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ALL-STORY WEEKLY

JULY 23

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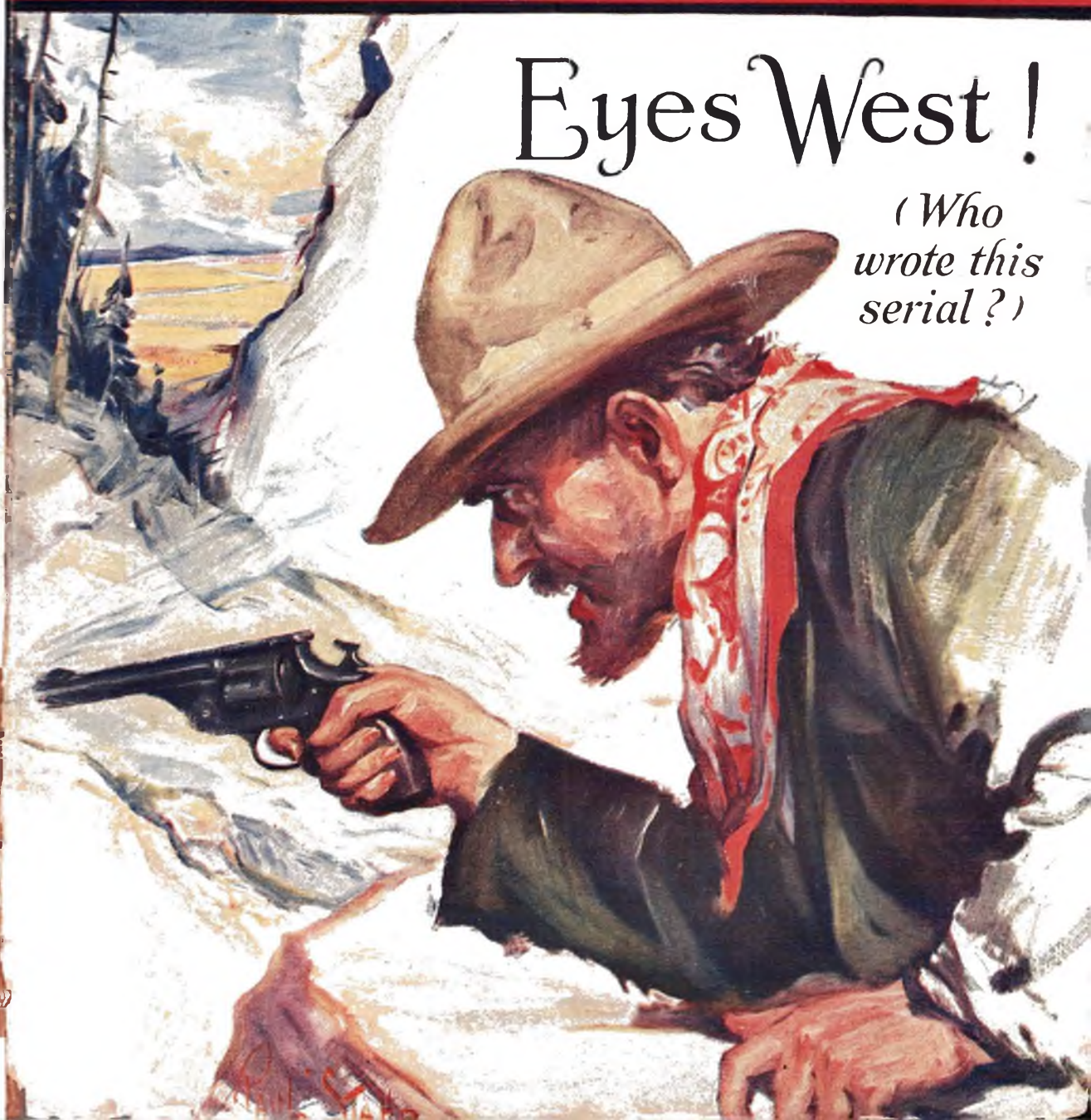

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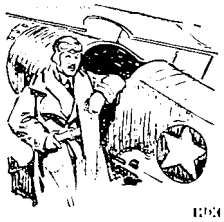

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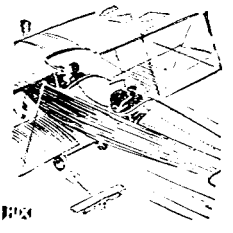

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 187 | CONTENTS FOR JULY 23, 1927 | NUMBER 6

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOLUME 187 SATURDAY, JULY 23, 1927 NUMBER 6

Eyes West!

EDITOR'S NOTE.—*This story is by one of our favorite writers. The names of the readers who successfully guess who it is will be printed in the Reader's Viewpoint, although the author's identity will remain unrevealed.*

CHAPTER I.

IN THE STARLIGHT.

"ALL right, I'll make you up in five minutes so you'll pass," sighed Rupert Bagueville, with a sort of fretful resignation, glancing at the presentment of his own handsome countenance in the mirror, then scanning the face of his visitor a little doubtfully. "But I don't see why I should be bothered with such business.

"Oatman ought to know better than to send you here to me, when I have so little time, and he knows that I usually take a nap right after luncheon. And he knows that I can't take a nap if I get irritated or nervous, and then I'm no good for the rest of the day. Three o'clock—he wants me for that pampas scene, and at this rate I won't get dressed before five."

The visitor to the star's dressing room was young Ray Haskins, lately arrived from Texas, and suddenly discovered and pulled out of a mob scene to have the honor of doubling with the distinguished actor of romantic rôles. He was evidently under twenty-five, but he carried himself with some assurance, and now he regarded Rupert Bagueville quizzically.

"Too dog-gone bad about your beauty

sleep!" he exclaimed. "But I had to obey orders. Mr. Oatman, he told me to come in here and have you fix me up so's you'd be satisfied yourself, and I came. I guess Oatman was kind o' scared you wouldn't like it—his putting me in to do the riding and the rough stuff for you."

"That's all right," said the star a little more kindly, "but I can't say I see any remarkable resemblance, Haskins. Is that your name? You're not as dark as I am, and you're thinner; you're a regular kid, too—just about old enough to vote, eh? We've both got pretty regular features, and the height is about the same; that's all I can see. I raised this fancy mustache just for this South American piece, and now I'll have to show you how to stick one on your face that 'll look something like it."

"I'm not hit so hard with the resemblance either, Mr. Bagueville," returned Haskins almost belligerently; "but it ain't worrying me a whole lot, if you want to know. Out where I come from—out in Texas—they don't set so much store by handsome guys. We got plenty o' pretty girls, I'll tell the world, but the fellers just aims to be he-men. If I was to raise a mustache like that, with them darnin'-needle ends to it, they'd run me across the border for a greaser—*pronto!*"

"You'll do," said the other curtly. "Don't get the idea that they want any close-ups of you. When *Ramirez* stabs *Don Guzman* and jumps through the window, I go after him. I run to my horse in the patio and prepare to mount, but then you'll take the horse and beat it across the pampas after *Ramirez*. When it comes to the fight with knives, on foot, I'll be back in the picture myself."

"Too bad you wouldn't learn to ride; then you could do it all!"

"I'm an actor, not an acrobat!" snapped Bagueville.

"I'm not claimin' to be either one o' them things, Mr. Bagueville. Who said anything about acrobats? You might think they expected me to do 'most anything, though, in this dog-gone outfit they put on me. These ain't a man's clothes, no-how!"

He surveyed his nether garments, the capacious, voluminous "divided skirts" of the rough rider of the South American plains, and wagged his head ruefully.

"If any o' the boys out in my country see my picture in the fillums dressed up thataway, 'twon't be safe to go home."

"You'll get used to them," laughed the star. "They're a whole lot more comfortable than some of those sole-leather chaps you Westerners wear. The Argentine gaucho is probably the best rough rider in the world unless it's the Russian Cossack."

Haskins laughed harshly, rather more amused than resentful.

"You've been reading bunk about that rough ridin' stuff," he said patiently. "Never been in Texas, I guess. There ain't no real ridin' anywhere else, and no hosses. I'd like to pick a real mean hoss for one o' them Cossack guys to ride. Huh!"

"I never stopped off in Texas," said Bagueville. "I know the West, though. I've done a lot of work in Hollywood, and been all over California, and I've seen Texas a number of times from the train."

The younger man laughed immoderately and with frank contempt.

"I suppose I know all about New York, seein' it from the subway!" he groaned. "You better look at a map, mister. You could ride on about five hundred trains, and get off and walk around some, and you wouldn't know nothing about Texas. Say, you might as well say you'd crossed the Atlantic Ocean on a steamer, and knew all about Europe, Asia, and Africa; there'd be just as much sense. And California! Huh! What's California got to do with the West?"

"Ask a Californian," suggested Bagueville; "but be sure you have a six-gun along if you speak in that tone of voice. California is the Golden West, if you want to know."

"More like brass!" sniffed Haskins. "Texas is the Golden West, with diamonds and rubies set all over it. Get me? Texas is God's own country, mister. You go and fetch all the human critters in the world—all the folks in Europe, Asia, and Africa,

and New York, and fetch along their hosses and cows and dogs, and put 'em all down in Texas, and no one would know anything had happened.

"They'd all be lost before night, and they couldn't even find one another. That is a right smart piece o' country, Texas! The rest o' the United States is just set around the edges o' Texas. I'm a-tellin' you something, brother!"

"Oh, it's big enough," murmured Bagueville sarcastically. "I remember that from my trips—looking out the car window for about two days at sand and cactus, with the tank towns about a hundred miles apart. There seemed to be two or three men in each one of those towns, too; station agent and a couple of citizens—and a buckboard with a pair of mangy ponies trying to pull it. Saw plenty of turkey buzzards, too; they fly around picking up the dead ones, I believe."

Ray Haskins's face was becoming dark red.

"If you're kidding me, all right! But you're not talkin' sense, mister. You must 'a' been takin' a nap when you went through San Antone, an' you haven't seen Houston an' Dallas an' Austin. For real live towns they make New York City look like a railroad junction. You better look up the population of Texas; we got enough people right there to go an' lick the whole o' Europe, an' we could mop up Asia an' Africa on the way home.

"We could 'a' won the World War all by ourselves, but they would not give us room. There weren't guns or uniforms in this country enough for all the fellers in Texas, I reckon, so we didn't get a square deal."

Mr. Julius Oatman came into the dressing room, followed by a dapper little man who glanced about with the unfamiliarity of a stranger.

"Mr. Bagueville, we're waiting on the set for you gentlemen," said Oatman suavely, but with an anxious look in his small, shrewd eyes.

"I'm not sure I'll come out this afternoon, Oatman," drawled the star. "I did not know I was expected to make up the faces of the rest of the company."

"Come on, Mr. Bagueville, be a sport!" wheedled Oatman. "I sent this young man in to see you because I thought you'd want to have him look as much like you as possible—not that any feller could begin to look as well as you do, Mr. Bagueville!"

Rupert Bagueville frowned slightly, obviously annoyed by the compliment, and glanced inquiringly at the stranger.

"This is Mr. Kernan," explained Oatman. "Shake hands with Mr. Bagueville, Mr. Kernan. Excuse the informality, Mr. Bagueville, but Mr. Kernan wants to see you on a little matter of business."

"He can make an appointment with my secretary," said the star curtly.

"It wouldn't take a minute, sir," pleaded the visitor. "I have a certified check here for ten thousand dollars, payable to your order."

"Doesn't interest me!" snapped the star.

"But it would be no trouble to you, Mr. Bagueville, so to speak. If you just sign a little two or three line statement that you smoke Harlequin cigarettes—"

"I don't!"

"You might smoke a couple, Mr. Bagueville; you'll find them very good indeed. I'd be willing to make it—er—twelve thousand if you'd let us use your picture in our advertisements.

"I have received twenty thousand for the use of my picture," said Bagueville coldly.

Mr. Kernan paled slightly.

"But could we say that you smoked Harlequins exclusively?"

"You could not! I don't intend to smoke them. When I do smoke, I use a pipe. Cigarettes are bad for the throat, and I have a contract to talk for the radio three times next month."

"Mr. Kernan is a friend o' mine," pleaded Oatman diplomatically. "Be nice to him; he's willing to talk business."

"How about it, Mr. Bagueville?" urged Kernan, who began to look worried and miserable. "We haven't got a million dollars to spend, but why couldn't you just say that you congratulate us on making a superfine cigarette—something like that. If we could use your picture along with a line

o' that sort, I'd be willing to make it—aw, twenty thousand dollars, if you insist."

"All right, twenty thousand; I never haggle," said the star brusquely. "I hate this sort of business, anyway, but I know that your Harlequin cigarettes are no worse than a lot of others. I suppose I can *congratulate* you. That's all now! Write out two or three lines and I will look at them some time next week. My secretary will give you an appointment."

"Will you and this young man be out to the set this afternoon?" Oatman inquired politely. "The others are all made up for it, waiting your pleasure."

"Give them my regrets," said the star ironically. "The young man can do as he likes, but I shall not bother with his make-up to-day, and I shall not be out myself. You shouldn't bring visitors in here without an appointment, Oatman; you've got me nervous, and I shall have to rest. Don't say anything more, please."

Oatman caught the astonished Mr. Kernan by the arm and hustled him out of the room, mumbling explanations and admonitions.

Ray Haskins, from Texas, was spellbound. He regarded Rupert Bagueville wonderingly. For him there had been nothing of reality in the astonishing scene.

"Well?" challenged the star, turning on him suddenly.

"So's your old man!" blurted the young Texan rashly.

"I beg your pardon!" cried Bagueville.

"You can have it," replied Haskins breezily. "I'm not askin' any favors of you, Mr. Bagueville. I came here because I was sent. I ain't so sure I want to be made up to look like a twenty-thousand-dollar face. First off, I want you to understand that I ain't afraid of anything in your class; I could lick you with both hands tied behind me, and make that face so's it wouldn't be worth two bits for movies or cigarette ads."

Bagueville's eyes flashed angrily for an instant, as he turned upon the young man, but suddenly his lip curled in an ironical smile.

"Texas is talking pretty loud!" he exclaimed. "But you're rather interesting, Haskins; you seem to have the same opinion of me that I have of myself."

CHAPTER II.

DOWN THE LADDER.

"BACK again?" exclaimed Rupert Bagueville, with a bored air, as young Ray Haskins came into his dressing room the day after their first meeting. "All right; make yourself at home. Your hands aren't tied behind you, so I suppose you're going to let me off from that licking again, eh?"

"I ain't hangin' around for the fun of it; the boss told me to come, and I reckoned I'd have to do it," replied the surly young cowboy. "That Oatman guy said I might's well expect to find you with a grouch on, but you'd be just as sore if I didn't consult you about my make-up."

"That Oatman guy has a pretty low opinion of me, behind my back," the star remarked lightly. "I suppose he and his bunch can't think very kindly of any one that takes so much money away from 'em; but they keep raising their ante, for fear I'll get mad and go away."

"I'd worry a lot—what they thought o' me, if I was pullin' down the wad that you are!" said Haskins, a little more sympathetically. "Let 'em sign me up for a contract like yours for a year, an' they can all take a shot at me every time I walk out. I'd take a chance ducking the bullets every day for that kind of pay, believe me! Me—I'd sooner be ridin' herd this minute than stickin' round this man's town, but I'm out for the bank roll."

"And you think you can land it just because you can ride a horse and swing a lariat?" queried Bagueville. "Why, Hollywood's got whole flocks of handsome young Buffalo Bills, standing round and waiting for something to break. They bring their chaps and their Stetsons with 'em, and then they have to put on dress suits and try to look like cake-eaters dancing in Long Island palace sets.

"The toughest two-gun Jesse James that I knew out on the coast got so he could land

a job in 'most any studio as an English butler, or a ' silly ass ' with a monocle. He was tall and thin, and his face was naturally sour. Not a laugh or a grin in *his* young life, so I suppose he'll get to be a famous comedian some day."

Haskins nodded comprehendingly.

" I reckon so! I reckon you got to be the people's pet 'cause you're such a grouch offen the screen. I'd heard a lot about the ' Bagueville smile,' an' you've always been the life o' the party when I seen you on the screen.

" It set me back some when the loafers on the lot here told me to look out an' not get in your way 'cause you were apt to bite any one who spoke to you."

" That's good; that's the way I've got 'em trained," chuckled the star. " Otherwise they'd be in here using my make-up box and trying to bum car fare to the city."

Floria Maywood, the *Dolores* of the South American drama, walked slowly past the open door of the dressing room and nodded haughtily to the star.

" Coming out to the set this morning, Mr. Bagueville?" she inquired sarcastically. " Don't bother on my account; it's no trouble to make up and stand around all day."

" I'll see how I feel," answered Bagueville disagreeably.

" It doesn't matter, anyhow," drawled Miss Maywood. " I've no interest in the thing. I busted my contract this morning, but Oatman cried all over the place, and raised me a thousand a week. My nerves won't stand another month like this. You have crabbed the whole picture for me, and you have walked on every scene I've had a chance in."

" I'm the star," replied Bagueville superciliously.

" Oatman said the thing would be a dud without me," she retorted; " said it would not run a week on Broadway without me."

" Oatman will say anything!"

" Yah! The public's getting wise to you. My Chinese butler has got more temperament than you, and he's a stone image. A year from now you'll be lucky to fill in on old men's parts. You can kid the managers for awhile, but it's the public that gets your number, old dear!"

" Shut the door, will you?" Bagueville said to Haskins. " There's too much noise outside there."

" The cold facts get you, eh?" shouted Miss Maywood, as Haskins rather timidly closed the door.

" My gosh!" exclaimed the young cowboy in solemn awe. " I thought you two had a crush on each other. The way you make love in front of the camera, I thought sure enough she was your sweetheart. I didn't think you'd talk that way to a lady, either."

" I'm always afraid she'll stick a knife in me when it comes to a clinch," laughed the star. " And don't you go calling Floria a lady to her face; she'll feel insulted."

" Gosh!" the young man exclaimed again. " Say, it's *some* life, ain't it?"

" Oh, Floria's not so bad," said Bagueville lightly. " Matter of fact, we're pretty good friends. She's never sent me any poisoned candy or tried to throw acid in my face. She's a pretty good woman to work with, if you keep her in her place.

" But it *is* some life, as you say. Not that I'm kicking about it, however. Don't go away with the idea that I take about a hundred times as much money as I'm worth, and then knock my job all the time. I might have worked fifty years in business and not pulled down what these people have given me in a couple of years."

" And you just tumbled into it!" exclaimed Haskins enviously. " No experience at all, I hear; and you walked into the studio as a star right off the bat."

" But I had the publicity, and that's a long way ahead of experience. You know I rowed on the college crew two years; then I went in for the single sculls, and when I cleaned up all the championships at Henley I came home and found my picture in every Sunday supplement, and on the news reels.

" The picture people chased me all over the map, insisting that I was a movie star already, and pretty soon they were shooting the camera at me, and I was making love to yellow-haired baby dolls and bobbed-hair bandits.

"I don't hate money any more than you do, but it did get me when all the tooth-paste, and hair-tonic, and soap, and cigarette people started to rush me. Money is money, but it's no kind of a life to live: and I'd like to get out where I could find some reality and act like a human being."

"That's me, too!" Haskins agreed heartily, beginning to find some admirable qualities in the spoiled darling of the movie world. "I'll work like a dog to make a nice little pile, and I'll even stick around New York to do it, if I have to; but when I've got my stake, it's back to Texas for mine. I know what I can do with money there, where the real folks are."

"Where men are men!" exclaimed Bagueville with a smile.

"No kidding!" protested the younger man. "I've had that line thrown at me all along, but it's God's truth. Gosh! You meet fifty thousand men here in the East, and you can't pick one of 'em that you'd like to pal around with.

"Even if you do happen to run on to some guy that looks all right, chances are he'll cop your bank roll and walk off with your clothes and your boots. Out our way, you shake hands with a feller and from that time on he'll die for you, or you'll die for him, see? If he *does* happen to turn out to be a low-down, ornery coyote, he knows pretty well what he'll get, I'll tell the world!"

"Six-guns, and ropes, and all that," mused Bagueville.

"Not so much these days," said Haskins regretfully, "but there's other ways. Texas is big enough to be a world all by its own self, but it ain't big enough to hold any guy that's not a square-shooter. The best of everything—that's what we have here! Best men and women, best hosses, best cattle, best farms, an' the only cities fit to live in. When anything gets down below the hundred-per-cent mark, it's got to get right out o' the State blamed quick."

"That accounts for some of the Texans I've met," remarked the star.

"Is *that* so? Maybe you're referring to present company, mister?"

"Keep your shirt on," laughed the other. "You're not half bad, even if you do come from the great open spaces. You're the first person that I've allowed to hang around and talk to me for more than five minutes in the last six months."

"Gosh! That's an honor, all right! That ought to get my pictures in the newspapers. I reckon if you was to sign your name to a couple o' lines, sayin' that I was all right to talk to for ten minutes, I wouldn't have to worry about my future no more."

"Don't get too smart, kid, or too fresh," warned Bagueville. "or you'll find that Texas isn't the only place where they know how to run 'em out. As a matter of fact, you're still a little green, and a little dumb, but you've got sort of an honest look about you, and you haven't tried to borrow even a plug of tobacco, yet.

"As long as it's got to be done," he continued wearily, "I suppose I might as well build a mustache on your face and try to make you look a bit like me at long range."

He brought out some crepe-hair and spirit-gum, and proceeded to construct a romantic black mustache with upturned ends. Regarding his own countenance in the mirror of the dressing table, he lightly penciled a few lines upon the substitute's face that would help to carry out the counterfeit.

"With that gaucho hat and the chin strap on," he remarked, "you'll do very well, just galloping across the picture. Matter of fact, there's no need of taking a lot of trouble with the make-up."

"How 'll I get this dog-gone stuff off?" inquired the victim, with certain contortions of his face that indicated momentary discomfort. "I wasn't figurin' on your gluing the thing on me; I reckon it 'll take hide an' all when it comes off. I'm right sure I wouldn't walk down the street, even in a strange town, with such a get-up—not if I had to cut a piece my lip off to get shet of it."

"It 'll wear off in time," said Bagueville mischievously. "And if you have to leave it on, those Texas queens of yours will rave about it when they see you."

"Like all the women rave about you, I reckon," retorted Haskins sarcastically.

"Raving hasn't hurt me much," said Bagueville seriously. "You see, I've al-

ways been playing romantic rôles, and I've made up pretty elaborately for 'em. It's not my own face that the movie crowds have talked about, so I'm not likely to get vain about what they think of my grease-paint and my wigs and eyebrows, am I?

"The worst of it is, I tell you, kid, that people envy me and think I'm happy. Money? Sure, it's great! But you can't show folks that there's no reality in the life—and a man doesn't want to spend his life in dreams, does he?

"We never have a chance to wake up and be ourselves. I'll tell you straight, I have my doubts about that 'God's own country' of yours, but I'd like to slip away and get mixed up with some real human beings for awhile."

Julius Oatman came bustling in.

"Come on, be a sport, Rupert," he said ingratiatingly. "Come out to the set once and give the folks a treat. Floria's getting so sore she'll quit, and I can't stand for that."

"I'm coming out presently," answered Bagueville. "But don't call me Rupert; I've told you I don't care for familiarity, Oatman. I'm not here to enjoy the social advantages of your studio, and I prefer to be known here as a poor mixer. Get me?"

"I get yer!" said Oatman, grinning with a sort of supercilious patience. "Business is what appeals to you; money first, and art somewhere down the line. That's what comes of our having to make a feller into an actor just because he's won a couple of boat races. But the money keeps on coming, so you might as well be happy.

"I've got a little magazine story for you to sign your name to: it's all about art and beauty, and how folks ought to dress and decorate their homes, an' all that bunk. I paid a newspaper guy fifty dollars for writing it, and the magazine is going to pay you five hundred for saying you're the author of it."

"Nothing doing, Oatman! Consult me before you cook up any mess like that, will you? It happens that I learned to write, and when I want to figure as an author, I'll do my own stuff, see?"

"Aw, lay off the high hat!" cried Oatman indignantly. "Here I'm doing all these things to help you, and you don't appreciate it. Right now I've got a script in the office for you; South Sea stuff with hula-hulas, an' volcano effects, and lots o' sob stuff. I got it cheap from a young feller, and we're going to put your name on it as the author: Rupert Bagueville, actor and playwright, appearing in his own masterpiece of tropical love and adventure."

"The sooner you forget that, the quicker!" snapped the star. "I'm not writing plays, and I'm not an expert in art and decoration, so my name doesn't figure as the author of anything until I want it to."

"You make me sick!" groaned Julius Oatman.

"Get out, before I lose my temper!" ordered Bagueville.

"You belong out in Hollywood, with a palace and a squad of Chink servants," said Oatman disgustedly. "They stand for the big noise and the high-hat stuff out there. We're in New York, and we're in for *business*. Listen, Mr. Bagueville: for two cents I would chuck my contract with you. That's how much you make me sick!"

"You offer to break the contract?"

"Sure!" cried Oatman furiously, "it would be a pleasure. And it would add ten years to my life; so bad for my nerves it is!"

"You hear what Oatman says, Haskins," said Bagueville. "I may call you as a witness. I'll finish the picture—for the sake of Floria Maywood and the others; I don't want to wish any hard luck on them; after that, I'm off."

"You shouldn't make me lose my temper," said Oatman sulkily. "I'm not busting any contracts, Mr. Bagueville."

"You've busted one!"

"Not on my life, Mr. Bagueville! You walk out on me, and I make you a promise: you won't never be in a picture for any producer that's now in the business."

"You were the one that proposed to break the contract," chuckled Bagueville, "and I have a witness to it."

"I'll take it to the Supreme Court if I have to!" threatened Oatman.

"Take it to the League of Nations!" jeered the star. "And get rid of the idea, Oatman, that I have to appear in the pic-

tures to be happy. You can't prevent me from driving a taxicab, or sawing wood for a living, you know."

"My hair has a right to turn white—so much trouble!" wailed the producer, and rushed from the scene.

"Gosh, you've got your nerve, all right!" exclaimed Ray Haskins. "Here I am, ready to mortgage my life to get into the pictures, and you talk back to your manager and try to kid 'im into firing you. Gosh! Where do you go from here, Mr. Bagueville?"

"Oh, I don't know," drawled the star thoughtfully. "Land of Hope and Glory, I guess. I suppose that's almost anywhere around San Antonio, Texas."

CHAPTER III.

PURE NOTHING.

ON rising ground amid a wilderness of brown sand, ledges of crumbling limestone, and peculiarly symmetrical "knobs" that looked like the toy hills of a toy landscape, a traveler halted to survey the scene and marvel at the whimsical versatility of nature. As his flivver rolled forward again, he looked ahead and saw a buckboard and a pair of tethered ponies under a live oak near the trail.

There was a woman sitting on the ground by a small brush fire, and as he drew nearer he discovered that she was slender and apparently young, and she was rather becomingly dressed in khaki jacket and short skirt, with high laced boots and a small shade hat. A closer view revealed bright, challenging eyes, black hair that was bobbed in modern fashion, and features that were entirely satisfactory.

The flivver came to a dead stop, as though of its own accord, and the girl looked up inquiringly, but neither smiled nor frowned. She was brewing something in a tin kettle over the fire, and a great festoon of brilliant green mistletoe drooped from the live oak branches overhead and shielded her from the scorching sun.

"Is that an invitation or a challenge?" the man in the flivver asked quietly, with a smile that was something of an apology for his temerity.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded sharply, and met his eyes squarely, with perfect assurance.

"The—er—I was thinking of the mistletoe," he answered uncomfortably, and flushed before her stare.

"I'm glad you have the decency to blush!" she exclaimed. "Better be on your way, unless you have a better joke than that up your sleeve."

"I'm sorry," he said contritely. "I guess the girls stand for more kidding where I come from; I didn't mean to be fresh. I begin to see why you're not afraid to travel alone—and I mean that as a compliment. There are women that go into the African jungle alone, and come out safe and sound, and there are eyes that can tame lions at a glance."

"You don't look much like a lion!" she observed witheringly. "You'd better quit now, before you get fresh again. As for being afraid, I *am;* but I can't afford to hire a cavalry escort every time I want to go on a little errand of a couple o' hundred miles or so.

"Most of the men around here are regular fellers, but you run across a fresh Easterner once in awhile. Then there are real bad men, too, but they've mostly got some sense about things; I always pack a couple of guns, and I can shoot straight and quick."

"I was going to ask you for some advice about getting some gasoline for my car," said the young man, feigning a cringing timidity, "but I guess I'd better be moving on."

"Oh, you're all right," she said lightly. "You can get out of your car and have a mug of tea, if you want to. I knew there was nothing bad about you when you first come along; you're just sort of foolish."

"Then you're a character reader, too!" he exclaimed, alighting without delay. "That's what the phrenologists, and astrologists, and physiognomists have all said about me—nothing bad about me, just sort of foolish. But that's an awful character to go through life with, isn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Better foolish than bad, I guess. You may keep out of jail if you don't get too foolish. Find a place

where there's no scorpion or centipede waiting for you, and sit down. I'm not camping here because I'm hungry, and I haven't much stuff to eat, but a cup of tea braces you up and rests you, and the horses had to be fed and rested up."

She took an enameled metal cup from a small hamper and poured some tea from the little teapot that stood close to the fire, and she offered her guest some hard crackers and a jar of thick jam.

One of the ponies pawed the ground impatiently and shook his nosebag to find the few remaining oats at the bottom of it, and from a crate on the rear end of the buckboard, a chicken set up an excited cackling in a shrill treble.

"And we might have had broiled chicken!" exclaimed the man ruefully. "Or would it have been fricassee? So much depends on age and pedigree!"

"Judging by the style of the car you drive, mister, you haven't money enough to eat that kind of a broiler," she replied crushingly. "That's the White Leghorn cockerel that won the blue ribbon at the last Madison Square Garden show. Just came out from the East by express, and I drove in sixty miles to get him. It would cost you a little over three hundred dollars to broil that bird."

"Now, who's kidding?" he laughed. "Three hundred, for a bunch of feathers and a cackle?"

"You're just plumb ignorant!" she retorted, with a flash of anger. "Why don't you read the papers? It happens that this little rooster is worth twice that sum, but the Eastern breeder is helping me to get a good start and establish the strain in Texas. This bird's mother holds the egg record for New York State, and his father has won half a dozen silver cups."

"I apologize, very humbly. I'm getting in wrong pretty fast now, and I suppose I ought to be moving along. I was going to ask you about gasoline, but, of course, you don't use it for bronchos—they're peppy enough without it—and you don't keep a list of filling stations. I have enough to last me twenty miles or so, but then I may be stranded in some extra-dry bit of desert."

"Oh, I happen to have a flivver, too," she replied, "and if you'll stop at my chicken ranch, about ten miles straight ahead, my Mex cook will sell you enough gas to carry you to the next town. I'm Miss Merrick."

"Thanks, very much! And if I should rest my flivver there until you arrived, would you think I was getting fresh again, Miss Merrick? By the way, my name is Ringham—Robert Ringham."

"You're welcome to what little hospitality we have to offer, Mr. Ringham," she said cordially enough. "You may have to wait some time, though; I don't drive my horses in high. I don't want to accuse you of commercial motives, but most people that come this way in cars have something to sell, and I warn you that I'm not a very good buyer. I'll look at anything you have to sell, but there isn't much that I need."

"I'll have to disappoint you," he laughed. "I haven't a thing to sell. That makes me appear as a suspicious character, doesn't it? I suppose it doesn't sound reasonable to say that I have no tangible reason for being here in this locality, but I'm not prospecting for gold, or oil, or real estate, or anything in particular; and I'm not selling anything."

"It is odd," she agreed, "to find a man who is looking for nothing, I should say."

"But there you've hit it exactly!" he exclaimed with satisfaction. "I am traveling by motor, busily engaged in an eager search for *nothing*. Men have striven mightily for less worthy objects, you must admit. The fact is, I've had altogether too much of *something*, and I want to rest my soul in a sort of vacuum, if I can find anything like that.

"A young man told me that this—well, your country all around here, is God's own country, but he didn't make the reasons for such a distinction very clear. From his ravings I made out that there was very little of anything here but sunrises and sunsets, and a great deal of space. I thought it might come fairly close to the vacuum that I need for myself."

She peered at him curiously, with a good deal of interest.

"Oh, I know all about that sort of feel-

ing," she said slowly. "I came here at first for much the same reason. But you'll be terribly disappointed, Mr. Ringham. Nothing is one of the hardest things in all this world to find, and you'd do better hunting for gold or diamonds. Just as you think you're on the right track at last, just about to come upon the mother lode of pure nothing, you stumble over *something*. It's a heart-breaking quest."

"I was afraid of that," he sighed, "but I suppose I shall keep on for awhile. The green prospector has lots of hope and persistency."

Assuring her that he would wait at her ranch until she came there, he started off in his car and continued his exploration of the seemingly endless undulations of sand, with the patches of cactus and ill-nourished trees and verdure.

Before he was minded to watch for signs of the poultry ranch, he ran out of the wilderness into a moderately thriving agricultural settlement of a dozen small farms, with surprising abruptness. There were narrow irrigation ditches that marked the land in squares and long rectangles, and new grass seemed to have sprung up with new houses, while fruit trees and shade trees struggled bravely to keep up with the rank growth of vegetables and weeds.

As the flivver approached this hamlet, it overtook a disreputable-looking, but quaint figure that stalked with long, loose-jointed legs through the dry, brown dust of the road; a man effectively disguised as a scarecrow, who would have been called "Dusty Roads" in a comic journal of an earlier decade.

Ringham observed him with casual interest, figured that he was two or three inches over six feet, and noted that his clean-cut features were set off by a clear skin that was evidently washed at regular intervals. A nondescript hat, ventilated with many rents and punctures, flapped over large and merrily twinkling eyes, and a thick, brown beard that was apparently trimmed with devoted care from time to time emphasized the incongruity of the picture.

"Give you a lift?" Ringham challenged pleasantly, as he reduced the speed of the flivver.

"Your invitation forces acceptance, kind friend," answered the tramp. "I purposed to make one of yonder houses my destination, but a negative response to overtures of good fellowship chills the cockles of a warm heart."

"Let me know where you want to get out," said Ringham, as the poetically eloquent hobo clambered into the car.

"My actual port of call," the tramp explained glibly, "is a matter of experiment and selection. I find that wherever a few houses are gathered together, one at least is to be marked as a potential haven for the traveler, and there the dogs are fat, gentle, and soft of voice, and the good man and his lady are not too meticulous of judgment and discrimination."

"You're a professional traveler, then," remarked Ringham, with frankly ironical good humor.

"I thank you!" exclaimed the other appreciatively, and then sang softly:

> "A wandering minstrel I—
> A thing of shreds and patches,
> A-singing songs and snatches—

"You get me, sir? The freemasonry of the open road has drawn us together, and when we part it will be with the handclasp of blood-brothers."

"*Here's* a poultry ranch!" cried Ringham abruptly, and halted the car in front of a small farm with long ranges of tar-papered chicken houses and dozens of snow-white fowls foraging busily over the ground.

"Miss Merrick's place?" he called to an ill-looking woman who sat on the steps of the cottage, with her arms on her lap.

"No, 'tain't! We ain't in that class!" she responded crossly. "If you-all got anything to sell, we ain't buyin' nothing."

"Here the dogs would be lean and hungry, sharp of tooth, and hostile to the stranger," whispered the tramp.

An uncommonly pretty girl of eighteen or nineteen appeared in the doorway back of the ungracious woman. Long hair with a coppery sheen hung gloriously over her shoulders, and her eyes and lips joined in a lovely smile of innocent cordiality.

"Miss Merrick's place is just ahead; the first one on the left!" she called out.

Ringham bowed and thanked her, and the tramp bent himself double and swept the tattered scrap of grimy felt from his head with a magnificent gesture.

"Nature's compensation!" he exclaimed, as the car started. "Amid grim rocks and forbidding crags, the little golden flower rears its head to bring a message of hope and cheer."

CHAPTER IV.

CHANTICLEER.

THE flivver stopped again, after proceeding no more than a stone's throw, and the travelers saw a pretty adobe house, built in the Spanish style, and regular rows of orchard trees under which flocks of white chickens moved about contentedly in the shade. A soft-toned, lazy bark sounded from the entrance porch of the house, and an old collie of dignified mien moved languidly down the path.

"The augers are auspicious!" cried the tramp. "The dog is sleek, and his alert manner is merely perfunctory. The aroma of savory viands is in the air: peace and plenty abide within. A joyous coincidence, my friend, that our ways converge to a common goal!"

"My destination is still over the horizon," Ringham informed him. "I don't know where I'm going, but I'm on my way. I'm to ask the Mexican cook here, to let me have some gasoline; then I shall be off again. Perhaps we shall meet again, Mr. —er—"

"O'Keefe," announced the tramp, doffing his headgear again with a flourish; "Eustace Fitzjames Michael O'Keefe."

"My name's Ringham," said the other.

"A proud and noble name, fit to stand beside that of the ancient and royal house of the O'Keefe's!" the tramp declared, and gave his companion a long and bony hand, but with the grip of a wrestler.

A Mexican servant came from the rear of the house, regarding the visitors with suspicion, but the name of Miss Merrick was a sufficient password and he agreed to furnish the flivver with an emergency supply of gasoline.

Ringham sat in the car while he went to search for a can, but Eustace O'Keefe descended ceremoniously, addressed the servant in smooth and fluent Spanish, petitioning him to vouchsafe a bit of substantial sustenance in the name of San Francisco de Tejas, and presently accompanied him to the rear of the establishment, arm in arm.

The Mexican was placid and slow of action, and by the time the car was provided with fuel, and due payment for the service was negotiated, Miss Merrick's buckboard was seen approaching the ranch.

From the other poultry yards, across the road, a dog now ran out to dispute the right of way with the horses, and it was precisely the sort of dog that O'Keefe had pictured. It barked shrilly with hostile intent, and leaped savagely at the noses of the horses, causing them to rear and kick.

A light crate bumped off the rear of the buckboard, cracked open, and liberated a snow-white rooster with an arched tail of satiny sickle feathers and a high and vividly crimson comb. The dog bayed furiously and went after the bird, which cackled wildly and flapped along the road till it soared into the air like a peasant, as Leghorns are wont to do, and ended its flight in the midst of the startled fowls of the ranch of tar-paper coops.

The dog appeared satisfied with this result of conquest, but not so the White Leghorn cock that ruled the flock. He challenged the newcomer with a deep-toned *cock-a-doodle-doo* and flew to meet him, and in an instant they were beak to beak, their hackles expanded and their wings fanning the ground, engaged in the formal preliminaries of a barnyard duel, while the hens scuttled nervously about and voiced their anxiety in ladylike cackles.

Robert Ringham had leaped from his car when the dog went after the valuable rooster, and he joined O'Keefe and the Mexican in hurrying to the aid of Miss Merrick. The girl quieted the startled ponies, handed them over to the Mexican, and ran for the scene of battle.

"That low-down, ornery rooster will tear my rooster's comb all to pieces!" she cried.

A middle-aged man in a black Stetson hat and neat black clothes hurried from the house, and he was followed by the ill-looking woman and the young girl with the auburn hair.

The cocks threw themselves at each other, spurred and tore fiercely, then settled back to the beak-to-beak position, circling and maneuvering for another encounter.

Then the man in black darted forward into the flock and deftly caught up one of the roosters, while the other flew up at him, trying to reach its enemy. The man hastily examined the captive, dropped it, then made another swoop and expertly captured the opponent.

"Here's your rooster, Miss Dotty," he said blandly, turning to meet Dorothy Merrick, "an' he's none the worse for a little fun, I reckon."

The girl thanked him, and took the bird by the legs, supporting its body with her other hand.

"But this isn't my rooster, Mr. Trempert!" she exclaimed at once. "Mine wore a blue leg-band—one of those celluloid ones."

"Sorry to dispute with yer," Miss Dotty, but I know my own chickens right smart," the man replied, and his smooth-shaven, flabby face wrinkled into an expansive and supercilious smile.

The rooster on the ground was strutting about and claiming victory.

"But look at them!" cried the girl. "This one is just plain White Leghorn, same as your dog is just plain hound; it couldn't get a prize at a county fair. You can see for yourself what the other one is, can't you? Look at his shape, and carriage, and color. You don't think I'd pay three hundred dollars for a brass-looking bird like this one, do you?"

"I don't know what *you'd* pay," returned Mr. Trempert sarcastically; "but I know well enough that I wouldn't pay three hundred dollars for anything short of a solid gold rooster. Three hundred cents is just about my limit for a chicken. Them fancy breeders in the East throw an awful bluff, an' they catch a good many suckers."

"But that other rooster *is* Miss Dorothy's, Uncle Alvin!" spoke up the girl with the auburn hair spiritedly. "I feed these chickens every day, and I know every last one of them like I do people. We never had a beautiful rooster like that one in our yard, and that's our ugly old Pancho Villa that she's holding in her arms."

"Shut yore face, Em'ly," roared the man in black savagely. "Who's askin' you to butt in? You got less sense than most women."

"I reckon I've took care o' these chickens enough to know 'em," whined the thin woman angrily. "That's our rooster there, like Alvin says. You, Em'ly, you keep yore impident mouth shet, an' go in the house."

Dorothy Merrick dropped the rooster that she held, and made an impulsive gesture of anger and vague amazement.

"You can't mean that you'd keep my new rooster, Mr. Trempert! You certainly know what you're about. I examined the bird at the express office, and I know him. I can't imagine what's become of the blue leg-band he had on."

"Permit me to settle the case out of court," said Eustace O'Keefe, sweeping a courtly bow to Miss Merrick. He stretched his long legs in a prodigious stride, swung a long arm with lightning swiftness, and scooped up the disputed rooster, then offered it to its rightful owner with another obeisance.

"If you take it, Miss Dotty, I will just naturally have to come over an' claim it again," warned Trempert. "I don't often set up to argue with a lady, and it seems pretty small business to be fussin' over a little white rooster, but a man has to stand up for his rights. It's the principle of the thing—see?"

"And you drop that chicken, you dirty bum!" he added, turning angrily upon Eustace.

"I can't discuss our relative social classification," said the tramp blandly, "but I refuse to drop the chicken."

"Sic 'im, Red!" Trempert cried sharply to the vicious hound that was sniffing about near the group, and made a suggestive sign toward the picturesque hobo.

The dog leaped forward with a snarl.

Eustace jumped back and aimed a kick at the animal, but it eluded his boot, and sprang, snapping for a hold; and it happened to catch the unfortunate rooster by the neck, then jerked it from the man's grasp, gave it a shake, and dropped it.

Robert Ringham landed a kick that sent the hound twenty feet, tumbling and howling, then caught Alvin Trempert by the collar and swung him about.

"Call off your dog, or I'll kill it!" he cried.

Trempert swore great oaths and reached for his hip pocket, but the tramp got to the pocket first, jerked out an automatic, and flung the weapon over the high fence. Then he snatched Trempert from the grasp of Ringham, waltzed him around, and struck him across the face with his open hand—a cracking blow that caused the man to whimper and fling his arms out for protection.

Holding his victim by the lapel of his coat, gathered in one hand, the tramp went through his pockets with the long, deft fingers of the other one.

"He's robbing me!" yelled Trempert.

"No, no, my friend—merely a digital reconnaissance, an experimental frisking for the sake of justice. And here we have the evidence, the damning evidence!"

He stepped back, letting the man go, and held up a seamless celluloid ring of blue.

"The gentleman removed the band with the skill of a magician, when he first appeared in the rôle of peacemaker," he announced.

Dorothy Merrick was on her knees beside the lifeless little pile of rumpled feathers, and there were very feminine tears of rage and grief in her eyes.

"It took most of my savings to get that rooster," she complained pathetically.

"The damned chicken's dead, anyhow!" Trempert declared savagely, soothing his own ruffled plumage and glowering from one to another of his enemies of the moment. "There's no need of havin' a funeral, is there? You can have the bird now if you want it, Miss Merrick. Your greaser cook can slip it in the pot and have a tasty *arroz y gallina*."

"A man without respect for a lady's feelings has no self-respect!" Eustace declaimed dramatically, and reached for Trempert's throat. "You're unworthy the respect of men, and your gray hairs shall not protect you."

"You do the talking, but leave him to me!" cried Ringham, and jostled the tramp aside as he lunged at Trempert.

The startled Trempert struck at Ringham, and for a moment there was an ineffectual boxing match, without skill or method; then Ringham pounded down the other's guard and felled him with a smashing blow on the jaw.

"Oh, come away, please!" cried Miss Merrick distractedly. "There's been trouble enough."

"We'll have the law on the whole bunch of yer!" yelled Trempert's wife, as she lifted up her man and led him toward the house.

Dorothy Merrick walked slowly away toward the buckboard in the road, escorted by her two companions.

"It's pretty hard to bear—the disappointment and the injustice, and everything," she complained; "but I hope this affair won't go any further. The Tremperts are hard enough to get along with as neighbors, and I don't want to carry on any trouble with that man; he's too mean and unprincipled. I've tried to be decent to them on poor little Emily's account."

"What a daughter for such a pair!" exclaimed Ringham.

"But she's not their daughter; she's the legal ward of Alvin Trempert, and that's bad enough, in all conscience. No, I've got to swallow my rage and disappointment, I suppose, and go on as I did before. It was good of you two to fight for me like that, and I'm hoping it doesn't mean a lot of trouble for you. Now, we'll try to forget it, and I'll have Pedro get some supper for you right away."

"The honor is too unexpected, too overwhelming, ma'am!" cried the tramp, evidently forgetting that he had selected the pleasant adobe house as his goal for the day. "I am traveling light; my wardrobe is a thousand miles away. I have, as it were, retired from society for a season."

"We don't dress for dinner here," she

said dryly, "and all hungry people are welcome if they're worthy of a square meal."

"I accept the invitation without argument," said Ringham.

Presently the wayfarers were ushered into the living room of the bungalow, and Ringham expressed his admiration of the long refectory table, evidently obtained from some ruined mission of the old Spanish territory. The hostess had been a puzzle to him since the moment of the meeting on the road, for she carried herself with an air that could scarcely come from anything but good breeding and refined environment; yet she talked much of the time in the careless, rather slipshod manner of country folk.

It had occurred to him already that her rural manner was studiously affected, for suggestions of sophistication escaped her in unguarded moments.

The supper was of Mexican dishes, served with dignified pride by the Mexican cook. There was a great dish of *pastel de puerco*, a highly seasoned pork pie suited to the appetites of ranchmen, and the cook continually pattered in and out on slippered feet, bearing away empty dishes and returning with fresh platters of hot *tortillas* and richly compounded *enchiladas*.

"We have variety in our diet," the hostess explained pleasantly. "This happens to be Mexican day, but to-morrow we will have Boston baked beans and brown-bread, or perhaps a lamb stew, for a penance."

Heavy footfalls sounded in the vestibule, and an elderly, square-shouldered man of determined mien entered the room unceremoniously, followed by a young man in cowboy's chaps and sombrero, and by the hostess's hostile neighbor, Alvin Trempert, whose face was bandaged grotesquely.

"There they are!" growled Trempert, glaring across the table. "That dirty, long-shanked bum over there, and the smart-lookin' guy in the brown suit."

"I'm Hiram Quillen, dep'ty sheriff in this county," announced the square-shouldered man. "What's your name, bum?"

"Accepting the title as merely generic," said the tramp airily, "I will ignore the indignity. My name is Eustace Fitzjames Michael O'Keefe."

"I'm Robert Ringham," said the other guest. "What can we do for you?"

"I'm arrestin' you two bums for assault an' battery, on complaint of this respected citizen an' taxpayer, Mr. Trempert. You better come along."

"I shall furnish bail for these men, Mr. Quillen," said Dorothy Merrick. "If they are guilty of the offense charged, it's on my account."

"There ain't no bail to-night," snapped Quillen. "To-morrow morning I'll take 'em over to district court for a hearin'. I'm just a-doin' my duty as an officer o' the law, Miss Merrick."

"Lead on, we follow, good Dogberry!" exclaimed O'Keefe, the vagabond. "Even the calaboose has its merits: the Texas stars are cold at night, and the calaboose is usually heated. The fruits of philosophy are a complaisant spirit and a quiet mind."

CHAPTER V.

"THE YEAR'S AT THE SPRING."

HIRAM QUILLEN, the deputy sheriff, had his own car waiting outside the Merrick poultry ranch, and he ordered his two prisoners into the rear seat under guard of the cowboy, Jim Dentry. Robert Ringham protested that he could not leave his flivver in the road, and suggested that he be permitted to drive it along under convoy of the official car, but the deputy sheriff was on his dignity and would hear nothing of such irregularity.

It appeared that Quillen maintained a temporary lockup for the small hamlet at his ranch, the county jail being some twenty miles farther north, and he herded tramps and malefactors of all descriptions in a small square room at one end of his adobe house.

"You're a ragged, disrep'table bum," he said to Eustace Fitzjames Michael O'Keefe when they arrived at the house, "but you ain't as dirty as most of 'em, so I won't put the hose on yer to-night.

"As for you," he went on, turning to Ringham, "you're a decent-lookin' feller, an' I'm s'prised to find you gettin' into trouble so ornerylike with one of our taxpayers. There ain't no other prisoners here to-night, an' I've no objections to you an' the bum eatin' breakfast along o' me an' Jim Dentry before we start for district court in the mornin'. If you two was good enough to eat at Miss Merrick's table, I'll be able to stand for it, I reckon; an' it 'll save trouble an' fuss for my daughter in serving the meal."

He ushered them into a bare room with two barred windows, and invited them to make their selections from half a dozen rough bunks that were ranged along the walls.

"Don't go'n lose a lot o' sleep tryin' to saw out the winder bars," he said solicitously, "'cause I've got a couple o' husky German police dogs that 'll pick you up right off an' tear yore clothes. One while I was havin' to repair this dog-gone place an' put in new bars all the time, but the dogs sticks around all night an' kinder discourages bums from wantin' to get out."

"Liberty is priceless," returned the tramp, "but it is my philosophy to live for the present moment, and at this moment sleep and repose of soul are my desiderata, my good and honest Dogberry."

"You got my name wrong," corrected the deputy sheriff; "it's Quillen. There was a feller named Atterbury lived up to the county seat one while, but I never heard of no Dogberrys round here."

At five o'clock next morning Quillen unlocked the door of the cell and summoned the prisoners to breakfast. They joined him at a wet and soapy wash bench beside the pump in the yard, and after rough and strenuous ablutions went into a clean and cheery living room, with chintz curtains at the windows and rag rugs on the floor. Jim Dentry, the special deputy for the emergency, was already at table, and as they sat down with the host and jailer a lovely yellow-haired girl with apple cheeks and a winsome smile came in from the kitchen with a coffeepot in one hand and a deftly balanced platter of flapjacks on the other.

O'Keefe rose from his chair instinctively and bowed low.

"Aurora, spirit of the dawn," he cried, "touch the morning mists with thy rosy fingers and banish the somber steeds of night!"

The girl halted in astonishment, juggled the platter over the head of her father, and giggled musically and heartily.

"You sit down!" the deputy sheriff gruffly admonished O'Keefe. "That stuff's all right, mebbe, for a vodevill show, but we ain't used to it here."

He steadied the platter down to a secure position on the table, speared half a dozen flapjacks at the first attack, then pushed the platter across to the waiting Jim Dentry.

"Hurry up the sassages an' some surrup, Greta," he ordered, and helped himself to the coffee.

The apple-cheeked girl was back at once with the sausages, and she abstractedly passed them to O'Keefe while she studied his boldly chiseled features and his romantic beard.

"Stiddy there, gal!" cried her father sharply. "I aim to treat all folks fair an' square, but lawbreakers don't get helped before officers o' the law, nohow! You ought to know better, gal."

"Oh, I forgot!" gasped the girl, blushing a rich and lovely crimson. "But Jim let on to me that these men were probably all right, 'cause they didn't do anything but beat up old Alvin Trempert—and goodness knows he's needed it long enough. I must say I'm right glad of it, the way that old scalawag treats poor little Emily all the time."

The deputy sheriff rapped sharply on his plate with a fork.

"That 'll do, you hear? This is a law-abidin' place we live in, and taxpayers is entitled to pertection. As fer you, Jim Dentry, you're a special dep'ty, by my orders, an' don't you go expressin' prejudiced opinion out o' court, d'ye hear? You got a long way to go 'fore you'll be a lawyer, an' what's the use o' talkin' if you ain't a lawyer?"

The irrepressible Greta, still blushing and giggling, retreated to the kitchen, and

there she rattled the frying pan busily, and broke into tuneful song in a high, flutelike soprano of singular purity. Evidently she was singing in Italian, and Bob Ringham and O'Keefe seemed instantly to recognize the selection.

"*Caro nome!*" cried O'Keefe, aghast, half rising from his seat. "Ah, we are transported to La Scala, to Covent Garden, to Paris, my friends!"

"Sounds all right, I reckon," muttered the deputy sheriff apologetically, but with a certain furtive interest and pride. "That ain't my kind o' music, but it's something she picked up offen the phonograph that Miss Galley Cursey sings. Greta says she guesses the words ain't quite all right, an' she don't know what they mean, but we heard the same woman sing it on the radio, an' I mus' say it checked up pretty good."

"Your daughter is a genius, divinely gifted, divinely inspired, good Dogberry!" declared O'Keefe fervently.

"My name's Quillen, I tell yer!" snapped the man impatiently. "I don't know anything about this genius business, an' I don't cotton to it much, but I've let on to folks that Greta will be singin' at some o' them San Antone churches 'fore we know it. I've heard o' women gettin' ten dollars a Sunday, an' even more than that."

"Make it ten thousand!" corrected O'Keefe gravely. "Believe me, she will sing before royalty and the great ones of the earth."

"I reckon you ought to know," drawled the deputy sheriff sarcastically.

There was a small radio set on a table by the outer door, and near the rough stone fireplace stood a small phonograph, but the only instrument for individual expression in the home was an ancient and rather battered melodeon.

"By your leave," said Eustace O'Keefe impulsively, and sprang from the table to the melodeon.

Perched on the stool, he pumped the pedals vigorously, drew some rasping, reedy chords from the instrument, and suddenly filled the room with the sonorous tones of a typical Irish tenor voice.

He sang "*La donna è mobile,*" from Rigoletto, and the girl came to the kitchen doorway and stood spellbound and enraptured.

"That's from the same opera I was singing," she remarked simply, when he finished. "We've got a Caruso record of it in our album. My, but you're just grand, Mr.—er—"

"Eustace Fitzjames Michael O'Keefe," said Eustace, rising from the stool and bowing profoundly.

"You're an opera star in disguise!" declared the mystified and frankly perplexed Bob Ringham.

"Nay, friend, we do not dissemble," said the tramp. "I sing, I play, I dabble in the arts luxuriously, but never for gain. Our family is of the *noblesse*, we are not *bourgeois*."

"Take that home an' try it on your piano!" exclaimed Jim Dentry explosively. "Gimme some more o' them flapjacks; I feel faint."

O'Keefe seated himself again on the stool and pumped out the opening bars of "*Caro nome.*"

"I pray you, sing it again, Greta *mia*," he said softly to the girl, "and I will accompany you in my poor way."

The deputy sheriff rapped furiously with his fork.

"Better stop this foolishness right off!" he growled. "I won't refuse no one another cup of cawfee, an' there's plenty o' flapjacks, but we got to get started for the county seat right off. The judge is right in the midst of his plowin', and he may adjourn court 'fore we get there. What's more, Mr. Fitzjames, my daughter's name ain't Greta Meer; it's Greta Quillen. You do seem to have a terrible time gettin' names right."

Alvin Trempert drove up to the house as they were leaving the breakfast table, and hailed the deputy-sheriff.

"What's the matter with you, Hiram?" he inquired ill-humoredly. "Ain't there no court to-day? Thought you'd be gone an hour ago with them thugs you got there."

"Been waitin' to see *you* go by," Quillen retorted, with the confirmed motorist's invariable humor. "I got a real car, and

we'll pass yore ol' bus about halfway along the road, Alvin."

An hour later they were all before the bench of the district court, and Hiram Quillen reported the charges to the judge. The eager Alvin Trempert was invited to present his evidence, and he undid his bandages and exhibited a bruised and swollen jaw.

"Vagrancy—that's what these birds should 'a' been up for, your honor, long before they had a chance to attack respectable, law-abiding citizens," he complained indignantly.

"Between you an' me, judge, the woman was the start of it. That Miss Merrick, up our way, is right good-lookin', and it was a case of these bums butting into a little difference of opinion between neighbors, trying to show off before the woman. This big bum here handled me pretty rough, and the other guy beat me up. Two to one! I never had a fightin' chance."

"Not after you lost your gun," spoke up Bob Ringham.

"I never laid a hand on my gun, your honor!" declared Trempert.

"My mistake, your honor!" cried O'Keefe regretfully. "I snatched the gun from his pocket before his hand reached it. He wins a point on a technicality; I concede it."

"That 'll do for you!" snapped the judge. "It's like Mr. Trempert says: you ought to have been jugged soon as you got into the county. I've no use for hoboes.

"And you say that you're a tourist, eh?" he sneered, turning on Bob Ringham. "Well, that's about the same thing—no visible means of support. You got anything to say?"

"The charges are substantially correct, as read," replied Ringham calmly. "There's no use in going into details here. My course of conduct would be the same again in similar circumstances, but I should try to do a better job another time."

"To that sentiment I subscribe with all my heart!" cried O'Keefe.

"Look here!" thundered the judge, rapping with his gavel for emphasis, "do you two scoundrels think that you're in New York City? You're in the State of Texas now, and the law has to be obeyed. I find you two guilty of the offenses charged, and—"

He paused and wrinkled his brow thoughtfully, then smiled with evident gratification as inspiration came.

"We're not hankering to have you supported by the State very long, but I'm compelled by my sense of duty to fine you each the sum of one hundred dollars; and in default of such sum you will each serve one day in the county jail for each dollar o' the fine."

"Ha, ha!" roared Alvin Trempert in high glee.

"Had I known the rates in advance," said Bob Ringham quietly, "I should have hit the complainant again."

He opened his jacket and drew from inside his shirt a canvas money belt. The unbuttoning of a pocket in it disclosed the bright green color of new currency, and he slipped out two one-hundred-dollar notes and laid them on the bench.

"I am advancing the amount of my friend's fine, until he can communicate with his bankers," he explained.

"'Sir, my good friend; I'll change that name with you!'" quoted the astonished and delighted tramp, seizing Ringham's hand. "Believe me, as a philosopher I am prepared for life's eventualities, but—it would have been hard. A hundred ducats—a hundred days in limbo! Yes, it would have been hard—in spring!

> "The year's at the spring
> And day's at the morn;
> Morning's at seven;
> The hillside's dew-pearled
> The lark's on the wing;
> The snail's on the thorn:
> God's in his heaven—
> All's right with the world!

"Ah, good friends, all is *indeed* right with the world! Spring—the burgeoning of trees and flowers—friendship—and the road to God's to-morrow!"

The judge allowed his eyes to wander out the window, where the spiney cactus in the lot next to the courthouse was performing its annual miracle of blooming in passionate red and flaming yellow. Perhaps he was thinking that the lilacs in the dooryard

of his boyhood home in New England were about coming into flower.

"That poetry was by Browning," he mused abstractedly; "I've heard my daughter recite it several times."

"Fol-de-rol!" cried Alvin Trempert, fiercely. "Must be the lunatic asylums are letting all the nuts run loose!"

The judge came to himself with a start.

"That 'll do!" he snapped indignantly at Eustace O'Keefe. "What do you mean—acting up like that in this court? Get out, both of you! You've paid your fines. Get out, before I hold you for contempt of court. And you'd better not stop going till you're clear of this county, believe me!"

Eustace ventured to pause on the threshold and wave the magistrate an airy salute, and as his honor, the deputy sheriff, and the thoroughly angry Mr. Trempert all glowered at him malevolently, he favored them with one more snatch from the classics before he skipped gayly out of view:

> "A great while ago the world began,
> With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
> But that's all one, our play is done,
> And we'll strive to please you every day."

CHAPTER VI.

TO BE LET ALONE.

"IT only goes to show what a fool a man is when he thinks he's master of his fate and captain of his soul," Robert Ringham observed to his vagabond companion as they trudged the first mile of what threatened to be a long hike back to Miss Merrick's ranch, where the flivver was parked.

"I came out to this great open country of freedom and independence for the sole purpose of being alone—of having a chance to get acquainted with myself. I knew that I might meet a man or two a month in the desert, but I made a resolution that I'd pass them by with a how-de-do and have nothing to do with any one—and, least of all, get myself mixed up with other people's troubles.

"But you see what it amounts to! I've not much more than started my travels, when I'm arrested and treated as a criminal and an undesirable citizen, because I allowed myself to get interested in a cock fight.

"Oh, I've made a pretty hash of my experiment!" he exclaimed disgustedly, as he reviewed the late adventures. "I made a strict rule for myself that I'd steer clear of pretty women—that I'd eliminate that hazard from my problems; and the first thing I do is to get interested in the proprietress of a chicken farm, and start knocking out her enemies.

"By Gosh! The old monks knew what they were about: you've got to shut yourself in a cell and never look outside; you can't have any solitude in any other way. You mustn't think I'm getting personal, O'Keefe; you're so different from the usual run of human beings that you meet, that I feel perfectly at ease with you; you have no curiosity."

"Indeed, you give me too much credit," laughed the other. "I'm fair consumed with curiosity; there's no mortal man with more inquisitiveness in his make-up. But the last man who should be prying into your affairs is your friend. Whatever is right and proper for me to know about my friends, they'll tell me in good time, eh? And now I might turn a question back at you, Mr. Ringham: why have you not asked me whence I come, whither I go, and all the whys and wherefores?"

"But that's all your own business, and none of my mine," said Ringham.

O'Keefe seized his hand and wrung it fervently.

"Between you and me, my friend, there's the basis of an endurin' friendship. To be on hand when you're needed—to give yourself and your service with all your heart and soul, that's loyalty and devotion; but when a man goes digging into the private life of his friend, to overhaul his immortal soul and set it in order, that's the impertinence of a meddler and busybody, and it murders friendship."

"I've always had a longing to be let alone by—by people, you know," said Ringham in a burst of confidence. "There's too much pawing over, and advising, and butting in. I think we shall get along, O'Keefe."

At this moment they were overtaken by the deputy sheriff and his assistant, homeward bound, and the official stopped his car and invited them to ride, masking his courtesy by a gruff surliness. Then, as they approached the Quillen ranch house a little later, they were greeted by the young girl, who seemed to be watching for them with frank interest.

"He let them go! The judge let them go!" she cried hilariously, clapping her hands.

"My friend Ringham let us go—himself and me," O'Keefe corrected politely. "This day vast sums of money have passed before these eyes, to purchase liberty for the innocent, and to swell the coffers of the unworthy."

"You've no call to be hittin' at the courts," Quillen protested. "Trempert pays his bills an' his taxes, and he's entitled to protection, I guess; there's no more to be said, I reckon."

"We have a long walk, O'Keefe," said Ringham.

"Don't bother 'bout walkin'," the deputy sheriff said with shy friendliness. "We'll let by-gones be by-gones, an' Jim 'll run you over to Miss Merrick's in the car."

"You must come again—both of you—without waiting for father to bring you the way he did," Greta laughed mischievously. "We can be right entertainin' here, when it ain't official."

"We shall come, Miss Quillen," Ringham assured her, while O'Keefe was maneuvering a bow of particular grandeur.

"Call me Greta," she commanded; "we're not stuck-up about names and things out here. You're Bob, and—and *he's* got so many names I don't know which to choose, but I reckon I'll call 'im Mike; that's easier than Eustace or Fitzjames."

"Mike it is! An' sure, any name drips honey that comes from your lips, asthore!" cried O'Keefe, indulging freely in a rich brogue for the speech.

"Better be gettin' along, I reckon," said Quillen uneasily. "You're right welcome to the car, but Jim's got to get back an' do some work."

The tramp was still posturing and affecting troubadour airs when Bob Ringham hustled him into the waiting car. The bored and disgusted Jim started the engine without delay, but Eustace leaned far out from the rear seat and shouted:

"And if her cheek be smooth and bright,
While truth within her bosom lies,
I'll gaze upon her morn and night,
Till my heart leaves me through my eyes.

"An' that's from Tom Moore, th' sweetest singer o' them all!" he added, lifting his robust voice above the roar of the motor, as the laughing girl waved them a farewell.

"'Tain't any wonder you got to be a tramp, brother!" exclaimed Jim gravely, as they rushed along the road. "I'm as strong for the gals as the next one, but you got to keep some sense about you. A feller that's shootin' off poems to judges an' janes all the time, there ain't no tellin' what he'll come to."

He made a quick run to Dorothy Merrick's ranch, and grinned with obvious relief when he gave each of the passengers a parting handshake.

Ringham's flivver had been rolled into the yard in front of the poultry runs, and they went to it directly. And almost immediately Miss Merrick came out of the house and greeted them.

"Pedro heard from the Trempert's greaser that you were each fined a hundred dollars," she said regretfully. "It ought to be my obligation; you got into the trouble for my sake. I'd like to pay it."

Ringham shook his head with finality.

"Men don't look at it that way," he assured her. "It's all over now, only I'm hoping that you will sue Trempert for that rooster. You've got two witnesses, for what they're worth, and I'll come across the State of Texas to be at the trial."

"It was a big loss and a big disappointment," she said ruefully, "but it has to be charged to loss and gain, I guess. When you're starting a business and haven't much capital, you're pretty helpless. I can't afford to sue Trempert, because I haven't a lot of money, and because I mustn't make any more of an enemy of the man than he is already. I bought this piece of land from Alvin Trempert, and he took back a second

mortgage on it to help me build. Pretty soon I may have to ask him to extend the mortgage, and I know just about how mean he can be."

"That young girl over there," said Ringham gravely, "does he treat her very badly."

"He doesn't beat her," answered Miss Merrick significantly. "It's the life she has there that's awful. She was in high school in San Antonio, and her father wanted to send her to college. He bought some lots out here, from Trempert, and was going to build a house; then he died and left her all alone in the world.

"And the poor—well, he's dead now, but he made Trempert her guardian, and that's about the worst thing a father could do for a child. Trempert seemed to be the only person the man knew, but I can't imagine how he got into his confidence so far."

"She looks like a girl of some spirit," Ringham remarked. "Why doesn't she strike out for herself, like other girls of to-day? She must be eighteen, or more."

"The sheltered life!" exclaimed Miss Merrick, with a shrug. "Emily is almost eighteen, but her father kept her young and unsophisticated. No doubt she'd like to get away from such a guardian, but she'd be like a cage-bird let loose: she couldn't fend for herself in the open."

Miss Merrick invited the two men to stay for luncheon, but Ringham declared that he must be on his way.

"I shall come again, you may be sure," he said with conviction. "There are so few people in your little colony here, but such a lot of life! In the big cities you can't see the people for the crowds, but in your little cross-section of civilization here, one doesn't need a magnifying glass to study individuals."

"I hope you have found me an interesting specimen," said the girl with some asperity.

"Oh? I'm not as bad as that!" he laughed apologetically. "And I wouldn't venture into personalities again, Miss Merrick—after our first encounter. I've been trying to prove to you that I'm not naturally fresh."

"You've behaved very well since that," she admitted, smiling. "And I'm not ungrateful for what you two men tried to do for me. But I do have so many irritations and worries. I shouldn't be peddling neighborhood gossip, but I'm completely upset again this morning over this poor little Emily. She has been here this morning—she came over while Trempert was at court, and his wife was not watching her.

"She wants me to take her away from here," the girl went on, sighing dejectedly, "and I don't know what I ought to do about it. The Tremperts are trying to marry her to their son, Edwin Trempert. He's a worthless young lawyer in San Antonio; neither good nor bad, and with scarcely enough character to be called even indifferent.

"There's money back of it all, of course, but Emily doesn't know that her father left any sort of valuable property; they've kept everything from her since his death. We know well enough that Alvin Trempert wouldn't want his son to marry her if there were not money in it somewhere, and the poor girl knows what a life it will mean for her."

"Why don't you take her away?" Ringham demanded abruptly. "But I beg your pardon; you have your business, and it would be rather serious anyway."

"It certainly would!" she returned gravely. "It would be a runaway, with plenty of pursuit, and I haven't the resources or the cunning, to plan and carry out such business. She can't walk away from the Tremperts and defy them to bring her back.

"Alvin Trempert is too crafty, and he has a crafty lawyer working for him. They would spare her no humiliation, and they'd break her down completely on a legal fight. She simply wants to escape, like any captive, and make a run for it."

"So many people *would like* to make a run for it!" exclaimed Eustace reflectively. "That is *my* profession, you perceive. I am always on the run—away from people—the world—from myself!"

"And I, too," declared Ringham impulsively; then flushed as he regretted the burst of confidence.

"And I!" cried Dorothy Merrick, and laughed a little shrilly, as though frightened.

"But so many people can't run away—from anything!" sighed Eustace mournfully. "Running away is merely done to save the soul, and it is usually expensive for the body; it involves one's credit, one's bread and butter, and it is downright scandalous. Only a person who has nothing in the beginning can afford to do scandalous things."

Oddly enough, the subject of their argument arrived suddenly in their midst, furnishing them a climax and a test.

"Dorothy—oh, Dorothy!" cried little Emily Preston fearfully, darting into the porch where they were standing, "he's telephoning to Ned in San Antonio now. He's going to take me there to-day. He knows that I was over here this morning, and he's furious; he almost struck me. He's sure that I'm trying to get away, and he's going to take me to San Antonio and keep me there."

"Oh, what can we do, Emily?" gasped Dorothy Merrick, nonplused.

"I suppose the young lady would hesitate to—to run away with two strange men," said Eustace gently; "unless the situation were desperate enough to warrant extreme measures."

Emily Preston started nervously and stared at him a little fearfully.

"Oh, of course," he said politely, "with a shrug of apology, "that is unthinkable. Running away *is* difficult."

"But I can't let him take me to San Antonio, Dorothy!" groaned Emily. "I'd be helpless there; just like a prisoner in a cell: it would mean the end of everything. Ned would be there, and I can't bear to see him; he's more repulsive to me than his father is!"

"Your poultry farm, Miss Merrick?" queried Bob Ringham, "I suppose it would suffer if you left it?"

"My farmer—Karl Vogeler, would take care of it, of course," she answered doubtfully, "but terrible things might happen if I were away. It might ruin my business."

"As I see it," Ringham went on speculatively, "Miss Emily's running away is bound to make a lot of trouble anyway. She's too young and inexperienced to do such a thing by herself, and any person that helps her will be not only a party to the crime, but an abductor, a kidnaper, and all that sort of thing."

Miss Merrick groaned and nodded in agreement.

"Well, there's scarcely a problem to be solved, then," Ringham decided. "There's no question of whether it will create trouble or not: it will! We know that it will make plenty of trouble for any one that's concerned in it, so that's settled. Miss Emily doesn't care to run away without a chaperone, and we don't want to make her any more unhappy than she is, so it looks as though you were in for it, Miss Merrick. As for myself, I don't see how I can spare the time or run the risk of so much trouble, but my car seems to be needed.

"Everything is settled then, isn't it?" he concluded calmly. "We're all in for a peck of trouble, but as long as we know it in advance, we'll be prepared to face it. You just grab any light luggage that you may want, Miss Merrick, and we'll get started. Going north, I suppose—into the great open spaces! We should meet too many people in the other direction."

Dorothy Merrick laughed; it was a high, hysterical laugh, without mirth; but her eyes flashed and she trembled with excitement.

"Come, Emily!" she cried hoarsely, "if Alvin Trempert catches you now, you'll never have another chance to get away from him."

The two girls hurried into the house to make necessary preparations, and Ringham walked out to the flivver to start the engine.

"Now, all my plans *have* gone a-glimmering!" he exclaimed. "I'm old enough to learn to mind my own buisness, and be satisfied with my own share of trouble, but—"

"I'm glad you've expressed yourself, my friend," said O'Keefe. "A gentleman minds his own business until the business of the weak and the oppressed needs minding: then he proves that he's a gentleman."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

EVICTED

FOR years before the rambling house
Of unexpected ells
I swung my hammock 'neath an oak
Among the pimpernels:
And there, lulled by the purl of leaves,
My healing rest I took;
Or, to the citherns in the grass,
I read my thoughtful book.
But all is changed and all is lost
That made this spot so fair,
Since they macadamized the pike
And built the trolley there.

Anon a loaded wain creaked past
On its unhurried way,
And poured across the mossy wall
The sunny scent of hay;
Or brown, bare feet went pattering by
Deep in the roadside shade,
To gather windfalls in the field
Hard by the ferny glade.
But now the shriek of flying cars
Fills all the summer air,
Since they macadamized the pike
And built the trolley there.

The once so quiet valley rings
With laughter loud and shrill,
And ugly hoardings now profane
My green and purple hill.
The clovers burning by the way
Are hidden in the dust,
And on the dear old house itself
Are streaks of grime and rust.
I'm like a child without a home,
Nor any road to fare,
Since they macadamized the pike
And built the trolley there.

Edward W. Barnard.

Penny Wise

By BEATRICE ASHTON VANDEGRIFT

Author of "Suspense," "Captain," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

THE letter with the legal air came just as Jason was starting for work. He stuffed it in his ulster pocket, wondering why a firm of New York attorneys should be writing to him, and made a dash for the nearest subway kiosk.

He thought he might have time to open the letter while waiting for the down town express, but he had hardly reached the platform when his train, like a long, black dragon with two red eyes, slid into the station and impatiently waited to be gorged.

An unsmiling guard, with a weary but expert air, gave Jason a push into the unyielding mass of humans within the car, and the sliding door closed.

Jason sighed, thereby discomforting two stenographers and an already tired business man, and gallantly took his elbow out of the small of some one's back. Then he shook himself like a wet collie and tried to settle down into as compact a space as possible. Until the next station should emerge out of the underworld there was nothing left to do but wonder as to what was in the letter.

He had the rash thought of trying to open it then, for his curiosity was gnawing him where his breakfast would have been if he'd had the time for breakfast. But in order to draw the missive from his ulster pocket, insert the nail of one finger under the flap, and spread the thing out for perusal, he would have to inconvenience a lot of people and even cause some actual distress.

At Seventy-Second Street, Jason finally managed to get a seat in a corner. Now for the letter!

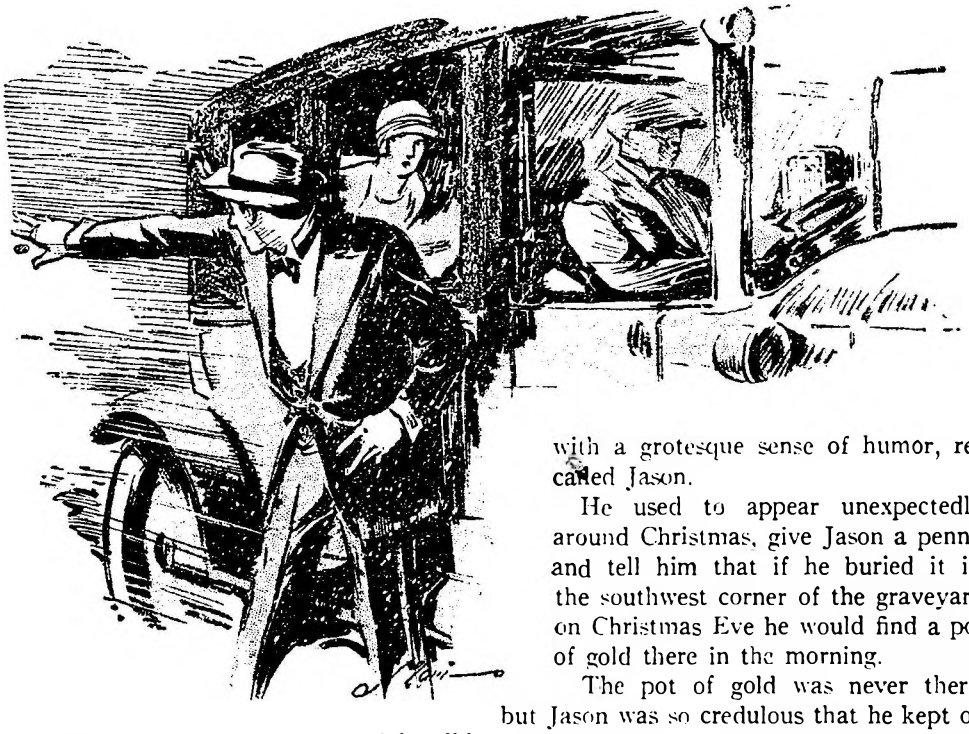
He drew it from his pocket and looked at the outside:

SCHLY & ELLIOT

Attorneys at Law

A shiny black pocketbook dangled from above, obscuring his vision. He looked up and saw a frail young creature swinging from a strap. Jason immediately rose and gave the young woman his seat.

She thanked him with a tired, sweet smile that Jason did not return. He never smiled at strange girls and very rarely at the few he knew. They might think he



was trying to flirt with them, and he did not want any woman to think he was fresh.

Women were strange, mysterious creatures to be stood up for and tipped hats to and protected against men who *did* want to flirt.

Standing and swaying by the strap, Jason, of course, could not open the letter. He could only wonder.

Why in the dickens were lawyers writing to *him?* He had no need for the gentlemen himself, and he could not understand why any one else's lawyer should want to communicate with him.

Alarmed, he tried to think back on the various things he might have done to bring him to grips with the law, but could conjure up nothing.

Eliminating unpleasant possibilities, Jason took to dreaming of others. Perhaps a rich uncle had died and left him his millions. Wait, though. Did he have any rich uncles?

No, only Uncle Walt, out in Saddle City, Nevada, and Jason didn't know whether he could be considered rich or not. He was apparently well off—a jolly old bachelor with a grotesque sense of humor, recalled Jason.

He used to appear unexpectedly around Christmas, give Jason a penny and tell him that if he buried it in the southwest corner of the graveyard on Christmas Eve he would find a pot of gold there in the morning.

The pot of gold was never there, but Jason was so credulous that he kept on trying.

Jason had almost spent his rich uncle's millions when the dragon eased itself into the Chambers Street station and violently belched forth its human contents. Jason shook himself loose from the crowd and started for the steps, bucking upstream against a drab trickle of water that cascaded down from the street above. Incoming stenographers were shutting their umbrellas, silkily sibilant.

It was raining. Jason wouldn't have a chance to open the letter now until he reached the office.

At the office he found a rush job waiting for him. The managing editor wanted a cartoon of the opposition's candidate for mayor to run on the same page with an editorial on the recent milk scandal.

Throwing the ulster on a peg in the corner by the steel file, Jason settled down to scrutiny of the photograph before him that had been rushed from the "morgue" for his use.

Way back on the ranch near Saddle City, he had made pictures without realizing they were cartoons. As a boy, he used to love to sketch the cattle and the sheep.

Each animal's face seemed so individual. He would sketch, too, the sleepy contours of Mexican Joe or the wide-awake ones of Bar Rail Bill.

It had been while he was feverishly and earnestly putting to paper a cock fight back of the ranch house that the managing editor of the New York *Ledger,* out in Nevada for his health, had happened to glance over his shoulder.

Jason looked up, startled at the amused chuckle behind him.

"W-what's that?" the managing editor had spluttered.

"That," Jason had soberly replied, "is a portrait of those two roosters."

"A portrait!" gurgled the editor, and wiped his eyes.

Jason scowled at his levity.

"What's funny?" he asked.

The editor blew his nose in amazement and glared.

"Do you mean to tell me," he roared at Jason, "that you don't see anything funny in that cartoon?"

"No," answered Jason. "And it isn't a cartoon. Anyhow, I didn't figure it's being such."

The man was incredulous, flabbergasted.

"Why," he stammered, "do you mean to tell me that you're drawing this in all seriousness—that you're not deliberately trying to make it one of the funniest pieces of work I've ever seen?"

"I'm not trying to do anything at all," denied Jason crossly. "I'm just drawing those roosters as I see 'em, mister."

"Well," announced the managing editor positively, "if you're drawing things just as you see them, young man, you wear the unconscious spectacles of humor that Tad —that Briggs—that any of those chaps would almost give their sight to have. Now, have you got any other portraits around?"

"There's some down on the walls of the bunk house," said Jason ungraciously. "The boys couldn't afford wall paper or plaster or such, so they asked me to decorate for 'em. Maybe you'd think they were funny, too."

"Maybe I would," smiled the editor, "and if I do—"

He did, with the result that Jason Brown, ex-ranch-boy, was drawing the modest but respectable salary of fifty dollars a week on the art staff of the New York *Ledger.* All he was asked to do was to draw things "as he saw them."

And he did, soberly creating grotesque "portraits," rife with unpremeditated humor, unconscious even of the fact that he had a funny bone.

So now Jason squinted at the likeness of the candidate for the city's next mayor; then, partly from the photograph and partly from his memory of a meeting with the worthy gentleman, he began his portrait.

Under his sober, plodding pencil grew a cartoon that would have had the gentleman laughing at himself. Jason made him a genial fellow with a cocked derby and a forced smile, held on tap for milk-starved children or visiting royalty alike. You could see at once, from Jason's "likeness," that he had played hopscotch on the sidewalks of East New York; in fact, that he had every qualification for Lord Mayor of the world's largest city.

And in that ready, broad smile Jason located a gold tooth. The finished sketch of the man and the gold tooth sent the managing editor into transports of glee and inspired him to write beneath it the caption:

He Denies Being Born With a Gold Spoon in His Mouth,
But How About the Gold Tooth?

A fourth of New York was to laugh at that cartoon the next day.

In the meantime, Jason, ink spotted and weary, suddenly realized that he had had no breakfast, was in need of lunch, and that the letter was still unread.

He hauled on his ulster, covered the ink pot, swung open the scarred oak gate that gave him an appearance of detachment from the rest of the noisy room, and descended three flights in the freight elevator.

On the way out he spoke to no one. The scarred oak gate was not the only thing that detached him from the rest of his fellow workers. It was his queerness, his preoccupation, his not caring for the things that the rest of the men cared for.

At the white, hospital-like lunchroom around the corner he sat at the end of a long white enamel table, pushed the remains of some one else's coffee and pie away from him, and ordered coffee and pie for himself.

Now for the letter.

He brought it forth just to the level of the table top with a guilty air, put a finger in the slit, started to tear, but stopped.

A young lady was regarding him from the other end of the long table. She looked at him soberly a moment, without embarrassment, then plunged her gaze into the steaming depths of the muglike coffeecup.

Jason felt overpowered. Strangely impelled, he felt for the stubby end of a pencil in his breast pocket, turned over a menu to its blank side, and began to make a picture of the girl.

This was not a cartoon. Something had happened to Jason's eye.

He was putting on the finishing touches when a waiter in a soiled apron snatched the menu from him without ceremony, turned it over and presented it to the girl for her consideration.

The girl calmly ordered a custard éclair, while Jason sat, petrified. The waiter left the menu at her elbow, marked something on his pad, and ambled off vaguely in the direction of the kitchen.

While stirring her coffee the girl moved the menu to her range of vision again, and scanned it, wondering, perhaps, what dessert she might have chosen if she hadn't taken the éclair.

Jason held his breath. Would she? She did. Unaccountably she turned the menu over and saw her picture.

Her cheeks pinkened a trifle, with displeasure, of course, thought Jason, his skin prickling. Then her cool, green eyes wandered inquiringly about the almost deserted room. They lit on Jason.

He immediately colored—more than a trifle.

"So it's you?" the girl's eyes seemed to say; and Jason felt as though they were laughing at him.

He was wrong. They were smiling, as were her lips—a friendly, nice smile of interest.

But Jason did not smile back, though he wanted to. That would mark him as fresh, and he didn't like girls to think him so.

The waiter set down the pie. Jason lifted the upper crust with his fork, scowled at the contents, let the crust fall again, picked up his check, took a hasty swallow of the lukewarm coffee, and fled.

At the cashier's window, on the way out, he remembered that he had forgotten something, and went back for the letter, on the floor by his chair. As he bent down, he felt the girl's eyes still on him. What a fool she must think him!

Once again, at the office, during a lull, he found time to think of the letter. He tore the flap and read.

His uncle *had* died and *had* left him a legacy!

Poor old Uncle Walt!

The letter indicated that there was something peculiar about the legacy, but just what, it did not say. It urged him, however, to call on the Messrs. Schly and Elliot at once, and they would explain to him in person.

Bewildered, Jason felt the thing to be in need of explanation. Happenings of this sort had never fallen to his lot before.

It was all too unreal.

II.

At the uptown offices of Schly and Elliot a businesslike stenographer told Jason, on inquiry, that Mr. Schly was out and that Mr. Elliot was very busy.

"Just tell him that Brown is here," sighed Jason, sitting stiffly on the oak bench reserved for the office boy. "I'll wait."

The girl became not so businesslike.

"It couldn't be Mr. *Jason* Brown?" she asked archly, with a flash of unsuspected dimples.

Jason nodded.

The stenographer used the dimples again and told him that Mr. Elliot might not be so busy after all. In fact, in another two minutes Jason was propelled to a comfortable leather chair in front of a mahogany desk as flat and expansive as mesa land, and was listening to the bland

tones of a stout gentleman in pearl gray who was telling him that he was a very lucky young man.

"Just what is this legacy?" Jason managed to ask, breaking into the lawyer's congratulatory address.

Mr. Elliot beamed like a fairy godmother.

"In the first place," he said, drawing a long breath and tipping back his chair, "ten thousand dollars—"

He paused a moment, then added slowly— "In pennies."

"What?" gasped Jason.

"I admit that seems queer," observed Mr. Elliot.

"It sure does," agreed Jason.

"You knew your uncle, of course."

"Oh, yes," said Jason.

"You knew him to be slightly—eccentric?"

"He was queer, yes."

"Fond of a joke," went on the lawyer, paving the way for further explanation.

"Yes, a great kidder. That was Uncle Walt all over," supplemented Jason.

Both of them nodded solemnly over Uncle Walt's sense of humor.

"Well," said the lawyer, suddenly brisk. "To get down to the will. Your uncle, Mr. Brown, has left you ten thousand dollars in pennies to be spent in a certain way. You want to know how, of course."

"Yes."

"First, then, Mr. Brown, you are to spend these one million pennies within a time limit of thirty days."

"That's not so long, is it?" put in Jason.

"It's very short," commented the attorney, and resumed. "The second condition is that you must spend them *as* pennies. They must not be converted into other kinds of money, nor may they be given away. They must be spent for value received."

"Gosh!" murmured Jason.

"Another clause provides that you must confide in no one the fact that you have been left this legacy, nor can you make explanations of your actions in disposing of it."

"A lot of people," foretold Jason wanly, "are going to think I'm crazy."

"Probably," smiled the lawyer. "The last clause provides that, on successful completion of the terms of the will, you are to inherit the remainder of your uncle's estate. I should judge that it would amount to approximately five hundred thousand dollars."

"Whew! I could do a lot with that," whistled Jason.

"Anybody could," agreed the attorney, affably. "Now, there is also a letter here in my keeping from your uncle to you, to be delivered to you only on your successful completion of the terms of the will. That may tell you something."

"I hope so," groaned Jason. "I don't get this at all. In the first place, where did Uncle Walt get all these pennies?"

Mr. Elliot reached in a drawer and brought out a folded newspaper clipping which he flipped across to Jason.

The clipping contained the smudgy photograph of a tall gentleman whom Jason dimly recognized as his uncle, standing at the head of a procession of small express wagons drawn by little girls in daisy chains and little boys in red, white and blue hats.

On reading the accompanying article, Jason learned that his uncle, shortly before his death, had given his personal check to representatives of the school children of America in exchange for the pennies contributed by them toward the erection of a memorial to a former president. The picture evidently intended to show Uncle Walt receiving the wagon loads of pennies from the school children and giving the check in exchange.

"Uncle Walt always did like to get his picture in the papers, somehow," observed Jason, charitably.

"He was a great philanthropist," reminisced Mr. Elliot.

"He must have been," said Jason a little darkly, "to get himself loaded with a million pennies. But I don't see why he passed 'em on to me."

"A million pennies," sagely reminded the lawyer, "is ten thousand dollars, Mr. Brown. And there's more to come."

"Yes," breathed Jason, and it made his head whirl.

Mr. Elliot brought his chair down gently.

"Well, Mr. Brown," he said in conclusion, "that's that. The money will be delivered to you at your address to-morrow morning at ten. You'll be home, of course?"

"I can arrange to be, I guess," answered Jason, hesitantly.

"All right, Mr. Brown," beamed the lawyer. "You're a lucky man, sir. Yes, that's the right door. Good day."

"Good day," murmured Jason, and went out without even seeing the extremely unbusinesslike stenographer who held the door for him, and smiled.

III.

THAT night, Jason had a terrible dream. He dreamed that he passed in review before all the slot machines in the world, trying to get rid of his million pennies, and that he was compelled to chew all the gum produced therefrom. When he woke up in the morning, his jaws were actually tired.

The first thing he did was to call the *Ledger* and tell them he wouldn't be in until that afternoon.

"That's all right, Brown," came the voice of the city editor. "I suppose you're finishing up that sketch on the fight last night."

"Oh—er—yes," lied Jason, and rang off.

Mrs. Olmsted, the landlady, wondered why he didn't eat much breakfast that morning and why he didn't go to work.

"Are you sick, or something?" she asked, solicitously.

"Yes, or 'something,'" Jason told her, gravely, and fled from his cold cereal to his room on the third floor front.

A million pennies!

His head swam. He must think of something else or he'd go crazy.

He fished from under his crumpled pillow a copy of *Mesa Tales* and tried to lose himself in a story of his beloved West, written by an ambitious young shoe clerk who had never been west of Columbus, Ohio, when a series of insistent knocks battered his door.

It was Mrs. Olmsted, flushed and breathless from excitement and a climb of three flights.

"Mr. Brown!" she panted. "You're wanted. There's three police downstairs and a tank."

"Gas, oil, or water?" asked Jason.

"It's on wheels," she breathed, "and has a hide like a rhinoceros. And the police have guns. I guess you'd better give yourself up, Mr. Brown."

"I will," smiled Jason, and followed her downstairs, his heart hammering.

In due course, the armored car gave forth its load, the three men bearing bag after bag to the safety of Jason's room while Mrs. Olmsted stood aghast, though trying to give to the crowds on the sidewalk the impression that she knew all about it.

In bewilderment, Jason signed a paper, one of the guards saluted and the "rhinoceros" lumbered off, with a short, gray tail of smoke behind it.

Mrs. Olmsted closed the hall door on the dispersing crowd and faced Jason in the dim circle of the fanlight.

"For the love of all the saints, Mr. Brown," she breathed, "what's in them bags?"

Jason eyed her gravely.

"Maybe it's wheat, Mrs. Olmsted," he said. "And maybe it's gold bricks."

"Whatever it is," grunted Mrs. Olmsted, abashed by her boarder's reserve, "it's trouble. I feel it in my bones. You'd better lock your door to-night, Mr. Brown, and get a gun."

"That's a good idea," agreed Jason, without smiling.

IV.

JASON had told the city editor that he wouldn't be down town until afternoon, but lunch hour found him in the little hospital-like restaurant around the corner from his office at precisely the same time he had been the day before.

Both his spirits and pockets weighed heavily, the former with disturbing thoughts of the thirty days to come, the latter with two dollars in pennies.

His luncheons usually did not call for over sixty cents, but made suddenly extravagant by the conditions of his new legacy, he ordered five or six of the most expensive dishes the restaurant offered, though he doubted if he could even drink his coffee.

The prospect of getting rid of one million pennies in thirty days, when noon of the first day found him poorer by only his subway fare down town, was not encouraging. It is hard for a young man of simple, frugal tastes to turn spendthrift overnight.

He was drowned in deep and gloomy contemplation when the waiter came to his side with a menu.

"I've already ordered, thanks—everything I'm going to," he muttered a trifle sourly.

"Yeah, I know," twanged the waiter. "But that dame back there told me to hand you this."

Then Jason saw that the menu was the one on which he had drawn the picture of that strange, disturbing young lady the day before. Under his sketch in a nice, sincere handwriting were the words: "This is awfully good? Can't I keep it, please?"

Jason blushed and wrote: "Sure. Glad to have you," in a slightly unsteady hand and passed it back to the unblinking waiter.

Jason half turned in his chair, losing his napkin, and met the straightforward, gray-green eyes of the girl at the table behind him.

She smiled.

Jason smiled a little, too, and embarrassed by a sudden feeling that overcame him, turned around again.

He took refuge in chicken à la king, minced lamb on toast, Brussels sprouts and a chocolate pie. He probed them all abstractedly with the point of his fork, then deserted them for two glasses of ice water. He felt he must cool off before he encountered the gray-green eyes of that girl again.

As the waiter brought his check he heard the sharp click of a feminine handbag behind him and the soft scrape of a chair pushed back.

Feeling in his hip pocket, he brought forth a handful of pennies. He counted out ten of the better-looking ones and tried to tuck them unobtrusively under his pie plate.

But they wouldn't tuck. He then tried stacking the ten in a neat pile beside the crumple of his napkin, but they looked as high as the Eiffel Tower.

He ended by splitting the pile into two of five cents each, took another swallow of ice water and rose to reach down his hat.

All this time, he thought, he felt the amused eyes of both the girl and the waiter upon him. What a fool they must think him!

He was paying his check at the cashier's window just as the girl came up to pay hers. She waited near by while he confusedly counted out one hundred and thirty-five pennies and pushed them en masse across the glass slab.

The gum-chewing, red-lipped cashier eyed him in amazement. She was a young woman who was accustomed to expressing herself freely, and freely she did.

"Hey, Charlie!" she hooted. "What's the large idea, huh? Been robbing the mint?"

"N-no," stammered Jason, wishing her voice didn't have such splendid carrying qualities.

"What's the idea, then? Been saving up for this meal for a long time? Well, Charlie, if you think *I'm* going to count out this assortment of joy berries, you're all wrong. Trot out some real cash and cut the comedy."

The back of Jason's neck burned, but he tried to be dignified.

"That's all I have right now," he said. "You see—"

He stopped. The will restrained him. He could not explain the diabolical conditions under which he was laboring.

"Well, it's all right this time," grumbled the girl, wearily counting the pennies in pairs. "But don't do it again. I never did have much bank training, Charlie."

Jason cast a desperate glance at the calm, waiting figure of the girl beside him. She mustn't think him an utter fool, or that his name was Charlie, or that this red-lipped young woman behind the bars was in the habit of calling him by his first name.

The girl's gray-green eyes were a little mystified, but the smile she gave him was still friendly.

"I liked that picture you drew of me," she murmured in a voice and stepped up to take Jason's place at the window.

"D-did you?" said Jason inanely.

"Yes," she replied, opening her neat

black hand bag and half turning her back on him.

Jason waited a moment. She evidently wasn't going to say anything more, and the hundred and one things that came to his mind to say got no farther than his throat, so he left. At the corner, he looked back, but either she hadn't yet come out or else had disappeared down a side street.

He went back to the office and tried to concentrate on the cartoon of the fight the night before at the Garden. But his pencil didn't work so well. Something was wrong.

He didn't see things the same—hadn't ever since he had made that sketch of the girl. Jason was losing his cartoonist's eye.

The managing editor merely grunted over the finished sketch.

"Humph, that's not so good, Brown," he commented, shortly. "Doesn't seem to strike me funny. Guess you're a little off your feed, eh?"

"Must be, sir," answered Jason, mournfully.

V.

In the next three weeks, he managed to get rid of sixty-seven dollars and forty cents' worth of those malicious pennies. Twenty-three days of the precious thirty already gone and only six thousand, seven hundred and forty of the million coppers! It was a slow and torturing process.

Even the man at the change window in the subway was beginning to get a little grouchy about giving Jason a perfectly good nickel every morning for five measly pennies. It tied up the turnstiles and traffic while he counted them out. What was the big idea, he wanted to know? Was Jason kidding him?

Jason didn't see the girl again, either. He didn't dare go back to that same lunch room and face that red-lipped, loud-mouthed Amazon of high finance at the cashier's window. He frequented other places in the neighborhood, ordering merely coffee and buns, or something that wouldn't come to over twenty cents and that could be counted out with the least effort to the cashier and a minimum of embarrassment to himself.

The pennies were having a cheapening effect upon Jason. He felt mean and little and people began to look at him as mean and little. Here, he had a fortune in pennies and people were treating him like a pauper!

His work at the office wasn't going well. His drawings lacked something. Every one said the old punch was missing. He wasn't seeing things the way he used to.

So he wasn't much surprised when the managing editor called him into his office one Saturday morning and gently fired him.

"It's too bad, Brown," he said kindly. "I don't know what's the matter with you. You've fallen off lately. Maybe it's only temporary, and if you get back that comedy eye of yours, come back. In the meantime, well—" He shrugged. "We just can't keep on dead wood, you know, Brown."

"I know," gulped Jason.

He spent the remainder of the morning packing up the contents of his desk into a neat little bundle, said a casual good-by to the office force who didn't seem to regret his going, and at his usual lunch hour wandered to the door of the hospital-like restaurant. This was the last day he would be in that neighborhood, probably.

He was relieved to see that the red-lipped Amazon was not there and that the girl with the gray-green eyes was!

The pressure of recent events had given Jason a sort of dogged courage that he had never had before, and this time he went directly to her table and pulled out a chair across from her.

"How do you do?" she began pleasantly, looking up from her lamb croquette.

Jason sat down.

"It isn't a very nice day, is it?" she went on, with a glance at the drizzle outside.

Jason agreed, emphatically.

"But I *like* the rain," she added.

In her shiny green waterproof that made her eyes seem like clear brook water, Jason decided that she was just made for rainy days, or sunny ones, for that matter.

He said nothing of that, though.

The girl went on, chattily.

"This is a queer sort of neighborhood, isn't it? Great towers of offices and green

parks and one of the world's largest bridges all jumbled up with dirty little crooked side streets and musty old frame shops. But I love it, don't you?"

"Yes," agreed Jason with a gulp. "But I guess I never realized how much till now—when I'm leaving it."

"Oh!" murmured the girl. "Then you're not going to be around here any more?"

"No," said Jason, and his despair pricked him to a strange, new boldness. "That's why I came in here to-day, hoping you'd be here, to ask you—that even if I wouldn't be here any more, I could see you again—some more—somewhere else—" He floundered, but continued. "I thought maybe you might even go out with me to-night, uptown, to dinner and a show."

The girl hesitated.

"I know you don't know me," Jason hastened to put in before she could say no. "I might be a cutthroat or a crook or even—a flirt."

She laughed gayly.

"Why, I don't think so," she said, trying to pull the corners of her lips into soberness.

"But you wouldn't go out with me, would you?" he pleaded, anxiously.

She regarded him steadily. She noted his nice, high forehead, a little flushed with intensity—his lean, almost homely face still bronzed from Western sun and winds—the wryness of his clumsily tied necktie. Then she spoke.

"Why, yes," she agreed. "I would. I'd like to."

He almost whooped.

"Where's your house?" he asked, anxious to arrange the details. "Give me the number and I'll come for you. What would be a good time? Six?"

Her brows contracted, thoughtfully.

"No," she said lightly. "You'd better meet me somewhere else. At the drug store, say, in the middle of Times Square. That's a convenient place."

"All right," agreed Jason, his spirits slightly dampened. He would rather have come to her home. That was the way men called on girls back in Nevada.

But he was so exhilarated at the thought that she was willing to go out with him at all that his spirits soon rose above the temporary set-back.

Jason tried to prolong the lunch as long as possible, for two reasons. He liked sitting opposite the gray-green eyes and he didn't like the thought of having to face the new cashier with two fists full of the hateful pennies. Those pennies were doing dreadful things to Jason's sensitive soul.

But the girl at last seemed to be finished and quickly corraled her own check before Jason could get it. She started for the cashier's window, Jason lingering behind a little to tuck five coppers behind the folds of his napkin.

The same waiter was there and he didn't want to risk the embarrassment of a double pile of pennies again.

The girl had finished paying her check when Jason came to the window.

"I must run on now," she said, much to Jason's sorrow and relief. "But I'll see you at six. Good-by."

She nodded brightly and passed out through the rain-fogged swinging doors, her green waterproof crackling like fresh, crisp lettuce.

Jason counted out twenty-five cents, the price of his modest meal, while the cashier, evidently the store manager himself, watched him gloomily.

"This is all the change I happen to have with me. Don't want to make you break a big bill," explained Jason with forced cheeriness, as he pushed the pile beneath the grating.

The manager grunted and looked at him with cold-eyed scorn. Jason felt as humble as a worm without even the prospect of turning.

When he emerged to the street, the girl was nowhere in sight, though Jason thought he saw a green waterproof swinging briskly across City Hall Park. But there were so many ladies out that day in green waterproofs that he couldn't be sure it was *the* girl.

In spite of his recent dismissal from the office, in spite of the ever-growing predicaments inexplicably forced on him by his fun-loving old uncle who must be even now laughing at him from a golden cloud, Jason's thoughts were rosy. He was planning

what sort of entertainment he could provide his young lady that evening. It must be lavish, he decided.

First, if the girl were a business woman, she would appreciate extravagance for an evening. Secondly, if she were one of those society belles, she would expect extravagance. Thirdly, and urgently, he simply must get rid of those blamed pennies.

They would have dinner, then, at the Waldorf. That was elegance unparalleled to Jason's mind. Then they would go to a good show.

He should have asked her what she would like to see. Perhaps she had already seen most of them, especially if she were a society belle, which Jason thought unlikely and which he hoped was not so.

But it was astounding how very little he did know about her. He didn't even know her name!

The choice of a show was too perplexing for Jason and he finally decided to leave it to the girl herself when they met for dinner. They could surely get seats for something, even at the last minute.

The next question was, what should he wear? A dress suit? No, that was a little too much. A Tuxedo, he guessed, was the proper thing. Well, he would have to go right uptown and buy one.

He stopped at his boarding house first, went to his room and took down from his top closet shelf two of the money bags. But how should he carry them? He finally solved the problem by dumping them into a small, black traveling bag which thereby became alarmingly heavy.

Then he climbed aboard a south bound Broadway surface car.

At Fiftieth Street, Jason saw a particularly promising store of men's fine furnishings, and got off the car as soon as he could stop it, walking back two blocks, lugging the heavy bag.

He paused inside the entrance several moments, looking about at mannish displays of raccoon coats, on spring sale, at pale pink sport ties and silk and wool golf hose in various appealing shades. At last, he managed to attract the attention of an anæmic young clerk with disinterested blue eyes and a new manicure.

"Did you want to see something?" asked the clerk wearily, glancing with disapproval at Jason's plain blue serge, a little too short in the trouser legs for him and showing a glimpse of socks that were not all silk.

"Sure," answered Jason.

"What can I show you?"

"A Tuxedo outfit. Complete with all the riggings."

"We're having them on special sale now for seventy-five dollars and seventy-five cents," recited the young man.

Jason ruminated.

He had brought almost two hundred dollars with him and hated to tote it home.

"Haven't you got anything a little better?" he inquired.

The clerk thawed somewhat. Jason was proving a more promising customer than he had expected.

"Yes, we've got a very smart one—latest thing out," he warmed to his subject. "Best thing in the store or on Broadway for that matter, for one hundred and ten dollars."

"Shirt and all included?"

"No, you'll have to get those separate. They'll cost you another eighteen or twenty."

"Good," beamed Jason.

He followed the clerk to the back of the store and took off his coat. The clerk caressingly brought forth a handsome black suit on a hanger.

"Just feel the material," he urged Jason, pinching it himself.

Jason felt, but remained unenlightened.

"Seems all right to me," he commented.

"Just slip into this vest, sir," invited the clerk, deferentially.

Jason warmed to this attention like an outcast hound pup suddenly brought into a cozy family circle. Inside ten minutes, he decided to take the suit. In another five, he had acquired a white, pleated shirt, a black bow-tie and some pearl studs.

The clerk gave the outfit to another man to wrap and busied himself with his pad.

"It all comes to one hundred and forty-nine dollars and fifty cents," he told Jason, checking off the items with a flourish.

Jason hoisted the heavy black money bag to a chair, while figuring how much his bill would come to in pennies. Let's see.

Yes, fourteen thousand, nine hundred and fifty of them.

The clerk hovered near, an expectant eye on the bag.

"Very few of our customers pay us in gold," he observed. "You must be from the West, sir."

Jason eyed him frankly.

"I'm from the West, all right," he admitted, calmly. "But this isn't gold. It's pennies."

"What? I don't get you, sir."

"I said I would have to pay you in pennies," repeated Jason. "That's what's in that bag."

The clerk paled.

"Are you kidding me?" he asked.

"No," said Jason.

He opened the bag and brought out a handful of thin-worn coppers.

The clerk took a backward step.

"I'll call the manager," he muttered. "I —this beats me."

The manager, a short, greasy individual with a pomaded hair cut, came waddling down the aisle in front of the clerk. His near-sighted eyes took in Jason curiously.

"What's up?" he inquired.

"This gentleman," explained the clerk, "has just bought a Tuxedo with shirt and studs and wants to pay for 'em with those pennies in that bag there."

The manager switched his opaque blue eyes from the bag to Jason.

"Are you calling me out here to take up my time with foolishness?" he asked sharply.

Jason hastened to explain.

"I've bought one of your suits," he said, "and want to pay for it in pennies. I can't tell you why. But a hundred and forty-nine dollars in pennies is as good as in bills —if you don't mind counting 'em."

"Counting 'em! Great guns!" ejaculated the manager, his voice becoming surly. "Say, now, what is this, anyhow? Are you one of them college boys coming in here to play a joke?"

"No," denied Jason. "I've never been to college and this isn't much of a joke."

"Looks as though he's been holding up a bank," put in he clerk, in an undertone. "Might be a bandit."

"Or a plain nut!" added the manager. "I know his kind."

"What 'll we do about it, sir?" murmured the clerk.

"It's what will *he* do," snapped the manager, turning on Jason. "He either gets out of here in two minutes or gets thrown out. I ain't got no time for foolishness."

Hot with anger and embarrassment, Jason grimly hoisted on his old coat and began a dignified exit.

The manager called him back, peremptorily. "See here, you can't leave them things here."

Jason retraced, picked up the hateful black bag and went out with less dignity than he intended.

It was the most humiliating thing that had happened to him in over three weeks of nothing but humiliation.

Darn Uncle Walt! He felt like chucking the whole thing then and there. What did he care for ten thousand dollars—or five hundred thousand?

Then the remembrance of a pair of gray-green eyes flashed to his mind. Vague, rosy dreams of romance—a home with the girl in it—pretty things for her—success for her —stirred his heart.

Sordid as it may seem, a young man needs money nowadays. It's what helps to make dreams come true—even vague, half-formed dreams like Jason's.

Immediate need pricked him to new action. It was half past three by the ornamental clock in front of a near-by jeweler's and he had to have a Tuxedo by six.

Jason decided to try no more Broadway stores. Aimlessly, he wandered to Sixth Avenue and drifted down it, looking in the windows. It really wasn't necessary to look in the windows, though. Most of the stores' contents were on the street.

He hadn't gone more than five blocks when he was suddenly attracted by a full-length wax dummy in a Tuxedo, the ensemble bearing a roughly-lettered sign:

BIG BARGAIN

Everything You See on Me For Forty-five Dollars Cash

It was the word "cash" that encouraged Jason. The sign didn't specify what kind.

It merely asked for cash, and Jason had that in plenty.

He went into the dim, little store, prepared to be frank from the start and lay all his cards—or rather, pennies—on the table.

A pale Hebrew with blinking, keen eyes came from the musty back regions of the shop at the twinkle of the bell.

Jason got down to business at once.

"You have a Tuxedo outside for forty-five dollars," he began.

The proprietor nodded, rubbing his hands expectantly.

"It looks as though it would fit me, and if it does," went on Jason briskly, "I'd like to buy it."

"Good."

"I may as well tell you now," blurted Jason, "that I'll have to pay you in pennies."

He turned and indicated the black bag. "They're in there," he finished.

The little Hebrew blinked.

"That's funny," he commented.

"It's darn funny," agreed Jason "But the question is, will you sell me the suit?"

The man hesitated, adjusting his spectacles to gaze at Jason curiously.

"Ach, pennies," he spluttered. "Such a cheap nuisance."

"Yet, forty-five dollars in pennies," reasoned Jason, "is forty-five dollars. You'd rather have them that way than somebody's no-good check, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah. I never take nobody's check, good or no good. I do strictly cash business only."

"Pennies are cash, aren't they?"

"Yeah."

"Good, honest cash, too. A lot more honest than some of these counterfeit bills floating around," went on Jason persuasively. "The only reason that people don't like pennies is that they take a long time to count."

"Yeah, that's it. To count. My goodness! Four thousand five hundred pennies"—the little man had evidently been making calculations during Jason's speech—"would take maybe two hours to count. Ach, Himmel! I couldn't do it. It's craziness. Ain't you got no other money?"

"Those pennies," declared Jason firmly, "are all I have. If you don't want to sell me the suit, all right, say so."

"I'd like to sell the suit, yeah. But, ach, it seems such a cheapness to count them cents. I couldn't do it. What if a real customer should come in?"

"If you're worrying about losing trade while you count 'em out," smiled Jason, "I can fix that. Just what do you figure your time is worth by the hour?"

The man shrugged, spreading indifferent palms.

"Ach, how should I know? I never timed myself by no speedometer. Here in the store, maybe it's worth ten, maybe twenty dollars. Home, it ain't worth so much."

"All right," agreed Jason. "I'm willing to pay you twenty dollars extra an hour during the time you take to count out the price of the suit."

"Yeah," said the little man shrewdly. "But what about the extra time it would take to count out the extra twenty?"

Jason sighed wih exasperation.

"What time do you close?" he asked.

"Around five."

"That's only a little over an hour off. If you think you can do more trade with other customers that may happen in here between now and then than you can with me, say so."

The proprietor deliberated a moment.

"Well," he sighed, "you win. I will take the pennies. You try on the suit by yourself, mister, while I commence counting. Or maybe you're scared I'll cheat you, eh, if you ain't watching?" he added warily.

"Go ahead," encouraged Jason.

He wished that he *could* persuade a few people to cheat him out of those miserable pennies.

The suit was a little large in the waist for Jason, but otherwise a fairly good fit.

It was almost five when he finally left the dingy little store, his hard-won Tuxedo safe under his arm, his bag of pennies lighter.

VI.

HOME again. Jason hurriedly set about dressing for his down town appointment,

the first he had had with a girl in New York and one of the few of his entire lifetime.

After a final scrutiny of himself in the mirror, he wearily picked up the still heavy bag of pennies, went out, and hailed a taxi.

It was then almost six o'clock.

The cab skillfully threaded its way down crowded, lighted Broadway, and stopped at one of the many corners of Times Square.

Jason got out, lifted his bag to the curb, opened it, and deftly counted out one hundred and ten pennies, the fare exacted by the meter, plus fifteen cents by way of a tip.

He poured this offering into the overcoated lap of the driver.

"Hey, what's this?" asked the man, startled.

"What I owe you," explained Jason impatiently, "and a little extra for your speed and courtesy."

"Speed and courtesy be damned," snarled the man. "You can't load *me* up with this lead. Shell out some regular cash, bo."

"That's all I have," persisted Jason in irritation, for a near-by clock said sixteen minutes past six. "And I haven't time to stand here and make explanations."

"Well, you're gonna find time," snarled the driver threateningly.

At this crucial moment a brisk, hurried individual edged Jason from the curb, planted his own suitcase in the taxi, climbed into the back seat, and panted:

"Five dollars if you get me to Grand Central in six minutes!"

The driver pushed the pennies more securely into his lap, gave Jason a scathing look, and scornfully sped away.

The girl was waiting just inside the store when Jason entered, still a little flushed from his encounter.

"You've had to wait," he began apologetically, his eyes lighting on her curly, close-cropped golden bob, not too short to detract from her girlishness. Her hair reminded Jason of one of those small, close-petaled yellow chrysanthemums that you see in florists' windows around November.

She had a dark blue velvet cape around her, but Jason caught a glimpse of a corn-colored dress beneath that licked her knees demurely with its froth of fringe.

"Not long," she answered pleasantly.

"You're all dressed up," observed Jason.

"So are you," she smiled.

"We'd better take a taxi," he almost groaned, not yet recovered from his recent experience. "You can't walk in those clothes. I thought we'd go to the Waldorf, and that's almost ten blocks away."

"Taxi!" she hooted. "I'd much rather walk—and be a part of the Broadway fashion parade."

"All right, if you say so," breathed Jason, relieved.

He steered her through the crowds, his heart as high, his spirits as gay, as the great golden glitter of electric advertisements around them. Even the hateful bag of pennies seemed lighter in his hand.

He propelled her, with quite a worldly air, into the lobby of the Waldorf. He had never been there before himself, but the tinkle of glass and silver and the music of an orchestra down a long corridor to the left hinted to him of dining. She did not need his guidance here, but went on a little ahead of him.

At the cloak room he checked her cape, his hat, and the black bag, which he would have to refer to later when it came time to settle the bill. When he came to the girl's side again she was in conversation with the head waiter, who led them to a nice table by the window without any suggestion from Jason.

"This is a pretty nice layout, isn't it?" he began, pinching his bow-tie into shape.

"Yes," agreed the girl, picking up a menu. "I like it. I come here quite a lot."

Her words dampened Jason's ardor. She was used to this, then. This was her life. She might be a social butterfly, after all.

Jason began to realize that he would have need of that five hundred thousand. And to get it, he must spend the remainder of those devilish pennies. He tried to crowd from his thoughts that he had less than seven days in which to do it.

Curiosity about the girl had been gnaw-

ing Jason ever since he had met her. That was one of the main reasons why he had invited her out that evening, to ask her about herself.

Another reason was that he took simple joy in merely sitting opposite her and watching the lights in her gray-green eyes, the smilingness or seriousness of her not-too-red mouth, the curl of her chrysanthemumlike hair.

"What do you do all day?" asked Jason bluntly, when he had given the order.

She bit off a piece of celery with a sharp but ladylike crunch and looked vaguely out of the parted curtains onto Fifth Avenue.

"Oh, different things," she answered evasively.

"What things?" followed up Jason. "Are you a stenographer, or something like that—go to business down town, maybe—down where I met you?"

"No, I'm not a stenographer," she told him carelessly, then added with more interest: "But what do *you* do?"

"Nothing," answered Jason ruefully.

"Oh, a gentleman of leisure—a young millionaire," she hinted, her eyes focusing on him more intently.

"Well, n-not exactly," stammered Jason.

"You must be," she insisted slyly, "the way you throw your pennies around."

The thrust hurt him. She had noticed it, then.

"That—that's just a hobby of mine," he tried to explain, as much as the third clause of the will would allow him to do.

"My, but you're queer," she laughed, and moved her tiny silver compact from the path of the oncoming turtle soup.

This also hurt Jason. All his life people had thought of him as queer. But this girl's thinking so made him feel worse than ever. He remembered, too, that she hadn't answered his question about herself.

"I wish I knew your name," he began again, after a silence in which he tried to make friends with the puzzling green soup. "You haven't told me."

"I know," she smiled. "And perhaps I won't, either."

"Why not?"

She looked again out of the window.

"See the people on top of the busses!" she exclaimed amusedly. "Most of them working girls and their beaus, out for a little bit of fresh air. And see that big man there on the front seat, smoking and blowing it all back on them. Isn't it pathetic?"

But Jason wouldn't let her swerve him that way from the main issue.

"Why won't you tell me your name?" he persisted.

She met his eyes soberly.

"I have a reason," she answered. "But that shouldn't stop you from telling me yours."

"I won't, though, either," refused Jason moodily.

"I bet I can guess it," she bantered. "Come now. Is it Jones, Brown, or Smith?"

"Brown," blurted out Jason before he realized it.

"Would it be very forward of me to ask the first name and perhaps the middle initial?" she continued, her eyes twinkling with glee at the way she had trapped him.

"No, it wouldn't be forward, I guess," glowered Jason, angry at being caught, yet resolved not to put two feet into the trap. "I'm not figuring on telling you, though, seeing you wouldn't tell me yours."

"All right, Mr. Brown," she cooed. "But please don't be angry. What's in a name?"

"Angry?" marveled Jason, his stubborn lips breaking into a smile. "Why, I could not be—at you. I guess I don't have to know your name and occupation to know you're nice."

"You *do* think I'm nice, then?" she asked.

"Sure," muttered Jason, and took refuge in the green turtle soup.

VII.

THE meal progressed in such comradely merriment that Jason almost forgot that the moment of reckoning was approaching—the moment in which he would be compelled to haul forth those pernicious pennies.

He choked on a bit of meringue. How could he do it? How could he do a thing

like that in this room of staid tapestries, of dignified aspect—with those haughty portraits gazing down at him with somber, aristocratic eyes, and those haughty waiters looking at him with real, seeing ones?

He noticed a gentleman at the next table, settling his check. It was brought him, decorously, face down, on a small silver tray, by a waiter whose respect must be secured at all costs.

How would Jason have the nerve to dump six hundred and some pennies onto that elite little tray before the eyes of that dignified waiter? In the first place, the little tray wouldn't hold that many. In the second place, Jason simply didn't have the nerve to go through with it.

The man at the next table put no money on the tray, however. He merely turned the check over and signed it.

"Be sure and have Mrs. Harrison's dinner sent to her room at once," he ordered the waiter, who bowed deferentially.

You evidently didn't need to pay in cash, then, if you lived in the hotel, as this man apparently did. The revelation brought a stir of hope to Jason's heart, along with a sudden inspiration.

The same waiter was already tabulating, at a discreet distance, the check which would soon be laid before Jason on the pretty little silver tray.

Jason crumpled his napkin, apologized to the girl, and fled. At the coat room he stopped for his hat and the black bag, and went out one of the many exits to the street, reëntering by another.

An alert bellboy annexed the bag and stood near, while Jason strolled, in apparent nonchalance, to the desk.

The clerk laid down his pen and eyed Jason expectantly.

"I would like a room," began Jason, assuming a worldly air.

"With bath, of course," murmured the clerk.

"Of course," said Jason.

"By the day, week, or month, sir?" resumed the clerk, studying a chart.

"By the week," said Jason.

He figured rapidly.

At the end of a week all would be over. He would have discharged his duty by the pennies somehow, and be in a position to pay the hotel in real money—part of the five hundred thousand. If he *didn't* get rid of the pennies— But Jason didn't like to dwell on the possibility.

"I can give you a very nice room," announced the clerk, looking up, "on the Fifth Avenue side, fifth floor, for ninety dollars."

"I'll take that," sighed Jason.

The bell boy secured his key, lifted the heavy bag and followed Jason into the elevator. The boy settled him in his room, put the bag in the closet, opened two of the three bay windows and stood, expectant.

"I'll see you downstairs," said Jason, benevolently, "when I change a couple of big bills."

The boy grinned and vanished. This tall Western gentleman would be fine prey, he decided.

In three minutes, Jason was at his lady's side again. She had finished her coffee and was daintily munching a small cake. The finger bowls had already been brought.

Jason disregarded his and turned to the hovering waiter. He beckoned him with a superb gesture and the man sped noiselessly to his elbow with the check.

"A pencil, please," commanded Jason.

"Right here, sir," murmured the waiter, deftly producing one. "You wish to sign?"

"Of course," said Jason.

He wrote his name, unaware of the slightly craning neck of the girl.

"Just put your room number here, sir," added the waiter. "Thank you, sir."

He retired.

Jason brought out a roll of fifty pennies, which he had previously wrapped in paper for an occasion like this and laid it alongside his coffee cup.

"Oh," murmured the girl, disappointedly, "you've got them all wrapped up this time!"

Jason flushed and quickly led her from the dining room before the waiter should approach their table once more. He hoped he would not have to meet that man's eyes again during the coming week.

He helped the girl on with her blue cloak, taking note of the warm curve of her white little neck, with its fuzz of gold

where the bob had been newly clipped, and led her to a chair.

"Would you wait here a minute, please," he asked, "while I go upstairs and get my hat?"

"Oh," she exclaimed, a little mystified. "You live here?"

"Yes," returned Jason, drawing himself up a bit. The girl evidently considered it a very nice place to live.

Her eyes narrowed and she seemed to be impressing something on her memory. But she was smiling at him as he turned to look back at her from the elevator.

When Jason came down again he was carrying in his hip pocket as many pennies as he could stuff in them. He knew he couldn't sign for tickets at the theater and he was unaware that he could have bought tickets at the hotel where his signaure was good.

"Now, what show would you like to see?" asked Jason, as they strolled toward Broadway. The girl had again scorned a taxi. "Though I suppose you've seen all of 'em," he added, looking down at her with a keen, probing glance.

"No," she answered quietly, "I haven't seen any of them—except two or three. I don't have much time to go."

Jason's heart leaped. Maybe she wasn't an idle daughter of high society after all!

"Would you like to see the 'Danger Signal'?" he asked. He had heard that name mentioned on the subway several weeks before and it was the only one he remembered of the current plays.

"I'd love to," she smiled, happily, and snuggled her arm inside his with comradely content.

Jason propelled her masterfully and with a swelling bosom to the door of the theater just off Broadway where the "Danger Signal" proclaimed itself to the public in a glare of red lights.

"Hope I can get seats," he muttered, taking place in the line before the window.

"Sometimes you can get fine ones at the last minute," commented the girl, standing near him in the lobby.

She smiled at him encouragingly from time to time as he moved up to the window.

At last he was there, with a line behind him as long as it had been before him.

"Can I get a couple of seats?" he asked the suave young man behind the gilded bars.

"For to-night?" grunted the young man.

"Yes."

"Got a couple in the thirteenth row with a post between," he stated frankly. "Will they do?"

"No," said Jason decisively.

"Nothing else downstairs. Wait. Here's a couple just turned in. Fifth row, center. Three eighty-five each. O K?"

Jason nodded and felt in his pockets. He brought forth the entire contents of one and dumped them in front of the grating. Three of the pennies rolled off the window ledge and trickled to the floor with a loud, clear and prolonged tinkle.

A woman and two men picked the three up and returned them to Jason, stonily. Jason blushed and reached in his other pocket for the remaining pennies, which he heaped on top of those already on the window ledge.

The ticket man eyed him curiously.

"Hey, what's all this?" he spluttered, causing several persons in the line back of Jason to crane their necks.

"Seven dollars and seventy cents, I hope," said Jason. "Just count 'em, please, to make sure."

"Good night!" breathed the man heavily. He looked at Jason in alarm, as though he expected him to pull a revolver next, for Jason must certainly be some sort of desperado.

Jason might have kept up the delusion if it hadn't been for the placid, ingenuous smile he sent beaming through the bars. The man promptly amended his verdict of "desperado" to "plain nut."

"What's the idea?" he demanded impatiently, for the line behind Jason was growing restless.

"I'm paying for those tickets," explained Jason with increasing embarrassment. "I'm sorry I have to give you these pennies, but they're all I have with me."

"Except a lot of gall," snapped the man. "We don't have to accept these, you know. Nobody can make us. If you haven't got

any real cash with you, get out of line, please."

The eyes of the girl and several others were on Jason. In the others, as he scooped up the pennies and back out of line, was amused scorn. He did not dare to look to see what was in the girl's.

His face was flaming. A little hot prick scalded his spine and his knees felt weak.

He shouldn't have tried it. He should have known he couldn't have decently got away with it. The pennies were a millstone around his neck—spoiling everything—all his chances of this nice girl's ever liking him. What a sap she must think him!

He went to her side. Murmuring something he didn't intend her to hear, he took her arm and got her out of the red glare that heralded the "Danger Signal" into the comparative darkness of the side street.

"Gosh, I'm sorry!" he blurted out miserably.

She said nothing.

"I—I'll call a taxi and send you home," he suggested. He thought it was the only decent thing left to do.

She eyed him curiously.

"Why, it's early," she said. "We could take a walk in the park."

He thought she was making fun of him. A walk in the park! Nice entertainment for a fellow to hand a girl all dolled up in a corn-colored dinner dress, evening wrap and fragile gold slippers!

"Thanks," he said dryly, "but I won't bother you any more."

He called a taxi before she could protest further.

She paused a moment on getting in and faced him.

"Mr. Brown," she asked, earnestly, "why do you do this, if it makes you so miserable?"

"Do what?" he gulped.

She hesitated.

"Why, you know," she said, softly. "This—penny business. What do you do it for?"

She was asking him point-blank. He would have liked nothing better than to blurt out the whole thing, to try to make her understand what devilish conditions were tying him down, making a fool of him before every one and especially *her*. Maybe if she understood she wouldn't absolutely condemn him.

For a wild second, he thought of telling. No one would ever know. Uncle Walt wouldn't know. The lawyers wouldn't know. He could tell her to-night, and then to-morrow chuck the whole load of pennies off Brooklyn Bridge.

That would be a simple way to get rid of them. Then, with the five hundred thousand—

He shook himself. The idea was crazy. Jason could no more do a thing like that than put lead nickels into a blind man's cup.

The girl was still eying him intently.

Jason returned her gaze, resolute.

"I wish I could tell you," he said, "but I can't. Good night—though I'd better call it good-by. You won't ever want to see me again."

She murmured something, but the chug of the impatient taxi drowned her words. Jason looked after her ruefully, dug his hands in his pockets, brought forth a few pennies and shied them at a lamp-post.

Fifteen seconds later, he was groveling for them on the sidewalk, much to the amusement of a passer-by and the interest of a policeman on the opposite corner.

Shying pennies at lamp-posts was not spending them.

VIII.

JASON trolleyed back to the boarding house, packed his blue serge suit and two changes of underwear in an old grip and started out. It was only nine o'clock, and Mrs. Olmstead was still abroad.

"Are you skipping out on the rent, maybe?" she accosted him suddenly from the bottom of the stairs as he came down.

"No, Mrs. Olmsted," he denied. "I'll be back at the end of the week to settle and move out the rest of my stuff. I've left enough for security, I guess."

He had. He had left most of his belongings and the whole hoard of pennies that seemed hardly touched. There was no use taking them with him until he had thought of some way to spend them—in bulk.

Passing them out in driblets the way he had been doing would get him nowhere. He could see that. So he left them in his closet, under lock and key, though he would have been vastly relieved if any one had stolen them. There was no clause in the will forbidding that.

"Well, I must say it looks mighty funny," grunted Mrs. Olmsted, but let him pass her. She had always liked Jason until he had imported those strange bags into the house. "See that you do come back, Mr. Brown."

"I guess you can trust me," said Jason wryly.

He slept at the Waldorf that night in the first real luxury he had ever known. His shower was luxurious, the sheets were luxurious—everything but his sleep, the little he had of that.

The next morning found Jason sitting in a large, green upholstered chair in his hotel room, staring contemplatively out of the window.

How was he to get rid of those pennies in the five short days remaining? There were hundreds of opportunities for a young man in New York City to spend ten thousand dollars, but sad experience had taught him that it could not be spent in coppers. People looked on them as objectionable, a nuisance.

He couldn't even give them as charity. The will prevented that. He couldn't convert them into real cash, even if a bank would undertake the transaction.

By one o'clock he had accomplished nothing but a headache. He took the elevator down to lunch, steeling himself for another possible encounter with the waiter of the evening before. Would the man eye him with absolute scorn, perhaps even return the fifty paltry pennies with injured dignity?

But, no. The waiter came forward with a bow and, in competition with another, inveigled Jason to a table in his section. He obsequiously removed a slender vase of jonquils an inch further from Jason's elbow, drew out the tall, mahogany chair and settled Jason with deference.

"It's a fine day, sir," he observed pleasantly.

Jason was too flabbergasted at the man's apparent homage to make response.

"Isn't there anything special I can get you, sir?" went on the man anxiously. "A bit of an anchovy canape, perhaps, or a fine chilled grapefruit?"

Jason studied the menu in bewilderment. Peremptorily, the waiter beckoned to a younger one.

"A napkin for Mr. Brown," he murmured. "And quickly, boy."

Jason glowed with amazement.

The waiter had remembered his name! Moreover, he had used it respectfully.

Jason's spirits began to rise. He knew this was a fine hotel, that its guests would receive every courtesy, but the respect paid him this morning far surpassed the slight attention he had received the evening before and, so far as he could see, was not given in such a degree to any other of the patrons. If only the girl were here now!

She was.

Jason's vaguely wandering gaze suddenly lit on a familiar corn-colored bob beneath a little green hat three tables down from him. Her back was to him, but he knew her, nevertheless.

Crumpling his napkin, he half rose to go to her, but stopped.

There was some one with her—a tall, heavy, dark man with an olive skin and shifting eyes that strayed often from the face of his companion. He was obviously a foreigner, a Turk even, thought Jason.

His high, oily forehead was built for a turban. The fingers that caressed his bearded chin were heavy with bizarre rings.

Jason took an immediate dislike to him. It wasn't solely because he was with the girl. If he had met him, man to man, he would have disliked him.

She, apparently, had no such feeling. She leaned toward him across the table. The murmur of her voice that came indistinctly to Jason's ears was wheedling, soft, almost pleading. She was evidently "making up to him" for all she was worth.

Jason went heartsick. He burned at the easy, amused look in the shifting eyes that were smiling back at the girl. He would have liked to murder them both, then and there.

What sort of a girl must she be? He had dreamed of her as ideal. He had even been weaving vague, romantic plans around her. She had seemed the nicest girl he had ever known, and here she was playing up to a slick foreigner who was evidently loath to grant her what she was asking.

Jason couldn't stand the sight of it any more. He fled, much to the concern of the waiter who was just bringing on the canapes, and went outside to the street. He couldn't even stand being in the hotel with them while they were there.

Jason strolled over to Broadway, aimlessly. He ignored the gay April sunshine, the hurrying crowds, the brightness of new Easter attire, scarce a week old.

There was nothing to do with his time and little he could do with the few pennies in his pockets. Mechanically, he stopped in front of a news-stand and bought an afternoon paper.

The newsboy accepted his three pennies without comment. Jason smiled sardonically. Buying a three-cent paper was about the only thing he could decently do with his money.

He tucked the paper under his arm without looking at it, wandered up to Forty-Second Street and sat on a stone bench by the library. For an hour he watched the dingy city doves, trying to forget a pair of gray-green eyes that had seemed so wide, so nice, so trusting—then strolled back to the hotel.

He had two hours yet before dinner and nothing to do but think, and that was precisely what he didn't want to do. His thoughts at that time were far from cheerful.

Twice, the bell-boy came with ice water without his sending for it, lingering at the door and looking back at Jason with ill-concealed admiration.

Jason couldn't fathom it. What had got into people anyhow?

He sat down in the big green chair for further speculation on the strangeness of events, but something under him made him uncomfortable. It was the newspaper he had bought and carelessly tossed aside on coming in.

He straightened it out and gazed abstractedly at the front page. A paragraph near the bottom suddenly caught his attention. The heading ran:

ECCENTRIC YOUNG MILLIONAIRE FLINGS AWAY FORTUNE IN PENNIES

A curious heat pricked Jason. Amazement made his cheeks burn. What in the dickens?

The article, written in a light, fanciful vein typical of the modern "feature story," described the strange antics of a young man about town, a Mr. Jason Brown, residing at the Waldorf. It told how this gay young gentleman was amusing Broadway by flinging away his fortune, penny by penny. The story even described Jason's black bag, the way he tipped waiters, and wound up by speculating as to why the young "Copper King" had chosen this as a fad.

Jason's ears burned. The story was just accurate enough to make him wonder who on earth had written it and where he got the "dope," and just overdrawn enough to assure him that the author didn't know much of what he was talking about.

Who had concocted the darn thing? Jason didn't recall telling any one at the *Ledger* office of his newly and strangely acquired legacy; besides, this article did not appear in the *Ledger*, but in a rival sheet, the *Inquirer*.

The whole thing mystified Jason. Had he been shouting aloud in his sleep? Had he inadvertently let out his secret? Who knew enough about him to write him up like this?

He read the paragraph again and smiled at the allusion to the "young millionaire." That showed how little the author of the article really knew. It also gave him a glimmering insight into the strange new deference shown him at the hotel.

The management must have read the article in an earlier edition, just before lunch, and the news must have spread rapidly. It explained the servility of the waiter, the dogged admiration of the bell boy.

Jason began to feel not so irritated, though he was still mystified by the whole proceedings. Having people kotow to him was a pleasing new sensation after his shy, self-conscious boyhood and young manhood,

and the last three weeks of abject humiliation.

Yet things were still dark for him. The pennies were not spent.

Bedtime found him no further in solving the problem. He slid gratefully between the clean, new sheets of his mahogany four-poster and laid his aching head on the cool pillow.

Another day gone and nothing accomplished, except the establishing of a reputation he didn't quite deserve. Yet it was interesting to be treated like a gay young millionaire, precarious though his position might be.

He slept little that night, tossing between a mixture of pleasant dreams and nightmares. Toward morning, however, he dozed peacefully and was awakened by the high sun shining in his eyes and the telephone ringing in his ears.

It was the clerk, probably, wanting to know if he'd like more ice water or his breakfast in bed. It was not the clerk.

A man's brisk, cordial voice informed Jason that the speaker was a Mr. Carr, representative of the Packman Automobile Company. Mr. Carr sincerely hoped that such a fine, bright day found Mr. Brown in the best of health, and begged for an interview.

He wanted to try to bring Mr. Brown to the opinion that the new Packman Speedy Eight was the finest roadster on the market. In fact, he would like to sell Mr. Brown one of these cars.

He understood that Mr. Brown made a hobby of spending only pennies and he thought the idea a charming one. So original. If Mr. Brown decided he would like to buy one of the Speedy Eights, it would please the company very much to send one of their new Packman Light Trucks to Mr. Brown's address to aid him in transporting the—er—pennies, as he realized it would be quite difficult for Mr. Brown to handle five thousand dollars' worth of them alone.

Yes, that was the price of the Speedy Eight, though they were willing to give Mr. Brown a reduction if—

"No, no!" hastily interposed Jason, dizzy with the bewilderment of it all.

Not on your life, he thought. They could take every one of those pennies they wanted.

He said aloud that he felt sure he would like to buy the Speedy Eight, and if Mr. Carr would send the truck to his address—he gave that of his old boarding house—the deal might as well be considered closed.

Mr. Carr expressed great delight and asked if Mr. Brown would mind if several camera men from the newspapers and movie weeklies accompanied the party. The papers were anxious for the story, and the publicity would be—er—very gratifying to the Packman people and—er—he hoped not too offensive to Mr. Brown.

Jason hung up on Mr. Carr's pleasant monologue and whooped. Could you tie that?

As he crossed the lobby on his way in to breakfast, the clerk leaned from the desk, greeted him with a deferential: "Good morning, Mr. Brown," and handed him a fistful of mail.

While waiting for his grapefruit, Jason slit the letters eagerly with his butter knife.

They were all on a par with Mr. Carr's proposal. Two other auto companies invited his trade, but made no such convenient provision for truckage as had the Packman people. Four exclusive tailors begged his patronage.

Two clubs asked for his membership. Nine charities solicited his support. Three enterprising young accountants thought they might be useful in the handling of his money.

Such are the results of a little publicity. Jason gave silent, heartfelt thanks to the person who had written that silly, exaggerated article. He would like to meet him and shake his hand.

IX.

By five o'clock that afternoon, Jason had spent the last of the million pennies.

The Packman light truck had come for them, accompanied by a battery of camera and newspaper men who had followed him about all afternoon in his rounds of lavish spending.

Jason had been snapped sitting at the wheel of his new Speedy Eight with the

truckload of pennies in the background. He was the central figure in a flash light photograph of a luncheon given by him to the members of the Idlers' Club which he had just joined, with a sea of admiring faces around him and an attentive waiter holding a large clothes-basket for his tip.

The next morning, Jason drove to the lawyers' office where Mr. Schly and Mr. Elliot greeted him with congratulations. They promptly turned over to him a check for five hundred thousand dollars and his uncle's letter, which ran:

DEAR NEPHEW JASON:

If you're reading this, you've pulled through all right. Thought you would. You're the nearest thing to chick or child I've got, and I want you to have what I couldn't take with me.

I bet you've cussed me out a hundred times in the last thirty days and thought I was crazy. Maybe I was. But, Jason, boy, if I'd left you that money without strings to it I know what you'd do with it, knowing you. You'd stick it in the bank and keep on plodding, missing half the joy of life.

You never did have enough get-up-and-go. You needed bringing out. And spending that money the way I've made you spend it must have done it.

I bet you've had some pretty queer experiences getting rid of the pennies—some of 'em good and some of 'em bad. But I'm hoping they did you good, all in all.

Anyhow, try to think kindly of your

Loving

UNCLE WALT.

P. S.—Remember when you were a kid how I used to make you bury a penny out in the graveyard Christmas Eve and tell you you would find a pot of gold there in the morning? Well, that gave me the idea for this.

"Poor old Uncle Walt!" murmured Jason, and his eyes became suddenly moist.

X.

LEAVING the lawyers, he drove back down town to Park Row. Still mystified about his "write-up," he stopped in at the *Inquirer* to satisfy his curiosity.

Jason followed an escort through a maze of overflowing waste paper baskets, cluttered desks and low-hung, green-shaded lights to a typewriter with a bent, golden head before it.

Jason's heart jumped.

It was the girl.

That explained everything. She was the one who had written that story, of course. She knew he was staying at the hotel. She knew his name, at least the Brown part and she could have got the rest from the hotel register. She, it was, who had charmingly written of his mysterious black bag and penny tips!

Of course!

Jason's surprise turned to irritation. So, she had simply been using him as "material!" All that merry comradeship between them amounted to nothing. She was merely a reporter and he was her story.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, recognizing Jason, and lowered her head in embarrassment.

"Thank you for that story," began Jason coldly. "You don't know what a help it was."

The girl raised her head proudly.

"Well, it helped me, too," she answered with a toss of her corn-colored bob. "I got a boost on it."

"Fine," approved Jason, smiling, though his thoughts were bitter. "I'm glad I was of some use to you. I'm glad I made such a good story." Then he went on, passionately: "That's all I was, I guess—a story. I was crazy to think you just liked—me."

"Why," she murmured, amazed at his intensity. "Why, I did, Mr. Brown. Maybe at first I saw in you—just a story. But I liked you, too, for yourself—after a little while."

She raised her eyes again and looked at him steadily, though her smile was tremulous.

Jason's heart thawed.

"And that fellow," he went on, seeing things in a new light. "That greasy guy you were with in the hotel that day—was he just a story?"

"Yes," she said. "They sent me to interview him. He was the Pasha of something or other in Turkey and I was to get his opinion of American women. He was a hard subject, too. Didn't want to talk."

That was why she had to wheedle him, of course!

Jason glowed.

"Gosh, I'm glad!" was all he could say.

Something in his gaze made the girl shy again and she took refuge in remarking: "I suppose I didn't get your story very straight, Mr. Brown. You see, you wouldn't talk much, either. Perhaps you'll give me the complete one now."

"Yep," chuckled Jason. "You weren't very accurate. In the first place, I'm not a millionaire. Just had a little money wished on me by my uncle out West. He was a funny old duck and made me spend it in pennies. Thought it would do my soul good and I guess it did. It sure loosened me up, having to spend money like that. But I'm going to be more careful with the rest of it—put it in a little ranch out in Nevada."

"Oh," murmured the girl. "Then you aren't going to stay in New York?"

"No."

She bent her eyes to the typewriter and thoughtfully jabbed a key.

"You aren't going to leave—right away?" she asked, after a silence.

"No," returned Jason, suddenly serious. "There's something I have to do before I go."

"W-what?"

He bent so near to her over the typewriter that she had to meet his eyes again.

"Make you love me," he said slowly. "I've got to start courting you regular, I guess."

"And—and when are you going to start, Mr. Brown?" she asked demurely.

"Right now," returned Jason. "It's going to be a mighty big job, I guess, getting you used to the idea of me and the West—together."

She smiled shyly.

"Why," she murmured, "I like the West already. I was born in Oklahoma, you know. And—and as for you, Mr. Brown, well—just you start your courting and see."

THE END

TAPESTRY

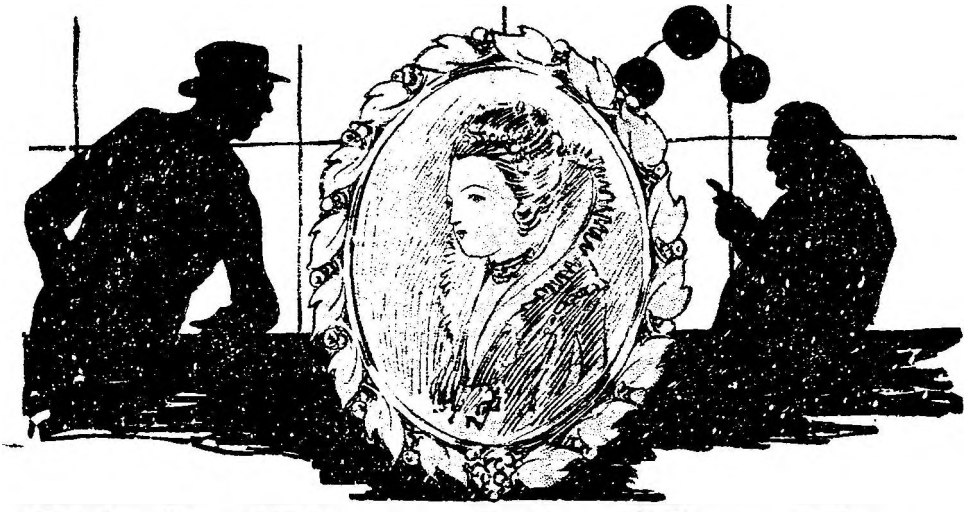
THE sunlight weaves pale patterns on the moss,
As always through the brichen woods they ride—
The gold-haired lady on her milk-white steed,
Her gallant cavalier his roan astride.

Her grass-green kirtle sweeps the ground. A hat
With sweeping feathers shields her rounded cheek;
The knight, adoring eyes fixed on her face,
Bends close. What are the words he seems to speak?

Alone—save for a loping hound—the wood
Enfolds them with its ancient, magic spell—
Is this a rendezvous, whence peril leads
To those who love not wisely, but too well?

I do not know, but watch them often, as
Eternally upon my wall they ride—
The lady on her palfrey, and the squire
With love-lit eyes, who canters by her side!

Mazie V. Caruthers.



Why Did She Do It?

By CORALIE STANTON and HEATH HOSKEN

Authors of "The Great Outlaw," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

DICK HERITAGE is a prosperous young man, living in London, very happily married. One day Molly, his wife, disappears. Scotland Yard detectives guess that Molly's motive for leaving Dick might have been jealousy of Mrs. Anna Crome, a very able lady who wants to help Dick in politics; or it may have been to elope with Dick's best friend, Howard Lake, with whom she is reported seen in Paris. The newspapers soon get hold of the story, and are only prevented from playing it up in a large way as a front-page sensation by the murder of the great politician, Lord Shelmerdine, which occurs just then. Dick is walking through St. James Park, cast down by the weight of his worries—when suddenly he finds himself face to face with Howard Lake!

CHAPTER VI (*Continued*).

FACING THE GRIM FACTS.

YES—Howard Lake himself, with his raw, thick, red hair, and his freckled face, and full, strong-looking mouth, and quaint, sharp nose, and broad forehead. Howard wore his bowler hat rather on the back of his head, as usual, and was dressed in brownish tweeds that were just a shade different from London clothes, more American in their wide fit, with a salmon-colored tie, spotted with yellow and black—a shocking discord with his red hair.

Howard had always dressed abominably, thought Dick, who had a curious feeling as if his brain were being cleaned out with a vacuum machine.

"Hullo, old Dick!" exclaimed Howard. He seemed at a loss for words. There was always some of the awkwardness of the schoolboy in his manner.

Dick came to his senses. "Where is Molly?" he asked.

"Molly?" repeated Howard, looking mystified.

"Molly! Where's Molly—my wife?" Dick's face was rather frenzied.

"My dear chap, what do you mean?" Howard had one of those persuasive voices, the sort of voice that wins the hearts of old maiden ladies and babies and dogs and

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for July 16.

tramps. "Ought I to know where Molly is? I don't quite follow you."

"Where is Molly?" Dick's voice was monotonous, mechanical, like the vacuum cleaner that was scouring out his head.

Howard put his hand on his friend's shoulder. He was a little shorter than Dick, but burlier in build.

"What's the matter?" he asked quietly. "Have you had bad news of your wife, old chap?"

"When did you last see Molly?" the unreal voice went on.

"When did I last see her? Dick, you're very disturbing. Hasn't she been found yet? You must have had a wretched time. I haven't seen anything in the papers, so hoped it was all right. I've been up to my ears in work. I thought no news was good news."

"When did you last see Molly?"

"Dear old boy, when we dined at Matterini's, the three of us—it must have been a month ago."

Dick looked at him with contempt.

"You were seen with Molly at the Gare du Nord in Paris at the beginning of the week."

"At the Gare du Nord, in Paris? I? I say, Dick, this isn't a joke, is it?"

"No."

"Who saw me?"

"Gramount, the artist who lives in our house. You know him?"

"Yes. But he didn't see me in Paris at the beginning of this week."

"He did."

"He couldn't, old fellow—because I was not there."

CHAPTER VII.

DESPAIR.

DICK looked into his friend's eyes and realized that he was making a fool of himself. His nerves were all to pieces. He was like a demented animal careering round and round an inclosure, trying to fight his way out. It led to nowhere.

He tried to control his voice. "You weren't in Paris with Molly?"

"Certainly not."

"You haven't been in Paris at all?"

"Not for more than six months. I went over directly after you were married."

"Where have you been, then?"

"My dear chap, you're obviously not yourself; so I will answer your question. Otherwise, I might be inclined to tell you to go to the devil. I have been at home, and traveling about the North on business. I know you've had a nasty shock. I had hoped that everything was all right, as I'd heard nothing. But I honestly don't see any reason why you should insult me."

"Molly hasn't turned up," said Dick blankly.

"I'm frightfully sorry. But I do wish you would explain."

"Can you come back home with me? Perhaps Gramount will be there."

"Certainly, if you doubt my word."

"He was so positive." Dick turned and hailed a taxi, and they were driven to the Embankment. Neither of them spoke during the journey.

Howard lit a pipe. Dick stared out of the window at nothing.

By the time they reached his flat, his anger had evaporated, and he was again in the grip of despair. Howard would not be behaving like this if he had run away with Molly—not unless he had become a different person.

He had known Howard intimately since he was a boy. If he had run away with Molly, he would have done it like a man; he wouldn't have denied it.

They found Gramount at home. He looked startled at the sight of Lake. He invited the men into his rooms, and mixed them drinks. He was dressed for dinner, but said that he had plenty of time.

It was Howard who took the lead.

"Heritage says you told him that you saw me with his wife at the Gare du Nord in Paris, Gramount. It's naturally upset him very much; and that upsets me, because we're old pals. You did not see me there."

"Oh, but I did!"

"No. I wasn't there; so you couldn't have seen me. Will you tell me the exact time?"

"That's easy. The afternoon train from Boulogne was just coming in. Somewhere between four and five o'clock. I was at the station, getting my ticket for London, and I saw you in the crowd going into the customs."

"You didn't. Forgive me—I don't mean that you didn't think you did. I must have a double; that's all. You say I was with Mrs. Heritage?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can prove that I wasn't there. To begin with: my passport; I have it at my hotel. You can tell by it when I last crossed France.

"And I will tell you what I was doing between four and five o'clock on Tuesday. I was motoring from Liverpool to Manchester, where I ate my dinner, and spent the night at the Midland Hotel. I am well known there."

Dick broke the silence that fell on them. "I can't make it out," he said lamely.

"I could have sworn it was you, Lake," said the artist, much embarrassed. "I apologize."

"You take my word?"

"Of course I take your word. You are right, you must have a double."

"Can you be equally sure the lady was Mrs. Heritage?" asked Howard with a slight laugh.

Gramount looked helplessly at Dick "I can't think how I came to make such a mistake, Heritage. Now we've put the police on the wrong track."

"I must let them know at once," said Dick. He was cold. His nerves reacted to everyday life again. "Will you come upstairs with me, Howard? Gramount wants to get off. I'm as sorry as you both are. But one has to clutch at straws."

The two friends went up to the delightful flat. Slantwise through the bow front windows of the dining room came the last lingering twilight rays. There were asters and Michaelmas daisies in the vases and bowls; a fire burned on the hearth. The maids kept everything going just as when Molly's joyous presence had filled the charming rooms.

"I'll telephone to Scotland Yard," said Dick. The instrument was in the hall, with an extension to their bedrooms. When he came back he looked at his friend. "Clayson says he has no earthly right to question you, but he would be grateful if you would see him."

"Of course I will; but it must be to-morrow, because I'm going back home and sailing for New York on Tuesday. I'm at the Savoy."

"I'll tell him."

He came back again from the telephone. "He'll call on you at ten to-morrow, if that will do. I suppose you can't forgive this."

"Dear man, don't worry! If your Scotland Yard people think I can be of any use, I'm only too willing. I wish I could be. Unfortunately your artist friend is unreliable. If he didn't see me, how can one assume that he saw your wife?"

"Howard, I simply can't talk about it!" Dick gulped.

"Well, I'll get off," said his friend. "I wish I could tell you how sorry I am. You must get some news soon." Suddenly he put his hands on Dick's shoulders and looked square into his eyes. "Heavens, man, don't you *know* I'd do anything for you?"

"Yes—of course," answered Dick in a dull voice.

He hadn't a kick left in him; he had worn himself out with useless emotions, baseless suspicions, unworthy anger. To doubt Howard's word was madness; it would have been greater madness still to doubt his loyalty.

Well, he had been carried away by grief.

The next day Inspector Clayson rang Dick up. He had had an interview with Mr. Howard Lake, who had most kindly and generously placed all information at his disposal to prove that he had not been near Paris on the day Mr. Gramount thought he had seen him there.

It was a regrettable mistake, as obviously Mr. Lake might have taken it in a very different spirit. But the inspector understood that Mr. Lake was an old friend of Mr. Heritage's, and only anxious to help in any way he could.

This rather discounted Mr. Gramount's

statement that he had seen Mrs. Heritage at the Gare du Nord, although of course it was possible that he had not been mistaken in that case.

They would therefore pursue their inquiries in France as well as in other quarters. He hoped to have good news to communicate before long.

"And so on and so on forever and ever!" said Dick to himself with a funny, loose laugh as he hung up the telephone receiver.

CHAPTER VIII.

DICK IN POLITICS.

A YEAR had passed, and it was spring again: and the unaccountable disappearance of Mrs. Heritage was as great a mystery as ever. It had, naturally enough, ceased to be of any interest to the general public, and even her friends were beginning to forget her, merging the sudden strangeness of her passing from their midst into the more familiar state of looking on her as if she were dead.

Her father had not mentioned her since Christmas.

On that festival he had asked Dick in a letter, couched in words of a humility that was more proud than most men's pride, if he could bring himself to forego the legitimate pleasures of his age and spend a night and a day with him at Cannon Hall.

Dick arrived late on Christmas Eve, and the next day ate his Christmas dinner with his father-in-law. The repast was of the simplest, but laid and served with ceremony of priceless old silver and china in the charming little cedar-paneled Justice Room.

When the famous port had been poured into the Jacobite glasses, and they were alone, the squire of Cannon raised his, and, looking at his son-in-law with bitter anger in his deep-blue eyes, said in a cold, inhuman voice:

"I drink the health of my dead daughter!"

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed Molly's husband nervously, as he gazed into the old brown, mummified face, with unforgiving scorn written all over it. "We—we can't know."

"She is dead to me," the squire went on. "She filled newspapers with my name. She stole my property from my house. She has disgraced her family; she has failed in her duty to you, to me, to her race."

"But, sir, we know nothing," ventured Dick, to whom such sentiments on such a day were peculiarly shocking and, spoken by this skeleton of an old man with hatred in his heart, something like sacrilege.

"You are soft, like all your generation," retorted Sir Lionel. "My daughter is dead to me. I shall never forgive her. If she is alive, still she is dead to me."

"Sir, have you thought—she may be really dead?"

"Then," said the squire with furious finality, "she ought to have let me know. She has made a fool of me, a laughing stock of my race. I have wiped her out of my mind."

It was all but comic—this tragic rage of resentment because Molly had not let her terrible old father know that she was dead.

"I shall never mention her again," he added. "Never speak of her to me."

He never had mentioned her again. Dick went down on a Sunday every month, and spent a day and a night at Cannon Hall. In the midst of his increasing pressure of work, both professional and political, he found it in his generous heart to be sorry for the old squire.

He was aging fast and breaking up. Each month he seemed more gaunt. His head looked smaller, all a blaze of blue eyes—as blue as an Italian sky, most incongruous and rather frightening.

There was no doubt Sir Lionel liked to have him, although he never said so. And the cigars Dick brought gave him a foretaste of heaven. Once or twice the young man ventured to remonstrate.

"Why don't you come up to town and stay with me now and then, sir?"

"Can't afford it, my boy."

"But, sir, you're too hard on yourself. You could spend a bit more. There are things you could sell. Don't you think it's your duty to take things a bit easier?

After all, the place goes to a distant cousin —practically a stranger."

"He will find it intact," said the angry old voice. "I don't sell—you might know that. What he does with it is his own look-out. He will get it from me as I got it from my father—all but the Holbein miniature."

He did not mention Molly, but Dick knew that he meant to say that his daughter had stolen it. The more his health failed, the more bitter he became.

Dick did not often allow himself to think of Molly now. Time had done its work. Of necessity the first acuteness of his grief had been dulled. Those six months of life with her had become somewhat like a beautiful dream.

He, like her father, no longer spoke of her to others, though not for the same reason. He had schooled himself into believing that she must be dead.

All the efforts of the police had failed. They had never discovered the slightest trace of her after the finding of her clothes on the railway line. If she really had been at the Gare du Nord on that October day, she had vanished into thin air.

Dick, then, could not but believe that she must have had some accident, or lost her reason, and died and been buried somewhere, in some inexplicable manner, without any one knowing who she was. It seemed impossible, but then impossible things were always happening in this world.

Of the Holbein miniature in its unique frame nothing had ever been heard. Dick, following the arguments of Inspector Clayson, no longer connected the theft with his wife's disappearance. The two events were coincident, but there was absolutely nothing to link them together.

Dick had taken a partner in his office, as keen a worker as he was, and they were engaged on the Southend scheme, which was nearing completion.

His operations had enabled several factories to be built near the estuary of the river, taking advantage of the tides for power, and he was already marked out as a coming man among the giants of the engineering world.

Nor had he lost his interest in politics. The General Election had not materialized in the autumn, and was now, according to those in the know, not likely to take place until the following winter.

But Dick had just lately received another offer to fight a by-election in Clayshire, a most important agricultural division, of which the retiring member had recently attained Cabinet rank.

He was in the thick of his preparations in a particularly windy and unpleasant month of March. The nominations were out. He had a tough proposition in the Opposition candidate. It was going to be a straight fight, and a hard one, without quarter or mercy. Dick was going down to stay in the constituency at the end of the week. The polling day was a fortnight from then.

Dick walked from the home of Samuel Monroe, with whom he had become as intimate as any man could with that dour Scotsman, where he had been dining, to Rutland Street, where Mrs. Crome awaited him.

When he was admitted, the manservant took his coat and hat with a murmured greeting that showed the visitor to be a frequent and a welcome one, not only to Mrs. Crome, but to her household.

"Nasty night, sir."

"Beastly, William. I got blown here as much as I walked."

"Madam is in her sitting room, sir."

"All right—I'll go up."

Anna Crome held out her hand without rising, as he entered her room. She had just come back early from a big political reception and was wonderfully gowned in her favorite oyster-gray colored lace, hung with her famous pearls.

"I'm so glad you could come on here," she said, smiling. "I didn't know whether you would have to go on to the House of Commons with Monroe."

"You said on the telephone you particularly wanted me," Dick answered. He walked across the room with the air of a person quite at home, and helped himself to a cigarette. "Monroe wanted me to come. He says you're the best political agent in England."

He came and sat down beside her on the big couch. She smiled at him and laid her hand on his arm with an emphatic gesture. She was at home with him, as he with her.

He had forgotten those moments of embarrassment of their earlier acquaintance. For months he had worked with her now in politics, and she had not shown any desire but to work with him.

She looked much younger, less intellectual. Her mind, though like a rapier, had melted in the sort of buoyant life that any young woman of means and vitality might live in the present day, when women have discovered that all the world belongs to them.

Anna was as interested in public affairs as ever, but she had in a way dropped her mantle. She was no longer the puller of strings; she no more gave the impression that she sat on the secret councils of statesmen.

Rather, she sat at Dick's feet, and was his fellow worker, and looked to him to tell her what to do.

She had given him his chance. Now she was only anxious to help him make good. At the same time, she was just as happy dancing with him at the Flower Club, or watching the latest play by his side, as engaging in those strange, exotic, and mystifying talks that had in the old days made him a little bit afraid of her.

She was a perfect dancer, and she taught Dick to dance by sheer will-power. Yes, Anna Crome had cast her serpent skin and grown back into a child.

"Dick," she said excitedly, "I hear you are to have a very stiff fight. This Sykes man is very dangerous."

"I believe so," he answered. "But, then, you see, they say my election address has taken the wind out of his sails. Shelmerdine's principles, as you call them, have done a lot for me.

"I am all out for big wages for the agricultural laborers—as much as can possibly be paid. This scheme of distribution of market gardeners' produce and dairy stuff has taken on with the men's wives most extraordinarily.

"That was a great poster you suggested, Anna. The basket of eggs and the lettuce and things, and the motor van collecting them—the van belonging to the village. Jessop, the agent, tells me it's absolutely *it*.

"And the slogan, 'Women, live on your eggs and fruit and vegetables, and put your man's money into the bank.' You're dead right, it's the women we have to get.

"And my electric light scheme for all the villages is a winner, too. So easy—just to use what they've got—their water power. They've had it for a thousand years, and left it idle."

"Dick, you're wonderful!" she said, smiling.

"Anna, I owe it all to you. You've put me into touch with the right people—that was everything, at first."

"By the way," she said, looking serious, "I've something to tell you. I've heard it to-day. It seems that they've got a new clew. One of the men from Scotland Yard came to see me. He's a new one. The old inspector who was in charge of the case died a month ago.

"Isn't it amazing, Dick, that they have not found out anything about Shelmerdine's death yet? This is what the man told me—one of these rather bouncing young officers who think they know everything. What it comes to is that Shelmerdine did really go up to his rooms on the day of his death, in the afternoon, with a woman.

"A man who used to live in the same building and went out to Kenya Colony to take a job on the very next day, has just come back, invalided. He evidently heard about the matter, and went to Scotland Yard and told this detective who came to see me that he happened to be leaving his rooms on the top floor about half past three that same afternoon and met them on the stairs.

"He is quite sure about the time and date, because he had an appointment with an East African official, and was just going to keep it, which took him about three-quarters of an hour.

"He knew Shelmerdine slightly, as an acquaintance. He says that when he came back to Pall Mall he saw a woman leaving

Shelmerdine's chambers. He can only say that she was young, and that her face was very white, and that she didn't seem to know what she was doing.

"He says he can't describe her, because all women look alike nowadays with these little hats, short skirts, and no figures. But he thinks he would recognize her if he saw her. Rather like a needle in a bundle of straw.

"But it's set Scotland Yard to work again. The florist's boy seeing a lady go up with a man might have been Shelmerdine, and now this Major White confirming it, and having seen a woman come out of the door about half past four, and in a state of great excitement."

Suddenly she leaned toward him, her green-brown eyes very soft. "What a shame, Dick, I've reminded you of your own trouble! And when you have so much to think about! Forgive me, my dear. I know—I feel it inside me that you're still always thinking of your poor little wife."

He answered her frankly, having got over his nerves. "I am sure, more so every day, that Molly must be dead. Of course, your talking of Shelmerdine brings it back."

She patted his hand.

"But you mustn't think of it now; you really mustn't. It was my fault. Your poor little Molly—I'm afraid it's as you say. But now you've got so much to do. Would you like me to go through the speech for the Corn-market at Testerbury with you, Dick? You said that was worrying you."

"It would be a help," he said. "The women are said to be awfully strong in Testerbury."

"You've got it in your head, haven't you?"

"Mostly."

"Then you shall recite it, and I'll take notes."

She got up to fetch paper and pencil, and just then her butler came into the room with a telegram. The man waited.

"No answer, thank you," she said.

When the man had gone she did not speak. She stood there, swaying from foot to foot. She put up a hand and patted her hair. She moved about the room aimlessly, picking up a book here, plucking at a flower there.

She seemed to have forgotten that she was not alone. Once Dick caught sight of her face. There was a grin on it—a perfectly senseless grin.

"Anna!" he called sharply.

"Yes," she answered, and shook herself.

"Oh, Dick!" She picked up the telegram, and put it down again. "I am a fool. What are you thinking? Guy is dead."

"Guy?"

"My husband."

Dick sprang to his feet.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I say—can I do anything?"

"No, dear, no. I'm sorry, too, now he's gone. But—there is nothing to do. I'm sorry, yes. I suppose one forgets all at once what a man's done to one. He was killed in a motor smash—in a car I paid for only last week. He wanted a new one."

Her voice was clear, like a child's. Dick thought her wonderful. He remembered how she had given him a glimpse into her life months ago. And now this man who had done her so much injury was dead.

And she was sorry.

He came nearer to her, took her hand. "Sit down, Anna. You've had a shock."

She looked at him through half shut eyes.

"Dick, I'm afraid I can't help you tonight. And I shall have to see to things. I'm going to fail you."

"Never, Anna! You couldn't do that. You've been wonderful. I shall be all right. You mustn't worry a bit."

She tried to smile, but her face suddenly became rigid. He caught her in his arms; he thought she had fainted. But she stood up again.

"Dear Dick, it's the feeling of failure," she whispered. "I've done nothing with my life."

Her eyes were quite shut now. Her face was wan, ghostly, and so young.

Dick bent his head and kissed her very gently.

She stirred, but said nothing. In a mo-

ment she was herself again, and clasped his hand in a firm grip.

"Dick, we mustn't be sentimental. Bless you for comforting me. But there's a big fight ahead, and we mustn't think of anything but that."

"Wonderful woman," said Dick to himself as he walked home.

CHAPTER IX.

FRESH NEWS OF MOLLY.

THE next morning, just as Dick had finished his breakfast, Inspector Clayson, who had kept the case of Molly in his charge ever since her disappearance, called to see him. He had the detective shown into his study, which was his and Molly's old bedroom.

In the first rush of bitter grief, when he had realized that his wife was not coming back, he had changed the whole flat, trying to disguise the spots where he had known such delicious happiness. Now, with the passing of time, he hardly remembered how the rooms had been arranged formerly.

It was more than three months since he had had any dealings with the police. Excitement fought with apprehension, as he went to join the inspector. Fear of having the wound reopened gripped him. If the man had come to say that they knew what had happened to Molly! If it was something dreadful! It seemed to him he would rather not know now.

But Inspector Clayson was not the bringer of that sort of news. In fact, he considered his news good, and looked pleased with himself.

"We have traced the miniature at last, Mr. Heritage," he began, taking some papers out of his pocketbook. "At least, I believe so. Was it familiar to you, by sight?"

"Not exactly, but still I think I should recognize it."

"I have a photograph here, and a full description. One of our men was in New York on other business. He had worked with me on this case in the beginning, and he happened to have taken a special interest in the miniature, chiefly because of its frame. He is in our special branch that deals with jewel thieves."

"New York!" exclaimed Dick.

"Yes, sir." Inspector Clayson placed a very clear photographic print in front of Dick. It showed the miniature by Holbein of Lady Olivia Cannon, lady in waiting to Anne Boleyn. The rather plain lady in black velvet wore a big ruff and large pearls, with her hair stiffly braided with jewels.

There was no mistaking it, or the wonderful jeweled frame of olive branches and fruit in gray pearls and emeralds and diamonds.

"Yes, that's it," Dick said. "I'm sure that's it. New York! Why New York?"

"We can't say that yet, Mr. Heritage, although there is one remarkable circumstance in connection with the finding of it. Our man had business with the very well known art dealer in New York, Kaspar Kauradi.

"All the finest things from the Old World find their way into his shop, so it is said. And it is not always that they come there by fair means.

"Our man was after some stolen gold plate from the Duke of Peterborough's collection, and he paid Kauradi a visit. While there he saw the miniature, and made inquiries.

"At first there was some difficulty in finding out who had sold it, Kauradi himself having been ill. He had refused ten thousand pounds for it the very day our man was there. He allowed it to be photographed, and took it out of his showcase, and looked it up.

"This much we heard by letter, with the photograph, which arrived yesterday. Late last night we had a long cable from our man, in which he states that a certain Mr. Howard Lake, of Nottingham and of Moorchurch Street in the south of London, sold the miniature to Kauradi's manager.

"He explained that he had received it in place of a bad debt from an American in San Francisco. Now, as this Mr. Lake is described as a leather importer and merchant, I take it that it is the same gentleman, your friend, whom Mr. Gramount

thought he saw in Paris with Mrs. Heritage."

Dick was speechless.

"When did you last see Mr. Lake, sir?"

"About three months ago. I should think. He had been to America just after my wife disappeared. He does not very often come to London nowadays."

"We have ascertained that he is on the Etruria, which arrives at Liverpool tomorrow. We have wirelessed the ship, and shall get into touch with Mr. Lake as soon as he lands."

"I can't make head or tail of it," said Dick helplessly.

"Excuse me, sir, but didn't Sir Lionel Cannon suggest that his daughter took the miniature?"

"Yes, but what's that got to do with it? Lake proved a perfect alibi. He was not in Paris when Gramount said he saw him."

"I know, sir." The detective shrugged his shoulders. "But in a case of this kind —with a lady involved—well, it is my experience that much can be done, shall we say, in the way of alibi?"

"Are you suggesting that my wife wanted money, and gave the miniature to Lake to sell?"

"No, Mr. Heritage. Not that—because I don't know. It may be true that Mr. Lake received it as a bad debt. He has stated so, and there's no reason to doubt his word. He may be able to explain. But it would be a very strange coincidence."

"An impossible one!" cried Dick, much perturbed.

"Supposing Mr. Lake should have received the miniature in the way he says," the detective went on, "would there be any reason to suppose he has ever seen it before?"

"Certainly not. He was never at Cannon Hall to my knowledge."

"Then he might have acted in perfect good faith?"

"Of course."

"We are entirely in the dark until Mr. Lake arrives and tells us the name of the person who gave him the miniature. In his cable our man informs us that Kauradi's manager paid Mr. Lake five thousand pounds for the miniature, and that Mr. Lake appeared to be extremely surprised at the largeness of the amount."

"But surely such miniatures by Holbein must be known to everybody!" protested Dick. "There can't be so many of them in the world."

"Well, yes, that is true. But we cannot expect art dealers to inquire too closely into these matters. And from what I have seen of Sir Lionel Cannon, he is not the gentleman to advertise his belongings."

"You're right, inspector. Shall we ring him up?"

"I thought I had better go down to see him to-day, Mr. Heritage. I can then make certain that it is really his lost miniature."

"I will telephone him that you are coming. I am afraid he is breaking up. I don't want him to be taken by surprise."

"Very good, sir. Thank you. And tomorrow Mr. Lake will be here, and we shall no doubt get to the bottom of it."

The inspector took his leave.

Dick stood staring out of the window on to the river, lashed with little blustering squalls.

This was too much of a coincidence, Lake selling Sir Lionel's miniature in New York nearly six months after he had been supposed to be seen in Paris with Molly. And telling a yarn about its being handed to him in payment of a bad debt. It wanted explaining; it certainly did.

Dick was angry again; his blood surged in waves through his veins, as he saw himself betrayed and cheated, made a fool of. He lost his reason for the moment, and raged impotently because of this mystery that had suddenly come to life again to distract him just when he wanted all his energy and mental power, concentration and strength.

In the afternoon, Mr. Jessop, the political agent in the constituency that Dick was fighting, called at his office.

Mr. Jessop was a big man with a slightly coarse, though open, dark-skinned face, a mass of spiky black hair, clever, small black eyes, and a thick-lipped mouth full of imperfect teeth. He had rather a dashing way with him. He was a self-educated man, and apt to be impatient of the herd.

"I've got a suggestion to make to you, Mr. Heritage," he said, having accepted a cigar and bitten off the end. His voice was robust, a good voice for laying down the law. "It's been borne in upon me that you've got a potential ally down in Testerbury that we've ignored up till now.

"I can't think why I haven't put it to you before. But now that you're coming down there, it must be remedied. It's Milton Clough."

"Milton Clough!" repeated Dick, at a loss.

"The famous Milton Clough, Mr. Heritage. Come now, you must have heard of him—the great novelist?"

"Oh, of course, I know his name. I'm afraid novels aren't much in my line, Jessop."

"Mr. Clough's novels must be in your line, Mr. Heritage. I've been taking notice of all sorts of things this last week. I want you to buy Mr. Clough's novels and read every one of them. They're very strong—all about the soil, you know. Local Thomas Hardy.

"And Clough's a power—no doubt about that. The agricultural laborer's friend, all that sort of thing. They think no end of him. If we have him on our side, we win. I'll go as far as to say that."

"Does he take any interest in politics?" asked Dick, rather amused.

"That's just it, he doesn't. But he's got to. And he's a difficult gentleman, a bit of a hermit. A sort of little king in his way, and almost blind. All the big guns come to see him, and wait on his doorstep while he makes up his mind to let them in or not. We must get him on our side in this contest."

"Have you tried?"

Jessop had a laugh of bull-like strength.

"No good my trying, Mr. Heritage. Unfortunate but true. I got in wrong with Mr. Clough a little while ago. Nothing to do with politics. Mr. Clough knows nothing about politics, as I said.

"No, it was a little matter of a right of way. I've got a little farm holding near Mr. Clough's place, and so I have to take sides in these matters—for the good of the neighborhood.

"Mr. Clough closed a right of way. I don't say he was entirely in the wrong, or entirely in the right. Who ever is? But I had to go on the other side because of my interests. And I'm dirt to Mr. Clough since that day."

Dick laughed. The big, black-haired, thick-lipped fellow was amusing. He was so racy of the soil himself.

"What do you suggest?" he asked.

"Well, that you should tackle him. Read his books, and go and get him to see you. Or, perhaps—Mrs. Crome is going down to help you, isn't she?"

Dick looked taken aback.

"Mrs. Crome's husband has just died," he said. "She rang up this morning to say that she would be away for a few days."

"She didn't live with him, did she?" asked Jessop, whose business it was to know everything and everybody.

"No. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Crome did say that she would come down and help, all the same. She didn't think it need make any difference—once she had done all that was necessary."

"Sensible woman, Mr. Heritage. Wonderful woman from what I've seen of her. You couldn't have a better helper. Full of brain, and then she's got a way with men.

"You send her to see Clough. She's probably read all his books, and enjoyed them. What we want is to identify him with us. We want him to come to one of your meetings—on the platform, and make a speech.

"Mind you, he's the idol of the agricultural population, and if we carry them, we win. No doubt about that—no earthly doubt."

"It's an idea," said Dick, whose brain always leaped to new suggestions. "Where does Mr. Clough live?"

"At Filmshanger, about twelve miles from Testerbury, in the valley—a most remote spot. As I tell you, Mr. Heritage, he's a hermit, and we've got to bring him out of his shell."

"Has he a wife?"

"No. Mrs. Clough has been dead some time. He has a son and a daughter, both grown up. Well, I must be getting off.

Whatever you do, buy his books as a beginning, and read 'em. I shall expect you down in a few days."

CHAPTER X.

MR. CLOUGH'S SECRETARY.

MILTON CLOUGH'S Clayshire home was a long, white-stuccoed house with green shutters, lying athwart a grass-grown down rising abruptly at the back, behind which, in a deep hollow, was one of the largest and most interesting ancient Saxon camps in the country.

Within a few miles of the sea, it had sheltered many a Saxon host, and enabled them to resist the Roman invaders until resistance became useless, and one civilization gave place to another and stronger.

There was a ring of elm trees around the house, and farther away were two woods. Garden flowers did not flourish in the bleak, moist, salted air. There were two big lawns back and front, and a hard tennis court flanked the kitchen garden.

It was an essentially featureless domain, the house of a man careless of all externals, and living only in the realm of his own imagination.

Milton Clough himself was a tall, dried-up-looking man of some fifty years. He had a very sweet smile, and a pathetic look about the eyes that could hardly see.

His sight was so nearly gone that he was learning Braille finger-reading and preparing himself without any fuss to spend his remaining years in darkness. His forehead was great, benign, showing altruism, sympathy and at the same time a stern balance between the essentials and non-essentials of life.

He sat in his low-ceiled study one lovely spring morning, almost unable to distinguish between the light and shade on the fields that dropped to the valley. The tall green shutters were half-closed. Inside the room were many books, soft green covers, and curtains, and a sense of peace and cleanness, as if all the ugly things of life had been eliminated.

Clough was studying a Braille book, his almost sightless eyes shut, his lips moving.

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills," he murmured, "from whence cometh my help." Then he passed his fingers over the magic dots in silence, and spoke again aloud: "He that keepth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep." And then again: "The Lord shall preserve thy going out, and coming in, from this time forth for evermore."

The great writer strained his eyes toward the sunshine that streamed, softly-tempered, into the room. His light was going out. But he still had much to do.

The door opened, and his son came in, a stalwart lad with his father's vivid, fine-drawn slenderness, but with more definitely material charm.

Vincent Clough was studying art in Paris. He was at home for a little time, because his father had had a severe illness, and his sister had written warningly: "Come home for a bit, Vin, dear. I know the old man is pining for you."

"They're making an awful fuss about this election, dad," he said, throwing himself into a deep chair. "I've just ridden into Testerbury and back. Do you know anything about it at all?"

"No, Vin, I can't say I do," answered his father. "I never understood politics."

"The candidates are due down to-morrow," the lad went on. "There'll be more fuss than ever, then. I had absolutely to tear myself away from an old girl who wanted to rope me into canvassing."

His voice was gay and young, but his father knew that he had something he wanted to say. And he had a very shrewd idea what it was.

There was an unusually close bond of sympathy between father and son for these modern days. Vincent had in his blood the freer power of expression of the artist that his conventional public school and university education had not been able to eradicate.

He got up and went to the window, lounging there with his hands in his trousers pockets.

"I say, dad, I spoke to Mary last night. Out on the downs—after dinner."

"Yes, my boy?"

"Mary refused me."

"Did she? Then she doesn't care for you, Vin—in that way?"

"No. She was frightfully upset. It made me feel awfully bad. Really, she seemed terrified."

"Did she say if there was any one else, Vin?"

"She said there wasn't. She said she was not going to marry anybody. I haven't got over her face yet—white as death, and as if she'd seen a ghost. I think there must be something about me she can't stand. But she's never given any inkling of it before."

"It was the shock, no doubt, as she hadn't expected it. I'm sorry, my boy, but you are young yet. I hope it won't make it awkward for you."

"I thought if you felt you could spare me, I'd go back to Paris next week."

"Certainly, Vin. I'm much stronger, and seeing you has done me a lot of good. I am sorry for myself, too. Miss Dale is a sweet girl. Her patience with me is extraordinary for such a young woman.

"I would have liked her as a daughter-in-law. Her quiet ways are so soothing. For such a young girl she has a wonderful way of effacing herself, and of going about her work without your knowing that she is there.

"I never knew anybody to use a typewriter with so little noise. But, of course, we mustn't be selfish, must we, my boy? If she cannot look upon you as a possible husband, we must resign ourselves."

The young man flung himself toward the door. Just to-day when his dearest hopes were blighted, his father's quiet and peaceful view got on his nerves.

"I'll go on to the links and get a game," he said, mad to hit something, if only a golf ball. "I'll lunch at the club, dad."

"All right, my boy."

A few minutes later, Milton Clough put away his Braille book, and rang a bell on his writing table. His daughter opened the door, and looked in. Do you want Mary, dad?"

"That's right, Sylvia. Ask her to come."

Mary Dale, Clough's secretary, came into the room. She was a very slight young woman, pale of skin, with short, very dark bronze-black hair that almost looked as if it might have been dyed.

Her small, red-lipped mouth closed firmly, giving her in repose a prim aspect. She wore large tortoise shell-rimmed spectacles. She was dressed in black. It was understood by the family that she had lost both her parents fairly recently.

She had been recommended to Milton Clough by his cousin, Mrs. Waterson, about two months ago. She had been with Mrs. Waterson in the capacity of nursery governess to her two little girls.

Mrs. Waterson was going out to Egypt to join her husband, and taking her children with her. Miss Dale refused to accompany them. Clough wanted a secretary, and liked the idea of a young woman.

He suffered at times severely from nervous indigestion, and could not bear any noise or fuss. As soon as his cousin brought Miss Dale for him to interview, he took a fancy to her.

He could hardly see her, but something in her shadowy form as she stood in front of him, appealed to him, and her sweet voice completed the conquest.

She was not very expert, but quick at picking things up, and Clough, owing to his failing eyesight, could no longer write his own work, but liked to dictate it very slowly, thinking aloud, as it were, while his secretary wrote it down in her own handwriting, and then copied it on the typewriter in the same room, while he was busy with his composition.

She would read it over to him, and he would add and correct, and so gradually mold the child of his brain into the perfect form that the entire world fervently admired.

Miss Dale had fallen quietly into her place in the quiet household, only enlivened by Sylvia Clough's high spirits, and the two or three visits that Vincent had paid.

With the young man it had been a case of love at first sight, with the bitterly disappointing result that he had just communicated to his father.

Clough spoke of it.

"Vincent has just told me about himself and you, Miss Dale." He was a man

of few intimacies, intensely shy; and although to his son and daughter, the girl was Mary, he always spoke of and used the more formal mode of address. "I am sorry you could not say yes to him.

"He is a good lad, but, of course, that is no reason for marrying him, if you don't want to." He looked in her direction under his green eyeshades, with his charming, whimsical smile.

He could not really distinguish her, as she went over to her seat at a small table. She did not say anything. He was almost sure she gave a low sob.

"You mustn't think I can't understand," he said quickly. "The last thing we want is to embarrass you—you must believe that. Vin is going back to Paris."

"I'm so sorry," said Miss Dale in a voice barely above a whisper. "I'm so terribly sorry. Perhaps you'd rather I didn't stay with you, Mr. Clough."

"What an idea, Miss Dale! I should miss you very much indeed. You suit me so well; you are just right. There goes a selfish old man! But I mustn't make it worse for you. Let's get to work, shall we? Will you read that last chapter over to me slowly? I dreamed about it last night, and found it very bad."

Four days later Miss Dale was working in Clough's study. It was a cold and blustering afternoon; the wind had brought on one of the author's shocking attacks of nervous indigestion, and he was in his bedroom, behind closed shutters, trying to get some rest.

The chief peculiarity of his complaint was that he could not hear even the slightest sound.

The door opened, and the parlormaid came in.

"There is a lady particularly wants to see the master," she said.

"Where's Miss Sylvia?" asked Miss Dale. They both spoke in whispers.

"Gone to Testerbury, shopping, miss."

"I don't think it's much good my seeing the lady, Jane. I'm very busy. Can't you tell her Mr. Clough is ill? What does she want? What is her name?"

"She didn't give no name, miss. She said she'd come again, and she's come about the election; so she wanted to see the master most particular."

"Oh, well!" Miss Dale rose to her feet and picked up her spectacles, that she often did not wear when she was alone. "I suppose I'd better go. The lady might make a noise. Where is she?"

"In the hall."

"Ask her into the drawing room, Jane. Mr. Clough couldn't possibly hear a strange voice there."

The maid departed. Miss Dale, with what appeared to be purely a mechanical gesture, took a mirror out of her plain black leather handbag, powdered her face, and smoothed her hair. Then, with tight lips, she went into the drawing room.

A woman in the deepest mourning confronted her, a slender woman with a white face, and a skin so ethereal as to be almost transparent. She had a large mouth, and curious nondescript eyes, set very wide apart. She was not good-looking, but at once attracted attention.

Her hair was all but invisible under a little small poke bonnet of black, with a white crêpe ruff inside, and a sort of choker around her slender throat. What Miss Dale could see was a cloudy gray.

"I am so much obliged to you for seeing me," she began. and Miss Dale was obviously startled by the heavy ringing quality of her voice. Indeed, she looked somewhat apprehensively at the door. "Are you Miss Clough?"

"No. I am Miss Dale—Mr. Clough's secretary. I am sorry to say that Mr. Clough is very ill, and cannot see you."

"Oh, dear, I'm so sorry!" said the lady, lowering her voice at once. "That is most unfortunate for us. Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Mr. Clough has very bad attacks of nervous indigestion."

"Oh, too bad. I expect he overworks. Such a wonderful man! I've read all his books—every one. They simply thrill me. But may I tell you what I've come about?"

"Sit down, won't you?" asked Miss Dale politely.

The lady sat down.

"My name is Mrs. Guy Crome," she

said, " and I have come to ask you for Mr. Clough's powerful support for our candidate—Mr. Richard Heritage."

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT MISS DALE DID.

TO Anna Crome's surprise, the young woman with the tortoise-shell glasses suddenly shot out of her chair, and almost ran toward the door.

" Oh, what's the matter?" cried the visitor.

At the door Miss Dale turned, holding the handle. She was breathing fast. Her mouth opened, but she said nothing for a moment or two. Then she came slowly back into the room.

" I thought I heard somebody in the hall," she explained. " I was afraid they were going to make a noise. Mr. Clough does suffer so terribly."

" Dear me, it must be awful!" sympathized Mrs. Crome. " One of the penalties of genius, isn't it? I've heard that Darwin suffered agonies of sickness after every meal. I imagine they use up all the blood in their brains, and don't leave enough for their stomachs. Do the attacks last long?"

" Not generally."

" I do hope this one won't. Mr. Heritage's agent has told me about Mr. Clough's supreme influence with the agricultural population. Mr. Heritage is all for the agricultural population himself, for higher wages and, above all, better houses, and more time for recreation.

" He thinks the hours they work are simply wicked. And he has a wonderful scheme for putting electric light into all the villages. You have heard about Mr. Heritage, of course, Miss Dale?"

The girl shook her head.

" We live very much out of the world," she said. " And, really, I don't think Mr. Clough takes any interest in politics."

" Not in politics, perhaps; but surely we could interest him in Mr. Heritage's views, which are just his own views, as I understand them. We want him to help us as the friend of the agricultural laborer, the idol they call him. A big word, Miss Dale.

" We want to persuade him to come and speak for us at one of our meetings. I expect the other side have approached him."

" Not that I know of. I have not had any letters about it."

" That would be a still greater feather in our cap! I expect they didn't dare. They haven't anything like our program. But I must tell you about Mr. Heritage, so that you can tell Mr. Clough.

" He is a very brilliant engineer with a tremendous belief in water power. He is quite a young man, but has just lately finished a big scheme for the Southend Corporation—a tearing success.

" He has been singled out by the men who know the ropes best in politics as one of the most promising of the younger men. The late Lord Shelmerdine believed in him implicitly, and would have backed him with all his might if he had not met with that dreadful death.

" Mr. Heritage himself experienced a great sorrow last autumn, when his young wife mysteriously disappeared, just faded away into thin air from their home in London.

" He adored her. You may imagine his grief. Nothing has been heard of her since. Of course, it means that he has thrown himself more entirely heart and soul than perhaps any other man would into public life. He works day and night. He has only work left."

A good special pleader was Anna Crome.

" I will tell Mr. Clough what you say," said Miss Dale.

" And I do hope I may come again, and Mr. Heritage will make time for himself to come, however busy he is, as Mr. Clough is an invalid."

" Not exactly an invalid," the girl corrected. " He has these attacks now and then, and his eyesight is going."

" Do you think we are asking too much?" Anna Crome queried abruptly.

" I couldn't say. I know Mr. Clough is very keen on agricultural questions."

" Well, you will let me know, won't you, Miss Dale? I have taken a house in Testerbury, in the Cathedral Close. Mr. Heritage is staying with Sir George Poole at

Stitwell Park. The Committee Rooms are in the High Street next door to the Lion and Crown. Now, I do hope I can count on you."

"I will tell Mr. Clough," said Miss Dale.

She saw the visitor to the door herself. She shook hands.

"That girl didn't like me," said Anna Crome to herself, as she got into her car. "I wonder why."

Miss Dale did not go back to Milton Clough's study. She went upstairs to her own room, creeping past the author's bedroom into another corridor.

She locked her bedroom door, and went over to the window, hanging to the sill with hands that were white at the knuckles. In the grip of a fearful reaction, tears streamed down her face.

But she did not give way to her emotions for long. She bathed her face, put on a hat and coat, and went downstairs with the same mouselike noiselessness.

She opened the green baize door that led into the kitchen quarters, and told one of the maids that she was just going on her bicycle to the post office, and would not be away many minutes.

At the village post office, about a mile and a half away, she sent a telegram, which, if the operator had had any curiosity in the matter, might have read rather cryptically.

The next afternoon Miss Dale worked with her employer for several hours. Clough was better, but his attack had so shattered him that he said he could not possibly see either Mrs. Crome, or Mr. Heritage, or any one connected with the excitement of an election, at any rate, for several days.

Much to his family's astonishment, however, he was not actually averse to the proposal to visit one of the young candidate's meetings and speak at it. Of course, he must see him first, and learn about his actual program: but the qualities that Miss Dale had passed on to him from the able lips of Mrs. Crome inclined him favorably.

"That is the kind of thing we want," he said, his idealistic face alight. "It sounds like the most practical proposition I have ever heard: better houses, electric light, and more time for recreation.

Sylvia, his daughter, had a slightly cynical disposition. She had taken her degree at Oxford, and thought she knew a great deal about the world.

"Why, dad, anybody would think it was the first election program you had ever heard about!" she cried mischievously. "For mercy's sake, isn't every political candidate an angel direct from heaven, until he's elected? And aren't you the dearest white, innocent dove to believe in this one?"

Her father smiled.

"All right, cynic," he said. "But, funnily enough, and for some unknown reason, this young Heritage appeals to me. When I've talked to him, I'll tell you if I am wrong."

Miss Dale was walking across the hall, where the telephone was, after finishing her work with Clough, when the bell rang, and she went to answer it.

"That's Miss Dale, isn't it?" asked the postmistress. "I've got a telegram to read to you, Miss Dale, handed in at Nottingham at 3.15 P.M., received at 3.40 P.M. To:

DALE,
Care Clough,
Filmshanger, near Testerbury, Clayshire:
Will be at end of Parade Leastone to-morrow noon. Meet me there. Wire if possible.

The postmistress added: "The message is signed with initials, Miss Dale. I'm not certain whether I made a mistake but I think they are H. L."

"That's right, thank you Mrs. Jones," said Miss Dale.

Later on she told Clough that an old friend of hers was coming down to Leastone, the seaside town about fifteen miles away, to-morrow morning. Could Mr. Clough possibly spare her? She would go on her bicycle, and was sure to get back not very late in the afternoon.

"Of course, you must go," said the author. "Why, my dear, I've often thought what a dull life you lead with us here! Although I can hardly see you, there's something about you that always makes me think you were meant to be a very sunny

little girl! I sometimes think I impose on you."

"I'm very happy with you, Mr. Clough," she answered. "I have been very happy," and there was a sound of tears in her voice.

Punctually at noon, having left her bicycle in a garage in the town, Miss Dale reached the less busy end of the parade at Leastone, a very quiet, modest, but quite delightful little old-world town, boasting a fine church, sheltered by hills from the cold winds, and filled with flowery and productive gardens.

A big closed car was pulled up against the promenade, and a man jumped out, and came toward her, Howard Lake, with his heavy, burly figure, his impossible clothes, his red hair, green eyes, and funny little nose.

He gripped her hands hard.

"Molly! How good to see you!"

"Hush!" she retorted sharply. "I'm not Molly. I'm Mary Dale, the secretary of Milton Clough. We might be seen; lots of people might know me by sight. But I had to see you, Howard. The most awful thing has happened. Where can we go?"

"I've brought a luncheon basket in the car. Can you tell me a quiet country road? Sit by me, and show me the way."

"There's Weston Park; it's open to the public. I don't suppose many people go through."

"We'll eat there. Get in."

The big car slid away in the direction she indicated.

"What is it?" asked Howard.

"Dick's down here." Her tone bordered on hysteria.

"Of course; fighting an election."

"You know?"

"Naturally. I've only just got back from the States, and almost the first person I saw was Dick, accusing me of having stolen one of your father's family miniatures."

"Howard, what can you mean? What miniature?"

"Never mind, now. I want to know about you. What are you doing here?"

She told him briefly.

"Molly, I've wondered and wondered about you. I haven't known any peace. When I came back this time and heard there was no news of you, and this new mystery came up, I felt I must move heaven and earth to find you, and tell you that you mustn't hide any longer."

"Howard," she asked in a stark voice, "what can I do but hide? You know."

He was silent, and there were a good many complicated turnings, so that she had to tell him the way.

They pulled up ultimately in a beautiful clearing in one of the beautiful parks of the southern counties, with immemorial trees spreading bare, lacelike branches high over their heads, and all around acres of rhododendrons rising out of lawnlike sward that in a month or two's time would be a blaze of rich color.

A touch of bathos was given by a large wire basket attached to the stem of a mighty beech for pleasure parties to deposit their paper and orange peel.

Lake unpacked the luncheon basket, but the girl stared listlessly at the appetizing fare.

"I'd rather talk first. You eat. I may be able to swallow something later on.

He opened a pint of champagne, and made her drink a glass to make her feel better.

"You're all to pieces," he said. "Molly, I don't feel I can stand it any longer. So you're here with Clough, the author, and Dick wants to come to the house."

"That Mrs. Guy Crome is helping him, Howard. She called. I had to see her. She was in deep mourning."

"Her husband died just the other day."

"She's in love with Dick," said Molly.

"She didn't know you, of course?" He ignored her statement.

"No. How should she? She's never seen me. Dick somehow never wanted us to meet. Of course, he talked about her, and how clever she was, and how she knew men who would help him in politics. But Mr. Clough's inclined to help Dick."

"What do you want me to do, Molly?"

"I've got no money." She smiled wearily. "Not enough to feel safe on. I want you to give me some. Then I can manage to get away; I can find an excuse, and come

back when this election is over—just for a few weeks, so as not to make it seem funny."

"That's easy enough," said Howard gloomily. "But why don't you come out in the open and face the business?"

"How can I?" Her voice was bitter. "You know, Howard."

"You forget that you haven't told me everything."

"Enough for you to see that I can never face the world again. I'm an outcast. You know that. And, anyhow—now, when Dick's in the middle of this election! Haven't I done him enough harm?"

"I suppose you're right." He drained his glass of champagne, looking at her with miserable eyes. She was the wife of his best pal.

"Howard, you helped me before! You were the only living creature I would turn to."

"Of course, Molly. And I'll help you again. I told some thoroughly beastly lies the last time, and was quite prepared for even worse ones. But I wish you could trust me altogether."

"I can't. I can never do that. You agreed to help me on my own terms. You did, Howard; you did."

"I know. And, of course, I'll do anything you tell me to."

"I just want enough money to take me away somewhere for a week or two. I shall go to a tiny little village I've discovered a long way from here. Nobody will know me there."

"Do you want to go at once, now?"

"No. I must go back to Filmshanger. I can't leave the house like that. I can make up some story—a sick relative. Mr. Clough believes anything you tell him.

"Sylvia can do his work while I'm away, and, when the election is over, I can go back with another good excuse, and get away altogether. I mustn't rouse their suspicions, whatever I do."

Lake looked at her with hopeless eyes.

"I've got about a hundred pounds on me," was all he said.

"That 'll be heaps. Now we've fixed it up, Howard. What about this miniature you talked about? Tell me."

"Not until you've eaten something, Molly."

"Oh, all right!" She took a sandwich of chicken and jelly and pistachio nuts, and chewed it as if it were sawdust.

"Do you mean to say that you didn't know about the miniature?" he asked.

"No. Why should I?"

"Didn't you see the papers at the first?"

"No. I was in a high fever for a long time. They thought I was going to die. I told you," she added reproachfully.

"It was the valuable Holbein miniature of your ancestress, Lady Olivia Cannon, in a priceless jeweled frame, that was stolen," Lake informed her. "As a matter of fact, I missed the news, too, during the first few days, coming and going on—our little trip."

He gave a painful smile, as if at the memory of something fantastic and unreal.

"But who stole it?" she asked.

"They don't know. As a matter of fact, they thought you did." He told her about some one having entered Cannon Hall during the night, and taken some of the old clothes from her room, and the miniature from the drawing-room, and apparently entered and left by the little garden door.

They had thought it must be she, because no one else could have known the house so well.

"Ridiculous!" exclaimed the girl. "But what can you mean by Dick accusing you of stealing it?"

"Well, that is the most weird thing of all, in the way of coincidences, Molly. What should happen, but, when I was in San Francisco some weeks ago, a man should default in his payment of a big debt—over ten thousand dollars, and offered me the miniature instead.

"He was a new customer. I found him a queer kind of chap. He was very well thought of in Frisco, and had an invalid wife, and was undoubtedly at the time very seedy himself. That's how he came to be in a bad way financially.

"His health had failed him, and he was hugely committed in some real estate gamble that had turned out a complete fraud. I saw the miniature was valuable, and would fetch a bit of money, although I never expected it to cover his debt to me.

"It seems funny now, but it never occurred to me to ask him how he had come by it. He didn't say it was by Holbein. He had been a very rich man indeed, and I presumed he had bought it in Europe.

"In New York I decided to sell it. As you know, I am absolutely ignorant of art, and the thing was useless to me. To my amazement, Kauradi of Fifth Avenue, gave me twenty-five thousand dollars for it without a murmur.

"I sent the surplus back to the man in San Francisco, and sailed for home. As it happens, a Scotland Yard man was over there on another job, who knew about the miniature. He saw it in Kauradi's shop, and found out how they had come by it.

"I had told them, as it happened, when I found the thing to be valuable. By that time I was on board, and they wirelessed me and, as I say, Dick met me raging with fury at my duplicity."

"Of course he believed you?"

"He had to. The thing was so easily proved. But I'm sure he has doubts."

"But, Howard, how could he?"

Lake gave an embarrassed cough.

"I haven't told you. I didn't want to. But I suppose I'd better now that all this has happened. You ought to be prepared. We were seen at the Gare du Nord in Paris together."

She gaped. The color drained from her face. She took off her spectacles, and wiped her eyes.

"Howard! Who saw us?"

"That artist fellow who lives in your house—Gramount. Dick taxed me with it, and took me to Gramount's rooms. Of course, I lied flatly.

"And I was lucky in being able to prove a perfect alibi. That was because you took fright at being on the Continent alone, Molly, only an hour or so after we landed, and we flew back to England immediately."

The girl wrung her hands, wailing: "Oh, dear me! Oh, dear me, what shall I do? Do you think Dick suspects anything?"

"I can't say. He took my word, of course. But you know how these things stick, and now, with the miniature on the top of it, it's asking him to swallow rather a lot!"

She broke down, and sobbed disconsolately.

"Molly," he pleaded passionately, "let me beg you to come out into the open and face this business!"

"I can't! I can't!" she cried. "Never that—never! You must know, Howard. You seem mad to me to suggest it. Dick would turn from me in loathing. I should lose him just the same, but he would know—what I am."

She buried her head in her lap, a huddled broken little figure.

With infinite gentleness, the big red-haired man laid the tips of his blunt fingers on her head. In his eyes was something he would never let her see.

He whispered sad, puzzled words:

"But, Molly, how is it going to end? You can't keep it up forever. There'll come a day when Dick must find out."

From her muffled lips came the answer, like a groan:

"I had hoped I'd die! I very nearly did. But I don't suppose I shall now."

"Molly, Molly, you foolish child!"

Almost he had betrayed himself, but she suddenly sprang up. She was a changed being. She smoothed her hair, powdered her face, and put on her spectacles again.

"This won't do, Howard! I must be practical now. I've got to get away. That's the main thing."

It was as if the need for action invigorated her. She looked at him with the shadow of a smile.

"Howard, would you know me at once?"

"Of course," he said slowly. "You're not disguised."

"I thought it would be foolish. Anybody can tell a disguise, can't they? It's only my hair—I had it darkened—and the goggles. And I feel so different—oh, Howard, I feel so different."

"I don't know that any one who had just met you casually would know you at once," he said consolingly, "unless, of course, they had reason to suspect anything."

They were packing up the luncheon things, and tidying their pitch. Molly actually laughed, as she dropped the grease-proof paper into the wire basket on the beech tree.

Lake drove her round the beautiful country afterward, and brought her back to Leastone in time to fetch her bicycle and ride back to Filmshanger.

CHAPTER XII.

A FATAL MISTAKE.

THREE days later, when the election excitement was at its height, Clough received Richard Heritage, in his courtly, old-world, and rather royal way. One could only call it receiving the candidate.

He found, as he expected to, a sympathetic appeal in the young man. Dick spoke to the point. He had real plans; he could produce the means to carry them out. He was no carpet politician, no windbag. His enthusiasm was infectious.

The great author, for his part, responded to such an unheard of extent that he consented to come out of his retirement and speak at Dick's big meeting in Testerbury the following night.

It was to be a rousing rally, two cabinet ministers on the platform, the finest woman orator of the day, Mrs. Gaberdin, and a host of other important people. But place of honor was reserved for Milton Clough.

Clough was still weak after his late attack, and excused himself from going into the drawing room for tea. Sylvia entertained the candidate with decided enjoyment, despite her cynical attitude toward men in general, and parliamentary candidates in particular; and Dick engaged in a spirited battle of words with her.

Just as he was about to take his leave, she was called away to the telephone, and Dick, standing up by a table, saw a book of snapshots open at a very good view of the house lying between the two woods.

He turned the leaves over, himself a keen photographer, and came upon a picture of a girl standing alone on a tennis court holding her racket, and smiling at some invisible person.

He gave a start of incredulity, looked and looked again, picked up the book, and took it to the window. His eyes were glued to that face, particularly to that smile.

Sylvia came back.

Dick held out the book to her. He asked her who that girl was. His voice sounded flat.

"That's dad's secretary, Miss Dale," she answered. "A jolly good shot, too. You seldom catch Mary smiling like that. She's a serious little soul. But why do you ask, Mr. Heritage? Do you know her?"

"She reminds me of somebody," he answered. "But it is obviously not the same person. Is she here with you? Does she live in the house?"

"Oh, yes. But just at the moment she's away for a few days. A relative was taken ill, and Mary has gone to nurse her."

"But she will come back?"

"Oh, yes, she'll come back—I expect next week, if all goes well. How funny if she should turn out to be the girl you know, Mr. Heritage!"

"Yes, it would be funny," said Dick in the same flat voice. "But it is not at all likely, as I said. The young lady I was thinking of is a very long way off." He added, so abruptly, that it startled Sylvia: "Where did you say this lady was now? And what is her name?"

"Mary Dale," the girl said, stumbling over her words in her embarrassment. "Somewhere in the North, I think she said. It was nearly a day's journey, I know."

"I wonder if you would give me the address? I would very much like to communicate with Miss Dale. It occurs to me that she might be a sister of the lady I am thinking about, and I might get some news of her. It—it is a childhood friend."

"Do you know, I'm afraid I don't know the address! Mary went off in a great hurry. She hasn't written—not to me. I will go and ask dad if he's heard from her, but I'm almost certain he hasn't, because he hardly ever tries his eyes by reading letters, and would have given it to me."

She ran out of the room, and came back a moment or two later.

"No, dad hasn't heard, Mr. Heritage. And Mary didn't leave her address. She told him it was Cumberland she was going to, and she would wire as soon as she knew when she could come back. I wasn't at home when she left."

"Thanks so much," said Dick, now smiling apologetically. "Perhaps I shall be able to find out later on."

"Of course you will. Mary did not think she would be away more than a week. I hope you will come and see us again, Mr. Heritage."

"I shall be delighted, Miss Clough. And don't let your father back out of the meeting to-morrow night."

"He won't want to, I'm sure. He's keener than I've ever known him on anything outside his work for a long time. I'll bring him over all right."

They shook hands, and he took his leave.

Dick drove back to Testerbury without the slightest regard for the laws regulating speed. He drove to Anna Crome's hired house behind an old gray wall in the peaceful Cathedral Close.

She was at home, having just come in for a breathing space after an exhausted round of canvassing, and three special open-air meetings for women.

She had to go on to a concert in aid of a local charity, at which she was making a speech, and then to prepare for the most important event of the campaign, the grand meeting in the Cornmarket Hall that night.

She was a somewhat incongruous figure in the shadowy, paneled drawing room leading into the old gardens. Her spectacular clothes and her fragility of appearance, almost hinting at decadence, and really but a deceptive mask for her virile personality, were striking in any surroundings.

But here, among the old portraits and fading water colors of Italian scenes, and all the gracious, if shabby, possessions of a scholarly mind, fixed in a simple faith, she was more like an inhabitant of another world.

There was tea laid on a table near the window. There were many cups and saucers, but Anna was alone. She had taken off her hat, and her turban of ash-blond hair, crushed by hours of confinement, had dropped low over her eyes. It gave her a tired look.

She was wearing herself out, thought Dick in an impersonal way, as he walked unannounced into the room.

She looked at him, and cried out:

"For Heaven's sake, what's the matter?"

He stood in front of her, eyes blazing with excitement. "Anna, it was Mr. Clough's secretary, Miss Dale, you saw when you called, wasn't it?"

"Yes—a thin girl with black hair, and horn-rimmed goggles. Why? How funny you look!"

"That's Molly," he said.

"Molly!" she repeated dully.

"My wife—Molly."

"Dick, are you mad?"

"No. It's Molly."

"What did she say?"

"She wasn't there. She has gone away for a few days. I saw a snapshot of her, and asked Miss Clough who it was. They don't know her address at present."

Anna broke in:

"That's why she behaved so weirdly when I first mentioned your name—before she knew you were a candidate at this election.

"She jumped up as if she'd been shot, and ran to the door, and then pulled herself up and came back. So that's your Molly—your wonderful Molly!" she added slowly; and into her voice came an acidity that Dick was too excited to notice.

"I've found her, Anna! I've found her!" he said in a choked voice, everything forgotten in the rapture of the thought, all the old indescribable happiness pouring back into his heart.

"Of course she has gone away!" said Anna, and the sound of her voice was like ice-cold water flung in his face. "She went when she knew you were here, Dick. She has run away from you again."

"Anna, you can't possibly think that!" he said.

"What else? You are unreasonable, like most men, Dick. You can't face facts when they concern yourself. Obviously, if your wife has hidden herself from you all this time, it was because she wanted to. The moment she knew you were here, she went to hide somewhere else."

Her words had the power of naked truth. The fount of romantic hope, springing up in his heart, went down.

"Miss Clough says she's coming back," he said unsteadily.

"Naturally your wife would have said she was coming back. She is a clever girl; she had certainly shown that!"

"Anna, I don't know you!" Dick said in a bewildered voice. "You sound as if you were quite pleased that Molly has gone away! You can't mean it. It was you who helped me so much, who were always so helpful, so certain that everything would come right.

"Why, it was you who kept my faith in Molly for me—when I was almost losing it, when I was so terribly worried about Howard Lake!" His voice broke; this supreme shock, coming on the great strain and excitement of the campaign, had weakened his control.

Quick on the uptake, was Anna Crome.

She laid her hand on his arm, in strong, friendly touch.

"Dick, I am always wanting to help you. You must never doubt me, my dear. And it is not that I don't sympathize—far from it—I think you must know that.

"But, don't you see, just now you must have your whole mind to give to the election. You simply must not let any of your thoughts go wandering." Her voice was soothing, as well as encouraging.

But the lover in Dick rebelled.

"Anna, how can I control my thoughts when I have found Molly? What does anything matter?"

"Dick, thousands of people are putting their trust in you. Important ministers are backing you. Friends are working for you. You are at the crisis of the election. You can't let them all down.

"You must concentrate on winning the seat. You don't know where your wife is at the moment: so it couldn't help you to worry about her. If I seemed hard just now, it's only because I have your interests so much at heart."

"I know, I know," he murmured. "But I could be finding out where she is."

"Dick, listen! To-morrow I can be spared for a little while. I'll make all the inquiries I can. Perhaps they'll remember at the station where she booked to, perhaps she sent a telegram.

"Perhaps they'll have heard from her at the Cloughs. Perhaps even to-night they'll know where she is. Only to-night—to-night you must have all your wits about you. To-night you must be at your very best. Promise, my dear, promise."

"Yes, yes," the young man said, with quick remorse. "I know all you say is true, Anna. I'll do my best. Perhaps the Cloughs will have heard."

She made him drink some tea, and then got him off to a committee meeting, driving him there herself.

Fearing that he might give himself away, she herself attacked Sylvia immediately they met. It might sound odd from her, but it was the less dangerous.

"So you haven't brought the nice little secretary, Miss Clough. Oh, how stupid of me. Mr. Heritage told me she had gone away."

"Yes, Mrs. Crome. Mr. Heritage thought she reminded him of somebody he knew—a childhood friend, he said. He wanted to know her address, but we haven't heard from her yet."

Anna, from the corners of her eyes, saw Dick's face fall, and look blank and heavy.

The meeting was a tremendous success. Milton Clough received an ovation, and made a thrilling, picturesque, inspired speech. He looked like one of the prophets of old, as he stood on the platform, his all but sightless eyes aglow with an inner vision.

Dick spoke very well, and was enthusiastically received.

But Anna was profoundly disappointed.

She knew, as she listened to him, that the mainspring had run down. She felt it would take superhuman efforts on her part to rally him for the final struggle.

Fate became her ally the next day in a truly sensational manner.

She had driven over to Filmshanger to inquire after Clough's health. She never neglected those small courtesies; they were so often the most paying things in life.

Afterward she prepared to call at the station and use her sharpest wits in an effort to find out, without attracting undue attention, to what station Miss Dale had booked on the day of her departure.

If she failed there, she might try the post

office. She had promised Dick. Of course, it was a delicate job, but these particular country people happened to be awfully dull.

Mr. Clough was lying down, she was told by the maid and, just as she was turning away, having left cards, Sylvia came into the hall.

"Do come in, Mrs. Crome," she said hastily. "It's rather weird. I wonder if you could advise me what to do?"

No matter in what light everybody regarded her, everybody recognized the virile mental power in Anna Crome's light frame.

"It's about Mary Dale," Sylvia Clough added, as they passed into the drawing room.

"Oh, have you heard from her?" asked Anna.

"Yes, but it was so mysterious. It was not half an hour ago. Some one rang up on the telephone. It was a long distance call—some place that sounded like Piddockshaft—I don't know whether there is such a place.

"It was a man's voice, speaking with a strong accent of some kind, a very rough voice. He said: 'Miss Dale will not be able to come back. She is very sorry she will not be able to come back.'

"I interrupted, asking if her relative is worse, or if she was ill herself. He went on: 'Miss Dale will not be able to come back.' It was just like some one repeating a lesson.

"I asked more questions, but that was all he ever said. I asked what we were to do with her things, and he did not answer, but rang off, I suppose, because I heard nothing more. I didn't like to worry dad. He had a slight attack this morning—not very bad. I didn't know what to do."

"I don't see what you can do," said Mrs. Crome. "It certainly sounds queer."

"So utterly unlike Mary," said the girl. "She was so awfully considerate."

"But you said she was going to relatives, didn't you? You don't know what the people are like, I suppose?"

"No. But I can't tell you how it's worried me. Oh!" She opened her left hand in which she held a folded pink paper. "I went to her room, and looked to see if I could find any address anywhere. I was thoroughly upset.

"And I found this telegram rolled up in a ball on the floor. I wondered whether I could find out who sent it. It must be the old friend who came down to see her the other day."

"Oh!" said Anna Crome with apparent carelessness. "Does it tell you anything?"

"Well, no!" Sylvia held the paper out to her visitor, who scanned it rapidly. She saw that it was handed in at Nottingham on the day after her first visit to Filmshanger. It read:

DALE,
Care Clough,
Filmshanger, near Testerbury, Clayshire:
Will be at end of Parade Leastone to-morrow noon. Meet me there. Wire if possible.
H. L.

It was, in fact, the confirmatory copy, delivered by the postman, of the message that Miss Dale had received over the telephone from Howard Lake.

Its significance was great to Anna Crome. She proceeded to handle the situation carefully.

"Of course, this is very vague, isn't it?" she asked. "You say an old friend came down to see her?"

"Yes, she asked dad if she could have the morning and afternoon off. But, you see, there are only initials on the wire, and that makes it difficult."

"I think I should wait a day or two, Miss Clough," the elder woman advised. "After all, there may be nothing in the matter. It may be that the rough-voiced person who spoke to you wasn't used to the telephone.

"I have heard people give the most stupid messages—particularly some servants. They seem to lose all their wits when speaking over the wire. So you may hear from Miss Dale at any time."

"Yes," agreed Sylvia, "perhaps you're right. I don't know what it was that made me so uneasy."

"Oh, what a lovely view you have!" cried the visitor, suddenly rising and going to the window. "That wonderful sweep of downland, and that exquisite curve of the marsh far away. Just look—where the sun

is catching the shore—the gleam on the sands. Too divine!"

"It is pretty," Sylvia admitted with the indifference of custom, on which Mrs. Crome commented, with her airy incisiveness of speech.

"There you are! We're all like that. We don't see the beauty we know well. Why, this view is one of the perfect ones of the world! Would you believe it, I acquired a Luini fresco two years ago, a fragment, a head of St. Catherine from the Villa Landi.

"I paid far more than I could afford for it. I hung it where I could see it from my bed, choosing different places for it, as the seasons changed. For weeks I trembled with joy every time I came near it. For months it was to me the most beautiful thing in the world.

"The other day I realized that I didn't remember when I last looked at it. It's the same with your view. I quite understand. I expect you would rave over my Luini. Oh, may I just go on the veranda and smell the sea?"

"Let us walk through the garden?" invited Sylvia, fascinated, as most people were, by Anna's talk.

Anna went on talking, and it was not until she had driven away that Sylvia remembered the telegram from Nottingham that she had shown her. Mrs. Crome must have taken it away by mistake, or dropped it somewhere.

She looked for it, but could not find it. After all, it didn't help much, and she remembered the initials.

Anna looked upon that telegram as a goad placed in her hand by fate with which to prick Dick Heritage into putting all his powers into winning the election by once more shattering his faith in his wife.

She went straight back and showed it to him, telling him under what circumstances Molly must have received it, on the very day after their meeting in Clough's house, no doubt in answer to one she had sent to Howard Lake herself.

It was pretty obvious: Nottingham—and 'H. L.'

Dick said very little, but listened while Anna expressed her opinion that, of course, Molly had no intention of coming back, and had adopted the most impersonal means of letting the Cloughs know.

It was a fatal mistake on Anna Crome's part, the kind of mistake that only very clever women ever make.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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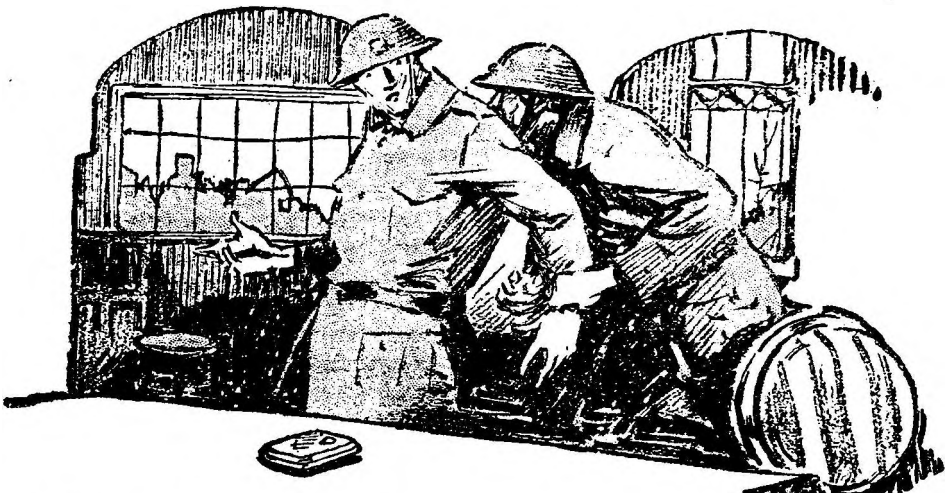
"THE BEST LAID PLANS"

THE little town where you and I were born,
We both had sworn
To leave for good when we grew up.
Life called and it was all beyond.
None loath were we to sup
At some far table. Near the fishing-pond,
Do you remember how we talked things over,
Our bare feet cooling in the sweet, white clover?

How we would sail the seas and stalk the land,
And maybe search the skies for contraband?

We met last night—a party—gay with fun,
We did not speak of boys who once had spun
Such dreams of rare adventure high with hope,
Because—you play with stocks, I deal in soap!

Peter A. Lea.



The Booby Trap

By GORDON STILES

FOR days the Allied artillery had hurled its blasting force against the enemy, playing havoc with his lines of communication, "strafing" his concentrations, shattering his trench junctions, and doing its utmost to ruin his morale. Night and day, the airplanes, freighted with bombs, made their journeys of death and disaster, deluging the foe's area with hundreds of tons of high explosive. The prelude to the great fight that drove home in the enemy's mind the first doubts of his ability to win the war—the Battle of the Somme!

Nick Waters, some time of Fitchburg, Massachusetts, but latterly of the Canadian army, lay in the darkness of an old stable that was his billet and did a heap of thinking.

It was funny, how Nick had come to think about things; he could not understand it himself. He had been in France more than eighteen months now and it had been only recently that he had ever stopped to consider why he was there or to wonder if he would come through all right.

Soldier of fourtune that he was, hard boiled from half a dozen adventures in Central America and Mexico, despite his mere thirty years, he had long since regarded himself as immune to fear or worry or any other annoying mental processes. He had hastened gayly to hook up with the Canadians in the autumn of 1914, with no other thought other than that the biggest show of his time was about to be staged, and that he craved a front seat. He got it, too.

From January of 1915, when his contingent first went over the top in Flanders, until the present—the summer of 1916—his love of action had been satisfied to an extent he had never dreamed of. Months back he had lost count of the engagements in which he had participated. He had ceased to differentiate between "major" and "minor" affrays. As he put it: "A bird is just as dead if he's killed in a piking trench raid as he would be if it was an advance on a fifty-mile front." He let it rest at that.

And having given an excellent account

of himself in the line, Nick had won a transfer to a new branch of the service, a branch which had been the subject of whisperings up and down the British lines for months, but which now was to have its first opportunity to prove itself, namely—the Tank Corps.

Nick counted himself lucky; everybody had been trying for a job with the strange, ungainly masses of steel that had so lately arrived in France.

It was something different, something he had not tried. Therefore it ought to pack a fresh thrill.

The great offensive had been set for the next day but one, and the tanks, protected from aërial observations by nets, cleverly camouflaged by motley vegetation, and concealed ingeniously from the prying eyes in the enemy O. Pips, lay at their appointed intervals just behind the Allied trench systems on the Somme front. Grim and formidable they waited there while their crews chafed at the enforced delay, and the artillery battered the positions they were to storm in forty-eight hours.

Why Nick lay there thinking of what was ahead and wondering if he would come through safely, as he had come through scores of other "shows," was an easy problem to solve, from a detached viewpoint at least. Because, on his last leave in London, from which he had returned only a month ago, Nick had met Her!

Gladys Craig, her name was. And she was putting in eight hours or more daily as a V. A. D. in Millbank Hospital. Nick had almost wished he had got a "blighty" and had been sent to London, to Millbank, to the very ward where Gladys fetched and carried for wounded Tommies, where she bantered them good-naturedly when they had reached the bantering stage on the road to recovery.

He could think of nothing more wonderful than to be able to see Gladys, to hear her low, soothing voice every day! Gosh!

Instead, he had met her at a dance, and when he looked into her eyes, which were deep and brown and liquid—when he had danced six times with her in the one evening—when he had held her young, vibrant body in his arms and listened to the sort of things that twenty-two-year-old V. A. D.'s used to say to soldiers in those times—well, Nick was done for!

He did not stop to consider that his six feet of slender, wiry frame, his eyes, blue as glittering ice, his sunburned face and his blond hair, all crisp and bleached and funny from the sun in France, could not fail to render him an object of interest to any normal girl. To say nothing of his—to Gladys—fascinating American accent.

No. Nick merely wondered how so marvelous a creature as Gladys could have consented to spend practically all of her free hours with so ordinary an individual as himself.

But she had done it, during the balance of his leave.

Curled up under his blanket, the ground heaving with the burst of enemy shells, the whole sector trembling under the steady pound of British guns, Nick lived over those delightful trips up the Thames, those teas at Kew Gardens, the one grand splash when he took her to dinner at Hampton Court and hired a taxi both ways!

Then, best of all, that afternoon at dusk, on Hampstead Heath, with the early moon coming up, big as a washtub, when Gladys had snuggled in his arms, and, between kisses, promised to marry him when the war was over. Nick drew in a sharp breath when he thought about it now, felt reverently the packet of letters in the pocket of his tunic, over his heart. Gosh!

II.

Most of the officers in the Canadian brigade to which the quartet of tanks was assigned were more or less hardened veterans. There were, however, a score of new ones—lieutenants and subalterns for whom this would be the first real trip over the top.

And among the latter, a member of the infantry regiment quartered close to Nick's billet, was a certain Lieutenant Traymore. His first name was Cecil, but he could not be blamed for that, and his stalwart frame belied any suggestion said name might arouse in the minds of the ever critical Tommies.

He had been properly discussed by the enlisted men about the camp, Nick included. And the verdict of these self-constituted judges had been favorable.

Traymore looked and acted like a good scout. Nick, in particular, admired the chap, mentally decided that the new officer would be a credit to his outfit in the coming show. That was how it was on the morning of the day preceding the famous attack.

But in the evening—well, that is something else again.

It chanced that Captain Bemis, who was in command of "Lord Roberts," as its crew had affectionately dubbed the tank in which Nick was to make his début, had sent that young man across to the regimental orderly room of the 936th with a message for the colonel.

Since the 936th was Lieutenant Traymore's unit, it was not surprising that the officer in question should be present in that same orderly room, himself waiting for something or other and passing the time in conversation with another young man of the same rank.

As he tarried while an answer to the communication he had brought was in preparation, Nick found himself perforce an eavesdropper.

His ears caught snatches of talk of this and that, but nothing of particular interest to the somewhat bored Nick until his attention was riveted by a remark of Lieutenant Traymore, who confided to the other:

"Yes; I'm going to commit matrimony on my next leave."

In any one who contemplates taking the same hazardous step, such information naturally creates a fellow feeling. And as Traymore went on to elaborate a bit, the intermittent fragments that came to Nick as the two officers, now pacing up and down together, passed and repassed him, caused him to think more and more highly of the officer involved.

Fine big chap like that would be bound to have a lot of common sense, Nick thought. He wondered idly who was to be Mrs. Traymore, and what she looked like.

The last question was soon to be answered, for, at the end of the short beat they were treading, the two men stopped, while Traymore drew from his pocket what appeared to be a number of photographs, which he passed over to his companion, and the pair stood for a moment scanning the lot in the clear light that came from a nearby window.

Nick could not hear the lively comment that appeared to be going forward, but, as the two men turned and came back toward him, he saw that Traymore had retained one of the photographs in his hand and was regarding it with absorption as he murmured to his friend something about "the best of the lot."

At that instant they came abreast of where Nick stood, paused while both looked at the picture in Traymore's hand. Nick looked, too, out of sheer curiosity, leaning forward as much as he dared to do so. He looked, and turned cold.

From the print which the lieutenant held in his hand the unforgettable eyes of Gladys Craig stared straight into those of the incredulous Nick!

It was not only the eyes that his startled gaze embraced. Her whole provokingly beautiful face, every familiar line of it, stood out with dazzling and disconcerting clearness.

And to Nick, fast becoming unnerved from the shock, it seemed that there was about it a trace of mockery.

His first impulse was to tear the print from the officer's hand, denounce him for the liar that he was. Gladys marry Cecil Traymore! Huh!

But Nick was far too well trained for so foolish a move; discipline had become instinctive. The alternative of saluting Traymore and politely inquiring what his statement had been based upon, Nick dismissed as out of the question, much as he would have liked to do so. Traymore would reply, and rightly, Nick thought bitterly, that it was none of his business.

At that instant he was called to receive the answer to the captain's message, and, brain awhirl, black thoughts crowding each other for space in his mind, he stumbled into the open air and made his way, unseeing, to his own headquarters.

His errand accomplished, Nick slunk

away from the sight of man, so far as he was able, threw himself down in the shade cast by a blasted ruin that once had been a marble château, and tried to appraise the situation.

For an hour he weighed the evidence pro and con, set the parting words of Gladys, and the conviction that her letters fostered, against the damning and incontrovertible testimony that his ears and eyes had heard and observed so short a while ago. A lump rose in his throat as he drew out the tiny snapshot which was his only likeness of the girl who had come to mean more than life to him.

Traymore, he recalled with almost tearful bitterness, had not one but at least half a dozen photographs. Even in his despair Nick longed to see those others. He wildly imagined tearing them to bits and hurling the fragments in Traymore's face!

But after all, Nick was a man of the world. His experience had taught him to view almost everything with an air of detachment, and now this faculty was called into play.

He was not, Nick reasoned, the first man to be ditched by a girl. He had seen plenty of that; it happened every day. You could not really depend on any woman! While you were with them they were for you. It was expedient.

He might as well face the thing. Gladys had been kidding him along as many another man had been kidded along before, doubtless by Gladys herself. He wished Traymore joy of his conquest.

Funny, though, he thought, how different it was to have the lightning strike right at home. He recalled how he had almost laughed at the troubles of others. He wished now he hadn't. Because it hurt—hurt most damnably—to lose— Oh, hell! He'd scurry around and see if he couldn't raise a drink from the mess sergeant.

On the way he passed Traymore's tent, observed that the young officer was engaged in the duties that mark the last day before a great drive—packing his effects, cutting insignia from an old uniform to be worn to the push, so that, if captured by the enemy, there would be nothing to mark him as an officer or betray his unit.

Nick mused a little about it all. If the drive succeeded and the objectives were attained, perhaps Traymore would not be on hand to claim his luggage when the transport brought it up. There would be plenty of such cases.

Bah! What nonsense was he mulling over! Of course Traymore would be there. The other would be too lucky! Damn! He swallowed dryly, hastened his steps.

III.

Nick crouched at his post in the diamond-shaped tank, swung his machine gun around its arc of better than ninety degrees, almost held his breath as they waited for the signal to go.

Opposite him, Corley, the other gunner, made his preparations, examining his ammunition belts, testing the breech action. Captain Bemis, manning the forward gun, looked around and smiled encouragement at his companions, while the driver peering through narrow slits at the scene outside, swore softly at the already stifling heat, although it was not yet four o'clock in the morning.

For moments there had been a slight lull in the artillery fire—the hush that precedes the storm. The men in the grim tanks, the airmen already seated in their planes, the infantry, feet on the firing steps—all poised as a hawk about to swoop on its prey, knew that the big moment was at hand.

Then—*crash!* The thunder of the guns filled the whole universe! A terrific roar! Ominous, portending! The barrage!

The tank trembled as its great motor sprang to life with a grinding voice. A private pandemonium of sound, Nick had called it.

He stuffed the cotton a little tighter into his ears and braced himself for what was to be a history-making journey. He wondered how the enemy would react to this new marvel sent to destroy him.

As one, the line of tanks lunged forward. Forward, across the bridges over the trenches prepared by the engineers in advance—on, into the rivers of barbed wire that streamed their sinister way through No Man's Land! Through the peepholes Nick

could see the set faces of the troops as they sprang to move on with the new engines of war.

He could not see the myriad planes, low-flying, raining death into the enemy strongholds, but he knew they were there. He watched, rather, with a keen fascination, the flat lane which the tank was making through the dreaded wire. Pie for the men on foot, he thought, and wouldn't it put the wind up the enemy?

But here was business! Above the wild sounds without and within, above the dull crashing of shells and the smash of small arms fire, came the sudden *ping, ping, ping* of missiles striking the tank itself. Faster and faster it came, settled to a steady metallic rain as the astonished enemy poured machine gun and rifle fire into the very teeth of the advancing monster.

Nick chuckled. Fools! Well, he knew, if they didn't, that nothing less than a direct hit from something three inches or more would penetrate the armor that surrounded him and his companions. Ah! the trenches!

The nose of the tank thrust itself skyward—so sharply that for an instant Nick wondered if the thing was about to turn a backward somersault. He clung grimly to the handrails and held his breath. Then, with a lurch that threw him forward so abruptly that his arm felt as if it were being wrenched from its socket, the great lumbering creature came down astraddle of the first line enemy trench!

On both sides, the white, frightened faces of would-be defenders stared at the ungainly apparition that had come to confound them. Swearing through clenched teeth, Nick let them have it.

From his place of comparative safety he sprayed his bullets by the hundreds, playing the gun almost as the nozzle of a hose, upon the scrambling humanity that now sought only to get away from this horrible new menace.

The temporary hatred which battle invariably brews seethed within him. He worked his gun viciously. And at this wild moment his hatred suddenly included Traymore!

He fired mechanically, but his mind flew to the man, the swine who had stolen his girl. He wished Traymore would step into his line of fire. By Heaven, he did! He'd fill him so full of steel that—that—bah!

If he were only out there with the infantry now—he might get a chance at Traymore. He'd do it, too! In the confusion—

With surprise Neck saw that he was firing at nothing—that is, nothing but black torn earth, spattered with odd shaped bundles of clothing with arms and legs flung about at grotesque angles. The enemy had fled. And now the tank was moving.

Down flopped her tail with a jolt; then she dragged it up slowly and painfully as a dog drags a broken leg after him. And the lumbering on began once more.

Crunch! That would be a machine-gun emplacement. A sudden retarding of speed, followed by a slow but steady progress. That meant, probably, the shot off trunk of a tree. A splintering of wood or a crushing of stone, and a building had declined further dispute with the irresistible machine that trampled down everything in its path.

And through it all the canker of jealousy surged in the heart of Nick Waters! He realized himself that it was a strange time to be harboring such feelings; he couldn't help it, that was all.

He plumped a snarling burst of fire into a panic-stricken machine-gun crew, and laughed aloud at their sprawling contortions.

Now the captain was peering eagerly at the blackened, smoke-mantled terrain ahead of him. Nick could make out the half-destroyed buildings of a village. This and a lull in the racket without caused him to suspect, and rightly, that the great drive was over; the objectives of the British had been attained.

The captain leaned down and screamed orders into the ear of the driver.

His eyes on the alert for signs of enemy stragglers, Nick watched the first buildings of the town come slowly into view. Straight down the principal street waddled the tank, made its squashing way through a mass of dead artillery horses and came to a halt on the far outskirts.

Thankfully the four of them scrambled

through the narrow aperture and stretched their cramped limbs luxuriously, sloshed the grimy sweat from their faces with their equally grimy hands. The first push in the Battle of the Somme was over!

IV.

Captain Bemis was jubilant. He beamed upon his aids and cried: "By Jove, we've done it! If the others are as lucky as we are, the Tank Corps will shine from now on. There will be enough of our chaps here presently, but at present we four own this burg! Orders were for the infantry to wait until the tanks had gone through to clean up any snipers or machine-gun nests. But it looks to me as if they were damned glad to go. We gave them a fright, all right! Now you chaps can give your legs a good stretch while I get after my reports."

Nothing loath, Corley and Nick set out to examine the captured village; the exhausted driver preferred to try for a nap in the lee of a barricade of sandbags. The disgruntled enemy, digging himself in some miles away, was already sending over his metallic compliments and a hot time might be expected later on.

The place was in pretty much of a mess, the two explorers found. It had been a point from which all civilians had been ordered away, evidently, for the numerous corpses they encountered were garbed in uniform and there was no sign of life about the streets.

On a thoroughfare running at right angles to the main street stood a pretentious-looking house which appeared to have been little damaged by shells. The interior of this Nick and Corley decided to investigate; a bulletin board beside the front door indicated that it had been some sort of headquarters.

Sure enough, the once elegant living rooms were now a huddle of desks and tables, from which all papers had been removed. After peering into corners and curiously examining a rather fine fireplace, the two intruders made their way into what had been the officers' mess of the enemy unit of occupation.

A long table down the center of the room, a clutter of chairs, and a rude sideboard affair, built against the wall, were the chief objects of inspection. The sideboard was nothing more than a shelf from the edge of which cheap cloth curtains fell to the floor; the top was covered with a sort of oilcloth.

And lying on this shiny surface, midway along the board, was something that caught the eyes of both the visitors at the same instant. A massive silver cigarette case.

Corley leaped forward with outstretched hand.

"Mine!" he shouted. "Come to papa, oh, you shiny baby!"

But Nick seized him by the shoulders.

"Not on your life!" he declared. "Corley, you damned fool, haven't you been in this game long enough to know better? I'll bet a month's pay it's a booby trap!"

"Gosh! Wow! I'll bet it is, too! If it isn't, it ought to be. But for a second it looked good."

They approached the object gingerly, their thoughts full of the bitter experiences of others who had pounced upon tempting souvenirs in times past, only to find themselves blown to kingdom come an instant later.

Nick said: "You wouldn't catch any officer leaving anything so nifty as that behind, no matter how much of a hurry he happened to be in. No fear!"

They stared down at the case for a moment, circling about in a manner ridiculously similar to that of a pair of game cocks just ready to fly at each other. Then Nick with a wry face carefully moved aside the cloth curtain at the point opposite the alluring trophy.

He bent low, and turned to Corley with triumph written on his face.

"There!" he exclaimed. "Look!"

"Gee whiz!" Corley breathed. "Sure enough!"

Very respectfully they examined the parallel wires that came down through the board from a point directly under the case, the slightest disturbance of which, they knew now, would result in an electric connection freighted with disaster to all in the vicinity.

"I'll bet," said Corley, "that there is about a ton of TNT or guncotton or something hooked onto the other end of those wires in the basement."

"You're probably underestimating the quantity, at that," returned Nick. "However, we'd better pull our freight away from this charming place and notify the engineers to come and fuss with those wires. It's no kind of party for us to be mixed up in."

"Right!" agreed Corley, and they made their way to the street.

V.

At the corner of the main street they stopped. In the near distance, at the approaches of the town, they could see the oncoming mass of Canadians, moving up slowly, wearily. The two watched in silence for a moment. Then Corley said:

"I'm hungry. And back along this street, as we came down, I saw something that looked as if it might have been a bake-shop. I'm going to skip back there and give it the once over. When that bunch that's coming gets in, they'll act like a swarm of locusts. You wait here a minute and I'll have a look-see."

"All right; make it snappy. We've got to notify somebody about that booby trap."

"I'll show speed," Corley promised, and was off.

Corley had scarcely gone, when a figure, grimy and disheveled, came tramping along the street toward where Nick stood waiting. The man was on the opposite sidewalk, but there was something familiar about his gait, and a second later, with a surge of black anger, Nick saw that it was Traymore.

The latter appeared to be in a hurry, and peered keenly about as he trod the shell-torn pavement. At once it flashed over Nick that, in all likelihood, Traymore had been sent on ahead to select quarters for the regimental staff. And at the very same instant he saw that Traymore had spotted the mansion which he and Corley had so lately quitted.

"By God! By God!" he muttered under his breath, half frightened at his own thoughts. "He'll go there! He'll make a bee line for it. And he's green at this—easily green enough to grab that case!"

He smiled grimly. This fool would bump himself off. Why should he, Nick, lift a finger to prevent it? Didn't he hate the cuss? All right, then, let him go! Why, even fate had sent Corley off at the right moment! Lieutenant Traymore would not marry Gladys Craig on his next leave. No, indeed!

A wave of exultation swept over Nick—fiercely. Here, awhile back, he had been thinking how he would like to kill Traymore—and now the matter was about to be settled—settled so easily and safely.

His rival would be out of the way for good and all! Nick even drew a bit of cynical satisfaction from the thought that it would serve Gladys right.

Traymore had seen him, and Nick's hand came smartly to the salute. Intent upon his quest and with a handsome building before his eyes, the officer hurried on, passed the corner, and headed straight for the fatal spot!

Nick stood still and watched him go!

Gladys! Gladys! Her name began to drum in his ears. Gladys! She who had made him suffer, and who had driven him to—to—yes, to murder!

That's what it was — murder! And Gladys—his heart suddenly skipped a beat. Her face rose before his eyes—her face, and it was no longer mocking; it was reproachful.

Perhaps, he thought, perhaps Gladys *did* love this man who even now was going to his doom! Even if she had trifled with himself, she might really love Traymore! A girl has to love somebody!

And he saw Traymore mount the steps and enter the door behind which lay that silver case.

Within him a great tension suddenly gave way; something seemed to snap, to burst. With a gasp that was half sob, Nick bounded after Traymore.

Good God! What had he been thinking of? He, Nick Waters, standing by while a man, a comrade, went to a horrible death! It was unthinkable, no matter

what or how powerful the motive. If only —if only he could be in time!

VI.

TRAYMORE had given the outer room only a brief glance; it would do for an orderly room. With a murmur of satisfaction he entered the spacious mess.

"Ah," he said aloud. "This is simply great! Hope the old boy appreciates my energy and initiative. Hello! What's this?"

He had spied the glittering case on the sideboard.

Now he stepped quickly toward where it lay.

"Somebody," he thought, "was in a hell of a sweat to get out. A supersouvenir!"

He reached out his hand.

A swift rush of feet behind him. And as he turned, reaching for his gun, Traymore felt his arms pinioned by powerful hands and himself dragged away from where he stood, while the near-hysterical voice of Nick Waters cried:

"Keep away! Don't touch it! For God's sake, don't touch it!"

"Don't touch what?" repeated Traymore. "And who are you, might I ask?"

Nick pulled himself together. "Don't touch the cigarette case! It's a booby trap!"

Traymore drew back in alarm.

"Lord!" he said. "I'd heard of them—booby traps, of course! In training camp. But I never thought—"

"Look here, sir!" Nick pulled aside the curtain, watched the face of his rival go white, and continued: "In reply to the other half of your question, sir—I am the damnedest rotter the Almighty ever let live! They call me Nick Waters! I'm in the Tanks, sir."

"But, how—how did you know—"

Nick interrupted, told the story of how he and Corley had discovered the trap. He ended with:

"Then, sir, when you came along, and I saw that you meant to give this place the once over, I—I—let you go to it, sir. Because when you go on your next leave—you are going to marry my girl, the girl I hoped to marry myself."

He stopped and gazed miserably at the other.

Traymore's brows lifted in surprise.

"I don't quite get you, my dear chap," he said. "It might simplify matters if you were to tell me the name of the young lady in question—your girl, whom I am going to marry. Odd situation, I should say!"

"Her name," Nick told him, "is Gladys Craig!"

"That does help"—Traymore laughed whole-heartedly—"because the girl I expect to marry is Elizabeth Campbell. Where did you get that fool idea, anyhow?"

Hastily Nick explained.

Traymore laughed. "I'll be jolly well damned if that isn't a good one!" he said. "You see, Waters, some of the organizations in England that are supposed to make the soldier's life sweet and happy hit upon a scheme of collecting photographs of pretty girls and shipping them out to the front so that the heroic Tommy could stick them up in his tent or funk hole, or wherever, and thus look upon the likeness of one or more real home folks, or some such sort of tosh.

"But the officers generally grab off most of the good ones; I had a lovely collection which I meant to save for Elizabeth, and I chanced to show some of them to a pal yesterday—just after I had told him I was about to marry. I fancy that covers the little misunderstanding, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but—look at me. A minute more and I'd have been a—"

"Tut! Tut! From what I've seen—and you've seen a lot more—I can imagine that a man would think queer things out here. And do queer things. War puts strange quirks into men's brains. And, whatever you might have thought and planned, you can't blink the fact that you have kept me from going west. Can you, now? If you had not discovered this thing in the first place— Oh, the devil! I'll call it square if you'll let me be best man when you marry Gladys Craig. Are you on?"

"Done!" said Nick, and gripped the proffered hand.

THE END

Seven Footprints to Satan

By A. MERRITT

Author of "The Metal Monster," "The Ship of Ishtar," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PREVIOUS PARTS

FOLLOWING my capture I was taken to a man calling himself Satan, who was installed in a castle of priceless treasures, of mysterious passages, and situated, I later learned, in an isolated part of Long Island. He dealt in souls, offering those whom he selected a gambler's chance to attain the world's power and beauty or to become his slave for a year, or a lifetime; all of which was arranged by an elaborate system of steps, four of which were good, and three evil. I took his option of stopping at the second step, and, as both were evil, was his slave for a year, with the ordeal again to be faced at the end of it. I completed my first test, of looting a necklace from the museum, and met the regular members of the organization. Among them I made friends with Consardine and Gobham, and fell in love with Eve Demerest, whom Satan had selected to be the mother of his child. We planned to overthrow him, with the aid of Harry Barker, a cockney I once befriended, who, being an electrician, knew the secret passages. My presence at the Discoverers' Club, where I lived, was attended to by a double. Harry was conducting me, through the maze of passages, to Eve's room.

CHAPTER XIII *(Continued).*

IN SATAN'S WALLS.

BARKER and I slipped out of the lift, and crossed what was apparently a ten-foot-wide corridor, black as a windowless dungeon. We passed, I conjectured, through its opposite wall, and along another passage of eighteen short paces. Here Barker paused, listening.

Then in front of me a hair line of faint light appeared. Slowly, ever so slowly, it widened. Barker's head became silhouetted against it. Cautiously he advanced, peering out. Then he nodded, reassuringly. He moved forward.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for July 2.

We were in a dimly lighted, narrow corridor. It was hardly wide enough for two men to walk side by side. It was lined and paved with some polished black stone, into which the light from some hidden source, seemed to sink and drown. We were at one end of it. The floor fell in a gradual ramp for a hundred yards or more, and there the way either ceased or curved, the light was so faint and the effect of the polished stone so confusing I could not tell which.

"Looks like a' halley into 'ell, don't it?" muttered Harry. "Well, in a minute or two try to sye it ain't."

He set grimly forth down it, I at his heels. We came to the part that had perplexed me, and I saw that it was a curve, a sharp one. The curve was unlighted, its darkness relieved only by faint reflections from behind. I could not see its end. We moved on into the thickening gloom. The floor had become level.

Suddenly Barker halted, his mouth close to my ear.

"Lay down. Not a sound now when you look in. On your life! Don't 'ardly breathe!"

I looked through the crack. I felt a cold prickling along my spine and in the roots of my hair.

A little below me and not more than fifty feet away sat Satan. And he was opening the gates of his Black Paradise to the dying souls of the *kehft* slaves!

The meaning of the scene struck clear with my first glimpse of it. Satan was leaning forward from a massive throne of heavy black stone cushioned in scarlet and standing on a low, broad dais. His robes were scarlet. At his side squatted the ape-faced monstrosity of an executioner, Sanchal. At his left hand stood two figures with veiled faces. One of them held a deep ewer, and the other a golden goblet.

At Satan's feet was a woman, rising from her knees. She was not old, fair-haired, and must have been once very beautiful. Her body, seen through the one white robe that was her only covering, was still so. Her wide eyes were fixed with a dreadful avidness upon another golden goblet in Satan's hand. Her mouth was half open, her lips drawn tight against her teeth. Her body quivered and strained as though she were about to leap upon him.

The executioner whirred the loop of his cord, and grinned. She shrank back. Satan lifted the goblet high. His voice rolled out, sonorous and toneless.

"You, woman who was Greta von Bohnheim, who am I?"

She answered as tonelessly.

"You are Satan."

"And what am I, Satan?"

She replied:

"You are my god!"

I felt Barker shudder. Well, I was doing a little shivering myself. The infernal litany went on.

"You shall have no god but me!"

"I have no god but you, Satan!"

"What is it, woman, that is your desire?"

Her hands were clenched, and she drew them up to her heart. Her voice was tremulous, and so low that barely could I hear it.

"A man and a child who are dead!"

"Through me they shall live again for you! Drink!"

There was faint mockery in his voice, and derision in his eyes as he handed the goblet to the woman. She clutched it in both hands, and drained it. She bowed low, and walked away. She passed out of the narrow range of my vision, stepping ever more firmly, face rapt, lips moving as though she talked with one unseen who walked beside her.

Again I felt the cold creep down my back. In what I had beheld there had been something diabolic, something that truly savored of the Prince of the Damned. It betrayed itself in Satan's cold arrogance and pride during the blasphemous litany. It was in his face, his glittering eyes, and in the poise of his huge body. Something truly of hell that possessed him, emanated from him, hovered around him. As though, as once before I have tried to describe it, as though he were a mechanism of flesh and blood in which a demon had housed itself.

My gaze followed the woman until I could see her no more. The chamber was

immense. What I could see of it through the crack must have been less than a third of it. The walls were of rose marble, without hangings or ornamentation of any kind. There were pierced openings like the mouths of deep niches, over which silvery curtains fell. There was a great fountain that sent up tinkling jets of water out of a blood-red bowl. Couches of the rosy stone were scattered about. They were richly covered and on them lay, as though sleeping, men and women. There must have been dozens of these, for there were a score of them within my limited vision alone. I could not see the roof.

I thought that these curtained apertures might be cubicles or cells in which the slaves dwelt.

A gong sounded. The curtains were plucked aside. In each of the openings stood a slave, their eyes fastened upon Satan with a horrid eagerness. I shivered. It was like an eruption of the damned.

Satan beckoned. A man stepped forward toward the dais. I took him for an American, a Westerner. He was tall and lanky, and in his gait something of the rocking habit of the range rider. His face was the hawklike type that the mountain country breeds, and, curiously, it made the peculiar pallor and dilated eyes masklike and grotesque. His mouth was thin and bitter.

Like the woman, he prostrated himself before Satan. The veiled figure with the goblet held it out to the ewer bearer, who poured into it a green liquid. The cup bearer handed the goblet to Satan.

"Rise," he commanded. The suppliant sprang to his feet, burning gaze upon the cup. The unholy ritual began again.

"You, man who were Robert Tailler, who am I?"

"You are Satan!"

"And what am I, Satan?"

Again the blasphemous avowal—

"You are my God!"

"You shall have no god but me!"

"I have no god but you, Satan!"

"What is it, man, that you desire?"

The slave straightened, his voice lost its lifelessness. His face grew cruel as that of the executioner's own.

"To kill the man I hate—to find him—to ruin him—to kill him slowly in many ways!"

"As you killed him once—too swiftly," said Satan maliciously, and then, again tonelessly:

"Through me you shall find him whom you hate, and slay him! Drink!"

He drank and passed. Twice more I heard the clang of the summoning gong, and twice I watched the white faces of these doomed ones with their avid eyes appear through the silver curtains and disappear behind them. I heard one man ask for dominance over a kingdom of beasts. Another for a paradise of women.

And Satan promised, and gave them the green draft.

The *kehft!*

The subtle, devilish drug that gave to its drinkers the illusion of fulfilled desire. That turned the mind upon itself, to eat itself. And that by some hellish alchemy dissolved the very soul.

I stared on, fascinated, Eve forgotten. But if I had forgotten, Barker had not. The crack through which I was looking closed. He touched me, and we arose. Soundlessly we slipped up the ramp through the dim, black passage.

I felt a bit sick.

It had been no nice picture, that of Satan wallowing in the worship of those slaves of his, dealing them out love and hate, dark power and lust, sardonically and impartially giving each what he or she most desired.

Illusions, yes. But more real than life to the drinkers when the drug had them.

But, God, their awakening!

And after that awakening the burning craving to escape reality! To return to that place of illusion to which the *kehft* was the only key!

No wonder that the three of the museum affair had gone to their deaths with such blind obedience!

And, if Satan was not what he pretended, very surely he was not disgracing that power whose name he had taken.

I had paid little attention to where we were going, blindly following Barker's lead.

"Well," he whispered suddenly. "Was I right? Wasn't it a' halley into 'ell? What about Satan now, cap'n?"

I came back to myself with nerves jumping.

"A drug dealer," I answered him. "A dope den *à la* Ritz. That's all. I've seen opium joints in China that would make it look like a trench dugout. And the pipe hitters there would cut your throat for a pill just as quick as these would for Satan."

Neither of which assertions was at all true, but it gave me comfort to say them.

"Yes?" he said cynically. "Well, it's a good wye to think. I 'opes you keep on thinkin' that wye, cap'n."

I hoped that I might begin to think so.

"Soft along 'ere," he whispered. We were moving like ghost in the darkness of a passage. I had an indistinct memory of having entered several lifts. Of even the probable location of my room I had not the slightest idea.

"'Ere we are," he muttered, and stood for an instant listening. I thrust my hand into the pocket where I had slipped my wrist watch, that its illuminated dial might not betray us. I took a swift look. It was almost half past midnight.

Barker drew me forward. There was a faint scent in the air, a delicate fragrance.

Eve's!

We were in her room.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN EVE'S ROOM.

"BEAT her to it," I whispered incautiously.

There was a rustle, as of some one sitting hastily up in bed.

"Who's there?" came Eve's voice softly. "I've got my finger on the alarm!"

"It's me—Jim," I answered, as softly as she, but mighty hastily.

"Jim!" A subdued light gleamed suddenly. "Where have you been? I've been worried to death about you!"

Eve was leaning forward from her pillows, brown eyes wide and luminous, silken mop of her hair a bit tousled. She looked like a wakeful little girl who had been exasperatedly pulling it. She was, also, the prettiest thing I had ever seen. Every time I looked at Eve she seemed prettier. I wondered when she was going to stop. She had on some sort of a lacy pink negligee. All the rest of my life, I knew, my heart would beat faster whenever I saw a lacy pink negligee, even when it was only in a shop window.

She slipped out of bed, ran straight to me, and kissed me. It was so pleasant that I entirely forgot everything else.

I became aware of a queer noise behind me. Harry was teetering from side to side, his hands clasped, his eyes half closed and moist, his face ecstatic, and he was crooning like an affectionate parrot. He *was* a sentimental burglar, Harry.

"If you want to say: 'Bless you, my children,' go ahead, Harry," Eve said, mischievously.

He blinked, snapped out of it, and grinned at her.

"Made me think of me an' Maggie," he said. "Just like when we was courtin'. Fair warmed my 'eart, it did."

"Well," I said, "I move that this meeting comes to order. We've got a lot of ground to cover, and not much time to do it. What's the chance of us being interrupted, Eve?"

"Hardly any," she murmured. "Frankly, everybody does as they like about having room parties. So everybody is extraordinarily discreet about visiting without an invitation. On the other hand, Jim, you're the one person it wouldn't do to have found here. Our aversion to each other has been so marked, darling, you know. Satan would be bound to hear about it. And the second he did—"

She didn't have to finish the sentence. I had a very clear idea of what Satan would do.

"It would be hard to explain Barker, too," she added.

"How about it, Harry?" I asked him. "Like to be any calls for you? Any awkward searching parties?"

"Not unless something big goes wrong," he said. "If they look for me in my room, I can say I was workin' somewhere else. Satan won't be 'untin' me, that's certain."

"Well," I said, "we'll have to take some chances. But we'll talk low and in the dark."

Eve stepped over, and put out the lamp. She drew aside the heavy curtains from one of the windows. A faint light filtered in from the moon hidden behind a hazy sky. Barker and I moved the chaise longue over to a shadowed corner. The three of us sat down upon it.

We talked. Not the slightest use of setting down a word of it. We got nowhere. A few schemes gleamed brightly for an instant, and then went glimmering like will-o'-the-wisps. The spell of what I had beheld in Satan's unholy shrine was heavy on me, try as I would to throw it off. I had to fight a sense of futility.

We were like three flies in a web of the Temple of the Footsteps. If we got out of one, it was only to find ourselves in another. But steadily Eve's warm, soft body pressing against mine, her courage, her trust in me that shone so sweetly from her brown eyes, armed me against the devastating sapping of my confidence. There *was* a way. There *must* be a way.

More than an hour had passed, and we had found not a single clew to it.

And Barker had been growing fidgety, nervously abstracted.

"What's the matter, Harry?" I asked him at last.

"I'm huneasy, sir," he said. "I don't know why. But I 'ave a feelin' somethin's wrong somewhere."

It struck me as funny.

"You're devilish well right there is," I couldn't help chuckling. "It's what we've been giving all this time trying to right."

"No," he said soberly. "I'm bl—I'm hunusually huneasy. An' I'm never that wye hunless somethin's bl—'orrible wrong. Cap'n, I think we'd better call it a night, an' get back."

I hesitated. As I say, we had got nowhere. At any moment one of us might get a flash that would open up a way out. Truth was, of course, I didn't want to leave Eve. But there was no denying the little man's distress. And if he should go and not be able to return—well, then I would be in a pretty fix. I hadn't the slightest idea of where my room was, or how to get to it.

"We've decided a lot of things *won't* do," said Eve. "It sounds Polly-Annaish, I know, but it really is some progress. The day may bring new ideas. We'll meet again to-night."

"All right," I said. "We'll go, Harry."

By the involuntary breath of relief he drew, I realized how troubled he was. Eve slipped to the windows, and let drop the curtains. The room resumed its original darkness. I felt her hand touch mine, and then her arms were around my neck.

"It's going to seem a long, long time till to-night, Jim, darling," whispered Eve.

"'Urry!" came Harry's whisper. "'Urry up, cap'n!"

I cautiously began to make my way toward where he stood by the wall.

"Gord!" I heard him gasp.

The word was thick with terror. I leaped forward.

The ray of a flash light struck Barker full in the face. A hand shot out with the quickness of a snake, and caught his throat. I saw his face distorted with agony as his own two hands flew up to break that merciless grip.

The light struck me in the eyes, dazzling me. I ducked, and dived in. Before I could touch whoever it was that held it, the flash dropped to the rug and Barker's body hit me like a bag of sand hurled by an elephant. I staggered back with a grunt. The lights in the room flashed up.

Just in front of me, menacing me with his automatic, stood Consardine!

And Consardine's eyes were cold and deadly. There was death in them. They flashed from me to Eve. His face softened, as though with relief from some fear. Swiftly it gave way to bewilderment, incredulity. It grew hard and deadly again. The muzzle of the gun pointing at me never wavered. At my feet Harry gasped, and staggered up dizzily. I put an arm out and steadied him.

"What are these men doing here, Eve?"

Consardine's voice was still and flat, as though he were holding himself in check by enormous effort. I had read the thought behind those swiftly changing expressions. First that we had crept into Eve's room for some sinister purpose. Then—suspicion of Eve herself.

I must wipe that out. Keep Eve out of it. Play on Consardine's first card. I answered him before she could speak.

"You're rather impetuous, Consardine," I said in a voice as hard as his own. "But your gun makes that safe, I suppose, when you let loose on an unarmed man. I was restless, and decided to go back to the bridge game. I got lost in your cursed rabbit warren. I ran across this man here who told me that he was working around the place. I asked him to guide me back to my room. By some damned irony, he managed to make the mistake of all mistakes of getting me into Miss Demerest's. Believe me, I was quite as anxious to get away as she was for me to go. Miss Demerest, I think you will confirm what I say."

I turned to her. It was an open lead, and it sounded plausible enough. Consardine paid no attention to me whatever.

"I asked you, Eve, what men are doing here?" he repeated.

Eve looked at him steadily for a moment, and then walked over and stood beside me.

"Dr. Consardine," she said, "Mr. Kirkham is lying like a gentleman, to save me. The truth is that I asked him to come and see me. And I asked Barker to guide him to me. Both of them are entirely innocent of anything except courteously doing as I asked. The whole responsibility is mine."

The veins suddenly stood out on Consardine's temples, and the gun in his hand wavered. His face flushed. The cold fury had given way to hot anger. He might be just as dangerous, but I had a flash that Eve knew what she was doing, that her instinct had been truer than mine.

"So!" said Consardine thickly. "You thought you could make a fool out of me! Dupe me! I don't enjoy being fooled. How long have you two known each other?"

"We never set eyes on each other until you brought us together," said Eve.

"And why did you send for him?"

"To get me away from Satan," answered Eve steadily. "What else?"

He regarded her with smoldering eyes.

"And why did you think he could do that?" he asked her.

"Because I love him! And because he loves me!" said Eve quietly.

He stared at us. Then abruptly all anger fled, his eyes softened.

"Good God!" said Consardine. "You babes in the wood!"

Eve put her hand out to him. He took it, patting it gently. He looked us over carefully again as though we were some new and puzzling specimens. He turned out all the lights except the shaded one beside Eve's bed, strode over to the window, and peeped out the curtains. He came back to us.

"Let's talk over this," he said. "Barker, I'm sorry I choked you. Kirkham, I'm sorry I bowled you over. I'm sorry, too, that I misjudged you. And glad I did. Eve, I wasn't spying on you from out there. You were on my mind. You have been, child, for some time. I could see how restless and disturbed you were at the game. I thought—it was something else.

"You were on my mind, I say. I thought that perhaps you had not gone to bed. And that a talk with me, who am more than old enough to be your father, might help. There were—some things I had to say. I stood out there for minutes, hesitating. I thought I might slip the panel a mite and see if you were up—or awake. I thought you might be crying. And just as I was about to do it, it opened and I heard Barker curse. Then the rest happened. That's all."

I gave him my hand. Barker grinned widely, and saluted.

"Had I better be goin', sir?" he asked.

"Not yet," said Consardine. "Kirkham, how long have you known Barker?"

"'E syved my life, 'e did," broke in Harry. "'E pulled me out o' 'ell. An' while we're all tellin' the truth, Dr. Consardine, I'll sye I'm fair sot on doin' the syme by 'im an' 'is young lydy."

I gave Consardine a brief account of my experience with Barker. He nodded approvingly.

"First," he said, "it will be well to clarify the situation by stating my own position. I am Satan's servant. I am bound by a certain oath to him. I took that oath with open eyes, fully realizing all that it entailed. I came to him voluntarily, not like you, Kirkham. I recognize that your oath was under duress, and that therefore

you are entitled to act in ways that I am not. I do not break my voluntary oath nor my word. Besides that, I am convinced that if I did I would not live long. I have a foolish partiality for living.

"I could cheat Satan of his pleasure in my torture, but—I do not believe in any existence beyond the grave, and I find life at times, vastly interesting. Furthermore, I have certain standards of living, appetites, desires, and likings which my contact with Satan insures of satisfaction. Away from him they certainly would not be satisfied. Also I was an outlaw when I came to him. Outlaw I am, but hunted outlaw I would be without his protection. First and last—there is my oath.

"Let it be understood, then, that any assistance that I can promise you will be largely negative. It will consist of warning you of pitfalls to avoid, and of closing my eyes and ears to what I may see or hear. Like this affair to-night, for instance."

"It is all we could ask, sir," I said. "And a great deal more than I had any right to expect."

"And now I say to you, Kirkham," he went on, "that I think you have little chance to win against Satan. I think that the road you have picked has death at its end. I tell you so because I know you have courage, and you should be told what is in my mind. And I say it before you, Eve, because you, too, have courage. And you must consider, child, whether you should allow your lover to take this almost certain risk of death, or whether you should do—something else."

I looked into Eve's face. Her mouth was quivering, and her eyes were tortured.

"What—what is the something else, Dr. Consardine?" she whispered.

"Become Mme. Satan, I suppose!" I answered for him. "Not while I'm alive."

"That," he acquiesced quietly, "of course. But it is not what I had in mind—" He hesitated, shot a glance at Harry and quickly switched to another thought, or back, rather, to his old one.

"Understand," he said, "I want you to win, Kirkham. In any way that does not break my oath to Satan, or threaten my prejudice for remaining alive, I will help you. At the least—I will keep hands off. But realize this—I am Satan's servant. If he orders me to take you, I shall take you. If he orders me to kill you, I shall—kill you."

"If Jim dies, I die. If you kill him, you kill me," said Eve tranquilly. She meant it. He knew she meant it, and he winced.

"Nevertheless, child, I would do it," he told her. And *I* knew *he* meant that. So did Eve.

"You—you started to—you were about to speak of another way—" she faltered.

"I do not want you to tell me your plans, Kirkham," he interrupted her, quickly. "Only this. Do any of them involve your trying to kill Satan?"

I hesitated. It was a dangerous question to answer. After all, Consardine had warned me he could be trusted only so far. What did he consider the limits of his oath?"

"I perceive they do," he had interpreted my silence. "Well, it is the one thing you must not attempt. It is the one thing that is impossible. You may think you can kill him while you and he are alone. Kirkham, I tell you Satan is never alone. Always there are guards hidden about—in the walls, in secret places. Before you could fire, they would have you winged.

"And there is Satan's abnormal quickness of mind. He would perceive your thought before it could be transformed into action. If you tried it while others were about they would have you down before you could fire a second shot—assuming that you managed to get in a first one. And Satan has an unhuman vitality. I do not believe one bullet or two could kill him any more than they could an elephant. The real point is, however, that you would never get the chance."

Well, Consardine did not know everything—that was clear. With that stone in the wall of the slaves' hall up half an inch instead of a quarter, and a rifle poking through the crack, I would not have given much for Satan's survival. Assuming, of course, that basically he was human.

"Furthermore," he went on, almost as in answer to my thought, "suppose you did perform what I believe the impossible. Kill

him. Still there could be no escape for you. Better to be slain at once. There is not a place on earth where you could hide from the vengeance of his people. For it is not only by fear that Satan rules. Far from it.

"As he has told you, he pays his servants well. His continuance means ease, luxury, safety, power—most of the things of life for which man commonly strives—to more people than you can imagine. Satan has his splendid side as well as his dark one. And his people are scattered over all the globe. Many of them are more highly placed than you, as yet, can dream. Is it not so, Eve?"

"It is so," she said, and the trouble in her eyes grew.

"Satan's throne does not rest upon the backs of cringing slaves," he said. "As always, he has his princes and his legions. To sum up. I do not believe you can kill him. If you try and fail, you die—horribly. And Eve is not saved. If you did kill him, you die as inevitably. Eve would be saved from him—yes. But will she have her freedom at such a price?"

"No! No!" cried Eve, and stood in front of me, arms outstretched, despair in her face.

"Consardine," I said abruptly. "Why does Satan hide his hands when the climbers go up the steps?"

"What's that? What do you mean?"

"I've seen him on the black throne three times," I said. "Twice with Cartright, once with myself. He pulls the lever, and then he hides his hands under the robe. What does he do with them, Consardine?"

"Are you hinting that the steps are a crooked game? That's absurd, Kirkham!" His voice was amused, but I saw his strong hands clench.

"I'm hinting nothing," I answered. "I —wonder. You must have seen many go up those steps. Have you ever seen Satan's hands in the open while they were mounting? Think back, Consardine."

He was silent. I could see him marshaling in his memory those he had beheld beckoned by the shining footsteps. And his face had whitened.

"I—can't tell," he said at last. "I didn't notice. But—I don't think so."

He jumped to his feet.

"Nonsense!" he said. "Even so—it means nothing!"

I was shooting in the dark. No, not quite. I was giving substance to that shadowy thought, that nebulous suspicion I had feared to bring out before Barker.

"No," I said. "Do you believe, then, that Satan with all his genius for details, his setting-up of the cards, his discounting of every chance—do you believe that Satan would leave any door open through which one could come and rule him? Has crown and scepter ever been won?"

"Yes," he replied disconcertingly. "Unfortunately for the doubt with which nearly you netted me, Kirkham, they have. I have been with Satan eight years. Three times I have seen the steps conquered!"

That was like a slap in the face. For the moment it silenced me. Not so Eve.

"What became of them?" she asked.

"Well," he looked at her uneasily, "one of them wanted something—something rather peculiar. He died of it in six months."

"Yes," drawled Eve. "So he died of it. What about the others?"

"One of them died in an airplane accident between London and Paris," he said. "She was on her way to—what she wanted. Not even Satan could have helped that. Everybody was burned."

"Rather unlucky, weren't they?" asked Eve innocently. "Both of them. But the third?"

"I don't know," said Consardine half angrily. "I suppose he's all right. He went to Asia. I've never heard of him since then. He wanted a sort of a hidden little pocket kingdom where he could do as he pleased. Satan gave it to him."

"Two dead, and one—disappeared," mused Eve. "But don't you think that you ought to have heard something about that third one, Dr. Consardine? Couldn't you find out what became of him? Maybe —maybe, he died, too, like the others."

"As Eve says, two of them didn't last long," I said. "The third is doubtful. If you were in Satan's place, Consardine, wouldn't it occur to you that it was advisable to keep up hope in the aspirants by showing them now and then that it could be

done? It would to me. And, still assuming that we thought like Satan, wouldn't we hand-pick our successful climbers? I would. But I wouldn't pick the kind that would be likely to live long, would you? Or if they were well and hearty, a little accident might be arranged. Like that Croyden air bus you've mentioned, for instance."

"Gorblyme!" gasped Harry. "The swine! That wouldn't be 'ard to do. An' I'll bet *'e* done it!"

"What does Satan do with his hands when he hides them under his robe?" I repeated.

"And what became of that third winner?" murmured Eve.

On Consardine's forehead little beads of sweat stood out. He was trembling.

"See here, Consardine," I said. "You told us you didn't like being a dupe. You didn't like being fooled. Suppose Satan has been making a colossal mock of you—and the others. What happens?"

I saw the effort with which he mastered himself. It frightened me a bit. After all, I hadn't the slightest evidence to back up what I had been hinting. And if Consardine thought that I was deliberately deceiving him—

But I wasn't. The doubts I had raised were entirely legitimate. Satan *did* hide his hands. The bad after-luck of the step conquerors had been something that Consardine had known, not us.

"Barker," he turned to Harry, "have you ever looked over the mechanism that Satan tells us controls the choice of the Shining Footsteps? Answer me! Is it what he says it is?"

Barker wrung his hands, looking first at him and then at Eve and me, piteously. He swallowed once or twice.

"Answer me!" ordered Consardine.

"Gord 'elp me, cap'n," Harry turned to me desperately. "I never wanted to lie so 'ard in my life. I want to sye I 'aven't seen it. Or that it don't work them bloody prints. But Gord 'elp me, Miss Demerest, I *'ave* looked it over. An' it does work 'em, Dr. Consardine. It does, just as *'e* says it does!"

Well, that was that. It knocked, apparently, my theories clean through the vanishing point. For a moment I had hoped that the little man would be diplomatic. Say, at least, that he didn't know. But I could not deny him the right to tell the truth—if he felt like it.

"That's all right, Harry," I said cheerfully. "What we're looking for is the truth. And what you say settles everything, I suppose."

"I'd like to 'ave lied, cap'n," he half-whimpered. "But, 'ell, I couldn't."

Consardine, I suddenly noticed, was behaving rather oddly. He did not seem at all like one whose faith in Satan had been impregnably reënforced. He seemed, indeed, more disturbed than ever.

"Barker," he said, "you'd better go now. I will see Captain Kirkham back to his room."

Harry slid over to one of the walls. He bowed to us miserably. A panel opened, and he was gone. Consardine turned to us.

"Now, Eve," he said, "I'll tell you what brought us here to-night. I told you that you'd been on my mind. So you have. Damnably. I wanted to save you from Satan. I had a way to suggest. I stole the idea from Shakespeare. You remember the stratagem by which the honest friar schemed to get Juliet to her Romeo? And cheat their respective warring families? Their Satan, in a sense."

"The draft that would make her appear to be dead," whispered Eve.

"Exactly," nodded Consardine. "It was something like that which I was about to propose to you. To treat you, from my medical knowledge, in such a way that the health and beauty and spirit which make you so desirable to Satan would fade—temporarily. To put you in such condition as obviously to make impossible, at least in the near future, his personal plans for you. And to keep you in that condition until he had found a substitute for his paternal impulses—or something else happened.

"There was a risk to it, certainly. Great risk to you, Eve. The waiting might be too long—I might not be able to restore to you what I have taken from you. Yet you might have preferred that risk to the certainty of—Satan's arms. I was going to let you decide."

"*Was* going to?" repeated Eve breathlessly. "Of course I'll take the risk. Oh, Dr. Consardine—it seems like the way out!"

"Does it?" he asked, grimly. "I think not—now. The original scheme from which I stole my idea came to grief, you remember, because of Romeo. Well, I was reckoning without Romeo. I didn't know there was one."

"I—I don't quite—get that," said Eve.

"Child," he took her hands, "are you willing to give up your lover? Never see him, never meet him, never communicate with him. Not for weeks or months, but for years? Kill your love for him, or live on, starving upon memories?"

"No," answered Eve directly, and shook her curly head.

"And even if you persuaded her to, Consardine, what do you think I would be doing?" The bare suggestion stirred in me resentment and stubborn anger. "Fold my hands and turn my eyes heavenward and meekly murmur: 'Thy will be done!' Not me!"

"I'm persuading no one, Kirkham," he replied quietly. "I'm only pointing out that it's the only way the thing could be done. If I did to Eve what I have described, what would happen? Treatment here for a time, of course, so Satan could see her failing. Then her removal somewhere, for other doctors to look after her.

"Her symptoms could not be feigned. The medical fraternity is not wholly represented by me in Satan's entourage. He has some highly placed specialists among his dependents. And if he has not, he could call them in. And would, unless at the very outset he was persuaded that her condition would inevitably mean a faulty maternity, weakness in offspring. Forgive me, child, for talking so plainly, but it's no time to be beating around the bush.

"The specialists I could take care of. Hoodwink. I could have been a very great—" He hesitated, and sighed—"well, no matter. But Satan has set his will on you, Eve. He will not lightly give up his purpose. If it were only as a woman that he desired you, it would not be so difficult. But you are more than that to him, far more. You are to be the bearer of his child. Not upon my word alone, much as he trusts my judgment, would he relinquish you as unfit. He would have to be convinced beyond all doubt—and therein lies the danger to you and possibly—death."

He paused, looked pityingly into her troubled eyes.

"Too great a risk," I said. "I'll try my way first, Consardine."

"Enter Romeo," he smiled faintly. "You'll have to, Kirkham. You've made the other impossible. You think that life would be worthless without Eve, I take it?"

"I don't think it, I know it," I answered.

"And you feel the same way about—Jim?"

"Yes," she said softly. "But—to save his life—"

"It wouldn't," said Consardine. "I know men and women. No matter what you made up your mind to do, Eve, he would be working and planning to get you away. Nor are you exactly the kind to sit down, as he expresses it, with meekly folded hands. He would be trapped, sooner or later. It might very likely follow that the trick would be discovered. Then I would have to give up my foolish prejudice for living. I won't take the chance of that.

"But, assume that you do escape. Together. You would be two hares running around the world with the hounds constantly at your heels. Satan's hounds, always on the move. Always with his threat hanging over you. Would such a life be worth living? There might be a child. Be sure that Satan's vengeance would not spare it. I repeat—would such a life be worth living?"

"No," I said; and Eve drew a deep breath and shook her head.

"What can we do?" she whispered.

Consardine strode once across the room and back. He stood before me, and I saw that again the veins in his forehead were standing out like cords, and that his gray eyes were hard and cold as steel. He tapped me thrice on the breast with his fist.

"Find out what Satan does with his hands when he hides them!" he said. He turned from us, plainly not trusting himself to speak further.

Eve was staring at him, wondering even as I at the intensity of the rage that was shaking him.

"Come, Kirkham." He had mastered himself. He ran his fingers through Eve's bob, ruffling it caressingly.

"Babes in the wood," he repeated. He walked to the panel slowly, considerately.

"To-night," I whispered to Eve.

Her arms were around my neck, her lips pressed to mine.

"Jim—dear!" she whispered, and let me go.

I looked back as I passed through the opening. She was standing as I had left her, hands stretched out to me, eyes wide and wistful. She was like a lonely little child afraid to go to bed. I felt a deeper twinge at my heart—a strengthening of resolve. The panel closed.

In silence I followed Consardine as he led me to my room. He entered with me and stood for a moment staring at me somberly. Quite suddenly I felt dog-tired.

"I hope you sleep better to-night than I shall," said Consardine abruptly.

He was gone. I was too tired to wonder what he had meant by that. I managed to get out of my clothes, and was asleep before I could draw the bed covers over me.

CHAPTER XV.

SATAN OUTLINES A VENTURE.

THE ringing of the telephone aroused me. I reached out for it, only half awake, not in the least realizing where I was. Consardine's voice brought me out of my lethargy like a bucket of water.

"Hello, Kirkham," he said. "Don't want to spoil your beauty sleep, but how about having breakfast with me and then taking a canter? We've some excellent horses, and the morning's too nice to be wasted."

"Fine," I answered. "I'll be down in ten minutes. How will I find you?"

"Ring for Thomas. I'll be waiting." He hung up.

The sun was streaming through the windows. I looked at my watch. It was close to eleven. I had slept soundly about seven hours. I rang for Thomas.

Sleep, a plunge, and the brilliant sunshine that sent the shadow of Satan far below the rim of the world. Whistling, I hoped half guiltily that Eve felt as fit. The valet brought me out what Barker would have called a "real tysty ridin' rig." He convoyed me to a sunny, Old World, lovely room looking out on a broad green terrace. There were a dozen or so nice-looking people breakfasting at small tables. Some of them I had met the night before.

Over in a corner I saw Consardine. I joined him. We had an extremely pleasant meal, at least I did. Consardine did not seem to have a care on earth. His talk had a subtly sardonic flavor that I found most stimulating. So far as the conversation was concerned, our encounter in Eve's room might never have been. He made no slightest reference to it; nor, following his lead, did I.

We went from there to the stables. He took a powerful black gelding that whinnied to him as he entered. I mounted a trim roan. We rode at a brisk canter along bridle paths that wound through thick woods of scrub pine and oak. Now and then we met a guard who stood at attention and saluted Consardine as we passed by. It was a silent ride.

We came abruptly out of the woods. Consardine reined in. We were upon the cleared top of a low hillock. Below us and a hundred yards away sparkled the waters of the Sound.

Perhaps a quarter mile out lay a perfect beauty of a yacht. She was about two hundred feet long and not more than thirty in beam. Seagoing and serviceable, and built for speed as well. Her paint and brass shone dazzling white and golden.

"The Cherub," said Consardine dryly. "She's Satan's. He named her that because she looks so spotless and innocent. There is a more descriptive word for her, however, but not a polite one. She can do her forty knots an hour, by the way."

My gaze dropped from the yacht to a strong landing that thrust out from the shore. A little fleet of launches and speed

boats were clustered near it. I caught a glimpse of an old-fashioned rambling house nestled among the trees near the water's edge.

My eyes followed the curve of the shore. A few hundred feet from the pier was a pile of great rocks, huge bowlders dropped by the glacier that once covered the island. I started, and looked more closely.

Upon one of them stood Satan, black-cloaked, arms folded, staring out at the gleaming yacht. I touched Consardine's arm.

"Look!" I whispered. "Sat—" I stopped. The rock was bare. I had turned my eyes from it for the barest fraction of a second. Yet in that time Satan had disappeared.

"What did you see?" asked Consardine.

"Satan," I said. "He was standing on that pile of rocks. Where could he have gone?"

"He has a hole here," he answered indifferently. "A tunnel that runs from the big house to the shore."

He swung around to the woods. I followed. We rode along for a quarter of an hour more. We came out into a small meadow through which ran a brook. He dismounted and dropped the reins over the black's neck.

"I want to talk to you," he said to me.

I gave the roan its freedom, and sat down beside Consardine.

"Kirkham, you've set my world rocking under my feet," he said curtly. "You've put the black doubt in me. Of the few things that I would have staked my life on, the first was that Satan's gamble of the seven footprints was a straight one. And now—I would not."

"You don't accept Barker's testimony, then?" I asked.

"Talk straight, Kirkham," he warned coldly. "Your implication was that Satan manipulated the telltale from the Black Throne. With his hidden hands. If so, he has the cunning to do it in a way that Barker, going over the other mechanism, would never suspect. You know that. Talk straight, I tell you."

"The thought that Barker might be wrong occurred to me, Consardine," I said. "I preferred to let it occur to you without my suggesting it. I had said enough."

"Too much—or not enough," he said. "You have put the doubt in me. Well, you've got to rid me of it."

"Just what do you mean by that?" I asked him.

"I mean," he said, "that you must find out the truth. Give me back my faith in Satan, or change my doubt into certainty."

"And if I do the latter—" I began eagerly.

"You will have struck a greater blow at him than any with knife or bullet. You will be no longer alone in your fight. That I promise you."

His voice was thick, and the handle of his riding crop snapped in the sudden clenching of his strong hand.

"Consardine," I said bluntly, "why should the possibility of Satan's play being crooked move you so? You are closest to him here, I gather. His service, so you say, brings you all that you desire. And you tell me he is the shield between you and the law. What difference, then, does it make to you whether his gamble of the seven footprints is on the level or isn't?"

He caught my shoulder, and I winced at the crushing grip.

"Because," he answered, "I am under Satan's sentence of death!"

"You!" I exclaimed incredulously.

"For eight years," he said, "that threat has been over me. For eight years he has tormented me, as the mood swayed him. Now with hint of the imminent carrying out of that sentence; now with half promise of its wiping out and another trial at the steps. Kirkham, I am no coward—yet death fills me with horror. If I knew it to be inevitable, I would face it calmly. But I believe it to be eternal blackness, oblivion, extinction. There is something in me that recoils from that, something that shrinks from it with a deadly terror, with loathing. Kirkham, I love life.

"Yet if the gamble was straight, he was within his rights. But if it was not straight—then all those eight years he has played with me, made a mock of me, laughed at

me. And, still laughing, would have watched me go to whatever death he had decreed, unresisting, since I would have believed that by my oath I was so bound.

"And that, Kirkham, is not to be endured. Not by me!

"Nor is that all. I have watched many men and women take the steps, risking all on Satan's word. And I have seen some of them go to death, as calmly as I would have done, their honor, like mine, rooted in dishonor. And others go broken and willing. Like Cartright. While Satan laughed. And there are more who live like me on Satan's sufferance. And all this on a cast of loaded dice. If so, then I tell you, Kirkham, it is not a thing to be borne! Nor shall it be borne!"

He plucked at his collar, gasping, as though it choked him.

"God!" he whispered. "To pay him back for that! If it is true—I would face death—singing—but I must know if it is true."

I waited until he had regained control.

"Help me find out whether it is or not," I said. "It may well turn out to be an impossible job for me—alone."

He shook his head.

"You have Barker to help you," he replied.

"I don't want to run him into any more risks." I would cover up the little man as much as I could. "There's a certain amount of prowling involved, Consardine. We might run across somebody not so well disposed as you. But the three of us ought to be able to settle matters one way or the other quickly."

"No," he said stubbornly. "Why should I? It is up to you, Kirkham. It is you who have raised the doubt. It is you who must resolve it. One way or the other. After all, your suspicions are based upon the vaguest evidence. A triviality, and two, or it may be three, perfectly explicable happenings. The chances that you are wrong are enormously greater than those that you are right. Why should I risk my life upon them?

"I have already gone far. I have promised you neutrality, and somewhat more. I will go no further. Take Barker. I promise neither to see nor hear you should I meet you in your—wanderings. But at this time I will not invite certain death by joining you in them. I have been reasonably content. If you are wrong, I shall still be. If you are right—ah, then, I repeat, you will be no longer alone.

"In the meantime—Michael Consardine holds fast to his place in the sun."

He chirruped to the black gelding, and mounted it. There was no use in further argument, that was plain. We rode away, through the woods, and after awhile turned back to the château.

I left him at the stable, and went to my rooms to change. There was a note pinned to my pillow. It was from Satan. A casual sort of message. He hoped that I was enjoying myself as I deserved, and would see me about nine o'clock that evening.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. The more I thought over Consardine's talk, the more I sympathized with his viewpoint. Also, oddly enough, the higher rose my spirits. I sat down to dinner in a pleasantly reckless state of mind.

Consardine was at the head of the board as on the previous night. I had Cobham for companion. I saw Eve toward the far end. She ignored me. It was difficult for me to do the same toward her.

Cobham had been drinking. For some reason he seemed to feel a certain responsibility for me. He paid no attention to any one else, nor would he let me. He was vastly interesting, but as the time wore on I began to feel a profound distaste for Cobham. He was expounding his theories of life as a mere electro-chemical reaction. He made it clear that neither the individual nor the mass meant anything to him in terms of what is commonly called humanity. He was appallingly callous about it.

He seemed to have no more feeling about men and women than he would have about his test tubes. Rather less, I fancied. In fact, that was what men and women appeared to him to be, just a lot of animated test tubes with minute curiosity-provoking differences in their contents. And he saw no reason why they should not be broken, or emptied or the contents changed in the way of experimentation. He sketched a

few rather awful experiments with gasses upon the *kehft* slaves. At least I hoped that the unfortunate subjects had been the slaves. He did not say so.

Listening, I was convinced that of the two Satan might be the more human. Cobham kept on drinking steadily. The only effect of the liquor was to make him more coldly, inhumanly scientific.

"You've got too much sentiment in your ferment, Kirkham," he said. "You probably think that life is sacred, to use the cant word, not to be destroyed unless by dire necessity. Bosh! It is no more sacred than the current I turn on or off at will from my lamps, nor the ferments in my tubes that I end at will. Whenever did nature give a damn about the individual? Neutralize the weakening ingredient in you, Kirkham, and you might become a great man. I can do it for you, if you will let me."

I promised to think it over.

At eight thirty Satan appeared. I had been wondering where I was to see him. Consardine yielded his place, and Satan beckoned me to sit at his left hand.

"To my new follower, James Kirkham," he raised his glass. "I am much pleased with him."

They drank to me, standing. I saw Eve pointedly set down her glass untouched. So, as she had meant him to do, did Satan.

At eight forty-five, as though at some signal, the company began to drift out of the room. In a few minutes there remained only Satan, Cobham, and myself. It rather surprised me to see Consardine leave. Servants cleared the table, and at a nod from Satan withdrew.

"There is a ship," he began abruptly, "that sails from Havre within three days. She is the Astarte, a slow boat. She carries some things of superlative beauty which I feel it time for me to claim. There is a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds, another by Romney. There is an ewer of rock crystal, and twelve rock crystal cups, marvelously engraved and set with great cabochon sapphires and rubies.

"They were made, it may be, in ancient Crete for Queen Pasiphaë. At least they are immemorially old. And to them an unknown genius gave his best. They were long hidden in the Kremlin. The bolsheviki have sold them. There is a necklace of emeralds upon each of which is graven one of the metamorphoses of Ovid. There is nothing like it in the world."

He paused, then bent his head toward me.

"I must have them, James Kirkham. You and Cobham shall get them for me."

I bowed, awaiting further enlightenment. Cobham, I noticed, had not drunk anything since Satan's entrance. He did not show at all what he had drunk. He sat silent, eyes upon the glass with which his fingers played; cynical, a faint smile upon his full lips. Yet I felt that he was watching me covertly, as though awaiting something. Whatever Satan was about to tell me. I suspected that he had already gone over it with him.

"I have selected you as leader," Satan went on, "not only because the task may demand the exercise of unusual resourcefulness, but also that close obedience to orders which you have proved to me you can exercise. I am merely outlining the venture tonight so you may be turning it over in your mind. You will receive your detailed instructions before you sail."

Sail? That meant leave Eve! I moved restlessly. I suppose my discomfiture showed in my face. At any rate, he sensed it.

"Yes," he said. "The transfer will not be made on land after the Astarte arrives, I prefer to make it on the high seas. You are to engage in what the prejudiced would call piracy, James Kirkham. Ah, well, it is a romantic calling."

He eyed me, faint malice in the sparkling gaze.

"And you have your romantic side," he purred. "I admire it. For I, too, have mine. Therefore I envy you, somewhat, this venture."

"And I am grateful," I smiled, meeting his scrutiny squarely. But the palms of my hands had grown suddenly moist.

"The Astarte," he continued, "will take the southern route. There is little likelihood of her encountering any serious storms at this time of year in those lati-

tudes. On the day she sails, you and Cobham will set out in my yacht which I perceived you admiring to-day.

"Besides her crew, the yacht will carry a dozen of my drinkers of the *kehft*. They will be for use in emergency. But it is my hope that none such may arise. The Cherub, is it not a lovely name?—the Cherub will leave ostensibly for a coastwise voyage. On the first day out, the night rather, the Cherub will cease to be her angelic self—yes, I assure you there were girl cherubs as well as boy ones.

"She will be cunningly changed to the semblance of the Sea Wolf, the yacht of an eminently respectable financier which at that moment will be logging along its unsuspecting way to Havana. This also in case of emergency. And, of course, the name of the Sea Wolf will replace that of the Cherub wherever the name is noticeable.

"You will circle the Astarte two days later at a designated section, keeping out of sight, of course. Her speed is fifteen knots, yours forty. You will be able therefore to stop her, remove what I desire, and get back here—again the innocent, spotless Cherub—at least two days before she can arrive in port."

My heart, which had been growing steadily heavy, lightened. Satan intended no mischief to the ship then, or to its crew. Else he would not speak of her return. Cobham gave a short bark, like a suppressed laugh. The cynicism of his smile had deepened. Satan's blue stare rested upon him for an instant. Cobham moved uneasily.

"You have planned, of course, sir," I said, "how we are to stop the Astarte."

"Naturally," he answered. "I am coming to that. At this time of year, this boat would not carry more than a hundred persons. Some of the passengers she does carry will be my people. But besides that, I have arranged it so that there will be even fewer than usual. A number of staterooms have been reserved for a tourists' club. But, oddly, just before the Astarte is to sail, these reservations will be canceled.

"There will have been an unavoidable change of plans. The generous representative of the club will waive all claims upon the reservation money, and the line will be guaranteed indemnity. The Astarte, because of the anxiety of the owners of the objects I intend to acquire, will not delay her sailing. I think there will be not more than thirty passengers, of whom ten, at least, will be of my following.

"Very well, James Kirkham. We come now to the night of your adventure. All that afternoon you have been following the Astarte at a distance of ten miles. It is a moonless night. At nine o'clock there is a concert going on in the salon. The few passengers are a happy little family party. They are probably all there. So are some of the officers. You have put out your lights and have steamed up to within four miles.

"There will be a signal from the Astarte which you will answer. At the moment of that signal, two men assigned to that task will hurl a few bombs into the engine room of the Astarte. The bombs will be filled with a certain gas, the invention of Mr. Cobham. Immediately thereafter the occupants of the engine room will take no further interest in their work. A third man of mine will slip into the engine room and bring the boat to a standstill."

He paused, scrutinizing me; I felt upon me again the covert glance of Cobham. By some miracle I managed to keep from my face the horror I felt as I inquired:

"Well, that wipes out the engine room crew. Then what?"

For many moments Satan did not answer me. His brilliant eyes searched me. I drove from my mind the swift picture that had come into it of men choking and writhing on the floor of the Astarte's engine room. I bore his gaze, frowning as though puzzled. Whether he had found what he had been hunting, I do not know, but suddenly its disconcerting intensity diminished.

"Oh, fie, James Kirkham!" he said unctuously. "It is not necessary to kill. The gas I refer to is not lethal; it is a sleep gas. Its effect is practically instantaneous. At least, it acts within five seconds. But it is harmless. Six hours, and its breathers awaken without even a headache. How bloodthirsty he thinks us, Cobham!"

Something warned me to hide my relief, even as I had hidden my dread.

"We still have the officers and the crew," I said indifferently. "What happens to them? Frankly, in all you have outlined, Satan, I seem to be nothing but an onlooker—a messenger boy."

"The venture at this point passes into your hands," he answered. "You will by this time have drawn up beside the Astarte, and will board her with Cobham and a sufficient force to take charge. Conditions may now arise which I can foresee, but must trust to your ingenuity and courage to meet. There will be much confusion on board the Astarte.

"You must see to it that no boats are launched, and that no one escapes from her. Before you board, the captain, and a mate or two, may have suffered some slight accident. Nothing serious, no, no; merely disabling. Then again, they may not. You may have their resistance to overcome. Without bloodshed, if you can. But with or without—it must be overcome. Then weather conditions may complicate matters. I think you will not find it too tame, James Kirkham."

Nor did I. I had an uncanny feeling that Satan was not presenting me with the full picture.

"In your final instructions you will find definite information as to the location of what you are to bring me," he said. "The objects are in a strong safe in a steel storeroom. So precious are the jewels that only the captain will know the combination of the safe. You need waste no time trying to persuade him to tell it to you. There will be with you an expert to whom the safe will have no mysteries.

"After you have recovered the things for me, you will cut loose from the Astarte and make all speed home, taking off from her before starting certain of my people on board her who would find it embarrassing to remain. That is all."

I considered for a moment. What he meant was that some of his agents on the Astarte would be questioned, and might be recognized for what they were. Well, how about us on the Cherub?

"Have you considered the probability of some one on the Astarte identifying us later, sir?" I began.

"You will all be masked, of course," he interrupted smoothly.

Cobham moved suddenly, impatiently.

"The wireless," I suggested. "I suppose that will be disabled before the engine room attack?"

"It will not be necessary," he answered. "The yacht carries extraordinarily strong batteries. At the moment of the signal the Astarte's radio will be blanketed, her waves strangled. There will be no message from her that can break through the barrier the operator of the Cherub will interpose."

I sat for a moment in thought. Everything seemed to be plain. And yet—I felt a cold unease, a boding depression. There was something else, something deadly sinister hiding behind Satan's smooth phrases.

"I trust you were satisfied with the rewards of your necklace venture," he broke the current of my thoughts. "The rewards of this one will be proportionately greater, naturally. The invitation to join me cut your vacation rather short. What would you say to taking, after the affair, a six months' trip? You shall go wherever you please, and as you please, and do as you please. At my expense, of course. You may also spend what you please, let me add."

"Thank you, sir," I said, "but I feel no need of a vacation. And frankly, I find my contacts with you infinitely more interesting than anything I could hope to experience away from you."

His face was inscrutable as ever, but I felt that had pleased him.

"Well," he said, "we shall see. Only continue as you have begun, James Kirkham, and you shall have no cause to complain of my generosity."

He arose. I stood up politely, Cobham cautiously.

Satan for a moment considered me.

"How are you spending the evening?" he asked me.

"Cobham spoke of us joining the bridge game," I answered; "but if you have any other desire—"

Cobham had done nothing of the sort. He had said so much, however, that I hoped he might take it for granted that he had. I particularly did not want to be

separated from Cobham just then. If Satan had thought, as I half feared, of asking either of us to accompany him, he changed his mind.

He nodded and walked toward the wall.

"It would be a good idea"—he turned beside the open panel—"to look over the Cherub to-morrow. Familiarize yourself with her. Good night."

Cobham sat silently for a good minute, staring at the point where Satan had disappeared.

"That was damned decent of you, Kirkham," he said at last, slowly. "I don't know how you guessed it, but I couldn't have stood much more of Satan to-night. Damned decent!"

He stretched out a hand to the brandy. I grinned — Cobham had remembered, then, and was aware of my maneuver. He poured his goblet half full of the liquor and drank it neat.

"Damned decent," he repeated, and I saw the brandy take hold of him swiftly. "Have a drink with me."

I poured myself a small one. Again he half filled his glass and tossed it off.

"A damned shame," he muttered, "treating you like a child. Why should you be coddled? Lied to? Kirkham, *you* deserve the truth!"

So! It was coming, was it? That hidden, sinister something I had sensed was getting ready to crawl from Cobham's lips.

"Have a drink with me," I said, and tipped the decanter. "Who's treating me like a child?"

He glared at me drunkenly.

"You think that gas is going to put that engine room crew to sleep, eh?" he chuckled. "Nice little lullaby for poor, tired sailors? Sweet little chemical sl-slumber song composh-composed by Pa Satan and M-Ma Cobham? Well, Kirkham, it's going to put 'em to sh-sleep. Forever!"

Forever! I felt the rush of tiny particles of ice in my veins. But now was no time for any hysterical outburst. What else was there? I poured myself another brandy and drank it composedly.

"Well, what of it?" I asked. "A long sleep or a short one—what does it matter?"

"What's it matter—what's it matter?" He stared at me, then brought his fist down with a thump on the table. "By God, I was right! Told Satan you had the guts! Told him needn't—needn't tamper with the form-florm-formula with you. What's it matter, he asks? Have a drink with me."

I drank with him. He laughed.

"Masks!" he said. "You wanted masks so people on Astarte couldn't rec-rec-ognize you later. Later! Ha, ha—later! That's good, that is. Hell, man, there's not going to be any later for them."

The room swam around me. What was Cobham saying now?

"Not exactly accurate. Say—twenty minutes later. Twenty minutes later—*bonk!* goes nice bomb. Gentlemanly bomb. Quiet, dignified, but strong. *Bonk!*—out goes bottom of the Astarte. No boats. *Kehft* drinkers have tended to them. Astarte sunk without trace! *Bonk!* Swooooosh! Bubbles! Finish!"

He became drunkenly plaintive.

"Don't—don't believe fooled old Kirkham for a minute. Don't believe he thought Satan would run rish-risk anybody on Astarte running across one of us. Anybody telling police about wicked pirates holding 'em up in mid-ocean. To hell with the witnesses; that's Satan's motto! Make it 'nother unfathomed mish-mystery of the ocean. That's best way. That's Satan's way."

"I'm damned glad to hear it," I said. "It was the one thing I was uneasy about—"

The drunkenness dropped from Cobham like a cast-off cloak. His face became white and pinched. The glass fell from his hand. Out of a darkened corner of the room walked Satan!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MIRRORED CELL.

IT was a crisis, and a bad one. There was no doubt about that. A time for quick thinking, if ever there was one. I cared nothing about what happened to Cobham. That callous devil could have been whisked to hell without my turning

a hair. But I myself was in the gravest danger of sharing his fate. If Satan thought that I had deliberately drawn his confidences, he would waste no time asking for explanations. The fact that I had not accepted his word would in itself call for my punishment.

Worst of all, I had caught him lying to me. He might decide that would render me useless to him hereafter. But that was secondary. The paramount thing was that it made him, as the Chinese say, "lose face." If his ancestry was what Barker believed, that was the one unforgivable affront. Whether it was or was not, I know that Satan's infernal intellect was clothed with as infernal a pride. And that pride had been wounded.

My only chance for escape lay in healing the wound before Satan knew that I had perceived it. I jumped to my feet and walked toward him.

"Well," I laughed, "have I passed the test?"

Instantly he caught it. Whether, at the moment, he believed me as naïve as my question implied, I could not know. Still, after all, why not? It was exactly the kind of trap, or rather experiment, he had been teaching me to expect him to conceive.

Nor did I know how long he had been listening. Had he intentionally left Cobham and me together to see what would happen? And heard all? Probably. If so, there had been no single word I had spoken upon which his suspicion could feed. At any rate, to follow my lead was the only way he could maintain his pride, save his face. He followed it.

"Cobham," he said, "you were right."

He turned to me.

"Tell me, James Kirkham, when did you first suspect that you were under test? I am curious to know exactly how keen that perception of yours is."

He waved to me to be seated, and dropped into his own chair. I kept my eyes steadily averted from Cobham.

"The first thing that puzzled me, Satan," I said, "was your attitude toward the Astarte. It would certainly not have been mine. That dead men tell no tales, is a safe and sane old rule. I would have followed your instructions—but," I added boldly, "I would not have approved of them."

His eyes never left me as I spoke. I felt his will beating against mine like a hammer, endeavoring to strike out the truth.

"When did your suspicion become certainty?" he asked.

"At the moment you appeared here," I told him.

Suddenly I let some of my anger find vent.

"I'll stand for no more such experiments upon me, Satan," I cried, with a cold fury that had none of its roots in the matter in hand, but was real enough nevertheless. "Either I am to be trusted wholly, or I am not to be trusted at all. If you do trust me and I fail you—well, you have the remedy in your hands and I am ready to pay the penalty. But I'll not be the subject of any more laboratory experiments, like a child in a psychological clinic. By God, I won't!"

I thought that I had won. Not only won, but that I had leaped into higher regard than Satan had ever held me. If those gemhard eyes could be said to soften, they did.

"I agree, James Kirkham," he said quietly. "Yet I am glad that I put you to this test. Since it has fully revealed to me what dependence I can place upon you."

"I made my decision. I gave my word," I said a little stiffly. "As long as you play fair with me, I obey your orders, Satan. Let that be understood, and you will find no more loyal servant."

"It is understood, James Kirkham," he answered.

I ventured to look at Cobham. He had regained some of his color. He was watching me queerly.

"Cobham," I laughed, "you could be as good an actor as you are a chemist."

"Cobham—has been—very valuable to me," said Satan. "And never more than to-night."

I saw a deep shudder shake Cobham. I feigned to observe nothing. Satan arose.

"Come with me, Cobham," he said. "There are matters we must discuss. And you—" He looked at me.

"I'll turn in," I said. "I know the way."

He strode across the room, Cobham following. Once he turned and shot me a strange glance. There was gratitude in it —and there was deadly terror.

I walked over to the panel that was the beginning of the road to my room.

"James Kirkham." I turned, and saw Satan standing by the opposite wall. His bulk almost hid Cobham, now in front of him.

"Sir?" I answered.

"James Kirkham," he said, "I was never better pleased with you than I am now. Good night."

"I am glad, sir," I replied. "Good night."

The panel behind him clicked open. I pressed upon a hidden spring, the wall parted. Before me was the tiny elevator. I entered it. Satan and Cobham were passing through that other wall.

I caught a glimpse of two of the *kehft* slaves, cords in hands, gliding to Cobham's side.

As my panel closed, I thought I saw them pinion his arms!

And now I was in my rooms. Eve would be expecting me, but I had no desire to make further excursion that night. That Satan had taken my bait, I was reasonbly sure. But Cobham was in for punishment —how severe I could not tell. The emphasis Satan had put upon that "has been" in speaking of his usefulness was ominous. Cobham had caught the threat. And there had been that swift vision of the slaves closing in on him. I would be on Satan's mind, whatever he believed. It was possible that he might summon me: might even come to me.

It was best to stay where I was. Barker would be along sooner or later. I would send him with a message to Eve.

I turned out all the lights except a dim one in the living room, undressed, and turned in. I lay there, smoking. I felt more than a little sick, and filled with a hot, helpless rage. The affair of the Astarte would have been bad enough even as Satan had outlined it. Cobham's revelations made it hideous. I would go on with it, of course. There was nothing else to do. If I refused, it would be the end both for Eve and myself. And some one else would take my place. Cobham, in fact, had made it imperative that I should go.

I must find some means of averting that ruthless destruction of the treasure ship. Obviously, the chances were that would mean the end for me also. But it had to be done. I knew that if I stood aside and let those helpless people go down, I could never more live at peace with myself. I knew that Eve would feel the same about it.

What I hoped most desperately was that we could find the way to break Satan's webs before the time came for my sailing.

Suddenly I was aware that some one was in the outer room. I slipped noiselessly out of bed and to the curtains. It was Barker.

I beckoned to him.

"Careful, Harry," I whispered. "Come in here, and keep those ears of yours wide open. Things have been happening."

Briefly I sketched the developments of the day, from my conversation with Consardine to Cobham's drunken disclosures and his sinister shepherding by Satan. I could feel the little man shiver at that.

"Gord!" he muttered. "Cobham's a proper devil, but I'm sorry for 'im. Satan, *'e'll* see 'e don't do no more talkin'. We got to work quick, cap'n."

"I've an unbreakable hunch that my work is to stay right in this room," I told him. "And if you don't think that is going to be the hardest kind of work, with Miss Demerest expecting me, you're wrong."

"No," he said, "you're right, sir. An' I've got to get hout quick as my be. 'Ere's what I come to tell you. I hacted like a bloody dummy last night when you 'inted about Satan an' when 'e 'id 'is 'ands . Fair took me off my feet you did, just like Consardine. I 'adn't been away from you five minutes before I saw 'ow it could be done. 'Ell, I saw a dozen wyes it could be done."

"Right," I whispered, "but cut out the explanations. How are we going to find out if he does it?"

"That's what 'as been rackin' my brains all dye," he answered. "'Ow to get in the temple an' look over the black throne. The

gold one sinks down an' under, but the black one's built in. An' there's two of the *kehft* slaves watchin' it in there hevery hour of the dye an' night. Four hour shifts they got, an' you can bloody well wyger 'e picks proper plucked uns for that duty, cap'n.

"No trouble gettin' in; ther's 'arf a dozen trick entrances back of them thrones. Ten minutes, an' we'd know what was what. But 'ow the bloody 'ell to get them ten minutes? No good shootin' the pasty-faced blighters. That'd bring 'em all down on us. No good killin' 'em nohow. The minute they found 'em, Satan'd know what the gyme was."

He was silent for a moment.

"Cripes!" he said at last. "If we could only get some bloomin' hangel to drop down an' 'old a glass of the *kehft* under their noses! They'd follow it like a 'ungry lion would a bone! An' see nothin' else!"

I caught his shoulders, heart thumping.

"By God, Harry! You've hit it!" My voice was shaking. "Do you know where he keeps that hell brew? Can you get at it?"

"Sure I know," he said. "An' there ain't none better at my trade than me, cap'n, as I told you. I'd sye I could get it. But then what?"

"We'll be the angel," I told him. "It works quick, I know that. How long does it keep them under?"

"I don't know," he answered. "Some longer, some shorter. We'd 'ave our ten minutes though, an' a lot to spare—"

"Cripes!" he chuckled. "What a gyme! If they wake up before the relief comes, they ain't likely to say nothin'. An' if they don't, they ain't likely to get a chance to say nothin'. An' if they do get a chance either way, who the 'ell would believe 'em?"

"Get the stuff," I said. "Try to get it to-morrow. And now play safe. Get out of here. If you can manage it, tell Miss Demerest not to look for me to-night. Tell her not to worry. But take no chances. Harry, you're a wonder. If you were a girl I'd kiss you. Scoot!"

Again he chuckled; another moment and I knew he had gone.

I went into the other room and put out the dim light. For the first time since I had fallen into Satan's hands I felt free of that damnable depression, oppression rather, which had shadowed me. It was as though a door had begun to open. A door of escape.

I slept soundly. I awakened once in the night from a dream that Satan was standing over me, watching me. Whether it was all a dream, I do not know. Perhaps he had really entered to resolve some lingering doubt. If so my sleep must have reassured him, for it was that of one who had not a care on his mind. I lost no time worrying about it; in another moment I was asleep again.

The next day passed quickly enough. I was up early. As I was dressing, the phone rang. It was Consardine. He said that Satan wished me to go out to the yacht after I had breakfasted. He, Consardine, would accompany me.

There had been no change of plans then. I was still caste for my piratical rôle.

When I entered the breakfast room, Consardine was waiting for me. We ate together. I was itching with curiosity about Cobham. But I asked no questions, nor did Consardine speak of him. We walked down to the boat landing, talking of this and that. Tacitly, neither of us made any reference to the conversation of the previous day. It must have been uppermost in his mind, as it was in mine. Yet, after all, there was nothing more to say. He had made his position sufficiently plain.

A cutter was waiting for us, and took us out to the Cherub. The yacht was as beautiful inside as out. The captain was a squat, thick-set, broad-shouldered Newfoundlander. He was introduced to me as Captain Morrisy. It may or may not have been the name his parents gave him. Probably not. He was a genial pirate. A hundred years back, and he would have been floating the Jolly Roger. The first mate was a clean-cut, saturnine chap with the hall-mark of Annapolis. The crew were as hard-boiled looking a lot as any the marine corps ever produced.

The discipline was military and perfect. It reached its apotheosis in the engine room. The engines, specially designed, oil-burning

Diesels, were marvels. So interested was I that lunch time came around before I realized it. I had not been mistaken about Morrisy. He told us tales of smuggling and gun and rum-running in which he had been active before he had signed with Satan. Born a hundred years too late for the Black Flag, he had done his best with the material at hand. He was a pirate, but I liked him.

When we got back to the château, I found a summons from Satan. With many misgivings I obeyed it. The misgivings were all wrong. I spent two of the most fascinating hours I had ever known. I was guided to that part of the great house which was Satan's own intimate domain.

I cannot begin to describe what I saw there, nor the atmosphere of those dozen or more chambers large and small, wherein that dark, strange soul took its delight. Each of them was a temple in which the mysterious indefinable and eternal spirit that humanity calls beauty, and has always worshiped and sought to capture, had become incarnate—a living thing.

And Satan was different. He was transformed—gentle, no mockery either in word or look. He talked only of the treasures about us. It came to me that he loved beauty even more than he did power; that he considered power only as a means toward beauty. And that evil though he was, he knew beauty better than any one alive.

When I left him, his spell upon me was strong. I had to fight against the conviction that what I had beheld justified him as to any means he had taken to get it: that the true criminal was he who would try to thwart him. Absurd as it may seem, I felt myself hideously guilty in the plans I was harboring. It was with difficulty that I held myself back from confessing them, throwing myself on his mercy, swearing myself to him. I think that only the thought of Eve kept me from doing so.

That was, perhaps, his object. But I had to tell myself so, over and over again after I had left him, to banish the loathing I felt about going on against him. If this seems deplorable weakness, I can only say that he who thinks so would not if he had been subject to that same sorcery, and had listened to Satan preaching in the heart of the miracle he had fashioned.

If it was a trap, I escaped it. But to this day—I do not know whether in the greater sense Satan was not right.

The company at dinner helped me to throw off the obsession. A brisk bridge game afterward did more. It was close to midnight when I returned to my rooms. I had not seen Eve all day. Consardine had mentioned, casually, as we were going in to dinner, that she had gone to town, and probably would not return that night. I took it as a hint that it would be useless for me to venture to her room.

I dropped off to sleep, hoping for Barker. He did not come.

There were some truly charming people at the breakfast table next morning. Among them an Australian major, a soldierly and engaging scoundrel. We went riding together, following a different road than that which I had covered with Consardine. At one point it ran parallel to the driveway. A smart little roadster hummed by, headed for the château. Eve was driving it. She waved. The Australian took the greeting to himself, remarking that there went a damned nice girl. Everything seemed suddenly brighter. It meant that I would see her that night. At least, that was what I thought then.

After we had stabled the horses, I hung about the pleasant terrace. Maybe I would get another glimpse of Eve, maybe even a whispered word. About four o'clock Consardine appeared and dropped down at the table beside me.

Consardine seemed ill at ease. We had a drink or two, and talked of this and that, but it was plain that something was on his mind. I waited for him to speak, not without a certain apprehension. At last he sighed, and shook his great shoulders.

"Well," he said, "unpleasant medicine gets no sweeter while we hesitate over taking it. Come along with me, Kirkham. Satan's orders."

I remembered vividly his declaration that if his master commanded him, he would unhesitatingly take me prisoner, I felt a distinct shock.

"Does that mean that I am under arrest?" I asked quietly.

"Not at all," he answered. "There is nothing—some one—Satan wishes you to see. Do not ask me his purpose. I do not know it. I might guess, but—ask me no questions. Let us go."

I went with him, wondering. When he finally stopped we were, I thought, in one of the towers, certainly we had gone far above the ground floor. We were in a small, bare room. More a crypt, in fact, than a room. One of its walls was slightly curved, the bulge toward us. Consardine walked over to this wall, and beckoned me beside him. He touched a hidden spring. An aperture about a foot square, like a small window, opened at the level of my eyes.

"Look through," he said.

The place into which I peered was filled with a curiously clear and palely purplish light. It was distinctly unpleasant. I became aware of a thin, droning sound, faint but continuous, upon one note. I was not enough of a musician to place the note, but it was quite as high as that made by the rapid vibration of a bee's wings. That, too, was unpleasant. Light and droning, with a concentration-shattering quality, a blurring effect upon the mind.

At first glance I thought that I was looking into a circular place in which were a crowd of men, all facing a common center. Then I realized that this could not be so, since all the men were in exactly the same attitude, crouching upon one knee. There seemed to be thousands of these crouching men, line after line of them, one behind the other, growing smaller and smaller and vanishing off into immense distances.

I looked to right and to left. There were the kneeling men, but now in profile. I raised my eyes to the ceiling of the place. And there they appeared to hang, heads downward.

I stared again at those facing me. It was strange how the purplish light and the droning clouded one's thought. They held back, like two hands, the understanding from fulfillment.

Then I realized abruptly that all those thousands of faces were—the same.

And that each was the face of Cobham.

They were the face of Cobham, drawn and distorted, reflected over and over again from scores of mirrors with which the place was lined. The circular walls were faceted with mirrors and so was the globed ceiling, and all these mirrors curved down to a circular mirrored slab about seven feet in diameter which was their focus.

Upon this slab knelt Cobham, glaring at the countless reflections of himself, reflected with sharpest accuracy by that clear and evil purplish light.

As I looked, he jumped to his feet and began to wave his arms crazily. Like regiments of automatons, the reflections leaped with him, waving. He turned, and they wheeled as one man in diminishing rank upon rank. He threw himself down upon his face, and I knew that unless his eyes were closed his face still stared up at him, buoyed, it must have seemed, upon the backs of the thousands reflected upon the slab from the mirrors in the ceiling. And I knew that no man could keep his eyes closed long in that room, that he must open them, to look and look again.

I shrank back, trembling. This thing was hellish. It was mind-destroying. There could be no sleep. The drone rasped along the nerves and would not permit it. The light was sleep killing, too, keying up, stretching the tense nerves to the breaking point. And the mimicking hosts of reflections slowly, inexorably, led the mind into the paths of madness.

"For God's sake—for God's sake—" I turned to Consardine half incoherent, white-lipped. "I've seen, Consardine—a bullet would be mercy—"

He drew me back to the opening.

"Thrust in your head," he said, coldly. "You must see yourself in the mirrors, and Cobham must see you. It is Satan's order."

I tried to struggle away. He gripped my neck and forced my head forward as one does a puppy to make him drink.

The wall at this point was only a couple of inches thick. Held helpless, my head was now beyond that wall. Cobham had staggered to his feet. I saw my face leap out in the mirrors. He saw it, too. His

eyes moved from one reflection to another, striving to find the real.

"Kirkham!" he howled. "Kirkham! Get me out!"

Consardine drew me back. He snapped the opening shut.

"You devil! You cold-blooded devil!" I sobbed, and threw myself upon him.

He caught my arms. He held me as easily as though I had been a child, while I kicked and writhed in futile attempt to break the grip. And at last my fury spent itself. Still sobbing, I went limp.

"There, there, lad," he said gently. "I am not responsible for what you've seen. I told you it was unpleasant medicine. But Satan ordered it, and I must obey. Come with me. Back to your rooms."

I followed him, all resistance for the moment gone from me. It was not any affection for Cobham that had so stirred me. He had probably watched others in the mirrored cell from that same window. If the necessity had arisen, I would have shot Cobham down without the slightest feeling about it. Nor had the ordeal of Cartright shaken my nerve at all like this. Bad as that had been, it had been in the open, with people all around him. And Cartright, so it seemed, had been given some chance.

But this torture of the many mirrored cell, with its sleep slaying light and sound, its slow killing, in utter aloneness, of a man's mind—there was something about that, something not to be put in words, that shook me to the soul.

"How long will he—last?" I put the question to Consardine as we passed into my rooms.

"It is hard to say," he answered gently again. "He will come out of that room without memory. He will not know his name, nor what he has been, nor anything that he had ever learned. He will know nothing of all these hereafter—ever. Like an animal, he will know when he is hungry and thirsty, cold or warm. That is all. He will forget from minute to minute. He will live only in each moment. And when that moment goes it will be forgotten. Mindless, soulless—empty. I have known men to come to it in a week, others have resisted for three. Never longer.

I shivered.

"I'll not go down for dinner, Consardine," I said.

"I would if I were you," he said gravely. "It will be wiser. You cannot help Cobham. After all, it is Satan's right. Like me, Cobham had taken the steps and lost. He lived at Satan's will. And Satan will be watching you. He will want to know how you have taken it. Pull yourself together, Kirkham. Come down, and be gay. I shall tell him that you were only interested in his exhibition. What, lad! Will you let him know what he has made you feel? Where is your pride?

"And to do so would be dangerous—for any plans you may have for the future. I tell you so."

"Stay with me till it's time to go, Consardine," I said. "Can you?"

"I intended to," he answered, "if you asked me. And I think both of us can stand putting ourselves outside of an extra sized drink."

I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror as I poured. The glass in my hand shook and spilled.

"I'll never want to look in one again," I told him.

"The thing comes from Tibet," mused Consardine. "Or at least so Satan told me. It is a device of the lamas. They call it the 'Soul Slayer.' A good name for such a terrible device."

He poured me another drink.

"Enough of that," he said briskly. "You must get it from your mind. Should Satan be at dinner—thank him for a new experience."

Satan was not at dinner. I hoped that he would receive a report, as no doubt he did, of my behavior. I was gay enough to satisfy Consardine. I drank gayly, and often.

Eve was there. I caught her glancing at me, puzzled, now and then.

If she had known how little of real gayety there was in my heart, how much of black despair, she would have been more puzzled still.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

Man's Place Is the Home

By JOHN WILSTACH

AS I dawdled at breakfast, the morning paper propped up in front of me, with special emphasis on the want ads, I never forgot my duty of keeping an active eye on the time.

Pouring myself a second cup of coffee to dissipate the cobwebs of slumber I shuddered as I looked outside at the bleak, lowering winter day and pushed my toes further into woolen lined Eskimo slippers.

"Martha," I exclaimed sharply, "hurry up, my dear. It is almost half past eight. You mustn't be late at the office."

My better half—much better—hurried in from the bedroom of our little flat hastily adjusting her hat.

"Punctuality," I began, "is—"

"Something you know nothing about," she snapped, "or you'd know it was time for you to go to work. Every time I go to business leaving you to wear out some comfortable easy chair, I feel like leaving a bomb near by. Here I slave all day and what do you do—I ask you? Contribute not a cent to our combined support."

"Isn't that just like a woman," I replied wearily. "Don't I tidy up the apartment and take Teddie out for his morning and afternoon walk? And am I not here when you return from work, with a smile and a cheery welcome? Don't I listen patiently while you relate everything that happened at the office, including what the boss said, and aren't your slippers always in their place and your dressing gown—"

"Bought with my money," she flared.

"I don't think it at all kind to keep reminding me of my economic dependence," I retorted. "By the way, kindly leave a quarter on the bureau as you go out. I need some tobacco and I like to have some change in my purse. A woman never thinks that a man feels so humiliated without a cent in his pocket!"

"If I were a man—"

That was one speech I always cut short.

"Remember, dear," I reminded her, with a certain dignity, "that you promised to love, honor, and obey."

"But not support," Martha stormed.

"Keep that energy for the office," I returned, aiming to terminate this fruitless conversation, "and don't forget the quarter."

She fairly threw the coin at me, and swept out of our home slamming the door behind her.

That's the way some women are, fairly begrudging us men a bite to eat and a place to lay our weary heads, and always insisting upon our helpless servitude, just as if man's place wasn't the home.

After Martha had left, with that thunderlike closing of the door that always makes my nerves throb, it was sometime before I could gain calm.

The same hope kept repeating like a refrain over and over in my mind.

If only Martha would get a raise.

We tried so hard on the thirty-five dollars a week she earned and I am sure the dear girl did her best, but we never really seemed to make both ends meet.

I had worn the same blue serge suit until it really was a sight, while I hadn't had a new hat since goodness knows when, but still we didn't seem to get ahead.

If only I could get something to do. I would take anything; that is, something I might fill without any nerve strain; but it is getting hard these days—what with women holding all the really good positions and elbowing us men out. Only those very young are wanted and I was twenty-four, though some mornings, I fancy, after a long sleep and a face massage, I appeared somewhat more juvenile.

When Martha and I had married two years since, things had been different.

Life had been painted in roseate hues and Illusion, that great artist, had showed the boat of happiness gliding gently along the river of existence. But all too often we bridegrooms have a terrible awakening to the real facts of married life, after the glamour fades, and we are forced to see hard facts as they really are.

I remembered when I first arrived so trustingly in the big city with oh, such ambitions.

It seemed that I had overstayed my welcome in Shelter, Long Island, though why I could never understand. Over my little white bed was a framed sign I had worked out in colors in kindergarten: "*Mother is your best friend,*" and I thought I was doing the right thing in staying home with her instead of cutting home ties.

But father said I must either go to work —or leave. I never hesitated a moment—I left!

The only position I might have condescended to take was one as soda jerker in the American Store and that was filled by the proprietor's son.

My mother wept and asked my stern parent who would be left to water the geranium plants and bring in the mail from our R. F. D. box, but father was inflexible, like all strong, silent men who only open their mouths to say something disagreeable.

"I've had to work all my life," he said, "and I don't see why I should have a useless, worthless son, too shiftless and lazy and good-for-nothing to earn his salt."

"I can do without salt," I pleaded weakly.

"Who does he take after, I wonder, that's what gets me?" he ranted, pulling at some hair he could ill-afford to lose.

"My ancestors were gentle folks," mother said proudly. "One of them had a slave who refused to be freed."

"I suppose his name was Useless," growled father. "Kindly don't give me that poor but proud story. But what the poor have to be proud about I can't imagine. *My* family was one of the first to break ground west of the Ohio River."

"Now don't bring out that old covered wagon," she protested. "I'm tired of the sight of it."

"I won't be a party to you two quarreling about me," I said firmly. "If need be I shall make my way to the big city and carve my own way—"

"Into the bread line, I bet," growled my father, and left for his job at the boiler factory.

Mother then went up to the attic and un-

folded her little savings, forty-seven dollars in all, and pressed the money upon me. There were tears in my eyes as I stuffed the old bills into my pocket and embraced her warmly.

I told her she shouldn't worry about me as I would go directly to the Y. M. C. A. immediately upon my arrival in the metropolis.

I didn't have an opportunity to say good-by to my sister Evangeline, who left at seven o'clock to work in the cotton mills, but I left a message for the dear girl.

My heavy underwear, mittens, chest protector of red flannel, rubbers, and wall mottoes, were all packed in a big old-fashioned Gladstone bag, and I left with my mother's warning to be a good boy and keep away from designing girls.

Ah, if I had only heeded her words of caution! She knew—ah, only too well she knew, the pitfalls dug for a young man's feet in the wicked city.

I sigh now when I think of how fresh and inexperienced and innocent I was in the ways of the world that day I strayed forth from the family circle.

Luck, if that is what you might call it, favored me from the start.

Answering an advertisement for a floor walker at Marston's which had attracted my eye as being a pleasing profession, I found favor with the man in charge of the employment bureau. He said that I looked neat and capable and I got the job.

Of course the duties came hard at first, unused as I was to steady toil. Pointing out this department and that, answering a hundred questions, and seeing that none of the young ladies behind the counters neglected customers, and being on my feet hour after hour, I was fairly exhausted when the closing hour came.

There, alas, in Marston's store, I met Martha.

She was in the artificial flower department and after we had exchanged demure good mornings for a week or two, she became bolder and stopped me to wire a dainty flower in my button-hole.

Why didn't I let things stop there, keeping my distance, as a discreet young man should, and hesitate before accepting her first invitation to a moving picture. Little do we young men know to what these first advances may lead.

Why did I not remain happy and single? How do I know? Tempted, perhaps, by her delightful picture of a comfortable home and that two could live as cheaply as one, I hesitated and, then weakened.

I longed for a home—that was it—and never knew that I was being lured to the altar by a giddy creature who had naught but thoughts of pleasure in her mind, after she had placed a wedding ring on her finger and a slave bracelet on my right wrist.

Every night, after a hard day on my feet, Martha insisted upon going dancing or to the movies.

I stood the pace for a time, hoping things would be different after a bit, and that she would really decide to settle down.

But the human system is only capable of just so much, and my constitution is delicate. I was meant for a home-maker.

The continued round of work and pleasure was too much for me. I became bothered with fallen arches and then nerves, that terrible malady that hits working men in such a vulnerable part.

Soon I found myself talking sharply to old ladies who requested the way to the doily counter, and then came the day that I was so exhausted, upon awakening, that I was late for work.

Of course I was criticized for punching the time clock after the opening hour, and I knew a crisis was coming.

Of course I begged Martha to reform her ways, but she had become a devotee of the silver screen and a radio addict, filled with a depraved desire to get Havana or Hoboken between 1 and 4 A.M., when all respectable announcers are in bed.

So I handed in my resignation, and it was accepted without flutter or fuss. There were enough single men going to work every morning; there was work enough for a married male to do being guardian of the hearth and keeping the home heater hot.

Let Martha be the wage earner. Even the most enthusiastic exponent of men's rights will admit that one is enough in any family. And though we had no children,

I maintained that Teddie, our toy fox terrier, needed a father's care.

But like all who ask little—a quiet corner by the window, some tobacco for my pipe, and permission to save the cigar store certificates, and a friendly chat with Harold, over the dumb-waiter, after our morning dishes were washed—I was soon to be begrudged even that.

The conflict this morning after breakfast before Martha went to work, was but one of many, leaving me upset and unstrung.

Still that day I went as usual about my daily tasks. I did the dishes, made the bed, dusted things off, put out the garbage, and the hundred and one household things that keep a man's hours occupied and for which women give us so little credit.

I heard Harold whistling at his work in the next apartment, so I opened the door to the dumb-waiter and called to him.

Glad indeed I was to hear him in such a light mood; his wife was a massive physical training instructor, and the poor fellow often bore black and blue marks he was too proud to show, but I had often heard her loud voice drowning his whimpers and the sound of a falling body not heavy enough to be hers.

I suppose her companions at the gymnasium thought Mrs. Thunderton a hail-girl-well-met, and never imagined she was cruel to her fragile mate. But you can't always tell just because a man doesn't complain, and sometimes words hurt more than blows.

"Hello-oh-oh, Harold," I cried. "How is everything?"

"Fine, Larkie," he replied, opening the shaft door. "I've just been getting a bundle ready for the laundry. I wash and iron all our smaller pieces myself, but I'm not quite strong enough for the wet wash."

"Even if you were," I said tartly, "little enough thanks you would get for it. Women are so unappreciative."

"It's the difference in their nature," replied Harold sadly; though, manlike, he was ever ready to defend the stronger sex. "Women mix so much in the large affairs of the world they can't be expected to notice our household cares. Tell me, Larkie, did you hear that talk last night on the radio about the husband and the home?"

"Yes," I replied warmly, "and I certainly do agree with the speaker that if man, too, wanders from the household, who will look after the children and keep the family intact? Women have bobbed all wifely responsibility with their hair."

"Yes, indeed. What with her engagements on the City Committee of Progressive Citizens, and the Vigilant Board of Voters, not to speak of the New York Women's Athletic Association, Mrs. Thunderton has scant enough time for me. It's a curt word of farewell in the morning and a growled query about dinner being ready at night. And sometimes, at the last moment, when everything is ready, she telephones that she has a business engagement with a woman friend and isn't coming home at all," faltered Harold.

I paused in silent sympathy.

"I don't know," Harold sighed, "what I would do without Elsie. She is such company for me; you know I am alone so much."

Elsie was, I knew, Harold's pet Pom-Pom his wife had given him on the first anniversary of their marriage. Now, alas, she paid no attention to the date and didn't like her attention called to it.

The little pet was such a comfort to Harold—made up in a way you know for the lack he felt of never having had a child of his own.

"How is Elsie?" I asked.

"The poor dear doesn't get enough exercise. What with housework, and this and that—you know how it is—I cannot take her out enough," explained Harold, "and when I do get her on the street she pulls at the leash, and I return simply fagged out. Oh, there's the doorbell; I must answer it."

"Maybe I'll see you in Central Park later in the afternoon," I said, and closed the door on our gossip.

I returned to the front room, where I finished straightening things up. Then the ice man came, and it was time for me to go shopping; I had promised to go out and see if I might secure any bargains in the January white sales.

Always I tried to arrange a menu for the evening meal that would tempt Martha

after she returned from work, but this morning I had no heart for the task.

Instead of going out, however, I sat down and studied the want ads.

Bitterness filled my being. I was tired of having to beg for pin money.

So, like many a man before me, I decided I must assert myself and go to work—become a bread-winner again as well as a consumer. Long enough I had led a sheltered life, shielded by a woman's petticoat, one might say, if the reigning sex hadn't discarded them in favor of knickerbockers.

I started at the top of the page.

Butchers were wanted—but I couldn't stand the thought of sharp knives and all that raw flesh. Carpenters. No; every time I had ever tried to drive a nail, I hit a finger instead. Chauffeurs. Automobiles were still a mystery to me. Druggists, engineers, firemen, janitors, painters—it seemed every trade possible, for which I had no bend, was listed.

Now, if there were only an opening for an experienced tea taster or dog leader—something refined and ornamental that wouldn't be much of a mental strain!

How often had my eyes vainly sought an advertisement something like this:

> Elderly gentleman, single, with ample means, desires the company of a restful, unenergetic young man, apt at reading news tid-bits aloud, exchanging the time of day, and an adept at Old Maid and Casino, as a traveling friend. All expenses and acceptable salary paid. No pushing hustler need apply, but a gentleman who cultivates leisure and repose.

A position of this description would suit me nicely, and I told my aching heart that Martha, our honeymoon long past, would soon fill the void I might create in our apartment we called home. Day by day, and night by night, I could see her heart hardening against me.

Suddenly an electric shock, an inspiration, you might say, went through me. Why not place an advertisement in the situation wanted column myself, telling my qualifications for a life of retired relaxation?

Eagerly I sought a pencil and paper in Martha's desk, and busily set to work. This was the tiny masterpiece I created, a prose poem one might call it, showing I had something of the instinct of artistic salesmanship.

> Pleasant young man wishes position, not involving crude toil, as a companion for single, elderly man, not active, but desiring companionship of one the same age in speed and spirit. I will take employer on short walks, read aloud, and play indoor games without exercise. Compensation to be agreed upon.

Who might say how many wealthy old gentlemen, happily widowers, would welcome the notion of a good-natured young man to enliven their hours?

Of course I was a trifle old to be adopted, yet no one might tell what would be the result of such a friendly business arrangement?

Things, I was sure, could not go on as they were. This might be my opportunity for a break to freedom.

I was wise enough to realize that Martha would never pay for the insertion of such an advertisement, so I must think of some way to provide the money myself.

How could I raise the cash? I thought over my possessions, and discarded the thought of them in turn. But wait—there were my baby pins and locket, kept from long before the time admiring women had called me another Little Lord Fauntleroy, and rough, horrid boys at school names I cannot repeat.

Taking these tiny golden treasures from a pocket in my Gladstone bag, I discarded my apron and dressed for the street. There was a pawnbroker's place I had passed, situated a few blocks away on Eighth Avenue, identified by three golden balls. The meaning I had heard was: "Two to one you don't get it out." But I must take a chance.

Putting Teddie on a leash, I left the apartment and started down the street.

Of course I was a trifle ashamed to enter the pawning establishment, but the evidence in the window showed that many people of all kinds had been there before me; so I ventured in—first looking about to see that I wasn't being observed by neighbors. People do talk so.

An affable gentleman, without a coat,

his arms encircled by wonderful pink garters, greeted me pleasantly enough.

"We don't take dogs," he said.

"I'd never think of parting with Teddie," I retorted indignantly, and placed the baby pins and lockets on the counter before him.

"I—I want some money on those tokens," I stammered.

"Are they gold?"

"Of course. I've had them since I was a child in arms."

"Not interested in your cradle days. Two dollars!"

"And a half." I summoned up the words, with sudden courage.

"Wait until I make a test to see if they are brass and weigh 'em."

Can you imagine—the scoundrel would not take my word?

In a few minutes he returned from the front of the shop with a yellow ticket on which, at my dictation, he wrote my name and address, and then passed it to me with the money.

I pocketed the cash and slunk out of the place feeling as if I had done something sneaky or dishonest, for somehow, from newspaper accounts, I had always connected these pawnshops with stolen goods. What if I were arrested and accused of robbing some unknown infant? The shame—the disgrace—why, it would reach to Shelter, Long Island.

So I hid the ticket in my inside pocket, and hurried to the stationery store in the neighborhood that took want ads for the newspapers.

The man carefully counted the words in my copy, and said I might obtain three insertions for two dollars and forty cents. I parted with my money gladly, casting my all on a turn of fortune just like one of those gamblers in the movies.

Then with a heart brightened by the hope that springs eternal in the human breast, as they told us at school, I started on my shopping expedition.

I had by now quarreled so often with Italian vegetable men that I had almost learned their language, but I knew a butcher I could rely. Of course I charged my purchases. Martha didn't think a man should be trusted with ready cash, what with bob-haired bandits roaming the streets.

II.

BEING fair, I must say for Martha that she was punctual. Finishing work at five thirty, she immediately fought her way home in the subway to work herself into condition for me.

To-night I thought to have a surprise for my wife, but she had a greater one, of more far-reaching results, ready for my ears.

"I'm dead tired, Larkie," she gasped. "Take my hat and coat. Hurry and bring my slippers and dressing gown."

I dashed hither and thither, like a dutiful helpmate, making her comfortable.

The potatoes were already on the stove and some fresh stringless beans. I never started the meat until Martha came in; but the table was neatly set and naught out of place to raise a complaint from a working woman after a hard day's toil.

It was not until we were seated that my wife broke her news, abruptly and bluntly, just like a woman, without any of the tact or delicacy that would have instantly occurred to a man.

"You know we're not getting ahead on my salary," she began, starting an old subject, as we sipped the soup.

"Well, I may go to work," I began.

"So I have thought of something to add to our income," she went right ahead. "You, Larkie, can sleep quite comfortably on the couch in the parlor. I'm going to *rent your room.*"

"Take in a lodger!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, have you any objection?"

I was speechless. Sometimes one's feelings are so intense that they cannot be translated into words.

"I'll receive nine dollars a week for the room, and you may be sure our lodger will be no trouble."

"Are my feelings not to be considered?" I gasped. "And who is this intruder?"

"What does it matter to you? He's a working man—that's something—a cousin of one of the girls in the office; Dick Trimmer is the name. He will be up to-night."

I was so overcome that I nearly burned

the meat, but I got it off the stove in time.

And yet what could I say? Dependence kept me quiet, though rebellion was seething within, only awaiting a spark to flame into hot activity.

What homelike privacy and peace I had was to be invaded, and no doubt destroyed, by some noisy stranger. Dick Trimmer, indeed! The name sounded like a salesman of saxophone perfection in ten lessons.

"I won't cook for him," I declared.

"Only breakfast," explained Martha, as if that meant nothing.

Teddie rubbed up against my legs under the table as if in silent sympathy. Martha paid no attention to my perturbation.

Ah, well, the hand that carries the pocketbook rules the roost. So I suffered in silence, awaiting the worst.

At half past eight it came—for the doorbell rang, and after I answered same, in walked the expected Mr. Trimmer.

Did you ever meet any one whom you disliked heartily on sight, and who filled you with a distaste that suddenly turned to hatred in a manner unexplainable?

"Hello, Martha," exclaimed this individual, breezing in like an overfed elephant, "so this is our little flat? Well, well, and over there, I suppose, is your husband, Larkie Meadow, whom I have *not* heard so much about."

"*Mr.* Meadow," I said, briefly.

He lurched over his suitcase and grasped me with a big, sticky hand like an unwashed beef, crushing the bones of my fingers until I winced under the pain.

The first thing Mr. Trimmer did was to break a radio owner's pet commandment; he went over and whirled the dials as if the set were his own.

Then he seated himself in my favorite rocker, which creaked under his weight.

"Nice and comfortable, eh?" he beamed. "Nothing like a homey atmosphere and getting away from restaurants. I like corn beef and cabbage, and pork chops and sauerkraut, not, mind you, more than twice a week, though, and if I do say it myself I am some cook. Out camping I'm always elected by the boys, and my biscuits. Well, say."

I shuddered, and Teddie growled at my feet, something he had never known to do yet, having been kept away from rough dogs and fed balanced diet biscuits instead of bones. But I'd like to have seen his sharp teeth fasten on a certain shin, but he had never been taught to "sick 'em," so there was no help in that quarter.

Must I describe Dick Trimmer?

Words fail, or those, anyway, that a gentleman may use in front of a lady.

He was fat in an unhealthy way, with a red, shiny face that looked as if it had been polished by lubricating oil. Eyes round and piggish, and a loose flannel mouth set in an assertive grin. Of course you can imagine the voice, loud and strident.

Now I knew, clearly, why deadly poisons had been invented—and used. Rough on rats might be easy on humans, I thought. Just a spoonful in the coffee.

Martha must have noticed me smiling.

"What's the joke?" she asked, sharply.

If I had told her that I was imagining a certain well occupied slab in the morgue she'd have thought me insane, so I passed over the question.

"Oh, nothing," I said.

There was no reason for much conversation on my part—Mr. Trimmer was under way.

"Well, folks, I am sure that we are going to make a happy family," the voice boomed on, "and you'll find me a very easy fellow to satisfy when I have my own way. You'll soon get used to me, eh, Martha?"

"Mrs. Meadow," I interrupted, but he paid not the slightest attention to me.

"I am sure we will endeavor to make you very comfortable," glowed Martha.

A rattlesnake or a scorpion at the foot of his bed would be my part of the entertainment, if I had my way.

I merely grunted.

"How would you folks like to go to the movies—my treat?" Trimmer suggested.

Martha's eyes gleamed; I knew the symptoms.

"I noticed a fine picture down the street, an extra super special, Bob Fairface in 'Just a Horse.' I do so admire those Western films showing the great plains, and handsome cowboy heroes."

Martha was breathing heavily. There'd be no stopping her now.

"You run along, dear," I muttered weakly. "I don't feel at all well to-night."

And I didn't. The effect of one dose of Mr. Trimmer, even a short one, made me physically ill, and I greeted the prospect of being left alone to face my problem.

When the new lodger had escorted my wife to where the other addicts were gathered, I came to one important conclusion. I would keep secret the insertion of the advertisement in the newspaper—maybe this might be the means of my salvation.

The next morning, furtively, I gazed spellbound at the copy, which seemed the most distinguished on the page, and longed for results.

I simply prayed for an unknown kind old gentleman to show himself and rescue me from a life that I saw would become unbearable for any man who had a single spark of spirit left in him.

III.

THE next four days I am going to pass briefly—though they passed over my anguished nerves painfully enough. I do not hold with those who gloat on prying into painful lives. I have given you a first front view of Trimmer; taken profile and from the back, in sunlight and shadow, he grew upon one—like a boil—in every way a fit subject for the knife.

Then the morning dawned, when I went to the door, Martha and our lodger having left for work, and found a letter forwarded to me from the newspaper office.

This is what I read:

> DEAR SIR:
>
> If you will go to The Mansion, a charming place on the Arrow Pike, just north of Arbortown, Long Island, you will find an old gentleman, Charles Buzzle, who, I am sure, will welcome you to the life you desire. The existence he leads there at The Mansion is ideal in every way for one of your cultivated longings, and I doubt not you will find the work of a delightful and restful nature.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> JOHN BROWNING.

There was no address on the plain sheet of paper and the message was typewritten. But what cared I? Here was a hot tip, I believe those who follow the ponies call it, and I remembered that Arbortown wasn't more than five miles away from the residence of my parents at Shelter.

I suppose every one has something put away for a rainy day. Well, I had ten dollars hidden far from feminine eyes, dating from my last salary as a floorwalker. This I now obtained from a little purse I had secreted in the closet. Then I wrote a note to Martha and left it in full view on her desk, saying I was called home by important news—some one was sick in the family.

Some one was—and that party of the first party was me. Sick of being a household drudge and a slave of the kitchen.

And now, after all, I had to sit passive and watch Trimmer grow into the apple of Martha's eye. Every evening he had catered to her craving for the pictures and was entering her heart via the silver screen. So I felt no twinge of conscience in leaving so abruptly.

Let him don the apron and show what a good cook he was. I thought—yes, I did—that Martha might miss my apple pies and muffins, but I put the thought from me sternly. I must think of myself now.

I did hate to say good-by to Teddie, but maybe dogs wouldn't be welcome where I was going.

Well, about noon I alighted from the railroad train at Arbortown, and asked the way to The Mansion. It was a balmy day in spring and I enjoyed the stroll out of town along Arrow Pike, until I came in view of an imposing residence surrounded by a wonderful garden.

There seemed lots of guests wandering about the grounds, and far off some one was playing a violin among the trees. An ideal scene of peace and restfulness.

I stopped a passer-by along the roadway and asked if this was The Mansion. The man looked me over and said I had come to the right place!

Up the drive I marched, picturing in my mind the genial Mr. Buzzle. On the way to the main entrance I was stopped by a delightful old gentleman, who asked if he might assist me in any way.

"You are a stranger here," he said, "and some of the guests may not seem very courteous to you at first. The fact is that some of them have overstayed their welcome and are afraid Mr. Buzzle will throw them out."

"I am looking for a position," I returned with dignity, "not free room and board."

"Well, you never can tell," he cackled. "When I came here they took all my money away from me and I'm going to stay until they give it back."

Though I wanted an elderly gentleman to look after I could see that, possibly such a responsibility might be rather trying on the nerves, I reflected thus as he wandered away, laughing to himself.

Reaching the porch I asked for Mr. Buzzle.

"Right inside, in the main office," suggested a lady, rocking back and forth.

A dignified, white-haired gentleman, behind a big roll top desk, greeted me with a courteous smile.

"Mr. Buzzle?" I asked.

He admitted the identity.

"I have a letter, in answer to an ad I put in the paper," I went on, "saying that here I might find an ideal life, and work of a delightful and restful nature."

He gazed at me in a puzzled manner, then his face cleared.

"Have you your commitment papers?" he asked, stretching forth his hand. "I will call a keeper immediately."

"Commitment papers—keeper?" I repeated vaguely. "Here is the letter. By the way, what is this place?"

"Don't you know? An insane asylum!" he replied.

Then the letter I had received, in answer to my advertisement, was a hoax.

As Buzzle read it over he laughed gleefully.

"John Browning, who wrote this note, is one of the inmates," he explained. "Those of a harmless nature are allowed to read newspapers, write letters and even wander about the grounds. This must have been his idea of a little joke."

"Joke, indeed," I muttered. "Then there's no job here at all?"

"Not if you're right in the head," said the superintendent, vastly amused.

Think of being taken in by a lunatic. It was for this I had left a home that, if unhappy, was still better than none. Well, the only thing to do was to bow out more or less gracefully, though what I accomplished was more or less of a stumble, feeling like a perfect idiot.

Then I thought the only way to proceed was to my former home with mother—if father would stand for it.

He did—for just two days—and then the old story arose. There was wood to be cut and other chores that I found distasteful and really couldn't bring myself to do.

Which way to turn? The thought of going back to Martha and Trimmer was distasteful, but father was getting so he watched every bite I ate, and kept growling unintelligently to himself in a language that spelled violence.

The third day, after breakfast, I received a telegram, and naturally was all excitement as I opened it.

LARKIE MEADOW,
Shelter, Long Island:
Come home at once. Teddie and I miss you terribly. Take the next train.
MARTHA.

I read over the message again and then counted the words. There were four over the regulation ten, so Martha really must be upset.

You can imagine the pleasure with which I thanked mother—leaving out father—for such wonderful hospitality, and took the next train to New York.

I wondered what had happened to bring about such a change, for I had thought of Martha, doped with pictures, quite happy without me. Goodness knows, all she had done was complain.

Well, there was nothing for it but a return of the housebroken male.

It seemed, since getting used to work around the flat, I was good for nothing else.

When I rang the doorbell of our little home, Martha herself answered the door and threw her arms about my neck. I hadn't received such treatment since honeymoon days.

"Oh, Larkie, I'm so glad you're back. I can't simply live without you."

"Why aren't you at work?" I asked. "And where's Trimmer?"

"I am too upset to-day. I telephoned that I was sick. My dear, just look at this place," she sighed.

I did look about me, and you never did see such an upside-down apartment, looking like a fire sale at a second-hand furniture store. Then I darted into the kitchen.

What a mess, unwashed dishes and pots and pans. The two beds in the sleeping room weren't made up and the dust—my dear—the place looked as if it hadn't been thoroughly cleaned and swept in a month.

Martha followed me about.

"My dear Larkie, I had to put Trimmer out; his cooking was terrible and he threw ashes all over everything. Then Teddie disliked him so, and kept whining, missing you ever since you left. The climax came last night when Trimmer wanted to have roughneck friends up for a poker game."

"Dear, dear," I muttered.

"I realize that I have been a business woman so long that I am totally unfitted for housework. I have lost all sense of cooking, break dishes when I try to wash them, and simply haven't the patience to make a bed. If you will only come back and be the same old Larkie I'll try to treat you better, and even let you have a weekly stipend of pin money to spend without accounting for it."

My heart warmed. Yes, here was my niche, and I could see hours of work before me.

"We'll try again, Martha," I said softly. "Get on your hat and coat and run along to business—and we will try to be a happy and ideal team, each in his and her way. After all, dear, there's no use getting away from what is right and natural."

I took the carpet sweeper out of the corner and started over the dirty heaps.

"There's no getting away from it," I concluded, "man's place is the home!"

THE END

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DAVY'S LOCKER

"WHAT'S in the locker of ol' Davy Jones?"
"Nothin' much, sonny, but sailormen's bones."

"Isn't there gold, dad, an' jewels there, too?"
"Yes, there is such 'neath the fathoms of blue.

"Gold from the mines of the north, south, an' west,
Gems from the east of the risin' sun's nest.

"Stained with the life-blood o' pirates an' lords,
Guarded by skeletons still grippin' swords.

"Laces from Erin an' scents from Cathay,
Gems robbed from idols in old Mandalay.

"Bits of all treasure that is known to be,
Lie stowed in Davy's chest under the sea.

"Cared for by legions who sleep 'neath the foam,
Who sailed for strange ports an' never came home

"An' when the last day o' God has grown dim,
Sonny, they'll carry the locker to Him."

Pat Costello.

Nevada Gold

By GEORGE M. JOHNSON

Author of "The Range Rider," etc.

CHAPTER XIV.

JERRY ON THE JOB.

JERRY VAN BUREN managed to keep rather a close watch on Chamberlin *et al* during the ride down to the irrigation dam—and subsequently. Young Mr. Van Buren was somewhat handicapped, to be sure, by the fact that he had to remain out of earshot; but the actions of the precious trio enabled him to figure out with a reasonable degree of accuracy about what they contemplated doing.

Whereas Jimmy might have been expected to profit by their recovery of the hidden gold—through the simple process of taking it from them after they had secured it—he had no desire that his objective be gained in such a way as they proposed.

Aside from the destruction of valuable property, for a vast sum of money had been expended in construction of the dam, another aspect occurred to Jerry Van Buren which Chamberlin and his associates had either not thought of at all, or merely dismissed from their calculations as unworthy of serious consideration.

The sudden wrecking of the dam would set free a tremendous volume of imprisoned water, which would tear down the narrow gorge like a thunderbolt, bringing death and destruction to the farming community of the alluvial flat where garden crops had already displaced the sage brush. Jerry had no intention of allowing this.

From a safe distance he watched the activities of the group, beginning at the powder house and later resumed on the strip of land extending out into the lake. Under cover of darkness he slipped in close, to a point where he could overhear the discussion which went on as the raft and its dangerous cargo was prepared for the coming voyage. Jerry indeed was a highy appreciative listener.

"Now, ain't these ducks a regular little

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for July 9.

bunch of hell-raisers!" he chuckled to himself. But there was a sinister grimness about the chuckle, far more grimness than genuine mirth; for in Jerry Van Buren's mind was a picture of the short stretch of cañon below the gap filled with a seething, roaring torrent, sweeping on with the resistless force of a Niagara toward the unconscious families on the irrigated farms.

Jerry remained in that locality until the raft was launched, and the brusque "Let's ride!" of Quinlon's warned him that he, too, should be on his way. Then he slipped back from the point, as quietly as he had come, to where his horse was waiting.

A few minutes later his mount was picking its way along the valley slope, headed for the place from which the three men had regarded the lake and come to their momentous decision. Jerry had a rifle in a saddle scabbard, and presently he withdrew the weapon from its sheath.

Dismounting from his horse, the cowboy seated himself on a rock, placidly gazing down on the smooth surface of the lake below him. A faint light glowed from the watchman's shack, but Jerry did not make any move to warn him of the threatened danger. Instead, he rolled a cigarette, twisting the end with meticulous care.

"It sure is one large night," he mused, striking a match on his boot sole. "Dunno when I've seen a prettier moon, and if I'm any judge, Lois would enjoy the view from here a heap. It ain't so daw-goned far from Scott's Choice but what we could make it in three, four hours of riding. And this is the lake them pole-cats aim to blow to kingdom come."

A deep shadow fringed the water on Jerry's side, cast by the massive hog-back which rose behind him. Beyond that shadow and to the opposite side the surface of the lake was clearly visible, smooth as a sheet of glass. Objects exposed to the white glare of the moon could be seen with startling distinctness.

Beyond the dam the sandstone ridge stood out, sharp cut against the sky, its rugged backbone showing a serrated, saw-tooth outline. North, as far as Jerry could see, stretched the lake, a glint of silver that finally merged vaguely with the shadows and dark blots of jutting headlands. Peace seemed to brood over the whole scene, and Jerry's glance grew sober as he contemplated it.

"Yes, sir," he mused audibly. "I'd call that a right pretty sight. I'm considerably peeved at anybody that'd want to wreck it, let alone what else might happen in the wrecking process. Speaking for myself, I'd be willing to assert quite positive that it's going to be genuine pleasure to settle with them three skunks. I ain't all ready, though."

His roving glance caught the faint movement of some slowly floating object, as it came within range of his vision.

"There she is, carrying a hundred pounds or more of sudden hell. Likely, them three buzzards are squatting on their haunches right now, waiting for the dirty work to open 'em a footpath to that gold."

Gradually the raft drew nearer, under the influence of the current that was quickening its progress toward the spillway. Jerry could now see clearly the dark mass of explosive. The raft was squarely opposite him, giving the opportunity for which he had been waiting.

"Guess I might as well touch her off," he mused.

He cocked his rifle, running one finger along the polished barrel with a caressing gesture.

"A plumb easy target," Jerry muttered. "This is like taking candy from a kid."

He raised the gun, squinting over the sights; then pressed the trigger.

The sharp report of Jerry's Winchester rang out in the still air, instantly drowned by a mighty roar from the dynamite, exploded under impact of the bullet. A geyser of smoke and water spouted like an erupting volcano above the lake, while adjacent cliffs caught the sullen detonation, tossing it back and forth till the whole valley echoed and reëchoed.

Jerry crouched behind the shelter of the rock on which he had been sitting. The shanty door was flung open, disclosing the startled outline of the watchman.

"That bird just got the surprise of his young life," he mused, with a silent chuckle. "I bet he's plumb demoralized, wondering

what the devil broke loose. When he finds the powder house smashed into he'll be able to figure that somebody's tried to stage a 4th of July stunt against his dam, which is about all anybody 'll ever learn—unless I get talkative some time. It's a cinch those three guys up the lake won't."

The watchman, rifle in hand, explored along the dam, crossing to Jerry's side, where he presently disappeared below a projecting outcrop of rock.

"I might as well shift," Jerry reasoned. "My job here is done, and they ain't a lot of use hanging around." Accordingly he left.

Meanwhile the three dynamiters were keeping an interested watch on the water level. Five minutes passed, then ten; there was no perceptible lowering at the margin of the lake.

"That's funny!" Quinlon mused. "Seems like we ought to be getting results by now."

"It's more than five miles to the dam," Rube said. "And this here's a whale of a big lake. Might take longer than we figured."

Quinlon grunted doubtfully, while Al Chamberlin said nothing. Slowly, inexorably, the minutes passed—still no change in the water level. Quinlon savagely knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"Well," he said gruffly, "we've failed. Guess they ain't no doubt of that. Not now."

"But we couldn't have failed!" Chamberlin mused, sorely puzzled. "The only chance of failure lay in the explosive not going off. Why, that dam couldn't stand up under the kick our dynamite would give. We heard it blow up."

"Something blew up all right," Hoke said sourly, "but it wasn't the dam; it was our scheme. And she sure made a hell of a big noise."

"The raft might have gone against a cliff," Rube suggested.

"Not a chance on a quiet night," Chamberlin asserted. "Didn't you see the set of the current toward the spillway? Nothing but the dam itself could have ticked off that charge."

"Mebbe we didn't use enough," Farley persisted. "Mebbe she only knocked out a little hole."

"Talk sense!" Quinlon snapped. "Even if we blew out only five or six feet from the top of the spillway, we'd be getting the effect up here by now."

Farley's next comment was a question.

"What are we going to do about it?" he demanded practically.

"I'm going down and have a look at that dam," Chamberlin asserted. "When something like this happens to me I want to know why."

"That goes for me, too," Quinlon grumbled huskily. "How about you, Rube?"

"Do you reckon it's safe?" Farley queried. "We must have stirred up a lot of excitement."

"They got nothing on us, have they?" Hoke demanded. "It 'll be light enough to see by time we get there. Come on!"

This investigation was carried on with considerable caution and discretion, for it was obvious that all strangers about the dam would be open to suspicion.

They arrived shortly after sunrise, following a rather inconspicuous course along the hog-back, at a much higher level than their former place of observation. But they got a clear view of the entire length of the concrete structure, which was wholly undamaged. The puzzle thus remained unsolved.

"Well?" Quinlon observed, after they had taken in all that was to be seen.

"It was a bust," Chamberlin stated gloomily. "I'm damned if I can understand what happened."

Evidently the watchman—or the sound of the explosion itself—had spread the news, for a group of saddled horses were clustered close by the shanty. The riders appeared scattered here and there about the dam, clearly searching for evidence regarding the attempted outrage.

"We can't try that stunt again," Chamberlin remarked. "I wouldn't wonder if they'd have a fair-sized patrol working both sides from now on."

"And we'd better duck out before some of them guys spot us," was Farley's prudent council. This time, at least, the two others cordially agreed with him.

A day or two later found Jerry Van Buren again riding into Scott's Choice.

"Hello, Jerry! What's the news?" Lois cried eagerly. She had not seen the cowboy since he told her that Quinlon would probably be pardoned, and had been anxiously waiting for word as to the latest developments. Jerry grinned infectiously at her, the characteristic merry twinkle in his blue eyes.

"Say," he grumbled in pretended disappointment, "is that all you want to see me for? Ain't you interested in me outside these here now certain matters?"

"Of course I'm glad to see you, Jerry!" she protested. "But you ought to know that I'm dying of curiosity."

"Well," he said, "I don't reckon I'll have any peace a-tall until I tell you. Hoke Quinlon's out of the hoosegow, and he undertook to guide them other two scallywags to where he claimed to have hid your dad's gold."

"Did they find it?" she cried.

"You ever been over to Towanda Lake?" Jerry asked musingly. "It's a mighty pretty lake, especially at night when the moon's a-shining. Yes, sir, I claim that lake's about the prettiest sight in Nevada. Wouldn't you like to ride over with me some time?"

"I think you're mean, Jerry!" Lois stamped her foot by way of emphasis.

"You ain't answered my question," he rebuked her. "Don't the idea of riding over to Towanda with me some time appeal to you?"

"Of course I'd like to go," Lois answered. "But you're supposed to tell me the news. You don't stick to the subject. What's Towanda Lake got to do with Hoke Quinlon and my father's treasure?"

"You might not think so, but it's got a whale of a lot to do with it. You see, they wasn't any Towanda Lake when Hoke hid the gold, the dam being completed while he languished in the Carson City hoosegow. Now he claims the place where he cached it is under thirty feet of water."

"I don't believe it," Lois cried. "I bet he was fooling them, planning to get it all for himself later."

"I expect you ain't the only person to whom that idea occurred," Jerry grinned at her. "Rube Farley didn't act a heap convinced that his pal was dealing honorable and above board. Only, of course, Hoke might have been playing straight at that, and seems like his two pals were willing to let it ride.

"It was their idea to blow up the dam, so the water'd drop, and then they'd either find the gold, or find out Hoke was lying. Quinlon didn't act very cordial to the notion at first, but after awhile he sort of warmed up to the scheme.

"They broke into the powder house and fixed up a raft that would explode against the spillway. Of course they didn't bother about the folks down on the flats that would be washed to glory when the dynamite let go."

"Did the dynamite explode?"

"Yep, she exploded," Jerry went on so contentedly that Lois knew at once no mischief had been done. "And, lady, I'm here to state that she made a regular noise a-doing it. But it was a funny thing about that there dynamite. All of a sudden-like she went off, way out in the water, all of a hundred or more yards above the dam. It never did any more harm to the dam than if a kid had shot at it with a peewee rifle."

"How do you account for that? Didn't they have the fuse or whatever they used set right?"

"It was this way," Jerry explained. "A fellow saw that floating raft, and took a notion to plug a bullet into it. Dynamite being powerful, sensitive stuff, thataway, when the bullet landed it went off—bing!"

"Oh!" said Lois in understanding approval. "I see!" She smiled at him winsomely. "But what about Quinlon and the others?"

"The place where Quinlon claimed he hid the gold was a few miles up the lake. After they started the raft they beat it up there pronto, to wait for the water to drop; but she never dropped an inch. I expect they were terribly disappointed."

"They must have been!" Lois agreed, her eyes dancing gleefully. "And so the gold is still there under water."

"That's what Quinlon says," Jerry returned judicially.

"What do you think, Jerry? Do you believe he hid it there—or somewhere else?"

"Knowing Hoke Quinlon like I do," he informed her, "I'd sure be loath to believe him if he said he saw the sun rise yesterday morning. But, of course, even a pole-cat has to tell the truth sometimes. Yes, sir, I kind of have a hunch that Hoke Quinlon hid the gold right there, even though he says he did."

"But suppose it isn't there. Why can't Quinlon sneak off and get it for himself?"

"Al Chamberlin's a fine little watch dog," Jerry said confidently. "He's riding herd on Hoke to a fare-ye-well, just so nothing can happen. Al trusts Quinlon just as far as he can see him, and not an inch farther; so like a prudent, far-sighted gent, he aims to keep him in view all the time. And I either got my eye on Chamberlin personal, or some good friend of mine has. You needn't worry, Lois."

"I'm not worrying, Jerry. But you'll be careful, won't you? Those men would kill you in a minute if they knew what you're doing to break up their plans."

"Oh, you think mebbe they'll start in on *me*, do you?" Jerry observed complacently. "Well, now, speaking casual, I'm inclined to the belief that they're in a sight greater risk of personal harm than I am. Don't you figure I can take care of myself?"

"I know you're better in every way than any or all of that miserable crew, Jerry," the girl said half-shyly. "But that's not the point. It's so easy for a bullet to be fired in the dark—just as they apparently killed my poor dad. Men like that wouldn't stop at another murder. So you will be careful, won't you?"

"Why, I'm expecting to," he drawled. "I wouldn't derive any particular satisfaction from stopping a bullet—in the dark, or in the daylight. They's quite a chore of things I'm planning to do before shaking hands with the Grim Reaper, and bidding him howdy."

"Have you learned anything more to prove who really shot my father?" Lois presently asked.

"I've picked up one or two facts that we can mebbe spring after awhile," Jerry said. "The way it looks to me is that Farley fired the gun after his pard had doped out the plot. Hoke would prefer it that way."

"And your idea is to keep them shadowed while they're trying to get at the cache?"

"That's it."

"But if the treasure is really forty feet under water, how do you suppose they'll ever recover it?"

"I dunno," Jerry rejoined, quite frankly. "I figure the job can be done, but just how to do it is kind of a puzzle to me. I'm pinning my hopes on Al Chamberlin, though. He's so crooked that if he strolled down an alley, he'd be liable to meet himself strolling back, but the lad is clever. You got to hand it to him.

"Yes, sir, when it comes to spotting gold Al Chamberlin's a bully boy with a glass eye. Say the word *gold* to him, and he'll point just like a setter pup in a bunch of valley quail.

"If the yellow metal is really sunk in the place Hoke indicates, just leave the job of fetching her up out of the drink to little Al. He's turning over in his mind a scheme that he thinks will do the trick, and I aim to be Johnny-on-the-spot when he tries it."

"This Mr. Chamberlin must be a very capable gentleman," Lois murmured half-mockingly.

"He's capable, but he's no gentleman," Jerry grinned at her.

"I imagine that there are others even more capable, however," she smiled meaningly. "How soon will they be ready to give his mysterious idea a trial?"

"In ten days or thereabouts, the way I've sized it up. Seems like he's got to send to Frisco for some equipment."

"I wish I could be there, hiding, and watch while they try it," she exclaimed. He grinned in good-natured derision, whereat Lois hastily added: "I mean it. And I don't see why not. Didn't you just invite me to ride over to the lake with you?"

"My invite was for a pleasure trip, not business."

"Now you're stalling. This would be the best kind of a pleasure trip. Won't you take me, Jerry? Please!"

"I don't know exactly what might break loose," he told her, half-seriously.

"I'll stay back in the bushes, way out of sight, and not bother at all," she promised. "I won't be in your way a bit, and whatever you tell me to do I'll do. You've got to take me, Jerry!"

Young Mr. Van Buren offered other objections, implying very definitely that Lois had no business even wanting to go; but his arguments fell on deaf ears. Lois was determined to be a witness to the attempt to recover her father's treasure, and she said so in no uncertain terms. At length Jerry weakly yielded to superior numbers.

"Anybody that expects to win a debate with a lady is sure my idea of an optimist," he sighed. "Goshamighty, do you girls always figure on having your own way all the time?"

"Then you will take me!" she cried triumphantly. "Jerry, you're a dear!"

"I'm an addle-pated jassack," he corrected her gloomily. Then in a sudden flicker of hope: "Course I may not know far enough ahead so I can come over here and get you."

"You make it your business to find out, mister," Lois ordered him gayly. "It's only a few hours' ride from here to the lake. Absolutely no excuses will be accepted."

Dire forebodings were registered in the way Jerry shook his head, but Lois interrupted as he started to speak.

"Don't let's go through that again!" she implored. "I'll be expecting you, Jerry—any time you come. Vacation begins next week, so I won't have school on my hands."

"I don't seem to have any say-so in this business a-tall," Jerry mumbled.

"No," she told him, "you don't. Which is just as it should be. But won't it be exciting—riding off together like that? You really ought to be glad of my company, don't you think so, Jerry? After inviting me."

The twinkle came back into young Mr. Van Buren's blue eyes. Since surrender seemed necessary, he was willing to surrender with good grace.

"I'll sure look forward to that ride with a heap of pleasure. And I dunno's I blame you for wanting to go, being it's sort of your party after all. Guess they ain't much reason why you shouldn't have a chance to enjoy it."

So the matter was definitely settled; but later, when Jerry was about to ride away, Lois took occasion to remind him, just to be on the safe side.

"Don't forget, Jerry. You promised. There are lots of things about this that you know and haven't told me. I've been a regular sport, haven't I? I haven't teased you to tell me a solitary fact unless you felt ready to of your own accord. Now I'm going to demand my reward for being a good little girl. Don't forget, Jerry!"

"I ain't the forgetting kind," the cowpuncher assured her, and his voice was sober. "Any promises I make you I don't have any trouble remembering, not a-tall. Next time I drift over this way we'll hit the trail for Towanda Lake, your dad's gold cache—and the men that murdered him. Everything 'll be all set for the final showdown."

Thereupon young Mr. Van Buren mounted his horse and fared forth.

CHAPTER XV.

IN WHICH CERTAIN PLANS ARE MADE.

THE unexplained fiasco resulting from their attempt to blow up the irrigation dam left Chamberlin still uncertain whether the gold was where Hoke Quinlon professed to have hidden it. This was a thing which had to be proved definitely one way or another, and, lacking such proof, he gave Quinlon no opportunity to slip off into the wilds on his own account, though Hoke did not seem especially desirous of doing so.

In fact, he appeared fully as anxious as the others to devise some means whereby they could explore the lake bottom. But Chamberlin realized that this might merely be an elaborate bluff, based on the conviction that recovery of the treasure from its supposed location was nearly impossible.

"Later in the summer things might be a sight easier for us than now," Rube observed one day, when they were in confer-

ence about it at Reno. "Come dry weather, and they'll use a lot of water for irrigation. The lake ought to drop quite some distance."

"That means a three or four months' wait, if we want the lowest level she'll ever show," Chamberlin replied. "My idea is to get it before then."

"You and me both," Rube warmly agreed. "I was only figuring that mebbe we couldn't put the proposition across any other way. But when the water's fifteen or mebbe twenty feet lower'n now it would be a big help. Why, shucks, a lad that was good at swimming and diving could locate it, working from a raft."

"He couldn't bring up a twenty-five-pound sack of metal," Hoke objected.

"Mebbe not. But he could put a sack in a basket, which could be pulled up by a rope."

Chamberlin glanced at Farley with added respect.

"That's not so bad, Rube," said he. "But who'll do the diving for us? I can't swim enough to say so, and neither can you or Hoke. If we drag in an outsider, it means another split. I'm against that."

"So'm I," Hoke added shortly. "The pot ain't big enough to stand any more entries."

"I don't claim to be keen for that myself," Rube assented. "Only my idea is that most anything's better than nothing."

"I've already mentioned that I've an idea how the proposition might be worked," Chamberlin said. "There's nothing sure to it, because this job's out of my regular line. But I'll give you a notion of the plot anyway.

"As it happens, I'm acquainted with a chap down in Frisco that may be able to help out. If my hunch is a good one, he'll confirm it, and besides look up what equipment we'll have to use in putting it over."

"What you aiming to do?" Hoke demanded.

"Ever hear of a diver's suit? They're usually handled from a boat, the diver being raised and lowered by a winch. Air is pumped to him through a rubber hose. What we want is a lightweight outfit that could be worked from the shore.

"The man who wears it simply wades out, his air line in charge of the other two. When he finds the buckskin bags we're after he brings 'em ashore."

"How far could a diver work out like that?" Farley asked.

"No limit except the length of air hose he could manage. According to Quinlon, his clump of bowlders are not more than a hundred and fifty to two hundred feet out. Allow an extra hundred to the order just to be sure, and we couldn't lose."

"Who'd do the diving?" Quinlon inquired dubiously. "I don't mind saying I ain't crazy about roaming off under that cold water."

"Tell me exactly where the gold is hidden, and I wouldn't hesitate," Chamberlin said. "There's nothing to be afraid of. But we're getting ahead of time, arguing over who does the diving. As I told you in the first place, I don't know that the thing is workable. Only thing to do, as I see it, is to find out. You fellows agreeable?"

"Sure," Farley assented, "but make it snappy. I been waiting more'n a year to realize on this job, and I'm getting all-fired sick of waiting. Look at all the time I've missed where the bright lights flicker down in Frisco."

"You're lucky, Rube," Chamberlin grunted. "Anything you had a year ago would be gone now. As it is, you've got the blowout coming. A good meal always tastes better if you're hungry."

It was agreed that Chamberlin should communicate with his acquaintance in San Francisco, stating the essential details of the problem confronting them, and authorizing him to purchase such equipment as they might need, in the event that he approved the plan.

After a few days Chamberlin received an answer, stating that there should be no difficulty in carrying out such diving operations as he proposed; also that a special lightweight suit, complete with hose and air pump, was being shipped. Chamberlin was quite exultant.

"That stuff 'll be in by express within a day or two," he informed Quinlon and Farley. "As soon as it does, we'll hit the

trail for Towanda Lake. The diving suit can be packed on an extra horse."

"You're talking glad words," Rube cried. "I been flat broke or near it for so long I can't get used to the notion of having a roll in my jeans."

"You'll soon have a roll that would choke an army mule," was Chamberlin's encouraging comment. "That is, if things go well with us up at the lake."

Rube and the lawyer had already come to an understanding that Hoke Quinlon was to be left out in the final settlement. He was needed until the treasure was actually in their possession, but no longer.

This was merely a continuation of the plan they had previously made to recover the gold and leave him to serve his term in the penitentiary, a scheme which fell through because of Hoke's unwillingness to tell them where to find the cache.

But once Old Sandy's ill-starred strike was brought forth from the lake, Hoke was to be disposed of by a bullet in the back. The treasure which had already cost one life would take another. Such was the plot hastily outlined between Chamberlin and Rube Farley, almost under Quinlon's very nose. If he had lied about the location of the gold, so much the worse for him. Measures could be taken to force out the truth.

The lawyer's face now betrayed no inkling of this guilty secret as the three eagerly discussed their prospects. Nor did it betray the fact that Chamberlin in turn planned to eliminate Farley as the last barrier between himself and the gold.

Al Chamberlin was unscrupulous to the extreme, hesitating at nothing which would gain his objective. In the present case he saw no earthly reason why he could not safely exact full profit from the enterprise.

In due season the diving outfit arrived from San Francisco. It proved to be similar in general construction to regular deep-sea equipment, made of rubber, with leaded shoes, and a copper helmet in which two plates of heavy glass were set.

Air for breathing was supplied by a hand pump, and a valve controlled by the operator allowed surplus air to escape into the water. Altogether the suit weighed something more than a hundred pounds.

"We're mighty lucky," Chamberlin said, greatly pleased. "Seems outfits of this kind aren't on the market as a regular thing, but here was a special order some parties put through. They didn't have any use for it, so my agent in Frisco got it at a bargain—only five hundred dollars, which I had to advance, as the order came C.O.D. You fellows want to pay me your share of the ante now?"

Messrs. Quinlon and Farley looked dubiously from one to the other, and then at Mr. Chamberlin.

"Where do you figure I've got any ready cash?" Quinlon grunted. "Me just out of the hoosegow and all."

"I'm flat, too," Farley chimed in.

Counselor Chamberlin did not appear especially surprised at the tidings; evidently he had expected something of the sort.

"It's a good thing one member of this crowd is in funds," was his dry comment. "What would you two roughnecks do without me?"

"Forget it!" Quinlon advise "Take yours out of the pot when we win her. All expenses paid before we split."

"That's the ticket," said Farley. "You do that, Al."

"It looks as if I'd have to," Chamberlin conceded with a wry smile at his own expense.

After this delicate matter had been thus settled, Chamberlin's associates examined the outfit curiously.

"What's the idea of making it so heavy?" Hoke demanded.

"This is light for a diving suit," Chamberlin explained. "But there has to be some weight to hold a man to the bottom when he walks out from shore. Under water a diver with this suit on wouldn't know he was carrying anything at all: his own weight he'd lose because the water buoys him up."

"Humph!" Farley grunted. "I ain't going down to the bottom of no lake with that contraption on me. Suppose something went wrong? Why, a chap would die like a dog."

Quinlon made no comment.

"Nothing can go wrong," Chamberlin insisted. "With fresh air coming in, it would be possible to stay at a moderate depth for hours. The only discomfort would come from the cold and the water pressure, and at thirty feet that last would not be enough to bother seriously."

The three loaded the suit and a supply of food on a pack animal, setting out for the lake on horseback, flattering themselves that what they did was not known to a soul in Reno. They were ignorant of the fact that the detective system inaugurated by Jerry Van Buren kept him posted as to their activities.

Jerry left Reno shortly after they did—it was after dark, of course—though making no attempt to trail them closely. He knew their destination and approximately how long it would take for the party to arrive; that knowledge was enough.

Jerry's idea was to ride west toward Scott's Choice, picking up Lois there, according to his promise, and then to circle back to the irrigation lake. If this schedule went through as outlined, Jerry counted on reaching Towanda not much later than the Chamberlin party.

He made good time into Scott's Choice, in spite of the rather rough country through which his route led.

"Well, here I am," he told Lois, with a cheerful grin. "All ready to hit the trail? I expect them friends of ours will be at the lake about noon to-day."

"I'll be ready in a minute," Lois replied. "Somehow I seem to feel that you'd come this morning, Jerry. What's the news?"

"Last I saw of those birds was at Reno, when they started out with a bundle of heap-big medicine lashed to a pack horse. Guess they're aiming to charm that there gold out of the water. I pulled out from Reno about the same time they did."

A belated sense of guilt flooded Lois Miller's heart at the thought of the hard riding made necessary on her account.

"I'm an awful bother, Jerry," she cried contritely. "I didn't think how much extra work my going along would cause you."

"That's nothing," he assured her. "Let's get going. I want to strike Towanda a little after Chamberlin's crowd get there. They's a dandy place up in the brush where we can watch from. I expect we may get an eyeful."

"What do you think we'll see, Jerry?" the girl asked. There was a sober look in her eyes, for she was thinking of her father, and the grim tragedy which ended his life.

"Oh, I ain't sure just what we'll see," Jerry drawled indulgently. "Different things, likely. I bet you're scared."

"I am not scared!" Lois Miller's tone expressed indignation at the mere thought. "You can't bluff me out of going now, so you needn't try."

"I wasn't," he disclaimed. "Why, I'm just yearning and pining for you to be riding the Towanda trail with me."

Lois glanced at him in quick suspicion; then, with the inconsistency of a woman, she naïvely said:

"But I thought you didn't want me along. You seemed to believe lots of excitement might happen—gun fights, perhaps, and everything."

"My goodness!" Jerry mocked her. "You don't mean it! We better hurry up, then, or we'll miss some of it. That 'd be too bad."

And so they started.

In the meantime, Chamberlin, Farley, and Quinlon were dipping down into the rugged, cañon-cut country that bounds Towanda Lake on the north. Chamberlin rode behind his two companions, and a saturnine smile played on the lawyer's crafty lips as he glanced at their unconscious backs.

Already they could see the distant sheen of sunlight on the lake, which glittered beneath the cloudless sky like a huge blue sapphire. Their previous trip had brought them in from farther east, through lower country, and the lake had remained hidden from sight until they stumbled on it at the last moment.

Jerry Van Buren saw the cavalcade from a distant ridge; pulling in his horse and motioning to Lois with a wave of his hand.

"Look what Santa Claus brought us!" he called.

"What? Where?" the girl cried. And

then when she at length perceived the horsemen, dwarfed to insignificance by the miles which intervened: "But how do you know those are the men we want? I couldn't recognize anybody so far away."

"No doubt of it," he maintained. "We're playing in luck to come in just behind 'em."

"Have they seen us, do you think, Jerry?"

"Guess not. They were up against the sky line, and that made 'em stick out like a wart on a man's nose when I first caught sight of where they were. And we ain't a-going to be seen till we take a daw-goned good notion. Mebbe not a-tall. You can't tell what might happen on this play till she busts wide open."

At sight of the lake, Hoke Quinlon and Farley had instinctively spurred up their horses, and at a brisk trot the cavalcade proceeded onward. Varied thoughts were in the minds of the trio; thoughts of evil, self-indulgence, and lust; and, deep within the sordid soul of each, a scheming as to how he might in some way betray his comrades and thereby secure their share of the expected treasure for himself.

A precious crew, indeed! Fair type of the human scum that ever afflict the sturdy pioneers of a frontier region. And Chamberlin, educated after a fashion, with a veneer of polish that set him apart from the others, was by and large the worst of the three.

They came, a little later, to that level shelf which formed an ideal camping site by the water's edge. Horses were picketed off to one side where grass provided a chance for grazing. Chamberlin himself unpacked the diving suit, while the other two watched, curious and yet uncertain. The question of who should don this strange apparel and venture down into the cold depths of the lake was still unsettled.

"This is the air pump," Chamberlin explained. "Somebody keeps working that all the time, forcing fresh air into the helmet. All the diver has to do is to open the valve now and then to let it out."

He manipulated the pump, assuring himself that it acutally delivered air through the long line of hose.

"Everything O. K.," was his verdict. "Now who goes under?" and he glanced inquiringly at them.

"Not me!" Rube hastily declared. "I'm game to take a chance on most anything, but I got to draw the line some place, and this is it. I ain't a candidate."

Chamberlin offered no protest, his glance straying to Hoke.

"Tell me exactly whereabouts those bowlders the stuff is cached, and I'll tackle it," said he, after a moment. The thought was already in Al's mind that it would be better for him to go. If he found the gold, he need not bring it back to the shore with him.

A second hiding place could easily be selected, at a depth which would be above water during the dry season—later recovery thus being simple. Yet Chamberlin was shrewd enough not to appear overeager. He met Quinlon's questioning look with a frank and open countenance.

Quinlon hesitated, glancing dubiously at the water, and then back at the diving suit. It was clear that he was not in love with the notion of volunteering, and Chamberlin felt sure that he had taken the first trick.

"Where does she lie, Hoke?" he asked.

Then Quinlon suddenly squared his shoulders. Hoke had been turning matters over in his mind, and had come to the conclusion that it would be just as well—looking at the affair from his own viewpoint—for Al Chamberlin not to go wandering about on the bed of Towanda Lake.

While Hoke did not actually know that his associates planned to double cross him, he suspected it on general principles, because that was exactly what he hoped to do by them.

Hoke cherished no more of what might—for want of a better term—be called high ideals than did Counselor Chamberlin himself. The writer has grievously erred in his portrayal of Quinlon if he has not succeeded in bringing out the fact that Hoke was wholly unhampered by such vain sentiments as honor, decency, love of fair play, and the like.

Now he glimpsed his way clear to the accomplishment of the same worthy purpose that Chamberlin had been flirting with—

though with the essential parts reversed, of course. The fatal weakness of Hoke's position lay in his own lack of imagination, an inability to put himself in the place of another and figure out in advance what the reaction might be.

"I'll go myself," he told Chamberlin. "I planted the stuff there. I'll get it."

"O. K. by me," the lawyer carelessly remarked, masking his disappointment with a pretended indifference. "Climb into this rig."

Jerry Van Buren and his fair companion took in this intriguing scene from a cozy little hiding place two score of paces to the rear. It was the same spot Jerry had previously used when he spied on the three the first time they reached the lake.

"Now I'd never thought of using a diving suit," he said softly to Lois. "Isn't that one whale of a hunch! I told you the lad was clever."

Chamberlin was helping Hoke into the outfit. The helmet was secured by a sort of bayonet joint, one half-turn giving an absolutely water-tight union. Before adjusting the helmet Chamberlin gave the amateur some final instructions.

"While the pump is working you'll hear a little hiss of air coming in," he said. "That shows everything is going all right. If the air stops coming, turn around and beat it for shore. There'll be enough in the suit to last you for a few minutes, but not long.

"As soon as you feel any pressure on your head, open the valve and let air escape. When you're ready to come back, give three jerks on the hose, and we'll start pulling it in. That way there'll be no chance of her getting hooked or fouled on obstructions in the way. Get the idea?"

"Sure!" Hoke grunted. "Fasten her on, and let's get this business over with!"

"I'd just as soon go," Chamberlin suggested; but Quinlon refused to consider it.

"This is my job," he replied, "and I'm going to do it."

With the air hose arranged so that there was no danger of kinks, Quinlon entered the water, the depth of which increased so abruptly that three or four steps carried him completely under. Chamberlin worked the pump, while Rube played out the hose. At first neither spoke, but when about seventy-five feet had been carried out by the diver's slow advance, Chamberlin emitted a grunt.

"Rube, we're a couple of fools."

"What do you mean?" Farley asked.

"Hoke's going to trick us. The gold may be here and it may not be here, but here or not, we won't see it. If it's really here, he'll shift it to a new hiding place, where he can get it alone later on when the water level's dropped.

"If he hid it somewhere else, he'll just stay down awhile to bluff us along. In either case he'll come back and report that he couldn't find it, or that it was gone, or any other excuse he happens to think of. We made a mistake letting him go."

"Kinda late in the day to think of that, ain't it?" Rube demanded.

"I thought of it when he was getting ready, but what could I do then?"

Farley swore fluently.

"You really think the son-of-a-gun would slip it to us that way?" he asked.

"Of course he would. I got suspicious when he was so willing to go down himself, when all he had to do to get out of the job was tell me where the gold was cached. That is, assuming it's here. If it isn't here, he wouldn't want me to go. I can think of only two reasons why Hoke didn't want to tell me where the stuff is."

As he talked, Al Chamberlin kept up his steady pumping. "Either he couldn't tell because it never was here, or he's planning to leave us high and dry. How does it strike you?"

Rube swore again.

"Guess you're right, Al. Do you s'pose he got wise to what we was fixing to do?"

At this point Jerry Van Buren gave Lois a poke in the ribs with his elbow.

"Nice little bunch of crooks, ain't they?" he chuckled. "I bet each one is planning to double x the other two. I'd place my blue chips on Al Chamberlin in that game. Them other two hard-boiled eggs ain't got a chance. Alongside Al they're a couple of babes in the woods."

"Sh!" Lois cautioned him. "What if they heard you?"

"Hoke isn't wise," Jerry went on in a subdued whisper. For Lois Miller's benefit he was answering Farley's question. "He's just naturally crooked—like the other two."

The air line had been going steadily out, with occasional interruptions as Quinlon apparently stopped to get his bearings or consider how best to avoid some obstruction unseen by the watchers. Finally, when but thirty or forty feet were left unused, all further outward progress ceased.

"Likely he's fussing around that clump of bowlders," Rube muttered. "Mebbe the stuff is hid here after all. It don't seem like Hoke would travel so far if it wasn't. Be a joke if he brought it back with him, now wouldn't it?"

When he put on the suit, Quinlon had left his belt and holster lying on the ground beside his coat. Chamberlin nodded toward the weapon.

"We don't know what 'll happen, but we'd best be ready," he said to Farley. "Let that air line go for a minute and flip the shells out of Hoke's six-shooter."

"I gotcha!" Rube growled, and he quickly rendered the gun harmless, then returning to his duty of handling the air hose.

"Hoke's taking plenty of time about it," he growled. "I dunno whether that's a good sign or not, but I'm beginning to think he's playing straight with us at that."

"Not much danger," Chamberlin said grimly.

"He's coming back!" Farley suddenly exclaimed. "There's the three tugs on the hose."

He began pulling in on the line, which yielded to him as the diver retraced his steps. Farley coiled the hose in a neat pile, while Chamberlin kept on supplying air. Lois Miller, beside Jerry up in the brush-hidden rocks that overlooked the flat, found herself trembling. She sensed a tension in the air, which seemed vibrant with the warning of portentious happenings soon to come.

At last the grotesque copper helmet of the diver rose dripping from the lake; then his shoulders, and next his body. Quinlon had returned empty-handed!

Without comment, Chamberlin helped unscrew the bayonet joint, lifting the heavy casket from Hoke's head. As if by chance the diver stopped close by the place where his belt and pistol lay. He glared uncertainly about him, apparently laboring under a tremendous strain.

"Well," said Al Chamberlin coolly, "you found it, I suppose." The remark was both a statement and a question—and it carried an unmistakable challenge and a threat.

"The gold is gone from the place I hid it," Quinlon cried in a husky voice. "They wasn't a sign of it left—not a trace!"

CHAPTER XVI.

TROUBLE FOR MR. HOKE QUINLON.

LOIS MILLER was held in the grip of a feverish excitement as she peered down on the three actors of the little drama which was unfolding before her. Jerry emitted a low, contented chuckle, deriving a frank enjoyment from the prospects of a clash between Hoke Quinlon and his two dubious associates.

"Something stirring now," Jerry muttered. "Don't miss this. It's going to be good."

Lois had no idea what to expect, being considerably mystified over the whole development to date. Had her father's treasure ever been hidden in this place? If so, was Quinlon now playing straight with his fellows?

Or had he, while concealed from view below the placid surface of Towanda Lake, hurriedly transferred the gold to another hiding place, with the idea of returning to get it for himself when the demands of irrigation had lowered the water level? These were a few of the many questions which flashed through the girl's mind.

She stole a glance at Jerry. The cowboy settled calmly back on his haunches, and though his blue eyes twinkled with appreciation, yet on Jerry's face was a certain grim hardness which she had never seen there before.

He sensed her scrutiny, turning to flash a grin at her, the harshness vanishing as he did so; but when Jerry again looked

down to the little flat, his jaws and features were once more set in stern, implacable lines.

Lois shuddered, she knew not why, but with an instinctive realization that tragedy lurked in the air. Yet not for an instant did she regret being there; she wouldn't have missed it.

Chamberlin had been assisting Hoke from the diving suit; now finally he spoke, and there was an ugly significance in the tone of his voice.

"So you didn't find it, eh?" said Counselor Chamberlin.

"No," said Hoke defiantly, "I didn't find it. The stuff wasn't there."

"You're a poor liar, Hoke," Chamberlin informed him coolly.

Quinlon's face blazed in a sudden fury. "What's that?" he snarled.

"You heard me the first time. You must think we're a couple of weak sisters to let you get away with murder like this. If the gold ever was there, it's out there now. Either you're lying now, or you were lying when you said you hid it there. Take your choice!"

Hoke was standing directly beside his belt and holster. His answer to Chamberlin's challenge was a lightninglike drop to his knees, the weapon flashing from its sheath with bewildering speed.

Lois Miller's body stiffened.

Jerry emitted his characteristic chuckle of amusement.

"That's pretty fast work," he said appreciatively; "but it won't help Hoke Quinlon. He ain't wise yet that the deck's stacked against him a whole lot."

Hoke rose to his feet, still holding Chamberlin covered by the yawning muzzle of the Colt, eyes straying wearily toward Rube Farley, as if to make sure that the latter did not start a counter-attack.

"Now I got your hand coppered!" Quinlon snarled in savage fury. "They any more remarks you want to make?"

"You're a fool!" Chamberlin said with a short laugh. "I wasn't born yesterday. I'm going to pull my gun on you now. Shoot, if you feel like it."

Slowly, deliberately, Chamberlin reached back for his pistol.

"Stop it, Al!" Quinlon gritted. "Don't make another move!"

There was no trigger on Hoke's gun, the raised hammer being held back by the crook of his thumb. But already a dazed, bewildered look was spreading over Hoke's face. Chamberlin's utter coolness under the threat of what should have been certain death was convincing proof that all was not well. Quinlon began to sense a trap. With an oath he let the hammer fall, the only sound being a harmless click.

"You're through, Hoke!" Al Chamberlin said. "I'm just beginning."

His pistol swung up to cover Quinlon as he spoke. "We pulled the teeth out of your forked lightning, but mine's all primed for business. Stand where you are, and don't make any false moves, or I'll give you what you just tried to give me."

At this psychological instant Rube Farley deftly threw a loop of the air hose about Hoke, effectively pinioning the latter's arms to his sides. At the same time Chamberlin jumped into the fray. He had no intention of shooting Quinlon, for that would mean that the secret of where the treasure was hidden must die with him —highly undesirable, to say the least.

For a time things were lively, but Hoke was terribly hampered by coils of rubber hose in which he was enmeshed, and against such odds the final issue was never in doubt. It ended by Hoke's being overcome, arms lashed behind his back.

"Now, Hoke Quinlon," Chamberlin cried triumphantly, "we've got you where the hair is short!"

Hoke glared at him in the vindictiveness of impotent rage.

"Damn you, Al!" he growled, adding other embellishments which the lawyer ignored.

Presently Hoke Quinlon's remarks trailed off into sullen silence.

"If you're through expressing your opinions," Chamberlin said pleasantly, "we might as well get down to business. *Where is that gold you took off the Scott's Choice stage?*"

Quinlon broke out in a fresh spasm of invective, language so extremely frank that Lois blushed, up in her retreat.

Jerry grinned mischievously.

"You cover up your little ears," he softly advised. "When the air down yonder ain't so sultry, I'll give you a poke, sort of, and you can come out of winter quarters."

To which Lois made no reply: she did not want to miss any of what might go on, but realized that her position was not without its embarrassing possibilities.

"Where's the gold?" Chamberlin repeated. "I'm asking you."

"Why, you poor clam!" Quinlon frothed. "I don't know where it is, any more'n you do. It's gone from that clump of bowlders where I cached it."

"Farley and I had a little chat while you were talking to the fishes," Chamberlin stated, his voice dangerously calm. "We doped out ahead of time just what your report would be. I don't know whether you hid the plunder here or some place else, but whatever it is, you know the trail, and you're going to show us."

"Oh, I am, am I?" Quinlon sneered.

"You are!" Chamberlin informed him. "There are easy ways of making a man talk, even if he doesn't want to, and I imagine we won't have much trouble getting what we want. It may be you shifted the gold to a new place out here close to shore, where you can get the stuff later; maybe it never was within five miles of this lake.

"I don't know, and I don't care which it is. But I'm going to find out the truth. It 'll be easier for you if you come across with the information right away."

For the first time a trace of uneasiness showed in Hoke Quinlon's scarred face; a bit of his bravado vanished.

"Just what you going to do to me, Al?" he demanded.

"Nothing—unless you ask for it." Chamberlin retorted coolly. "I'm giving you a last chance. Where's that gold?"

"I don't know, I tell you," Quinlon repeated stubbornly.

"All right," was Al's short reply. "It's up to you. Rube, start a fire!"

A sudden chill swept over Lois Miller.

"Oh!" she gasped in horror. "What are they going to do?"

"Easy!" Jerry cautioned. Then, more gently: "Kind of a mean bunch, ain't they? The good Lord must be mighty sorry He let carrion like that into the world."

Lois Miller's hands were clenched convulsively, one fist pressed tight against her lips. It seemed that she must scream aloud, from the sheer horror that seized her. Her body felt icy cold.

In a daze she watched Rube Farley methodically go about the task of kindling a small fire from dry branches. Chamberlin strolled down to where the horses were picketed, presently returning with a brass cleaning rod, which he thrust into the blaze.

While waiting for the rod to heat, Counselor Chamberlin clipped and lighted a cigar. Though staging the whole performance with the deliberate intention of shattering Quinlon's morale, it was obvious that Chamberlin was ready to carry through to the grim end if necessary.

Hoke's nervousness increased—and with good reason.

"Say," he abruptly called, "this here joke's gone about far enough. Untie me, will you, Al?"

"You better wake up that this is no joke," Chamberlin said coldly. "At least, you've got a strange sense of humor if it strikes you as funny."

He took the cleaning rod from the fire, examining it judicially; unsatisfied, he returned it to the hottest part of the blaze.

"What you going to do, Al?" Quinlon's voice rose in a scream.

"I'm going to make you talk turkey. I've heard big steers bawl and bellow when the brand was slapped on them, and the thought occurs to me that a hot iron might help you do the same."

Lois went sick at heart. Imploringly she appealed to Jerry.

"Don't let him do that!" she gasped. "I can't stand it, Jerry, even though Quinlon may be the man who murdered my father!"

Jerry's smile reassured her.

"I'm just getting ready to draw cards in this game," he whispered. "Stuff like that is a trifle rough, even for a polecat

like Hoke Quinlon. Will you stay here till I'm through?"

Breathlessly Lois nodded.

"Only hurry, Jerry. What beasts those men are!" and the girl shuddered violently. "I want Quinlon punished—but not this way."

With that Jerry left her, wriggling off through the bushes like a snake. Lois tried not to look down to the flat, but a hideous fascination drew her unwilling eyes in that direction.

Chamberlin had again taken his cleaning rod from the fire. She could see the last six or eight inches of the metal glowing red hot.

Deliberately the man walked toward his victim, who shrank in cringing fear from the fate in store for him.

"Guess you'll be ready to talk in a minute, Hoke," said Al Chamberlin.

Bushes extended quite close on the side where the fire had been built. Intent on their savagery, neither Rube nor Chamberlin had noted Jerry's stealthy approach, until he now stepped forth to confront them.

"Howdy, gents!" said Jerry mildly.

For an instant Chamberlin stood dumfounded, staring at the intruder as if at a ghost. With a quick movement he tossed the cleaning rod to one side. Then, "Who the hell are you, and what do you want?" he snarled.

Jerry's appreciative glance took in the scene.

"Having a little picnic, eh?" he remarked. "Mind if I join you?" Jerry's appearance was one of nonchalant ease, as if the last thing he expected was an unfriendly welcome.

There was no hint of violence in his mild manner. Lois Miller's heart almost ceased beating as she realized his deadly danger. "Why didn't he draw his gun?" she moaned to herself. "They'll kill him! They'll kill him!"

She stifled a scream as Chamberlin's hand leaped for the pistol on his hip. Jerry's right hand twitched—no other word could describe the motion. It was like the snap of a powerful spring suddenly released, like the flicker of a sunbeam across running water—too swift for the eye to follow.

From above his holster there burst forth a cloud of white smoke; his six-shooter barked harshly, accompanied by the high-pitched whine of mutilated lead whizzing into space.

Lois saw Chamberlin's gun hurled from his grasp as by a hammer's blow; saw him grab with his left hand at his numbed fingers.

"Why, you dropped your gun, didn't you?" Jerry drawled mockingly.

The whole thing was over before she really understood what was happening. Jerry glanced once at Rube, meaningly, with a significant nod. He spoke no word, but Rube's hands obediently went up.

Rube thoroughly understood what was expected of him.

Chamberlin, helpless and disarmed, turned to his accomplice in a sudden outburst of rage.

"Why didn't you back my play?" he snapped. "With both of us pulling, one would have been sure to get him."

"You're wrong a heap, Al," and Rube Farley laughed mirthlessly. "I've stacked up against this red-headed cuss before. He ain't the kind that you get; he's the kind that gets you! Savvy!"

Jerry's first move was to secure Rube's gun, which he tossed far into the lake. Quinlon's pistol was unloaded, and the cylinder of Al's was jammed by a fragment of the bullet that had hit it; but both followed the first weapon into the water.

"Now," said Jerry placidly, "what seems to be going on here, anyway? You guys planning to salvage a sunk boat?" He glanced at the diving suit.

"Turn me loose," Hoke spoke up invitingly, "and I'll tell you all about it."

"You don't need to talk with your hands, do you?" Jerry countered. "Any remarks you wish to utter as you are, I'll sure be glad to hear."

Hoke hesitated for an instant, glaring defiantly at his two former associates, now cowed under the potent threat of Jerry's pistol.

"I reckon I might as well," he growled. "Something over a year ago I cached some

gold—these two skunks claimed a share in it—under a stack of stones, planning to come back later and get it. I was delayed longer than I figured on, and meanwhile the lake water had backed up here.

"We were going to get the stuff with that diving suit, but when I got to where I cached the gold it was gone. These guys wouldn't believe me, claiming I was double crossing 'em—the da—"

"Never mind what they are," Jerry hurriedly interposed, thinking of the unseen listener. "I ain't questioning your judgment in the matter, but you can tell me them details some other time. That's correct, is it—about the gold?" and Jerry appealed to the others.

"There *was* some gold," Chamberlin growled sourly. "He knows where it is now, but I'm damned if I do."

"I don't know, I'm telling you," Quinlon savagely reiterated. "It was gone."

"Why, now, mebbe it might 've been gone, at that," Jerry said soothingly. "Fact is, I kind of suspect it was."

"What the hell do you know about this business?" Chamberlin inquired.

When Jerry answered, his voice was mild, apologetic, even.

"Why, you see, I happened to ride up this valley about the time Hoke was hiding that gold," he explained, "and, seeing him do what he did, I got interested. So after he'd struggled on I collected the stuff he hid, and hid it all over again, not wishing to burden myself with such a load at that time.

"It seemed a wise sort of hunch—what I did. Don't it strike you thataway?" and Jerry beamed warmly upon the trio, who, in the throes of this startling information, goggled at him like so many fish. And Lois Miller, still concealed in the bushes above, was no less astounded.

"I had the same trouble you guys did," Jerry rambled chattily on. "I had to leave this country on account of trouble at home, where I was needed bad, and when about a year or so later I come back to salvage the gold I'd cached, the dawg-goned stuff was under water, and I couldn't savvy a way to get it out.

"I reckon that there diving suit you boys were thoughtful enough to buy for me will help a lot. I sure appreciate your kindness."

Jerry paused, gazing fondly and meditatively at them.

"Now I got more bad news for you," he went on gently. "You're all under arrest," and a flip of Jerry's hand threw back his vest, to disclose a little silver star pinned to the flannel shirt he wore. "I went and had myself made into an ossifer, just so's I could have the pleasure of saying what I just said."

Hoke and Rube Farley questioned each other with their eyes, recent unpleasantness forgotten in the light of this new danger.

"Arrest?" Chamberlin sneered. "That's a hot one. You can't arrest me."

"Trouble is, I've a'ready done it," young Mr. Van Buren explained patiently. "Now they's an awful lot of things I *could* arrest you for. S'pose we put it down that I'm arresting you for having a share in robbing the Scott's Choice stage—the same job Hoke did a little time about. This gold you've been trying to recover was taken from the Wells Fargo box on that stage."

Chamberlin laughed harshly.

"I didn't rob the stage," he said. "I was down at Reno when it was done, and I didn't even know the stage had been robbed until Hoke Quinlon sent for me."

"You knew where the gold in question come from," Jerry reminded him, "and if you want to share in the profits you ought to expect to share in the risks. But let that pass. I aim to be accommodating, and if it hurts you fellows in your tender feelings to be yanked up for stealing gold off a stage, we'll change the indictment to *murder!*"

"Murder!" Rube Farley gasped, ashen-faced. "Nobody of us ever did any murder!"

"That's a poor guess," Jerry said grimly. "The gold belonged to an old prospector by the name of Sandy Miller." Jerry's steel-blue eyes were fixed relentlessly on Farley. "He was shot in his cabin the night before the stage was stuck up. I'm taking the three of you in on general principles."

"You're a fool, and I intend to see that

you pay the price of your folly!" Chamberlin snapped. "I happen to be a lawyer, with considerable influence where influence counts, and I can take good care of myself. You can't tie me up with either of these affairs."

"They's a queer old duck living up Trout Lake way, above Scott's Choice," Jerry said as if musing to himself. "Mebbe you chaps never heard of him. Name's Hopkins, but most always he's called Cock-Eye, account one of his eyes is out of line with the other. He's a very comical-looking hombre.

"Well, now, this Cock-Eye Hopkins likes to fish, and he's got him a dugout canoe on Trout Lake. The morning Quinlon stuck up the stage Cock-Eye was fishing for trout, and he happened to look down in the clear water.

"He saw a rifle lying on the gravelly bottom, twenty or thirty feet below the top, and it didn't appear rusted a-tall; so it couldn't have been there long. He managed to hook it up, and took it back to his camp with him.

"It was a .44-40, and fastened on the gun barrel was a queer-looking cylinder. The funniest part of it all was that when Cock-Eye fired that rifle it didn't make any noise a-tall.

"Cock-Eye's brains ain't all they should be, so it never occurred to him that they was any connection between that unrusted gun sunk in Trout Lake and the shooting of poor old Sandy Miller, down at Scott's Choice, the night before.

"But when he told me about finding the gun, and showed it to me—months later, that was—I could see a whole lot of connection, and ever since I've been camped on the trail of you three polecats, waiting and working to pin the job on you from start to finish."

"You're cock-eyed yourself," Al Chamberlin fumed. "You can't drag me into the mess."

"A lad sure can do a lot of things when he tries hard enough," Jerry said in his mild voice. "The silencer on that rifle was sold to a shyster lawyer by name of Al Chamberlin in a hardware store down at Carson City.

"The dealer had a record of the number on it. Chamberlin gave it to Hoke, knowing pretty definitely that it was going to be used in a rough play.

"Quinlon put it on a .44-40 Winchester that he had, and either he or Farley—probably Farley, though it don't make much difference—shot poor Miller, leaving the layout to look like suicide. If we ain't got connection enough there to make a rope that 'll hang you three gents, I'll go jump in the lake."

"It's all bunk!" Chamberlin protested, though his voice was none too steady. "You can't prove a thing!"

Rube Farley looked utterly woebegone; the shock of learning that the rifle he had disposed of had come back to plague him was too much. Nor did Quinlon appear especially happy.

"I guess it can be proved all right," Jerry said contentedly. "I'll let you do all the worrying."

His six-gun had been very much in evidence during the brief explanation, so that neither Chamberlin nor Farley had any thought of attempting to turn the tables by a sudden attack.

"I'm going to take you birds over to Piñon Gap," Jerry resumed. "And just to discourage any funny business before it starts, I'll decorate you with some jewelry I got with me."

From his clothes Jerry produced three pairs of steel bracelets.

"You, Farley, stick out your hands," and Jerry motioned toward Rube with the barrel of his gun. Rube obeyed, under the compelling influence of the big pistol, to be duly decorated with the handcuffs. Chamberlin and Hoke were similarly honored in turn, the latter being first freed from his former bonds. Next Jerry Van Buren carefully rolled up the diving suit, hiding it in a convenient spot for future reference.

By this time Lois concluded to join the party, much to the surprise of the prisoners, though they had about passed the point of being surprised at anything that might happen. Jerry saddled the three riding horses the men had used, fastening them in line by two lariats after the manner of an

Alpine party. Thus was any hope of an escape by a swift dash wholly removed.

Shortly afterward they started the trip to Piñon Gap, the three prisoners riding ahead. Jerry's watchful eye never left them. Lois rode close beside him.

"You were wonderful, Jerry," she whispered. "But I think you might have told me you knew where my father's gold was all the time. You didn't trust me very much, did you?"

Jerry's grin was apologetic.

"I didn't like to tell you till I knew how to get it," he replied. "Seemed like it might be better to keep still, and then break the glad news after I had things all lined up. Besides, I wasn't near ready to play my hand; not till just lately.

"All this time I've been getting things on these three coyotes. Course, that may not seem like very heavy reasons to you, but I was plumb satisfied with 'em. You ain't very cross at me, are you?" he added so ingenuously that Lois had to smile.

"I'm not so barren of gratitude as that, Jerry," she said.

"The job isn't finished yet," he informed her, "so you don't want to be too free with your gratitude. Wait. In a day or so we'll ride back to Towanda Lake and salvage your dad's gold. I got a hunch we'll have better luck than Hoke and his pals."

"I'd love to go with you, Jerry." Then, after a pause: "What are you planning to do with these men?"

"Bed 'em down temporary in the Piñon Gap hoosegow," he said. "Meantime send a wire to Carson, and have a chap come up and escort 'em there. I've a statement made up showing what the scallywags have done, including a blackmail stunt Al pulled to get Quinlon pardoned. The three of 'em are sewed up tight. You're glad of that, ain't you, Lois? You still want 'em punished?"

"Yes," the girl assented, though reluctantly. "It's a horrible thing to think of—that they will be punished as they will be. But it is the inevitable penalty of evil."

"I'm thinking the same, and I figured you'd prefer the punishing done according to law and order, rather'n have me do it personal. So I was mighty careful not to hurt 'em. Mebbe you noticed it."

Again Jerry's infectious chuckle was in evidence; it seemed that he could not remain serious for long.

"Indeed I did, Jerry!" she laughed. "But for a moment I was terribly afraid you were too careful of them to be careful of yourself."

"You didn't need to worry about me," said Jerry. "I always have a lot of respect for my own hide."

In due time they reached Piñon Gap, having experienced no trouble with the prisoners along the way. An hour or two was required for Jerry to arrange matters there to his satisfaction, and then the two turned their horses up the road to Scott's Choice, that same trail Lois had followed the afternoon of her first meeting with Jerry Van Buren. And so many, many things had happened since then!

CHAPTER XVII.

THROUGH TROUBLED WATERS.

IT was two days before Lois Miller and Jerry again rode the trail back to Towanda Lake. The long ride—including the roundabout return by way of Piñon Gap—had left the girl rather used up, and Sheriff Broman's wife promptly put her to bed and kept her there. The sheriff himself was a highly appreciative listener to the tale of the happenings over at the lake.

"Guess I was a stubborn old fool," he told Jerry, "not to believe what Lois said about her dad. I'm giving you a bit of advice, son. Allus take what a woman says when she's got a hunch on some proposition. They're allus right, and we're allus wrong. I dunno why, but it's true.

"Now—me—I knew poor old Sandy Miller shot himself. It was such a clean case. I even got kind of out of patience with that girl when she tried to tell me different. I ain't nothing but a doddering old nit-wit."

"You're no such thing!" Lois called emphatically from her room where she had both ears wide open to hear what went on. "You're a dear!"

The sheriff winked genially at Jerry, but did not venture to deny the soft impeachment.

"That there advice of yours, sheriff," young Mr. Van Buren drawled, "is sure good medicine, but I ain't needing it, having been posted on them facts for quite some spell of time. The old world sure would run on the rocks if it wasn't for women and their brains."

"Yes, sir, son," the sheriff added, "you've said it. And I've learned my lesson, even if it did come late in life. When a woman says a thing, it's so, even though I know for a fact it ain't. I don't aim to get caught any more this yere way."

"Shush! Both of you!" Lois again entered the conversation. "If you talk that way much more I'll begin to think you're right about not having any brains."

"Mebbe it's just as well to keep 'em fooled at that," and the sheriff bestowed another solemn wink on Jerry. "Catch 'em young and tell 'em nothing. That's a danged good motto."

"Humph!" young Mr. Van Buren grunted. "They ain't nothing a chap *can* tell 'em. They know it before he does."

Lois protested against being required to spend the following day in absolute rest, but Mrs. Broman remained firm. So there was nothing to be done about it. Early the second morning, however, the two prepared to set forth, bound for Towanda Lake and the gold.

"Need any help, Jerry?" Sheriff Broman banteringly inquired.

"No, sir, sheriff," Jerry assured him. "I ain't feeling the need of any more assistance this trip. I got all the help I need right here," and he grinned cheerfully at Lois.

They naturally went by the most direct route, rather than around through Piñon Gap, and thus missed learning certain things which might have had some bearing on their plans. The diving suit they found undisturbed where Jerry had left it, and delayed only while he lashed the outfit in place behind his saddle.

"I planted your dad's strike about four hundred yards up the line," Jerry told his companion. "It's just around the next point, where the valley begins to narrow."

"Are you going down to the bottom of the lake in that thing?" Lois asked, with unconcealed misgivings.

"Sure I am. Why not?"

"It seems awfully dangerous, somehow."

"Sa-ay," he drawled, "what's the matter with you? Don't you think I'm as good a guy as Hoke Quinlon? He could manage it O. K., and if he could, I'm sure I can."

"That's not the point," Lois cried indignantly. "I don't want you to risk your life—just for some gold."

"Why not?" Jerry asked, in deep interest, but Lois only blushed—and glanced away. "It's safe enough," he went on, "and you just forget to worry.

"You handle the pump and feed me plenty of fresh air, and before you know it the job's done. Why, the way I look at it, we're mighty lucky to have a diving suit all packed out here for us to use. Without it that there gold of yours is anchored to the bottom till the lake goes dry."

Finally Jerry stopped, close by the water, sending a shrewd glance about him.

"This is the place," said he. "That big dead pine's one of my landmarks. I put the four buckskin bags under a flat rock; it ought to be easy to find 'em again. You don't mind if I leave you for a few minutes, do you, Lois?"

"I guess not. But you're sure you'll be all right, Jerry?"

"It's a cinch!" he exclaimed.

Jerry incased himself in the diving suit, first making sure that the air pump funtioned. Next he lifted the copper helmet over his head, twisting it tightly into place with a powerful wrench of his muscular arms. Through the glass front Lois could perceive that he was grinning at her.

"See you later," he shouted. The words sounded faint and far away. With a reassuring wave of his hand Jerry walked out into the water, while Lois began working the handle of the air pump on which his safety depended. Her heart was beating wildly, though she tried to calm herself with the thought that he was really in no danger.

But just the same, as the huge helmet disappeared beneath the water, she felt ter-

ribly alone. The sun shone warmly down on the glittering surface of the lake; a few small birds hopped about in a near-by thicket, rustling the leaves and chirping cheerily; but in spite of all this Lois was unable to shake off a feeling of dread.

She kept up the steady pumping, counting the strokes of the handle so that her mind could be occupied with something. It seemed ages and ages since Jerry had disappeared.

About half the length of rubber hose had gone out before further movement ceased, and for quite awhile now it had remained motionless, evidence that he had already started the return journey, or was still at work uncovering the treasure. When was he ever coming back?

Then, like a huge, grotesque fish thrusting its snout abruptly from the water, the copper helmet appeared. Next came Jerry's shoulders—and his body.

He was walking slowly, under the double burden of the heavy suit and three obviously weighty bags. These he deposited on the ground close by her. Reaching up, he untwisted the helmet, lifting it from his head.

"The air smells good," said Jerry Van Buren. "That I've been breathing tasted of oil and rubber. I found the four sacks right where I left 'em. At first I tried to bring 'em all in one trip, but one of the daw-goned things slipped out of my fingers. I'm going back after it in a very few minutes."

"Don't go in the water again, Jerry!" Lois exclaimed. "Let that last one stay there."

"That's foolish talk," he grunted. "Twenty-five pounds of gold is worth seven or eight thousand dollars. Soon's I tonic up my lungs with a cigarette, I'll finish the job."

He rolled and lighted a smoke, enjoying it in idle satisfaction. At length he rose to his feet, again incasing his head in the diving helmet of copper.

"I won't be gone long this time," were Jerry's farewell words.

Again Lois began the steady strokes of the air pump, while young Mr. Van Buren disappeared beneath the water. Two minutes passed. A sudden sound from behind caused the girl to turn, startled. Al Chamberlin stood there, looking coldly at her.

"Guess I surprised you, Miss Miller," he said, with a mocking smile; it accentuated the sneering cruelty and viciousness of his lips.

In spite of the panic which gripped her, Lois did not once stop that rhythmic up-down, up-down movement of the pump handle. A question flashed into her startled eyes.

"I escaped from the train," Chamberlin said in answer to her look. "It was ridiculously easy, for the guard was a brainless lout, much less clever than your friend, Van Buren. There's a clear case against my—er—recent associates, who unquestionably, will be hung for their part in the passing of your late father.

"Though not definitely or personally connected with that portion of the affair, it seemed prudent for me to take advantage of the opportunity fate was good enough to thrust in my way. So I left. By the way, *stop that pumping!*"

"Please!" Lois gasped. She pointed toward the three bags of treasure already recovered. "Take those, if you must, and go!"

"And leave that wild cow-puncher to follow and kill me! Not much! Stop it, I tell you!" and he kicked the pump handle from her hand.

Lois tried to reach it again, but Chamberlin thrust her roughly to one side.

"I'll take care of the pump!" he snarled. "Behave yourself, or you'll get hurt!"

Desperately, frantically, Lois sprang at the man like a tigress, clawing madly at his face with sharp finger nails.

So sudden was her onslaught that Chamberlin was for an instant taken completely off-guard.

"You she-devil!" he hissed savagely. His right fist landed on her cheek, a glancing blow that sent the girl sobbing to her knees, though she was conscious of no pain. Her arms groped blindly forward, clutching at his legs.

Blood was streaming down the lawyer's face where Lois had cut him. A frenzied rage possessed Al Chamberlin, the lust to

kill. His fingers circled her slim, white throat, thumbs, pressing tightly in.

"I'll fix you!" he growled, shaking her head from side to side, while his two thumbs sunk in the deeper. "Tear my eyes out, will you!"

Lois tried to scream, but not a bit of air could escape from her wind-pipe. Her tortured lungs gasped for air, and then everything went black before her. There came a sudden thud, as twenty-five pounds of gold in a water-soaked buckskin bag crashed into Chamberlin's chest. He went over backward, releasing his victim as he fell.

Jerry Van Buren, warned by the abrupt failure of his air supply that something was wrong, had hastened his last trip. Chamberlin failed to notice him emerge from the water, so intent was he on punishing the girl who had defied his orders. He now sprawled on the ground, while Jerry stumbled toward him, hampered by the leaden weights on his feet, and also in a bad way for oxygen.

Chamberlin took in the whole situation, quite coolly. His right arm reached down to the pistol sheath under his body, drawing the weapon even as Jerry lunged forward. He had time for one shot—and no more. His fingers pressed the trigger.

That one revolver shot proved Jerry's salvation and Chamberlin's ruin, for the bullet struck the copper of the helmet, to be harmlessly deflected. But the violent shock of impact broke the glass, letting in to Jerry a plentiful supply of fresh air.

He hurled himself bodily on Chamberlin, before the latter could fire again, and his two hands pinned the lawyer's arms to the ground, holding him helpless. Jerry's eyes, bloodshot, glared down through the broken glass at Al Chamberlin, who twisted and writhed in a vain attempt to escape the weight which crushed him down to the ground.

Jerry felt sure that Lois Miller was dead, for her unconscious body still lay where she had fallen; believing this, there was no mercy in Jerry's heart for the wretched man now in his power.

"Listen to me, you woman killer!" he growled. "I reckon I could forgive you anything on earth but the one thing you've just done. You got half a minute to live, Al Chamberlin! Then I'm going to crack your worthless skull like a Digger Indian cracks a piñon nut. It's the end of the trail for you!"

Jerry's body grew tense; without further ado, he brought the heavy copper helmet that incased his head down on Chamberlin's unprotected face. Al Chamberlin lay still.

Jerry struggled to his feet. A wrench unloosed the helmet, and quickly freeing himself from the diving suit, Jerry bent over the girl he believed to be dead. Her heart was still beating.

"Alive!" Jerry cried huskily. "Alive, thank God! She'll be coming to in a minute or two most likely."

His glance strayed toward the gruesome shape huddled on the ground—the thing which had been Al Chamberlin.

"Can't have her see *that!*" Jerry muttered.

The diving suit had been wrapped in a section of canvas, and this Jerry spread over the remains of the man whose power for evil was now past. Then he tenderly picked up Lois in his arms, carrying her down the lake shore a little distance, away from that neighborhood of horrible recollections. Resting her body against one knee, he began bathing her face, bruised from the cruel impact of Al Chamberlin's fist.

"Lois!" he whispered softly. "Lois!" calling her again and again by name, as if the sound of his voice must bring her back from the land of shadows.

At last her eyelids fluttered; then opened wide. She stared into his face unbelievingly.

"Jerry," she whispered, "are we both alive?"

"You bet we are!" he assured her cheerfully. "I'll say we're alive a heap."

"I thought you were dead, Jerry!" she murmured. "Out there under the cruel, smiling water. I know I was almost dead."

"How do you feel now?" Jerry demanded.

"All weak and shaky. My neck hurts, but I guess I'm all right. I will be in a minute, anyway."

She closed her eyes, relaxing comfortably

in Jerry's arms. He dared not move lest he disturb her. Thus they remained for awhile, silent. Lois was the first to speak.

"What became of Al Chamberlin?" she asked. "The last thing I can remember he was choking me to death."

"Chamberlin's dead," he told her. "I crashed the helmet down on his skull because I thought he'd killed you. You're not mad at me for killing him, are you, Lois?"

"Mad at you, Jerry?" she repeated wonderingly. "Why, I couldn't be mad at you, no matter what you did."

"You mean that, do you? Really mean it?"

Lois Miller nodded, the trace of a smile on her lips. She was already beginning to recover from the shock of her recent experience.

"Do you like me pretty well, Lois?"

Again she nodded, shyly this time.

"Do you like me awfully well?" he persisted. "Well enough to ride the long trail with me—till at last we come to the end of it together?"

"Yes, Jerry," she whispered. "I like you well enough for that—if you're sure you want me."

He bent swiftly over, kissing her tenderly, while Lois Miller's arms slipped up around his neck. The four bags of poor old Sandy Miller's gold—which had taken their toll of blood and suffering—lay forgotten on the ground.

"What you aiming to do with all your money?" Jerry Van Buren asked a little later.

"Half of it belongs to you, Jerry," she quickly answered. "I want you to have it."

Lois was thinking happily that the thirty thousand dollars would be enough to give Jerry a start in the ranching business. They wouldn't have to live on a cowboy's meager pay.

"Sa-ay," he drawled, and Jerry's blue eyes danced like the blue wavelets on Towanda Lake. "Sa-ay, I ain't asking for a split on that gold of your dad's."

"I know. But I really want you to take half, Jerry," Lois insisted.

"You ever hear of Amos Van Buren?" her cavalier chuckled.

"He's a cattleman, isn't he? The man who is said to own enough of Nevada range to make three or four Eastern States. Why, Jerry, is he a relative of yours?"

"Relative?" Jerry exclaimed. "I hope to tell you he's a relative. Why, he's my *dad!*"

"Haven't I been the stupidest thing!" Lois gasped. "No wonder you could do such marvels! And all the time I thought you were just an ordinary cowboy—I don't mean that, either, Jerry, dear; there's nothing ordinary about you. Whether you were rich or poor didn't make any difference to me—is he the friend who gave you my pony?"

"Of course he is! I've told him all about you, too. He wants for me to bring you over right soon."

"Oh, dear, Jerry! Do you suppose he'll like me? Wouldn't it be terrible if he didn't?"

"My dad not like *you!*" Jerry gulped. "Goshamighty! If he wasn't a married man with a perfectly good wife, I'd never dast take you near him till after I had my claim recorded.

"You'll have that there dad of mine broken to harness and eating out of your hand in less'n ten minutes. And my mother is just like Mrs. Gil, Lois, only more so. You don't need to worry about my folks."

"I'm not really worrying, Jerry," she whispered. "I know they're wonderful. They'd have to be, with you for an example."

Her eyes wandered far down the sun-drenched lake, to the point where it merged with the darker shade of the pine-clustered slopes. The sheen of Towanda Lake seemed reflected in the matchless blue of the clear sky above, where one big white cloud lazily floated.

Everywhere was serenity and peace, a rich promise of happiness for the future. Somehow, she knew not why, Lois Miller's eyes filled with tears.

"Isn't it a beautiful world to live in, Jerry!" she whispered.

THE END

The Panther of Big Smoky

By HOWARD E. MORGAN

TWENTY years before, a lynx had dropped out of a tree on Jake Slagel's back. He still bore the marks of the terrible battle that he, a twelve-year-old youngster, had waged for his life, that black night in the Saskatchewan wilderness.

His rangy body still listed slightly to the left when he walked, due to the torn muscles in his back. On damp days his back pained him, and it took very little imagination for Jake Slagel to interpret these clutching pains in terms of razor-edged claws, ripping deep into his body.

Slagel had never forgotten that night. Ever since, he had hated cats; all animals, in fact.

Jake Slagel and Tom MacLaughlin, together trapped the tributaries of Big Smoky River. They had been partners for years, and they made money on their productive trap line.

Slagel was the killer, by common consent. When a beast, caught in a trap by a paw, perhaps, needed dispatching, Jake Slagel it was who wielded the short-handled ax. And he did it with a fierce sort of willingness, which caused the leather-skinned, kindly MacLaughlin to shrug his thick shoulders in uncomprehending amazement.

Slagel was a somber, silent man and seldom talked about himself or anything else. So it was that, during the many years that they had been partners, MacLaughlin had never heard the story behind the big man's horribly lacerated body.

MacLaughlin was much older than Slagel, a man of keen intelligence, and it is safe to say that he knew Slagel better than Slagel knew himself. Hence, MacLaughlin often wondered at the ready manner in which Slagel wielded that ax; at heart, Slagel was kind; it was not the real Jake Slagel who swung that bloody ax—a second time, always—to make sure that his victim was dead.

II.

IT was in the late winter when the big panther, driven down from the hills by lack of food, came to Big Smoky. MacLaughlin saw the sinister new arrival first.

"Never saw sech a big feller, Jake. An',

doggone, but he shore is ugly! I took a pot shot at him acrost Wolf Holler; didn't hit him; 'twas too far, but the bullet whistled offen a rock right close to him, an', man, you ought 'a' heard him screech. He shore cussed me out proper, in cat langwidge, an' ef I'd been within reach, danged ef I don't believe he would of rushed me."

Jake Slagel's blue eyes gleamed with a queer light.

"We'll git him, Tom," he said. "I'll—I'll—git him—right soon."

And MacLaughlin knew that hate was again rampant in Jake Slagel's heart. Slagel would kill the big panther; the thing was a foregone conclusion, and the big man would not rest easy until it was done.

It soon became evident that the big panther had set himself up as king of Big Smoky. And successfully so. The surly old black bear who had ruled the furred inhabitants of Big Smoky for several years was the only logical contender, and Bruin early gave evidence of his unwillingness to meet the big cat in combat, which was the only logical method of deciding the kingship.

MacLaughlin read these things from the white wilderness trails, and was mildly surprised. The signs argued that the big panther was indeed a formidable beast.

The ugly old black bear, wise in wilderness psychology, was a mighty battler, and not one readily to step aside for an interloper. However, this time, he had done it; and MacLaughlin's respect for the big lion grew.

This respect increased when, after the first month of the panther's reign, MacLaughlin discovered that the big beast religiously avoided that section of Big Smoky's tumbling terrain, covered by their trapline. Evidently the big cat knew men, and realized that, just as long as he left the trappers alone, they would leave him alone.

And MacLaughlin was glad. He was not a killer; so long as the panther did not kill, wantonly, as so many lions do, thus spoiling the trapping, the new king of Big Smoky was safe, in so far as he was concerned. Live and let live was Tom MacLaughlin's motto.

This sentiment did not apply with Jake Slagel, however. From the first day his partner had encountered the panther, Slagel had been on the lookout, rifle always ready, hoping for a shot at the tawny beast.

It was not long before he, too, learned that the lion did not hunt within that area—twenty miles square—embracing their trapping grounds. But he gave the beast no credit for intelligent discrimination, as MacLaughlin had done; rather, he decided that the cat was an arrant coward.

Which was only what he had expected, however; all animals were cowards, particularly members of the cat family. Sinister, vicious, back-slashing cowards—slinking, always slinking and crawling along behind a man's back.

Passing a thicketed spot, Jake Slagel invariably felt yellow eyes watching him from the shadows, and slinking shapes following him, snakelike, always out of sight. This was not altogether imagination. They were there. He knew.

And, as with most other humans, the knowledge sent involuntary shivers spidering up and down his broad back. Only Jake Slagel's back was different from the backs of most men: those natural shudders were always accompanied by tight, twitching pains, reminding him of his mutilated body, and of that night, twenty years ago, in Saskatchewan.

Jake Slagel was never allowed to forget his injury—and the cause thereof. The briefest glimpse of a furred shape whisking through the bush, filled him with a killing rage. And so he was not willing to let well enough alone when he found that the king cougar was not molesting him, and his.

The desire to kill the beast still held active place in his vengeful thoughts. In leisure moments he planned ways and means of hunting the animal down.

He did not discuss these plans with his partner; in matters of this sort, MacLaughlin sometimes had queer ideas. So long as the panther wasn't troubling them, it would be just like Mac to say, "Leave the poor cuss alone."

Anyhow, Slagel wanted, himself, to kill the beast. It was *his* fight, *his* debt he was paying.

Both men were very busy during the

winter months, and it was not until late spring, after the best pelts had been secured and they were looking forward to a trip south with their winter's catch within a few weeks, that Slagel had an opportunity to go gunning for the king cougar.

Characteristically, he did not tell MacLaughlin where he was going; merely shouldered his rifle and started away into the hills one foggy morning at dawn.

The trapper shrewdly guessed that the panther's hunting grounds were in Rolay Basin, just beyond the first row of serrated ridges, constituting the foothills of Big Smoky. There were moose and caribou in Rolay Basin, and mountain goats on the rocky lifts surrounding the alder-clad valley. Ideal feeding grounds for a mountain lion.

Ten miles from the cabin, in a rock-walled ravine leading into Rolay Basin, he found tracks in the sticky snow which told him that his guess had been a good one. But there were two of them: one set of tracks revealed a large, hair-padded foot; the others were much smaller. Evidently, the king cougar, and his mate.

Jake Slagel whistled softly through his teeth, and a pleased smile twisted across his heavy face. Two of them; so much the better, and he would brain the cubs, if fortune led him to the den. He would make a clean up. The slinking, yellow devils!

The tracks were fresh ones, only a few hours old, he was sure. At first it struck him as queer that the cougars should be trailing together; the female cougar must have been delivered of her young a month since, and while the cubs were helpless, she would not go far from her lair. The answer soon came to him: the den must be near at hand.

Slowly, cautiously—a hulking black shadow, drifting wraithlike through the valley mists—the trapper followed the cougar tracks. Quarter of a mile farther on the tracks separated, the female cougar turning back toward the hills, the king pushing on across the valley. Slagel hesitated, briefly, then followed the male cougar.

Straight across the treacherous muskeg-tufted swamp the tracks led, then circled widely about a dense clump of birch and alder saplings. Slagel followed patiently, rifle ready.

On the far side of the alder thicket, he came upon a splotch of red in the snow, and a few bones, picked clean. His woods-wise senses unerringly told him that here the king cougar had brought down a yearling moose, after cleverly luring the beast away from its "yard." He had eaten his fill and gone on.

Tracks of a big lynx were mixed with the panther's. But the lynx had appeared after the panther was gone and had eaten his fill of what was left of the meaty moose.

Various other meat-eating forest denizens had come to the board, following the lynx. All that remained were a few marrowless bones.

Slagel readily picked the king cougar's tracks out of the maze of other tracks in the trampled snow and followed them back toward the hills.

It soon became evident that the panther was carrying a bloody weight, his offering, evidently, to his mate. The tracks circled about toward the spot from which Slagel had started, earlier in the morning.

Finally they led up through a dense thicket of short trunked spruce toward a ragged mass of ice-covered bowlders lining an irregular ridge top. Up there, among those rocks, would be the cougar's den, Slagel felt sure.

There was ice beneath the soft, shifting snow: Slagel moved slowly, picking each step with infinite care. Part way up the steep wall the female cougar had met the king. She had relieved him of the meat; the load had been a heavy one for her; a red trail showed in the whiteness where she had dragged it onward and upward.

Slagel paused to get his breath, anchoring his big body in the crotch of a stunted cedar scrub. As the pounding of his heart diminished, he caught the whisper of a sound in a close-growing thicket of spruce at his right.

Then he saw it—a sinuous, yellow shape, darting with amazing speed through the bush. The rifle jerked to his shoulder, but he did not fire. As well try to hit a lightning bolt.

It was the king cougar, right enough, and

the beast was undoubtedly interested in the man's movements. The tawny shape flickered here and there through the trees, never still for an instant; there was an element of frantic alarm in the panther's movements which told Slagel, definitely, that the lair was near. The king was afraid the man would find the den.

Slagel grinned. He'd get 'em all.

A thick-trunked spruce jutted out from a fertile crevice between two huge bowlders, a hundred yards farther on. Slagel decided to climb that tree. From that vantage point, he should, with luck, be able to get a shot at the king; possibly, too, he might locate the cougar's den.

It was an almost perpendicular climb up to the big tree. He made it finally, and, breathing hard, clutched the rough trunk to keep from slipping backward.

Just as he started up the tree, the king cougar dashed across an open space a hundred yards away. A perfect target, but Slagel's gun was strapped to his back. He swore softly.

"Get you yet—damn you!"

Perched insecurely on a limb halfway to the top of the big spruce, Slagel mopped the sweat from his face and queried the broken hillside spread out below him. The steep he had just climbed looked dangerously slippery and almost perpendicular, from where he crouched. He'd watch his step on the way down.

He considered vaguely that he had been lucky coming up; it hardly seemed possible that a man could successfully have surmounted that treacherous glissade. Probably he could not have done it without his arbitrary interest in the hunting of the cougar family to spur him on.

He turned his attention to the near-by rock pile. A flash of movement caught his eye. He grunted in pleased amazement. The cougar's den!

In a hollow in the center of a seemingly impenetrable mass of briers which climbed over and about the rocks lay the female cougar. She was stretched out in the sun, contentedly washing herself, exactly like a full-bellied domestic tabby cat who has just finished the leftovers from the master's chicken dinner.

The big cat was less than fifty yards distant, and in plain sight. Slagel had passed within a dozen yards of the den on his way up that icy slope; exceedingly well hidden was that brier-guarded wilderness home.

Slagel was downwind; even so, however, he wondered why the alert mother had not seen him. Evidently she trusted absolutely to the guardianship of the king? Certain it was that her yellow eyes never strayed far from a certain black opening in the brier thicket. Reason for the mother cougar's concentrated attention on this particular spot was soon evident.

Following a violent agitation of the thorny shrubs in the immediate vicinity of that black hole, two tiny shapes struggled out into the open. Two cubs, round-bellied, fuzzy little tikes; each held one end of a gristly strip of meat in its jaws.

Backward and forward they struggled, slipping, sliding, falling, snarling. Whenever the miniature tug-o'-war took the participants beyond the limits of the well-trampled open space, the mother reached out a clawless forepaw and gently but firmly cuffed them back into the arena.

For several long minutes Jake Slagel watched this intimate scene. From time to time, a half grin drifted across his whiskered face.

At last he shrugged, determinedly, and reached for his rifle. The grin left his face.

"Damn 'em!" he muttered.

The rifle had become wedged in a nubbin-formed crotch in the tree. He turned half about to free the gun. As he turned, his quick glance was drawn to a naked-limbed beech tree, growing close to the spruce in which he perched.

That first quick glance detected a splotch of yellow. He looked again. And this time he saw—the king cougar, crouched on an outstretched limb in the beech tree. The big beast was not ten yards away.

His little eyes gleamed redly. From time to time the white teeth showed in a soundless snarl. A fearless guardian of his home was the king cougar.

That old familiar sensation of shuddering rage, twitched painfully up and down Jake Slagel's broad back. He tugged im-

patiently at the gun, but the stout caribou-skin casing was securely caught in the crotch. Balancing precariously on the slender limb, he yanked fiercely on the weapon.

This time it came free, but the surging pull, with his weight behind it, threw him off balance. With his free hand he caught at the rough-barked tree trunk to steady himself. His clutching fingers found no hold.

The limb on which he sat creaked alarmingly. There was a crackling sound. He grabbed frantically at a nubbinlike projection above his head, but the nubbin was smooth and slippery and slid through his cold fingers.

He teetered backward, wildly struggling for balance; then the limb on which he sat gave way and he fell down, down, down, crashing noisily through the branches.

He struck the ground at an angle dangerously equal to the angle of the slope. The soft snow whisked away from beneath him and his big body hurtled down the icy wall, accompanied by a miniature avalanche of snow and gravel.

Slagel had hit the ground on his back. The impact had been accompanied by excruciating pain. For an instant, everything went black.

He came back to consciousness almost immediately, but with consciousness came a realization that the use of his lower limbs was gone. He was paralyzed, temporarily at least, from the waist down!

He did not struggle; could not, to any purpose. His head and shoulders collided solidly with a jagged bowlder. Dazed, he slid away, and down again. Thorny briers clutched at him, tore his clothes and gouged his flesh. These briers grew thicker; noticeably slowed his progress. Finally he came to a jolting stop, his body wedged between a rock and a smoke-blackened stump.

For long minutes he lay very still, striving to fight down the dizzy nausea that sought persistently to overwhelm him. For a time he succeeded in part.

At intervals, his vision came clear, and in one of these brief moments he saw that he was close to the cougar's den. Not twenty yards away was that black hole in the brier tangle.

No living thing was in sight, but two green eyes watched him from the blackness of that round hole. The female cougar. And the king—

A hissing snarl from close at hand roused him to shuddering consciousness. Half concealed behind a stunted spruce scarcely a rod away, the male cougar crouched, ready to spring. The king had followed the man down the slope, and now—

Sheer horror covered Jake Slagel's helpless body with a cold sweat. He felt strength coming slowly into his legs, but—too slowly; he would not be able to move, to get away, before the yellow devil was upon him.

The gun. No—there was not time. White-faced, staring, a helpless, broken thing, Jake Slagel watched the tail-lashing yellow body of the king cougar with a terrible fascination. It would be all over—in a jiffy. Why—why didn't the grinning devil jump?

With his staring eyes the only evident thing of life in his battered body, Jake Slagel lay there, scarcely breathing. Sweat rolled down into his eyes. He blinked the drops away.

Suddenly the cougar came to its feet, and, belly hugging the snow, circled slowly about the helpless man. Slagel dizzily followed that sinuous form. He gave no thought to the gun now. His only chance lay in remaining absolutely still. If he moved so much as a hair—

Around and around went that tawny shape. Slagel fought mightily for control of his dizzy senses. But the battle was a losing one. Abruptly the snow went red, then black, before his eyes and he slumped back in a faint.

When he awoke, his first impression was of a curious sound, not unlike the lazy *wh-r-r-r* of a slow-speed saw through soft wood; only this sound followed no regular tempo. No, it wasn't like a saw. It was more like a cat, purring—a big cat.

Full consciousness returned to Slagel suddenly, and, in a comprehensive glance, he discovered many things. That sound *was* a cat, purring—the female cougar!

She lay, her eyes half closed against the pale glare of setting sun, suckling her two

cubs. The king cougar was nowhere to be seen, but even as Slagel considered this, a wailing screech sounded from the valley below, followed immediately by a hoarse, bleating bellow. The king, making his kill.

Life was flooding back into Slagel's legs, accompanied by tingling pin pricks of pain like the return of feeling to a limb which has been asleep. Gingerly he felt himself over, tentatively moving a leg, then an arm, twisting his body this way and that.

He was not injured—not seriously, that is. No bones were broken. Lucky; but, no—luck was not the name for it. It—it—was something more than luck. And—the king had not touched him.

There were tracks, there in the snow, indicating that the big cat had circled the rock against which the man lay, probably a hundred times. Once, the beast had come close, had stood not a yard away, querying the unconscious man.

As the narrowness of his escape impressed itself upon Slagel's now alert senses, cold perspiration again came out on his body; but this time it was the sweat of relief.

He sighed gustily, and pulled himself erect along the rough bowlders. His gun was all right. Lucky again.

He patted the old Winchester affectionately. On the point of slipping the gun inside its torn casing, he paused, irresolute.

The two cubs, he saw, had finished feeding. They rolled about, playfully wrestling, before their mother's outstretched paws. Motionless as the gray rock at his back, Jake Slagel watched this pleasant picture.

As he watched, one of the cubs pulled free. The little tike shook himself violently, so violently that he fell. Jake Slagel laughed, rumblingly.

"Jest like humans, now, ain't they? Yessir. Jest like a couple fool kids—"

With sudden determination he thrust the gun in its case. He shrugged, and grinned shamefacedly.

"Aw, hell, you cain't do it, Jake—an' you know it. You cain't kill her—an'—an'—nor—them cubs—cute lil codgers, both of 'em—hell, no—"

III.

It was noon next day when Jake Slagel plodded wearily up to the little cabin across the valley. Tom MacLaughlin observed his partner's disreputable figure with wondering eyes.

In the course of an adequate meal, Slagel relieved MacLaughlin's curiosity.

"—An' he never touched me, Tom. Jest circled roun' an' round'. So long's I didn't hurt his family, w'y, y'see, he wouldn't hurt me, 'r anyhow, thet's the way it looked—wouldn't you say so?"

The attentive Mac solemnly agreed.

"An' the ol' lady—by jing, Tom. She was jest like a comfortable ol' cat, purrin' in a basket. An' them cubs—dog gone—ef they warn't the funniest lil duffers—"

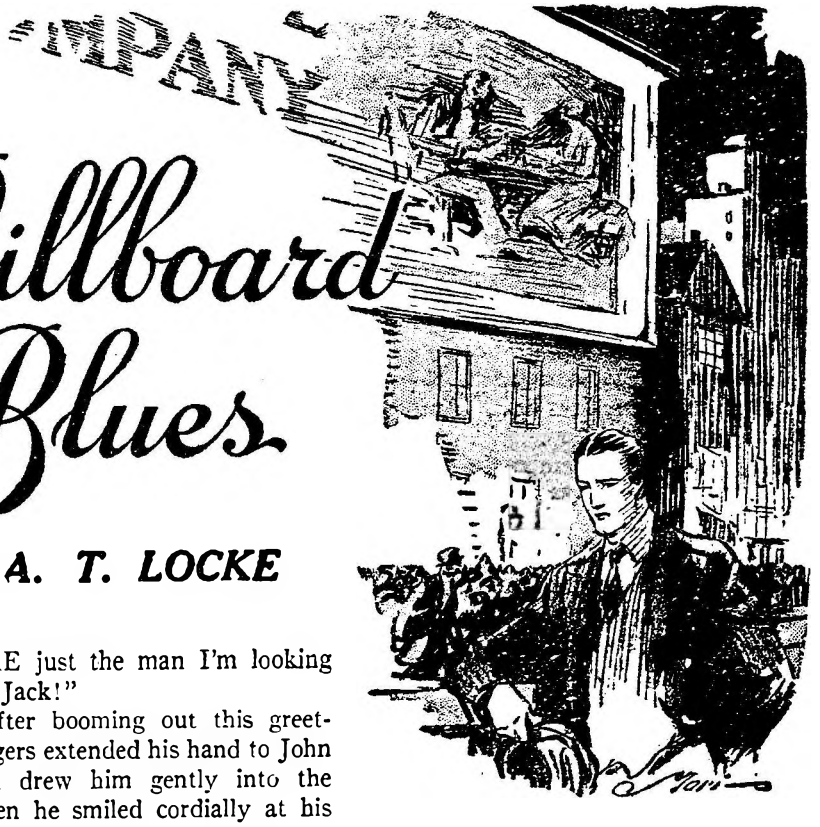
MacLaughlin grinned appreciatively.

"Whut say, we lay off the king, Mac. He really ain't harmin' us none?"

MacLaughlin's eyes twinkled.

"Shore," he agreed, "we'll lay offen him, like you say, Jake."

THE END



Billboard Blues

By A. T. LOCKE

"YOU'RE just the man I'm looking for, Jack!"

After booming out this greeting, Bob Rutgers extended his hand to John Derwent and drew him gently into the studio. Then he smiled cordially at his friend and slapped him on the back.

The Japanese valet who had opened the door for Derwent stood quietly to one side.

"Just give Takano your hat and gloves and stick," continued Rutgers, "and then sit down by that table over there and give me about a three-quarter view of that handsome face of yours."

"But—" Derwent objected.

"Now, never mind," interrupted Rutgers. "Just do as I tell you. It won't hurt, and it will be all over in a few minutes."

"But—" the younger man remarked rather helplessly again.

"I'll tell you all about it while I'm working," chortled Rutgers breezily.

"But—" began Derwent once more, only to pause as though expecting another interruption. It was not forthcoming, however, for Rutgers was engaged in tacking a square of canvas on a frame. So Derwent continued.

"I came down here to say good-by to you," he complained resentfully, "and the minute I enter the place you put me to work as a model."

"Sure," agreed Rutgers cheerfully. "If you ask me, it's time you went to work at something, and this is the best job I have for you to-day. Just sit down now, and try to look noble and all that. You're supposed to be making love to a very charming girl who is sitting across the table for you."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Derwent. "Then you really want me to look like an idiot. Say, Bob, I'm not competent for this job."

"Look like anything you want to," said Rutgers, "but sit in the position I tell you to. All I want to do is get this job blocked in and get a shadow of a likeness. I'll put the finishing touches on your charming countenance after you've gone. Turn your head more this way. There! That's just right."

Then the artist went hastily to work, deftly and rapidly attacking the canvas.

"I got a call from Bill Plummer this afternoon," he explained as he worked. "Just a few minutes ago. He's gone into the advertising business and has landed a big national account. He asked me to do a little rough sketch for him, and, of course, I couldn't refuse him."

"But I thought you swore a long time ago that you never would do another commercial job," Derwent objected. "You'll be doing crayon enlargements or mother-of-pearl inlays next, I suppose," he chuckled.

"I don't call this a commercial job," Rutgers replied. "I'm just paying a debt of gratitude, that's all. I won't even charge Plummer for the work. I haven't forgotten the time, a few years back, when he was editing a little trade journal and when the work I got from him just about kept me from starving to death."

"But it will hurt your reputation," the other warned him.

"I don't want a reputation," barked Rutgers. "I want to do as I please."

"Don't worry," said Derwent a little sarcastically. "As far as I have observed, that's what you always do. You even have the gall to make a model out of a person who comes to make a friendly call on you."

"It can't be helped," the other replied. "When Bill asked the favor of me I didn't want to tell him that I was booked to sail for Europe to-morrow night. I didn't want to pull any alibi at all, and yet the request put me right up against it. It didn't even give me time to make arrangements for a model and so, as I usually do in an impasse, I sat down, filled my pipe and had a smoke. And that brought you along to save the day."

There was silence between the two men for a moment as Rutgers worked on the outline of his composition.

"I don't care much about this job of sitting still," Derwent finally complained. "I feel restless to-day. There must be something the matter with me."

"You can't get any sympathy here," Rutgers replied. "There's only one thing the matter with you, and I've told you before what that is. What you need more than anything else is work. If you could only develop a healthy interest in something you would feel all right."

The crayon slithered over the canvas for a moment.

"Why don't you take your water colors and go out and do some landscapes or go over to the Erie Basin and paint some of those tramp steamers? Those boats have lines like the Venus de Milo and all the colors of the rainbow. You have a talent for drawing and for color, but I guess it must be dying on its feet. Talent, son, is like a horse; if you want it to thrive and develop you have to take it out and exercise it once in awhile."

Derwent brightened up a little.

"This is good weather for outdoor sketching," he conceded. "One of these days I will go over and look at the boats."

Rutgers shook his head.

"Then we'll check that proposition off the list," he said dryly. "If you're only going to do it, you never will get around to it." He thought for a moment. "Why don't you go out and make love to a girl?"

"Good Lord!" Derwent exclaimed. "Women bore me to death, and you know it. I no sooner make an engagement with a girl than I find myself regretting it."

Rutgers shrugged his shoulders.

"You're too damned self-sufficient, that's what's the trouble with you," he asserted. "You have more money than you know what to do with, and there's just nothing in the world that you want. Until you find something that you do want, something that you can't simply reach your hand out and take, you will be in a hopeless way."

"I may join you in Europe a little later," suggested Derwent.

"Not if I know anything about it!" Rutgers exclaimed. "I'm going away to get a complete change of scenery and I'm not going to leave any address behind me."

The spring sunshine gleaming through the great north skylight of the studio was slowly paling and the shadows in the room were losing their definition. Rutgers put a few finishing touches on his sketch and walked away from the easel.

"All right, Jack," he announced. "I'm through."

Derwent rose to his feet and stretched himself, as he was rather cramped after the tedious pose he had maintained. Rutgers looked at his watch and whistled impatiently.

'Jack," he said, "you'll have to beat it now. I'm sorry to hurry you away, but with you I don't feel that I have to stand on any formality. I expect another caller in a few minutes, and, anyway, I've got to get down to work and keep at it for the best part of the night. It will remind me of the old days when I had to plug twenty hours out of every twenty-four to make a living."

Takano brought Derwent his things.

"Then I'll say good-by, Bob," said Derwent, ready to leave.

"I hate this farewell stuff," confessed Rutgers. "There's no use making a rite of it. I'll be back in New York before you realize that I've been away. Good-by, Jack, and thanks for the favor of this afternoon."

The door closed and, a moment later, Derwent, feeling decidedly lonesome, passed over Washington Square and started his long walk up Fifth Avenue.

II.

JOHN DERWENT looked curiously at the billboard which, during a casual stroll along Riverside Drive, had come into his field of vision. There was something very familiar in the face of the distinguished looking young man portrayed upon it.

With the eye of an artist, Derwent grasped the fact that the oil painting from which the lithograph had been reproduced was the work of an accomplished painter. He was momentarily irritated by the thought that here was another instance of the way in which modern men of genius are seduced by commercialism. He studied the face of the model again, then suddenly his jaw dropped and he emitted a faint gasp of amazement, not to say dismay.

There was no question about it, it was his own face he was looking at; the likeness was striking and unmistakable. And the technic of the painting readily betrayed the identity of the artist. It was the work of Bob Rutgers.

Derwent's memory raced back three months to the afternoon of the day preceding the one on which Rutgers left for Europe. He had posed for Rutgers that afternoon and had forgotten the incident almost as soon as he had left the studio. And now, confronting him, was the visible evidence of the episode.

Derwent shivered slightly, despite the fact that it was a warm day, possessed by the sensation of panic which might seize a swimmer emerging from the water to find his clothes stolen.

There he was, John Derwent, a figure of heroic proportions, exposed on a billboard for all the world to gaze upon. He had been wantonly betrayed by an old friend and used as a convenience regardless of all proprieties.

Rage against Rutgers took possession of him for a moment, but it passed after a brief consideration of its futility. The artist was in Europe or Africa or Asia, probably in some outlandish place, and could not be reached in any way. Well, Derwent thought, he could wait until his return and then, after one brief scene between them, their friendship would be severed forever.

With one last comprehensive glance at the billboard, Derwent walked on his way along the Drive. His usually placid brow was furrowed, and, after a few paces, he found that he was mumbling to himself.

Presently he recalled that he had not inquired as to how the sketch was to be used. Then, after all, Rutgers really had not betrayed or deceived him. The artist, indeed, had explained that he was obligated to do a commercial job for a friend.

Derwent groaned. He should have had the common sense to have found out just where and how the sketch was to be used. He really had no one to blame for being pilloried but himself.

In due course he came in sight of another billboard containing a twenty-four sheet on which he was shamelessly exposed to the gaze of every passer-by. It fascinated him, in a way, and his footsteps lagged and final-

ly he came to a halt after he had looked along the sidewalk in both directions to make certain that no one was approaching.

He did not want any one, even a stranger, to find him looking at the billboard. He was certain that, if he were discovered contemplating it, he would feel like a man caught in the act of admiring himself in a mirror.

As his eyes dwelt on the work of commercial art he felt a great rage well up within him and he knew that his temper was manifested outwardly by a scarlet flush on his cheeks. All the excuses which his ordinarily just mind had found for Rutgers were forgotten as he beheld the scene in which he played so important a rôle.

There he was, seated at a table and, opposite him, sat a girl. On the table there was a box of crackers and, beside it, a package very plainly labeled "Greene Cheese." The scene was captioned "Crackers and Cheese," and it was very plainly meant to represent a midnight lunch in which a young man and his sweetheart were indulging. It was a very *bourgeois* conception, a scene in which young John Derwent could not imagine himself for a moment as a participant.

Glancing furtively in each direction, and finding that no one was dangerously near him. he continued his inspection of the billboard.

He shook his head despairingly as he studied the expression on his picturesque countenance and realized the implication of it. There on the billboard he was unabashedly making love to the girl who sat opposite him. He knew very well that he never in his life had looked like that at any girl and that the expression in his face had been faked entirely by the clever Rutgers. And yet the likeness was perfect and Derwent knew at once, with the proper inspiration, it would be perfectly possible for him to simulate exactly the asinine expression with which the artist had endowed the portrait.

His eyes wandered again to the girl in the picture, following the eyes of his likeness on the twenty-four sheet. They lingered on her fair face, on her warm and candid brown eyes.

"She's just crazy about him," he thought vaguely.

Then he wondered how such a silly and erratic idea ever entered his mind. He continued to regard the picture of the girl, however, his eyes wandering down to where two slender, silk-clad limbs were visible under the table. He glanced quickly away, and took one more look at the representation of himself.

"Tommyrot!" he muttered, and hurriedly resumed his walk.

III.

If John Derwent was anything, he was an artist. He possessed a fine sense of line and color and, for some time, had studied at the Art League where, indeed, he had become acquainted with Rutgers.

Derwent had inherited a large fortune, however, and an indolent disposition, two things which easily combine to discourage work. He was the last of his line, without relatives, and he lived alone in a sumptuous bachelor apartment on Park Avenue. He lived alone, that is, if a servile and impeccable English valet and a French chef who knew how to cater to the tastes of an epicure be excepted.

"Hi'd tender me resignation, honly 'e wouldn't give me a character," complained Brooks, the valet, one day, to Gaston, head of the culinary department. "'E ain't fed right, that's the matter. 'Is stomick his upset."

The black eyes of the Frenchman snapped and his mustache almost bristled with indignation.

"Eet ees you, *cochon!*" he ejaculated. "Always he ees complain' about ze clothes."

And John Derwent, if he had heard the comments of his servants in regard to his mental condition, in a lucid moment, might have confirmed their diagnosis.

Just two weeks before, he had seen the first billboard upon which he was pictured in the act of having a snack of crackers and cheese with a lovely girl at midnight. Before he had finished his walk that day he had, to his consternation, seen no less than eight other billboards containing the

same twenty-four sheet. If he had seen one more in the following couple of days, he had seen a hundred of them.

Everywhere he turned he had beheld himself and his fair companion eternally nibbling at crackers and cheese. The Greene Cheese Company had apparently launched a Napoleonic advertising campaign in which he, John Derwent, was to play something of the rôle of drum-major.

On the first day he had discovered that he had become, as it were, a public character, for a strange girl had spoken to him on the Drive. In the days immediately following, many other people he could not identify had greeted him familiarly.

This had puzzled him at first, but then it dawned on him that these people just thought they knew him. They had seen his picture on the widespread twenty-four sheet, but they did not connect him with this when they saw him in person. He was just somebody they had met somewhere whose face was familiar even if his name was forgotten, and who, without the slightest doubt, deserved a nod of recognition.

At the end of the first week of numerous, and rapidly increasing, experiences of this kind, the shy and reserved Mr. Derwent had withdrawn sourly into himself and had refused to speak to anybody on the street.

It was bad enough, in the first place, to have his picture on the billboard at all; and to be stared at everywhere he went by people with I'm-sure-I-know-you-but-I-can't-quite-place-you expressions on their faces added very materially to the first cause for aggravation.

It was neither of these things, however, that had converted John Derwent from a peaceable, retiring citizen to an irritable, nervous, haggard wreck of his former self.

He had been greatly annoyed, of course, on the day that he discovered the first billboard and then, when he found so many of the people he met on the street insisted on speaking to him, he came to the conclusion that the best thing he could do would be to remain indoors most of the time. He had tried this, but quickly had become conscious of a desire to see the twenty-four sheet again.

Then it had dawned on him that the one feature of the lithograph which interested him acutely was the picture of the girl who sat opposite him at the table.

The third day after he had decided to seclude himself, he had ventured out and taken a walk up the Drive and, finding an opportunity, had paused in front of one of the billboards to study the girl in the picture. It had been his desire to prove to himself that he was not at all interested in her, that the vague and alarming suspicion which he was beginning to feel had no basis in reality.

Her perfect composure, the proprietary air with which she regarded his likeness on the billboard, had irritated him at first.

"What a nerve she has," he had told himself, "sitting there with me as though I had known her all my life—just as though we were about to be—well, married."

But he quickly had decided that she was not to blame after all because, on the billboard, he was regarding her with even more tenderness than she was revealing for him. He was making love to her and she, apparently, was only responding as a modest girl in love would.

He had squinted his eyes and looked at her again in what he had considered a cold and analytical manner. He had decided that she was pretty; there had been no question about that. He had, at the same time, come to the conclusion that she was not like the other girls he had often taken to lunch or dinner at the Ritz and other equally exclusive places, or with whom he had danced and chatted at such affairs as his social obligations made it necessary for him to attend.

It would be impossible to imagine one of those girls sitting up at midnight and eating crackers and cheese with a young man. No. The girl on the billboard, he had decided, was different, decidedly different, but certainly there was something about her that was charming.

There then had come to him vividly, the recollection that some time, somewhere, he had heard that a man is in love, or dangerously close to it, when he believes that any one woman is different from all other women.

Calmly and dispassionately he had given

this thought his consideration. Was he, then, in love with the girl on the billboard?

He had come to the immediate decision that he was not, that such a thing was impossible. The very idea was ridiculous. He had even turned his back on her and walked away without as much as a backward glance, just by the way of proving that he was not in love with her.

And yet, on the following day, despite his decision to remain indoors, he had been unable to resist the urge to venture forth.

At the end of a week, after countless glances at the crackers-and-cheese beauty, he had arrived at the point where he was ready to admit that he might possibly be in love with her. It was ludicrous, unprecedented, but there were indications that pointed strongly in that direction.

Then there had followed a few more days during which he had fought himself to a frazzle, one moment admitting his surrender and the next moment denying it, and it was this conflict that had kept him in a turmoil.

John Derwent liked to believe that he was sternly intellectual, not softly romantic. For days he had alternated between these two extremes, his mind being in the ascendant one moment and his heart the next.

At times he sniffed and poohed at the very thought that he had fallen in love with a girl on a billboard; at other times he found himself composing love lyrics to brown eyes or tendrils of wavy black hair.

It was this conflict that had transformed him and made him miserable and that had led Brooks and Gaston into the belief that he had been possessed by the devil. It was this that had caused him, five minutes after he had calmly decided that he was not in love, to slam the door of his apartment and go out in search of a billboard on which he might find enthroned the divinity who had entered into his life with such devastating consequences.

IV.

It was rather late in the afternoon, so he decided to cut over to Columbus Circle where he knew he could satisfy his desire. He walked down Park Avenue to Fifty-Ninth Street, turned west on that thoroughfare and was soon pacing along the southern boundary of Central Park.

He felt actual elation in the thought that he would soon be able to let his eyes rest on the likeness of that adorable, but strangely disturbing girl. As he approached that human whirlpool, the Circle, he let his eyes wander skyward and there, far above the busy plaza, he saw himself and the brown-eyed one at their midnight tête-à-tête.

There they were, sitting on the top of the world, with the box of crackers and the package of Greene Cheese between them.

The billboard across the Circle was so far away that the details of the picture were not visible. This, however, did not bother John Derwent, for he had so often seen the twenty-four sheet at close range that every feature of it was etched indelibly on his memory.

As he stood there, apparently a careless observer of life on the Circle at five thirty in the afternoon, he felt himself succumbing completely to the spell cast by the radiant girl of his dreams. The elusive suggestion of her, which he derived from the distant billboard, seemed to bring her very close to him.

The shrill whistle of a traffic cop brought to a halt the flow of automobiles which had been passing over Fifty-Ninth Street and whirling into the Circle. It also aroused John Derwent from the reverie into which he had fallen.

He was instantly aware of the fact that he must have been gazing steadfastly at the billboard for some time, for he was quite surrounded by a crowd of people who very apparently had paused there, after the manner of New York people, to find out what his eyes were fastened on.

Some of them looked questioningly at him while others still continued to scan the tops of the buildings on the other side of the Circle.

"What cha lookin' at, mister?" a newsboy piped up, much to Derwent's annoyance.

He continued to stand his ground, but did not deign to answer his inquisitor.

Crossing Fifty-Ninth Street, he turned into Broadway and suddenly decided to dine out and then go to the theater and, by these expedients, keep his mind diverted. He lingered long over his dinner in his favorite restaurant on Fifty-Second Street and, before he finished his demi-tasse, was laughing at the illusion which, during recent days, had seemed to take possession of him so completely at odd moments. That he, or any other man, could fall in love with a picture was inconceivable!

Darkness was descending over Broadway when he found himself once more on that street and he decided to loiter down as far as Times Square. He liked the lights, the crowds and the color of it.

He was brought to a halt by the crowds near the corner of Forty-Ninth Street and, just as it happened, he was close to a radio and music store. As though it were mocking him, the voice of an announcer drifted out.

"This program is being broadcast through the courtesy of the Greene Cheese Company—the Greene Cheese Company. Try crackers and cheese for your midnight lunch after enjoying these numbers which are being provided for you through the generosity of the Greene Cheese Company—the Greene Cheese Company."

There was a burst of jazz music and Derwent hastened on as though he were being pusued by a pack of hungry timber wolves.

He paused again, just above the swelling expanse of Times Square, for a moment of serious thought. He knew that the only reason that he was walking down Broadway was because he wanted to catch a glimpse of a girl on a billboard.

It was not exactly what one would call a sane impulse. But, then, he had heard that people in love are not considered as being in a normal state of mind.

He was in love then—that was the trouble. No. He couldn't be. Such a thing was impossible. But was it? After all, he had the intelligence to know that, somewhere, there was an embodiment of the girl on the billboard, a breathing, laughing, living girl just like her.

Then why not wait in peace until the return of Bob Rutgers from whom he could find out just who she was and through whom, undoubtedly he could meet her. That was the thing to do and that was just what he would do. He was the master of his own mind and he would direct it as he pleased.

There were many things in the world to think about besides a girl with dancing brown eyes, wavy bobbed hair and adorable shoulders. He decided to continue his walk down Broadway, but, at the same time, was determined that he would not even cast one glance upward in search of the girl on the billboard.

His feet lagged as he edged his way through the crowded sidewalk to the curb where, in a very casual manner, he paused and looked up.

Then he stiffened and stood as one transfixed; his face flamed and his lips moved convulsively. The billboard which his eyes sought was still there, but rising high above it was a great electric sign which he had never seen before. It was fairly ablaze, glittering and scintillating against the dark background of the night.

GREENE CHEESE

The inscription flamed forth in green lights, persisted for a moment, and then disappeared. Then, at the top of the sign, in white lights, there blazed forth three words:

Crackers and Cheese

Then there flashed into being below it two people, a young man and a girl, who were seated at a table. There, high above Broadway, they seemed to move and live.

She made him a sandwich and gave it to him and he ate it with apparent relish. Then they leaned over the table toward each other and their lips met.

Then, while the kiss was being exchanged, another slogan flashed on underneath the scene.

Greene Cheese Has That Irresistible Charm

Then the scene vanished and John Derwent did not linger to see any more. He stepped into the nearest taxicab and, alter-

nately flushing and shivering like a victim of the fever and ague, rode back to his apartment.

V.

WHEN John Derwent awoke the next morning, he gazed around him curiously for a moment. He was in a canopied four-poster bed, and neither this nor the old fashioned furniture which met his eyes as he sat up seemed familiar to him.

The room in which he found himself was spacious and high-ceilinged and the sunlight was streaming through two large windows through which he caught a glimpse of wind-stirred foliage.

Then he remembered.

He had gone back to his apartment the evening before in a taxicab and, on the way, had come to the decision to get out of New York for a few weeks and here he was in his country place in Connecticut. There was nothing to worry about after all, so he lay back on his pillow again and reviewed the events of the past day.

He must have been in a highly agitated state of mind when he reached his apartment the evening before. He smiled as he thought of the consternation revealed by Brooks and Gaston when he ordered them to get ready for an immediate journey to the country.

He was amused again when he recalled the amazement of Mrs. Logan when he got her on the telephone at nine o'clock in the evening and ordered her to have the house ready for his arrival at midnight. Mrs. Logan was his country housekeeper and she lived the year around on the Connecticut estate with her husband who was gardener and handy man.

Throwing the covers aside, Derwent hopped out on the floor, and pressed a button to summon Brooks.

The latter responded with alacrity, but wore rather a timid expression when he entered the room.

"It's a fine day, Brooks," was the cheerful greeting of his master. "I'm going over to the club to play some golf after breakfast and I might as well dress for the links right now." Brooks felt safer and expanded a bit.

"Yes, sir," he responded, and then went out to prepare a bath for his affable employer.

The latter, left alone, briskly indulged in some rigorous calisthenics while awaiting the return of his valet, then went to the window, inhaled deeply and looked over the countryside as the valet reëntered.

"Brooksie," he said with fervor, "there's nothin—" The sentence ended abruptly.

The old Derwent mansion stood some two hundred feet back from the State highway and the eyes of the owner of the estate had passed over the lawn, with its towering elms, and across the road. They had reached a knoll on the other side of the highway and they were now fixed on a billboard which had been erected on the little hill. On the billboard Derwent could distinguish the figures of two people, a young man and a girl, who were seated at a small table. And he knew, without further scrutiny, that they were eating crackers and cheese.

"Is there anything wrong, sir?" Brooks finally queried with some anxiety.

"Nothing at all," his master responded quietly. "I'll take my bath now."

But the charm of the countryside had departed, and once back in New York Derwent made two calls. He saw Silas Pettibone, Rutgers's attorney, but the old gentleman, whom Derwent had never met before, was adamant and refused to reveal the whereabouts of his client.

He did, however, mention the fact that Derwent's face seemed familiar, which did not improve that young man's temper.

Derwent next went to the Art League to see if he could learn there anything about the model. This quest, likewise, was futile.

The following day he sought out Dill Plummer's advertising agency on the remote chance that Plummer might be aware of the identity of the girl on the poster. He received the expected greeting from the young lady in the anteroom.

"Your face looks very familiar," she apologized, "but I've forgotten your name. I wonder where I met you."

She seemed to be a nice sort of girl, so Derwent managed to set loose a smile when he answered her.

"Maybe it was in Deauville," he suggested. "Have you ever been there?"

She knew he was bantering, so she flushed and hastened away when he gave her his card to take to her boss.

Plummer proved a cordial sort of fellow, and he extended a hearty greeting to Derwent when he learned that the latter was a friend of Rutgers.

"Bob is the salt of the earth," he insisted, "and I'll go the limit for him or for any one he calls a friend."

"That's fine," Derwent said, "and I certainly appreciate your kindness and I won't take up much of your time. I've got a friend out in Iowa," he confided, "an old college chum, and all that sort of stuff, and he's just written me and asked me to do him a little favor. I'm sort of passing the buck, as it were. He's got a kid sister, quite a flapper I guess, and a few months ago she skipped off to New York. Wanted to be independent and all that sort of thing."

Derwent laughed quietly and convincingly, he hoped.

"It seems she didn't write home, and the family rather lost track of her. But," he continued impressively, "an odd thing has happened. You'll agree that it *is* an odd thing. You just put out a twenty-four sheet for the Greene Cheese Company. I inquired there and they told me you were handling their advertising."

"Yes," Plummer agreed. "We are."

"Well, it seems that my friend out in Iowa saw it and he is sure that the girl who posed for one of the figures on it is his sister. So, of course, he wrote to me to see if I could use the clew and trace her in any way. I'm something of an artist myself, and when I saw the poster I knew in a minute that it was Bob's work, but he, as you know, is in Europe, and when he went he didn't leave any address behind him. I thought possibly that you might know who the girl is and where she can be found. Anyway, I took a chance and stopped in to see you."

"Well, well!" ejaculated Plummer. "That is a queer case." His brow was wrinkled with thought. "What beats me is where your friend saw the twenty-four sheet in Iowa. We've only covered New York and Connecticut so far."

He was lost in thought for a moment.

"Maybe I can explain that," said Derwent slowly. "Her brother is—er—a traveling man. He runs back as far as Buffalo on a flying trip once in awhile, and perhaps he saw it there."

"Ah! that accounts for it then," said Plummer. "We've got fifty boards in Buffalo." His eyes lit up with enthusiasm. "This Greene Cheese Company campaign is going to be one of the biggest things in the history of advertising," he asserted. Derwent listened, fascinated. "That poster," Plummer went on, "is a work of art, and, before we get through, it is going to be a familiar sight the world over. We'll paste it on the sides of the Coliseum in Rome and you'll see it plastered on the Great Wall of China!"

"I didn't know the Chinese liked cheese," objected Derwent in a faint voice.

China was one country he had not traveled to, and he wanted to go there some day without having all the Chinamen staring him out of countenance and insisting that they had met him before.

"Perhaps *they* don't know it, either," agreed Plummer enthusiastically, "but they will know it before long. Our campaign," he continued earnestly, pounding a pudgy fist on his desk, "will reveal new gastronomical possibilities in the people of China."

He was silent for a moment.

"That twenty-four sheet," he continued, "will be raised like a banner over the face of the earth and it will lead the Greene Cheese Company campaign to victory. The face of Mary Pickford will be unknown compared to the face of that brother's sister of yours."

"But do you know who the girl is and where I can locate her?" queried Derwent, reverting to the reason for his interview.

"I haven't the slightest idea," replied Plummer, leaning back in his chair.

"Well, thanks, anyway," said Derwent. "I hope I haven't taken up too much of your time."

Plummer pulled out a watch.

"It's all right," he rejoined, "it's all

right. I've always got time for a friend of Bob Rutgers." He looked at Derwent closely as they shook hands.

"By the way, Mr. Derwent," he said, "your fame seems familiar. Haven't we met somewhere before?"

"Doubtless we have, and then forgotten it," answered Derwent. "I guess we both get around a good deal."

He knew, when he left the office, that he was up against an impasse. He had exhausted every source of information, and there was nothing left to do but await the return of Rutgers. In the meantime, of course, he could keep his mind occupied by work, and, as the weeks went by, this is what he did.

For the first time in his life he really toiled and, as day after day he spent long hours with his brushes, he became aware of the fact he was finding a strange satisfaction in life.

He never for a moment forgot the girl, never wavered in his faith that ultimately she would come to him. He did feel, however, that he would be more worthy of her, now that he was a worker than he would have been before.

So the days and nights went by and one evening when he arrived home there was a marconigram awaiting him.

Will arrive on the Olympic Thursday.
Meet me at pier. RUTGERS.

VI.

THE great vessel was just being warped into the dock when Derwent arrived. He stood at one side of the throng of waiting people and watched them with a sort of detached interest. He was complacent, self-satisfied, almost militantly happy.

Then, from the lowered gangplank, the population of the liner began to swarm into the shed. He watched the landing passengers carefully and finally caught a glimpse of Rutgers in the throng.

His heart beat a little faster, not necessarily because of the sight of his friend, but because of what his return implied.

And then his heart almost stopped beating altogether for, close to Bob and smiling up at him, was a girl and Derwent knew, in a moment, that it was the girl he had been seeking. A moment ago he had been sitting on the top of the world; now the world had no top and Derwent felt as though there was no world even.

Bob had seen and waved to him and, mechanically, he made his way toward them. His lips were dry, his throat seemed parched and choked, and he wondered if he would be able to speak above a whisper.

Then they were upon him, full of explanations and laughter.

"Meet the wife, Jack!" said Bob. "Isn't she just a peach, boy?"

Derwent felt that his smile was strained and that his congratulations must have the tinny ring of insincerity.

"I haven't forgiven Bob yet," said the girl, and her voice was just the sort of a voice Derwent had thought it would be. "It wasn't right of him to run away with me without telling any of his friends. But then—" she shrugged her pretty shoulders and smiled.

It was very apparent that whatever Bob did was right as far as she was concerned. Rutgers had been haggling with a customs man and now he came up to them.

"I've told you a lot about Jack, haven't I, Mabel, in spite of the fact that I never told Jack about you? He's a great egg and I'm tickled to death to see him again. But," he continued rather anxiously, "you're not looking very pert, Jack. What's the matter?"

"I'm feeling a little—er—off color," complained Derwent. "It's nothing serious, though," he lied bravely, with a smile.

He took them uptown in his car.

"Have you had any love affairs, you old son-of-a-gun, since I've been away?" Bob asked banteringly. "He's a romantic old cuss," he added to his wife.

"Are you, really?" she asked with her charming smile.

"Not me," asserted Derwent. "There's no romance about me."

Bob slapped him on the back and laughed heartily.

"I used to believe that I wasn't romantic, either," he said, "but now I know better. I met Mabel out in Toledo on that trip I took West a few weeks before I went

away. Three days after we saw each other, it was all fixed up. I used to laugh at love at first sight, but now, old top, I know better."

Derwent dropped them off at the hotel where they were taking a suite until Bob's studio could be refurbished to their taste.

"We'll run over and see you some evening as soon as we have time to turn around," said Bob. "Until then, good-by."

"Home, Dorgan," said Derwent. His voice was as dull as the sound of a lead quarter dropped on a marble slab.

VII.

A FEW evenings later Derwent sat moodily in his studio thinking of how his dream had come to a sudden and violent conclusion. He was rather vaguely wondering why, now, that it was all over he was not conscious of any feeling of bitterness.

He lacked the slightest inclination to jump in the river or to send himself reeling into eternity following the flash of a gun. Mabel was a nice girl, but, after all, he could make shift to get along without her.

After all, Rutgers certainly had idealized her in that portrait. She was at least a few years older than he had painted her and, somehow, her eyes lacked the warmth of those in the picture. And her neck and shoulders had none of that faultless symmetry with which the brush had endowed them.

Rutgers had made her perfect in his portrait because, undoubtedly, she had appeared perfect to his eyes.

Well, the world was still all right. If he was married to Mabel—somehow he didn't like that name—she would interfere with his work.

He sensed the fact that she was the sort of a girl who had opinions, who very probably was more or less of a competent critic. She had said something in the car about being an artist herself.

Well, she was all right for Rutgers who simply would brush her aside if she bothered him. But Derwent didn't want a girl he ever would have to brush aside. On with the work, then, and down with women.

The dream had been ridiculous, but nevertheless exquisite, while it lasted and the experience, at least, had made an artist out of him.

At about nine o'clock the bell rang and he went into the foyer to open the door himself. He found several people in the corridor and foremost among them were Rutgers and his wife.

"Hello, old kid!" shouted Bob "What's the matter? Did we surprise you? I want you to meet Mabel's father and mother, Mr. and Mrs. Gorman, and also this one," he added, bringing forward a girl who rather shyly had remained in the background. "This is Mabel's kid sister, Doris."

"Oh!" exclaimed Derwent, as he looked at the girl.

"O-o-o-o-o!" she murmured softly as she took the hand which, almost unconsciously, he extended toward her.

"Well, aren't you going to invite us in?" remarked Bob, and Derwent came to himself with a start.

"I—er—of course," he stammered. "Come in—of course—come in."

He led the way in a daze, still holding the hand which seemed to nestle so contentedly in his own.

"Are you two holding hands already?" grinned Bob brusquely. "You're a quick worker, kid. I told you, Mabel, that he was a romantic old cuss."

The girl beside Derwent flushed and he reluctantly relinquished her hand. Bob looked breezily around the room and then, emitting a long whistle, he walked toward a group of water colors.

"You must have been doing some work, Jack," he said. "Say, mother and dad—Mabel—look at these. I told you, didn't I, that old Jack could paint?"

But Derwent was unconscious of the compliment, he was aware of nothing or of no one excepting the girl who stood so close to him and who seemed to be regarding him with such adoring, wondering eyes.

"So it's you," he murmured softly, "with whom I've been in love all the time."

"O-o-o-o-o!" she breathed.

"And you must have—the way you look at me," he explained, "you must have been in love with me, too." He paused and

looked at her earnestly. "Tell me," he pleaded. "Don't fail me, my dear."

"I guess I have," she whispered. "Oh, I know I have. I saw you on that billboard and then—" Her voice trailed off and she lowered her eyes.

He took her by the hand and they walked slowly over to where the others were examining his work.

"I beg your pardon, folks," he said, "for the lack of attention I have shown you, but there has been a reason for it. With your permission, Mr. and Mrs. Gorman, Doris and I are going to be married."

"*What!*" four voices exclaimed in unison.

"You see," Derwent continued, "for about five or six months Doris and I have been making love to each other on several thousand billboards and that's about enough of a courtship, don't you think? Neither of us believes in long engagements.

Then they all sat down and Derwent, with his arm around the girl he loved so well, told the story without omitting a single detail.

"I told you he was a romantic old devil!" shouted Rutgers gleefully when the tale was ended. "Put 'em there, kids! As lovers you've got me backed off the map. But I sure started something when I posed Doris while Mabel was out shopping the afternoon before we left for Europe."

Then he leaned back and laughed, and laughed until tears came into his eyes.

"You might tell us the joke!" exclaimed Doris, a little indignantly.

"I was thinking," said Rutgers, "of how everybody Jack met was speaking to him and of how Plummer frightened him half to death boasting about the colossal campaign of the Greene Cheese Company. I met Plummer to-day and he told me that his best client has gone busted. Plummer spent so much money advertising Greene Cheese that the company didn't have any money left to make its product with."

"Thank the Lord for that," breathed Derwent fervently.

"Come with me," he told Doris a little later. "Excuse us, folks, for a little while, please."

He took her out to the breakfast room and there, on a little table, was a box of crackers and some Greene cheese.

"I've dreamed of this for a long time," he told her.

"And so have I," she whispered.

And there she sat, as he so often had thought of her, looking at him with those adoring eyes. And he knew that his eyes, too, were full of tenderness and love, just as they had been on the billboard.

And she made him a sandwich of crackers and cheese and he leaned back and slowly ate it. And then he leaned toward her and she leaned toward him and their lips met. And they stood up and he drew her close to him—her arms were over his shoulders.

"Hey, you two!" the voice of Bob boomed out. "You're out of bounds—you're beating the billboard all hollow and you're even going the electric sign one better."

THE END

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RETRIBUTION

WITH zephyr-footed tread sad Autumn came,
And stabbed fair Summer with his sword of flame;
Like soldier fighting to the death she bled,
And stained her slayer's robe a vivid red.

To hide his wanton crime from men away,
Then Autumn decked himself in somber gray—
When Winter froze his heart with vengeance slow,
And buried him beneath a pall of snow.

Mabel J. Bourquin.

The Capitulation

By JOHN H. THOMPSON

IT was a grade crossing on the main street of the little town, but in a pinch it would have passed for a shell hole in a war torn village, so badly had it been gouged out by traffic.

Bill, piloting our rickety flivver which we had picked up for a song at an automobile graveyard, saw the hole, but didn't realize how deep it was until the wheels struck it. The next instant there was a snap and a crash and the car stopped so suddenly that Bill and I soared gracefully over the front end and landed in the roadway beyond the crossing.

Fortunately for us nine out of ten graveyard cars don't have windshields and this was one of the nine.

"Ain't that the devil of a crossing?" demanded Bill indignantly as we struggled to our feet.

"What became of our wheels?" I asked irrelevantly as I surveyed the wreck.

"The back ones are on O. K.," said Bill. "And there's one of the front ones over there."

He pointed toward a broken wheel some fifty feet to our left.

"And there's the other," I announced indignantly pointing to our right.

Just then a shrill whistle sounded in the distance.

"Holy mackerel, a train's coming," ejaculated Bill.

Far down the long stretch of track was a puff of smoke.

A couple of onlookers, who had been standing in front of a drug store just beyond the crossing and who had witnessed our plight, hurried to our assistance and we desperately tried to move the body of the car, but a projecting piece of the spring was firmly wedged under the rail.

"Flag the train, quick! It's the westbound limited coming," somebody shouted, and a wild-eyed man went tearing down the track violently waving a red bandanna.

Storekeepers and others had come rushing to the crossing, but the concerted efforts of nearly a score of men were unsuccessful in moving the car, which had

struck the rail with such force that the piece of spring was twisted around it like a hook.

"It's a fine crossing for the main street of a live town," declared Bill sarcastically, pointing to the rut between the rails which was at least a foot in depth. "You ought to make the railroad company fix it."

"Make 'em fix it!" echoed one of the panting citizens with a grocer's apron tied about his waist. "I'd like to see somebody make the company fix it. I'd gladly give fifty dollars out of my own pocket. We've begged 'em, threatened 'em and prodded 'em for over a year; and we've appealed to the Governor and to the public utilities commission, but look at it—look at it!"

His voice was quivering with indignation.

"It's been like that for eighteen months," he went on. "The company's sore at this burg—there was a little row over the franchise—and they've refused to spend any money here for repairs. The hole doesn't bother them any," he added bitterly, "but it's hurting business all along Main Street. People in cars won't cross the tracks."

The man with the red bandanna had flagged the engine and was returning to the crossing with a group of trainmen in his wake.

"What's the matter here? What's the matter here?" angrily sputtered a brass-buttoned conductor glancing impatiently at a watch in his hand. "Don't you know that you are holding up the limited. Get that pile of junk off the rails and get it off quick!"

Three husky trainmen armed with levers and sledge hammers tackled the bent spring. There was the clang of steel against steel and in two minutes the car was being shoved clear of the track.

One of the trainmen stooped to examine the rail and straightened up with an exclamation of dismay.

"It's cracked," he growled.

"Cracked?" demanded the conductor incredulously.

The interested group of townspeople looked on with interest. Apparently there had been a slight defect in the rail and the blow of our car, followed by the twisting and hammering with the levers and sledges, had struck the defect just right to cause a break.

There was a hurried consultation at the end of which a brakeman scooted for the nearest telephone to call the section house, while the conductor strode angrily back and forth and begged for somebody to point out the owner of the car to him.

Bill and I with becoming modesty remained in the background. We aren't the kind to be always seeking glory.

"The gol dinged railroad ought to pay for the damage to the car," muttered Bill.

I agreed with him, but we both felt that this was not the psychological time to introduce the subject of claims.

Some of the train crew began arguing with people in the crowd and half a dozen fights were narrowly averted. It was easy to see that the present complication wasn't going to promote better feeling between the railroad and the town.

The arrival of the section gang prevented an outbreak of serious hostilities and an hour or more later repairs were made and the belated limited resumed its trip.

Bill and I were roundly berated by the groceryman and some of his companions, who pointed out with unnecessarily rough language that the chances of ever patching up things with the railroad were now as slim as a bigamist's hopes of winning the esteem of his various mothers-in-law.

We sadly canvassed the garages of the town until we located one which would fix our front axle for the four dollars we possessed. Personally I didn't think the car was worth it and would have been willing to resume our journey afoot, but Bill demurred.

It was late afternoon before the repairs were finished. Dusk was beginning to fall and under ordinary circumstances Bill and I would have remained in town overnight, but the feeling of hostility was so strong that we realized we would have trouble in digging up food and a place to sleep, so we decided to press on to the next burg.

We rattled along Main Street and suddenly spotted our belligerent grocer friend.

"Speed up, maybe he won't see us," I urged Bill.

Bill gave the old bus all the gas and we shot ahead. Just as we got going good I remembered something.

"The crossing, Bill!" I shouted. "For the love of Mike slow down."

The warning came too late. The next instant we struck the crossing. There was a violent bang as the front wheels hit the hole. Bill and I bounded into the air and before we came down the rear wheels had struck it.

There was a sickening crash and for the second time that day the car stopped with alarming abruptness. This time it was the rear end of the car which rested on the crossing.

"Suffering cats, the rear axle is busted now," groaned Bill.

"What'll we do?" I demanded.

From the direction of the drug store came an angry shout:

"Hey, you junk drivers!"

Afar off we heard the shrill whistle of a train.

"Holy mackerel!" I ejaculated.

Bill feverishly opened the door of the car and leaped out.

"Come on, Jim," he shouted over his shoulder, but I was already half out of the machine.

"Flag the train!" called Bill to the individual who had shouted from the drug store, and then without further ado we sped up the road from that accursed crossing and the equally accursed town.

The slow gathering dusk helped us and though there were several peremptory commands to stop we ignored them and soon were safe from pursuit.

We heard the train whistle and kept on moving for about quarter of a mile before we dared stop to regain our breath. Fully ten minutes elapsed thereafter before we heard the train giving the signals calling in the flagmen.

"I wonder what they did to the poor old bus this time," sighed Bill mournfully.

"I hope they smashed the danged old thing to smithereens," I snapped. "We ought never to have bought it in the first place and we were fools to spend another four dollars on it."

"That was a rough town and a lot of rough people," remarked Bill, changing the subject.

"And a rough crossing," I added. "Don't forget the crossing."

Bill grumbled a bit and lapsed into silence.

For half the night we trudged through the darkness before we came to the lights of another town. There was a sharp chill in the air and in lieu of any other place to go, Bill and I located the town hall and applied for lodging in the tramp room.

The desk sergeant proved a kindly, good-natured cuss and gave us a pail of coffee and some sandwiches which were left over from the prisoners' supper. The donation was as welcome as a poultice on a sore tooth.

I thought that our worries were over, but the first thing in the morning, Bill announced that he was going to find some work and earn enough money to go back to Gordonville and get the car out of hock. That man, certainly, is a glutton for trouble.

For three days we sweated on a lumber job and then with twelve dollars between us we grubbed a ride on a passing truck which was headed for Gordonville. My only hope was that if the townspeople lynched us they would riddle our bodies with bullets before we strangled.

Some guys would abandon a pal as bull-headed as Bill, but we always stick to each other.

We got off the truck as it approached the town and entered the place by a circuitous route so as to attract as little attention as possible. All we wanted to do was to get a line on our car and fade out of the picture as quickly as possible.

For all we knew, the car might still be at the roadside near the crossing, so we decided to stop in a restaurant and try to dig up a bit of information.

We blew into one of those one-armed, quick lunch palaces and after ordering a couple of bowls of soup, remarked casually to the man behind the counter that we heard there had been two grade crossing accidents in the town that week.

"Yeh," he replied sociably. "The same fellows were mixed up in both of them. A

committee of seven is trying to locate them."

Bill's soup went crashing to the floor.

"Gosh, I upset my soup," he said apologetically. He took out his handkerchief and wiped the beads of perspiration off his brow.

"That's all right, I'll mop it up and get you another," said the counterman.

"Don't bother," said Bill weakly. "I don't feel hungry any more."

"I ain't hungry, either," I interposed, shoving my bowl aside.

"What's the matter with that soup?" demanded the counterman, his voice bristling with hostility.

"Nothing, nothing at all. It's bully soup," said Bill hurriedly.

"Sure, bully," I echoed, flinging a half dollar on the counter.

We had enough enemies in that town without making any more.

The counterman, mollified, picked up the half.

"So they're looking for the guys who figured in the accidents?" ventured Bill, hoping to draw forth additional information. "Careless fellows like that ought to be run down and punished."

"Run down and punished?" echoed the counterman. "Not on your life. The mayor and business men want to give 'em the key to the city and a public reception."

"What?" chorused Bill and I.

"Sure, after the limited trains had been blocked twice in a day, the railroad company finally backed down off its high horse and fixed the crossing that the city had been trying to have fixed for eighteen months. The business men and everybody else were tickled to death. They want to—"

The counterman paused as he observed our faces.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he inquired solicitously.

"Yes, call up the mayor and tell him to order out the band, the heroes are coming," directed Bill as we headed toward the door.

THE END

AT PARTING

WHEN you come home fields brown and sere
Will mark the waning of the year,
And black decay its seal have set
Upon the beds of mignonette
You leave in fragrant blossom here.

The days will be too short, I fear,
For evening rambles to the weir,
And mornings may be chill and wet
When you come home.

There may be dearth of summer cheer
When trees are bare and meadows drear,
And every garden bannerette
Has blown to dusty shreds: and yet
My summer will begin, my dear,
When you come home!

Edward W. Barnard.

Silence is Golden

By HENRY LEWIS RENNICK

WHEN Jeanne Holton was three years old, she frequently lisped "Horatio at the Bridge" to Daniel Webster, her pet kitten, and Henry Clay, her first teddy bear. When she was ten, she rode in an open-faced Winton car and listened, in pop-eyed rapture, while her father, the Hon. Alexander Hamilton Holton, made the welkin ring for democracy as a silver-tongued Four Minute Man in the days when America was entering the Great War.

In short, she had been brought up on Demosthenes, Cicero, Mirabeau and Patrick Henry. Her ideal man was a handsome god in a Prince Albert coat, who had a majestic, flowing mane, a stentorian voice, and could sway maddened mobs as if they were docile children by the magic of his barytone larynx.

And at nineteen, Jeanne Holton, stenographer, was the center of the affections of a young man who seemed positively tongue-tied.

His name was Larry Morgan, by occupation shipping clerk in the offices of the Goshen Manufacturing Company, where Jeanne also worked, and his ambition was to become traffic manager of that concern. He was tall, slim, short-haired, and as far removed from Jeanne's flowing-maned ideal as is a Mexican hairless dog from a shaggy Newfoundland.

But he had a way of looking at Jeanne, with flashing brown eyes that sent thrills all through her soul and delightful shivers ricocheting up and down her slim, joyous, boyish body.

Jeanne's chum, Lucy Schwartz, who was secretly in love with Larry herself, said he was one of the strong, silent men of whom she had read so much. Jeanne replied that he was just a dumb-bell.

It did seem that way. If Jeanne were

to wander, accidentally on purpose, into the shipping room, Larry would respond to her openings with an entranced look and a bashful "Uh-huh." Then he would go on directing the packing of Goshen Magic Hen Coaxer.

On two occasions within three months, Larry, more by sign language than words, invited Jeanne to the movies. On these occasions his conversation consisted largely of ardent glances and much swallowing of a well-developed Adam's apple.

So the stage was set when into the offices of the Goshen Manufacturing Company came a 1927 model Demosthenes, equipped with a Patrick Henry starter and numerous modern improvements. He was George Larrimore, the company's newest salesman, and he could sell the Magic Hen Coaxer to hard-boiled New England farmers who raised only capons. At least he said he could.

In appearance he was a cross between a pre-war Senator and the firm-chinned young men who illustrate advertisements of How to Gain Success. From the moment he entered the outer office of the sales manager, where Jeanne worked, it was obvious to her that here was a man who would never be at loss for words.

Larrimore asked in a resonant barytone when Mr. Hulett, the sales manager, would be disengaged. Then he draped his well-tailored form over Jeanne's desk gracefully, introduced himself in a few well-chosen phrases, and launched winningly into pleasant small talk cunningly interspersed with deft compliments.

"I think Mr. Larrimore is perfectly grand," Jeanne confided to Lucy Schwartz at lunch. "I'm going to the movies with him to-night."

She did, and Mr. Larrimore expounded eloquently and at length on the technique of filmdom, the idiosyncracies of various stars, and of Jeanne's own lovely resemblance to at least three of them: beautiful eyes like Dora Dashurst's, maddening hair like Flora Flossmore's, a mouth even more invitingly kissable than that of slyly seductive Etta Atta from Budapest. After two hours of such earnest effort, Mr. Larrimore had Jeanne gazing at him with the same pop-eyed adoration she had previously reserved for her silver-tongued sire.

At lunchtime the next day, when Larry Morgan gulped at her and mumbled something about "movies to-night, Miss Holton?" the golden words of the 1927 model Demosthenes still echoed in her ears and she turned Larry down.

Lucy Schwartz saw the hurt look in Larry's eyes, and her own ample heart joined in his sorrow.

"I think," said Lucy to herself, "that Jeanne is a ninny. Larry Morgan is worth six of that loud speaker."

And so, by such quiet, sympathetic means as are known only to somewhat plump, cheerfully pretty, motherly little bodies as Lucy Schwartz, she set about gaining Larry's friendship and confidence.

From the way Larry's eyes shone every time they fell upon Jeanne, Lucy regretfully concluded that the best she could be to him was a sister. Her blue eyes clouded over at the thought, but her little plump chin set firmly and she decided that if she could not have Larry for herself, she would at least see that he got the girl he wanted.

Lucy disregarded Larry's gulps and hesitating conversation. She chattered on and on, seeming to gather his thoughts, and did his talking for him.

"You are crazy about Jeanne Holton," she said to him one night at a dance to which he had taken her.

Larry blushed.

"You needn't say anything," Lucy went on. "I know you are. And you are in the dumps because she has fallen for that new salesman. You know why she has given you the go-by, don't you?"

Larry started to stammer, and then shook his head.

"That's why," Lucy went on, remorselessly. "Because you can't talk. She thinks you are a dumb-bell. You've got to do something else besides sit around and throw calf's eyes at a girl if you want to win her. At least some girls."

Larry grew almost eloquent, for him.

"I c-can't t-talk," he stammered. "N-never c-c-could. I c-can think all right, b-but my ideas get all t-tangled up when I open my m-mouth. B-but I can feel."

He said this with a boyish pathos that caused Lucy to put her cool, plump hand in his and squeeze it.

"I know you can," she said, "but if I were you and were as crazy about a girl as you seem to be about Jeanne Holton I'd never let a loud-mouthed hen food salesman like that George Larrimore come in and get her just for the lack of a few words. I'd get up and show them, I would."

When Larry reached his room that night he picked up one of the textbooks on shipping problems that he was studying, in hope of getting charge of the Goshen Manufacturing Company's traffic department. But he found he couldn't read it. His thoughts were always returning to what Lucy had said.

There must be a way, he thought, of overcoming his shy, stammering bashfulness in conversation. He remembered advertisements he had read in the magazines, offering to teach public speaking in a few lessons by mail, but he dismissed the thought of these, as they took too long for study. George Larrimore was a fast worker.

When Larry reached the factory the next morning he found many of the office employees, including Jeanne and Lucy, gathered about the bulletin board. He walked up and read this notice, which was posted there:

TO ALL EMPLOYEES:

Next Monday night at eight o'clock this company will inaugurate a series of get-together meetings, to be held at the factory recreation hall. All the company officials will be present and all employees are invited. The purpose of these meetings will be to talk over our problems and receive suggestions from employees for betterment of our systems.

As an inducement a special prize of one hundred dollars will be given for the best suggestion, most convincingly put, received from any employee. Come on! Speak up! Supper will be served and there will be dancing afterward.

PRESTON B. HAWLEY, *President.*

As he read the notice, Larry heard Jeanne say to Lucy:

"Isn't that just splendid! I know George will win that one hundred dollars. You should hear the marvelous ideas he has about improving this business. And, of course, he will convince them. He's such a wonderful talker."

As Larry went about his work pasting parcel post stickers on packages of the Hen Coaxer that morning his heart was heavy. He had ideas. Good ones, too. But it was just his luck that somebody like George Larrimore, who could make speeches right off the bat, would win out.

Now there was one idea that Larry had been thinking about for a long time. If he could only get up and talk about it!

Lucy came in at lunch hour and he told her about it. He hardly stammered at all. In some way it seemed that he lost his hesitancy when Lucy was his audience.

"You s-see," he said, "we lose two or three weeks every time we land a new credit customer. The credit manager always wants about three weeks to look up any new account the salesmen get. And—and—"

He started to stammer, and Lucy smiled understandingly at him.

"Go on, Larry," she said, "take your time."

"See," he continued, "it's so hard to explain. We lose lots of time, and the new customer is bound to get sore about the delay. Now, all our salesmen get lists of prospects before they go out. Why d-d-don't we look up their credit before our salesmen see them, and then when an order comes in we c-can ship it right away if the customer is g-good."

"I think that's just magnificent, Larry," Lucy encouraged him. "You must spring it at the meeting."

"H-how c-c-can I?"

Lucy had a happy thought.

"Now, listen, Larry. I know you can talk if you just feel that you can. You've got five whole days to practice. I know a reporter on the *Star*, my sister's steady boy, who will write your speech for you. Then you go down to one of the elocution schools in the Lombard block and take a few lessons. You can practice a lot, and then you'll give that bunch at the meeting the surprise of their lives."

All that week Larry tortured his larynx and made his arms whip the air like mad-

dened semaphores, practicing the speech Bob Caspar, of the *Star*, had written for him, and the methods of enunciation, taught at Professor Quintius Eggbert's School of Drama, Elocution and Public Speaking.

Caspar had done himself proud in writing that speech. It began with a humorous anecdote, carried its hearers through a pæan of appreciation of the Goshen Manufacturing Company's efforts to encourage its employees' brains, jumped with powerful emphasis into the meat of Larry's idea, and concluded with a peroration almost as fiery as "Give me liberty, or give me death!"

"I hope it gets them," said Larry. "Lord knows it's hard enough."

Stutters would creep into his enunciation in spite of everything he could do, at first, but he set his teeth and practiced on. Sunday night, as he stood before the mirror in his room, rehearsing his oratory and gestures for the fifth time that day, he went through the speech perfectly, and sighed with relief.

"I'll show 'em," he said to himself.

Just then there was a knock at the door and George Larrimore, who lived in the same boarding house when in town from the road, came in to borrow five dollars until pay day. There was a snicker in his voice as he asked, after he had received the five:

"Where's the Chautauqua, Larry, or are you Hamlet in Modern Clothes? I heard you orating from the hall."

Larry's fists clenched, but he only stammered some futile answer as Larrimore left the room with a merry:

"Ta, ta, old tragedian. I'll see you at the meeting to-morrow night."

II.

As Larry entered the general offices of the factory the next morning he saw the salesman chatting merrily with Jeanne and, as he passed them, he heard Larrimore say, with a laugh:

"Old Tongue-in-his-Cheek there is cooking up a speech for the meeting to-night. It's a scream."

As he labored in the shipping room that day, Larry kept rehearsing, in his mind, the ornate words of that speech. He thought of his coming ordeal as a nightmare. But, when in his room again, at seven o'clock, he stood before the mirror for a final rehearsal, he found, to his surprise, that he had it down letter perfect.

Nearly all of the two hundred employees of the company were in the recreation hall when Larry arrived. He found a seat beside Lucy Schwartz and, as he looked about the room, saw that Larrimore and Jeanne were together. Lucy pressed his hand and said she knew he would show them.

On the platform, under a huge, flag-draped picture of old Perseverance Hawley, founder of the factory, sat the officers, with President Preston Hawley at the head of a long table.

The crowd terrified Larry. In a daze, he heard the president open the meeting and speak briefly of its purpose.

From the list of names of those who had informed him they would submit suggestions, Mr. Hawley called one name at random. A mixer in the feed compound room arose and rambled for ten minutes about some slight change needed in the chemical content of the egg coaxer. His voice was so faint Larry could not tell whether the needed ingredient was pepper or pomegranate.

One after another, men and women arose in the haze of the room and made their suggestions. The clock moved on. It was half past nine.

Larry was rehearsing his own speech inwardly when he heard the resonant barytone of George Larrimore.

The voice carried throughout the hall. President Hawley and the officers sat up in their chairs and regarded the speaker attentively. They laughed at his opening joke:

"It is an old story with a new ending. 'Why does a chicken cross the road?' The answer used to be: 'To get on the other side.' Now it should be: 'To get a box of Goshen Hen Coaxer.'"

Every one was regarding Larrimore attentively. Morgan whispered to Lucy:

"He'll get the prize, sure. What's the use of my speaking?"

Easily, confidently, Larrimore went on. And on. And then on. President Hawley was fidgeting, gazing at the list of names of those still to speak. Larrimore continued.

He got to the meat of his suggestion. It had something to do with giving the salesmen larger expense accounts. Then he went on. So did the hands of the clock.

When he finished, as solemnly as if his peroration was a benediction, the clock showed it was half past ten.

"He'll get it sure," Larry said. He was conscious only of Larrimore's magnificent lack of bashfulness.

"Ninny," Lucy whispered. "He didn't say anything."

Larry watched the platform. Some notes were passed up to the president, who arose and said:

"Several of those who had planned to speak have just informed me that their ideas were duplicated by previous speakers. We have only one suggestion yet to hear, that of Mr. Lawrence Morgan, of our shipping department."

In the outer hall the jazz orchestra was tuning up for the dance as Larry, dazedly, stood up.

He cleared his throat. The sea of faces before his eyes clouded into a fog through which he could see, like a lighthouse, the grinning countenance of George Larrimore. Already they were laughing at him!

Still he stood there. His eyes turned to the platform. President Hawley was tapping a shiny patent leather dancing pump impatiently against his chair, but in his eyes Larry read understanding and encouragement.

He cleared his throat again. People about him were coughing, whispering. His mind groped for the humorous anecdote Bob Caspar had written. It was something about an Irishman.

Pat, that was it. No, Mike. He cleared his throat again.

Lucy was pulling at his shirt sleeve.

"Go on," she whispered. "Go on."

Larry looked about him and gulped hopelessly.

"Mr. P-p-president and ladies and g-g-gentlemen, I am reminded of—"

Then he gulped. The great speech would not come.

"L-listen," he said, loudly, penetratingly in his confusion. "L-listen, I c-c-can't speak, but I've g-got something to say."

Then he went on. In less than one hundred words, halting but resonant, he told of his idea of speeding up credit shipments to new customers. Then he looked about him, groping for that magnificent peroration. It was gone. Vanished.

"T-that's all," he said, and sat down.

There was an instant of silence. Then a roar of applause.

"Good old Larry," said some one. "He said something, anyway."

President Hawley arose and waved a hand for silence.

"I think," he said, "that I express the will of all the officers when I award the one hundred dollar prize to Mr. Morgan, the last speaker. The most convincing way to talk is to talk briefly, and to the point. I think Mr. Morgan, we will adopt your idea. I thank you. And now, to the dance!"

Out of the maze of that night's events, one thought stood clear and shining to Larry Morgan. Lucy Schwartz was a mighty fine girl. How had he ever happened to be so crazy about Jeanne?

THE END

THE READER'S VIEWPOINT

IF our correspondent from Drayton, South Carolina, will send his name and address the editor will reply by mail to the question he asks. Meantime we are glad to print his letter herewith, as it gives us an opportunity to say that we are more anxious to publish good stories by new authors than stories of similar merit by older hands. Of all magazines in the field ARGOSY is exceptional in not playing up writers' reputations. We are constantly discovering new contributors. With ARGOSY the reader is the first consideration, not the author. Can the latter produce the goods *now* —not was he able to do it in the past. We make contracts with no one. Starting from the first of last December note the new names appearing every now and then in our table of contents, with more still to come.

In reply to H. H.'s postscript "The Fugitive Sleuth" ran in the *All-Story Weekly* from June 24 to July 22, 1916. These numbers are now out of print. Mrs. S. F. C.'s guess is wrong on the author of "The Great Commander" and the information we can supply H. B. MacN. about "Green Spiders" is that it was written by Alfred D. Pettibone and ran in ARGOSY from March 22 to April 26, 1919.

DRAYTON, S. C.

I have been a reader of the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY so long that I can scarcely remember when I first began reading it. For a well-balanced fiction magazine that really entertains, the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY is in a class all by itself. Really, I have no complaint as to the magazine's get-up. It seems about as good as it can be for the insignificant price asked for it. Personally I prefer it to *Munsey's*, though I read the latter publication quite often.

The list of ARGOSY-ALLSTORY authors is, as a whole, exceptionally good. My favorites are Fred MacIsaac, Kenneth Perkins, Edgar Franklin, Charles Alden Seltzer, Edgar Rice Burroughs, John Wilstach, *et cetera*. The war stories recently published were very good, especially "Thundering Dawns" and "Battle Sight." Why don't you have more of them? And, too, it is distinctly refreshing to read stories—good ones, of course—by new authors. Why is it that every fiction magazine holds on to old writers and never takes a chance on introducing a new one? By this I do not mean to insinuate that I do not like old authors—for I certainly do—but isn't it possible ever to publish something by an unknown writer? Beginners offer ideas that would make intensely absorbing reading, yet they are turned down simply because they have not "broken through." Every one has to have a beginning, but how is the young literary aspirant ever to make good in this day of "clannish prejudice" steadfastly resorted to by editors especially of fiction magazines. They are afraid, apparently, to venture into new fields—to take on new writers. They are disciples of the established order of things; never venturing, never daring beyond the appointed and recognized limits of their fields. I will even go so far as to say that it is infinitely more difficult for the aspiring author of to-day to "break in" than ever before. Competition in the writing game is as keen, if not keener, than in any other profession or business. Speaking as a whole, the majority of writers sell their stuff solely on their reputation, and not on the merit of their work.

Mr. Editor, you may indignantly deny this, but it is literally true. For instance, wouldn't you purchase a story from a recognized writer, even though it be of inferior quality, before you would buy one of real merit from an unknown? I think the average person can easily guess your answer. I do not say this because I am a writer, for I positively am not. Heaven knows I am absolutely devoid of any literary talent whatever. I make these statements because I like to see every one given a square deal, aspiring authors included.

Of course the chances are you won't publish this. Too long and too much criticism, you'll say. But I'm a good sport, and won't take offense if you don't. Still I challenge you to do so. Will you?

AN OLD FAN.

ASHEVILLE, N. C.

Why do so many of us become so entangled in a labyrinth of details and the final treatment of a story that we fail to grasp its final point? Answer: We of both sexes have allowed our little store of sex-vanity to so accumulate and expand in the wrong way, that we act, under fire, like the proverbial "Hit dog"—if a seemingly harsh word is pointed our way—we *limp off howling*.

I have tried, with the eye of a critic, to round up a couple of black eyes to give George F. Worts's stories, "Down With Women" and "The Freedom of the Shes." But no black eyes are forthcoming. In comparison with phases of English literature dealing with that eternal controversy, Men *versus* Women, we find no finer moral than Worts's story, "Down With Women," presented. Namely, we have our little bit to do in the affairs of the world, so let us perform it without malice and give love a thought as we go along.

I must also say a word in behalf of "The Free-

dom of the Shes." Worts shows us that there still, in spite of us, remains a bit of our forefathers' love for the frontier. Who has not heard a friend say, "I am going 'way back in the sticks when I get my vacation?" Is that not the backwoods strain—the blood of such men as Daniel Boone still predominating. Maybe I overestimate Worts. If so, that is better than underestimating him. The adventure stories are fine, so are the mystery and the ultraimaginative serials. We need diversion—but why turn a deaf ear to modern philosophy? Let us look such facts squarely in the eye and if they are true—say so.

Our old English professor once said: "Any effort put in writing is born of inspiration, therefore do not speak lightly of another's efforts." In view of that sound advice I have found real enjoyment in *all* the stories. Let the stories come body clean, spirit free. H. H.

P. S.—Have been reading the *All-Story Weekly* since Hulbert Footner wrote "The Fugitive Sleuth." May I ask you the exact date that story was printed?

Brooklyn, N. Y.

I have read Argosy-Allstory Weekly for two years on and off. I like every story printed in this famous and wonderful magazine, but the types I like best are Western, war stories, mystery tales and sport stories. I also make it my duty to read first and foremost that one page in this book of books known as The Reader's Viewpoint. My favorite author is the one and only Kenneth Perkins.

The stories I read in Argosy that I like are: "Night Hawk's Gold," "El Perro's Report," "Double Indemnity," "Recognition," and "The Mysterious Stranger." Also the first part of "Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp" I think is very good. J. A. K.

Chehalis, Wash.

I have just read a criticism in the Viewpoint on the impossible stories of Edgar Rice Burroughs. As we have Scriptural evidence that nothing is impossible, I want a small space for my little "say-so." Of all the versatile writers, ancient or modern, E. R. B. stands at the head of the class. Who but he can cover our little sphere, from East to West, North to South; then soar through the universe and weave his web of romance around the moon and the stars? My guess is that he wrote "The Great Commander." Am I right?

Don't change the Argosy-Allstory in any line. It is perfect in every respect. S. F. C.

Erie, Pa.

I would like to say something in regard to having some of the stories that have appeared in the Argosy-Allstory in the past republished. These would be more than welcome to the readers, both old and new, and publishing one of these stories at a time mixed in with the newer ones written, surely would quicken the interest of the readers.

I first began to read the Argosy when it was a monthly, in July, 1917. "McPhee's Sensational Rest," which appeared in that issue, is an example of what a treat would be in store for the people in carrying out my idea. R. F.

Evanston, Ill.

I have been a constant reader of the Argosy-Allstory magazine for a number of years and have just decided to hand in my report on the selections in the magazine. I enjoy all the stories by the author of "The Seal of Satan," whoever he is, also those by C. C. Waddell. Concerning the comments on the Westerns, although I do not like them, I read them all just the same. I wonder if you could give me some information regarding the story, "Green Spiders," a serial that was printed in the Argosy about 1918?

Just keep the Argosy as it is, and I will always buy it should it cost fifty cents, let alone one thin dime. H. B. MacN.

The Crossroads of America.

I have been a reader of Argosy off and on since along about Spanish-American War time, and have read ever so many good stories in that span of time. I liked "Hopalong Cassidy" and "Tickel Toe," or whatever the name of E. K. Means's stories were. I look over the contents first, read the poetry and wander back and read The Reader's Viewpoint, and then all of the continued stories and finish up on the short ones. You certainly furnish me lots of pleasure for the small price you charge.

"I've Come to Stay" was fast, and I enjoyed it very much, also "On to Florida," "Forged Faces," "Moonglow," and just about all of them.

"The War Chief" gives the Indians' side of the conquest of this country and is a very good sidelight on their mode of life. Your judgment and the make-up of your magazine are about perfect, and I have no suggestions to make, as I don't see how it can be improved.

I see some reader in Boston is not very backward in stating what he wants for his dime, but I am afraid that if you changed it to suit him you would displease a great many of us who are satisfied as it is.

This is from an old-time reader of about all of Munsey's magazines. C. I. L.

Brandon, Minn.

Please find inclosed my annual subscription, my indorsement of the Argosy-Allstory Weekly. Have had it long before it was combined and was always satisfied with it.

I do not think much of the so-called impossible stories, but realize there are some who do, so will not kick on that account. Am fond of Western, Northwest, and ranger stories, also war stories, and think those published recently were dandies. Would like to see more E. K. Means and Vingo stories. Here's for an unchanged Argosy.

C. J. A.

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