailed them.

"To think of seeing you here," he exclaimed. "Miss Rivers, I am delighted."

Flo looked annoyed. Bill was very nice and certainly had saved her from great embarrassment this morning—suppose she had not had a suite in which to receive Mr. Moulton! But he lacked tact. And he said he was broke, so what was he doing here?

Bill lingered.

"This is my friend, Mr. Moulton," she said reluctantly. "Mr. Peepe."

Bill inspected the scion of great wealth. "Not the son of J. Milton Moulton of New York?"

"He is my father."

"WHAT a coincidence," declared Bill as he reached for a chair from a neighboring table, drew it over and thrust out a not too well manicured hand. "I was chatting with your father in New York only last week, and he mentioned he had a son at Harvard. He is very proud of you, my boy."

"Indeed?" said Joe, who was neither impressed nor deceived by Mr. Peepe. "So you know him."

"Yes, indeed. I am very well acquainted in the banking district in New York. Well, Mr. Moulton, I trust we'll see you at the theater next week. Miss Rivers is joining the cast of Robert Hammond's production at the Trimount."

"Really? I thought, you said—"

Flo was crimson. She had stated that she was leaving Boston soon in order to punish Mr. Moulton for delaying so long in looking her up, and now she was caught in an untruth.

"It was not settled," she said with a significant look at Bill. "I didn't really expect to join Mr. Hammond."

"It's all settled now," quickly declared the press agent, who was missing no tricks. "I wired Bob, and what I say goes with him."

"I'm delighted," declared Moulton. "Join us at lunch, Mr. Peepe?"

Bill was about to assent enthusiastically when he received a vicious kick in the shin from a sharp-pointed slipper. "No, thank you, I wouldn't intrude. I'm expecting a man to join me later. Think of you two folks being acquainted! I suppose you met in the old days in New York?"

"No," Flo declared. "We met here when I was playing the lead in Mr. Moulton's play."

"What's that? A playwright? Say!"

Moulton frowned. "It was a very bad play. I had it produced out in Roxbury by the company of which Miss Rivers was a member."

Bill's professional interest was aroused. "What makes you think it was bad! You can't tell anything by a tryout with a rotten stock company. Look here, Mr. Moulton, give me that play; I'll have it produced by a Broadway cast, whip it into shape on the road and bring it into New York. I can do it for almost nothing, say about fifteen thousand dollars."

"No, thanks."

"And have Flo play the lead," he went on, unabashed. "She has a lot of talent, this little lady, and it would be a wonderful thing for her to be starred on Broadway."

"Back up, Bill," commanded Flo. "I ruined Mr. Moulton's play once. It's to big a part for me, and I wouldn't think of trying to play it in New York."

"It's out of the question," added Moulton. "Miss Rivers was very nice in the part, but I haven't any intention of investing fifteen thousand dollars."

"But—"

Moulton shook his head. "The play is dead. I'm not interested in a production of it, and my father would be very much annoyed. I produced it in Roxbury under the name of Arthur Littleton so that he wouldn't hear about it."

Romance! Romance in large chunks, thought old Bill Peepe. Holy Moses, what a break for a publicity man who was working for the worst old skinflint in the business. He glanced at Flo. The girl's cheeks were flushed, her eyes were shining. Why, the little dumb-bell was on the job! Not so dumb as that. She knew what kind of fish she had hooked.

Flo's thoughts were racing, as a matter of fact. She liked Joe Moulton. As Arthur Littleton, the impecunious young playwright, she had liked him a lot, and her heart had been singing when he called on her in her suite, and she had noted how his eye kindled when he looked at her. Moulton was just a name, no better than another.

But even Flo had heard of J. Milton Moulton; and so this was his son. Thoughts of Paris gowns, jewels, the Riviera, the Lido, and all the lovely places she had ever read about floated through her head. She wouldn't marry any man for his money, she was not that kind of girl; but she liked Joe. She liked his honest eyes, his lean jaw, his slimness, his kindly mouth.

But it wasn't possible. Just a dream.

"Well," said Bill, "pleased to have met you, Mr. Moulton. I want to say you are entertaining one of the sweetest, loveliest, and finest little girls in the profession. She's got a great future in the show business, Mr. Moulton, but I always hate to see a girl of her type in the game. She's not hard, she's too honest—"

"That will be about all, Bill," said Flo in a tone which was like a pitcher of icewater upon his enthusiasm.

Bill bowed and walked through the dining room, passed out at the further door and went into the lobby. Catch him paying a check in a robber's roost like that.

"Wow, what a story," he exclaimed. "It's got everything: human interest, sentiment, sweetness and drama. Leading lady falls in love with unsuccessful playwright, unaware that he is the richest young man in America. Let them alone for a week and the wedding bells would ring out in Providence, Rhode Island. But where would old Bill Peepe come in? 'Thank you, Bill, for all you've done for me. Good morning.' That's all!"

From his breast pocket he drew a contract by which Flo Rivers agreed to divide equally her professional earn-

ings for three years. If she married Moulton that paper was not worth a cent to old Bill. If she didn't it ought to be good for fifty or seventy-five thousand dollars.

"Hi, ho, hum," he sighed. "If I was a rich man now, it'd be different."

CHAPTER IV.

PUBLICITY.

HOMER GLUM, city editor of the *Evening Earth*, called a reporter named Tom Brennan to his desk.

"I got a tip," he said, "that a young actress named Flo Rivers staying at the Grand Union Hotel has her hooks into J. Milton Moulton, Jr., a Harvard boy. Got it from the press agent of the hotel, so it probably isn't any good, but take a run up there, see the girl, get her picture and size things up. According to the tip she refused a hundred thousand from old Moulton."

"Blah," remarked the reporter, who was young and naturally very cynical.

"Wait till I call the dramatic editor," added the city editor. He grabbed his phone. "Call Mr. Graves."

"Say, Graves, did you ever hear of an actress named Flo Rivers?"

"No. Yes, wait a minute. I think—here it is. She's a member of the Hammond Shakespearean troupe coming in next week. The press agent left a picture of her this morning."

"Shoot it down to me," the city editor commanded. "This," he said to Brennan, "makes the story a little fishy. We don't want Moulton suing us for a million dollars' libel. Give this girl the works. Probably she doesn't even know J. Milton Moulton."

Mr. Brennan, a nattily dressed young man with reddish hair and bow spectacles, took a taxi up to the Grand Union, arriving there about one thirty. He asked for Mr. Gower, who was out, but the hotel press agent, who was also the manager's private secretary, took him in hand.

"Miss Rivers is here," he said. "She has a suite on the fourth floor. A very beautiful girl."

"She was leading woman of that Roxbury stock company. The manager blew and left the company stranded. How does she happen to have a suite? Who's paying for it?"

"Ah!" exclaimed the hotel publicity man. "That is none of our business."

"Well, I got to see the girl."

The operator rang Flo's rooms and got no answer.

"Must be out," the press agent declared. "No knowing when she will be back."

Brennan yawned in the man's face. "I think this story is a lot of hooey," he declared. "And I can't wait around here all day."

The hotel man looked about and his eye brightened. "See that long-legged guy sitting near the news-stand reading a newspaper? That's Bill Peepe, press agent for Hammond. Miss Rivers is going to be in his troupe. Go over and talk to him."

Brennan crossed the lobby and addressed Mr. Peepe.

"I'm from the *Earth*, and I'm looking up a tip we got about a girl named Flo Rivers."

Peepe looked at him indifferently. "What's the tip?"

Brennan dropped into a chair beside him. "A lot of bushwah. She's engaged to J. Milton Moulton, Jr., and the old man's trying to buy her off. I believe it's the bunk."

"A wise guy you are," sneered old Bill. "You probably don't believe Peggy Joyce has ever been married."

"I never saw any marriage certificate," grinned Brennan. "Where are you hiding little Flo?"

PEEPE yawned without being polite enough to cover the cavity with his hand.

"At this minute she's over at the Ritz having lunch with a fellow named J. Milton Moulton, Jr."

"Yeh?"

"Yeah."

"I'll believe that when I see it."

"Go on over and catch them together."

"I happen to know Moulton by sight," the reporter said significantly.

"Well, go right up and ask him if his old man offered to buy the girl off."

"This fellow Moulton never talks to reporters. He's a tough baby. I called on him at Harvard once and nearly got chucked downstairs."

"Well, get chucked out of the Ritz. The dining room is only one flight up."

Brennan rose, his eyes snapping now with interest. "If she's lunching with Moulton, I got my story. I'm going over to have a look. See?"

"Go as far as you like. Want her picture?"

"We've got her picture."

"What a speed boy you are!"

Brennan went over to the Ritz, looked into the dining room and saw J. Milton Moulton, Jr., facing a beautiful little blonde who was the original of the photograph he had seen at the *Earth* office. He grinned and went into a telephone booth.

"Shoot that story, boss," he declared. "Flo Rivers denies that she is engaged or that she has refused an offer of a hundred thousand dollars to release the kid. At this minute she is sitting in the Ritz dining room with him, vamping him to a fare-you-well. He refuses to be interviewed as usual."

Unaware that their private affairs were the subject of interest to the press of Boston, Flo and Joe Moulton sat at table until after two o'clock and then the girl agreed to take a long ride into the country, have dinner at a dancing place and motor back in the early evening. Moulton cut two classes for the privilege and thought it cheap at the price.

It was a gorgeous ride, though the weather was a trifle nippish. Moulton had hired a big sedan for the afternoon; although he was the son of the richest man in New York he did not own an automobile. They dined and danced and found more and more to admire in each other and most reluctantly started for home when the road house closed at one o'clock.

Thus Flo missed the afternoon edition of the *Earth*, and some twenty telephone calls from morning newspapers. She went to bed and dreamed of a pair of clear, honest, affectionate brown eyes, of the grasp of strong arms in the dance and of many pleasant things.

BILL PEEPE was up early and purchased all the morning papers, which he spread out on the bed. The story had so appealed to all the journals that they had plastered it over the front page with layouts. There was a huge picture of Flo in every paper, a smaller one of J. Milton Moulton, Jr., and one of the papers ran a postage stamp picture of Robert Hammond, in whose company the girl was to appear. There were pictures of the stern parent—every newspaper morgue contained scores of photographs of the great banker. Artistically, they had all done very well, and the accompanying stories were triumphs of the craft of the rewrite men.

Bill studied the display and grinned when he saw Hammond's minute picture. "First time the old boy ever made the front page in his life," he said to himself. "He'll fire me sure as fate, but I got hold of a gold mine. Wonder how the kid will take it?"

At nine o'clock his phone rang.

"You come up here at once, you beast!" said an angry soprano. "Oh, I'll tear your eyes out."

"Honest, Delicious, I didn't have anything to do with it," he protested. "It's all a mystery to me, s'help me."

"You come here right away, do you understand? Oh, I wish I had a gun."

"Queen of my heart, your invitation thrills me, but I'm up to my neck in work—"

"If you don't come right away, I'll kill myself," she cried hysterically.

"Holy mackerel, don't do that! I'll be right up."

He hung up, hesitated, squared his shoulders and marched forth to battle. "Might as well get this over with," he muttered. "I'm afraid she's going to be hard to handle."

He found Flo with her blond bob uncombed, her eyes red and tears still flowing from them. She was wearing a flowered kimono of uncertain age and a manner which boded ill for the schemer.

"Top of the morning to you, little passion flower," he greeted with much more exuberance than he felt. "You're not going to let a lot of blah in the newspapers disturb you. Why, nobody pays any attention to newspapers."

Flo confronted him, her fingers working convulsively.

"You unprincipled scoundrel!" she spat. "You slimy, greasy serpent, you —you rat!"

"Darling, you can't blame this onto me," he protested.

Flo approached him menacingly, and he retreated like an elephant before a mouse. "This was what you meant when you said I mustn't know anything. This is how you got me the suite. This filthy, disgraceful, scandalous, lying story—oh, how could you!"

She broke down and sank, a sobbing heap on the floor.

Bill Peepe was a villain, but a sentimental one and tears started to his own eyes. "For the Lord's sake, Flo, don't take it like that. Listen to old Bill, will you? This will be the making of you. That guy wasn't going to marry you. He was going to give you a rush around and a cold good-by. His old man would disinherit him if he married an actress."

"What will he think of me?" she moaned.

"What do you care what he thinks of you? He ain't anything to you. This is the most marvelous publicity a girl ever had. It undoubtedly went all over the country this morning. It puts you in a fine light, see? You refuse the hundred thousand dollars, that's the kind of girl you are. If the old man breaks off the match, anyway, it ain't your fault. You are pure and noble. I tell you, kid, you got a great break."

FLO lifted her great eyes, and he winced at the scorn he saw in them.

"How ignoble you are," she said slowly. "You are utterly lost to any sense of decency."

"Is that so? You were busted yesterday, going to get chucked out of here on your ear. No friends. Was this Moulton guy around to give you a helping hand? Nix; you had to fall back on old Bill Peepe."

"I wish that I had starved to death before calling on you for help."

"At any minute now the vaudeville offers will be coming in. You'll get two thousand a week for at least ten weeks. That's something, isn't it, for a girl who would have been glad to take a twenty-five-dollar-a-week job?"

Flo got up from the floor and went over and slumped in a chair.

"Now your act is just what I told you. I cooked this up before I knew you were friends with Moulton. I was shaving, see, and reading the paper, and I saw that J. Milton, Sr., had been over to see his son and went back night before last. We were both flat, and I ran into Gower, the manager downstairs. He told me you were going to be put out last night. I couldn't do anything myself and out of a clear sky came this idea. Say, you ought to have seen him change. Right away a de luxe suite—"

"Will you please shut up?"

"You could have knocked me down with a feather when I ran into you and Moulton," he continued rapidly. "And when I heard about you meeting him under an assumed name when he pro-

duced his fool play, it was just a present from Santa. What a story! Without that the papers wouldn't have had much to go on, but this was a romance. No, you don't care anything about young Moulton—"

"It may interest you to know," Flo said solemnly, "that I love him and your vile falsehoods about us have ruined my life."

"Oh, gee, honey," he said with ready sympathy, "I didn't know that. I suppose it was just a chance acquaintance. Why, if you were in love, you two, you wouldn't have been busted. He would have set you up in a suite—"

"Do you think I would ever have appealed to him for help? I thought he had forgotten all about me, and I didn't know who he was. I was in love with Arthur Littleton."

"Well, if he's any kind of a man, this won't faze him. He'll come forward and stand squarely by your side."

"You are such a fool!" she sighed. "I don't know if he loves me yet, but in a few days, if we saw a lot of each other—and now you've spoiled it all."

Her change of tone encouraged Bill to take a chair and light a cigarette. "Students are always running round with actresses and mostly nothing comes of it. It takes planning to bring them together."

"Don't you see that he will consider me a filthy little schemer who took advantage of a slight acquaintance with him to exploit myself? He'll think that I care nothing for his friendship, that I only want to use him to further my own ends."

"He wouldn't have married you, anyway," said Bill. "That kind of guy can't marry anybody but a society dame picked out for them. You would have lost out playing round with him and now you're sitting pretty."

"I very nearly jumped out this window when I saw the newspapers," she cried.

"Now, for Heaven's sake, don't give way to that. Nothing is worth taking so hard, sister, and there ain't any man living worth a woman jumping out a window for."

Flo sighed. "I shall probably kill myself. Please answer that phone."

Bill picked it up. "Nix," he said. "She doesn't care to see you. She has nothing whatever to say about the matter, and you may do as you like."

"What was that?" she demanded.

"A newspaper reporter. Says he wants to interview you and get further details as to your romance."

"Why didn't you tell him it was all a mass of lies?"

"Because he wouldn't believe me. Your play is to refuse to say anything. Better refuse to receive phone calls." Without waiting for permission he picked up the receiver and got the hotel operator.

"Don't connect anybody with this room. Refer them to Mr. Peepe."

"But suppose somebody called I want to talk with?"

"Who? Moulton?"

She shuddered. "Oh, no. I couldn't see him."

"There you are. He wouldn't call anyway. He's off you for life."

"I suppose so," she said dully. Then, fiercely: "It's your fault."

"I've got to go put some breakfast in me. Have you had yours?"

"I can never eat again."

"I'll call back in an hour and talk things over."

"I wish I never needed to see you again."

He laughed as he departed. "You'll get over that. You're on Easy Street from now on, Flo Rivers."

CHAPTER V.

FURTHER VILLAINY!

FLO surely was hard to manage, Bill thought as he got into the elevator. Fortunately she was in a trap she couldn't get out of, and a woman always gives up when she finds her-

self in a sufficiently bad fix. It was going to be pretty soft for old Bill Peepe. Half of a couple of thousand a week and maybe more. The deuce with Bob Hammond and his rotten job!

Bill had emerged from the elevator and started toward the breakfast room when a hand clutched his arm and yanked him around. He looked into the angry face of J. Milton Moulton, Jr.

"I suppose I was talking to you on the telephone, just now," said the son of the multimillionaire.

Bill looked him over insolently. "None other."

"I want to see Miss Rivers."

"What for?"

"What for? You ask what for?"

Bill laughed nastily. "The proper rôle for a fall guy is to stay fallen," he said. "You've served your purpose, kid, and we don't need you any more."

"I believe you are entirely responsible for this outrage. What were you doing in Miss Rivers's apartment?" Jealous, thought Bill.

"That's our business," he replied significantly. "Now, listen, Mr. Moulton. Don't be too hard on the kid. We were both broke, see? We didn't know where to turn for a square meal, see, and then you turned up. Flo is a nice girl, honest, she is, but she was desperate. She needed publicity the worst way and when you turned up so unexpected, well, we just framed you."

"I don't believe it," muttered the young man. His mouth was twitching, and his eyes were like those of a beaten dog; he was pale as death. Even the unprincipled Bill Peepe felt sorry for him.

"You don't understand show people, old man," Bill said. "Flo had nothing against you, but your name and money make you a national figure and all a girl has to do is get seen out with you to be famous. Get me?"

"But she didn't know who I was! She was surprised when you mentioned it at lunch," he stammered.

"All bunk. Say, they knew who you were at the Roxbury Theater. You didn't fool anybody. Now, you don't have to be afraid of any breach of promise case, and we're not going to hold up your old man. You're all washed up and you can go about your business."

"I want to hear this from her own lips."

"Lissen, friend. Do you want to hurt the little girl? She's ashamed of herself for the dirty trick she played on you. She wouldn't have done it if she wasn't absolutely up against it. She don't want to see you, see?"

"I'll talk with her!" he exclaimed, and rushed for the telephones.

Bill followed him speculatively.

"This is J. Milton Moulton speaking. I wish to talk with Miss Rivers."

"Sorry," the operator replied. "She has instructed that nobody be allowed to call her apartment.

"But this is J. Milton Moulton."

"She was very specific. Nobody," replied the operator who was secretly thrilled at the opportunity of high-hatting J. Milton Moulton.

The boy returned to Bill Peepe who looked very sympathetic.

"Don't you worry any more," he said. "There won't be any comeback for you. Flo is a square shooter like I told you."

"You don't understand. I don't care anything about that. I want to see her."

"Telegram for Miss Rivers, Mr. Peepe," said a bellboy. Bill had informed all and sundry that he was Flo's manager. He tore it open.

"You can't open her messages," protested Moulton.

"Sure I can. We are like that." He lifted two crossed fingers.

He smiled joyously as he read. "Take a squint," he commanded.

The student read the telegram:

Offer you twenty-five hundred dollars a week, tryout week from Monday, at Orono Theater in New York,

ten additional weeks on circuit if you make good.

JACOB LEVI.

"You see what a good turn your name did the poor kid? Don't be too hard on her, Mr. Moulton."

"She won't accept. She couldn't."

Bill chuckled. "She's accepting right now. I'll send the telegram right away."

"Look here. Are you engaged to Miss Rivers?"

Bill hadn't thought of that, but it was a good idea. "It ain't announced," he said. "If it was we couldn't have pulled this."

J. Milton Moulton's face grew red and his eyes grew angry.

"I'm through," he declared. "I'll never believe in a woman again."

BILL watched him go out of the hotel, started for the breakfast room and went instead to the manager's desk.

"Miss Rivers is afraid newspaper men and others will try to get up to her apartment," he said. "Please place a man on guard up there at my expense to prevent anybody from trying to get in."

"I'll have the house detective on duty up there in person," the manager assured him. "The hotel got a lot of publicity this morning, Mr. Peepe. Mentioned a dozen times on the front pages."

"I ought to collect a few hundred for that."

"You can keep the fifty dollars and I'll O. K. your account," said the contented Mr. Gower. "That's all that you get out of it."

"Don't kid yourself," remarked Bill.

He had the decency to be slightly—very slightly—ashamed of himself as he ate his usual hearty breakfast. Moulton, apparently was badly hipped on Flo, and if he got to her and heard her story they might have made up; in which case this vaudeville offer would have had no taker. It was sort of rotten to let Moulton think that he was engaged to Flo and that Flo, herself, had entered willingly into the plot.

"After all," he said to himself to quiet his qualms, "these marriages between millionaires and actresses always go on the bum. Flo would be back in the show business for a year or, if his old man cut him off, she might have to support him. Exit J. Milton Moulton, enter twenty-five hundred dollars a week. That 'll console her quick."

He was wise enough to keep away from Flo for the rest of the morning and he was not aware that at noon she called the operator and instructed that if Mr. J. Milton Moulton called up, he was to be allowed to talk to her. The morning operator had gone off duty and the girl on the switchboard did not know that the young man had already called.

As the day wore on and Joe made no effort to get in touch with her Flo's spirits sank lower and lower. It was natural that he would not want to have anything more to do with her and she could not blame him. A dozen times she started to write him, but she was not agile with her pen and she did not know how to couch a convincing letter.

"He won't believe me, anyway," she sighed and abandoned the struggle.

WHEN Bill Peepe cautiously presented himself about four thirty he found her in a sullen, careless mood.

"We're leaving for New York on the midnight," he stated.

"The sooner I get out of this town the better," she said savagely.

"And the reason for our departure, Loveliness Personified, is that a week from Monday you open in an act at the Orono for twenty-five hundred dollars per week."

"That's out," she said with spirit. "I am not capitalizing this filthy thing."

"No? Then what are you going to

do? You're broke. Go after a fifty-dollar job. Any work you get will be due to this publicity, kid, and don't you forget it. You might as well take the best offer. You're all washed up with the Moulton family. Want to land in some cheap cabaret or go off on another unpaid stock job? Pack your things. Had anything to eat?"

"No, and I don't want anything."

"You'll get over that. A man that's going to be hanged eats a hearty breakfast. Indigestion don't bother him. In three months you'll thank me, Flo, for what I done for you."

She eyed him balefully. "I wish you'd get leprosy or beriberi."

He grinned. "Try taking a nap; I'll call for you at eleven. Have everything ready now."

"Oh, I'll go, but I won't take that vaudeville engagement."

He laughed when he got outside the door. Flo would change her mind about that.

Thoughtfully he sent a wire to the New York papers that Flo Rivers would arrive at the Grand Central Station at 7 A.M., but he expressed great astonishment when half a dozen camera men and motion picture operators were waiting for them at the taxicab exit from the station. Flo was so surprised that she stopped stock-still while the cameras clicked.

Bill had a statement from her which he slipped to the reporters, but refused to permit an interview. The statement was as follows:

> Although estranged because of the influence of millions I follow my heart and not my head, and my feelings are unchanged. I must earn my living, of course, and I shall accept a vaudeville offer to open at the Orono Theater a week from Monday, but I regret very much that my private affairs have got into the newspapers, and the attendant publicity is very distasteful to me.

Mr. Jacob Levi had a writer working all night upon a dramatic sketch in which Flo Rivers was to star, and he showed it proudly to Bill Peepe after the press agent had delivered the girl at a quiet hotel and instructed her to go to sleep.

The sketch was about a poor young factory girl who loved the son of the owner of the factory and they plighted their troth. The father heard of it and tried to persuade the son to break off the match, but the noble youth refused. He then called on the girl and offered her a hundred thousand dollars to give up his son, and the girl spurned him. But when he showed her that she was ignorant and uneducated and would disgrace the boy if she married him, she recognized that he was right and, still refusing the money, went out into a paper snowstorm.

Bill did not dare to show Flo this sketch for four days. Then, as she had no friends or relatives in New York, was without funds and in debt for her hotel bill, he dragged her to a rehearsal and forced her to play the ridiculous rôle. Flo was pale, she was not sleeping and eating, and was getting thin. In the part she would be just as pathetic a figure as its sob-stuff demanded. She read her lines mechanically, hating the thing more and more each day, but being enough of an actress to get through it.

THERE were four other actors in the sketch, and Bill craftily told her how long they had been out of work and how much this steady job meant to them, and this helped her to go through with the rehearsals. It was a terrible sketch, but Jacob Levi rubbed his hands when he watched the dress rehearsal, and assured him that the vaudeville audience would eat it up.

"They'll be looking at her and thinking how much this is like her own sad story and they won't know how rotten it is," he explained.

The Sunday papers carried notices of the opening both in the news columns and upon the dramatic page. The

yarn had faded out of the papers after the first couple of days because of the dignified silence of the Moultons, father and son, who treated it with the contempt it deserved; but the vaudeville opening revived it. The Boston papers carried the story and confirmed to Joe Moulton the perfidy of Flo Rivers.

Confirmed it, yes, but even this couldn't wipe out the memory of the sweet little face and the brave, clear blue eyes. He had been humiliated and degraded by this little traitress—and he couldn't get her out of his mind.

After twenty-four hours he convinced himself that the plot against him was the invention and achievement of the scoundrel of a press agent to whom she was unfortunate enough to be engaged, and he told himself that she would be well punished by marriage with the shambling, shifty brute. How could she love a man like that? What were women made of, anyway?

He saw the announcements in the Boston Sunday paper, shuddered as his honored name was again dragged into the limelight, and was sickened by the editorial surmises as to why the affair with him had been broken off.

But, like a moth attracted by a fire, he found himself drawn to the place where she was going to be. He could sit in the theater and see her appear in the dramatic sketch founded, so the papers said, upon her unhappy love affair with himself. How could she be so base as to go through with it? What astonishing influence over her that dastardly press agent had!

Joe took the midnight train to New York, purchased a ticket from a speculator, for the speculators were doing a thriving business with Orono Theater tickets for the first time in months, and presented himself at the matinée.

The show opened with a news reel, a two reel talking picture, an acrobatic act which was deadly, a pair of blackface comedians who were worse, a fat woman who sang "Blues" in a horrible voice; and then there flashed upon the program placards set in the proscenium arch of the theater, "Flo Rivers and Company."

His seat was on the aisle in the sixth row. The house was jammed, a hundred people standing up, and from every patron came a sigh or a titter or an ejaculation of interest. The orchestra was playing an overture. It finished, started it again, finished and did not try to play any more. In the quiet house a murmur went up growing louder as minutes passed. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, the curtains parted and a short, fat, baldheaded man, Jacob Levi in person, appeared. There was a gasp from the audience, which sensed the coming disappointment from his manner.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I regret very much to announce that Miss Flo Rivers was taken suddenly ill in her dressing room and we shall have to omit her act this afternoon."

A growl went up from the audience, a menacing growl. Jacob Levi lifted his hand.

"Anybody that wants his money back can get it," he said. "Miss Rivers will positively appear to-night."

Most of the people, being seated and comfortable, contented themselves with muttering, but a number of persons rose, among them J. Milton Moulton. He was almost triumphant.

"She could not do it, she could not do it," he was thinking as he stumbled up the aisle. "Not even that hound Peepe could make her do it."

He got out of the theater with no thought of refunding his ticket, hesitated, and then went round to the stage door, pushed it open and entered.

A husky Irishman confronted him. "Outside, bo, outside," he warned.

Moulton drew out a green wad and tore off a twenty dollar bill. "I am J. Milton Moulton," he said. "I want to see Miss Rivers. Take me to her dressing room."

"J. Milton Moulton? The feller she's in love with?"

"That's me," said the Harvard student, emphatically and ungrammatically.

The Hibernian beamed. "Come on," he invited.

He led Moulton down the corridor and stopped before a door. "That's hers. She's takin' on somethin' terrible," he said.

CHAPTER VI.

THE VILLAIN FOILED!

FLO, in fact, was screaming. "I won't!" she cried shrilly. "I can't, I tell you. I don't care if I starve to death. I won't do it, ever!"

Joe heard the voice of Bill Peepe. "You got to, Flo. It's a dirty trick on Levi. You can't throw away twenty-five hundred a week."

"I wish I had never seen you. I wish I had jumped out of that window in Boston!"

Moulton waited no longer, but pushed open the door. Flo was lying on her couch and Bill was standing over her with outstretched, imploring hands. Her eyes widened as she saw who stood in the doorway. She sat bolt upright. "Go away!" she wailed. "I'm seeing things!"

Moulton was on his knees by her side and his arms were around her.

"Flo, my poor darling," he said softly.

The girl pushed him away. "I didn't do it, Joe. I didn't know anything about it. It was all done when we were out in the country. Please believe me. I wouldn't do a thing like that to you, really I wouldn't."

"I know you didn't," he assured her. An impudent hand was laid on his shoulder. Bill Peepe.

"Say, Mr. Moulton, that kid is breaking a contract for twenty-five hundred dollars per week," he declared. "She isn't anything to you and you ain't got any business in here. She hasn't any money and she's got to work, see. Now you tell her you don't bear any malice and let her do her stuff."

Moulton got upon his feet and stepped close to old Bill Peepe.

"Flo has just assured me that she had nothing whatever to do with that newspaper story," he said quietly. "Is that true?"

"Well," said Bill with a shrug, "she was broke and I wanted to help her out, and it was a great piece of work, if I do say so."

"I wanted to die when I read it," sobbed Flo. She was wearing what Jacob Levi thought was a proper dress for a factory girl, a hideous affair of black crepe, and her eyes were big as saucers and reddened and her face was thin and pale; but she was very beautiful, Joe thought as he glanced at her.

"Flo, do you love this man?" he demanded.

"Bill Peepe? Oh my God, no!"

"And you're not engaged to him?"

"I should say not," she cried angrily. "Did he say I was?"

Old Bill believed firmly that a wise man avoids trouble, and he saw trouble brewing here. He began to move toward the door of the little room. Moulton swept by him, slammed the door, turned the key in it and put the key in his pocket. He tore off his coat and threw it beside Flo on the couch.

"Put up your hands," he commanded. His eyes glittered wickedly.

Bill protested. "Aw, say, what's the use of rough stuff?"

"Are you ready?"

"I'm not fighting, if that's what you mean."

Wham! A right hand pivot started for the point of Bill's chin, which he hastily ducked, and, seeing that he was in for it, brought up a right to the stomach which drove Moulton back against the door.

Peepe was a good rough-and-tumble

fighter, he had to be in his business, and he tore in to remove this menace; but J. Milton Moulton, unable to make the football or baseball teams, had specialized in boxing. He met the rush with two clever fists, and for a couple of minutes there was a steady beat of knuckles against flesh. For a moment Flo was too terrified to scream, then she got up on the sofa and brazenly rooted for her man.

"Slam him, Joe. Sock it to him. Serve the beast right. Oh-h-h!"

Her exclamation was due to a crash on the nose of Joe Moulton which caused the blood to flow.

THE room was only ten feet square and badly cluttered. There was little chance for footwork or anything except slugging. Theater attendants were pounding upon the locked door and shouting excitedly. For perhaps five minutes Bill Peepe stood toe to toe and gave as good as he took; but his wind was bad from booze and cigarettes, his cause was wrong and he knew it, and he was up against a better man. He had smashed in Moulton's nose and cut him over the eye, but both his own eyes were blacked and one of them closed, while vicious body punches were wearing him down.

Moulton saw that one solid punch, now, would end it, but he was so bitterly resentful against this man that he wanted to prolong his punishment. He could box now, so he parried the tired blows of Bill Peepe and cut him to ribbons with wicked jabs of left and right.

Bill was sobbing as he fought, and finally he was blind, but the punishment went on until the sight was too terrible for Flo.

"Stop, Joe, stop! You'll kill him. Oh, please, if you love me, stop!"

Moulton sent over a solid right to the heart and old Bill Peepe, schemer and contriver, dropped unconscious to the floor.

Joe turned a gory countenance to Flo, who leaped from the sofa into his arms.

"Oh, you were wonderful!" she told him, embracing him convulsively.

"May I use your wash basin to clean up?" he asked, breathing heavily. "I never enjoyed myself so much in my life."

He stepped over the recumbent form of the press agent and plunged his head under the faucet. Flo opened the door. Six house men and Jacob Levi were outside.

"My friend Mr. Moulton was having a little argument with Bill Peepe," she explained with a ravishing smile. "Come in, boys, and remove the body."

"Are you going on to-night?" demanded Levi.

"Cancel the act," she said curtly.

"I can sue you for this," shouted the manager.

Flo laughed. "Sue Bill Peepe if you can bring him back to life."

Moulton turned a shining face from the washstand.

"Send me a bill for your losses, Mr. Manager," he said. "Miss Rivers is canceling because she is going to get married."

Flo looked at him incredulously and saw his eyes. "You do mean it, Joe," she exclaimed. "You mean it!"

"You bet your life I mean it," he declared.

"It's O. K. if you stand the losses, Mr. Moulton," cried the jubilant Levi. "Boys, take Peepe into another dressing room and bring him to. These folks want to be alone."

In a moment the young couple were left alone.

"I don't see how you can marry me after the terrible scandal and everything," she said. "You are awfully good, Joe, but I won't hold you to that. Think: I rehearsed this rotten act and was going to get money out of it."

"But you couldn't go through with it," he reminded her triumphantly. "And you were as innocent as I was

all through. It was all that scoundrel Peepe."

"Just the same, you have your father to think of. He'll cut you off without a cent."

"Does that make any difference?" he asked tenderly. She threw her arms around his neck.

"Not with me, Joe, but it might with you."

And now these lovers kissed for the first time. It was a long, cloying kiss which would not be permitted in the movies.

"I AM twenty-four," he said, when they came up for air. "I love my father and respect him and I know he won't like this, particularly since the papers have made you out to be a scheming little hussy; but I don't happen to be dependent on dad. I come into my mother's estate in two months. And when father knows you and understands that you were as much the victim of this plot as I was, I am sure that he will come around all right. Anyway, we are going to get married."

"I don't see how you can love me," she protested. "I don't know how you can believe in me after what happened. When you didn't try to get any explanation from me in Boston I was sure you despised me."

"Didn't try!" Quickly Joe related his vain efforts to get in touch with her.

"It was all Peepe's doing!" she said furiously.

"And I sneaked up to your floor in the afternoon and was met by a house detective who put me out of the hotel."

"You were outside my door and I didn't know! How could you be so forgiving, Joe darling?"

He embraced her. "Because I just couldn't believe that you could possibly be guilty of a plot against me."

"When I didn't hear from you all day," she said, "I got so discouraged and I was penniless and Peepe forced me to rehearse this dreadful thing. It almost killed me, and this afternoon I just couldn't go on, no matter what happened to me."

They sat side by side on the couch, and presently she laughed a little.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"It's Bill Peepe," she said. "He's a scoundrel, but he is funny, and I think this all started because he wanted to be kind to me and was broke himself. I'm glad you beat him up, because he certainly deserved it; but the worst punishment is canceling the act. He was to get fifty per cent of my twenty-five hundred dollars per week. He's out of a job—he threw up his position with Robert Hammond. I hate him, and I'm sorry for him!"

"You needn't be. He's an alley cat and he'll land on his feet."

There was a knock on the door, and after a second's hesitation Flo opened it and confronted—Bill Peepe.

Bill was terrible to look upon, and the grin on his battered face made him still more ferocious.

"No hard feelings, Mr. Moulton," he said. "It was a peach of a scrap and I had a licking coming to me. I never thought you were on the level with Flo or I wouldn't have framed you. Now you've busted the only chance I ever had for big money, but it's all right with me. When are you going to get married?"

"We are going over to Jersey just as soon as I can get my bruises attended to and Flo changes her clothes," said Moulton. "You are an unprincipled scoundrel, Peepe, but you proved to me how much I love Flo, and I'm grateful for that."

"I hate you," said Flo. "I'm tickled to death that Joe walloped you, but I am kind of sorry to leave you flat broke."

"'Sall right, kid, I took a chance and I lost. How about your old man, Mr. Moulton. Won't he raise the roof?"

"It's likely he will take it hard," replied Joe, "thanks to the reputation you have made for my *fiancée*. How-

ever, I am independently wealthy and I shall marry as I please. Now, I might loan you a hundred or two if you're up against it."

"No," said Bill. "I don't need to borrow money. I got what I came in for, I'm going to get straightened out now, and then I'm going to sell some paper in this town the exclusive story of your romantic marriage for about two thousand bucks."

"You hound!" cried the indignant Moulton. Bill grinned.

"Wait a minute, Joe," pleaded Flo. "We can't keep this out of the newspapers after what has happened. Let him do it. After all, what do we care?"

Moulton hesitated, then laughed. "Go to it, viper," he said. "No, I won't shake hands with you."

"Good-by, Bill," called Flo. "Hope I never set eyes on you again."

The battered hulk of what had been Bill Peepe closed the door on them and stood on the corridor.

"Wow, what a story," he muttered. "The lover in the theater, the girl overcome with remorse and unable to go on. Twenty-five hundred a week tossed in the gutter for true love. Lover rushes around, terrible fist-fight with the girl's manager, knocks him unconscious, rush into each other's arms, all is forgiven and wedding bells in Jersey. Little Flo Rivers, starving stock actress, becomes bride of son of richest man in New York, who defies father and follows the dictates of his heart. Two thousand? I can get five thousand for an exclusive on this!"

He entered the stage telephone booth. "Give me the city editor of the *Morning Tabloid*," he said to the theater operator. His blackened eyes were glowing with the fire of the indomitable press agent.

Old Bill Peepe was himself again.

THE END

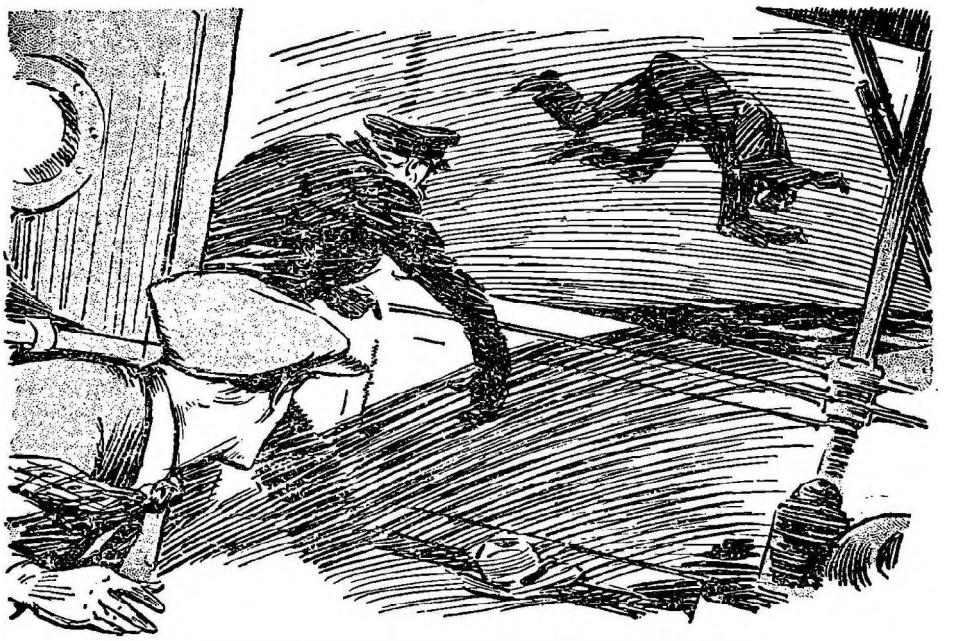
The Last of the Flamingoes

TWO hurricanes of recent years, it is feared by experts of the American Nature Association, have entirely wiped out the last of the North American flamingoes. This was almost accomplished two years ago by the storm at that time. But on the island of Andros, in the Bahamas, was created several years ago a sanctuary for these beautiful and rare birds, the few remaining specimens were cared for until recently the flock again numbered several thousands. But the storm in 1928 is thought to have practically wiped them out.

These birds have had much to contend with. Until the barren island became a sanctuary, it was a regular thing for the crews of sponge-fishing craft to visit the place in search of fresh meat which the flesh of the flamingoes offered. The birds were killed in large numbers by these men, who ruthlessly slaughtered them by hundreds when they needed only a few.

Their method was to take a length of rope, and with a man on each end, run into the flock. The legs of the young birds that could not fly were broken by the rope. Sometimes the ground would be dotted with the bodies of injured birds, many of which were left to suffer and die.

Oscar B. Aldrich.



A high, thin, horrible scream pierced the misty night

The Silver Fang

Off for Rangoon, with Mystery and Death for shipmates, Malabar MacKenzie seeks the Orient and the heritage of his pirate grandfather

By GEORGE F. WORTS

Author of "The Crime Circus," "The Return of George Washington," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

MALABAR MacKENZIE, wealthy young connoisseur, is standing before a jade peach tree in the Metropolitan Museum when a frightened young woman stops beside him, hands him a green purse, and hurries on. An instant later two Orientals appear; one follows her and the other, tall and suave, stops to question Malabar. He is angered at the man's insistent attitude, and snaps that the girl is his sister. The Oriental apologizes and passes on. Malabar waits all day, but the girl does not return.

Arriving, that evening, at his lofty Park Avenue apartment, Malabar has a quarrel with his father, Jason, Wall Street raider. Jason reproaches Malabar for being a dilettante, instead of living up to the traditions of his grandfather, Malabar MacKenzie, the "Silver Fang," who founded the family fortunes as a pirate of the Malay seas. Finally Jason tells his son that he's on his own, disinherited; and asks him what he's going to do about it. Malabar calmly replies, "Become a pirate."

A warning, left by a Chinese, is delivered to Malabar. He then opens the green purse, finding railroad reserva-

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tions, for that morning, to San Francisco and steamer passage to Hongkong; and another steamer ticket, on the Vandalia, sailing that night for Rangoon, Burma. Both were made out in the name of Sylvia Lavender, and her passport was also in the purse. And there was a beautifully carved flat butterfly of kingfisher jade, about the size of a dollar—a lovely antique.

On impulse, Malabar reserves the last available accommodations on the Vandalia—the thirty-five hundred dollar Prince of Wales suite. Examining his bank balance, he finds he has some seventy dollars more than his passage. Slipping a Colt thirty-eight in his suitcase, he starts for the boat—and finds his taxi is being trailed by another, whose passenger is the same tall Oriental!

CHAPTER IV.

KEEP OFF!

THE pier at which the liner Vandalia was made fast was, in outward and inward appearance, a swarming beehive. Under spitting arc lights at the street entrance, taxicabs and limousines were coursing in endless streams. Men and women in the somber or bright-hued evening attire, laughing and chatting, were alighting. Perspiring stewards were seizing hand baggage and trunks, to vanish into the dusty murk of the great pier shed.

Malabar MacKenzie, paying off his cabman, joined the stream of passengers and their friends. He pushed his ticket through a wicket, to have it approved by a white-mustached dignitary; was accorded prompt and flattering recognition. A voice ringingly reiterated: "Mr. Malabar MacKenzie in the Prince of Wales suite."

People in the crowd stared at him with curiosity and envy. It occurred to the young man, as he pressed on through the crowd, that he was fed up with applause for other people's piratical exploits. In the future, their awe would be accompanied by the whispers:

"There goes Malabar MacKenzie—the pirate, you know? They call him the Silver Fang."

He smiled at this fancy. Entering a vortex of humanity he pushed his way through to the other side. Through yawning doorways he saw the parallel armies of shining rivet-heads in the Vandalia's black hull. He was excited. Sailing anywhere was always exciting. And this was, without question, the most exciting voyage he had ever undertaken.

He had never been in Rangoon; never visited the Far East. He saw himself carrying a cutlass in his teeth. Malabar MacKenzie, the pirate! And he wondered if the shade of the original Malabar Mack were grinning with derision or approval.

The mystery hunter reached a massive stack of trunks. Some were marked "Wanted" and others "Not Wanted."

Near the largest wardrobe trunk he had ever beheld, his immediate quest came to an end. Malabar's brain, whipped to unusual alertness by excitement, took in a great many impressions at once. The first was that something queer was happening. The wardrobe trunk stood in a small clearing; a monarch in a jungle of trunks. It was at least five and a half feet in height by more than a yard across and deep.

A label pasted upon it stated that it was "Wanted." Wanted for the voyage! To Malabar, this seemed incongruous. Who could possibly want to travel with a trunk of such heroic size in his stateroom?

The question dissolved before a volley of others which fairly rattled through his brain. The immediate vicinity seemed to be aswarm with gliding Chinese. Some were in coolie attire, as if fresh from Mott Street. But the majority were well-dressed. They lounged casually near trunks and piles

of luggage. They talked in little casual groups. They walked casually by. None of them stared at the gigantic trunk, yet it was the focal point of their united maneuverings.

Malabar detected, or thought he detected, suspicious bulgings at hips. But what attracted him was the casualness of the little groups of strolling and waiting Chinese.

Then his heart stood still—and, as quickly, executed a back-flip. A slender young woman in a blue serge tailored suit came from behind the trunk and stood gazing sweetly at nothing in particular.

Malabar, only a dozen feet away, swore he would have recognized her by her very air, her posture, if she had worn a mask. He drank in the details of her greedily; the black hat which snugly fitted her small head; the black purse she had clasped between her hands; the translucent golden silk stockings and small patent leather slippers.

He would have gone on to say that there was absolutely nothing mysterious about her now, if it had not been for her eyes. That sweet, gentle gaze was deceiving. Her dark eyes, under curving thick black lashes, were as alert as a stalking leopard's. She flicked them from one group of Chinese to another.

They came to rest on the handsome, reddening face of Malabar MacKenzie, and quickly narrowed. Then she gave him a little smile.

HE approached her with a sense of awkwardness he had not known since his first dancing lesson.

"Miss Lavender!" he exclaimed.

Her dark eyes played upon his face. They were glowing now, and excitement danced in them. Only her smile was uneasy. It came and went and reappeared nervously. But her eyes glowed up into his flushed face. And he enjoyed that devastating sensation which is the lot of young men who fall precipitately in love, of seeing her grow lovelier, more provocative on each new occasion.

She was murmuring: "It was so kind of you," in a low, sweet voice, as musical, to Malabar, as the singing of orioles.

"I waited until the museum closed," he blurted.

"I could not come," Miss Lavender said.

"So I—I took the liberty of opening the purse. There wasn't any address. But I found the tickets."

She laughed softly. "They must have mystified you."

"I'll say they did!" It struck Malabar that he had never said such stupid things as he was saying to her. "In fact, I was never so mystified in my life. Your putting that purse in my pocket—that Chinese who came back to talk to me—"

"The simplest things," said Miss Lavender, "often seem so mysterious, on the surface. What did he talk to you about?"

"About you."

"Me?" She seemed amazed. Again she laughed, softly, but this time Malabar's hearing was more sensitive. She was, he realized, controlling her voice, her expression, with a great effort. She was under some tremendous strain.

"What did he want to know about me?" she continued.

"Who you were."

"What did you tell him?"

"That you were my sister."

Miss Lavender's gaze became alarmed, but her smile was outwardly amused. "How funny!"

"But I didn't know. All I knew was that you were frightened. I said the first thing that came into my mind."

"Do you frequently?"

Malabar smiled. It was rather a wolfish smile. He knew that she was sparring with him, edging away from dangerous grounds. He said abruptly:

"Why did you put that purse in my pocket and run?"

Miss Lavender's darkling eyes steadied on his. With an air of girlish frankness, she answered:

"Because those two men had been following me. I knew they wanted to possess that purse."

"Why didn't you tell a policeman?"

"Because a policeman would have asked embarrassing questions. I was walking up Fifth Avenue. They were following me, and coming closer and closer. I knew that they would, sooner or later, start some kind of scuffle. In the confusion, my purse would be gone. So I ran into the museum, intending to hide it."

She paused and looked wistfully at Malabar. To him, the story lacked conviction. Perhaps it was true. He was beginning to suspect that the more he saw of this lovely young creature the more mysterious she would become.

"And?" he helped her.

"The museum was crowded with people. Every time I saw a likely place to hide the purse, some one would be looking. And those two Chinese were just a little way behind me all the time. Then I went into the Room of Mirrors, where you were. I hoped you'd go—I was going to hide the purse behind the case. But you didn't go, and then those two men came into the room.

"I was desperate. If you'll pardon me for saying so, you—well, you were the most trustworthy, perhaps I mean the most honest-looking man I'd seen in a great many days. I knew the purse would be safe with you, that you would make every effort to return it to me, if I could not return for it. And—" she gave him an intimate little smile—"I was right, wasn't I?"

MALABAR removed the green purse from his pocket and gave it to her, but, naturally, he didn't go.

"I don't understand," he said, "why you could not have called a policeman, if those men were annoying you."

She smiled again. "I should think the contents of my purse would explain that. They wanted to know what my plans were, don't you see?"

Malabar nodded, but he still looked puzzled.

"You mean," he said, "it wasn't the business of the police."

Her look was one of a nervous girl who hated being pressed and wished that he would take some things for granted.

"I wasn't stealing anything, really!"

Malabar flushed a deeper red.

"I know you weren't. But it's all mighty mysterious." His voice became a little angry. "Why should that stocky fellow have been so anxious to get that purse that he came after me with a revolver?"

Her eyes flew open widely at that. "Did he do that?"

"I was waiting for you at the top of the steps outside the museum. I'd been waiting an hour and a half after the museum had closed. He came up those steps with his hand on a revolver in his pocket."

"What did you do?" Miss Lavender gasped.

"I knocked him cold," said Malabar simply. "And I'd like very much to know what it all means."

"I gathered that," said the girl dryly. "The heathen Chinee, as some one once said, is peculiar."

Malabar was losing his temper. The least she owed him, he declared to himself, was an explanation. He cast all restraint aside and bluntly asked:

"Why did you have a ticket to Hongkong in a westward direction and a ticket to Rangoon in an eastward direction, both dated the same day?"

"Why?" she cried. "To throw them off my trail! I thought you understood."

Malabar's brain whirled. He caught a glimpse of wheels within wheels. He captured his escaping dignity.

"If you prefer to have it rest there," he said stiffly, "of course I wouldn't dream of prying into your affairs. I've

perhaps done too much prying already." This last was uttered with bitterness.

But it didn't work.

"Not at all!" she sweetly exclaimed. "You haven't been the least bit prying. I think I understand perfectly how you feel. And you've been dreadfully sweet and thoughtful and kind. I simply couldn't have sailed without my passport."

And as if she were aware, for the first time, of the unhappiness in his eyes, she impulsively added:

"Don't you see? I bought the two tickets to throw them off my trail. If they'd secured my purse, they'd have known the trail I was taking. Now, they do know it. But now it doesn't matter so much."

Her smile was again winsomely girlish. It was as if she had admitted him to a great secret. As a matter of fact, Malabar knew nothing that he had not known when he finished inspecting the contents of her purse.

Miss Lavender was saying: "I want to thank you again for your thoughtfulness in returning the purse to me. I knew I could trust you."

Malabar brightened a little at that.

"You can trust me implicitly," he said earnestly. "Perhaps we can talk about it at greater length on the boat."

MISS LAVENDER'S smile vanished.

"On what boat?" she asked in a small voice.

"Why, on this one."

"You," she cried, "aren't going on this boat!"

With the first feeling of satisfaction he had so far enjoyed, the grandson of Malabar Mack nodded.

"To Rangoon, Miss Lavender."

"Why?" she wailed.

"To give you more opportunities to trust me."

"But you can't help me!" she cried. "There's nothing you can do. I—I don't need your help."

"I think differently."

Sylvia Lavender was pale. Her eyes were round and dark with worry. The look she gave him was both anxious and incredulous.

"You don't realize," she said in a low voice, "what you're saying. I think your curiosity, and perhaps your sense of chivalry, have been aroused. I suspect that you're an adventurous young man looking for excitement. All I can say to you—and I'm saying it out of my gratitude for what you've done for me—is, don't yield to the temptation. Stay off this ship. There is no reason why you should, with your eyes open, walk into danger. If you sail on this ship your very life will be in danger."

"Why?" Malabar snapped.

She made a little gesture of impatience with her hands. Her eyes had lost all their warmth.

"I cannot tell you any more than I have. You will have to take my word that my only interest in you is kindly and friendly. I know that you're a nice young man. But I don't want you tagging along after me. I'm carrying enough responsibility.

Malabar was growing angry. He didn't like being treated as a child.

"I think," he said stiffly, "I can take care of myself."

"I don't," said Miss Lavender. "You're an impulsive and headstrong young man. And you're a decent, honest person. And I want you to keep out of this." Her voice slid up nearly an octave. "Won't you leave me before we lose our tempers?"

"You're saying, in so many words," said Malabar in a gritty voice, "that this deal you're mixed up in, whatever it is, is crooked!"

Miss Lavender's eyes blazed. Her chin went up. Her slim shoulders seemed to straighten. Most curious of all, at least an inch seemed to be added to her stature.

"Will you leave me?" she cried.

Malabar bowed stiffly. He backed

away from her. It was as if a kitten had suddenly exposed the claws of a panther. She was not only lovely and mysterious; she was dangerous.

How different this encounter had been from the one he had imagined!

Retiring, he backed into a group of three whispering Chinese. They became as immaterial as ghosts, floating aside to make way for Malabar. He would have enjoyed starting a fight with all three of them.

He saw, as he retreated toward the gangway platform, that Miss Lavender had resumed her pose of innocent waiting. Demure and charming, as she stood beside the heroic wardrobe trunk, she gazed sweetly into nothingness. She had evidently obliterated Malabar from her consciousness.

Malabar, proceeding up the gangway and aboard the round-the-world cruiser, was white with anger. He'd show her whether he was a child or not!

CHAPTER V.

MYSTERY AND MENACE.

TO understand the anger which smoldered and smoked in Malabar MacKenzie it is necessary briefly to scrutinize his experience with women since he was old enough to shave. In college he had been, with his athletic triumphs and his unlimited allowance, an idol of the campus. He had "made" the best fraternity, gone with the liveliest and most exclusive set. In the eyes of girls he had been a reckless young god. His wealth, his good looks, his daredeviltry were irresistible. Girls adored him.

Since leaving college, each new girl he met was a repetition of a familiar experience. For his money, name and good looks he was flattered and adored. Until to-night he had never met a girl who had not treated him as if he were a prince in purple.

Sylvia Lavender had treated him as if he were a spoiled child. His interest in her was, accordingly, a thousandfold greater than his interest in any girl he had ever known. She was, in a dozen ways, a challenge. She could not have aroused him more if she had slapped his face.

Malabar's anger was at the point of bursting into destructive flame when he entered the suite for which he had paid practically his last dollar in the world. He stalked about the suite from room to room with the seething ferocity of an insulted animal in a cage.

Its delights, its conveniences, its comforts fell upon a succession of blind spots. But it was a beautiful suite. Had you suddenly found yourself there, you would never have dreamed that you were on board a ship.

The rooms were large and lofty, and richly furnished. They consisted of a library, well stocked with books, a palatial living room, a large bedroom containing twin beds, a huge trunk room, a luxurious bath, a dining room and two small staterooms—one for a valet, the other for a maid—each with its bath. In the library, against one wall, was a large fireplace. On its wrought-iron andirons logs were stacked ready to ignite.

Off the living room was a private deck, with room for a half dozen steamer chairs.

Malabar, having lost none of his anger, went out on this deck and looked down. He saw the gangways up which streams of passengers and their friends were coming, and down which other streams were going. Through one of the large doorways he could see Miss Lavender standing beside the trunk, and all about her, stock-still as in c a s u a l l y moving groups, the mysterious Chinese.

With a kick Malabar sent a steamer chair crumpling into a corner. Then, what remained of his anger was lost in a rising curiosity.

Miss Lavender was no longer alone. A tall man was talking to her. Malabar could not distinguish his features from this distance, but he saw that the man, a giant of a fellow, was not young. A gray beard, given a bluish tinge by the arc lights, swept down over his great chest; his feet were planted far apart, and his fists were planted at his waist.

Bluebeard towered over Miss Lavender as a mighty oak towers over a Japanese maple. The girl was looking up at him, and, although Malabar could not clearly see her face, something in her air suggested her recent attitude toward himself. He could inagine her dark eyes going hot and cold.

It became even more obvious that they were quarreling when Bluebeard lifted great loglike arms above his head and brandished his fists. Malabar wished that he could hear that conversation. It might clear up a great deal of mystery. But he could hear nothing, and what he saw only added to his mystification.

A small army of stewards seized the gigantic wardrobe trunk; they hoisted it to their shoulders and staggered off with it toward the gangway. The groups of Chinese who had been standing in its vicinity scattered. One group of them, which seemed as if it might have comprised a bodyguard, followed the trunk. The others sifted into the crowd and were lost.

NOW, under the sputtering arc light, as if in the center of a brightly lighted stage, Miss Lavender and the tall, gray-bearded man stood, carrying on their pantomime. The old man continued to wave his arms. Once he took a step away from Miss Lavender, then swung back toward her with such vigor that Malabar gripped the rail, believing that the old man was about to strike her.

But he evidently discarded this intention. The girl did not move. She stood perfectly still, her face uplifted. Even at this distance Malabar could see how pale it was. From time to time she punctuated with a headshake what she was rapidly saying. Once again Malabar gained an impression of a will that could not be swayed, of a purpose that could not be set aside.

And suddenly the old man seemed to give in. He dropped his hands into his side pockets, hunched up his bear-like shoulders, turned, and strode away from her. His stride was a rolling one; he lurched from side to side, knocking into people, as if his vision was blinded with trage.

Malabar could understand that. He told himself that Miss Lavender's obstinacy, the little he had seen of it, would have enraged a saint.

Bluebeard disappeared in the direction of the mountainous wardrobe trunk. Malabar's eyes leaped back to the girl. A reluctant sympathy for her struggled with a recurrence of his anger. She looked so small, so helpless, so courageous!

Malabar grinned. His anger had passed. He would be patient, as patient as Job. It was a long way to Rangoon.

He waited at the rail until the small, slender girl in blue started briskly for the nearest gangway platform. He waited until he saw her black hat bobbing among others as she came up with the stream to the promenade deck. He faintly heard a bugle, then a steward at a distance requesting all visitors to go ashore.

A tug whistled; another answered. The great bulk of the Vandalia throbbed to the stertorous bellow of her whistle. People were now running excitedly about on the pier. Lines were being slacked off. Stevedores, a swarm of busy ants, were tugging at the gangway platforms.

Malabar turned away from the rail. He went through his suite and out on deck. He was curious about that enormous trunk, and about the gigantic old

man. He wanted to give Sylvia Lavender a glimpse of himself, to assure her that she had not bluffed him out of going with her talk of danger.

The deck was crowded with passengers shaking hands with departing friends, with parting husbands and wives, separated lovers kissing, with worried people who had lost track of their baggage, with anxious stewards on the lookout for unintentional stowaways.

Malabar pushed his way through the crowds and circled the deck, seeing neither Bluebeard, Miss Lavender, nor the trunk. He descended to the deck below. Halfway aft he came upon the small army of stewards who were carrying it, accompanied by its guard.

Bluebeard was in front of it, rudely pushing people aside. A face swung out of the crowd and turned to Malabar—a square, yellow Mongolian face. Small black eyes stared and blinked. Malabar g r u n t e d. He had once thought that all Chinese looked alike. Yet he would have recognized that face anywhere. It was the somewhat sinister face that had confronted him on the steps of the museum; the face that he had struck with a left hook.

The Chinese was evidently anxious to place distance between himself and Malabar. He wriggled through the crowd and made for a doorway. Malabar hesitated, anxious to see that trunk delivered to its destination. But his hunting instincts were aroused by the Chinese so obviously desirous of escaping him.

The lure of the hunt won. Malabar struggled through the crowd toward the doorway through which the Chinese had vanished. He gained it and found that it was a cross corridor. It led into a maze of passages. Malabar presently found himself standing bewildered at the head of a wide flight of stairs. The Mongolian was not in sight. Vexed, he returned to the deck. It occurred to him that the man's flight may have been a deliberate effort to distract his attention from the trunk. At all events, the trunk was gone. He encircled the deck without seeing it again.

THE Vandalia's whistle roared again. The lights on the opposite side of the slip were moving. The Vandalia was under way. Somewhere an orchestra was playing "Old Man River."

Malabar made another tour of the deck, without seeing either the trunk, Bluebeard, or Miss Lavender. Well, all three were aboard. It occurred to him that he had almost a month in which to solve the mystery—a month which promised to be the most exciting period he had ever enjoyed.

He returned to his stateroom to unpack and think things over. On the floor, just inside the door, his eyes fell to a blank white envelope. Malabar picked it up. The envelope was sealed, and he tore it open, extracting a sheet of white note paper folded once.

Malabar, unfolding it, experienced the same chilling sensation that a hard-headed realist might suffer upon seeing the face of a man he knew was dead.

At the top of the sheet was an embossed ring of blood red. Within the ring was embossed, in silver, the broken-off point of a cutlass—the Silver Fang! The houseflag of his grandfather, old Malabar Mack!

Malabar had not seen one of these letterheads since he was a small boy—the letterheads that his grandfather had used until his death, twenty years ago.

His eyes misted with excitement and superstitious awe, Malabar read the two written lines beneath his grandfather's notorious emblem:

> You can leave this ship in the pilot's boat. Take friendly advice and do so.

There was no signature. The writing, in blue ink, was vigorous.

Malabar, running trembling hands through his thick blond hair, took the

note under a light and read it again. Then, rather unsteadily, he went out upon his private deck. The lights of New Jersey, twinkling dimly through the thinning fog, gave him no assistance.

A cool, damp wind fanned his hot cheeks. A whiff of steam from one of the laboring tugs drifted past him.

Malabar's excitement, his superstitious chill, gave way to a hard, logical suspicion. It was strange that this solution had not occurred to him before. His father was at the bottom of it all! His father, with his unlimited means, had hired the actors in a mystery drama of which he was to be the unwitting and unharmed victim. His father had hired Sylvia Lavender to place the purse in his pocket; had hired the Chinese to fan the spark of his curiosity.

His father had done it all. In no other way could this letterhead be explained.

Having hit upon this theory, Malabar now began to analyze it; to see if it would hold water. Would Miss Lavender have been so urgent in wanting him to stay behind if that theory were true? Hardly. Malabar was now inclined to reject his theory *in toto*. He knew that his father was a man without much imagination.

A man, to have set this elaborate stage, must be a man of tremendous imagination. And what would be his father's object? Simply to get him out of the way? No. His father was never roundabout. His father would have had to step completely out of character to have conceived such a scheme. But it bore keeping in mind.

Malabar returned to the bedroom of his suite, with the intention of unpacking and hanging up his clothes. There were two large Gladstone bags and a black alligator hand bag. He opened the hand bag first. Recent events inclined him to believe that it would be safer if he carried the revolver which he had placed in the hand bag.

Putting his hand in the bag, he met with another unpleasant shock. The revolver was gone! He recalled placing it in the bag, on top of the toilet accessories which Hodges had packed. The revolver had been the last article to go in the bag; he had placed it there himself. The bag had not been out of his sight save when it went aboard.

A steward, perhaps, had stolen it. But here was another theory that simply did not hold water. The steward who had carried up his luggage was the steward who would look after his wants during the voyage. It was certain that the steward would not have taken the revolver.

MALABAR seated himself on the bed and mopped his face with a handkerchief. Events were coming a little too fast for him. If his father were not behind these mystifying events, then what Miss Lavender had told him on the pier had been true: he lacked the proper equipment for serious adventure.

Malabar went out on deck. He wanted to ask a thousand questions of some one. The Vandalia was gliding down the bay, and the tugs had cast off. The deck was almost empty. From an open window, as Malabar passed, came the hilarious sounds of a cocktail party. Those people in there, it struck him, were sensible. They were enjoying themselves; they weren't borrowing trouble by attempting to pry into secrets guarded by slinking Chinese and revolvers—and silver fangs!

But, in spite of threats and discouragements and probable perils, he would not, he vowed, give up. He was more interested in life than he had ever been before. The plaything of furious, invisible forces, he was determined to find the source from which they sprang.

Malabar honestly acknowledged that he was infatuated with the girl Sylvia Lavender. It probably wasn't love.

Sensible people didn't fall in love so quickly and with so little encouragement. But it was certainly an exciting emotion.

All this hubbub, whatever was its source, must quiet down within a few days. Miss Lavender, in the course of time, must have some leisure, and he was determined to avail himself of it. They would have long walks and watch the moon on the water.

Perhaps he would make no further attempts at penetrating the secret of her mysterious actions. It might be best to disarm her by a frank, manly interest in nothing but her individual charm. With the mystery and Sylvia to choose from, he would choose Sylvia.

The young man's active imagination went on and on. It carried to a logical conclusion an acquaintance with the most charming, most alluring girl he had ever known. Moonlit nights and sunny days in her company would make this the most delightful voyage he had ever taken.

While Malabar's mind, whipped by the excitement of all these puzzling events, was toying with this charming future, his legs were taking him on a brisk tour of investigation. He started at the top deck and worked down.

He saw nothing to stimulate his interest until he was four decks down. Four decks down, on the forward turn of the wide promenade, he all but stumbled into an earnestly conversing trio in the darkness. Then he recognized Sylvia Lavender by the pure gold of her voice. Malabar stopped and backed off. He intended to hear that conversation. Above the chittering of a donkey engine in the deck well below, he heard Miss Lavender say:

"But it would break my heart, grandfather. You couldn't get along."

And a harsh, booming voice:

"It isn't so. No, no, no. It's always the same way. I know. I've been through this sort of thing before. Women only clutter things up."

A third voice, suave and somehow flavored with the accents of authority, broke in:

"I don't quite understand this debate, Captain Lavender; but I am certain that your wishes can be carried out. I must return to the bridge now. I'll speak to him. There will be absolutely no trouble."

"It isn't fair!" the girl cried. "After all I've done—after all the trouble I've taken!"

"You'll obey my orders like a good little soldier," said the booming voice, not angry any more. Malabar was certain that it could have issued only from the picturesque bulk of Old Bluebeard. Her grandfather!

"Then I will arrange it," said the suave voice.

"It is mighty kind of you to take this trouble for an old shipmate," said Bluebeard.

Suave Voice laughed. "I'd hardly call it a pleasure, with your granddaughter taking it all so hard. But it will be done, sir."

CHAPTER VI.

SNATCHED AWAY.

MISS LAVENDER said nothing more. Malabar, listening intently, trying to find some key to the riddle of their words, was certain that he heard her sob. She had lost some argument, that was certain. He waited a moment, in the hope that she would renew the argument, and, with that fighting heart of hers, would somehow come off victorious. From the little he knew of her, it seemed unlikely that she could give in so readily to anything she had set heart on. But she said nothing.

Captain Lavender deepened the mystery by finally bursting out, in his angry tones!

"There's to be no monkey business, young lady! If you go against my will, I'll use force!"

"Yes, grandfather"—very faintly.

Malabar started down the deck in the direction from which he had come. At an opening, he crossed through to the other side. Miss Lavender, her grandfather and a red-faced, white-mustached man in blue uniform passed under a deck light. The uniformed man Malabar recognized as Captain Hartley, a veteran of countless trans-atlantic crossings. Malabar had seen him numerous times on other ships, but knew him only slightly. What part was Captain Hartley playing in this plot?

Captain Hartley and Old Bluebeard did not glance at Malabar as they passed, but Miss Lavender saw him and gave him a quick glance out of eyes red and wet with tears. She was walking between the two tall old men, and her aspect was that of a prisoner. She walked with her hands before her, as if they were in irons. Her eyes narrowed as she glanced at Malabar, then they seemed to flash. She shook her head, as if to dash the tears out of her eyes. Then they were gone.

All of Malabar's former confusion of feeling for her was reduced to one of aching pity. He did not know what it was all about. He only knew that a good little fighter had been beaten.

Old Bluebeard aroused his liveliest curiosity. Captain Lavender was indeed a giant of a man. He must have stood a full six feet four. His long gray beard now looked positively blue. Under shaggy bluish-gray brows were the eyes of a hawk. His nose had the hook of a hawk's beak. To Malabar, as the trio passed, Captain Lavender resembled all the sea villains who have ever breathed.

The trio passed on and Malabar was left alone with his puzzle. His irritation grew. No matter what aspect of this strange business he encountered, he was baffled and mystified. He tried to piece together some fragments of sense from the conversation he had heard in the forward turn of the deck, but there were not enough data. Captain Lavender had denied his granddaughter something that she wished, and Captain Hartley had upheld him.

Malabar roamed moodily about the deck. He had, so far, made absolutely no progress in any direction. It occurred to him that he must put more of a check on his impulsiveness and bring his brain to beaf. The problem that faced him was the kind of problem that confronted detectives every day in the year. They dealt with mysteries and doggedly they worked them out. But Malabar, considering the clews which had been sprinkled about, could gain no help from any of them.

The green purse had afforded him only the clue to her departure. He had followed that successfully. The note he had received from some unknown Chinese before leaving his apartment and the note he had received on the old notepaper of his grandfather's led nowhere. What, he wondered, was in that gigantic trunk which had been the center of such seething interest on the pier?

On every hand, it seemed, he faced nothing but interrogation marks. By a fillip of fate he had been tossed into a play of mysterious forces which somehow traced back to his own grandfather.

Some actor in the play, perhaps the girl, perhaps Captain Lavender, perhaps one of the Chinese, had employed his grandfather's notorious emblem, the Silver Fang. More than his original eager curiosity impelled Malabar to use his head, to turn detective, in an effort to solve the problem. Who had used the Silver Fang—and why?

MALABAR'S steps were directing him, logically, toward the purser's office. A Chinese of indeterminate age, with bared teeth and dull, mystic eyes stepped out of a shadowed doorway as if to stop him. His eyes slid in almond-shaped slots toward Malabar, then became duller and more mysterious. He was, in a

sense, a symbol of the day's perplexing events.

Malabar's mind raced with half-formed thoughts: "If I took this fellow and half strangled him, I might squeeze some information out of him." Then: "Chinese, Chinese everywhere. Why? It's something Chinese. The key is something Chinese."

As if in answer to his thoughts, the Chinese brought his lips down over his blackened teeth, and his eyes grew still more opaque. Folding his arms on his chest, he backed against the cabin wall.

Malabar hesitated, then passed. He knew that those misty Oriental eyes were sliding up and down his back. The realization was accompanied by an icy chill which flitted down Malabar's spine. He could feel the spot on the left side of his back where cold steel would enter.

He hastily glanced back. The Chinese was still standing there, with folded arms, gazing after him inscrutably, his lips parted over his blackened teeth in an ugly, knowing grin.

The amateur detective proceeded on to the purser's office. It was a brightly lighted scene of great activity. The purser and his assistants were busy with passenger lists and account books, working in their shirt sleeves, perspiring, calling numbers and names back and forth.

Malabar had seen the purser on some other ship; a man with a thin, hard, white face and cold eyes which reminded Malabar of oysters. He was impatient at the interruption. Malabar handed him a check, made out to cash, which represented his worldly wealth: seventy dollars and seventy-five cents.

The purser glanced at it irritably; was about to make some caustic remark about passengers who took such occasions as these to annoy busy pursers, when his oystery eyes fell to the signature. His hard little mouth softened into an ingratiating smile.

"Certainly, Mr. MacKenzie!" he exclaimed. "Rather an odd amount."

"Rather," admitted Malabar, as he accepted the bills and the silver quarters. "May I see the passenger list—the L's?"

The purser graciously handed him a large, lined sheet of heavy ledger paper.

Malabar glanced down it: Latham, Landown, Loring—Lavender! Captain Boris Lavender and Miss Sylvia Lavender, Suite C, Deck D—an expensive suite.

Malabar said: "This is a curious name, Lavender. Who is Captain Boris Lavender?"

The purser looked up with his ingratiating smile—it was the smile of a fox—and answered:

"He's an old sea dog, Mr. MacKenzie, a picturesque old fellow. I think he's traveling with his granddaughter. They're only going as far as Rangoon. The girl is exceptionally pretty. If you'd like to meet her, I'm sure it can be easily arranged."

"Thank you," said Malabar, shaking his head. "I see they're occupying Suite C."

"Yes, sir, parlor, two bedrooms and bath. It's on D deck, Mr. MacKenzie. Are your accommodations satisfactory?"

"Quite," answered Malabar, and left.

He intended to investigate the vicinity of Suite C without delay—but he was delayed. He was aware of a mild commotion when he reached the deck. Passengers were lining the rail and, with lowered heads, looking down.

Malabar joined the line at the rail. He, too, looked down. The Vandalia was barely under way. Off in the middle distance a lighthouse or a lightship sent a brilliant finger of light traveling over the black water.

IN the light from portholes, he made out the form of a small motor boat with a hunting cabin forward. It was bobbing about on the waves close to the Vandalia's shining black hull. Sailors with gaffs were holding the

launch away from the Vandalia. A companion ladder extended down from a lower deck; its platform was within easy leaping distance of the motor boat's cockpit.

She was, Malabar knew, the pilot's boat. The Vandalia was about to drop her pilot. Nothing but blue water extended between here and Suez. Malabar saw before him a succession of delightful days and nights. He saw himself helping Sylvia Lavender down such ladders in strange, exotic ports. He saw her, little by little, learning to appreciate him; making him her confidant.

With idle interest Malabar watched the pilot's boat bobbing about. He saw a man in a black derby going down the ladder. That was, of course, the pilot. Then Malabar's idle interest gave place to the sharp pangs of consternation.

Behind the black derby was another black hat. But it was small and snug-fitting. Malabar gazed in growing alarm, and his suspicions were sickeningly verified when the wearer of the snug, black hat passed a brightly lighted porthole. For a fleeting moment, he saw the profile of Sylvia Lavender.

Now that mysterious conversation on the forward turn of the deck became full of meaning. Old Bluebeard was sending her back to shore! She was not making the trip, after all!

Malabar opened his mouth to call out. He did not call, but his mouth remained open. Sylvia—the object of his trip, the major reason for his being here—going back!

Suddenly, Malabar was sick of the whole business. He didn't care a damn now what the mystery was about. He had looked forward to a delightful trip in Sylvia Lavender's company. And she was going ashore!

Too confused and bewildered and hurt to be useful to himself, Malabar gripped the rail and stared. He saw the pilot leap into the cockpit. He saw the pilot extend his hand. He saw a length of slim, silken leg as it was extended and Miss Lavender leaped.

Malabar raced down the deck to a companionway, then down the steep, narrow stairs, out, and into another companionway. He violently pushed aside a deck hand who got in his way. He ran to the ladder which went down the side of the ship to the pilot boat, and flew down it three steps at a time.

The sailors were pushing the pilot boat away from the Vandalia's black hull. The champion broad jumper of the world could not have successfully negotiated that jump.

Malabar, gripping the white-painted rope of the ladder, shouted across the widening space:

"Miss Lavender!"

She stood in the cockpit, looking across at him, her eyes dark and glowing. She made a small gesture of helplessness with her hands. Her voice, soft and infinitely sweet, floated over the churning black water:

"Good-by! Good-by!"

The motor coughed, gurgled, purred. The distance increased. The stern swept sharply in an arc. The exhaust roared. And the pilot boat went purring off into the night.

CHAPTER VII.

A SCREAM IN THE NIGHT.

MALABAR stood up stiffly. He was vaguely aware that, just behind him, on a level with his head, was a rail; that people were lined up along it. Second-class passengers, perhaps. He turned and encountered an elderly woman's disapproving stare, and realized that he must have forgotten himself; must have been relieving his feelings in a torrent of profanity.

He looked along the side of the ship. It had subtly changed. Sylvia Lavender's going had taken away the enchantment which had made the Vandalia different from any ship on which

Malabar had ever taken passage. His hope of happiness was rapidly receding, bobbing along through the waves toward shore. And there was nothing he could do about it.

Malabar MacKenzie, accustomed all his life to being denied nothing that his whimsical fancy settled upon, spent a bad half hour. He went into the smoking room and waited for the bar to open. He tossed off three drinks of exceptionally raw whisky one after another. He snapped at the bar steward because the service didn't please his royal fancy.

He glared across the smoke-filled room at a table where sat four discreet Chinese gentlemen sipping claret lemonades. He found that he hated the entire Chinese race with a magnificent hatred. So intense, so malignant was the glare he sent in their direction that they ceased sipping lemonade, whispered among themselves and presently withdrew.

The outcast scion of the notorious house of MacKenzie finished his third whisky in a gulp and went out on deck. He watched the lights of America grow dim and expire. Back there was Sylvia, the only girl he had ever known who had stimulated his imagination and won his unlimited respect. What a spunky little thing she was! And he wasn't going to see her any more!

Malabar swore softly and silently into the warm, moist summer night. The Vandalia was entering fog again. He ought, he knew, to go to bed, get a good night's sleep. Only in sleep, runs an old Chinese proverb, is coined the gold of clear thinking. But Malabar knew that sleep was impossible. His brain whirled with irritating thoughts. Why had Captain Lavender sent her ashore? What was Captain Lavender doing on this ship, anyhow? What, in a word, was the mystery about?

Malabar laughed silently and bitterly. He was certain now that the answers to those questions would be absurdly simple.

He had suspected sinister motives because he had wanted to suspect sinister motives. He was certain now that the flashing facets of the mystery which had so gripped his imagination would, upon close observation, reveal nothing but some prosaic business transaction. Business competition often took devious byways. At the heart of the matter, he would find, probably, a few bales of silk that some one was selling a reluctant customer.

It occurred to the disgruntled young man that he might as well carry out his original plan and investigate the vicinity of Suite C. So he ascended to D deck and prowled about, looking for a door bearing the single initial C. He found it presently, well aft, on the port side, not fifty feet forward of the after deck well.

He walked past the door of Suite C. It was closed. The window, too, was closed and outside it the varnished shutter was down within an inch of the bottom. A stripe of pale yellow light glowed at this slotlike aperture.

Malabar turned about and, this time, as he passed, stooped down and peered fleetingly into this space. What he saw through the aperture caused his heart to leap and his breath to whistle into his lungs in an excited gasp.

HE walked on in the direction he had been taking, but his legs were like melting tallow. Bales of silk, eh! A prosaic business deal, eh! Malabar walked on, with that glimpse brilliantly imprinted upon his mind a picture he would be perhaps forever in forgetting.

In the center of a large room, the parlor of Suite C, stood the gigantic wardrobe trunk. It was evidently hinged down the back, for the trunk was open in two equal halves like the shells of an enormous clam. Partly inclosed within these halves was a great box which fitted the trunk perfectly. Obviously, the trunk had been built to fit snugly about the box.

This box was of brilliant red lacquer, the cherry lacquer for which Chinese artisans are famous. Upon its satiny surfaces were painted, in gold and silver, dragons with pink and yellow fire gushing from their mouths. And about the dragons, in white and black and blue, were painted Chinese ideographs. A Chinese chest it was, the most bizarre Chinese chest Malabar had ever beheld.

But it alone was not sufficient to cause his thumping heart and rapid breath. Seated on the floor on either side of the cherry lacquer chest was an elderly Chinese in the blue robes of the old empire. And before each Buddhistic figure an intricately carved brazier sent blue spirals of incense smoke into the still air of the room.

But even they were not the cause of Malabar's shock. He had seen, as if in a dream, Captain Lavender, standing beside the cherry lacquer chest, a grotesque, amazing figure with a dagger caught crosswise in his teeth, his smoldering eyes on the door to the deck, one huge hand resting on the butt of a revolver in a belt at his thick waist!

Malabar, all but staggering, went to a stanchion, leaned upon it, gazed down with jumping pulses into the foaming black water, and tried to recall other details. There were plenty. Against the back wall, as motionless as statues, a line of men were standing: Chinese all. Another detail: The upper left hand corner of the cherry lacquer chest had been somehow damaged. Some of the wood had splintered off, exposing what was underneath—the slightly greened corner of a chest within a chest, a chest of old bronze.

Malabar, trying to think rationally, trying to make himself believe that his recent conclusions were correct, that he was on the trail of a commonplace business transaction, was forced to accept his earlier reasoning.

Within Suite C, some sinister business assuredly was going forward. It had nothing to do with bales of silk or reluctant customers. A chest of bronze within a chest of cherry lacquer! Some secret, some prize, jealously guarded and sealed in bronze!

Malabar, endeavoring to make use of his knowledge of the indirect processes of the Oriental mind, came back time after time to the same conclusion. Under heavy convoy, a bronze chest containing some treasure infinitely precious was being taken—where?

His mind played with the fantastic but logical idea: a treasure chest! It would, by its size, contain a fabulous fortune. And his young imagination, stimulated by what he had seen in that short glimpse, saw the chest open, the lacquered retaining chest splintered and cast aside; the bronze chest giving up its secret—a dazzling hoard of jewels and gold; emeralds as green as the shallow waters of a tropical sea under a blazing sun; sapphires like luscious ripe grapes; diamonds sparkling and flashing with the fire of a million dancing breeze-swept waves; gold, soft and yellow.

A mandarin's treasure indeed! For those two, squatting on their hams before the smoking braziers, had certainly been no less than mandarins—and number-one, ruby-button, mandarins into the bargain!

MALABAR did not return to the window. It struck him that a man gazing into that window would not be given a cordial reception by the occupants of Suite C.

As he looked up and down the deck, he faintly heard the ship's bell tolling two bells; one o'clock in the morning watch. The deck was empty. Round-the-world tourists, overtired from the exertion of departure, had retired for the night. He encircled the deck, walking slowly and lightly when he passed Suite C, wondering about the treasure sealed in bronze; puzzling about Captain Lavender; and bemoaning the departure of Sylvia.

In a darkened nook, formed by the jutting ends of cabins, he settled down in some one's steamer chair to ponder the amazing situation. He thought of his father again, and of his recent suspicion that his father had engineered this whole affair. The departure of Sylvia might be accounted for in some such way. Even the elaborate stage setting of Suite C might be explained in that manner. But the theory seemed, more and more, to be losing its capacity to hold water.

Malabar was preparing to light a cigarette when a man came down the deck. Promptly, with hands suddenly trembling, Malabar returned cigarette case and benzine lighter to his pockets. From where he reclined, he could see the man plainly, but because of the shadow, the prowler could not see Malabar.

With gleaming, narrowed eyes, Malabar watched him. His first glance had identified the man as the same one who had approached him on the steps the museum and who, since Malabar had come aboard, had magically vanished into the bowels of the ship.

The manner of the Chinese was casual, too casual. He sauntered along the deck, looking out at the sea, looking, again, at his manicured nails. He passed the door of Suite C, hesitated and went on. When he came back, his hand was in the right hand pocket of his coat.

Malabar, holding his breath, until he thought his lungs would burst, waited and watched. Again the Chinese passed Suite C and went on to a stanchion three steps removed from it. There, with a suddenly assumed air of resolution, he wheeled about. He glanced up and down the empty deck. He walked determinedly to the door.

Here, thought Malabar, were potentialities for drama more dramatic than any he had so far this evening witnessed. A wolf about to enter a den of wolves! It occurred to Malabar that the Chinese was preparing to make of himself a sacrificial offering—and always thereafter that was Malabar's honest belief. How else could the man's audacity be accounted for?

The Chinese went to the door with his stubby blue revolver in one hand. The other hand he placed on the knob.

Malabar, half rising from the chair, biting his lower lip in sheer nervous excitement, watched the grotesque drama to its terrible end.

He saw the door suddenly swing open. He saw the giant bulk of Captain Lavender leap out of the door in a faint swirling mist of incense smoke. Saw him seize the revolver hand of the Chinese and send the gun turning over and over into the scuppers, where it came down with a bark. The hammer had been cocked; the arm had been fired by the sudden concussion.

Captain Lavender said nothing. He had looked like a man who would, in a rage, bellow profanely. But in a strange, terrible silence he picked up the Chinese by the shoulders; carried him, kicking and struggling, to the rail.

Malabar's blood, for the moment, became ice water. He wanted to cry out protestingly. The silent savagery of Captain Lavender was, to him, horrible. Why couldn't he turn this poor wretch over to the ship's officers?

THE Chinese was kicking and striking out and, in a thin, terrible voice, screaming in the language of his fathers. Relentlessly, Captain Lavender carried him to the rail. But he did not throw him overboard—not yet.

Malabar's heart went sicker still at the unbelievable brutality of Captain Lavender's intention. Then it was happening. He lifted the squirming Chinese up and brought his neck down with a hideous sharp crack upon the stanchion. Unquestionably, it broke the man's spine instantly.

A high, thin, horrible scream was left upon the misty night, and that was all.

Malabar did not hear the splash of the falling, lifeless body. Sick with horror and revulsion, he watched Bluebeard. That terrible old man was slowly wiping his great hands together; was gazing with hawklike eyes out into the misty night, as if casually to ask a question of the forthcoming weather. He picked up the revolver and carelessly tossed it after its owner.

Then he turned, and, in his curious, rolling stride, went back into Suite C. The door went to with a slam.

And Malabar found himself half running, half stumbling down the deck. Never in his life had he witnessed a scene so ruthless, so horrible. It was the shifting, distorted glimpse of a nightmare. The dying man's scream whistled in his ears like the wind from a haunted graveyard.

As Malabar ran, he was certain he heard footsteps behind him. And at that his blood went cold again. Captain Lavender or one of his partners in crime was behind him, pursuing him, determined to stifle the mouth of the witness as well as the murdered!

Like a man in a slow-motion dream, Malabar could not run faster. He could not bring up his heavy feet from the deck. His knees were sliding away from under him. For the second time to-night, he could feel cold steel sliding between the ribs in his back—the punishment he perhaps deserved for meddling and prying.

He all but cried aloud when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder and spun him about.

Malabar went spinning, his back flattened against the cabin wall with such violence that it almost knocked the wind from him.

A grim young man in a blue uniform faced him. His eyes were points of blue fire. Malabar, wildly eying him, saw that he was the first officer.

The Vandalia's first officer gazed at him a moment with cold suspicion and inquiry.

"Why were you running like that?"

Malabar, panting, tried to recapture his breath. His brain cried out: "Murder! I just saw a poor devil murdered!" But he checked that outcry before it could reach his lips. He found that he was indignant at being stopped so rudely.

"I will run if I wish!" he panted.

The first officer looked at him with skepticism.

"I heard some one yell a minute ago. It sounded like a woman screaming. What do you know about it?"

Defiantly, angrily, Malabar answered:

"I don't know anything about it. Why do you ask me?"

The Vandalia's mate stepped back. He looked up and down the deck. He muttered:

"It's mighty queer. What's your name?"

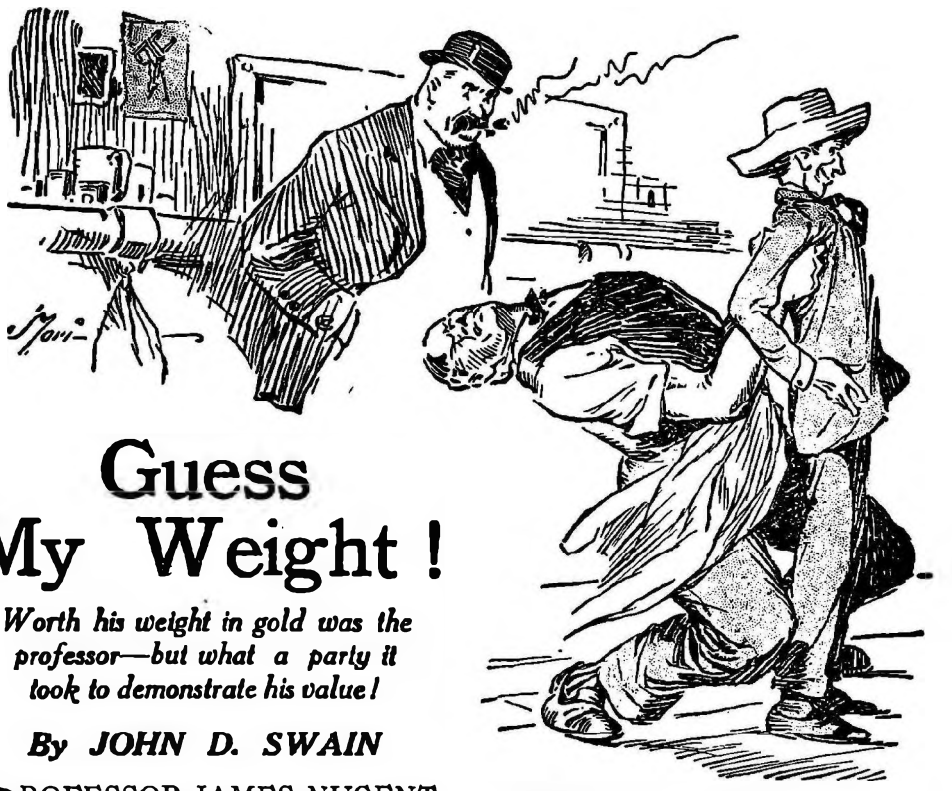
"Malabar MacKenzie!"

A queer look flitted over the first officer's grim face. It was the look that flitted over people's faces when they heard that magical name. He managed a crooked sort of smile. He mumbled something apologetic under his breath, turned about and rapidly walked forward.

Malabar stayed with his back flat against the white wall until the first officer was gone from sight. Then he took out his handkerchief and mopped his dripping face. Trouble for himself, he was certain, would come of this.

He tottered on along the deck and ascended, laboriously, a flight of steps. Wearily he let himself into his suite. It seemed large and lonely now. He wanted a great many things explained. A thing, a tiny thing, that had twinkled evilly on Captain Lavender's chest recurred to him now as an aggravating detail. It had been a tiny silver watch-fob. An exact replica of Malabar Mack's notorious emblem—a little silver fang!

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



Guess My Weight!

Worth his weight in gold was the professor—but what a party it took to demonstrate his value!

By JOHN D. SWAIN

"What's the big idea?" he demanded. "Friend of yours?"

PROFESSOR JAMES NUGENT —known professionally as "the Human Magnet"—looked and felt like nobody's business. The hour was four o'clock of a steaming summer afternoon, and he had been sitting in a stuffy and overcrowded anteroom ever since ten that morning. The Magnet was a little, worried looking man, with friendly eyes and a pathetically drooping mouth partly concealed beneath a semiwalrus mustache. He was neatly and even strikingly clad, but his clothes gave one the impression they would not hold out for another month.

His linen was clean, but looked as if it would probably be soiled in a few hours more. He had shaved, but already it was clear he would soon have to shave again if he entertained any social plans for the evening. He needed a square meal, and showed it.

It had been his intention, on entering the office of Moe Rothstein, who booked vaudeville and musical acts of all sorts, to arrive early so that his business might be finished in time for lunch.

But already the room was half full of applicants; and when noon struck, the professor had gradually moved toward the consultation room, and every seat between him and the door had been filled by fresh arrivals.

Having waited so long, it seemed foolish to surrender his place, and he had hung on while long interviews took place beyond Moe's sound-proof door. What happened to those who passed through was unknown, for they left by another door.

At one o'clock Nugent was hungry; at two, famished; by three hunger had passed, and he merely felt faint. Also, as he slowly drew closer to the fatal door, he became less optimistic.

Pressed close to him on the right was an elderly tragedian who had fallen asleep, his venerable head resting on Nugent's shoulder. On his left sat a pretty flapper who, despite the stifling heat, wore about her neck something that looked like opossum. It smelled queer, as if it had died recently; this, with the overpowering and exotic East Side perfume the little actress preferred, made Professor Nugent feel as if he were going to faint and miss his interview after all.

In the nick of time, just at half past three, he was saved. The door opened, and a tired looking secretary beckoned.

Nugent gently thrust aside the head of the old tragedian, rose stiffly, squared his shoulders, and tried to assume an air of genial confidence as he took the three steps that carried him to Rothstein's littered desk. The booking agent looked up with lackluster eyes. It had been a hard day for him, as well as for his clients, and he would hardly have brightened had it been John Drew himself whose hand was extended in greeting. He accepted limply, without comment.

"Well, well! Moe. How's the boy? You remember me, of course—'the Human Magnet.' It just happens I'm at liberty—"

"Everybody's at liberty," Rothstein sighed. "What are the cops thinking of?"

"Ha, ha!" The little professor laughed dutifully. "But I mustn't take up your valuable time. You know my act, and so—"

"Yeah, I know it—and it's a flop."

Nugent bristled. "I beg your pardon. May I suggest that your attention has not been called to my press notices? Here!"

Moe raised a protesting hand as Nugent reached toward a pocket. "I got nothing to criticize in your act, Nugent; what I mean, the idear ain't so good. It's old stuff. The people is tired of it. Too many doing the same thing on the small time."

"*Nobody* is doing it but me! There is a French girl who claims to do my stuff; but when a guy tries to lift her she puts her hand under his chin. And on this side there's Jim Telford; and what does he do? He's a smart wisecracker, and he gets 'em to laughing so hard that when they tries to lift him they couldn't even lift a stein of beer from a table.

"Now, me, I'm legitimate. I've no apparatus, nothing tricky; and I challenge one and all to come up onto the stage and lift me from the floor. It can't be done! Try it yourself, Moe, if you don't believe me. Now! Right as I stand beside your desk!"

Rothstein refused with a weary gesture.

"I know you got a straight act. I have seen it. But I'm telling you, it don't draw! Be yourself, professor! You open cold; no scenery, no props, no patter, nothing. And even though you do challenge anybody to come up on the apron and try and lift you, the house thinks you got your own gang planted downstairs. They don't believe their own eyes. Now—"

Nugent interrupted eagerly. "Yes, and it's just because my expenses are so small, carrying no company or scenery apparatus, not even needing an electrician, that I'm able to accept a very modest contract. My usual rate, as you perhaps remember, is five hundred a week on the—"

"I wouldn't try to place you for a hundred and fifty," Moe declared. "Can't you get me? That sort of act died out before the Big War. Now, if you'd listen to reason, have some swell scenery painted for you, get a snappy sketch wrote, and double with any one of a score of girls I could get you on the phone inside of ten minutes, you might come and show me the act. Otherwise, you're holding up the parade, and it's 'most closing time, anyhow."

The little man's figure seemed to shrivel and sag. He looked as if any

healthy cat could pick him up in her mouth like a kitten and bear him out of the office. Instead of which, his own discouraged legs had to perform this slight service.

HE paused to wipe his moist forehead. Seldom had his fortunes been at so low an ebb. True, he had a room, such as it was; but he already owed three weeks' rent on it, and Rothstein's Agency had been his last resort and his best bet; for it had given him bookings twice before.

In his pocket were a five-dollar bill and a little silver. In his stomach was a vast solitude. He knew that the only sensible thing just now was to eat a square meal. It might give him courage to return home and stall off the landlady once more. At any rate, food would put a little strength into his now wabbly legs.

By means unknown to himself, the Human Magnet was able to regulate his weight, or at least to appear to do so. He could make himself so heavy that the huskiest truckman could not lift him from the floor, or so ethereal that a frail girl could pick him up as if he were a sawdust-stuffed doll. This was his one and only gift. He had no other trade, profession or means of support. He had little education and, despite long experience in vaudeville, could neither dance, sing, act, nor do a monologue.

Once or twice he had demonstrated his powers before a group of scientists. This had been fine publicity for his act. Some of the scholars decided it was all a question of hypnotism. The Human Magnet made folks think they could not lift him, and so they couldn't. But if Nugent possessed hypnotic powers, he was unaware of it.

Others claimed it was a matter of rhythmic breathing; for Nugent was accustomed in these tests to breathe in and out very deeply and slowly, and to hold his breath during the actual effort to lift him.

Whatever the secret, the act had gone great—when it was a novelty. Then imitators had sprung up. The theaters were thronged with spurious magnets, each claiming to be the only genuine article. Some of them were clever, but all were fakes. However, the audience didn't know this. They tired of the act; a jazzier age demanded something more up-to-date.

Nugent had been "at liberty" now for more than six months; his slender savings had vanished. He was practically down and out. There remained nothing to do but to put in one more dinner, read an evening paper, and crawl home.

In the year when the Human Magnet dejectedly emerged from the dingy office building onto a sultry street, it was possible to quench one's thirst legally with almost anything an exuberant fancy dictated. Not yet had prohibition arrived.

The long wait in a room which did not contain even a water tank, the heat and the depression, had given Nugent a thirst that clamored louder than did his empty stomach. On the next corner he turned through swinging half doors into a refreshingly cool, dark room from which pleasant odors stole out to the pavement.

The saloon was deserted at the moment by all save a bartender and a solitary customer—an unusually tall and rangy man who leaned, elbows on the rosewood, a half emptied glass beside him, and told an interminable story to the patient figure which steadily mopped the shining board with a wet rag.

Professor Nugent requested a long goblet of dark beer. It was very cold and just bitter enough, it seemed to the Human Magnet. He sighed, and ordered a second, then wandered across the long, narrow room to where a free lunch was set out.

It was the Golden Age of the free lunch. Every saloon in the great city had one. The lunch before which

Nugent now paused was typical. There was no attendant; a sheaf of forks stood in a bowl of water, a stack of plates at one end of the table.

On a great flat steel sheet, over a low gas flame, sizzled scores of tiny pork sausages, and there was a dish of toothpicks with which to impale these. Potato salad, fish balls the size of large marbles, mustard, pickles, crackers and cheese, salt herring, pretzels, coleslaw, small cubes of bologna, were there in abundance. All good—and most of them creating new thirsts.

There was a specious air of generosity about the gesture. At the price of a nickel's worth of beer any respectable patron might truly eat all he could hold, for as long as it lasted. Once consumed, the free lunch was not replenished that day—or at any rate, not more than twice a day, noon and night.

Nugent finished his beer while sampling various morsels that appealed to him. He felt quite a new man. The faintness had gone from his insides, the dryness from his throat. His naturally friendly disposition began to emerge, and he felt the need of companionship. He didn't especially want another drink just yet, but sidled up to the tall stranger, who had finished his monologue, and ordered one.

"Won't you join me, brother?" he asked.

The tall man, thawed by human kindliness, admitted he might have just a shell of ale. The bartender served them silently, and Nugent laid down two more nickels.

How little man needs here below, after all! Ten minutes ago, the Human Magnet had been as near despair as one of his sunny nature could get. And now, having spent but twenty cents, he had consumed two refreshing drinks and a good meal, with a third drink still waiting for him, and had scraped acquaintance with a fellow being of unknown possibilities.

It was always an adventure, meeting a stranger like this! Sometimes it meant hours of happy converse, winding up with solemn oaths of undying friendship, possibly watered by sentimental tears! All sorts of things might, and did happen. Not all of them pleasant to contemplate; but nothing serious had ever happened to little Professor Nugent. He was so friendly, not to say puny and insignificant, that even the grouchiest of bums forebore to harm him. Especially when he was buying!

The stranger, of course, bought back. Then the bartender, sensing the critical moment upon which hung the issue of a breaking-up of the small party, or a long session, announced that the next drink was "on the house." And he poured for himself a very thimbleful of bar whisky. Whereupon the others switched to hard liquor; the stranger explaining he had drunk all the "hog-wash" his stomach called for.

THEY introduced themselves. The tall man declared his friends called him Jere and he hailed from "God's Country," more precisely, the rich lowlands of Iowa.

Little Nugent now began to enter that hazy land of golden dreams, where all is well. The sense of financial disaster was replaced by mellow optimism. To-morrow he would get himself placed with some bigger agent than Moe Rothstein ever would or could be. He entered into that imaginary kingdom which is the real cause of most men's libations. He escaped from actuality and was at peace.

His mind, too, seemed to function better. His wits were whetted, and large resounding words rose unbidden to his tongue—words he hardly knew he possessed. He ordered another round.

"Jere, how much do I weigh?" he asked.

The man from God's country, well accustomed to estimate weight on the hoof, looked down at the cheerful Hu-

man Magnet, closed his eyes and furrowed his brow.

"Oh, 'bout a hundred and thirty," he guessed.

It was a good guess; for Nugent weighed just under a hundred and thirty-two. He did not reply directly to his friend's estimate, but fished out his lone five-dollar bill, which he placed on the bar. Inasmuch as he had left in his pockets exactly thirty-three cents, the gesture was a bold one.

"Bet you a fiver you can't lift me," he dared.

The tall man stared. "If the time ever comes when I can't shoulder a little runt like you, I'll retire to the Old Folks' Home or shoot myself!"

"All right; put up your five, then."

Jere shook his head patronizingly. "I don't want your money, Jim! Wouldn't take advantage of your havin' a few drinks under your belt, for the world."

The professor scowled.

"I'm serious! And sober. That bet lays as she's placed. If you don't cover it, then you admit you can't lift me offn my feet."

With a snort of disgust, the lank one fished a bill from a sizable roll and slammed it down beside Nugent's. The bartender, like his kind, was a sporting man. All sorts of propositions came under his observation, day after day; in some of them he took part profitably. He now leaned over his counter and addressed the little man.

"I'd like in on that bet, myself! How about it, bo?"

"I'm sorry! But the banks are all closed. I can't get a check cashed this late; and I only brought enough for a few drinks. Just to show I'm in earnest I'll put up my ticker and chain, for whatever you think it's worth!"

He placed beside the money wagers a plated gold watch and chain, somewhat worn. The barkeep took it up, compared it with the big clock on the wall, saw it marked the same time; held the watch to an ear and heard a healthy tick. He didn't want the watch; but on general principles he always bet on a sure thing.

Later on, he could sell it to some drunk for a couple of bucks at least, maybe more. He reached into his pocket and withdrew five dollars. He had known the man Jere for some time; knew he was an unusually powerful fellow, well able to carry under each arm a half-portion like this fool stranger and roll a wheatstraw cigarette at the same time.

The stakes now being down, held by the bartender, the tall man stooped, his big, bony hands outspread. The professor closed his lips tightly, and drew a long, steady lungful of air, and held it, his cheeks puffed out. He set his elbows tight against his sides, and waited.

Jere seized his elbows rather carelessly, and at his first tug they slipped off and up Jim's meager arms. The big man looked surprised and took a firmer grip. Nothing happened. He grunted, stood back and stared with rounded eyes at the small man.

"You're heftier than I figgered," he admitted.

"You'd be surprised," Jim agreed, letting out sufficient air for the purpose.

This time Jere meant business. He stooped down, bending his knees, and threw both arms about the other's slender waist. He grunted with the exertion. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. Through his pants, the muscles of his thighs could be seen to swell, and the cords in his neck showed like cables. And still, nothing happened. The Human Magnet remained where he stood, as if nailed to the floor.

For two full minutes the tall man wrestled and strove; then suddenly he released his hold, sprang back and snarled: "*What the hell!* Say, feller, what you got in your pockets?"

"Not as much as I'm gonna have when I collect these stakes," beamed Nugent, expelling his breath. "Ready to quit?"

"Not till I've given you the once-over!" Jere pawed him from head to foot, seeking the pig iron he suspected the little man must be loaded down with. He retired, baffled.

"You got your dogs nailed to the floor!" he cried.

In answer, Jim lifted first one, then the other foot.

The bartender was deeply suspicious by nature. The thought came to him that he had been framed; these two seeming strangers had, between them, worked him for his five dollars, which they would split later on. He was a pretty husky specimen himself; in his business, a man had to be. He raked the stakes back and placed them beside the cash register. Then, there being at the time no other customers present, he vaulted lightly over his bar.

"Leave me have a try! There's sumpin' funny about this," he boomed.

Professor Nugent stepped back, lifting a thin hand.

"Wait! It will cost you another five first. Then you can try long as you want to."

THE bartender hesitated. That sounded fair enough; it would cost him five to see the little bum's bluff. If he lost, then he was out a sawbuck; but he had just simply got to find out whether these two skates were trying to double cross him. If they were, why then—

Grimly he placed another bill in the growing pot, leaning far across the bar to do so. Then he spat on his hands, hitched up his apron, and hugged the professor like a grizzly defending her young. Not until three long minutes had passed did he quit, puffing and panting like a blown horse. His eyes were bloodshot and popping. He was almost too surprised to be angry. There was nothing to do but to pass over the pot to Nugent; twenty dollars, a watch and chain. A clear profit of fifteen!

At this moment, when neither Jere nor the barkeep had thought of anything to say that might relieve their feelings, a sigh caused Nugent to glance behind him. He beheld a little old man who had entered from the back room with mop and pail, and was sadly cleaning up the floor.

Saloons used to have these melancholy derelicts, and they all looked alike. Thin, stooped, gray, forever cleaning, sweeping, polishing. They got a chance at the lunch, all the beer they wanted, and just enough money to furnish them with a bed and keep their shoes half-soled. Once in awhile a bibulous patron would buy them a whisky or even tip them a quarter. They fetched the milk for the saloon cat every morning, sprinkled sawdust, cleared away the free lunch remains.

The man at whom Nugent gazed was an especially frail, undernourished creature, who couldn't have weighed, clothes and all, much over a hundred pounds. An idea flashed into the Human Magnet's head.

"Listen! You guys are strong enough, but you're so clumsy you step on your own feet. There's a knack in liftin'! Any expressman knows that. Now I'll bet anything within reason this little feller here, the one who handles his mop so easily, can lift me clean off the floor!"

The idea that poor, sad, old little Johnnie could lift anything that two hearty men had been unable to budge, roused them to loud, coarse guffaws. They didn't, at first, think Nugent was serious, but when they found that he was, and there was a chance to recoup, they put down ten dollars each, which he covered with his entire assets.

But it wasn't easy to get the little helper to try. He was shy and moreover rather bitter and sulky. Life had made him that way. He didn't think he could lift Nugent, although he had not been present when the others had failed. But he knew that it was about all he could do to raise a full water pail. It was only when the bartender swore and threatened to fire him unless he

tried, that he unwillingly set down his mop and tottered forward.

"*Aw right!*" he bitterly agreed. "But it 'll prob'ly mean I'll have to wear a truss till me dying day, bad 'cess to ye!"

"Nothing like that," Nugent encouraged him. "Why, I don't weigh fifty pounds! Just put your two hands under my elbows; don't strain, lift easy—*e-e-asy* does it!"

And easy did it. To the stricken regard of the two onlookers, it seemed that the little cleaner didn't even try; yet Nugent rose from the floor as lightly as a feather, and was held there fifteen seconds before Johnnie set him down and turned dejectedly back to his mop and pail, unaware that he had furnished a topic for hours and hours of bar gossip and argument.

It was, Nugent felt, time to be on his way. Something told him that the time was ripe for saying good-by to his new friends.

The Magnet collected his bets, now fattened by twenty dollars more; bought a final round, gave the surprised Johnnie a five-spot, and passed out through the swinging doors onto the street.

The success of his operations had sobered him. He was still feeling exuberant and vivacious, but his head was clear, his gait steady. He recalled having read somewhere—in the report of a religious organization, he thought, that there were more than four hundred saloons in the city. Then it began to dawn upon him that there were other cities, hundreds of them, and that it didn't really matter to him whether he ever went back to vaudeville again, or not.

This was the life!

Prudently waiting until he had passed several bars, and got into another street, he swung open another pair of easy doors and entered, his eyes sparkling, a smile upon his lips.

It is unnecessary to this story to follow the Human Magnet for the remainder of a hectic afternoon and evening. With practice, his technique improved; and as his roll steadily grew, he was able to make heavier wagers.

It would be overstating the case to say that he was sober; but from time to time he sampled appetizing free lunches, drank here and there a cup of hot coffee. Also, he walked miles, from bar to bar; and then, too, his natural capacity was far above par. Not all that he did during the next few hours is known, even to himself. But certain high spots stood out.

Some time that afternoon he went into a tonsorial parlor, had a shave and facial massage. During the shave, he went to sleep; and, the barber having misunderstood his mumbled request, when he awoke he had lost his semi-walrus mustache, and his face was smooth.

He could not remember whether it was in this parlor or somewhere else that he had a manicure; but he recalled paying a negro boy a dollar to shine his shoes.

Much later, far down town, he entered a haberdashery that kept open evenings, and here he removed his shirt, replacing it with a new one with attached collar, together with a gaudy and expensive cravat, and crowned himself with a fine Panama. He had the impression he ordered his old hat and shirt delivered to his lodging house the following day, but if so, he must have given the wrong address, for he never saw either again. Not that it mattered!

Then he recalled in one crowded saloon the entrance of a Salvation Army lassie, with her tambourine; and he filled it with dirty, crumpled bills—a huge sum, representing all the wagers he had won in the place. Thereupon he launched into an eloquent history of the Salvation Army, its origin, its bright future, what it had meant to him and to thousands of other unhappy mortals; in the midst of which the girl slipped out, fearing he would change

his mind and want the money back. She did him a great injustice.

HE did not at all remember the instant when he was seized with the desire to ride somewhere. He climbed, not into a taxi, but an old hansom cab; and drove miles across town to his lodging house, where he paralyzed his landlady by bursting into tears as he peeled from his now amazing roll five hundred dollars, and thrust it into her red, swollen hands.

"You've been a second mother to me," he cried. "And I want you should take out all I owe you, and then take out whatever else any poor devil of a fellow lodger owes you! I wanna put this house on a payin' basis; and what's left, if anything, I wanna have you be my banker and keep for me. I ain't 'sponsible, to-night! Too benev'lent for my own good."

Then he leaned on her shoulder and wept, saying what a hard life she had led, and how it never had soured her, and how her name was whispered in the other world by poor old lodgers who had died on her after she'd tried her best to keep the breath of life in them.

All this was a blank to him, and he knew nothing of it until he met his landlady later and was told by her, as she handed him back about a hundred dollars, which she said was the correct balance after she had taken out all that her lodgers owed her—including forty bucks due from the man who had sneaked out the week before, letting himself and his luggage down by the bedsheets from the second-story back.

Much later he reappeared down town. His first act, after paying off his cabby, was to enter a pawnshop and exchange his watch for another that did not keep nearly as good time, but that had on the back of its case the emblem of a fraternal order Nugent did not belong to, picked out in diamond chips and imitation rubies.

The saloons in Nugent's city closed at midnight, and this law was strictly enforced. It was about half past eleven when the Human Magnet, still outwardly sober, entered one of the very toughest resorts, very far down town. Every hard character east of the Mississippi came here when in town. Sports, real, near, and tin-horn, made it their headquarters.

The place was well filled when Nugent came to rest before the bar, and announced that it was his pleasure to buy a drink for one and all present, including the boss, the barkeeps, the saloon cat and her five new kittens.

Such offers were not unusual in Lame Mike's place, and Nugent's roused no special notice, though it was not missed by any of those present, with the exception of the cat and kittens and Lame Mike himself. Mike was a teetotaler, because liquor made his knife hand unsteady and it was mortifying to make a pass at a man and merely wound him.

Lame Mike Dorgan operated a resort so tough that his six bartenders were selected as much for their athletic abilities as for their skill in mixing drinks. And not only that, Lame Mike kept in reserve two professional bouncers who were so tough they used ice picks for their teeth. For these reasons the outbreaks in this particular bar were very short lived. Mike was bound to have peace, if he had to commit murder to get it.

A dozen men had been thrown out onto the pavement during the evening, some of them more than once. Now, with closing time approaching, the customers were too busy getting their last drinks to start any arguments. And before the Human Magnet realized it, it was five minutes to twelve, and the bartenders were warning: "Closing time, gents! Last round!"

At two minutes before midnight all customers had been more or less gently shooed toward the door, excepting three who were still finishing a hooker in front of the bar, and two others who

were pawing over the remains of the free lunch, filling their pockets with broken crackers and crumbs of cheese and overlooked pickles. These, and the little professor, who showed no realization of the flight of time.

"Beat it, little feller!" a big barkeep ordered. "Everybody's out before the bell rings."

He spoke good naturedly, because the little man had been unobtrusive and a good spender. But the professor had no desire whatever to call it an evening, and go home. He had by now reached that stage where the thought of bed was abhorrent to him. And so was the thought of being alone. He wanted company, and he wasn't choosy about its social distinction.

Also this being his final fling for the day and his pockets being amazingly lined with more money than he had ever seen before, he wanted to make one good killing before quitting. He leaned confidentially across the bar, and confided his belief that the barkeep could not lift him from the floor.

The man, a thick-shouldered, undershot specimen with a broken nose, paused in his act of wiping glasses.

"Be your own age, shrimp!" he advised. "I could throw the likes of you clean through the window and acrost the street. But I don't want to. You've had enough! On your way."

From one of his pockets Nugent drew a sodden roll of bills which he began clumsily to count. There was one hundred and eighty dollars in all. He laid it on the mahogany with a flourish.

"All in good part, brother! There's plenty more where it came from. This much says you can't lift me. Not throw: lift. I'm no scrapper, y'understand."

The bartender shifted his gaze to where Lame Mike stood by his door, bidding the last customer good night, and with his door key in one hand. The other bartenders were taking off their white coats. In the back room the two bouncers, who had been playing pinochle, were preparing to leave.

There was no sense in letting a good roll of real money wander out into the streets in the frail guardianship of this little simp! It would be taken off of him within four blocks. The barkeep felt that he might as well acquire it. He had a family of his own. He licked his lips and nodded.

"Aw right, if you will have it! I'll go you."

He started briskly to walk around the bar.

"Hold on! You gotta cover my money," the Human Magnet cried.

THE barkeep hesitated; then, afraid something would make his man change his mind—if any—were he to stop to argue about it, he rang the cash register and counted out one hundred and eighty dollars, which he placed with the rest. Then he came around to where Nugent stood.

Almost idly he wrapped his long arms about the slender waist, and heaved up. A suspender button flew from Nugent's pants; that was all. And while the red-faced barkeep was struggling profanely, real terror filled his heart as he thought of the wager.

Lame Mike, having locked up, came limping down the room, curiosity in his eyes.

"What's the big idear?" he demanded. "Friend of yours?"

The annoyed bartender stepped back, wiping the sweat from his forehead. As he did so, the Human Magnet carelessly gathered up the wager and stuffed the whole into his pants pocket.

"Here, you! I ain't through yet!" The big man yelled.

Nugent smiled. "Oh, yes, you are, brother! You may not know it, but you're all through. But anybody else is welcome to take a chance."

He turned to the proprietor.

"My friend here thought he could lift me," the Magnet explained. "I

differ with him. And I just cashed in on the little bet we made."

Lame Mike turned puzzled eyes upon his big employee.

"I don't get this at all! What's this souse doing here after we've closed up? And what's this about money? Whose money?"

The bartender licked his lips, terror in his eyes. It was, to be frank, Lame Mike's money, taken from the cash register; merely borrowed for one small minute, as he had reasonably believed. And now it had gone, unless he could shake it out of this little nut! He was too confused to try to figure out why the stranger seemed so incredibly heavy.

"I," said Nugent, throwing out his thirty-three inch chest, "am a magician. The discoverer of an unknown physical law. No man can lift me from the floor; I back myself with any sum put up against me."

Again he flashed a great roll of sticky bills.

Now Mike was strictly honest; no customer was ever robbed or short-changed in his place, with his sanction; but a wager was another thing.

"Ya mean to say ya couldn't lift this rat?" Mike asked the bartender.

The latter nodded unhappily. "I didn't, on the first try. Leave me get another hold!"

Mike waved him aside.

"You've had yer shot! Let some of the rest of us into this thing. Why, even I, with me game leg, could walk off with this suit of castoff clothes!"

He extended his hands, walked toward the smiling professor, who put up a restraining hand.

"Put up your money first," Nugent demanded.

Lame Mike flickered a century note from his vest pocket, laid it on the bar. Nugent promptly covered it. There ensued another fruitless heaving, with no result whatever except to rouse Mike's temper.

Lame Mike turned to where his two bouncers, attracted by the argument, had slouched from their lair in back. They were terrible-looking objects, hardly human in appearance. "Roaring Bill" Rafferty did not possess a single feature that had not been altered at least once, and through this cross-word puzzle of old scars peered two mean little pig eyes. "Hob-nail" Leo was a Greek, pockmarked, shaped like a barrel, and with no neck worth speaking of. Both had thrown more than one fair pugilist out of Mike's place, not to mention professional wrestlers and celebrating lumberjacks.

"Look here, boys!" Mike said "This little vermin has got something new. Claims nobody can't lift him offn his feet. Well, I couldn't, nor Jake here. Now me, I got brains. I know when I had enough! But if either of you strong-arm birds thinks he can do what we couldn't, why, the perfessor here is ready to back himself to the limit. What say? Time's short. The cop will be poundin' on me door, asking when do we close the bar!"

Roaring Bill got his money down quickest; forty dollars, being all he had on him. He tried to borrow more from the boss, but was refused.

"Ya'll thank me for that, before yer through tryin' to lift this bimbo," he added.

Bill did thank him. For, after a terrific struggle, he was obliged to admit defeat.

Nugent beamed on the circle of scowling faces.

"Tell you what," he advised Lame Mike. "You got a great place here! Best company I ever was in. Finest liquor I ever drank! Best boys back of the bar. But you close up too soon! What you need, is a night shift; and me, I'll be it!"

Before Lame Mike realized what he was up to, he had vaulted the bar, and dropped to the other side. He took a white apron and inquired: "What'll it be, gents?"

"Come outa there!" bawled Mike.

"You beat it now. I'll lose my license if the cop on this beat find a souse back of my bar this time o' night. The union don't allow it, anyhow!"

The Human Magnet was not impressed.

"It's only the edge of the evenin'," he insisted. "If I can't serve drinks, get one of the boys to stay here. I'll pay him anything he thinks is right for overtime. You and me, Mike; and the two big fellers. We'll make a night of it! What say?"

Mike turned his head, spoke from the side of his mouth:

"Don't hurt the little fool," he whispered. "As a jag, he beats anything I ever see yet, and I've seen aplenty! But he's harmless. To everything but our pocketbooks! Just haul him outa there, and outside. Don't hit him!"

His two strong-arm men trotted back of the bar and laid sinewy hands on the professor.

But once more the little man blew himself up like a frog, inhaling deeply, and planting himself squarely on his two feet.

In the grim struggle, the seat of Nugent's pants came out, his collar was wrenched off from its button, his feet cruelly stepped on by Hob-Nail. But he showed no more indication of moving than did the heavy mahogany and glass fixtures.

Lame Mike threw up disgusted hands, breaking into a flow of rich profanity.

"And I pay you two bums real money to protect my place!" he moaned. "I wonder I ain't never found you out before. Here, you; go help them pork-and-beaners. Have I gotta stay here all night?"

Two of the stockiest bartenders rallied to the rescue. That made four in all; no more could get at the Human Magnet in the restricted space behind the bar.

In a rage, Lame Mike strode the length of his saloon, opened the door, and went out. Two blocks down, he caught O'Donnell, the night copper on this beat, and demanded help.

THE bluecoat spat contemplatively into the gutter.

"What's this earful, Mike? Tryin' to string me, are you?"

Mike profanely insisted he was not.

O'Donnell stared incredulously.

"And you got your two strong boys there, and your six barkeeps—them that the boys all calls 'The Wrecking Crew'—and all together you can't budge a little guy you tell me don't weigh a hundred and forty? This ain't the 1st of April, Mike!"

"What I'm telling you is right! He's some new kind of a faker. Nobody can't lift him; he's took more'n three hundred in bets off'n us inside ten minutes. I'll lose me license if I don't get him out."

"I'll have a look," the officer decided. "Lead on!"

He had a look, and tried his luck at pushing the Human Magnet along. He succeeded neither in this, nor in persuasion of the vocal sort; kidding, threats, nothing worked. The professor was having a perfectly wonderful time, and didn't want to go home. He took it for granted that everybody else was just as happy as he was; and he wanted to buy drinks, champagne, anything, for them all as long as they would bear him company.

In the end, there was nothing for it but to send for the reserves. O'Donnell could not explain the peculiar, the unprecedented situation, over the telephone, to the desk lieutenant. And so it was taken for granted at headquarters that a real riot was in progress down at Lame Mike's place; for never before had that gentleman needed police help in quelling anything that started.

The wagon was sent clanging on its way, and inside were the four most husky, fearless, and experienced members of the city strong-arm squad. The smallest weighed two hundred and ten,

but made up for his slenderness by his skill in wrestling and boxing and throwing the discus at the police games.

It was precisely one o'clock when the Human Magnet was lifted by six grunting, groaning figures, the four police, aided by Lame Mike's two bouncers, and deposited in the wagon. Only Mike's genuine humanity had prevented night sticks from being bent over Nugent's head.

James Nugent was borne to headquarters and put into a cell, where he promptly went to sleep.

The Human Magnet awoke next morning, feeling much better than he had any right to feel. He reviewed as much of the night before as he could, and realized that he needed a lawyer. That request was honored; the large sum of money removed from the prisoner's pockets when he was locked up entitled him to the best legal assistance.

Nugent rapidly explained the facts to the attorney who visited him, an hour later, and the lawyer sent out a flock of witness summons. At ten o'clock, in the City Court, before Judge O'Hara, Professor James Nugent was cited for disturbing the peace.

Officer O'Donnell made the charge, briefly reciting the history of the case.

Nugent's attorney, a young man named Milligan, rose to question the policeman.

"Did my client commit any breakage, or offer to strike or otherwise assault anybody present?"

"He did not," said O'Donnell. It was a tender subject; the policeman had been dreading some such question. "He refused to move out of the place after being duly notified to do so by the proprietor and by myself."

"When a man refuses to move on, Mr. O'Donnell, is it your custom to ring for assistance?"

"It is not! But—"

"One moment! When my client, as you claim, refused to leave Dorgan's place, did you take any steps to compel him, before calling for help?"

"Well," mumbled the embarrassed cop, "I asked some of Dorgan's boys to lend a hand; and the four of us—all that could get at the prisoner—couldn't budge him. Then I called up headquarters."

Lame Mike corroborated the policeman's testimony.

Then Attorney Milligan requested that the other witnesses rise. There were eleven in all; the policeman O'Donnell and the four members of the raiding, or strong-arm squad; Dorgan's two bouncers, and four of his bartenders.

Milligan ranged them in a line, then asked his client to take his place in the middle. The city solicitor entered violent objection to this procedure, but was overruled by Judge O'Hara, who was taking unusual interest in the case, which was a novelty in the usual round of drunks, petty assaults, street walking and the like.

The line-up was striking. Every man but Nugent was big and burly. Seen in their midst, the Human Magnet looked even smaller and frailer than he actually was. Milligan turned to Judge O'Hara:

"Your honor, my client stands charged with being drunk and disorderly. I do not deny he had been drinking, but I deny he was drunk or disorderly! It will occur to your honor that there is something queer about this case; there is even a hint of perjury here! For all of these witnesses are selected for their great strength and ability to handle unruly men.

"How can it be possible that all of them, singly and together, failed to move my client from his feet? I ask that your honor dismiss the case on the ground that the evidence is ridiculous."

Judge O'Hara peered over his spectacles.

"I confess my curiosity is strongly engaged. I will ask Mr. Clarkson to step forward."

A court attendant, a gray-haired man

of tremendous width of shoulders, and standing six foot of erect manhood in square-toed shoes, came forward reluctantly.

"Mr. Clarkson," his honor said, "I know you to be a powerful man. Kindly lift the prisoner high enough so that I can see his feet leave the platform."

The big attendant, flushing slightly, leaned down and clasped the Human Magnet in his arms. He grunted. The muscles stood out in his cheeks and his knuckles whitened. But Nugent's feet did not leave the floor. For some moments he strove; then the gavel of Judge O'Hara smote his desk.

"Case dismissed!" he snapped. "It is evident to me that this honorable court is being used for purposes of publicity!"

Word had indeed gone about that something novel was happening. The two apathetic court reporters had been joined by three or four men sent down on a hurry call from the newspaper offices. When the Human Magnet emerged from the courthouse, with his money returned to him stuffing every pocket, he was shot by half a dozen cameras. Already, inside, one daring photographer had taken a flash light of the line-up of the eleven athletes standing with little Nugent in their midst before Judge O'Hara.

As Nugent, with difficulty, forced his way through the throng, and signaled a taxi, three reporters tumbled inside with him, asking questions. The professor replied with great dignity and clarity.

He ordered the chauffeur to drive to his modest lodging house. On the way he stopped at a fashionable clothier's, to replace his tattered suit with a new one that left nothing to be wished for in material and cut. With his hat brushed, a fresh shirt and tie, and an imported Egyptian cigarette in his mouth he at length arrived home.

His melancholy landlady opened the door and, beholding her prodigal lodger, uttered a shrill cry of welcome. She threw her long, skinny arms about him, then, despite his frantic struggles, and before the eyes of the reporters, she lifted him from the stoop and kissed him on both cheeks! Thus accomplishing a feat that eleven hearty men had not been able to manage until they had first tripped him up. Once inside the house, Nugent telephoned a newspaper clipping bureau. The afternoon and evening papers carried front page spreads, one of them showing the Human Magnet standing beside the big men whose efforts to lift him he had foiled.

Among many editorial comments, the *Record* said:

> Any one meeting a mild-mannered little man of about forty, and weighing a hundred and thirty, who remarks: "*Guess my weight!*" is advised to put his hand over his money pocket and hurry away.

All day long the lodging-house telephone rang with calls for Professor James Nugent. There also arrived special messengers for him and many visitors. Among the first was Moe Rothstein himself.

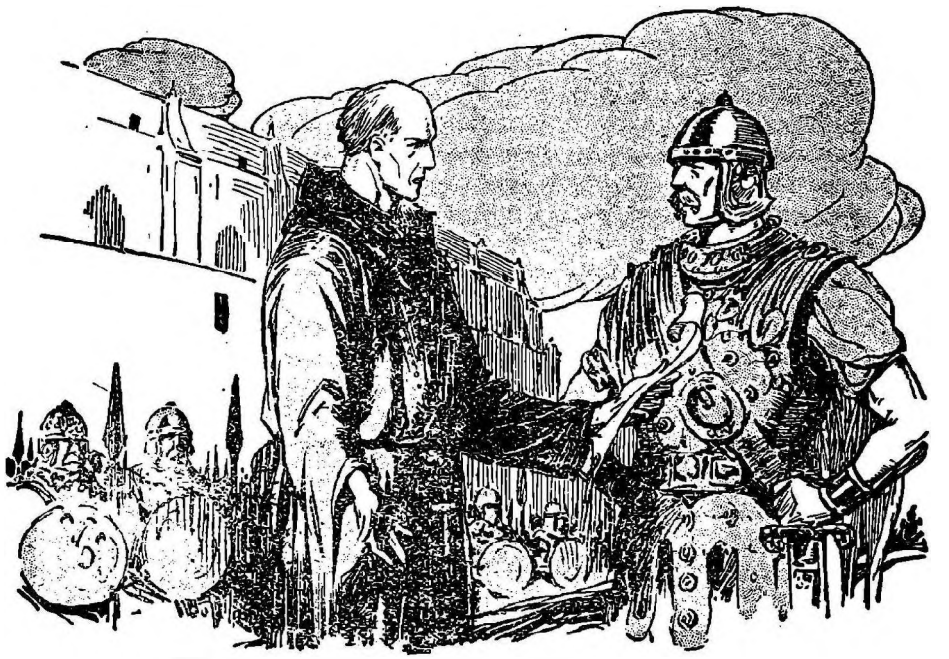
"*You* don't want me, Moe!" Nugent scoffed. "My act is a flop. The people are tired of it. What you want is something with more jazz in it. Here's your hat; good afternoon!"

For once in his life, he could afford to sit back and wait. He had received the best publicity in the world. All he had to do was to let it ripen properly.

The contract he finally fell for was from the O'Keefe Circuit, and was rumored to be for six months, at five thousand a week.

Anybody now guessing the weight of the Human Magnet is advised to add about ten pounds for the contents of the new leather money belt that has given to his waistline a comfortably plump curve!

THE END



"This is no deed of mine!" John declared contemptuously

He Rules Who Can

While Constantine and John the Eunuch struggle for power in the wealthy capital, Harald the Northman demonstrates what Viking wit and Viking axes can do against the Moslem hordes

By ARTHUR GILCHRIST BRODEUR

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

HARALD SIGURDSSON, Norwegian prince, arrives in Constantinople in 1038 with five hundred house-carles, trained fighters all. After a fight over a dancing girl, Cyra, in which he worsts Georgios Maniakes, Prefect of Police, he is arrested. But John the Eunuch offers him command of the whole Varangian Guard, the Norse half of the Emperor's bodyguard. Harald accepts on the basis that he serves the Emperor alone.

John, whose brother Michael married the widowed Empress Zoe, is real ruler of the Eastern Empire, playing one faction against another, and planning to place his younger brother Constantine on the throne. Harald, entangled in Greek lies and intrigues, hardly knows whom to trust—John, the wise ruler, accused of murdering the former Emperor; or Zoe, weak but rightful Empress; or the Patriarch of the Eastern Church, who schemes to destroy John and Michael.

Harald is fascinated by Maria, one of the Empress's retinue, and convinced that John has played him false, he promises her to kill the Eunuch.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for November 24

Then he learns that the Patriarch had lied to him about John—and Harald finds himself torn between his oath to John and to Maria.

Meantime John has sent Harald, with his Varangians, in charge of the fleet, and Georgios, with his Immortals —the Greek half of the Emperor's guards—in charge of land operations, to wage war against Sicily. John gives Harald secret orders to bring back Georgios in irons after the war is won, for Georgios plans to usurp the throne.

On the high seas, Harald receives an ebony coffer, presumably from John, but actually from Constantine, who has turned against the Eunuch. It contains Cyra's severed hands; and Harald swears vengeance against the Eunuch.

In Sicily, Georgios, mad with jealousy of Harald, first schemes to discredit him, and then sends him on an attack against walled Syracuse, which is almost certain to cause his defeat and death; and at the height of the battle, Georgios refuses to come to his aid. But Harald and his Varangians win out, and he swears he will take Syracuse—and exact full payment from the Greek.

CHAPTER XVI (*Continued*).

THE COUNTERSTROKE.

DAY after day passed, and the wailing within the walls of Syracuse scarce abated. The Arab sentinels paced the ramparts day and night, watching against surprise; but the kind of surprise they expected was was what Harald planned. His men labored on, always well guarded, extending their rampart to the bay and raising it, course by course. It could never equal, either in height or in thickness, the ponderous defenses of Ortygia; but it served.

The men worked like beavers, jesting as they toiled, for none of them could understand what so fragile a roof was good for. But for all their rude fun-making, Harald said nothing of his purpose till his flimsy roof was up; then, summoning his captains, he sketched lines in the earth.

"We cannot force the gate," he went on, "but we can dig under the walls." He smiled at the flash of comprehension that lit up their faces. "Set your men to work!"

The men dug in shifts, and, understanding the object of their work, they dug lustily. The dirt came out in reed baskets, which were piled on the wheeled platforms that had been used to transport the catapults, and so trundled to the marsh and dumped.

Days and weeks passed, the tunnel growing fast; and the men, whose appetites grew with the hard labor, took much feeding. Whole companies were sent out to hunt, to fish, or to bring salt meat from the ships.

The Immortals seemed as busy as the Varangians. They were constructing a wall something after the pattern of Harald's, using the stones of the old Greek walls. Neither Harald nor Georgios vouchsafed his plans to the other, but the Northman made a shrewd guess.

"By St. Olaf!" Harald exclaimed to Eilif. "He means to make a counterwall as high as the battlements!"

And this Georgios did. Within a month he had erected a vast salient of his own, matching the city walls in height, though far outflanked by them. Then his envoys came to Harald, demanding more catapults. Harald sent them to the ships, bidding them take what they needed. Reports came from the fleet that Georgios had taken more than catapults: sealed tanks of naphtha, sulphur, tar, ropes, pulleys, copper kettles.

"Can the fool be meaning to make Greek fire?" Eilif growled. "No fire-tubes will carry that far, nor has he taken any tubes."

"Then you go to the ships and leave order that he take no tubes, and that no

more naphtha be given him," Harald commanded. "The tunnel is now wellnigh under the wall, and I have use for the Greek fire myself."

The next noon Ulf, in charge of the day shift in the tunnel, came hurrying to Harald.

"We are under the wall!" he exulted. "We have struck the foundation of a great house."

"Leave off digging and shore up," Harald ordered. And calling Eilif, he directed:

"To-night at dark move your ships to the southwestern side of Ortygia. At midnight bring them as close to the wall as ye dare, without being discovered. When ye hear my trumpet to the north, run your ships against the walls, set up ladders, and storm!"

As soon as Eilif was gone, Harald sent off a messenger to Georgios, with these words:

"If ye take not the wall opposite you by midnight, I will be first in the town!"

"IT would be a brave end, if the earth should cave in and smother us!"

An officer dug his elbow into the growling house-carle's ribs.

"Keep your mouth closed," he rebuked, "and no earth will enter it."

The column filled the tunnel almost from wall to wall; and with the torches smoking, there was none too much air for so many to breathe. Yet Harald would not permit them to advance fast, lest the clash of their mail and weapons give the alarm. He himself, with a score of men armed with iron picks and shovels, led the advance.

Carefully he scanned the exposed surface of stone at the tunnel's end. The diggers had done their work well; they had struck the bottom of a stone floor, followed it for perhaps thirty feet, and scraped it clear of earth. The floor proved to be of tiles: not set in cement after the modern fashion, but held by the mortar between them and supported by beams set fairly close together.

The engineers set to work on the beams with knives, while spiked poles, each driven upward by two men, smashed into the flooring. The supporting beams once severed, the tiles were put to great strain, which was increased at every stroke of the poles. Whenever the pikes loosened a bit of mortar, the tiles sagged lower and lower. One dropped, another; then a whole mass, still cleaving together.

"Up!" commanded Harald.

Climbing on each other's shoulders, the engineers broke away more and more, till they had cleared a space large enough to pass six men through at once. Quickly, yet warily, lest their armor clash against the stone, the warriors swarmed up by threes and fours, each man, as soon as he was up, forming line with those who had preceded him.

They found themselves in a large, almost unfurnished building. It was coldly, but richly beautiful. Harald's torch gleamed on Arabic inscriptions in letters of gold, on rchly molded capitals and bright mosaic.

"A Greek church, made into a mosque," Thiodolf whispered. "This is not the hour of prayer, else we should have found greeting from the worshipers."

From some unseen room or passage came the shuffle of slippered feet, and the querulous whine of an old man disturbed. A light glowed from a pierced bronze lantern, and a bearded, turbaned ancient came into view around a column. At sight of the Northmen, their mail and bare weapons glinting in the torchlight, their fierce faces and hot eyes shining, he gave a sudden shrill cry, and turned to flee.

Thiodolf leaped forward, his long ax shooting out; and the old man dropped. He lay quite still, his white beard stained with dark blood. Thiodolf bent over him, fumbled at his girdle, and held up a pair of heavy keys.

"The custodian of the mosque," he said to Harald. "He is doubtless the only one here."

The Varangians were streaming up from the tunnel like an army of giant ants, till they filled the mosque; and there were more to come. Flinging wide the doors, they flooded out into the narrow street.

Here all was dark and silent, for the hour was late. Only here and there lights burned in the houses; and on the battlements, marking the line of the walls, iron cressets filled with blazing wood gave light to the Moslem garrison.

It was Harald's purpose to make his way into the heart of the city, if possible, before his entry should be discovered. Then the defenders would be forced to leave the parapet and assail him on level ground. A direct attempt to storm the walls from within would be too costly.

Through the streets the Varangians poured, shields up, blades flashing in the occasional beams of light. Of a sudden, at an intersection, they came full on a group of white-clad citizens, squatting around a brazier before a brightly lighted coffee-shop. The Arabs sprang to their feet with cries of alarm, breaking into flight like startled rats. Instantly the Varangians were upon them, striking out in haste to silence their shouts. From the wall came answering cries, as the alert sentinels heard and understood the shouts of the frightened men:

"Help, oh, Moslems! The *Nazrini* are upon us!"

The alarm was taken up through the whole quarter. Lights flashed in house after house; the shrill screams of women rang on the night; in the distance trampling hoofs thundered. Horns blared and drums rattled: somewhere a great bell pealed in a one-time Christian belfry. Horses neighed, a cock crowed. Men cursed and women whimpered behind pierced gratings.

Into an arcaded square the Varangians rushed. A small crowd, that had gathered to learn the cause of the turmoil, fled howling for shelter. There came the shuffle of many feet, the pound-pound-pound of spurred mounts, and a troop of Arab horsemen burst from the mouth of a wide street.

HOPELESS now to attempt surprise. The city garrison would be pouring troops from the walls at any moment. It was imperative that Harald summon aid from Eilif before the whole Syracusan army was upon him. He sounded his trumpet, once and again, till its peal rang back from wall to wall.

The roll of drums grew to a frenzied din. From down one long, straight street, a knife-slash in the close-built city, the Northmen could see a swarm of armed turbaned figures clambering down the stairways that led to the parapets.

The Moslems, falling into array, pressed forward. From every side street other Arabs were hastening up, some fumbling with the lashings of their mail as they ran. Harald brought his men to a halt, that they might catch breath before closing.

"Charge!" Harald then roared, determined to dispose of the enemy before him ere others should come up.

The Northmen surged forward like a living battering-ram. The head of their column swept the Moslems back, broke them into a formless crowd, and jammed them against the inner side of the wall. But fresh numbers from the parapets constantly trickled down to their aid, and the fighting grew furious.

Harald burst through a press of foes to come face to face with the Moslem officer in command. But the Arab did not fight; instead, shouting a command to his men, he pulled frantically at the reins, trying to force his horse away from the vicinity of his foe. The ax Hell licked in, and he fell.

The Saracen rout was so sudden, so

complete, that the Varangians stood a moment bewildered. The cressets on the battlements shone down on dead and dying, on the clustered Northmen, and on the backs of the fleeing Arabs. Then, as Harald gave the order for pursuit, a long, wailing peal came from the southward.

"Eilif!" Thiodolf shouted. The sounds of fighting came, faint and distant, across the city; the cries of alarm redoubled. Then the Northmen understood what they had supposed to be a panic-stricken retreat of their foes: the heathen had not fled; they had been summoned to relieve Eilif's pressure on the south wall of the island.

Without more loss of time, Harald drove his men after the running garrison, detaching a thousand to scale the now depleted parapets and harass the defenders there.

Down twisting, narrow streets the column rushed, unchallenged. It was strange that the hurrying Varangians met no more opposition. Not all the garrison could have concentrated on Ortygia to repel Eilif's attack. Then the riddle was solved. From the north came the bitter tang of smoke, the glint of flame, and the outcries of many men in mortal fight.

And Harald knew that Georgios had come. He saw the meaning of those catapults now, and the inflammables Georgios had taken from the fleet. On his tall angle of wall the Greek had mounted siege-engines, and from them he had hurled balls of tar and twine, soaked with blazing naphtha. The north end of the city was on fire; and under cover of the fire, Georgios was storming!

The streets rang with the hoofs of mounted Moslem messengers, sent pell-mell from north to south, from south to north, from both quarters to the eastern wall; each portion of the menaced city imploring the others for help.

The fire suddenly became a roaring conflagration: for in the whole north quarter, where the poorer suburbs lay, the roofs were of dry thatch.

ONLY the stern Varangian discipline enabled Harald to keep his blood-maddened, loot-hungry men in check; else they would have scattered down a dozen by-ways and fallen to plundering. Holding them in firm array, he marched them toward the southern wall, where Eilif was hard pressed. At last they found the rearward ranks of a whole Saracen division, and hurled themselves on its back like wolves. Ere the Arabs could face about, the bright axes were biting deep, breaking their ranks, flinging the whole army into confusion. The defenders broke, and sought safety down every street and alley.

Flinging the scattered remnants aside, the Varangians spread out into a long open space between the town and the western wall. From the opposite side came a sudden rush: against the Varangian shields crashed a column of Arab horse. How many they were no man could see, for the distant fire, though rolling ever nearer, was masked by intervening buildings, and the scattered lights cast but a vague, confusing glow here and there. But the Moslems drove in with a weight that spoke of mighty numbers. The whole front of the Varangian column was driven in, throwing those behind into disarray.

"Hold fast!" boomed Harald's voice, and the captains repeated the order. The axes swung and bit, swung again, while the rear ranks fought for space to wield their weapons better. Thiodolf, fighting with both hands, lifted his bull voice in the song he had made at Rametta:

> "Our prince has gone hunting.
> And harries the heathen:
> 'Hell' waits them, 'Hell' bites them,
> They cringe from his hatred.
> The raven flaps o'er us,
> The ravening wolf—"

He paused, grinding his teeth, for a scimitar had shorn into his right shoul-

der. A moment he fought with compressed lips; then, as his blade found the skull of the man who had smitten him, he burst into full song again:

"—thirst Harald sateth
With Saracen corpse-flesh!"

With flashing ax Harald was proving the song true. Heartened by the fury of his strokes, his whole front rank struck as he did—not so much at the Moslem horsemen as at the legs and breasts of their mounts. Beast after beast went down, choking the mouth of the street whence their attack had come, till the Varangians won space to realine behind a rampart of dead horses that checked the riders behind.

But these men were picked troopers, commanded by a famous leader. Unable to leap their horses over the heap of mangled men and animals, they slipped from the saddle and scaled the rampart afoot. Though they went down in whole ranks, they pressed on; and one in the van, falling out with a huge scimitar that smote swift and hard as lightning, led them forward. Leaping the barricade, he fronted the shieldwall before all his men; and these, following with exultant yells, cried loudly:

"Abulafar! Abulafar!"

Harald sprang to meet him. "Draw your men back!" he shouted above the din. "I command here, as you command the Arabs. Let us fight it out man to man!"

The giant Saracen lashed out with his scimitar with such speed that Harald had to fling himself aside to escape the steel. Thiodolf came to his rescue, and Ulf Uspaksson. Three or four Moslems pressed to their chief's side. Instantly both forces were embroiled again. But Harald, thrusting friend and foe aside, closed once more with the Moslem leader.

Sword and ax clashed, steel striking fire from steel. Once and again the Saracen thrust; cut after cut he drove in with the edge at head and shoulders. Harald warded with the shortened haft, holding the defensive, waiting for an opening. He struck, and Hell knocked the helmet from the Moslem's head. Had it not turned, the duel would have ended then.

The scimitar played like a living flame, rising and falling, slashing at a dozen angles, giving Harald scant time to parry. His wrist tired, his shoulders ached. At last, goaded to fury, he thrust the horn that flared beyond Hell's head full at the Arab's throat. The scimitar rose to guard, but the sharp-edged horn tore away two fingers, broke the grip of the maimed hand, and tore the curved blade from its owner's grasp.

Unwilling to slay a disarmed foe, Harald waited for him to raise his weapon with the left hand; but the Moslem staggered back and fell crashing. A stream of blood welled from his throat. Even as the ax-horn had severed his fingers, its blade, driven on by the desperate fury behind the stroke had torn through his mailed neck.

The Saracens raised cries of grief and fear over their fallen comrades. They fought now with doubtful valor, and at length broke, fleeing like wounded deer, with the Northmen in full cry after them.

"Who was—yon heathen—you slew?" Thiodolf panted, as he fumbled at his wound with a strip of his tunic.

"Abulafar, Emir of Sicily," Harald answered calmly. "He has paid his share of the price of Cyra's hands."

THE conflagration set by Georgios's tar balls and fire bombs—copper kettles filled with naphtha and sealed with clay—raged as far as the narrow mole between Ortygia and Achradina; and there the heroic efforts of the Moslems stopped it. The whole northern half of the city was laid waste, but the walled island, the heart and citadel, was almost unscathed.

But, under cover of that fire, Georgios had battered down the gate op-

posite his camp; and on its ravening red heels he had marched unopposed through the inner gate that gave entry to the wall across the mole. Only beyond the wide devastated area did the Moslems succeed in gatheiring their forces to oppose him; and for three hours they held him there without gain.

In vain the Immortals battered at the Saracen front; ranged across the narrow neck of artificial land back of their own fire-ruined wall, the defenders of Syracuse could neither be outflanked nor driven in. They fought for life itself; and they fought with the strength of despair.

The news of Abulafar's fall did not spread thither, for Harald's Varangians stood between that battle front and any Moslem messengers that tried to win through. But south of the great square the city learned of it speedily; into every quarter the fleeing Moslems fled, bearing the grievous word that the Emir of Sicily was slain. Where this news, and the report of the terrible fury of the Varangians, spread resistance died in mortal fear. The city was taken, save for the last heroic resistance to Georgios.

"North!" Harald commanded. "The Greeks are hard pressed, or we should have heard from them."

Back through the city the Varangians marched, weary, but exultant, their blood-splashed faces lifted in the joy of victory.

They smote the gallant Moslem defense in the rear, drove its outflung flanks into the sea, and rolled the center up against the long spears of the Immortals. Heartened by the timely relief, the Greeks broke through, overcame the last resistance, and then, drunk with joy at the reconquest of the great Greek city, fell on the necks of the Varangians.

Only Georgios held aloof, tasting for the third time in one campaign the bitterness of jealousy at his rival's triumph. To him Harald stalked, a grim figure in slashed and bloody mail.

"My men took the town, while you were held at bay," he boasted with the open, unashamed pride of the Northman. "Therefore we have the plundering of the town. You may take the loot from that part which you have conquered." And he pointed disdainfully at the desolate field of ashes and tumbled walls where the fire had raged.

Georgios stood immobile with anger.

Harald was merciless. "You would have had me die at a Moslem point rather than rescue me," he charged boldly. "To-night, in spite of that, I have rescued you; and if your share of the plunder does not please you, remember I have given you life. If you accept, say so; if not, draw sword and settle the matter with steel. There has been so much bad blood between us that it will be best for all if that blood be drawn."

Georgios gripped his dripping sword, and his eyes burned savagely; but the sight of that grim figure with the lifted ax was enough. Harald had beaten him once, man to man; nor had the Greek since then been able to break down his secret fear of the barbarian, his fear that if they came to death grips not Harald, but he, would yield up his life.

"Well," demanded Harald, "do we agree, or fight?" He took one step forward, balancing Hell as if to strike.

Georgios drew back. "I—I agree," he mumbled.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MIRACLE.

"THIS news must be kept from the emperor."

The Eunuch John let his smoldering eyes rest on the dust-stained soldier before him, and went on:

"It were best to say naught of it within the palace, lest it come to his ears. He lies in the extremity of fever. To learn now that one of his noblest cities, the Eye of Mesopotamia, has

fallen to the Moslems, might bring on a crisis that would kill him. You understand."

Left alone, John strode up and down the room, frowning. His flaccid face was lined with anxiety. Finally he summoned a servant.

"No news from Sicily?" he asked.

"None, Most Mighty, since the Bari merchantman brought word of the fall of Messina."

"No trace of—my brother?"

"None, Magnificent."

"Help me change my robes. I go to the Emperor."

The servant flung open a coffer of cedar, and drew out a long white garment, fringed with gold.

The Emperor lay, prone and unmoving, on an ivory bed. The room was half dark, heavy damask curtains shutting out the sun that else would have poured in from the gardens. His face, wasted and shrunken, bore yet an air of majesty.

John stepped lightly to his brother's side, and laid a hand on the hot forehead. Its touch burned him.

"Why does he not stir, when such a fever racks him?" he whispered to the physician.

The doctor bowed, hands crossed.

"He has not yet worn off the sleeping draft I gave him. If he wakes too soon he may die."

John started. "Is it so soon?"

"Only a miracle can save him, Mighty One. If the fever could be made to break, if he could perspire—"

"You have tried everything?"

"Everything known to science, lord. Crushed pearls in an elixir of wine and balsam. Everything. In vain."

A eunuch crept into the room, and caught John's eye.

"There is a soldier in the Chalke, Magnificence," he whispered, "from the Mesopotamian theme."

"His news?" asked John sharply.

"Edessa has fallen!" In his excitement the eunuch spoke too loudly.

John stepped toward him with a silent, tigerish stride. "That I know," he hissed. "Be quiet. Go!"

The eunuch cringed, and vanished Turning back to the bedside, John saw that his brother's eyes had opened.

The Emperor lay rigid, his features drawn together painfully. He moved one hand convulsively, and before John or the physician could aid him, he had flung himself from the bed. His face turned a deep red; beads of perspiration started out. Almost on the instant his cheeks and chin were bathed in sweat.

"The Father in Heaven be praised!" the physician murmured. "The fever is broken!"

John caught his brother about the shoulders and tried to force him back to the pillow. The sick man struggled, a half insane strength coming to his wasted, but once powerful frame. He tore himself from John's arms, shook off the covers, and struggled upright, his bare feet on the marble floor. His eyes glittered with a light half angry, half mad.

"Edessa! Edessa fallen!" he panted. "Edessa, the jewel of the East. This has come upon me for my sins!" He spoke with mournful vehemence. "For my most black and awful sins! Because I slew him who trusted me, because—"

In a flash John clamped one hand across his brother's lips, praying that the doctor might not understand. With unexpected strength Michael thrust John's arm away.

"I will atone, O God!" he cried, in a vibrant voice. "I will take back my fair city from the heathen, and plant Thy cross on its towers again! Aid me, give me life and strength to keep my vow, and I will take the cowl of monkhood!"

Sweat was streaming down his limbs, making his night robe cleave to him. His lips worked as in desperate prayer. John, shaken to the soul, tried to quiet him. The terrified physician, fearing that he had already heard too much to

live long, cast furtive looks from one to the other, telling his beads with trembling fingers.

"BRING me my armor!" the Emperor suddenly demanded, in a voice like the ring of a trumpet. From the surrounding chambers came the squeak and scurry of frightened eunuchs, none of whom dared enter.

"Arm me! Saddle my horse!" the Emperor shouted. "My sword! My guards! Beat the alarm!"

"Be still! Be still!" John urged. "You are sick. Your generals—"

Michael's fingers bit suddenly into the Eunuch's soft shoulder.

"Am I Emperor, or a slave," he cried in a royal rage, "that a slave dares dispute me? By the three Holy Names, I march on Edessa this day!"

Seeing his fury rising higher and higher, John knew force would not move Michael from his mad desire; therefore he tried humoring him. A eunuch was summoned to fetch the imperial armor, and lead a saddled horse to the palace.

With trembling hands, expecting every moment to see the Emperor collapse, John himself dressed his brother in the imperial robes of silk and cloth of gold, set the crested helmet on his head, buckled the jewleed, gold-inlaid corselet about him. Shaking off all aid, the Emperor walked, without a supporting arm, to the Chalke.

Eunuchs and slaves prostrated themselves before him, panic-stricken; and when he had passed them, ran scuttering through the great palace, whispering the news. The palace buzzed. The great double-headed eagle on the imperial banner was raised above the Chalke gate, to proclaim to all the world that a miracle had raised the well-nigh dead Augustus to life and strength.

It was indeed almost a miracle. The sudden access of health, like the fevered torpor preceding it, was one of the little-understood turns that advanced epilepsy may take. As delusive as the prostration of earlier stages, it meant no real return to health, nor postponed the day of death one hour. But not even the physicians understood the disease well enough to know this.

The city broke into open rejoicing. The loss of Edessa was as nothing; the Emperor, whom none had seen since his illness had grown acute, would win it back. The Emperor was cured: God had vouchsafed a miracle. Bells rang in the cathedral, echoed from every church in Constantinople. The people thronged the streets in their gayest robes.

Nor was it because the Emperor was loved. Neither he nor any of his low-born house held the affection of his subjects. But he was Emperor, successor to Justinian and Heraclius; he was well, and he would win back their lost honor from the scimitars of Islam.

At the end of the second week messengers dashed through the gates with news that the provincial troops, whom Michael was to lead into Mesopotamia were approaching. Without further delay Michael, followed by half a troop of Immortals, spurred through that gate to join his armies.

The next day men whispered that John the Eunuch, not daring to leave his brother unattended on the perils of a campaign, fearing lest he die on the way, had followed him to Mesopotamia.

The report was true. John was too much the skeptic to trust so dramatic a miracle; he knew it had come too late to check for long the ravages of his brother's disease. None perceived so well as he that, if Michael should die on the campaign, the strongest and most ambitious among his generals would proclaim himself Emperor, and march on Constantinople at the head of that very army destined for the relief of Edessa. If Michael's sickness returned, only the presence of the feared Eunuch himself could keep the

troops in hand and save the Empire from revolution. True, Zoe would seize the occasion of John's absence to intrigue; and Constantine had not been found. But John had taken his precautions against Zoe ere he left; and he trusted Aldhelm's Varangians to hold Constantine in hand.

The news of John's departure left the folk dazed at first, and somewhat frightened; then a great relief flooded the hearts of all. The Emperor was God's Anointed, but John was a tyrant. He was gone, and men might now do as they pleased. So they thought, till Aldhelm and his police put a bloody end to several intoxicated riots. Then it was understood that, though the tyrant was gone, the swords of the Varangians remained.

Zoe, too, learned that John had left his shadow behind him. It was her maid, the lovely Maria, who rushed breathless into her apartments with word that John had gone with Michael. Pausing but to put on her royal robes and coronet, and adorn her face with cosmetics, Zoe advanced regally toward the throne room. But she never crossed the threshold of her quarters.

A eunuch and a guard of Immortals barred her way; nor would they let her pass for all her threats and cajolings. John still ruled the city; it was only his brother, the Emperor, whom he no longer ruled.

CHAPTER XVIII.

REVOLT.

THE Patriarch of Constantinople glanced inquiringly at the cloaked and muffled figure admitted to his presence.

"Your business with me?" he asked. "Few dare seek me in these evil days."

His visitor cast off cloak and hood. He was young and supple; and at first sight of his features the Patriarch started forward in his high seat. He stared a moment, intently; then he fell back, shaking his head.

"You are like one I know too well," he muttered.

The young man smiled, frankly and winningly. "Perhaps there is reason for the likeness," he answered. "I am Constantine, youngest brother of the Emperor."

The Patriarch leaped to his feet, his whole frame quaking with rage.

"What do you here, son of an evil brood?"

Constantine met his fury with composure. "Your Holiness thinks evil of me?" he asked innocently. "It is not my fault that I was born brother to a tyrant. May I explain to Your Holiness that I am now a fugitive, with a price set on my head by that same loving brother John?"

"Nay, I have heard no wrong of you," the Patriarch frowned. "I did not so much as know of your presence in this city. But you come of a house that has brought shame on our land, murdered its rightful ruler, and held captive her who should bear the imperial crown. Therefore my roof is no fit shelter for you. Your errand? Speak, that I may be rid of you!"

Constantine crossed his hands on his breast, the picture of just humility.

"It has been my wretched fate," he spoke sadly, "to look on at the crimes of my brother John, helpless to prevent them. He took me secretly from my home, where I lived an innocent youth, meaning to make me his secretary and so bend me to his will, and make me the tool of his wicked deeds.

"I fled from court, resolved to live a fugitive or die at his hands, rather than be thought an accomplice of his baseness. For months I have lurked in dark and perilous hiding places, fed and aided by a few friends, waiting only a chance to escape, so that I might come to you and place in your hands the means to undo the wrongs he has committed. That chance has come, now that he has left the city."

The Patriarch eyed him with suspicion. "It had come to my ears that John had set a price on the head of one Constantine, a Paphlagonian; and the description given of the fugitive fits you well enough. But how can you, a mere youth, sought by the police, overturn that vast fabric of evil which your mighty brother has taken years to build? And, even if you could, how might I trust you, who are of his flesh and blood?"

Constantine appeared to hesitate. "I shall be safe in your hands?" he temporized. "You would not betray me when I have given you my confidence?"

"Speak, speak! No man can say I have betrayed him; nor do I harm those who would undo the evil wrought by the tyrant."

Constantine's words came with a rush. "Get me speech with the Empress!" he implored. "I know, for John has told me that in some way you maintain communication with her. Let me but have a few words with her, and I will show her how to win back her throne."

The Patriarch's eyes kindled with a fanatic hope, with which distrust was blended.

"You would do this?" the Patriarch panted, aflame but distrustful. "What surety have I that, if you succeed, you will not merely take his place as her oppressor?"

Constantine sighed, as one bitterly misjudged.

"This rebuke is one our house has deserved," he said. "Yet there is one way to convince you of my honesty, my single-minded desire to serve the Empress. From the moment when Zoe is proclaimed free and sovereign once more, you, Holy Father, shall be her chief minister. I will step aside, asking but to live a safe and retired life as a private citizen."

Like most weak men, the Patriarch was confident of his strength. Let him but regain his freedom and his grasp of state affairs, and he was sure he could dominate all the mighty empire. In no other way could Constantine have appealed more surely to his trust. Yet he was not convinced: he could not bring himself wholly to believe a brother of John.

"You shall see the Augusta within the hour," he promised, "but your eyes shall be blindfolded, that you may not know by what way I lead you to her. We cannot go openly to the palace, lest John's hirelings seize us." He called his servant.

Patiently Constantine allowed the two old men to bind his eyes.

CONSTANTINE stood at last in the Empress's bower; but not alone. The grim-visaged Patriarch kept by his side, determined to prevent any possible treachery. Though Constantine had spoken well and convincingly, he remained the brother of John.

In the same heavily perfumed chamber where Zoe had declared her love to Harald, Zoe now, attended by the girl Maria, awaited Constantine. She bade him approach; and most humbly Constantine kissed the polished marble at her feet.

"The hour has struck," he said softly. "John has left the city, not to return for many weeks, perhaps months. Now the mighty Augusta may resume her majesty."

Zoe smiled contemptuously. "If this is all your news, your breath is wasted," she answered. "I have tried to enter the Daphne, but John's Immortals barred the way. I am no more Empress now than before."

"But those Immortals are a handful," the young man insinuated, "before the thousands on thousands of Varangian police."

"The Varangians!" Zoe rose from her divan, her kohl-rimmed eyes wide. "The Varangians? Whom John left behind to guard the city for him!"

"They do not recognize his authori-

ty," Constantine reminded her. "They swore adherence only to the Crown, not to him. The barbarian Harald held them in restraint by their loyalty to him, but they have only to be convinced that John means treachery to Harald, and they will obey any order you give them."

"How convince the Varangians that John is Harald's enemy?" she asked, veiling her emotion behind lowered lids.

"I have the copy of an order given to Georgios to murder Harald in Sicily," Constantine made answer.

Watching her closely, he could see her features set, and the convulsive coiling and uncoiling of her fingers. Ignorant of the interview she had had with Harald in that very chamber, he could not read her emotion aright.

"John gave that order?" she cried hoarsely.

Eager to convince her of his devotion to her cause, Constantine made his first mistake. "Nay, divine Augusta. I gave the order, signing John's name and sealing it with his seal, that I might later use it against my wicked brother.

"Moreover, ever mindful of your welfare, I spoke with Georgios just before he sailed, urging him to see to it that the barbarian never returned alive. It was plain to me, though hidden from John, that the Northman had designs on the throne."

Zoe's eyes smiled dreamily; she was amused at his error. But the smile grew hard as she remembered Harald's disdain.

"So you expect the Varangians, when they see that order, to cast aside all obedience to John," she mused. "And since their allegiance is to the Crown, they will obey me. If that is so, then you have indeed done me a great service. But for that forged order"—the sudden coldness of her voice did not penetrate to Constantine's intrigue-hot brain—"but for that forged order, which will bring about Harald's death, they might have hesitated to listen to my appeal."

"It is true, Augusta. I have done this that you might regain your right."

"You shall be appropriately rewarded."

Now the Patriarch bent his gray brows on Constantine, watching him for the least sign of undue ambition. But Constantine, bowing humbly, answered:

"I ask no reward, Augusta. You have suffered much at my brother's hands. Give me only the joy of knowing that it was I who made your triumph possible."

Brilliantly Zoe smiled upon him.

"Give me pen and parchment, Maria," she commanded.

When they were brought, she wrote:

> To the Prefect Aldhelm, Commanding the Forces Within the City. From the Empress Zoe, Porphyrogenita, Augusta, Greeting:
>
> Be it known to thee that John the Paphlagonian, who so long usurped our powers, has left our domains. Having asserted our right to resume the throne, we have been denied by his servants, who hold us imprisoned in our chambers. We command thee, on thy allegiance to the Empire, to march forthwith on the palace and proclaim us Empress, with undivided rule. The order which the bearer of these our commands will bring thee will release thee from any further duties to the usurper. Zoe, Augusta.

SHE held the parchment out to Constantine, but withdrew it from his very grasp, asking: "How shall you get this safely to the Prefect, you on whose head there rests a price?"

Constantine smiled, vain of his cunning.

"That was John's order, and John is gone," he answered. "Moreover, I have powerful friends. The Syrian Demetrios, whom Harald persecuted, is back in the city. He nurses a grudge against John, who dared not protect him: but he is my man, for I have

promised him much wealth in recompense for his wrongs.

"One thing more: It would be well to command the Varangians to post guards at every gate, forbidding any man to leave the city till John returns. Otherwise the tyrant will learn of what we do, and may contrive a plan to overthrow you."

"Wisely counseled!" Zoe commended, and wrote the order into the letter. Handing him the scroll, she gave him the gesture of dismissal, and bade Maria lead him, blindfolded, back through the tunnel. The Patriarch remained behind.

"Do you trust him?" the Empress asked.

The priest considered. "He has asked for no reward," he said.

"The more reason to doubt him. He has told one lie: Harald does not covet the throne. I offered it to him—with my hand."

She turned, challenge in her manner, to the old man; but the Patriarch nodded sage approval.

"A wise offer, Augusta. In truth, I do not believe the barbarian covets aught but honor; nor could there be a man more fitted to share your throne. It was ill done of Constantine to plot against his life; but that is the nature of his breed."

Zoe laughed silently. "Nay, I trust him not; but he cannot harm us till the empire is in our hands again. He depends on my power for any hidden design he meditates. Now do you return to your dwelling."

After closing the tunnel entrance behind the priest, she cast herself on the divan and waited for Maria. It was but a little while ere the girl's voice sounded through the well-concealed tube. Springing to her feet like a girl, the Empress touched the spring that controlled the stone. Maria clambered out and quenched her light.

"To the balcony!" Zoe ordered; and the two women hastened to the stone balustrade that commanded the Augusteion and the senate house. From it a stone stairway led up to the battlements, and, seizing Maria's hand, Zoe drew her up the stair.

An Immortal halted them at the top. "You are confined to your chambers, Augusta," he warned her.

Zoe smiled on him flatteringly.

"I wish but to enjoy the clear air and the sight of the city," she protested. "I will go no farther than the stair there. I will not stir from your sight."

The soldier grew thoughtful. John was away; and the Empress at hand. No man knew what might happen in the easily disturbed city. It might be as well to grant a favor that could cost him nothing.

"If you will abide where I can watch you, Augusta."

"Have I not promised?" she asked, with queenly condescension.

She crossed the topmost step, and walked slowly to the merlons, the Immortal anxiously following beside Maria.

DOWN the long Mese Zoe's eyes roved, intently scanning the streets. The sun dipped lower and lower, till it glared level into her eyes. She shielded her soft complexion with one hand, but she did not move, save now and then to ease her position.

Then, far off toward the Forum of Constantine, something gleamed. The gleam grew, spread, became a flowing river of light. Zoe leaned forward, so suddenly and eagerly that Maria ran to her in alarm, fearing her mistress would fall from the battlements. From the distance came the blast of a horn, the shouts of many folk; the river of gleaming steel grew and grew.

From the direction of the Strategium flowed another, advancing to join the first; smaller columns moved in every quarter of the city. The excited shouts mounted to a many-tongued roar. The two rivers of steel

joined, and their united flood streamed toward the palace.

The Immortal, roused by the mounting tumult, came to Zoe's side, and peered out over the city. He thought the police had mustered to put down one of those sudden mobs which sometimes sprang up out of nothing in the city; but Zoe's excited glances woke his suspicion.

At the same moment he perceived that the shouting townsfolk were not confronting, but following, the Varangians. Instantly forgetful of the two women, he ran along the battlements to the first tower, shouting the alarm.

Zoe, exultant, drew Maria down the stair. Returning to her apartments, she commanded:

"My royal robes! My crown!"

Smiling happily, the girl stripped off the robe of fine tissue which her mistress wore, replacing it with the long coronation robes, heavy with gold and jewels, and set on Zoe's head the triple tiara of the Empire.

The palace garrison was not fitted for resistance. Stripped to a mere handful by the needs of the wars, too few even to man the Chalke alone, it was good for no more than a guard for Zoe and her household. The Varangian column swept to the very gates; and there, ax-blades fronting the bronze bars, they drew up in perfect order.

"What do you here?" the captain of the guard asked angrily.

Aldhelm the Englishman stepped from the shieldwall.

"Open!" he commanded. "We are thousands; ye but a few score. If ye deny us, we will break the gates and slay you all; if ye let us pass, ye may march out in peace. Choose!"

The garrison chose as they must. The great gates creaked open, and the Varangians surged in. They came in good order, harming no man; but their eyes burned with rage, for it had been told them that John had given secret orders for the murder of their Prefect in Sicily. Had any man resisted them, he would have been cut in pieces.

They found Zoe seated stately on the imperial throne.

THE march of the Varangians on the palace revealed to the people what was in the wind. Lovers of the old dynasty, they flocked into the Augusteion, yelling their joy, tossing their wide-brimmed hats into the air, singing songs of triumph at the very gates of the Chalke. Wherever a Varangian appeared on the walls, he was wildly cheered. The streets rang with the name of the Empress.

But it was Constantine who enjoyed the greatest triumph. The Empress, grateful despite all her doubt of him, had given out word that it was he who had restored her to her throne.

When he appeared on the battlements to make official proclamation of her restoration, the applause that greeted him from a hundred thousand throats was heard across the straits in Asia. It was half an hour ere he could make his voice heard; and he knew better than to speak long. In a few words he poured into the ears of the folk the message he wished them to believe:

"I have given you back your rightful Empress. Henceforth I shall see to it that none deprives her of her throne and power. Ye may trust me, citizens, to protect your Augusta."

Thus he won the adherence of the people, and their powerful if fickle support. That he had as yet no authority did not trouble him; he knew how to gain it. He was too shrewd to ask Zoe for anything; he would merely wait till she had need of him. The time would soon come.

The strength of Constantine's position lay in his willingness to work, and in that familiarity with the cares of state which he had acquired under John's tutelage. Well he knew that he

who performs the actual labor of administration, who shrinks not from its drudgery, wields its power. Zoe was hopelessly ill-fitted to rule, and the Patriarch was little better.

In all her life Zoe had never known the need to work. Her conception of an empress's duties was to pose upon the throne, to accept homage, to receive the flattery of men. This flattery Constantine gave her, delicately and with the sure touch of an artist. He waited on her ceaselessly, performed her every wish with humility and eagerness. She had but to express a desire, and he hastened to perform it. Slowly, inevitably, she came to rely upon him.

For a time the Patriarch diligently strove to perform his new duties as minister, bustling about the palace, receiving envoys, listening to reports. But the old priest, cloistered since youth, and for years a prisoner in his own house, knew nothing of the Empire, nor even of the city. The boundless red tape of business, the intricacy of politics, were beyond his comprehension.

Since the city must be governed, Aldhelm and his police governed it, and well; but the network of commerce and statecraft that bound the capital to its provinces became hopelessly ensnarled. At length the Patriarch, at the end of his patience and strength, implored Zoe to relieve him of his responsibilities. An honest zealot, weak and ignorant, he had tasted the tragedy of his own incompetence.

This was Constantine's moment. Precisely because he had never asked anything for himself, but had stood ever at her beck and call, Zoe turned to him. At first she gave him nothing more than the chance to work, and the title of minister of the household.

This was enough. He flung himself into the snarl of affairs abandoned by the Patriarch, and with all the talent born in him and so long fostered by his brother, reduced all to smooth-running order. Taxes once more flooded into the treasury, trade revived, the provincial armies received their supplies, and the very palace ceremonial recovered all its grandeur.

Zoe's indolent, selfish heart was delighted. Insensibly she came more and more to lean on her able minister. So he waited, with cunning patience, till he had become indispensable to her; nor did he even then ask anything for himself. Received in private audience, he reiterated his concern for her.

"Divine Augusta, you are not safe. The folk love you; the Varangians will defend you to the last drop of blood. But, when John returns, with what can you oppose him? He has thrice as many troops as you."

"The Varangians are worth ten times their weight of Greeks," the empress answered contemptuously. "And they hold the walls."

"But when Georgios comes back from Sicily," Constantine urged, "he will join with John. Does he not hate the Northmen, and covet the crown?"

IN spite of her newborn greatness Zoe was frightened. The name of Georgios was terrible from one end of the empire to the other.

"What do you advise?" she asked.

"Recruit fresh troops from the Bythinian theme. Bythinia was ever devoted to your house. With two themes, and the Varangians, you will be safe."

Zoe was silent, unwilling; Constantine understood her reluctance.

"They need not be brought into the city," he argued gently. "Let them camp outside the wall until word comes of John's advance, or of Georgios's return. Then they can be admitted to defend you."

"I will take counsel of the Patriarch," Zoe temporized.

Constantine risked all on one bold stroke.

"The Patriarch is in correspondence with Georgios," he whispered. "I

have intercepted a swift pamphylian bound for Sicily, carrying letters from him."

He handed the empress a scroll, sealed with the staff and cross of the Patriarch. With a cry of dismay Zoe read the superscription:

"To the noble Patrician and Cæsar, Georgios Maniakes."

"Cæsar!" she gasped.

None was called Cæsar save the heir to the throne. To Zoe's morbidly suspicious mind the term was enough to prove that even the Patriarch conspired against her. The old priest's fanatic devotion to her suddenly counted for nothing; she had endured captivity and scorn so long that the least breath of treason found ready entrance into her anxious mind. She was as ready to be convinced of unfaith in others as to be untrue herself.

"He shall be imprisoned!" she stormed pettishly. But this was not what Constantine wanted.

"To lay a hand on the Patriarch now were to offend the people," he objected. "Have you forgotten, Augusta, how his ill treatment at my brother's hands roused them against John? Nay, let him go free, but watch him; and do not trust his counsel. Yet I fear he may have got some word to Georgios before my suspicions were roused. Let me, then, recruit the new troops, lest Georgios come before they are ready to meet him."

"Do as you think best," Zoe agreed.

Not till the Bythinians were encamped without the walls did Constantine deal his next stroke. None told the empress, for none but Constantine knew that the new themes were not Bythinian, but Paphlagonians from Constantine's own province. Their officers kept close tongues, and the troops in their camp were out of contact with the people. They moved through their drill with the awkwardness of recruits; but a skilled eye might have seen that the awkwardness was artificial.

Then John came. The first word of him was a messenger on a blown horse; and him the Varangians on guard admitted directly to the empress.

"The host returns!" the messenger panted.

"And John?" demanded Zoe.

"He commands them."

"He? But the emperor?"

"The Divine Augustus died of a sudden fever, a fortnight after his troops had stormed Edessa."

Zoe closed her eyes, recalling the days when the stricken Michael had been dear to her. A little pain touched her heart, as she thought of his beauty and his strong youth. He had been a mighty soldier, and he had loved her. That was before John had seduced him to murder, and so brought on him the awful remorse that wasted his strength and paved the way for his long sickness. He had turned from her then, thinking his epilepsy a judgment from God.

"How—how near is John?" she faltered.

"A day's march, Augusta."

Signing to an attendant eunuch, she sent for Constantine, and made the messenger repeat his news. Constantine started back, and seemed much disturbed. Nothing in his manner betrayed that he had already heard the news.

"We must admit the Bythinians, Augusta," he said. "And since you, though wiser and mightier than any other monarch, are yet a woman, it were well to appoint a man to command them."

"The Prefect Aldhelm—" she began; but Constantine was now bold enough to interrupt her.

"The Bythinians would not obey him."

ZOE hesitated; but her fear of John overpowered her. "Then, do you take command, Constantine."

"For your sake, Augusta, I will. But with what title?"

In her need Zoe yielded the point. Only one office justified the assumption of military command within the city by a minister.

"With the title of Grand Strategos, and Protector of the Realm."

Constantine was satisfied; nor could she have done less if he were to have authority over Varangians as well as over the pretended Bythinians. Bowing to the pavement, he went out to order the gates opened.

Zoe relaxed helplessly on the throne, a prey to dire misgivings.

John's vanguard approached the Kaligaria Gate at noon of the next day: John himself riding in a litter, just behind the black-draped wagon bearing the embalmed body of the dead emperor. As was usual, the returned troops were challenged from the wall. On John's formally announcing himself, and the death of Michael, the gates swung open to admit him into the fields between the inner and outer walls.

But once he had entered, with the funeral wagon and his chief officers, the gate was immediately closed in the faces of his advancing column. The outer wall erupted armed men, bows drawn to the head; catapults and creaking ballistae thrust out their lean arms; cranes poised with tilted caldrons of molten lead; fire tubes thrust their smoky mouths toward the astonished army.

"What means this?" John asked calmly, though he perceived at once that there had been some sort of revolution.

Constantine advanced to meet him, clad in the scarlet cloak and embossed armor of a Strategos; and at sight of him John smiled a sour smile.

"I see," he observed quietly. "I am under arrest?"

"You are condemned to death for treason!" his brother declared pompously. "Away with him, guards! Ho, there! Hold the wall!"

A pair of burly Paphlagonians laid hands on the deposed tyrant; but ere they could lead him away, Aldhelm, the Englishman, strode forward.

"I ask a gift, Lord Protector," he said to Constantine; and his blazing eyes traveled to the Eunuch's face. "It is deserved, for we Varangians have served you well. Give us this John! He has betrayed our Prefect to death: let us punish him!"

The Varangians on the fighting platforms raised their voices in a howl of approval. Constantine hesitated; but the grim look on Aldhelm's face convinced him that John would never escape Varanian vengeance. He knew, too, that not even his hatred could devise a punishment more cruel than the Northmen would inflict. Therefore he delivered his brother into the hands of the Varangians.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE NEW TYRANT.

AS the Varangians led John away, Constantine beckoned imperiously to his brother's staff officers, who stood irresolute, penned in between the gate and the massed ranks of Paphlagonians.

"Which do ye prefer," he asked haughtily, "life or crucifixion?"

The officers paled, and stammered out a prayer for mercy.

"Mercy ye shall have, if ye do as I bid," the Grand Strategos promised. "Ye see that we are well-nigh as strong as you in men, stronger far in siege engines and fortifications. Lead back your troops to their provinces, otherwise ye shall be beaten and crucified."

He paused, giving the dismayed Strategoi time to consider the situation. They glanced at one another, nodding confirmation of his words, and conferred in short, low-pitched sentences. They could neither starve out nor storm this garrisoned city. There was nothing to do but acquiesce.

"We obey," said the senior Strategos at last. "Yet, in consideration of our services to the empire—for we have taken Edessa—give us money to pay our troops."

"It shall be done," Constantine agreed. "Now go, and wait without the wall."

Constantine, on a splendid African charger, led his Paphlagonians in a triumphal march to the Forum of the ancient Emperor his namesake; and there, surrounded by the excited people, he announced that the army which had redeemed Edessa was on its way to its home stations.

The cheers of the citizens changed to lamentation as the black catafalque bearing the dead Emperor's body paraded behind the garrison. Gravely smiling, greeted with applause, Constantine made his horse caracole over the flower-strewn streets toward the palace, acknowledging the homage of the folk like a Cæsar.

Far different was John's welcome. With hands behind his back, escorted by a thousand mailed Varangians, the deposed dictator was led to the prefecture of police. Seeing in him only the oppressor of their Empress, the townsfolk greeted him with catcalls and yells of derision. Stones and refuse pelted him; but as the foremost Varangians were hit as often as their captive, Aldhelm ordered a company forward to clear the way.

John had held up well, marching steadily, his face pale and drawn, but his great eyes glowing. But when he was brought into the court that served as Aldhelm's offices, fatigue and fear mastered him. He would have fallen had not the Prefect ordered a bench brought for him, unbound his hands, and given him wine. Then, every exit guarded, Aldhelm himself confronting him, the Eunuch was brought to trial.

He waited for no indictment. "What have I done to you," he cried, every vestige of his self-control vanished, "that I should be made a prisoner? Ere I left the city, ye obeyed my orders; why should ye now join with the traitor Constantine against me? By St. Justin, if I regain power—"

"That you are not likely to do," Aldhelm interrupted, grim with hate. "As for what we have against you, read this!" He cast before the prisoner the death order brought him by Constantine on the day of the rebellion.

John read, noting with widened eyes his own signature at the end, which authorized Georgios to slay, or have slain, the Grand Heteriarch Harald at the first opportunity. He straightened, regaining a shade of his former calmness.

"This is no deed of mine," he declared contemptuously. "It is a forgery."

Aldhelm smiled a thin-lipped smile. "I expected no other answer. No man confesses his crime while there is hope of escape. Know you how we Northmen avenge a slain lord?"

John's only answer was to stare at Aldhelm as at a well-meaning but bungling subordinate.

"They lay the murderer on a stone slab," Aldhelm went on, slowing his speech for emphasis, "and cut the bloody eagle on his back, severing ribs from spine. It is long ere the knife finds the heart, and so puts an end to the unbearable pain. To the Norwegians among us shall this be intrusted, that it be done slowly and well."

JOHN'S lips set, but he gave no other sign of fear.

"I can prove that writing false," he answered. "There are those in the palace who know my signature. The seal is mine, but that is easily stolen. He who could enter my chamber at will, and put poison in my wine—" His speech trailed off.

"Who is that?" Aldhelm asked.

"My brother Constantine, whose orders ye obey."

Aldhelm's forehead wrinkled with the effort to think straight and fast. The soldiers on guard stood like statues, seeming lifeless save for their eyes, which shifted from Aldhelm to John and back again.

"What you say is doubtless false," Aldhelm decided. "But I will give you a fair chance to prove it. Who of those in the palace would most surely know your hand?"

"Any of the eunuchs," John replied. "but Zodatas, who guarded the Empress's apartments, received my written orders oftenest. Yet if he is still there, Constantine will scarce let him come."

"Ulfgar!" Aldhelm called to one of his officers. "Take two men, and bring the eunuch Zodatas from the palace. If ye find him not, ask the Grand Strategos to place him in our hands, that he may give evidence against the Orphanotrophos. Mark well my words: 'that he may give evidence *against* the Orphanotrophos.' Come not back without him."

When the men had gone, Aldhelm folded the forged order so that the signature alone was visible, and laid it on his desk. Then, taking from his cabinet a second parchment, the lower half of which was blank, he folded it similarly. It was old, and so no whiter than the order.

"Write your name here, even as it appears on the order," he commanded. John, taking a pen from the desk, obeyed.

Aldhelm passed the still wet parchment to a soldier. "Lay that close to a fire, that the ink may be dried and a little faded. Now bring the prisoner food, lest he grow faint."

It was close to midnight before Ulfgar returned, bringing with him a sleek eunuch, terrified almost to palsy. When he found himself confronted with John, Zodatas cringed and gabbled excitedly, praying for mercy.

"No harm shall come to you," Aldhelm assured him. "I ask of you but a small service, which shall be rewarded with gold." He passed over the two sheets of parchment, each showing nothing but John's signature.

"Are both true?" he asked. "Scan them well, and be sure of your answer. Nay, turn your back to the prisoner." For Zodatas had turned his head slightly, to catch some sign from his former master. But John himself had turned aside, confident of the outcome.

Zodatas, his hands still trembling, took the sheets. Aldhelm towered over him, ready to snatch them from him if he unfolded either. For only a moment the eunuch studied them; then, glancing up with an access of confidence, he said firmly:

"The thing is easy. Both look like the hand of the Orphanotrophos, but this in my left hand is forged. Both read 'Joannes,' not 'Johannes,' as others sign the name. Therefore he who forged this knew my master's ways, and so must have been familiar with the palace.

"But the curves here are faint on the downstroke, whereas my master's hand was the same on both strokes. More: my master being always free with wine—" He paused, and shot a frightened glance at John, but the prisoner showed no offense. "My master's hand was not so steady as this. This is clearly false."

Opening the parchment Zodatas had declared forged, Aldhelm saw that it was Harald's death order. He tossed a bag of gold to Zodatas, and bade Ulfgar see him safely back to the palace.

JOHN, cleared of the chief charge against him, smiled with relief.

"I am now free?" he asked. "I am under your protection?"

"Not so," Aldhelm replied. "You are but proved innocent of outright treachery. I am not yet sure you have played fair with my master. You shall remain under guard till the Sicilian troops return. Then, if Harald is safe,

he will deal with you as he thinks fit; otherwise you will die as I have said."

All John's composure fell from him, leaving him shaken and pitiful.

"But my brother will have me crucified, or blinded, if I fall into his hands! Let me go, that I may flee; or take me under your protection!"

The grim Englishman felt a contemptuous pity for the strong man thus broken.

"He shall not touch you," he promised. "You will lie safe in a guarded chamber here; and there are no troops in the city that will dare face Varangian steel to take you hence. Moreover, for your comfort and my greater certainty, I will so deal that Constantine shall think you already dead. Asgrim!"

An underofficer strode to the desk.

"Go to the palace, and report to the Grand Strategos that the prisoner has been put to death. If he asks how, say that he was cut in pieces, slowly, and his limbs and head fed to the dogs of the street."

John's eyes lighted. "I thank you, Prefect," he said. "Now I must ask you one thing more, a thing you will admit should be granted. Let me send a message to Harald, telling him of the Emperor's death."

Aldhelm looked up, instantly suspicious. "Why that?" he asked. "Suppose Harald is already slain, the message then will fall into the hands of Georgios."

John smiled bleakly. "In which case, Georgios would at once sail for Constantinople, to make himself Emperor. He would deal harshly with Constantine."

Aldhelm shook his head. "You would make of me a tool for your vengeance on your brother. I will not do it. But this I will do: I will let you write a letter, at my dictation, addressed to Harald.

"It shall be borne to Sicily by a Varangian, with orders to deliver it to Harald if he lives; and, if he is dead—" Aldhelm's fist clenched—"it shall be given to one of his Norwegian officers. Thus the matter shall be kept between Varangians, whom I can trust. I will myself see that the message goes by a swift ship."

ASGRIM sauntered through the brazen gate of the Chalke, wiping from his beard the wine with which his comrades still on duty there had regaled him. They had pumped him also, and knew as well as he did how Constantine had received the news of John's death with a crooked smile, saying:

"There will be rewards for those who serve the state so well."

The underofficer was pleased with himself. He had been on state business, and had some hope of his share in the promised rewards.

"Good days," he mumbled, "when the Guard is once more honored in the palace."

He quickened his pace as he emerged into the Augusteion; for it was getting late in the year, and a bleak wind blew from the Black Sea. Passing under the shadow of Santa Sophia, his eye caught a patch of black that stirred slightly against the lighter stone of the cathedral wall. In a spirit of mischief born of the wine, he leaped forward and pounced on the moving patch. Something gasped and writhed under his hands.

He drew it closer to him, and bore it, struggling fiercely, to a narrow aperture farther along the wall, where a square of light came from the study of some priest. It was a monk he had captured, face wrapped in the hood of a long, black gown.

Quickly Asgrim's merry mood slipped from him. It was an ill matter to jest with the Church.

"Forgive me, father!" he implored. "I have drunk much."

The hooded figure suddenly flung itself upon him, clasping him with arms too soft for a man's.

"Save me, Northman!" she begged. "Death waits for me!"

"A maid!" the Varangian exclaimed. "In a monk's cowl! Nay, this passes belief. Who art thou, sweetheart?"

Immediately the woman loosed her hold on him, and gathered her hood closer about her face.

"I am Maria, lady-in-waiting to the Empress," she whispered, her voice hardly audible. "The Empress has been seized. Take me to the Varangian Prefect, ere the Paphlagonians find me!"

"Why—what—" Asgrim stammered, but she cut him off.

"Be swift!" she cried. "The city is full of soldiers hunting me, to drag me to death. To your master, quickly!"

Some promptings of chivalry rose in the Northman's breast, confused by wine, but genuine. He reached for his ax.

"None shall harm thee under my care!" he boasted; and, tucking the girl's arm under his left elbow, he strode off through the gardens.

So swiftly that the girl could scarce keep pace with his long strides, he made his way down the long Mese to the Prefecture. Here and there soldiers passed them; but for every Paphlagonian there was a Varangian on duty, and none interfered. Only here and there a Northman called a greeting, or joked Asgrim for flocking with monks.

When they climbed the long marble stair to the brightly lighted Prefecture the girl reeled against the doorway, exhausted. Lightly Asgrim picked her up, and carried her straight to Aldhelm's quarters. Setting her down there, he kept one arm about her while he beat furiously on the prefect's door.

Aldhelm opened almost at once, sleepy-eyed, wrapped in his cloak.

"What now?" he asked inhospitably.

"A monk—nay, a woman garbed like a monk," Asgrim answered. The brisk walk and the excitement had driven the wine from his legs, but set it mounting higher in his head. "She says the empress is slain."

WITH a startled exclamation, Aldhelm withdrew into his chamber, whence he shortly reappeared, clad in full mail, and with the cloak of his rank about him.

"Enter!" he commanded. "Hold the door, Asgrim! Let none enter. Now, girl, speak out."

Maria spoke, her voice dragging with fatigue, but sustained by her courage.

"Constantine came back to the palace and announced the capture of John," she said, beginning in the midst of things like one with no time to waste. "The empress poured out her joy, bidding him ask any reward he would. He begged her, seeing she was childless, to make him her heir; and she —having no idea of keeping the promise—consented. Straightway he received confirmation, under her seal, of his new rank, but he asked her to keep it secret for a time.

"Soon after, soldiers were admitted to the palace by the watergate, lest the Varangians in the Chalke forbid their entrance. These men were Constantine's troops. They broke into the empress's apartments, seized her, and carried her away. I hid in a closet, and while they ranged through the gardens seeking me, I crept to a secret passage which leads to the Patriarch's palace. Even as I closed the entrance behind me I heard the shrieks of the other maids and the eunuchs, all of whom, by this time, are dead or in prison.

"Constantine's men must have discovered the tunnel, for they rushed after us into the Patriarch's palace. I fled, but the Patriarch was caught and borne away by the soldiers. I reached Santa Sophia, thinking to take sanctuary there, but there were soldiers in the porch. So I hid in the shadow of the wall, praying they might not find me. Then that man," she pointed toward

Asgrim, "found me and brought me hither."

"And none knows what Constantine has done with the empress," Aldhelm said to himself, half in despair. "He would hardly dare kill her, though, as the girl says, he will doubtless spare none of her attendants. It is plain—he means to make himself emperor."

Maria laid her white hand on his shoulder. "You are right, Prefect. He will not dare slay Zoe outright, nor let any know she is not still safe in the palace. He will certainly have her carried to some nunnery and imprisoned there. When he has gathered enough power he will announce that the empress has taken the veil of her own free will, leaving him as her successor. Then, when the people have forgotten, she will grow ill, of slow poison, and die. That is how things are done in this realm."

Her tired eyes glittered, her breast heaved. Aldhelm tried to calm her, but she grew half hysterical. At last he seized her arm and spun her about, commanding:

"Peace! Gather thy wits, and tell me what nunnery he is most apt to place her in."

The girl calmed at once and twisted from his grasp, a little indignantly. "There is but one nunnery that would be safe," she replied. "The great cloister on Prinkipo, in the Sea of Marmora."

"Prinkipo Island," Aldhelm reflected. "It is but an hour's sail from the city. Constantine may have had a galley waiting at the watergate."

"What will you do?" Maria demanded. "You must send ships there, at once, to bring her back! You must storm the palace, and bring the traitor to justice!"

Aldhelm shook his head. "Peace, child, not so fast. Constantine will have provided against both measures. Knowing you have escaped, he will patrol the coast and place all ships under guard. To force a fight now would plunge the city in bloodshed; and we might lose. If we got to Prinkipo, we might not find Zoe there.

"We must wait till we know more. Then, this is in part Harald's affair, since Constantine has plotted against him. Best to wait till his return, or till we have news of him. You will lodge in the prefecture, maiden. A guard will keep your door against all danger. Find her a chamber, Asgrim, and her safety on your head!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE WOLF BREAKS HIS BONDS.

THE Moslems of Syracuse kept their houses, behind barred and muffled windows. The garrison had been rounded up, disarmed, and herded under strong guard in Casr, the Arab citadel, which once had been a temple to Minerva. Every nook and cranny in the city, already searched thrice over for loot, was ransacked for fugitives from the beaten host.

Late on the second day there rose from the very ground the strangest procession that Greeks or Northmen had ever seen. In the very faces of the troops that patrolled the suburbs, Achradina, Neapolis, and even the ridges of Epipolae where the Immortals had encamped, yawned great gulfs, curtained over by trees and bush-growths rooted in their rocky lips; and these the invading Christians had ignored, after reconnoitering their edges, thinking them groves and overgrown old gardens.

But now erupted from them hordes of ragged, emaciated folk, the men bearded to the waist, the women bent and broken things, the children almost skeletons. All were filthy, half naked, and white with an unearthly pallor.

The astounded troops at first raised the alarm, and drew together in ranks and companies. But as the weird host grew and advanced, it broke into song: shrill, feeble from individual lips, but

overpowering in the mass of joyful voices. And the words were Greek—the words of the Christian litany, "Kyrie Eleison!"

Shambling forward with halting, eager steps, their limbs scarce holding them up, their heads bravely lifted, they held out their arms in thanksgiving for deliverance. And the soldiers, astounded, half afraid of these gray apparitions, stared.

As fast as the singing groups drew close to the soldiers, men, women, and children fell to their knees, still singing; and when the litany was done they still knelt, their lips moving in prayer. From somewhere came a voice, trembling, but still powerful:

"We thank Thee, O Lord, Who hast preserved us in our adversity, that we might see the day of blessed redemption. Pour Thy blessings on these Thy soldiers, who have set Thy people free!"

Down from the Casr rode a knot of Greek and Norse officers, on captured chargers. Dismounting before the kneeling horde, they poured out a flood of questions.

He who had prayed, a lean old bishop, clad in ragged, earth-fouled remnants of cassock and stole—and these of an age long past—made answer:

"We are the Christians of Syracuse, the few thousands spared by the Moslem sword, by sickness and hunger. For generations more than we know, we have lurked in the ancient quarries, emerging only by night to plunder the fields for seed corn and fowls, that we might plant and raise a meager fare. Thousands have died, but we remain, a faithful flock; and above us God caused His trees to grow, that we might be hidden. Praise to Him, Who hath let us see this day of joy!"

To the credulous soldiers it was a miracle; therefore they doubted not that other miracles also might have been visited on these poor shreds of the once mighty Christian population.

"Art thou," an officer asked the aged spokesman, "art thou he who was bishop of this city when the Moors first came?" His voice was choked with awe. The old man looked down at the ruins of his outmodeled episcopal attire, and smiled.

"Not so, my son; that was more years ago than thrice my age could number. He who was then bishop fled with such of his folk as escaped the massacre, taking refuge by night in these well-hidden quarries. By him was my grandfather exalted as successor; my father by my grandsire, I by my father. And I ordained others as priests under me."

The soldiers broke into cries of wonder and praise. Then and there, while messengers rode to the walls to call forth all the host save those on watch, the ancient bishop made his rude preparations for a solemn mass of thanksgiving. The troops, Greek and Northman alike, gathered together to partake in the service.

WHEN that was done, they had time for their quarrels once more.

Trouble began over the loot, which Harald had ordered removed to the Varangian ships. Having won the city almost solely by the valor of his own Northmen, after Georgios had tried to contrive his death, he continued to insist that the plunder should go to them who had earned it.

The Greeks grumblingly assented, demanding as their own the booty of the next great city captured. For this reason Georgios gave orders that they should march on Palermo as soon as they could gather fresh supplies and ship the prisoners to the slave markets of Constantinople, where they would be sold by the State and the price received banked in the name of the two Christian corps that had captured them.

"Do you fight for plunder, or for the empire and the faith?" Harald taunted him.

"'Twas you who looted first," Georgios retorted.

"Aye; treasure, not men."

"What would you do then, who are so wise?" Georgios jeered.

"Bide here with ten thousand men, sending the rest with the fleet to harry the coasts. Burn every shore town and destroy its fortifications. Meantime we have the material for fresh troops in the rescued Christians."

"Famished, enfeebled wretches, scarce able to scare the birds!"

"They will grow strong with food, and we can drill them," Harald clung to his point. "And others are coming in: sturdy country folk, whom the Moslems forced to work as slaves on their villas. By the week's end there will be thousands of them."

"They are not worth their keep!" Georgios asserted scornfully.

"They bring their keep. Have not those who have come in already risen against their masters at the first news of our success? Have they not brought in loads of grain and droves of cattle? They will be glad to bear arms against their oppressors. When we have enough, we can leave them here with arms and a stiffening of our own troops, and then advance, leaving everywhere behind us garrisons of liberated men."

Georgios rose, his black brows meeting over angry eyes.

"It is easy to talk so when your ships are heavy with loot. My men have no loot, and are ill content. If I do not lead them soon to booty there will be no holding them."

Harald settled back in his chair, and looked out between the columns of the Casr, down on the gutted city.

"You are mad," he said with infuriating calmness. "You dare not march without me, and I choose to bide here."

Georgios brought his hairy fist crashing on the table.

"It is time you and I came to a settlement!" he bellowed. "Are we not on shore? And do I not command on land?"

"You did," Harald replied, "till you sought to betray me to the enemy. Now, he commands who is the better man. If you wish to settle the matter, I am ready."

Georgios glared, but had no answer.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

"Old Grog"—Admiral Vernon

EDWARD VERNON, 1684-1757, was an English admiral who earned fame in a manner he could hardly have foreseen.

In 1740, the year after he conquered Porto Bello, he headed an unsuccessful expedition against Cartagena. And it was then that he inaugurated a custom which secured him a perpetual monument in every dictionary of the English language—he mixed water with the rum served to his sailors!

What has that to do with fame? In this case, everything—that and Admiral Vernon's habit of wearing a grogram cloak in inclement weather. The cloak was called a grog for short, and the sailors under Vernon nicknamed their commander "Old Grog." When he issued rations of rum mixed with water, instead of raw as had been the custom before, the name of "grog" was transferred to the drink. Ever since that time grog has been the name of spirits mixed with water—or any intoxicating drink.

The adjective "groggy" comes from the same source. Too much to drink will make any man groggy! *Lloyd E. Smith.*

Every morning found the colonel and Jim at the track

Racing Blood

Palo Alto had the best blood of Southern thoroughbreds—but he was an untamable demon on four legs

By ROBERT A. SLOCUM

THREE sweating, swearing hostlers led or rather dragged out the last of the famous Matt Campbell stable, which was being sold at auction by Campbell's widow to satisfy his creditors. The horse, a magnificent black stallion that showed speed and stamina in every flowing line, fought his handlers viciously, dragging their struggling forms, scattering the little group of buyers with his flying heels.

When he had finally quieted, more from exhaustion than from lack of willingness to continue the fight, and stood with trembling legs wide spread and silken coat covered with flecks of foam, the auctioneer, who had taken cover with the rest again mounted his box and began his cry.

"What am I bid for Palo Alto, gentlemen? A three-year-old by Domino out of Kentucky Belle. There's no better blood in America. He spread-eagled his field like a wash day long shot in his maiden start at Belmont, carrying the Paxson colors, and won the Golden Rod Handicap by two lengths with the best babies in the country chasing him all the way. He's showing the devil's own temper to-day, but that's more from lack of work than anything else."

"It's lack of work all right," commented one of the listening buyers sarcastically. "They haven't been able to get a jock near him since he crippled Willie Ryder. I don't blame the boys, the horse is a natural born killer."

"Right," said another. "Person-

ally, I wouldn't have the black brute as a gift."

The auctioneer glanced sharply in their direction, hesitated a moment and then went on in a slightly different vein.

"Who'll start it off, gentlemen? If you can't race him, with his ancestry and past performance, he'd be an ideal horse to retire to the stud. His get should all be stake horses."

"Five hundred," came a half-hearted bid.

"Come! Come!" exclaimed the auctioneer disgustedly. "This is a thoroughbred, gentlemen, not a plow horse!"

"And a thousand, suh," came a clear voice from the rear.

All eyes turned in that direction to behold what was undoubtedly a Southerner of an almost vanished type. Standing tall and very erect in a frock coat, a broad-brimmed black hat pressed down on his white hair; with a sweeping mustache and a dab of white on his chin, he would have delighted the heart of a motion picture director. One knew at a glance that he honored a woman, worshiped a horse, and doted on Virginia twist and mint julep.

The face of the auctioneer brightened perceptibly at the bid.

"And a thousand from Colonel Lon Paxson, who knows a horse if any one does," he said.

THERE was a slight stir in the center of the group of buyers. A slender man with thin, rather hard features, somewhat better dressed than the average horseman, stepped out and held up his hand.

"Twelve hundred," he said in a voice that smacked of New York's East Side.

"And twelve hundred," cried the auctioneer.

"Fifteen, suh," said the colonel, imperturbably.

Several of the buyers looked at him pityingly and shook their heads. One of them remarked to another in a low voice:

"The colonel must be slipping, to be bidding on that brute."

"He probably can't afford anything else," said the other. "And then again it may be sentiment. The horse was foaled on the colonel's farm in Virginia, you know."

"Eighteen hundred," came another bid from the colonel's opponent.

"Eighteen hundred," cried the auctioneer. "Eighteen hundred for the son of the great Domino! Eighteen once—eighteen twice—"

Colonel Lon passed trembling fingers over his mouth, then bid with a faint tremor in his voice:

"Nineteen hundred and fifty, suh."

The other bidder cast a shrewd glance in his direction and then snapped out:

"Twenty-four hundred."

"Twenty-four hundred," repeated the auctioneer. "Twenty-four hundred for Palo Alto. He's going, are you finished?" He looked questioningly at the colonel, but the colonel, seeming suddenly to be very old and very tired shook his head and let his eyes fall to the tanbark at his feet.

"And he's sold to Mr. ——" finished the auctioneer.

"Jim Morrow," answered the buyer.

"Mr. Morrow," the auctioneer repeated after him. Then, descending from his box, "That ends the sale, gentlemen."

The group broke up and drifted away, leaving Palo Alto's new owner and Colonel Lon to watch the hostlers force the again struggling horse back into his stall. A rueful grin slowly spread itself over Jim Morrow's face as he watched, and he muttered to himself:

"If I ain't the original tomfool!"

"Allow me to congratulate you, suh," the drawling voice of the colonel interrupted his reverie. "You have bought a great ho'se."

Jim looked up at the colonel sharply.

"Yeh, what makes you think so?" he asked skeptically.

"I don't think, suh, I know," answered the colonel positively. Then, as if in explanation of his words, "I had the honah, the very great honah, suh, to raise the ho'se. Circumstances fo'ced me to part with him. Since then he has been grossly mishandled and hasn't won a race, but I believe with the propah handlin' the' isn't a ho'se in America can show him the way to the wiah."

"H'm," murmured Jim. "That why you bid him up?"

The colonel nodded. Then with the muscles of his face twitching and his erect figure appearing somehow devitalized he said: "I wish you luck with the ho'se, suh," and turned away, leaving Jim to contemplate his retreating figure as if it represented a specimen of the genus *homo* with which he was unfamiliar.

Finally he turned back to Palo Alto and expressed his feelings to the horse through the open half door of the stall with a muttered: "That old boy sure wanted you, horse, so you must be good."

UNTIL recently, Jim Morrow had never even seen a race horse. A child of circumstances who had been born in poverty, reared in the streets and educated in the newsboy's school of adversity, he had suddenly awakened to the fact that he was thirty-four years old and possessed a fortune which he had wrested from a reluctant world by sheer force of will and ability. He found also that he was beset with a vague longing for something to do besides the accumulation of dollars.

Chance, more than anything else, had sent him to Belmont one day to receive his first introduction to the sport of kings.

In the very first race he had seen a gallant horse come from behind and, after a fierce drive, nod out the leader at the wire in a nose-and-nose finish such as the judges hate and the spectators love.

As he watched breathlessly, the two thoroughbreds fighting it out on the track below him, he was seized with an overwhelming desire to own some of these four-legged gamesters who raced so gallantly. Then and there he decided to devote his talents and his fortune to the sport, so that some day he might have the joy of seeing his colors flash to the front as the field swung into the stretch.

He promptly went about finding out how and where he could acquire horses and the right men to train them. One of the results of his inquiries was his presence at the Campbell sale. He had come intending to buy everything in sight, and had bought one horse only —and that horse Palo Alto.

That night he ran across Jerry Akers in the lobby of his hotel. Jerry, as good a trainer as ever breathed the atmosphere of the stables, was a race track oddity. He spent a great deal of his time in the study of thoroughbred genealogical trees. It was said of him that he knew the past, present and future of every thoroughbred on the North American tracks, and the personal history of most of their owners.

It had been Jerry's advice that had sent Jim Morrow to the Campbell sale. Now Jim hoped he could induce him to undertake the training of Palo Alto.

At Jim's approach Jerry looked up from the form chart he had been studying.

"What luck, son?" he asked. "Did you buy the whole stable?"

"No, only one horse," Jim answered. Then, in answer to Jerry's look of inquiry, "Palo Alto."

"Help!" cried Jerry, throwing up his hands. With a broad grin he asked, "How come you picked out that black devil as the particular pet you wanted to play with?"

"Because I liked his looks," replied Jim a bit sullenly, on his face the expression of a small boy caught stealing apples. "And I thought you—"

"Wait a minute," Jerry interrupted, "I train race horses, son, not wild animals. What you want for that catamount is a lion tamer."

Jim's face fell perceptibly. "Does that mean you won't take the job?" he questioned.

Jerry nodded, and explained by adding, "There ain't any use starting something when you know you're licked before you begin, son."

"What 'll I do with my wild cat, then?" said Jim.

Jerry laughed. "If he was mine I'd try to sell him for fifty cents, and if I couldn't find no buyers I'd take him down to the river and drown him."

Jim studied the floor in silence for a time. Finally he looked up to say:

"The old boy who bid against me for him didn't seem to think he was so bad."

"Who was that?" asked Jerry.

Jim shook his head. "Don't remember his name, but he sure went his limit before he quit bidding, and after the sale he told me I'd bought a great horse. Said he'd raised the horse. Then he went on to say the only thing wrong with him was that he hadn't been rightly handled."

FOR the first time during the interview Jerry showed signs of real interest.

"He said he'd raised Palo Alto?" Jerry questioned sharply, and at Jim's assenting nod, said musingly to himself: "H'm, Palo Alto was raised at Colonel Paxson's place in Virginia, so it must have been the old colonel—" His voice trailed off into silence. After a bit he said seriously:

"Son, it's just possible the colonel is right. I've been forgettin' that Palo Alto's one of them hot-blooded Southern horses. They're all sensitive and most of 'em are cuckoo. But if they're handled right they'll stick their nose in front of anythin' that runs, and if anybody knows how to handle 'em it's the people down there in Dixie who raise 'em. So, the colonel havin' raised Palo Alto, might—mind, I'm only sayin' might—be able to do somethin' with him. If I was you I'd go see him and find out what he thinks about it anyway."

"I'll just do that," said Jim, a renewed glint of hope in his eyes.

The next morning found the New Yorker waiting impatiently in the lobby of the modest hotel where the colonel was staying. When the colonel appeared, Jim stepped eagerly to meet him.

"I wanted to see you about Palo Alto," he opened the conversation abruptly.

"Yes?" queried the colonel, somewhat taken aback.

"Did you intend to race him if you bought him?" Jim asked.

The colonel nodded. "I expected to condition him this wintah and bring him out for the De'by in the spring," he answered.

"Well, say," said Jim, his face lighting up. "That'd be just the ticket. I was talking to Jerry Akers last night and he wouldn't take him on, but he said you might, so suppose I turn him over to you and—"

The colonel's face reddened and his erect figure stiffened.

"Suh," he exclaimed, starting to turn away, "I'm not a hiahed trainer!"

Jim, realizing his mistake, caught the colonel's arm, clinging to it desperately for fear the Southerner would leave before he could explain.

"Wait a minute," he begged earnestly. He dropped unconsciously into the idioms of his East Side boyhood, in his eagerness to be understood.

"You got me all wrong, old timer. Listen—I ain't trying to hire you for anything, see? What I want you to do is take a half interest in the horse and

train him. Then he'll get his chance to pull a comeback. Me, I don't know any more about race horses than a bulldog does about the North Pole. But I do know a game sport any time I see one, whether he's got two legs or four.

"That's how I come to buy Palo Alto, because he's the gamest thing I ever saw. I got a roll that the biggest greyhound in the world couldn't jump over, but that ain't goin' to do Palo Alto any good if you won't come in and gimme a hand.

"If you will, and kin snap him out of his grouch, he'll be a winner and we'll split fifty-fifty!"

Jim stopped for want of breath and waited anxiously for the colonel's decision.

In silence the colonel studied Jim's face, from which, for the moment, all the sophisticated hardness had been erased, leaving it boyishly eager. Evidently what he saw satisfied him for he extended his hand.

"I'll accept yo' offeh," he said, "and I'm powe'fully in yo' debt, suh."

Jim wrung the extended hand joyfully.

"Say," he said delightedly, "say, if between us, with my dough and your brains, we don't drive enough religion into that black sinner to make a good race horse out of him, it can't be done."

The colonel, a suspicious moisture clouding his eyes, located a huge bandanna handkerchief, and blew his nose violently.

"Suh," he said, "if yo' will come to mah room I think I can find some ve'y excellent Bou'bon and a sprig of mint with which to dedicate the occasion."

Some time later when the proper justice had been done the Bourbon with fitting ceremony, the colonel said to Jim:

"Let us go now, suh, and see about having Palo Alto put aboa'd the cars fo' home, wheah he will receive the attention and treatment a thoroughbred is entitled to."

THREE days later a box car came to rest on a siding just outside a little town in the beautiful valley of the Shenandoah. The door slid open and a voice that seemed familiar to Palo Alto and carried vague memories of the Southland of his colthood in its musical drawl, floated in to the big black horse which stood blinking in the flood of sunlight which penetrated the gloomy interior of the car.

"Lawd Almighty if the' ain't Palo Alto come home again! How you-all feel, big boy, afte' gallivantin' round way up no'th? Come out heah till Ah sees does yo' want a apple fo' breakfast."

A white-headed old negro followed the voice into the car, shuffled unconcernedly up to the terror of the stables and slipped a halter over his head. So surprised by this lese majesty was Palo Alto, who was accustomed to having never less than two hostlers come into his stall, armed with twitch sticks and pitchfork handles, that he followed the old darky docilely down the incline of the chute into a sun-filled world which was many miles from the northern stable he had known for the past year. Scrambling off the chute he raised his head inquiringly and sniffed the fragrant air.

"Dat's right, hawss, look aroun'," encouraged the old darky, "and see does yo' know whe' yo' is at."

"Well, I'll be damned! What do you know about that?" exclaimed the surprised voice of Jim Morrow from beside the chute.

With his exclamation the spell was broken. Palo Alto seemed suddenly to remember his reputation, and charged the old darky with an equine squeal of rage, ears laid flat, teeth bared and fore hoofs striking viciously. To his surprise the twitch sticks and pitchfork handles still failed to materialize. The old darky merely

slipped nimbly out of the way and expostulated with him in an aggrieved voice.

"Whoa, hawss, that ain't no way to treat yo' old friend Mullen. Who been teachin' you-all such foolishment anyway? Whoa, now, er Ah'll bus' yo' from heah to de Promised Land!"

"Mullen, yo' rascal," came the voice of the colonel from the corner of the stable some distance away. "Yo' need any help with that wuthless ho'se?"

"Nawsir, Mistah Colonel," replied Mullen. "Ah reckon Ah'll git the' with him all right."

And get there he did, alternately dodging and running, all the time keeping up a steady fire of talk which did not seem to have the least effect on Palo Alto. They finally arrived, and the big black found himself once more in the stall where he had been born, with Mullen still all in one piece, and himself untouched by twitch or whip.

That night, as earth's silver satellite rose languidly from a bed of cotton clouds, Palo Alto heard for the first time in many months the soft murmur of dusky stable hands coaxing the ivories in a near-by stall. And the twang of Mullen's banjo from where the old darky sat in the moonlight at the door crooning:

"Gwine to run all night,
Gwine to run all day,
Ah bets mah money on the bobtailed nag—
Somebody bet on the bay.
Da-da do da-da do day,
Ah bets mah money on the bobtailed nag—
Somebody bet on the bay."

In the morning the big black, his temper apparently as vicious as ever, was turned out in a small blue grass pasture for exercise. The sole other occupants of the pasture were an ancient pair of mules and an equally ancient cow.

There being nothing else on which to vent his spleen, Palo Alto promptly set about making life miserable for his companions, kicking the mules into submission and chasing the cow with equine snorts and squeals of rage, until the poor bovine, bawling hysterically, tried to climb the fence.

A CLOUD of stable hands coming to the rescue of the cow cut short this form of amusement. Palo Alto found himself back in his stall listening to a lecture from Mullen.

"How come you so biggity, hawss?" asked Mullen disgustedly. "Y'all been up no'th so long yo' done fo'got all yo' raisin'? Don' yo' shake yo' head at me, big boy," as Palo Alto with a flirt of his nose scattered his feed. "Yo' know dat ain't no way for no tho'oughbred to ac'. 'Tain't nobody but ol' plow hawss 'ud chase a pore ol' cow. Yo' heah dat, hawss?

"Yo' ac' jes' lak ol' plow hawss, lak ol' plow hawss."

He finished scornfully, and turned to find Jim Morrow watching him with a broad grin on his face.

"What good will that do?" questioned Jim. "The horse doesn't know what you're talking about."

"Humph," grunted Mullen, surprised at such a display of ignorance. "Don' yo' think he don'. Dat hawss knows all right. He plumb ashamed of hisself, too. He ain't gwine to chase dat ol' cow no mo'."

And Mullen was right, he didn't.

In the long days that followed as the Indian summer of late fall drifted into the hazy, frost-laden mornings of a Virginia winter, Palo Alto found himself in a world where twitch sticks and whips were unknown. A world where good behavior brought extravagant praise and gifts of apples and sugar from Mullen and Colonel Lon. The harshest words or treatment he received were the occasional lectures from Mullen for some particularly atrocious bit of mischief.

It took quite a time to convince the temperamental black that this was not

just a huge joke at his expense, perpetrated by these two-legged creatures he had grown to hate so heartily in the past year. For some weeks he was suspicious of the blandishments of Mullen and the colonel. But at length he came to understand that his owner and dusky trainer were to be trusted. And when he did, he responded in the only way he knew—with docile, intelligent obedience to his trainer's wishes.

While Palo Alto's education in the ways of good race horses was thus being taken care of, Jim Morrow, by his daily association with Colonel Lon and Mullen, was gradually adding to his recently discovered instinct and passion for horses a fund of knowledge on the ways and nature of the thoroughbred. He learned that a horse was not an inferior animal to be bullied as so many people seemed to think; but that he was a highly intelligent and sensitive animal, prone to be swayed by memories and as instinctive in its likes and dislikes as a child.

These and many other things he learned. And with the learning his regard for Palo Alto mounted almost to worship. To him the son of the mighty Domino was the ultimate in equine aristocracy, and Jim's unceasing attempts to gain the favor of the big black were almost pathetic.

Palo Alto met his advances with a cool indifference that was maddening, accepting apples, sugar, or any other gifts Jim might bring him in much the same manner the Prince of Wales might employ when taking his hat from a footman. His heart had been given to Colonel Lon, and no amount of persuasion would change his belief that the balance of the human race were ordinary creatures only to be tolerated because the colonel wished them to be.

Jim eventually had to be satisfied with this state of affairs, and consoled himself with the knowledge that he at least owned a half interest in the horse he loved, and that his money would have a great deal to do with his success.

THE first week in January, Palo Alto, for the first time in over a year, felt the pressure of a racing saddle. Little Booker, Mullen's boy, four feet, ninety-five pounds, black as a pirate's heart, and as tricky a little son of a Senegambian as ever wore silks, was lifted to his back, and they were led out for a brief canter on the exercise track that was a part of the Paxson farm.

Every morning thereafter found the colonel and Jim at the track watching Palo Alto thunder over the course under double wraps. After each workout the colonel always asked the same question and received the same answer from Booker.

"Seems like he's roundin' to fo'm, eh, Bookah?"

"Yessuh, Mistuh Colonel, he sure am."

"Likes a distance, too, doesn't he, you scamp?"

"He does fo' a fac', boss." Then, with a chuckle: "Dis Palo Alto hawss reg'lar ol' rollin' stone. De fa'thah we goes, de fastah he gits, and does Ah give him his haid he jes' about flies."

With Palo Alto slowly but surely coming to proper form, and the interest of all hands and the cook centered on his regeneration, the days slipped by swiftly. Almost before they realized it winter blended into spring, and the day of days when Palo Alto was to receive his great test in the Kentucky Derby was rapidly approaching.

While these things were taking place in Virginia during the winter, up north the rumor was afloat that Sir Harry Neville, owner of the crack English three-year-old, Saracen, was bringing the horse to America in the spring.

Saracen had made racing history on the continent by winning the Grand Prix, and as yet had not been beaten. He came from a long line of English

Derby winners, and was regarded as the greatest thoroughbred to be developed in England in many years.

In March the rumor became a fact. Sir Harry arrived in New York with his horse and the avowed intention of capturing the Kentucky Derby. American horsemen, upon hearing this, laughed, and reminded the sporting world that only once in its long history had this classic of the American turf been won by a foreign horse.

Events soon proved, however, that Sir Harry's confidence in his horse was justified. Saracen took nicely to the climate, and his early morning workouts at Belmont, where he was quartered, left no room for doubt as to whether he was a great horse or not.

When Sir Harry entered him in the Preakness as a preliminary to the Derby, Saracen spread-eagled the field, winning from the pick of the eastern three-year-olds by five lengths, setting a new track record.

The men who a short time before had scoffed at his chances in the Derby, now shook their heads dubiously and were forced to admit that unless something unforeseen happened, the race was at the mercy of the English star. So, for the first time in the fifty odd years of the race's existence, a foreign entry was installed as the favorite of the Kentucky Derby.

In spite of the many stories of Saracen's greatness that filtered down to Virginia, the confidence of Colonel Lon and Mullen in Palo Alto's ability never wavered. But Jim was no longer in Virginia to share that confidence.

One bright morning in March he had received a telegram from his brokers urging his immediate return to New York. He was reluctant to leave the colonel, and still more reluctant to bid good-by to Palo Alto, but the wording of the wire left no room for doubt as to the necessity of his going.

Upon reaching New York he found his affairs in a chaotic state. Following in the footsteps of so many players of the market, he had placed too many of his eggs in one basket, and the bottom had given way, with the usual results. When everything was adjusted, his assets were summed up in a good car and a few thousands in paid-up bonds on which to make a new start. And, last but not least, his half interest in Palo Alto.

This last Jim felt guilty in listing, even in his mind, as an asset. He knew that another two months' care, plus transportation and the entry fee to the Derby would eat a substantial hole in his few thousands of cash.

For the first time since his partnership with Colonel Paxson, Jim felt doubt. He recalled all he had read of the English thoroughbred. How could Palo Alto, with his record of failures, his unreliable temperament and with no one but Mullen to train him, ever beat Saracen?

Was not Jim himself a fool to waste the little left to him on the turn of a horse's hoof, and that horse a well-known "bad actor" in race track circles? Then, too, he reminded himself rather bitterly: "If I'd been up here where I belonged instead of down there fooling around with that black devil, I wouldn't be broke."

BUT there arose before him the vision of Colonel Lon's face on the day of the sale. Colonel Lon, the only aristocrat who had ever treated Jim, product of New York's slums, as an equal. Could he fail the old man now? It took him no longer than the flirt of a horse's tail to decide. With a shrug of his shoulders and a wry grin he thrust the thought aside. "Palo Alto gets his chance," he muttered.

Jim remained in New York, where he received regular reports from Colonel Lon on Palo Alto's progress. The last week in April he had the horse shipped to Louisville for final conditioning. He did not go himself until the last minute, arriving the evening before the race.

He met Colonel Lon, who seemed a little whiter and thinner, but as erect as ever, in the lobby of his hotel. After their greeting the colonel remarked:

"I've heard of youah misfo'tune, suh, and I appreciate youah having entahed Palo Alto in the De'by anyway, mo' than I can evah say. I hope and believe that to-morrow you will find youah confidence in the ho'se was justified."

Jim was startled. He had not intended to tell the colonel of his trouble until after the race; but if he already knew, what difference did it make?

"Forget it," he said abruptly.

The colonel nodded and suggested:

"Shall we go down to the stable, suh? Palo Alto is being ente'tained by the laziest pack of niggahs south of the Mason-Dixon line."

So Jim found himself walking through the soft moonlight of a Kentucky night in May, with the colonel pacing thoughtfully by his side. As they approached the barn where Palo Alto was quartered, Jim heard the voice of Mullen and the soft twang of a banjo:

"Gwine to run all night,
Gwine to run all day,
Ah bets mah money on the bob-tailed nag—
Somebody bet on the bay."

In a double stall Palo Alto stood, stomping restlessly. One ear was cocked back to catch the familiar murmur that rose not ten feet away.

"Rattle dem dice, boy, how come dey's so quiet?" "Bam! Ah sees fo', little Joe. Does Ah make it Ah don't want no change. Two an' two is fo', three and one is fo'. Lady Luck, don' yo' leave me now. Showah down, fa'm hands!"

A lump rose in Jim's throat as he viewed the little drama, and thought that to-night would probably be the last time he would see it.

Colonel Lon's soft voice came from behind him with a suggestive note in it.

"He'll be fifty to one, suh."

Jim whirled around.

"But how about his chances?"

The colonel stared dreamily into the surrounding shadows.

"Bettah than even," he finally answered. "He did a mile in one minute and thi'ty-nine seconds this mo'nin' and finished fightin' fo' his head. The's a field of twelve stahtahs tomorrow, but it's really a two ho'se race—Palo Alto and Saracen; and all things bein' equal, Palo Alto will win."

"Yeah, but will he get the even break?" queried Jim a little skeptically.

"Why not?" replied Colonel Lon. "And remembah, on the basis of his last perfo'mance he'll be fifty to one and nobody will be afraid of him."

Something of the night's magic stole into Jim's soul.

"Fifty to one and a two-horse race," he mused. Many a time in the past when bucking the market he had tossed a quarter of a million into the lap of the gods and smilingly waited the verdict. True, he hadn't the quarter of a million now, and with what he had, he had intended to—then, too, in the old days he had been more reckless and cared less for the morrow; it was different now. But his nerve was still intact.

His head came up with a jerk, in his eyes a gleam that had been absent a moment before.

"By gad, I'll do it!" he exploded. "The old wheel of fortune, eh, colonel? We'll give it one more spin. Hook, line and sinker on Palo Alto's nose. If he wins we'll be on top of the world, and if he doesn't we'll only be broke and we might as well be that now!"

"Don' y'-all worry none about dat hawss losin', Mr. Jim," came the voice of Mullen from the shadows. "When de race is ovah y'-all ain't gwine heah da band play nothin' but 'Ol' Vi'ginny.'"

Jim laughed. His decision made, he

felt as if a heavy load had been lifted from his shoulders. "Good boy, Mullen," he said. "Keep up the old spirit."

To the colonel he said: "We'd better get back to town, colonel, so that I can place my bets to-night. Any heavy play on the horse to-morrow might hurt the odds." The colonel nodded and they moved off together through the moonlight.

DAY dawned with a cloudless sky above a track that was fast as lightning. Out to Churchill Downs streamed the sport loving thousands to witness the running of America's greatest classic, the Kentucky Derby; a mile and a quarter race for three-year-olds and up with fifty thousand dollars and the crown of the thoroughbreds to the winner.

Jim was at the track early and for a time paced up and down nervously, but as the time for the hanging up of the starting board drew near his nervousness vanished. And when Colonel Lon and Mullen led the blanketed Palo Alto into the paddock it was an icily calm young man who met them in front of the stall. You would never have known that he had wagered his last dollar on the big black's chances.

The call to the post sounded as the colonel was giving his last instructions to Booker.

"Remembah," he said, "keep him off the pace the fi'st half mile and aftah that let him run his own race. Above all, no whip or spurs."

"Yessuh, Mistuh Colonel."

The colonel gave him a leg up. Palo Alto, seeming to know his great hour had come, was trembling in every limb, his eyes brilliant from the flame within. He reared up, pawing. The colonel clung to the bridle. "Easy, easy," he soothed.

"Bring them out!" some one cried.

The colonel released his hold and one after another the starters in the Derby filed out of the paddock.

As Jim and the colonel squirmed their way to a place of vantage on the rail, Saracen, a huge, satin-skinned chestnut, led the field of twelve royal sons and daughters of the turf past the stands in the parade to the barrier, with Palo Alto, now strangely quiet, bringing up the rear.

It seemed that the field was at the post for an hour, but in reality it was only a matter of minutes. Thousands of glasses were leveled at the plunging, twisting wall of color. Suddenly it broke and spread, and with the ascending volcanic roar the race was on.

Saracen broke first and when the field swished by the stand he was on the rail setting his own pace two lengths to the good. Palo Alto was pounding along on the outside taking the dust of the second division.

"Say," asked Jim anxiously, "Booker ought to hustle him up, hadn't he, colonel?"

The colonel shook his head, lowered his glasses and answered confidently: "No, suh, Palo Alto is a Vi'ginia ho'se. They come from behind at the propah time."

The field swung into the back stretch with Saracen gradually increasing his lead.

"It's a procession," mourned a big man standing next to Jim, who wore an owner's badge. "Saracen won't even have to extend himself."

Even as he said it the rushing field passed the half mile post. Little Booker dropped lower in the saddle, swung Palo Alto to the crown of the track, let out a wrap and crooned:

"Baby, us has got business up ahead. Shake yo' dancin' slippahs and show dem white folks how us runs in old Vi'ginny."

The multitude kept its eyes on the leaders, but up in the judges' stand, sharp eyes that are always on the lookout for the unexpected saw a blue and white sash bobbing along in sixth place, then fifth, then fourth, as the great black horse picked up the field as easily as a child gathers up its toys.

"Good Lord!" gasped one of them. "Something's turned loose out there that has a stride like Man O' War!"

On rushed Palo Alto, gaining at every stride till he was racing on even terms with the flying leader. A buzzing in the stands showed that the watching thousands were trying to identify the black challenger. They made the turn and swung into the stretch, Saracen on the rail, Palo Alto a black shadow at his right. As they straightened away for the finish, Jim Morrow, leaning far out over the rail, shrieked it first, hurled it ecstatically to the heavens:

"Palo Alto!"

Instantly the throng, forgetting personal interest in seeing the American entry gaining, took up the cry and the throbbing roar of "Saracen!" was blasted by the exultant yells of "Palo Alto! Palo Alto! Paxson!"

For the mighty son of Domino, with little Booker doubled forward on his great shoulders, true to his ancestry, disdaining the rail and asking only for room, plenty of room, was coming down the track as his sire had done in the days of his glory.

Halfway down that final stretch the boy on Saracen cast a startled glance at Palo Alto and went to the bat. The gallant chestnut, realizing that the greatest test of his career had come, responded desperately, giving to his rider all that was in him. But the race was not for England that day, for Palo Alto was running for Colonel Lon and the honor of Virginia. By heartbreaking inches he nosed ahead and at the wire it was Palo Alto by a head and going away.

Up shot the roar of a hundred thousand throats. Down dropped the white figures at the judges' stand. The field came blowing back and still the thunder of triumphant America pealed forth. Down in the flower-laden winner's circle an almost hysterically joyful young man did an impromptu war dance while he centered the tribute on his white-haired partner who stood with hat off and glorified face lifted to the sky.

THE END

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Shadow-Souls

MY blacks stopped as we were about to penetrate the gloom of the Niger jungle, to place a cowrie shell or a red feather on their shadows.

A shadow is a soul, and in the jungle lurk the disembodied spirits of human beings—the Manu, the Ombwiri, and many others—who are viciously envious of more fortunate beings in the flesh, and will steal a man's shadow. A shadow is a sort of soul. If it is stolen, you will die. Perhaps no black ever knew of a man having his shadow stolen, but what with old wives' tales and his imagination he is not taking any chances.

He gets a thrill out of believing that the danger exists, and these thrills relieve the monotony of primitive existence. To him all phenomena have a supernatural, occult significance.

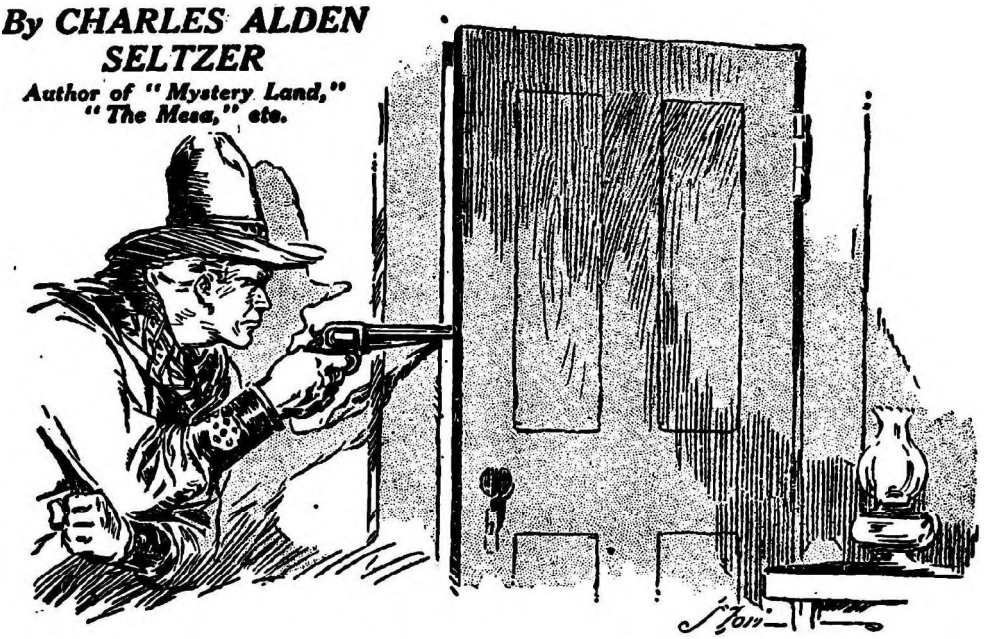
Oh, the black takes his fancies seriously. What if, when the clouds pass, the shadows don't return to earth? That is a real fear, hence, the propitiating Dance-to-the-Return-of-the-Shadows, which is a very serious ritual dance, indeed. Nobody ever knew of such a dreadful happening as the nonreturn of the shadows, but they get a thrill out of thinking about it—and a chance to dance.

T. Samson Miller.

The Raider

By CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

Author of "Mystery Land," "The Mesa," etc.



"Looking for me, eh?" sneered Dallman. "Well, come on!"

Ignorant of the dire peril besetting Ellen in the Navaho wilderness, Jeff Hale struggles to save his beloved rangeland from the murderous clutch of Dallman, the land shark

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

ELLEN BALLINGER, young, modern, and selfish, defies her father by riding to a lonely cabin in the Navaho basin in search of a former suitor, Jim Kellis. Finding that he has a Mexican wife, and that her father knew it, Ellen rides on, determined to marry the first man she finds.

Instead, she is kidnaped and carried to another cabin by a man snarling threats at her father, Matthew M. Ballinger. He leaves her, and shortly afterward rides past, fleeing from a group who halt at the cabin, talking about how they hanged a horse-thief named Kroll. Their leader, Jeff Hale, sees Ellen inside, dismisses his men, and stands guard.

In the morning, Ellen deliberately lies to Jeff, saying she recognizes his voice as her kidnaper's. Jeff, a daring, ruthless leader of the cow country, who has no more use for women than for man-made law, is nevertheless forced by his code to offer to marry Ellen and save her reputation; and she triumphantly accepts.

At the Hale ranch, the Diamond A, she learns that a land shark named Wade Dallman is stealing the Hale land to sell to the incoming horde of dry farmers, and that the heart of their ranch is about to be grabbed by her own father, due to a title certificate which has disappeared from the Land Office. Dallman appears, and

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Jeff horsewhips him off the ranch. Ellen recognizes Dallman as her abductor, but dares not tell Jeff.

Jeff and several others have been making night raids, trying to drive the farmers away; but at last realize the tide is too strong.

Although Ellen twice saves Jeff from arrest by Sheriff Hazen—a crony of Dallman's—by lying as to where he had been at the time of the raids, he believes she only married him to help her father grab the Hale land. But Ballinger informs him that he has decided not to acquire the Hale homestead, because Jim Kellis had tried to sell him the missing certificate, which he had stolen.

Jeff rides to Kellis's cabin, but cannot find him. Going on to Randall, Jeff learns that Hazen plans to hunt him down and kill him that night; so he waylays the sheriff, takes him to a lonely cabin in the Navaho basin, and, with the aid of two friends, Hart and Givens, scares him into confessing his crookedness and agreeing to leave the country.

Meantime Ellen, puzzled at a hint Kellis had let drop about Lincoln and the certificate, has ridden to Kellis's cabin in his absence—and finds the document behind an engraving of the martyred President. Kellis appears and chases her through the woods. Trapped on a precipitous slope, she hides, while Kellis, gone insane, hurls bowlders at her.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MISSING CONSPIRATORS.

HART and Givens found Jeff lying in a grass plot sound asleep. He had been in the saddle for nearly forty-eight hours had ridden three different horses—two of them to exhaustion—and now nature had overcome him. Givens covered him with a blanket.

"Hazen was lucky," said Givens, looking down at Jeff. "There was a time when he wouldn't have got off like that." He shook his head. "Jeff's changed. He's got a temper like a sidewinder with family troubles, but lately he's kept a hold on it."

"School," said Hart, "and marriage. Both learn a man somethin'."

"Sure," agreed Givens. "Hazen an' Dallman wouldn't be here no more if she hadn't married him when she did. He was seein' red about that time. Seems like he's about ready to break out now, though. Killin' a sheriff is one thing. Killin' a polecat like Dallman is another. If I was Dallman I'd be pullin' my freight!"

The afternoon sun awakened Jeff. He had turned and the glare was in his eyes. He sat up, gazed about him, and saw Hart and Givens seated near him, watching him.

Hart grinned at him. "You was bushed, I reckon. It's three, mebbe."

"Hazen gone?"

"He's ridin' north. He'll be missin' town plenty."

When Jeff got to his feet Hart handed him two pieces of paper. One bore Hazen's resignation; the other was his confession of his illegal association with Wade Dallman.

Jeff placed both in a pocket, as he gazed into the north.

"I'm thanking you boys," he said. "Killing him wouldn't be a proper deed for a married man. She ain't used to it." He smiled. "She's law-abiding."

Givens soberly watched him.

"I know how it is," he said, "I was married once. A man considers. But there's Dallman—say the word an' we'll take this off your hands."

"It's past that," said Jeff. "I've spoken to him."

Jeff mounted his horse and rode into the forest, following the faint trail used by himself and Hazen. The sun was still high when he reached the arroyo where he had waited for the sheriff, and in another half hour he was riding down Randall's one street.

To-day did not end the period of grace he had given Dallman, and he could not strike until that time arrived. But he was hoping that he might find Kellis in town, and he knew that his own presence might provoke Dallman to commit an indiscreet action that would hasten the crisis.

He dismounted in front of the livery stable and led the horse inside. He merely nodded to Allen and went outside again, walking slowly down the street. Blandin and another deputy were standing in front of the sheriff's office, and although his gaze rested momentarily upon them he gave no sign of recognition. He was looking for Dallman, and he knew Dallman would be looking for him.

IT seemed to him that he was an alien in his own land. This town had been here when he had come. Only a few shanties at first, he had watched it grow until now. Every building in it was familiar to him, yet to-day it was strange; a new atmosphere hovered over it, a hostile atmosphere. The street seemed different, the buildings were not the same, the people were strangers.

He knew, however, that nothing in the town had changed. The change was in himself. What had happened was that the town had finally revealed itself as an enemy, and he was considering it as he would consider a human enemy who had once been a friend. He was scanning it cynically, as he would scan a false friend's face, finding defects where he had once observed charm, detecting insincerity where he had once seen loyalty.

He knew that he had few friends here. Most of the men who watched him as he moved slowly down the street were farmers who were awaiting a signal from Hazen, a signal that would never come.

They were studying him, appraising him. No doubt some of them were already visualizing him dangling at the end of a rope. They knew him by reputation and not one of them would risk attacking him, yet they would act quickly enough if organized.

He was contemptuous of them and did not even glance at those he passed.

It seemed to him that the town was unnaturally calm, that all normal activity had ceased. Some wagons were on the street, but these were motionless, standing driverless before various hitching rails, the horses drowsing. The silence seemed sepulchral and served to strengthen the illusion of strangeness that had already afflicted him.

His enemies were watching him. He knew that. They were watching him and wondering what had become of Hazen. They were like a flock of sheep deserted by the bell-wether. Leaderless, they were waiting for instructions. They would do nothing until their leader appeared.

He wasn't interested in the farmers. He was searching for Kellis and Dallman, one or both. He did not see them in any of the doorways he passed, and so at last he began to enter the various saloons and gambling houses.

He spoke to no one, but stalked through the doorways, grimly scanned the faces that were turned toward him, and stalked out again. It was remarkable how doorways were cleared for his entrance, and amazing how quickly they were filled again after he passed.

Twice he tried the door of Dallman's office and therefore the watchers knew it was Dallman he sought.

But Dallman was not visible. No one had seen him.

CHAPTER XXV

THE CORNERED RAT.

DALLMAN, however, was in town. Early on the preceding evening he had made arrangements for the meeting of the farmers' posse, and in the darkness near the stable where

Ellen had once overheard Hazen and Dallman planning, the posse had waited for Hazen to appear. They had waited until midnight and had then dispersed, leaving Dallman nervous and apprehensive.

For Dallman knew that Jeff Hale's word to him had been final. He must leave town or meet his enemy in a fair fight. Dallman had no desire to fight, and he had hoped by taking the offensive with the posse to avoid the prospective meeting with his enemy; but Hazen had not appeared.

Dallman did not sleep. He still hoped that Hazen would come. He sat all day in his office, with the door locked, scanning the west trail from behind a heavily curtained window. Hazen did not appear.

But Dallman had seen Jeff Hale coming over the west trail, and he instantly divined the truth—that Jeff had met Hazen. To be sure, he did not know, and could not suspect, what had happened to Hazen, but the fact that Jeff came down the trail that the sheriff should be riding convinced him that Hazen would not appear.

Dallman yielded to a sudden panic of fear. He knew now that he should have heeded Jeff's warning. There was rage in his fear, and as he let himself out of the rear door of his office he was wondering if he dared conceal himself and shoot Jeff before his hour of grace ended.

He might try that.

He ran through the refuse in the rear of several buildings until he reached a door that was familiar to him. The door was not locked and he pushed it open, stood for an instant on the threshold and glanced about him to see if he was observed by any one outside, then stepped inside and swiftly closed the door.

He stood against the door, panting a little. He was aware of a strange nausea which he knew had not been provoked by his short run from his office. The feeling had come upon him a few times before when facing danger. Fear!

He did not attempt to delude himself. He was afraid of Jeff Hale! he had always been afraid of Jeff, even while he had been trying to steal the Hale lands. But he had thought that Jeff would not dare resort to violence, for the law was in Randall and Jeff must conform to it like all citizens of the town. Besides, Hazen was with him, and he had relied upon Hazen to protect him. But where was Hazen now? His absence made a difference.

Dallman felt that Hazen had deserted him. Somehow he had learned that Jeff Hale was coming to town; if he hadn't met Jeff on the trail he had found out about it some other way. He knew Hazen feared Jeff; the sheriff hadn't admitted it, but his fear had been disclosed in various other ways.

Dallman discovered that he was trembling. He still stood at the door, inside the kitchen. In front of him was another door, opening upon a bedroom. A third door led from the bedroom into the front room of the building, which was used as a storeroom.

The third door was not in line with the other two, but was a little to the right, so that Dallman could only see one of the jambs. By leaning a little to the left, however, he could look into the front room, where he could see various articles on shelves. The store held a miscellaneous stock, groceries, notions, dry goods. Not much of anything but a little of everything needed by the average small purchaser.

Dallman could hear some one walking about in the store. He waited until he was certain only one person was in the store, and then he called, softly:

"Dell."

THERE was a stir, a step on the floor, and a woman appeared in the third doorway. Craning her head, she peered into the kitchen and saw Dallman.

"Wade!"

She moved toward Dallman and came far enough into the kitchen so that light from one of the rear windows shone upon her.

She was young, but there was about her a singular atmosphere of untidiness which was not entirely a matter of personal appearance. It was in a certain, sly, veiled gleam of the eyes that one got his impression, and in the full, sensuous lower lip and the flare of the nostrils. Vast experience with men had given her a hard sophistication which was unmistakable. Randall knew her as a widow, Della Lane.

"What are you doing here at this hour?" she wanted to know. "Damn it! Don't you know better than that?"

"I'm in trouble, Dell," answered Dallman. "I've got to hide! Jeff Hale is in town, looking for me!"

Della's lips curved scornfully.

"You and Hazen are bunglers!" she charged. "Why didn't you organize your farmers last night?"

"Something's happened to Hazen," Dallman told her. "Hale came in the west trail. I've got an idea that he met Hazen and downed him. I'll be next. He warned me to get out of town."

"What are you going to do?" asked the woman.

"I don't know. I've got to think it out. He's a fast man with a gun; I don't think I'd have much chance with him."

"Seems like the best thing would be to get out of here, then," suggested Della. "The safest, anyway."

"I've got to think it over. I'll stay out here awhile. You go on back to the store."

For an instant the woman stood, silently looking at Dallman. Her face was expressionless, but at last it seemed to soften with sympathy.

"All right, Wade," she said. "You stay here and think it over."

She left Dallman, and he heard her walking about the little store.

An hour passed. Della appeared at the kitchen door, to see Dallman sitting in a chair, his head bent forward, resting in his hands.

"There's hell in his eyes, Wade!" she whispered. "He has passed the store twice. Once he looked in—just a glance. He means to kill you. It seems everybody knows it. Everything in town has stopped, and everybody's watching him. He's going from one saloon to another, and he isn't drinking, for he comes right out.

"People are s t a n d i n g around, watching him. Blandin and another deputy are right across the street, and they've been watching him, too. He is not p a y i n g attention to anybody, doesn't even look at them. He acts like a caged animal. And he's cold, Wade. I never saw him look like that before."

Dallman did not answer. He knew, though, that various men were aware that he was in town, and that sooner or later Hale would find him—Hale would stay in town until they met.

Dallman got up and walked back and forth in the kitchen. He would have to do something, but he was certain he could not go out in the street and face Jeff Hale with a gun in hand. He thought of that, and saw himself sinking into the dust.

He saw people coming toward him, saw them looking down at him, curiously examining the place where he had been shot. The mental picture horrified him, and he tried to quit thinking about it, knowing the effect it was having upon him; but he kept seeing it.

At the end of another hour Della once more appeared in the doorway. She seemed to be far away, and her voice had a note of terrible calm.

"He's been at the door of your office twice," she said, and vanished again.

DALLMAN ceased walking. He now stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the bedroom. He was pale, but there was a new light in his eyes—a strange mixture of malice, cunning and hatred.

Hale was looking for him. By this time everybody in town knew Hale was looking for him. They knew Hale was hunting him, that Hale intended to kill him. Well, he had a right to protect himself, didn't he? There was a fool custom to the effect that a warning to leave town must be answered by obeying or by meeting the enemy face to face. But Hale's warning had not been a public warning. Nobody besides himself had heard it!

That made a difference, didn't it? A great difference!

Dallman drew out his six-shooter, inspected it, and moved toward the third doorway with the weapon dangling from his right hand. At the doorway he paused and cautiously stuck his head around the jamb. He saw Della sitting on a bench near the front window. Her back was toward him. She was sewing something, and he knew she was covertly watching the street for the reappearance of Jeff Hale.

The sun had gone down; twilight had come. In the room where Dallman stood, out in the street, everywhere, was the solemn hush which in the high altitudes presages the imminence of night.

Dallman whispered, and it seemed to him that his voice must have been heard in the street.

"Della!" he said.

Della turned. Slowly she rose and walked toward him.

When she entered the bedroom and saw him standing there with the gun in his hand, her face paled and she stood rigid.

"Get out of here!" he said, a ring of cold command in his voice. "Go somewhere! I'm taking my end!"

Della stared at him for an instant. Then she caught up a shawl from the bed and went out the rear doorway, closing the door after her.

The store was not more than a dozen feet from front to rear. The small front window sash, swung upward upon hinges, was open. Flattening himself against the partition that separated the store from the bedroom, Dallman waited.

Only part of his head and the muzzle of his six-shooter were visible from the street. The gun was rigid, for it was held tightly against the doorjamb and its muzzle was pointed toward the street.

"Looking for me, eh?" sneered Dallman. "Well, come on, damn you!"

APPARENTLY, Jeff reflected coldly, Dallman was not in town, or at least he was not able to find him. Aware that he was being watched and his every movement noted, he could not go into the Elite, for fear of drawing suspicion upon Sadie.

Several times he passed the Elite. He saw Sadie inside, sitting at a table. Once he met her gaze fairly, but there was no sign that she had anything to communicate to him. Her eyes expressed nothing but apprehension.

He kept walking back and forth, from one end of town to the other. He had entered all the saloons and gambling houses, and had not seen Dallman.

The sun was low. He stood for a moment in front of the livery stable, which was almost directly across the street from the hotel where Ellen had stayed overnight, and where she had met Kellis; and rage blazed in him as he looked at the building.

"Lies!" he said aloud.

He had told her the truth. He loved her, he loved her more than he had ever loved anything; he had loved her from the beginning. He had fought against it, but it had conquered him. An aching regret seized him.

He kept seeing her as she had appeared when he had surprised her by suddenly entering the door of her room at the ranch house—when he had told her that the end had come. He

couldn't get that picture out of his mind; he had seen it during every waking moment since.

He was seeing her now as she gazed at him through the glistening strands of her wonderful hair; as she had appeared, her face framed in it, watching him reproachfully.

That silent reproach was one thing he couldn't understand. It was a contradiction. She had lied to him, had cheated, and yet she was able to rebuke him mutely, to make him feel that he had injured her by refusing to believe in her.

Well, he had told her to go, and by this time she was out of his life. He would never see her again. He had made it plain enough to her, yet all the time he had been talking he had been aware that he wanted her to stay. Yes, he wanted to have her stay. He would take her, knowing her to be a liar and a cheat.

He saw Mart Blandin again. Blandin was alone, sitting on a bench in front of the sheriff's office, and there was no one within a hundred feet of him.

Jeff moved toward Blandin. He had been in town for several hours and had spoken no word to any one. Perhaps if he talked with Blandin for a few minutes he could relieve the terrible tension that had gripped him, somehow calm the cold, deadly rage that seethed in him.

He stood before Blandin, looking down at the man. He remembered the papers in his pocket: Hazen's confession and his resignation. He passed them over to Blandin.

"Your boss has left the country," he said.

He stood facing the street while Blandin scanned the papers. Blandin did not look up; he seemed to speak to the sand in front of him which was darkening as the colors of the afterglow faded from the sky.

"So he's gone," said Blandin. "This makes me sheriff, if I want it." Blandin's voice leaped. "Why, damn it, Jeff, I can run Dallman in on the strength of this!"

"YOU'RE not touching Dallman!" said Jeff. "I'm going to kill him!"

"Why, yes," said Blandin gently, "I reckon that's right; you've got a right to kill him. He'd ought to be killed for what he done to your wife."

Jeff turned.

"Dallman didn't do anything to my wife, Mart. I'm going to kill him for what he's been trying to do with our land."

"Didn't, eh?" said Blandin. He now looked up and met Jeff's gaze. "Didn't do anything to your wife! Lord! Don't you know it was Dallman that abducted her?"

Jeff's muscles leaped and became perfectly rigid.

"Talk!" he ordered sharply.

"Why, shucks!" said Blandin. "I thought you knew. I overheard Dallman an' Hazen talkin'. They was runnin' that gang of rustlers, and they was both down in Navaho Basin the night you hung Hank Kroll. The man that was with Kroll that night was Hazen himself! I've knowed it, but I didn't dare say anything.

"Dallman was down there too, but he'd gone off alone to meet some of the other rustlers. He run into Ellen Ballinger—found her stretched out, senseless, after she'd fell from her horse. Dallman was scared Ballinger was goin' to file on your land, and would mebbe get it away from him, so he figured that if he'd take Ellen an' hide her for awhile he'd be able to make a deal with Ballinger. You spoiled that.

"I've been wantin' to tell you, but I figured I'd better not as long as Hazen was runnin' things. An' sometimes I couldn't understand how you wouldn't know it; I figured Ellen would know, who abducted her that night."

Jeff turned from Blandin. He did not want Blandin to see the fierce joy that shone in his eyes.

Ellen was innocent; the abduction had not been planned by the Ballingers.

The calm light that he had seen so often in her eyes had not been deceit or duplicity, but consciousness of her own truthfulness.

Many times had her expression baffled him. He had thought her a marvelous actress and liar, and he had permitted her to see the contempt in his eyes; yet all the time he had been treating her so unjustly she had made no complaint. She had endured suspicion and insult, always insisting that it had been he and no other that had abducted her.

He would reach her before she left the country. Failing in that, he would follow her East and tell her what a fool he had been.

But before he set out to find her he would finish with Dallman. If he lost her, the fault would be Dallman's; that skunk was to blame for all his troubles.

He stepped away from Blandin, and the latter whispered to him:

"He's in town, Jeff. I saw him this afternoon, in his office. He'll know that you are lookin' for him—by this time some of his friends have told him.

"He'll be hidin' somewhere, waitin' to shoot you in the back. Every time you've passed a buildin' or a doorway I've jumped, expectin' him to shoot. Watch yourself!"

JEFF walked eastward down the street. He was across the street from Della's store, and was facing the front of the building. Dusk had fallen, but through the window of the store he caught a glimpse of a face and saw a ray of dying light glinting for an instant upon metal.

He leaped sidewise and a bullet whined past him. The muffled crash of a heavy pistol was followed by the musical tinkle of falling glass. Before a second shot could follow, Jeff was across the street, crouching against the front wall of the building adjoining that from which the bullet had come. Dallman was located at last.

There was no space between the buildings for quite a distance down the street, but he found one presently and plunged into it. He expected to reach Dallman from the rear of the building from which the shot had been fired. He felt that Dallman would be there, waiting, watching, expecting an attack from the front.

Dusk was deepening into darkness, and he had some trouble locating the building.

When he found it he drew his gun from its holster, and entered. The interior was dark, but he soon discovered that Dallman had fled.

Della, too, had gone.

He stood in the rear doorway peering out. From somewhere in the dusk behind the buildings he heard the rapid beating of hoofs. The sound had developed suddenly from a heavy silence, and so he knew that a man had mounted and was riding away.

Dallman, of course.

Jeff turned, leaped through the rooms and the store and reached the street. He saw a horse and rider flitting over the east trail, heading at break-neck speed up the slope that led out of the valley.

Jeff turned, intending to run to the livery stable to get his horse. He saw a horse and rider bearing down upon him from the west, and he leaped aside to keep from being run down. The animal came to a sliding halt in a heavy dust cloud, and the rider slid down from the saddle.

The rider was Blandin.

"Just what I thought would happen," he said. "He tried to pot shot you! I seen him light out of the back door. He missed, an' he knows you'll follow him; he'll run like a scared rab-

bit, but this horse will ketch him. Run his head off, if you want to!"

Jeff leaped into the saddle.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PURSUED BY A MADMAN.

ELLEN, crouching on that sharp cliffside was not frightened by Kellis's maniacal threats. She was curiously calm and alert, for she realized that her life depended upon her ability to keep distance between herself and him. His marksmanship was bad, and his supply of rocks could not last long.

He would smash her if he could, of course, for he had already demonstrated his eagerness to do so, and his verbal threats did not disturb her.

She knew that she dared not risk moving from her present position as long as Kellis continued to throw at her, for the slightest injury would slow her movements and perhaps permit him to catch her. She was confident that as long as she retained her agility and senses she could keep a safe distance from him.

The now brilliant moonlight disclosed every feature of the great declivity. While Kellis continued to throw rocks at her she found opportunity to look about her and to estimate her chances of reaching another position in case he should decide to descend to her.

Close to her was an expanse of glassy rock perhaps a dozen feet wide. She could not escape over that. But above it was a narrow ledge which projected out over the rock and ran downward to a huge mass of broken granite that appeared to be strewn over a little level.

As she faced the wall the section of broken granite was to her left. On her right was a perpendicular drop into a shadowy cleft. She could not move in that direction, nor could she go any farther straight down from where she crouched. A backward glance told her that at a little distance the wall dropped straight to the valley below.

Once, glancing down into the valley, she was afflicted with a sudden vertigo, and she held tightly to the rock and closed her eyes. But she knew that she must conquer that weakness or she would never escape. So, deliberately, while Kellis crouched on the upper ledge and glared at her, she scanned the country below her.

And instantly the dizziness passed. For it seemed not so far, after all. Nor did it appear that a fall into the green depths would be so terrible. For the moonlight, working its magic upon the wild growth of the valley, transformed it into a gently undulating sea of soft, green velvet.

For an instant she had forgotten Kellis. She was reminded of him when she heard him screaming curses at her. Apparently a new frenzy had gripped him, for she saw him slipping over the rock ledge, his good leg searching an antenna, the injured one dangling.

Instantly she clambered over the edge of the rock in front of her and started for the narrow ledge above the expanse of glassy rock.

By balancing perilously she gained the narrow ledge. It was not wide enough to permit her even to crawl over it on hands and knees, so she lay flat on her stomach and wriggled over it. When she reached the huge rocks on the little level she sank beside one of them, gasping.

She saw Kellis now, in the position she had occupied. He was not behind the rock, however, but was stretched out, face down, upon it, holding tightly to its edges with both hands. His face was pallid, his eyes glared malignantly.

But Kellis was desperately frightened. He was clinging to the rock as a certain variety of ivy clings to the face of a brick wall, and Ellen, breathlessly watching him, was convinced

that the shock of the fall to the rock had momentarily restored his reason. She felt that as long as his sanity stayed with him he would not move. He was a coward, and if he had been in his right senses he would not have followed her.

SHE was no longer afraid of him. He had lost the revolver, and he could not throw rocks at her from his present position. She doubted if he would have the courage to attempt to follow her over the ledge.

She sat, watching Kellis, regaining her breath. Kellis still clung to the top of the rock. He continued to glare at her.

For perhaps an hour Ellen sat there, resting, and then she began to seek a way to descend. The night was passing; the moon was far over in the west and would presently vanish altogether.

She crept over the rocky level to the edge farthest away from Kellis. At the edge of the level was another outcropping of rock which ran like a ridge at an angle down the huge slope to another ledge. The distance was perhaps a hundred feet, and Ellen was certain she could descend without difficulty.

As she halted at the edge of the level she turned and saw Kellis watching her.

Her first step downward left only her head visible to him, and he must have divined that she was escaping him, for he shouted profanely.

She paid no attention to him. For a little while as she descended he was invisible to her, and then when about halfway down the declivity she saw him again. His head was twisted in her direction.

When she reached the lower ledge she rested again. She was growing confident of her ability to make the complete descent, and she no longer feared Kellis's pursuit. She could see him, still clinging to the flat rock. At the distance from which she looked at him he appeared to have been stuck there like a pinned bug.

She felt in the bosom of her dress. The certificate was still there, and the photograph of Jeff, which she had taken from the shelf in the Diamond A ranch house. She must get the certificate to the land office.

At the side of the ledge upon which she sat was another section of jagged rock that jutted out from the main wall. Just below the rocky section was a deep channel, a miniature gully formed undoubtedly by the erosive action of the elements. It seemed to her that from the end of the gully to the floor of the valley was not a great distance and that the hazards decreased as the valley grew nearer.

Confidently and boldly she stepped off the ledge among the rocks. She descended carefully, however, and slowly, giving her entire attention to her task. She reached the bottom of the rocky section and turned to look at Kellis before venturing into the gully.

He was wildly scrambling upward to the ledge above the rock upon which he had been lying. His voice reached her, screaming violent curses.

He was hopping upward like a great one-legged animal, his injured leg seeming to flap wildly with each muscular movement. He got to the upper edge of the rock, leaped upward and gripped the edge of the narrow ledge along which Ellen had squirmed.

HE clutched the edge of the ledge and tried to pull himself upward. It seemed his hands must have slipped at the first effort and that he had not strength enough to succeed in a second attempt, though he tried. There was a time when Ellen saw him gripping the edge of the ledge with one hand, and she knew that the edge sloped sharply, for she had had to cling tightly even while resting her entire body upon it.

Kellis might have returned to the safety of the flat rock. But he made no attempt to do so. Instead, he tried to cross by gripping the ledge with, first one hand, and then the other, swinging his body sidewise each time he attempted a fresh grip on the ledge.

His hands kept slipping off the edge of the ledge. His progress grew slower. He reached the middle and hung there for a time with both hands. Ellen observed him glancing to his right and left and knew he was beginning to realize that he was doomed.

He hung there, motionless.

Ellen saw him turn his head and glance backward to the glassy rock beneath him. She called wildly to him and started to clamber up toward him.

But she was hundreds of feet distant, and before she had gone more than a few yards his hands slipped off the edge of the ledge.

He dropped slowly, heavily, landing on his knees. Desperately he clawed at the glassy surface of the big rock and it seemed that for an instant he was lying there, motionless.

Then, slowly, he began to slide downward. He was still sliding slowly when he went over the edge of the rock, and with both arms outstretched he seemed to merely float downward into the shadowy space beyond the edge of the rock.

Cringing from the sight and yet held in the grip of a terrible fascination, Ellen watched him. So great was the distance he had to fall to reach the green, velvety sea at the bottom of the valley that he seemed a long time falling.

He turned over and over, slowly, gracefully, like an aërial acrobat who is confident of the position of the net in which he is to land; and he sank so gently into the soft green of the valley that Ellen felt for a moment that he could not be injured.

She wanted to climb down instantly, to help him. But the sight had unnerved her and she sank to her knees, trembling. She knew better than to think he had not been hurt by the fall, for she had heard a faint crash at the end, as of branches breaking with his weight.

By the time she reached the floor of the valley the moon had gone down behind the high peaks, and a heavy darkness engulfed her. She climbed to the top of a huge rock and crouched there until daylight. Then she got down from the rock and went in search of Kellis.

He had sought to kill her, but she could not leave the vicinity without determining how badly he had been injured.

She spent two hours searching for him, and when she finally found him she shuddered and ran from the spot. He was lying flat on his back, his eyes open and staring.

ELLEN started across the valley, through the dense, wild growth of the virgin forest. There were no paths or trails to guide her. But she had watched where the moon had gone down and she knew that the Hour Glass should be in nearly the opposite direction.

When the sun came up she walked straight toward it, but she was so tired that her progress was slow, and she had to stop frequently to rest.

The trees did not grow so close together as she had supposed when she had viewed them from the higher country. It was apparent that no axes or fires had ever destroyed them.

Great, gnarled cottonwoods stretched their mighty branches upward, magnificent old giants that demanded space in which to thrive, their huge roots extending far in all directions and sucking the sustenance of the soil to the exclusion of all other growth. They were the monarchs, and even the brush that encroached upon them was bleached and stunted. The newcomers and up-

starts of the forest remained at a distance.

The sun was almost directly overhead when Ellen pushed her way out of a tangle of undergrowth and came upon a small stream of water. She was suffering from thirst and eagerly approached the stream, knelt at a convenient shallow and drank, using her cupped hands.

The water was clear and cool, and she felt refreshed when she got up to resume her search for the Hour Glass.

She crossed the stream and went on a little distance through the trees. And then suddenly she found herself crossing a faint trail that seemed to run north and south through the forest.

Exclaiming with delight, she paused and considered. She had been traveling eastward, she knew, but the Hour Glass was northeastward from the Diamond A and the Kellis cabin. If she followed this trail she might find an eastward trail that intersected it. Then she would come out of the forest somewhere near the Hour Glass. If no east trail intersected she could keep on following this one until it took her out of the basin.

But she had grown so tired that her feet seemed to have become leaden weights. She walked grimly on, though, until under a mighty cottonwood, she came upon a fallen giant of the forest which in toppling to its final resting place had crashed through the branches of the cottonwood. The deadfall was in a deep shade. Ellen stopped and found the silence soothing.

She decided she would rest for a few moments, and she climbed upon the fallen trunk and leaned her head wearily against a convenient branch.

She must have fallen asleep, for though she had heard no sound she suddenly became aware that a horse and rider were near her. They were not more than a dozen feet distant, and they must have been there for some minutes. For the horse was contentedly grazing upon a clump of bunch grass, while the rider was sitting crossways in the saddle, watching her.

The rider was Bill Hazen.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN THE NAVAHO BASIN.

ELLEN sat erect, and Hazen grinned at her. He was obviously enjoying her astonishment.

Ellen's first sensation was one of relief, for Hazen was sheriff of the county, representing authority and stability and, to her, safety. In a little while now she would be upon the right trail. Perhaps Hazen would even take her to the Hour Glass, permitting her to ride behind him.

She entertained such thoughts until, expressing her delight at his appearance, she smiled at him. Hazen's answering smile was not that of a public official intent upon performing a service for a woman in distress. It was a smile which expressed cunning and passion.

Ellen was frightened. She glanced about and observed that she and Hazen were alone. And now she remembered that Hazen was Jeff's enemy. In her delight over seeing him she had almost forgotten.

Hazen slid out of the saddle and walked close to her. He stood, watching her, his gaze roving over her from head to foot, noting her torn and dusty garments.

"Where's your horse?" he asked.

"I left him at Jim Kellis's cabin," she answered, truthfully.

"What did you leave him there for? Decided you like walkin' better?"

She knew she did not dare tell him the truth, so she lied.

"I was at the Kellis cabin to see Mrs. Kellis," she said. "Father wanted her to do some work at the Hour Glass. I took a walk through the forest while waiting for her and got lost. I fell and when I got up I had lost my sense of direction. Then I found

this trail and thought it might lead to the Hour Glass. It does, doesn't it?"

"Not to-day. This trail leads north."

"Will you please put me on the right trail? You don't need to bother much, I can walk. And I am in a hurry; will you show me the trail?"

He smiled at her, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

"You're too pretty to ride alone, Mrs. Hale. I'm goin' to invite you to ride with me."

"Thank you. Then you are going to the Hour Glass!"

"You're gettin' things all wrong," he said. "I'm not goin' to the Hour Glass. I'm goin' to keep right on, goin' through the Navaho Basin. It 'll take four or five days of ridin'; traveling double it will take longer. It's a lonesome ride an' company will be acceptable."

"Father will reward you," she said, deliberately ignoring the significance of his words.

"He won't reward me," he grinned, and took a step toward her, holding out his arms. "Come on," he said, "I'll help you mount."

She got up and ran swiftly along the trunk of the tree. He followed, running beside her on the ground, leaping over the dead branches in his path, crashing through the smaller ones. He was grinning confidently, knowing that in the end he would catch her.

When she had gone as far as she could she leaped off the tree, fought her way furiously through some impeding dead branches and ran southward over the trail she had found. She did not look around, but she heard Hazen coming after her, laughing at her effort to escape him.

She was too tired to run fast or far. Desperation had supplied her with strength for a few minutes, but before she had gone far she felt her muscles begin to lag. She ran on, though, until she could go no farther. Then she ran behind a tree, hoping to hide from Hazen.

But Hazen saw her and leaped toward her. One of his clutching hands gripped her shoulder. She jerked away, and the cloth ripped. Terrorized, she screamed.

THEN she heard a flurry of hoof beats, and a voice:

"Why, it's Hazen! An' Jeff Hale's wife!"

She turned and saw two riders. They had evidently reached the spot over the south trail, for their horses were facing north. They were not a dozen feet distant. One was grinning felinely at Hazen over the barrel of a heavy revolver; the second rider was staring at Ellen.

"Playin' tag with the lady, Hazen?" said the rider who was holding the gun. "Gettin' rough, too, tryin' to tear her waist off. Thought you'd be halfway out of the basin by this time."

Hazen did not answer, but stood staring downward, his eyes sullen

"Lift his gun, Jess!" snapped the first rider.

The man called Jess slipped out of the saddle and deftly drew Hazen's gun from its holster. He ran an experienced hand over Hazen's clothing in search of other weapons. Finding none, he grinned at his companion.

"He's clean, Dell," he said.

"Turn around!" Dell ordered. Hazen meekly obeyed, and Dell looked at Ellen.

"Ma'am," he said respectfully, "we're friends of Jeff Hale. Last night Jeff visited our shack, bringin' this jasper with him. Mebbe you know him: he's Bill Hazen. He was sheriff, but he ain't any more. We understood he was headin' north as fast as he could travel, but it seems he didn't.

"We are headin' north, too, figurin' to leave the country, but we wasn't hurryin' none, an' we find Hazen ain't far ahead of us. In fact, we find him entertainin' Jeff Hale's wife. We know

that whatever's been done has been done by Hazen, but we'd like to know what it is."

Ellen told him, including her experience with Kellis. At the end the riders exchanged glances, then both looked at Hazen, who seemed to cringe.

"That's it, eh?" said Dell. "This guy is playin' Romeo an' Little Red Ridin' Hood. Thinks he's a wolf with women, eh?" He smiled broadly at Ellen. "Right now you're wantin' to go some place, eh?" he added.

"To Jim Kellis's cabin," said Ellen. "My horse is there, you see."

"Sure," said Dell. "That's easy. Jess," he added, "you just ketch Hazen's horse, will you?"

Jess jumped his horse forward. They saw him ride beside Hazen's animal, seize the dragging rein and come toward them. When Jess came up Dell dismounted and motioned for Ellen to come to him.

"You'll ride my horse, ma'am," he said. "I'll take Hazen's. The trail is plain. You ride this trail for about two miles. Then you hit another, crossin' it; turn to your right an' keep goin'. After awhile you strike the big trail runnin' from the Hour Glass to Randall. It runs right past Kellis's place."

DELL helped Ellen mount. After she was in the saddle she looked straight at Dell.

"What are you going to do with Mr. Hazen?" she asked.

"Why, Hazen is goin' to continue his trip, ma'am."

"With you?"

"We're figurin' on goin' part way with him, ma'am. So we'll be sure he's goin' where he's goin'."

"Oh," she said, "I was wondering. You see, it is not pleasant to be in this forest without a horse."

"It ain't, ma'am, for a fact."

"And—and—I think Hazen didn't mean anything, after all. He was merely foolish."

"Yes," said Dell, "foolish."

"Sure," added Jess. "Foolish."

Both men laughed. But there was no mirth in their laughter and Ellen glanced at them, puzzled. They stood, waiting for her to be off; and yet they seemed in no hurry, did not seem to be eager to see her go.

"Well," she said, "I thank you."

"Shucks," answered Dell.

"You'll remember about the trail," said Jess. "Turn to the right."

"Tell Jeff there'll be no mistake about it this time," said Dell. He flashed a strange smile at her. "He'll know what that means," he added.

His eyes were enigmatic. His gaze dropped; he seemed to become suddenly interested in a hummock at his feet. Jess had turned his back to her; his arms were folded, and he too was staring downward.

"Well, good-by," said Ellen, "and I thank you again."

She sent Dell's horse along the trail. She was strangely perturbed, and when she had ridden perhaps half a mile she turned in the saddle and looked back. The men were standing where she had left them. But now they were facing her, watching her.

She rode on, realizing that she must have slept long on the tree trunk, for the sun had gone down over the rim of the basin, and the wonderful pageant of the afterglow was visible. The strong, soft colors tinted the treetops and sent long bright shafts of varicolored light through the aisles of the forest. Dominating the sky was an effulgent flood of orange and gold.

Slowly as she rode, the colors faded to slate and purple and tones of gray. Then suddenly the light dimmed and the forest darkened. A solemn hush descended. Faintly to her in the dead and heavy silence came the sound of a shot. It reverberated in slowly diminishing waves until it ceased altogether and the heavy silence reigned again.

Ellen shuddered and rode on. She

reached the cross trail, turned to her right and went on into the deepening darkness. When, an hour or so later, she came to the broad trail running from the Hour Glass, she recognized it. And now, no longer in doubt as to her whereabouts, she rode swiftly.

Tired as she was, she intended to ride to Lazette, to deposit the certificate in the Land Office. There must be no delay about that. But first she would stop at the Kellis cabin for food, for she was famished.

SHE rode fast along the wide trail, for she was familiar with it, and when, at last, she saw a light shining through the trees ahead she rode more slowly, knowing that she would find Mrs. Kellis at home. She would have to tell Mrs. Kellis what had happened to her husband. She dreaded to witness the woman's grief, but she must tell.

But when she reached the front door of the cabin, after dismounting from the horse and tying the animal to a tree at the edge of the clearing, she saw no one inside. An oil lamp burned on the table in the center of the room, and as Ellen stepped inside her gaze went to a piece of paper on the table near the lamp. An empty cup had been placed on the paper to keep it from being blown away by the breeze that swept through the house. Curiously, Ellen bent forward and read:

> I am tired to live like thees. I see you throw knife at Ellen Balinger. You will keel her. Whisky make you crazy. For long time I theenk I don't love you. Now I know. Some day you go crazy and keel me and babby. I go way.

There was no name signed in the note, but Ellen knew the writer had been Mrs. Kellis. The poor woman's romance had been shattered.

Ellen stood for a long time leaning on the edge of the table looking down at the note. When she finally stood erect again she had decided to ride on to Lazette. She could not endure staying alone in the cabin; she preferred to be out under the stars to sitting here, brooding over what had happened. For she kept seeing Kellis lying at the base of the great slope; she kept hearing the faint report of the pistol in the forest.

She got a drink of water from a pail that stood on a shelf near the stove, and paused for an instant in front of a mirror on the wall. Then she walked to the front door and gazed out.

The moon had come up while she had been in the cabin. She must have been inside longer than she had thought, for the moon was high. It was bright, too, as bright as it had been last night while she had been running through the forest.

Standing in the doorway, she heard a horse coming, running fast. An instant later there was a smother of dust at the edge of the clearing. She saw a rider throw himself off his horse and come running toward her. He leaped upon the porch, and the light from the lamp inside shone full upon him.

Ellen stepped back into the room, slowly retreating until the table was between her and the rider. For the rider was Wade Dallman. He was trembling, and there was a wild glare in his eyes. But he was amazed to find her in the cabin, for he stood in the doorway and shouted:

"You? You? Damn you, what are you doing here?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AMBUSH.

LIKE Kellis, Dallman seemed to have lost his reason. His face was pallid, his eyes were blazing with a light that she had never seen in the eyes of a sane man. His muscles were tensed. He stood in the doorway with his legs spread far apart, his arms hanging at his side, his hands clenched, the fingers working and straining as though he was striving to drive the

nails into the flesh of the palms. His shoulders were hunched forward, his chin was thrust out, his mouth was open in a terrible grimace.

Ellen, however, knew Dallman was not insane. He was merely in the grip of a mighty emotion. Fear!

That was it. Dallman was deathly afraid of something. What that something was Ellen had no means of discovering, and yet she could read fear in his eyes. There was rage in them, also, and cunning, but fear was the dominant emotion.

He did not wait for Ellen to answer his question, but asked another:

"Where's Kellis?"

"Kellis isn't here."

Dallman leaped into the room. He ran from corner to corner, searching, throwing things aside, tumbling furniture out of his way. He was searching for something. He went to the bed and ripped off the quilts.

Raging, he pulled off the mattress and kicked it violently aside. He peered under the bed; into and behind the old dresser that stood against a wall. He ran, breathing heavily, to the stove and looked behind it. His gaze swept the walls, the floor. From a point near the stove he glared at Ellen.

"Where's Kellis's rifle?"

"I didn't know Kellis had a rifle."

Dallman's face blotched. He seemed to swell with rage.

"Damn that slut!" he shouted. "She's taken it!"

He stared at Ellen with the furtive, shifting gaze of a desperately harried animal. She could tell that he was involving her in some cruel, desperate scheme. In the heavy silence that had come with the cessation of his activity, Ellen could hear only his shrill breathing. Suddenly even that sound ceased. Dallman was holding his breath.

His head was cocked to one side, to his right, and he appeared to be listening for an expected sound. As Dallman's head was inclined to his right, Ellen divined that he expected sound to come from that quarter, the direction from which Dallman himself had come.

Ellen also listened, and it seemed to her that she could hear a faint drumming, as of a horse running. She looked at Dallman and saw that his face had grown pallid again.

He leaped at her, gripped her arms, held her and shook her savagely.

"Listen, you!" he said, his face close to hers. "You're goin' to die damn quick if you don't do what I tell you! Understand? I'll blow hell out of you!

"Jeff Hale is comin'. He's after me—chased me from town! He's close. If I could have found a rifle I would shoot him when he comes over that ridge out there. But I'm no match for him with a six-shooter. My horse is out there in the clearing. He's hid an' Jeff won't see him. I'm slipping out the rear door.

"You stand in the front door so Jeff can see you, an' bring him into the shack that way. Keep him inside until I get away. If he asks if you've seen me, tell him you haven't. I'm goin' to hang outside by a window and if you don't come through I'll blow you apart if it's the last thing I do!" He shook her again, so hard that she reeled dizzily. "You hear me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You'll do as I tell you?"

She nodded.

And now, unmistakably, came to them the rapid drumming of hoofs on the trail.

DALLMAN leaned over the table and blew out the light. He seized Ellen's arm from behind and shoved her to the front door, out a little distance upon the porch, where the light from the moon shone directly upon her. She heard Dallman's step in the room behind her, and waited expectantly to hear him step down from the rear doorway.

She would have heard him if he had done so, for on the ground just outside

the rear door was a wide wooden platform with loose boards covering its top, and these would creak and clatter with his weight.

She heard no such sound, and so she knew that Dallman was still in the room behind her. His voice came again.

"I'm stayin' here for a minute or two," he said. "If you don't come through I'll bore you right through the back!"

"All right," said Ellen, calmly.

She knew now that Dallman intended to kill Jeff. She had known it from the instant he had told her that Jeff was coming. For if he wished merely to escape he would have had time to disappear into the Navaho basin. He could have kept right on going, and by this time he would have had a mile or so of dense forest between himself and Jeff.

His search for the rifle had betrayed his intentions. Ellen knew that he had ridden here purposely, expecting to find Kellis, expecting to use the man's rifle. He had told her how easy it would be to shoot Jeff as he came over the ridge near the edge of the clearing.

Dallman did not intend to leave the cabin. He was now standing inside, probably near the rear doorway, in the darkness. The shack faced south, so that the cleared space in both front and rear received the full light of the moon.

Concealed in the semidarkness of the cabin, Dallman could shoot down any one who entered the front or rear door, which, of course, was just what Dallman intended to do.

Ellen heard the hoof beats grow clearer. She had ridden the trail several times, and knew that Jeff was now coming across a sand level just beyond the base of the ridge that Dallman had referred to. Presently he would burst into view on the crest of the ridge.

As she waited it seemed to hear that her brain had ceased functioning, and that her body was paralyzed. She could not think, and her muscles refused to do anything except to hold her body rigid. She wanted to shout to Jeff, to tell him of the danger that threatened him, to tell him to go back, to stay away. She knew that if she did that Dallman would kill her, but she would have been willing to die, to save Jeff.

And then there was a leaping silhouette on the crest of the ridge, a smother of dust on the near slope, and Jeff appeared at the edge of the clearing.

Jeff seemed to see her instantly, for he stopped and stared at her. The moonlight was so clear that she could see the expression of amazement on his face; could observe how he stood rigid, looking at her. She knew that she was equally visible to him.

JEFF had descended the slope of the ridge a little to the west of the doorway, so that if Dallman were watching from a position near the rear door he could not have seen Jeff when he stopped to stare at Ellen. And although Ellen was standing just outside the door, she was a little west of its center, so that her right arm and shoulder could not be seen by Dallman, standing inside the cabin near the rear door.

Ellen's lips now formed words, but she was powerless to utter them. And Jeff, his amazement changing to eagerness and delight, was walking toward her.

"Ellen!" he said.

"Oh, Jeff!" Ellen found herself saying, and wondered if the voice was her own.

And then, as if the sound had broken the paralysis which had gripped her, she quickly pressed the index finger of her right hand to her lips and as quickly removed it and motioned to Jeff to go around the west side of the cabin to the rear door.

Jeff paused again. Then, apparently interpreting the motion, he gazed keenly at her for an instant, and obeyed her.

Ellen stood rigid, motionless. She did not know for certain whether Jeff had understood her, but she was aware that he was always mentally alert, and he must know, of course, that her signals to him had been significant of the unusual. Also, he was pursuing Dallman, and she felt that it would be his conviction that Dallman was in the cabin, or in the rear of it. She hadn't been able to warn him in words, but she had cautioned him in pantomime, and now she must trust to his wisdom.

But there was a way in which she could create an illusion in Dallman's mind; a trick by which she could keep his attention centered upon the front doorway while Jeff cautiously approached the rear door. She waited an instant and then she spoke in a low tone, as if Jeff were standing near her.

"Why, Jeff!" she said. "How did you happen to come here to-night?" And then, quickly, pretending that she was not giving Jeff an opportunity to answer her, she added:

"You didn't expect to see me here, did you? Now don't pretend that you did! No; don't come in that way! The side, Jeff! The side, dear! There's a beam there! Don't you see it? You're so tall you'd be sure to bump your head on it!

"Now be careful not to fall over that bench! Now stand there for a minute until I look at you. I haven't seen you for a week, you know, and I want to—"

She paused, unable to say more. The strange paralysis was creeping upon her again, bringing incoherence, a queer apathy. It seemed to her that even her breathing stopped. There was a long interval of silence so deep that it seemed to her that she was standing alone in a place where all sound had ceased. An age. An interminable period. A monstrous and horrible hush.

Then came a hoarse and profane exclamation, a sudden scuffling as of a man in heavy boots swiftly turning. Then two thunderous reports and the sound of a heavy body falling.

She could not look; she dared not, had neither the strength nor the courage. She covered her eyes with her hands and stood there, waiting.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HOME.

JEFF had been amazed to see Ellen standing in the moonlight just outside the door of the cabin. He could not explain her presence in the vicinity, but her warning signal he interpreted correctly.

He knew Dallman was in the cabin, for he had not been far behind the man in the race from town; he had seen him heading toward this spot, and he had observed the man's horse standing in the timber near the edge of the clearing. He suspected that Dallman was inside the cabin, waiting for him, expecting him to rush through the front doorway and be killed.

A new rage surged through him at sight of Ellen's torn garments and disheveled hair. It was down on her shoulders, a glistening, filmy, negligent cascade. Her white face shone through it, and he saw that her lips were forming words that she could not utter. She was covered with dust, and a wordless wrath rose in him as he thought of her helplessness.

He moved cautiously toward the rear of the cabin. There was no window on that side, and he knew Dallman could not see him. Also, he heard Ellen talking, speaking his name, and he was aware that she was acting, trying to create in Dallman's mind the impression that Jeff was moving toward her.

Her voice became fainter as he

reached and turned the rear corner of the cabin. When he got to the rear door and peered stealthily inside, he could hear her voice more clearly. And then he saw Dallman.

The land shark, unable to control his impatience, had stepped to the center of the room, where he stood, bent forward, waiting and listening. He had been deceived by Ellen's trick, for his gun was out, held rigidly at his side as he waited for his enemy to step into the doorway. The moonlight, entering the east window of the cabin, shone full upon him. In his impatience he had emerged from the sheltering shadows.

And now it seemed he was beginning to distrust Ellen. He could see her, even as Jeff could see her, standing just outside the door in the moonlight. But she was no longer talking. She was standing there, rigid as a statue, and her hands were covering her eyes.

Suspicious, Dallman stepped forward, far enough to peer out of the front doorway. Seeming to realize that he had been tricked, he cursed, turned.

Jeff shot him—once.

Dallman's gun went off, the bullet plowing into the cabin floor in front of him. Dallman went down slowly, his knees striking the floor first. His hands went out in front of him, and for a few minutes he rested there on his hands and knees, his head drooping. Then he fell, face downward, his arms doubling under him, his legs slowly straightening.

Jeff walked to the man and stood for a time looking down at him. Dallman was still.

Jeff left Dallman and stepped softly to the door, where he stood for an instant looking at Ellen, who still stood waiting, afraid to uncover her eyes and turn.

"I'm thanking you," said Jeff.

Ellen turned swiftly.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, and swayed toward him. Then she was in his arms, and he was holding her tightly.

"I didn't want to kill him," he said regretfully. "I've been fighting against it. I went into town, looking for him, and I would have killed him if I had found him there. He tried to shoot me when I wasn't expecting it. That stirred me. But chasing him here I got over it. I would have been satisfied if he had got out of the country. Then when I saw what he had done to you, I had to go through with it. I waited until he turned. He had his chance. He had his gun in his hand. I think he meant to kill both of us—"

She didn't tell him the truth, then—how it had been Kellis who had been responsible for her torn clothing and her bedraggled appearance. She just held tightly to him, knowing that something had happened to change his opinion of her, and that she had him, had him at last.

THEY rode, first, to the Diamond A.

Jeff's father and mother had not returned, and they had the house to themselves. But they lingered only long enough to permit Ellen to change her clothing, and then they set out for Lazette, to file the certificate that Ellen had found.

They met the elder Hales in Lazette and Jeff gave Adam the certificate to file.

"You was right all along, daughter," Adam told Ellen. "I knew it."

Ellen blushed.

"Mebbe some other folks didn't," added Adam. "But I reckon they do now." He looked at Jeff and patted him on a shoulder. "Shucks, boy," he said, "you knew it too, but you was harder to convince."

When they left the Hales their faces were serious.

Riding to the Diamond A, Ellen had related to Jeff the story of her experience with Kellis, and Jeff had sent a

man to Randall to tell Mart Blandin just where Kellis's body might be found.

"He'll find Dallman in the Kellis cabin," Jeff added, speaking to the messenger. "Tell Mart I'll come in if he wants to see me about the killing of Dallman."

Jeff knew, however, that Blandin would not ask him to "come in." For Blandin, as well as a number of other people in Randall, knew that the killing had been justifiable.

And now, riding eastward from Lazette, Ellen and Jeff finally came to a trail that was familiar to both. The trail led to the Hale cabin in the Navaho Basin, where the two had met for the first time. Ellen looked at Jeff when he turned into it, but said nothing.

They were still serious, and so they rode on, saying little, until late in the afternoon they halted their horses in front of the cabin and proceeded to dismount.

"We'll grub here," said Jeff. "I'll do the cooking, and you will compliment me as you did during that breakfast. We'll stay here until morning, and then we'll ride to the Hour Glass. There's a lot of things I've got to say to your dad."

The meal was finished after awhile, and darkness had come when they went out upon the veranda and sat upon its edge, close together. The night song of the forest insects had begun, but their voices made the only sound that disturbed the solemnity of the night.

"How did you discover that Dallman abducted me?" asked Ellen.

"Mart Blandin told me. Dallman had boasted about it to Hazen. I was a fool to doubt you," he added. "But what I will never be able to understand is how you could mistake Dallman's voice for mine."

"I didn't," she said, drooping her gaze from his.

"Didn't? But you said—you were positive that—"

"I lied, Jeff. I knew it was not you. But Jeff, when I saw you standing before me in the moonlight, when you came in to cut the ropes that bound my hands, I—I wanted you. And I lied to get you. And I would lie ten thousand times to keep you!"

She snuggled into the arms that suddenly encircled her.

"And Jeff," she said, "I never loved Jim Kellis. I believe I only recognized his weakness and was sorry for him. I am still sorry."

"I know it," said Jeff. "I get older and wiser."

"And less and less a wild man. Oh, Jeff, we are going to be so happy!"

"Sure."

"But Sadie Nokes—"

"Shucks. Sadie Nokes is Mart Blandin's girl; they're going to be married next month. Mart used to send word to me through her."

"But the way she looked at me!"

"She was suspicious, thought you were after the land."

They were silent after that, listening to the voice of the great virgin wilderness that encompassed them. They were facing happiness, and the future was bright and alluring. And yet in the voice of the wilderness Ellen found a note of sadness, for she kept seeing Jess and Dell and Hazen as they had stood in the fastness of the basin, watching her as she rode away upon one of the outlaws' horses.

"Tell Jeff there'll be no mistake this time," one of the outlaws had said to her.

She wondered about the words as she wondered about the faint report of the pistol, which had reached her ears as she had been riding away. It seemed she could hear it now—the sound gradually diminishing until it died away altogether. But that, she knew, was life. Sadness in happiness. One always lurking near the other.

THE END

Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

RACING BLOOD

A WELCOME addition to our corps of sport story writers is Robert A. Slocum, who contributes to this issue "Racing Blood." In response to our invitation to introduce himself, he writes:

I was born in Virginia, and am a little past thirty years of age. Prior to the war I was busily engaged in acquiring an education, the greater part of which didn't take. When the war came along I enlisted and served here and overseas with a machine gun outfit.

After the armistice was signed and I was sent home, I started on an extended tour of the world, doing anything and everything I could find to do when the funds got low. I've been everything in the last ten years, from a reporter on a sports weekly in Shanghai, China, to a water tender on an oil tanker and an instructor of ladies' reducing classes in a dancing school here in the States. I bluffed my way into that job, and got away with it because the ladies didn't know any more about it than I did. (Poor souls.)

Now I am back in the army. I reënlisted in July, letting the government feed me while I try to convince various editors that I can write readable short stories.

The only reason I can give for "Racing Blood" is a natural love for thoroughbreds, and a desire to put it into words that other people would like to read.

EUGENE CUNNINGHAM is another newcomer who has made himself right at home with the old-timers, as witness:

Duncannon, Pa.

I have been reading ARGOSY for at least twelve years and sure am pleased. In fact, I can hardly wait until I get it each week. I say leave it as it is and every one will be more satisfied.

Eugene Cunningham has certainly pleased me with his stories, "Lord of Liarsburg" and "The Redhead." "A Brand New World" was great. Let's have some more. Also I am watching every issue for a *Mme. Storey* tale. I sure do enjoy them. I like all the stories and read every issue from cover to cover.

"The Apache Devil" was a *wow* of a story. I guess I could fill a book telling of the stories I liked.

I have noticed very little comment on the short stories. They are all wonderful and the authors certainly should be complimented on the good work, and you on your choice of fine stories. BOB LEHMAN.

J. ALLAN DUNN made many ARGOSY-reading friends with his recent serial, "The Pagan Ruby." They will be glad to know that Mr. Dunn wants to become an ARGOSY regular. We have several novelettes and a new serial by him now on the schedule.

Santa Barbara, Calif.

I will again write and compliment you on your wonderful magazine.

It gets more thrilling every week. Especially the serial, "The Pagan Ruby." It was very, very good.

If you would put some stories about California in the ARGOSY it would be keen. But it wouldn't make the magazine any better, because it couldn't be made any more interesting than it is now. MRS. LUCILLE BRADEN.

ALWAYS we are glad to hear from the ladies:

Los Angeles, Calif.

I have only read your ARGOSY for about a year, but my husband has read it for almost ten years, or ever since he was old enough to understand it. We think "A Brand New World," by Ray Cummings, is wonderful! In fact, it is so good I dreamed about it one night. We like "impossible" stories. George F. Worts is my favorite author; his latest, "The Crime Circus," was so good I could hardly wait for the next issue. I was wild about "The Scandal on Kitikat Key" and "The Duchess and the Fight Racket" was a scream. "A Friend of M. Smith" was very clever. The August 18 number was the best of all, I think; every story in it was a *wow!*

I will tell you how much we enjoy ARGOSY. Last spring we were in the mountains of New Mexico and it was Thursday, and we didn't have the ARGOSY, so we drove through rain on mountain roads for forty miles, only to find that they did not carry it there. Imagine our disappointment. MRS. R. E. THORPE.

Hayward, Calif.

I read the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY when they were separate editions.

Burroughs, MacIsaac, Merritt, Worts, Cummings, Franklin, and many others too numerous to mention, are my favorites. *Especially Burroughs.*

I, just like Merrill G. Kenyon, of Elmira, New York, wish that those who whine about their dislikes of the Western stories, would go take a jump in the lake.

My hubby is, or was, a Wyoming cow-puncher, and when he reads a Western story will stop and tell me of different landscapes, famous men, and so on.

Last, but not least, I want to say to you, Mr. Editor: Never mind the foolish cranks who don't like this and that. There are thousands more coming who prefer the stories of ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY to some trash that I see people buying. MRS. A. E. VEST.

ARGOSY is quite a traveler; here comes word of its visits to far-off South Africa:

Johannesburg, South Africa.

This is the first time that I am writing to your magazine, so I want to show you my appreciation of same.

I am only sorry to say that I haven't lived long enough to have read it from the start.

I have seen magazines with more stories in them, but my choice between quality and quantity, will always be "quality."

The ARGOSY provides really first-class stories. I don't see what so many of your readers are complaining about. *All* the stories can't *always* be interesting to *every one*. As for myself, I am quite satisfied with the ARGOSY as it is. There is only one part about the ARGOSY that I don't like; it doesn't come often enough.

The best story in the August 11 edition is "The Real Inside on Dirt." I'd like to congratulate Mr. John Wilstach on that yarn. Nothing boring about it. Absolutely true to life

I have quite a struggle sometimes to stop my dad from pinching the ARGOSY before I've read it. PAUL J. JAEGER.

JUST another cheer for "Rain Magic":

Burbank, Calif.

"Rain Magic" is the story I like best of all, bar none.

Mr. E. S. Gardner now rates for more room in our little book. LEROY PRICE.

"SMART woman, eh?" says this reader of the wife who presents him with an ARGOSY subscription each Christmas. ARGOSY subscriptions *do* make mighty acceptable Christmas gifts:

Washington, D. C.

In the issue of Nov. 10, just received, a Mrs. J. M. Sanchez suggests the eliminating of the Argonotes. She thinks it a waste of paper, and, with the perversity of her sex, promptly uses up a half column or so with her letter; however, I think you will find that a great howl would be raised if you did discontinue this feature. I remember not so long ago I contemplated canceling my subscription just because it was left out for a few issues. Better leave well enough alone.

I note you remark in Argonotes that the "impossible" fan is always clamoring for more. More power to him; let's have more; say run one serial of this type in every issue, that is, have an impossible or different story running continuously. When one ends, start another. You run four serials, don't you think we are entitled to that?

As for my favorite authors, they are all good, especially Burroughs, Cummings, La-Master, Merritt, Coe, MacIsaac, and in his class, Edgar Franklin cannot be beaten.

I have been a reader of ARGOSY for years and also read the *All-Story* before the two were combined. For the past three years I have been receiving my copy *via* mail; my wife always gives me a year's subscription for a Christmas present. Smart woman, eh?

In my opinion "The Crime Circus" and "The Scandal on Kitikat Key" were the two best stories I have read in many a day.

Yours in favor of bigger and better different stories, and the continuance of Argonotes.

FRANCIS A. DICKINSON.

SOME time ago we published a short article about a curious metal plate discovered by well diggers five hundred and forty-two feet beneath the surface in Broadwater, Nebraska. On one side was the inscription, "Our Darling," on the other the date, "1012." Where did it come from?

Mr. Nelson, who is an engineer, offers some explanations for the mystery:

Denver, Colo.

Your article, "A Mystery From the Depths," interests me.

Nature gives us many strange, as well as beautiful things underground. I have no idea what sort or kind of metal this was. In mine surveys, hundreds, also thousands, of feet deep stations are tagged with metal plates or disks, numbered on one side. If it is by an *order of the court* it is so stamped on the reverse. Rich ore bodies underground are also named, and at times tagged, like the "Jewelry Shop" Stope, in the famous Stratton's Independence Mine at Cripple Creek, Colo. Another, on the thousand-foot level of the Portland, marked "Our Anne." And again, the "Lost Annie." These tags or plates are usually copper, sometimes lead or zinc.

We have perhaps as many streams underground as on the surface. Not so large, yet strong, heavy flowing bodies of water. One I can direct you to. I listened to its tremendous roaring volume through a crevice. It was several hundred feet below me in lime formation, which trembled as do the walls of Niagara. Of course I was inclosed in a cavern three miles from its entrance, so my ears would register greater than on surface.

Such streams would carry a metal plate miles along its course to where it found exit again at some earth stratum of lower altitude. Or the plate may lodge and rest underground centuries; or wear its size down to a globule if it is of soft metal.

The plate marked "1012" and "Our Darling" may have been washed from a burial ground, by some violent flood, which tossed it into some sink hole to an underground stream miles and miles away. THOS. P. NELSON.

HERE is a reader who is seeking some back issues of *Cavalier*. Perhaps some one can help him out. If so, write direct to him—not to us.

New York, N. Y.

I would like to get in touch with some reader of ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY who has the back numbers of the *Cavalier Weekly*. The dates are January 4, 11, 18, 25; February 1, 8; June 14, 21. All in 1913. Also *Allstory-Cavalier* Nov. 14, 21, 28, 1914. I have every issue from 1910 up except the dates mentioned. But I have been a reader only since 1922, and have been picking up the back numbers ever since.

My favorite writers are Edgar Rice Burroughs, Garret Smith, Ray Cummings, A. Merritt, and Fred MacIsaac, all impossible story writers.

Have just finished reading "Thirty Years Late," and it is one of your best stories. Also like "The Golden Burden," "World Brigands," and "Brand New World."

Here's for *more* impossible stories.

PAUL VENNICK,
628 East Fifth Street.

WHAT do I get out of ARGOSY? Mr. Price asks himself the question—and answers it in great shape:

Pueblo, Colo.

Not so very long ago a close friend of mine spoke to me thusly: "I don't see what you get out of those old magazines! You know darned well it isn't true."

Now being a serious-minded idiot, though harmless, I decided to see, just for my own satisfaction, just what benefit I gained from "the old magazines," which, needless to say, were your three publications, ARGOSY, *Munsey*, and *Detective Fiction Weekly*.

The ARGOSY-ALLSTORY tops the three, however, so I won't enumerate any of the merits of the other two.

But just what do I get out of the ARGOSY? First, about two and a half times as much reading matter as I would get for the same price in any other magazine. Second, a far higher grade of fiction than most magazines carry. And last—and best, variety!

Whether it be in the cold political world of George F. Worts, in the world of business with Fred MacIsaac, in the domestic—and laughable—sphere where Edgar Franklin holds sway, in the sport world with John Holden, in the realm of history with Joseph Ivers Lawrence, in the world of crookdom with the inimitable John Wilstach, in the world of romance done so well by Richard Barry, in the Western worlds with Kenneth Perkins, Charles F. Coe, George M. Johnson, Charles Alden Seltzer, Clay Bridger, and Donald Bayne Hobart, in Florida *via* Loring Brent, in the realm of mystery with A. Merritt and in the world of the future with Ray Cummings and Will McMorrow.

Just a few more lines concerning the stories themselves:

"The Crime Circus" was superb, but don't let *Gillian Haseltine* become engulfed by marriage. I think George F. Worts is tired of *"Gil"* and is trying to put him on the shelf.

I fully believe "The Apache Devil" was better than its predecessor, "The War Chief." Whether or no, they were both splendid.

I enjoyed so much "The Scandal on Kitikat Key" that I read it three times over. The dialogue kept me chuckling and the situations were just as funny.

I see where some of your readers don't like Edgar Franklin. They needn't kick—we only get one of his about every three months. He's good—and don't let them convince you to the contrary.

"Heartbreak Trail," "Drums of Peace," "The Golden Traitor," "The Masked Barmaid," "Hawaiian Heels," and others, too numerous to mention are splendid.

'Ray for the ARGOSY!

Yours for life,
ROBERT PRICE.

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*_____

12-23

Looking Ahead!

The most unusual story Argosy has published in years! A broad statement—but undoubtedly true of the opening story in the

ISSUE OF DECEMBER 29th

It is

The Phantom in the Rainbow

by SLATER LAMASTER

Weird and uncanny adventure, the fascinating control of great wealth, mystery, danger, a great love, horror, deadly peril—and always a vague groping to understand what it is all about: all these you will find in this new serial by the author of "Luckett of the Moon."

The Hawk of Painted Rocks

A Complete Novelette

by WILLIAM MERRIAM ROUSE

will be another feature of this issue. A tale of the Adirondack Mountains country immediately after the Mexican War—with another of Mr. Rouse's two-fisted heroes with a real battle on his hands.

As this is the Christmas Number there will be three excellent Christmas short stories.

ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

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