

# ARGOSY



MARCH  
23

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

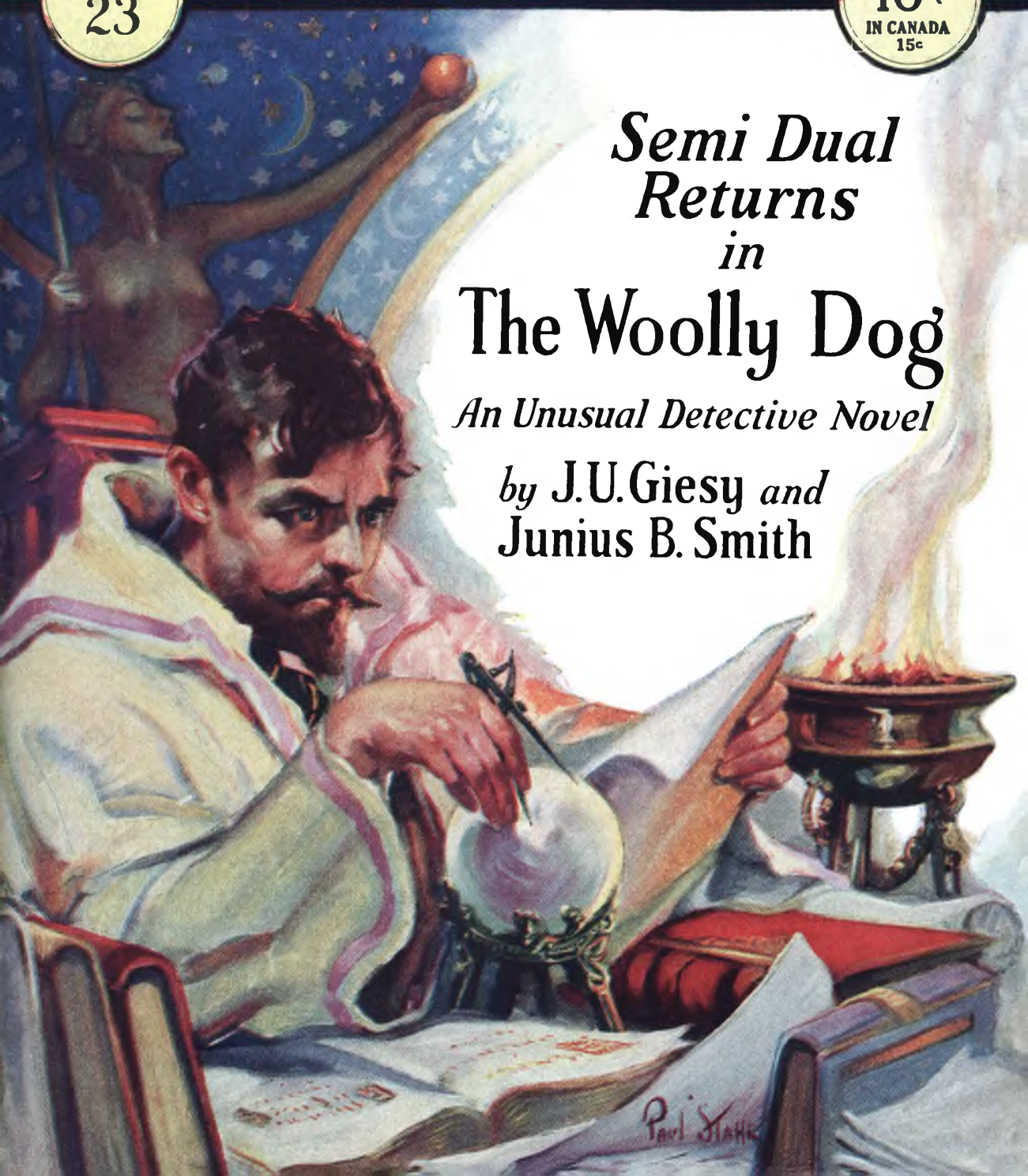
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*Semi Dual  
Returns  
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## The Woolly Dog

*An Unusual Detective Novel*

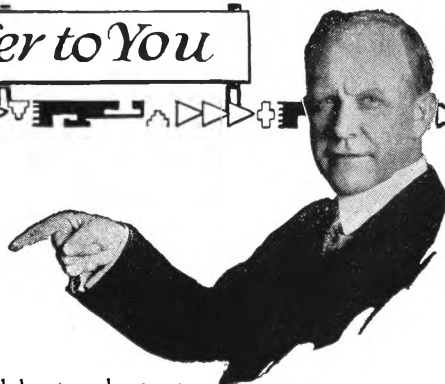
*by J.U. Giesy and  
Junius B. Smith*



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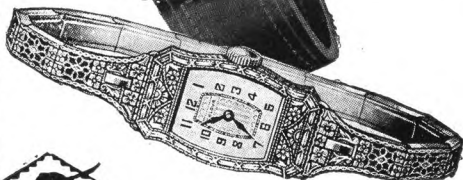
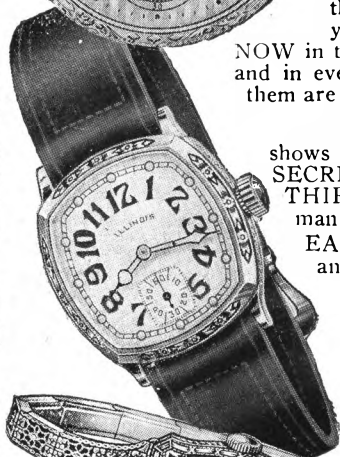
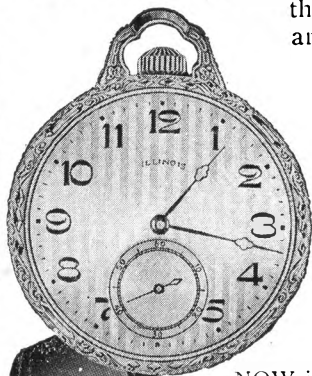


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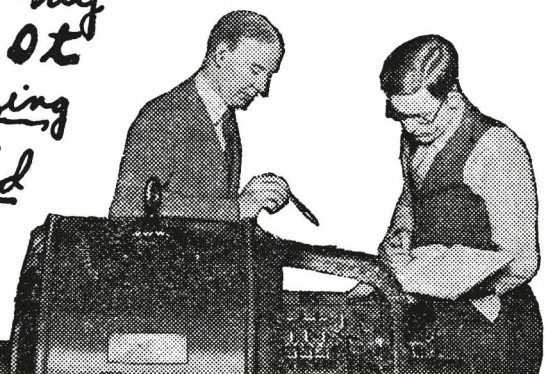


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# ARGOSY



## ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 202

CONTENTS FOR MARCH 23, 1929

NUMBER 3

### SERIALS

- The Woolly Dog** (Four Parts. Part I) . J. U. Giesy and Junius B. Smith 293  
*Semi Dual and a mystery of tangled passions*
- The Saga of Silver Bend** (Three Parts. Part II) . . . J. E. Grinstead 362  
*A war of the rangeland*
- Asoka's Alibi** (Three Parts. Part III) . . . . . Talbot Mundy 391  
*Carnival and intrigue in India*
- The Sea Girl** (Six Parts. Part IV) . . . . . Ray Cummings 409  
*Out of the ocean's depths*

### COMPLETE STORIES

- The Boat Share** (Short Story) . . . . . Warren E. Carleton 315  
*At sea with the swordfishing fleet*
- Different Blood** (Novelette) . . . . . John Gallishaw 326  
*A hatred that shook an army camp*
- The Lion Tamer** (Short Story) . . . . . Walter Marquiss 383  
*A battle of wills on the circus lot*
- Mountain Killers** (Short Story) . . . . . Thomas Barclay Thomson 407  
*Waylaying a mountaineer*

### OTHER FEATURES

- COVER DESIGN** . . . . . Paul Stahr
- Friday: America's Lucky Day** . . . . . C. A. F. Macbeth 325
- Uncle Sam, Printer** . . . . . George Parke 406
- Argonotes** . . . . . 430
- Looking Ahead!** . . . . . 432

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Coffee  
No One Can Steal You  
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The Dying Hobo
- 4227 Climbing Up Golden Stairs  
Lindy Lou
- 2426 Jeanline I Dream of Lilac  
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Come Back to Romany
- 2398 Ramona  
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- 4174 Casey Jones  
Waltz Mo Around Again  
Willie
- 4131 Wreck of the Old 97  
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- 4170 Gypsy's Warning  
Don't You Remember
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Little Log Cabin in Lane
- 2407 Girl of My Dreams  
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- 4133 Jesse James  
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- 2386 My Ohio Home  
Alice of the Pines
- 2381 Ford Has Made a Lady  
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Clancy's Wooden Wedding
- 2366 My Blue Heaven  
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- 4141 I Wish I Was Single  
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- 4160 Sweet Hawaiian Kisses  
Blue Hawaiian Moon

## Popular Songs

- 4118 May I Sleep in Your Barn  
Tonight  
When I Saw Sweet Nellie  
Home
- 4117 Where River Shannon  
Flows  
A Rose From Ireland
- 4119 Hand Me Down My  
Walking Cane  
Captain Jinks
- 2323 Get Away Old Man  
Well I Swan
- 8101 Roll 'Em Girls  
Save It for a Rainy Day
- 4038 Sleep Baby Sleep (Yodel)  
Roll On Silvery Moon
- 4086 Floyd Collins' Fate  
Pickwick Club Tragedy
- 2344 Me and My Shadow  
Sweet Hawaiian Kisses
- 4122 When I'm Gone You'll  
Soon Forget  
Father, Dear Father Come  
Home
- 2272 Rudolph Valentino  
Little Rosewood Casket
- 4173 Boston Burglar  
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- 4156 La Golondrina  
Dreamy Moon
- 4023 My Old Kentucky Home  
O Sole Mio
- 4084 Aloha Land  
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- 4009 Palakiko Blues  
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## Sacred Songs

- 4146 Silent Night  
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- 4075 Church in Wildwood  
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- 4046 Nearer My God to Thee  
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- 4091 Old Ragged Cross  
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- 4002 Flanagan's 2nd Hand Car  
Hi and Si and Line Fence
- 4004 Flanagan in Restaurant  
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- 4168 Jail Birds  
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- All with vocal chorus and all  
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wise marked.
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- 1585 All By Yourself in the  
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- 1583 Me and the Man in the  
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Please Don't Throw Me  
Down
- 1540 Old Man Sunshine  
Sidewalks of New York
- 1510 Ramona, Waltz  
If I Didn't Love You
- 1463 My Blue Heaven  
Best Gal of All
- 1457 After My Laughter Came  
Tears  
Back to Connemara

## Instrumental

- 4091 Listen to Mocking Bird  
Song Bird (Both Whis-  
tling)

## Instrumental

- 4189 Drowsy Waters  
Herd Girl's Dream
- 4162 Blue Danube Waltz  
Skaters Waltz
- 4016 Irish Jigs and Reels, No. 1  
Irish Jigs and Reels, No. 2
- 4138 By Waters of Minnetonka  
Over the Waves
- 4068 Arkansas Traveler  
Turkey in the Straw
- 4161 Dixie Favorites (Banjo  
Solo)  
Medley of Southern Airs
- 4217 Irish Washerwoman  
Mrs. McLeod's Reel
- 4218 Merry Widow Waltz  
Lullaby from Erinlieq

## Blues

- 7023 John Henry Blues  
St. Louis Blues
- 7025 Yellow Dog Blues  
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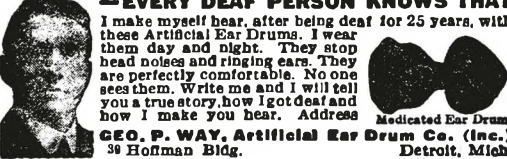
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## ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 202

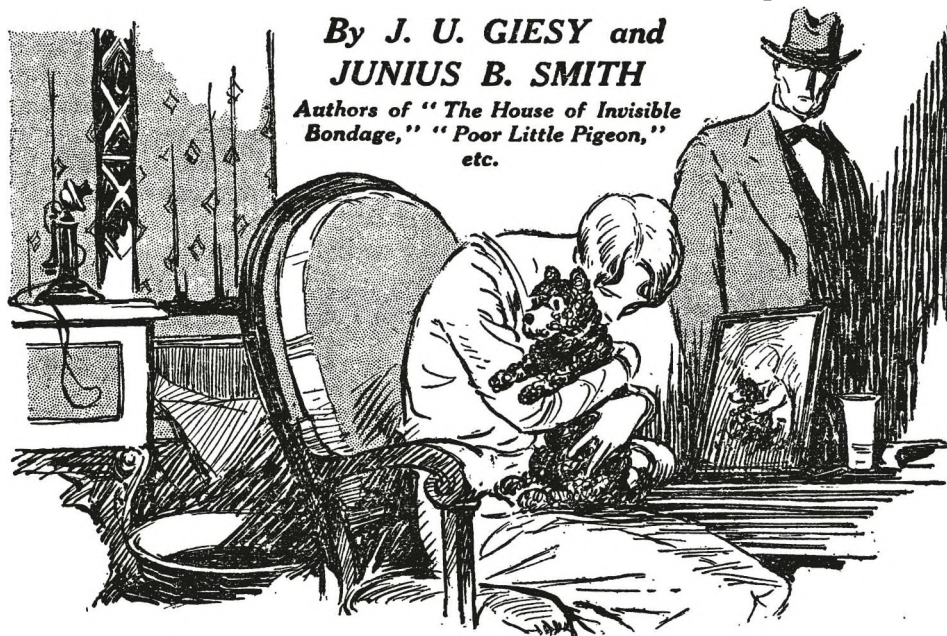
SATURDAY, MARCH 23, 1929

NUMBER 3

## The Woolly Dog

By J. U. GIESY and  
JUNIUS B. SMITH

Authors of "The House of Invisible  
Bondage," "Poor Little Pigeon,"  
etc.



*She was sitting there with a glass of cyanide on the table, and a toy dog  
clasped in her arms*

*When Helen Hart, adviser to troubled souls, died, it looked like suicide—but  
Glace and Bryce, private investigators, had their doubts*

### A Semi-Dual Story

#### CHAPTER I.

##### SUICIDE?

IT was two o'clock and I had just come in from lunch, when my telephone rang. I drew the instrument to me and answered. And the voice of Smithson, city editor of the *Record*, came snapping at me over the wire.

"Glace? Smithson speaking. Want to see you. Can you come down?"

"Why, yes," I assented. Smithson had been my chief in the days when I was a reporter, before Police Inspector James Bryce and I had formed the firm of "Glace and Bryce, Private Investigators." And we were friends.

"Then do it," he accepted briefly, and went off the line.

I slid the receiver back on the hook and grinned. The finality of his tone and manner had been characteristic of

the man. He reached a decision and acted. Long years in his position had made him concise in direction.

I put on my hat, left word where I was going and left the office. It was only a couple of blocks to the *Record* office and I walked.

Ten minutes after he had called me, I was facing Smithson in his den. I had not seen him for months, but he was little changed. The gray eyes under the green eye-shade were as penetratingly direct as they had ever been.

"Hello, Glace," he said. "Sit down. Helen Hart was found dead last night in her rooms at the Glenn Arms. Don't know whether you knew her or not. But that's not the point. She was one of our columnists. Ran the 'Hart to Heart' stuff—advice to the lovelorn—you know what I mean. Fine girl. Took her work seriously. Thought she was fulfilling a sort of mission, helping to keep a lot of youngsters out of jams. I knew her well enough to realize she was sincere about it. Let that sink in. Now she's dead and your friend, Inspector Johnson, says it's suicide and with all respect to Johnson, I say he's wrong. That's why I'm calling you in."

"Boiled down, that means you want me to see what we can dig up to prove your contention," I suggested.

"Just that." From under the shade his eyes bored into mine. "I admit I'm playing a hunch—that the facts as far as known give Johnson plenty of ground in support of the opinion he puts out. But I knew that girl. She wasn't that type, she wasn't a quitter. She was the sort who plays out a string. And I saw her, talked with her, just before she left here last night and she wasn't thinking of death. She had anything else in her mind. There was a girl. She had a date with her at her rooms. And as far as I can find out, it was the same girl who went there and found her sitting dead with a toy dog gripped in her hands."

"A toy dog?" I repeated.

"Yep." He nodded. "A toy woolly dog and a glass of cyanide."

**M**OMENTARILY he appeared shaken by some inward emotion. He lifted a hand and struck his desk. "Oh, I don't blame Johnson. It looks like suicide. And of course he don't know that girl the way we've come to know her around here the past two-years. At first it knocked me for a loop. And then I got to thinking. And here—"

He reached into a pocket and dragged out a printed verse, quite evidently clipped from some publication, held it toward me across the desk. "This thing of John Edward Allen's is what really decided me to call you over."

I took it and read:

Oh, grant me this  
That I shall scale Life's peaks, explore  
its glooms,  
Know mountained ecstasies, deep-val-  
leyed pains—  
That when my last red sands by Time  
are sieved  
And Fate has struck my sinews from  
her looms,  
I shall have earned three words o'er  
my remains  
Besides was born and died—  
"Between he lived!"

"I found that this morning under the glass top of her desk. It's hardly a suicide's code," Smithson said.

"No," I agreed. "It's not." And I frowned. I could imagine how Smithson felt. He had known the girl, liked her. Her death had left him shocked. I could picture him poking about her desk and finding the clipping I still held in my fingers, deciding all at once to verify or disprove the announced conclusions of the police. "And so you want Bryce and me to run it out?"

"Yes." Smithson nodded again. "I can't escape the feeling that there's something infernally queer about the whole business, Glace. So I thought you and possibly Dual—"



Semi-Dual! I understood the man's mental processes in a flash. Smithson had sent me to interview Dual years before and thereby changed the entire course of my life. I had gone and found a strange man in a strange abode. For Semi-Dual, modern metaphysician, astrologer, mystic, dwelt on the roof of the Urania Building, the same modern twenty-story office structure in which Bryce and I held our seventh-floor office suite.

There he had made for himself a little world apart. In the Urania's tower he had arranged his living quarters. On the roof he had set out a garden with clambering vines about the parapet and flowering plants and shrubs, a fountain and a sundial, open to the light and winds of heaven in the fall and summer, shielded in winter by a protecting roof of green-yellow glass.

One reached it from the twentieth floor of the Urania by a bronze-and-marble staircase, at the top of which one came into the central path of the garden across an inlaid annunciator plate which sounded a chime of bells in the tower to announce his coming.

There I had gone when first Smithson sent me to meet a man of splendid physique, a splendidly poised leonine head, aquiline-nosed, gray-eyed, with a brown and closely trimmed and pointed beard. And from that interview had come much else.

Semi-Dual, student of the occult forces of the universe and life, had given me his friendship. By his aid I had been largely instrumental in clearing up a mystery which had baffled the police. In the process I had met Inspector James Bryce. On Dual's advice I had left the *Record* and Jim had left the police.

And since then Semi-Dual had been the god in the machine of our endeavors toward clarifying many a human tangle whenever those elements which he himself referred to as "soul values" were involved. To the merely material values of property or wealth,

our strange friend gave small heed. But, let life or physical integrity or reputation be assailed and he flamed into action, a very high priest of that cosmic justice he taught and in which he believed.

Smithson knew all this from the past and so it was easy for me to comprehend his hope that Semi-Dual might again cooperate with Bryce and me in this matter wherein, if he were right in his conviction that a woman's death had not been self-inflicted, there was every probability that some one guilty of nothing less than murder would go unpunished and unsought through an error of the police.

"Dual, eh?" I said and smiled.

"Yep." For the third time Smithson nodded. "It's his sort of case, if I'm right. And I think I am. Because a girl, who kept that verse from Allen's poem, 'Desire to Live,' on her desk where she could see it every day, never took her own life. That's my hunch and, frankly, it's nothing else. But I'm asking you boys to help me play it."

"AND we're going to do it," I declared. Suddenly as I sat there watching my former chief, marking each evidence of his determination to clear up the circumstances surrounding the girl's death, the elements of a possible mystery in that death gripped me. "What about the toy dog?" I asked.

"Nothing about it, except that they found her sitting there with the thing crushed to her breast," Smithson said. "Get the picture, Glace! There she was, with the dog, in a chair, beside a table, and a glass containing a few drops of what proved to be a solution of cyanide, and a photograph of a kid holding the same sort of a dog in his arms—"

"The same sort of a dog?" I exclaimed. "Or the same dog, Smithson?" I looked him in the eyes.

They narrowed. His lips grimaced.

It was as though out of his world-weary knowledge he grimaced at life. "Go on and finish it," he prompted. "We're dry behind the ears."

"Had Helen Hart been married?" I inquired.

"Not to my knowledge." He leaned back in his chair. "You're wondering if that picture was a picture of her kid. I don't know, Glace. She never told me much about her life. But I'm telling you that if that girl ever had made a mistake, it was just a mistake and nothing worse. I wouldn't say that about many. I'm no sentimentalist. But I will say it about Hart. There was something about her rang true. And trying to help other girls in their troubles was the passion of her life. She worked at it in and out of hours, meeting them, talking with them, trying to steer 'em straight. There was that girl she had a date with last night—the one who went up to keep it and found her and ran out screaming. She was always doing something of the sort."

I nodded. More and more the affair was coming to interest me. The picture he had painted of the woman sitting alone with the toy dog, the photograph and the glass of lethal solution, swam before my mental vision and urged to action. I reached for the telephone on Smithson's desk. I called police central and asked for Johnson and waited until I heard his voice.

"Johnson," I said then, "this is Glace. I want to chin a bit with you about the Hart girl's death."

"Well, come on down and do it," he invited in a heavy rumble. "Always glad to assist, advise or instruct."

"I may want you to do the first two," I accepted. "I'll be right over."

Then I called the office, explained briefly to Bryce and asked him to meet me at headquarters.

"Be there on the jump, son," he promised.

I hung up, told Smithson I'd keep him informed as to progress, and left

him hitching himself again to his desk to resume the routine of his daily task.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE CONTRADICTORY CLEW.

**B**RYCE was waiting for me outside the headquarters building when I reached it, one of the deadly black cigars he habitually smoked projecting from beneath his stubby brown mustache, and an expression of avid interest plain to be read on his florid face.

"Hello, Gordon," he rumbled joining me in a stride. "Say, what's the racket about this Hart girl? I read in the paper this morning where she'd hopped off on a non-stop solo across the River Styx last night. What's wrong with that dope?"

"Mainly a question as to whether she hopped off or was shoved," I told him and looked him in the eyes.

"Huh!" They narrowed and widened till their brown seemed nearly black. "Well, for exclaimin' in public! Whose idea is the last?"

"Smithson's," I said. "She was on the *Record*. Come on inside."

He nodded and we entered the station, passed through the door of the detectives' room, to face Inspector Johnson seated beside a flat-topped desk.

"Hello," he took note of our appearance. "What particular interest have you two private 'shadows' discovered in the Hart girl's bumpin' herself off?"

"Personally none," I said as Jim and I found chairs. "But Smithson wanted us to talk it over with you." I went on and explained briefly Smithson's attitude.

"Huh!" Johnson grunted as I paused. He scowled. "And what's it to him whether it was suicide or not? What's his interest in the matter?"

"Why, chiefly, I reckon," Bryce suggested before I could answer, "the



interest of any good citizen in tryin' to see that the police don't make the mistake of merely readin' the surface instead of lookin' deep."

"What's zat?" Johnson stiffened. And then he grinned and relaxed. In the days when Bryce was on the force, the two men had been pals and they still were friends. "An' you're deep, ain't you?" he jeered. "Deep as a well an' just about as damp. And so's Smithson—all damp. That skirt just quit. Why, see here. She was sittin' there, with a glass of cyanide on the table beside her, an' no sign of a struggle. An' there was a photograph of a kid on the table, too—"

"Hers?" Bryce interrupted.

Johnson nodded. "The way I dope it, probably yes. Leastwise she'd had one sometime accordin' to the doctors. So it seems a pretty safe bet. The kid was a boy an' he was holdin' a toy dog in his arms. An' Hart was holdin' the same dog, the way I see it. She'd kept it, most likely, an' she got it out when she decided to quit, put the picture on the table an' drank the stuff in the glass—"

"An' set the glass back on the table an'—died," said Jim.

"Eh?" Johnson eyed him. "Well, why not? She could have done it—an' if any one else had done it, do you think they'd have left the glass sittin' there only part empty?"

"I dunno," Bryce rejoined and puffed out his brown mustache in a way he had. "He might 'a' done it if he was wantin' to make the thing look like suicide. An' the way it looks to me, if I'd been her an' was aimin' to finish the day's work by my lonesome, I wouldn't have left none in the glass. I'd have drunk it all."

"**Y**EAH," Johnson grinned in a way not entirely pleasant.

"Yeah, I reckon you would. You're bright an' always was. But wait a mo', brother—you ain't got it all. This girl was nervous before it

happened. We've got proof of that. An' it's darned serious proof. She had this dog an' it was one of these woolly kid toys. An' she died from cyanide. An' so did Swede Larsen—nearly. You know Swede. I took him with me last night when we went to the Glenn Arms, an' he handled the dog. An' then I reckon he must have put his thumb in his mouth or somethin'. Because all at once he gets dizzy an' keels over an' it looked for awhile like he was goin' to pass out. An' the reason for that was that there was powdered cyanide on that dog—in the fuzzy stuff of which it was made! An' Larsen got some of it on his hands, when he was examining the thing, and it nearly got him. What about that?"

"Well, what about it?" Bryce inquired. He was frowning. "How's that prove the girl was nervous?"

"Easy," Johnson told him. "Though I'm not surprised that *you* ask. Explainin' the proposition in words of one syllable, for your understanding, however, this is how it works out. This girl had the stuff an' she'd decided to use it, so she takes a glass an' fills it with water an' dumps the stuff in. But she was nervous like I said. Her hand was probably shakin' an' she spills some of it on the dog. Do you get it or shall I draw you a picture?"

"Nope," Jim decided, still frowning. "I reckon I get your point. She could have done it, if she'd been nervous, of course. But she must 'a' had a lot of it to spill it like that. Was there much of it on the dog?"

"Enough," said Johnson shortly. "It was worked down into its woolly coat, you understand."

"Sure," Bryce nodded. "I ain't as dumb as that. How long had this girl been dead when she was found?"

"Nobody knows for sure," Johnson replied. "But the docs figure it must have happened somewhere between seven and eight o'clock. She had a date with a girl for half past

eight, and the girl went up to keep it, and found her, and let out a squawk. Then Jeppy called the office." He named the house detective of the hotel. "And we went up there on the jump."

"An' found nothin'?" said Jim. "Nothin', that is, to make it look different from what it looked—no notes or nothin'?"

"Exactly nothin'," Johnson agreed. "Oh, we saw this girl. Molly May, she calls herself. She's an entertainer in a night club, accordin' to her story, which we ran out an' found to be straight. An' she had a note from the Hart girl makin' the date for last evenin'. Besides, the boy on one of the cages remembered takin' her up to Hart's floor just a few minutes before she ran back out yellin' blue murder. So there ain't nothin' there."

"Nope. Apparently not," Jim assented slowly. "But if Hart was dead, how'd this cabaret baby get in to find her?"

Johnson shrugged heavy shoulders. "She said the door was unlocked."

"But," Bryce objected, "you'd 'a' thought Hart would have locked it if she meant to drink that cyanide cocktail."

"Why?" Johnson demanded.

"Huh?" Jim scowled. "Well, I dunno. It just seems more natural, I guess. I reckon I'd lock the door if I was goin' to poison myself."

"But you ain't tryin' to suggest that what you'd do is any rule of thumb for the rest of the mob to follow, are you?" Johnson chuckled.

"No." Bryce shook his head and rolled his cigar across his mouth. "But I still feel it would have been more natural for her to have locked the door."

"O H, well, maybe it would have," Johnson waived the point, as he lay back in his chair. He seemed exceedingly sure of himself, a trifle amused by our presence on what

he plainly considered a fruitless mission. "Sorry if business isn't good with you two guys. But it ain't a bit of good your comin' down here an' tryin' to make this thing look like anything but what it was."

"Which you know we're not doing, as well as we do," I rejoined, a slight resentment at his smugness tincturing my words. "We're here because a man who had known the girl for the past two years asked us to discover anything we could. She wasn't contemplating suicide when she left the *Record* office last evening at all events, because she told Smithson about her date with this Molly May, as you say she calls herself. So she must have reached her decision in a hurry. Any idea where she got that cyanide?"

"No." Johnson frowned, and sat up again to the desk. "An' I haven't been able to trace it. But she may have had it. It ain't sure she bought it yesterday. She told Smithson about her date with the May girl, did she?"

I nodded. "So he says. According to him, she appears to have meant to keep it when she left."

"An' nobody's sayin' she didn't, except Johnson." Bryce gave the conversation a somewhat surprising turn. "What did this May skirt want to see her about? Did she tell you?"

"No. And I didn't ask her," Johnson growled. "Some jam of her own, I imagine. But what of it? She's out of it."

"An' I ain't even tryin' to say she was ever in it," Jim rejoined. "That ain't the point. The point is that the Glenn Arms isn't exactly what you'd call a cheap hotel, seein' as it's just about the highest priced flop in town. And by Smithson's own account, this Helen Hart was nothin' but a newspaper columnist. What I'm askin' is how she supported the racket in a place like that? It's a bet she couldn't do it on what the *Record* paid her per week. How'd she keep up the front?"

"Meanin' that might have been a



reason for what she done?" Johnson caught at the question. "Got herself in so deep she decided to throw in her hand?"

"Maybe," said Bryce. "But I hadn't thought of it that way. What I was meanin' was that we mustn't forget that she was a columnist, an' that folks wrote her all sorts of stuff about their private business, an' some of it may have been worth coverin' up."

"Blackmail, eh?" Suddenly Johnson leaned a trifle forward, and his words came in a startled grumble. "It's your idea that's where she got the jack to keep her goin'? Well, I'm damned. I hadn't thought of that. But she could have worked it, I guess. She was a swell looker. And you're right—it costs money to live in that dump. It's your idea that she got herself into some sort of trap and could only see one way out?"

"I ain't said so," Jim told him, grinning. "I still ain't arguin' that the thing was suicide. If she was usin' her job on the *Record* as a sort of clearin' house for explosive information concernin' people able to pay for silence, ain't it just possible that she may have tagged somebody who finally figured that a closed mouth spills no mush?"

"Somebody who went to her room an' fed her cyanide an' managed to spill it all over that dog in the process?" Johnson gave him a pitying glance.

**I** DUNNO. It's just an idea," Jim confessed. "But it ain't as far-fetched as it sounds. Take this girl who found her last night. She's a night club entertainer, you say. That sort gets in with big money—an' a shake-down ain't unheard of in a case like that. Hart an' some of these girls she was supposed to be helpin' could have teamed that sort of thing easy. You say she was good lookin'?"

"A peach," said Johnson, scowling.

"A reg'lar peach. Good face an' figure. Blond hair an' blue eyes. But, hell's bells, Bryce, look at the way it happened!"

"I am. An' that's the trouble," Bryce agreed. "But the idea just got to rattlin' around in my head."

"Like a loose pea in a pod," Johnson grinned. "Well, all right. You always did rattle. An' at that you may not be so far wrong. She couldn't have been playin' a hush money game, or she could have got mixed up with some guy herself. She was the sort most men would fall for, as far as looks went, as I've said. As to that, I don't know. But whatever was back of it an' brought her to it, she bumped herself off in the end, an'—"

The telephone at his elbow rang. He snatched it to him. "Johnson speakin'," he growled. . . . "Who? Oh, Jeppy! All right, brother, what do you want?"

And after that he sat, the receiver jammed to his ear, while a voice cracked and gurgled through it, and I found my interest quickened by his voicing of the name of the house detective of the Glenn Arms.

Johnson's interest appeared to be quickened, too, to judge by his expression which swiftly underwent a change, became suddenly that of rigid attention, until at last he interrupted the snarl of Jeppy's conversation: "Nev' mind that now. Get your dope together. I'll be down."

He snapped the receiver back on the hook and banged the instrument down. "An' if that ain't a sample of the average house dick," he exploded in a tone of tense disgust. "About the only thing that guy would be sure of would be the date on his pay check, an' then he'd be apt to be wrong. That was Jeppy at the Glenn Arms, an' he says the hotel switch has a record of two calls trunked out of the Hart girl's room around eight o'clock last night."

"After—" Bryce began in a voice of startled comprehension.

"Yes, after the docs say the thing happened." Johnson nodded. His lids were narrowed in speculation. He stood up. "Come on. I'm goin' over there to see him, an' as you two have horned into this thing you may as well come along."

His fingers pressed a button on his desk, and when an orderly answered its summons he demanded a police machine.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE ROOM IN THE GLENN ARMS.

THE machine was purring at the curb as we left the station. Ten minutes later it put us down in front of the Glenn Arms. Johnson rode in a frowning silence; Bryce chewed on his cigar. No question but Jeppy's unexpected message had proved a jolt to the inspector's self-satisfied poise, casting, as it could hardly help but cast, a doubt on his pre-announced conviction that the death of the night before had been an indubitable suicide. The thing had shaken him, moved him to instant action.

"Wait," he directed the police chauffeur as we left the car, and led the way straight through the doors of the fashionable hotel in a purposeful stride.

Jeppy was waiting for us. He sighted our entrance and came toward us across the foyer, scowling slightly in the manner of one with weighty affairs on his mind.

"Afternoon, Johnson," he said as he met us. "Hello, Glace; hello, Bryce. I reckon we'd better go somewhere an' talk things over."

"An' that's a good guess," Johnson growled. "What's been your notion in keepin' this dope on ice?"

"Why, I didn't know nothin' about it till the management told me," Jeppy explained as he led us into a small alcove off the foyer. "An' they didn't catch it until they was checkin' up on

last night's calls. All them things are charged, you know. An' that's how they picked it up. I got it to you as soon as—"

"The information was forced on you, eh?" Johnson grumbled as we found chairs. He appeared in an irascible mood and his tone as well as his words brought a tinge of color to Jeppy's cheeks.

"Well, I naturally wasn't expectin' any calls to have come from that dame's room after she was supposed to have knocked herself over," he rejoined.

Johnson eyed him. "An' just how are you so darned sure they did? How did you check up on the time they come through, I mean?"

"Easy," said Jeppy. "To begin with, none of the day girls knew a thing about 'em. An' we change shifts at eight o'clock. The girl on that section of the board is the only one what does. I've had her on the wire, an' she's comin' down. I sent a taxi for her."

Johnson nodded. "Then she oughta be here before long."

"Sure. I'm expectin' her any time." Jeppy's eyes swept the foyer, fastened upon the figure of a young woman crossing toward us. "There she is now," he said, and rose. "I'll get her."

He left us to meet the girl and bring her back.

"This is Miss Brown, the operator who trunked them calls," he announced.

"Sit down, Miss Brown," Johnson prompted and waited until the girl had taken a seat.

She was a trig little body with a quick intelligence in her face.

"Jeppy tells me you had two calls from Miss Hart's room last evening. That right?"

"Yes, sir."

The girl nodded, with her bright dark eyes on his face.

"About what time?"

"Just before eight, sir," Miss Brown answered without the least hesitation.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, sir, I am. Because it was just after I'd put on my set. You see, I'd come on fifteen minutes early so Mammie Bolling—she's the day girl on my section—could get off in time for a show. And those calls from 940 came through almost at once."

"Ninety-fourty was Miss Hart's room?" Johnson questioned.

"Yes, sir," Miss Brown nodded.

"You knew Miss Hart?" Johnson suggested.

The girl's expression altered. "Oh, yes. All us girls knew her," she answered quickly. "We thought she was grand. She was just as sweet as she was pretty. An' when it came to bein' pretty, she was the cats. It shook us up somethin' awful when we heard she'd—she was dead."

"DID she have a lot of calls?" Johnson asked.

"Yes, sir." Again the little operator nodded. "You know the sort of work she was doin', I guess. An' folks were always callin' her up, or she them, an' lots of times she had girls up in her room, like that one last night—the one who—found her."

"Uh-uh," Johnson said. "We know about that. But if you knew her and trunked a lot of her calls you'd probably know her voice. Now these calls last evenin'—did it sound like her puttin' 'em through or not?"

I stiffened. That was a pertinent question, and I saw its bearing in a flash. So did the little operator. Because her eyes widened and she caught her breath before she answered:

"Why—why, I—I hadn't thought of that. But now you mention it—the voice was—different—somehow."

"And"—Johnson leaned a bit forward and suddenly his tone was tense—"can you remember who or what place those calls were for?"

"The first one was to Monks Hall, that swell bachelor apartment house over on Park Drive," Miss Brown replied. "I know because I recognized the number. An' the second one was to the Parkway Club."

Johnson nodded. "Good girl," he said. "An' what were they about?"

It was a random shot, and I recognized it as such. But it did not fail of effect.

For the first time the girl hesitated in her answer. "I guess maybe you'd better make that a little plainer," she said at last.

Johnson shook his head as a man might at a refractory child. "We aren't tryin' to get you into any tangle, my girl," he assured her. "But this is apt to prove important, an' anything you say won't go any farther. There won't be any trouble about it, that is. You wouldn't be the first girl who's left her switch open an' got an earful over a wire. Now—how about last night?"

Still the girl did not answer. Instead she dropped her eyes and flushed.

"Come clean, kid," Jeppy prompted. "Listen: if you got any dope you owe it to Hart to spill it."

Miss Brown lifted her head. Her glance swung to Jeppy briefly and back to Johnson.

"An' that's an argument," she said. "All right. I'm human, I guess. An' there are lots of times when some funny stuff come over the wire to her room. A lot of it held a kick. So—well, sometimes we'd listen in. We got more'n one laugh. An' las' night when that call come from Monks Hall—that place bein' a swell bachelor joint—why, I did leave my switch open long enough to hear her ask for a guy by name. The Monks Hall's switch told her to page him at the Parkway Club. There, now, that's the low-down on the whole business—an' on the level I'd 'a' lied about it if it hadn't been for what Jeppy here said about my owin' it to Miss Hart."



"Well, it won't make you no trouble," Johnson reassured her. "But I reckon that ain't all. Not quite. You ain't told us yet who she was callin'."

"Gosh!" said Miss Brown. "That's right. It was a party by the name of Hubert Mumm."

"The jeweler?" Bryce exclaimed.

"Why, I don't know what he is," Miss Brown told him. "But that was the name all right."

"And did she get him at the Parkway Club?" Johnson asked.

"I dunno," she said. "Because I got a flock of flashes right after that. But I guess maybe she did, because it was several minutes before the connection broke."

"Well, all right. That's all, I guess," Johnson accepted her statement. "And thanks."

The girl rose. Her glance turned from one of us to another. "An' of course I don't know what it's all about really. But—I hope it helps," she said. "It's awful to think of her—doing what she did. She was always tryin' to help some one. It seems like there ought to have been some one to—help her, 'stead of—that. Say," she paused, "is there any doubt she did it? If it wasn't her put through those calls, would that mean—"

"We don't know just what it means as yet, Miss Brown," I told her. "But we want you to keep it to yourself. Don't talk till we know a bit more than we do now, if you *really* want to help."

"K. O." She nodded. "I reckon I'm hep. My Gawd, that would be pretty awful, but I'd rather think of it that way than that she did it herself. I gotcha. Maybe I do listen in on a wire sometimes, but that ain't sayin' I ain't first cousin to a clam. A mummy an' me is twins."

SHE walked out of the alcove without a backward glance, leaving the four of us chained for a moment by a silence which Bryce finally broke: "An' if them calls come in at the

time she says an' the doctors are right, then there was some dame in the Hart girl's room before that cabaret chick went in an' began to cackle."

"Yeah." Jeppy drew a kerchief and mopped his face. "But who? An' why did she call this guy Mumm? I reckon you know him, Bryce. I seen you recognized the name. He runs that jewelry store down the street here, an' he's a high roller. But who'd be callin' him from Hart's room after—"

"Maybe we'd better look that flop of hers over," Johnson cut in with a suggestion. His face was drawn into lines of consideration. "What's been done with her stuff? I mean, has anything been disturbed?"

"Not yet," said Jeppy. "Her rent's paid an' Lorne said to leave everything for a few days till arrangements was made about it."

"Who?" said Bryce.

"Why, Dick Lorne, her lawyer," Jeppy told him.

Johnson nodded. "Uh-uh. I know him. Well let's go up to her room an' take a look-see. If ever I seen a suicide, this was it, but if it wasn't there's something mighty funny about the whole works. Either it was suicide or it was one of the cleverest damned plants I've ever met. Come on. Let's get to work."

We crossed the foyer and caught a cage. On the ninth floor Jeppy led us out and along a corridor deep in a carpeting pile to a door which he unlocked.

We passed through it into the liv-  
room of a suite consisting of the room we entered, a bedroom and a bath. In the center of the first was a table with a brocade-upholstered chair drawn up beside it. And on the table was a framed photograph. I crossed and took it up while Bryce, Johnson and Jeppy pressed in at my side. It was of a child apparently between one and two years old, a boy in a sailor suit, clasping a toy dog in his arms.

"Same one was here last night," Johnson said gruffly. "We took the glass with us. But it was settin' on the table when we got here an' she was in that chair."

I put the picture down and glanced about. The room was beautifully furnished. Across it on the side next the bedroom door was a small writing desk, the leaf of it open, and close beside it was a telephone of the continental type on a small stand.

As I approached the desk, I noted a rectangular mark on its top.

"This room hasn't been made up since last night, has it, Jeppy?" I said.

"Nope," he said. "It ain't been touched."

"Then," I declared, "she usually kept that photograph on top of this desk. You can see where it usually set. Here's the very spot in the dust. It was carried from here to the table."

"That's right," said Bryce. "An' what's that writing on that pad beside the telephone there?"

"Let's see." I took up a small memorandum pad from beside the telephone. It bore a single number, which Johnson read aloud:

"Park 9279. Put that thing on the desk, Glace, an' keep away from the stand. If you'll look close you can see there's marks in the dust on the edge of the thing."

He was right, too, as one could see if he looked closely. Marks as of the fingers of a hand which might have gripped the edge of the stand while the telephone was being used. I saw them and so did Jeppy and Bryce. I looked into Johnson's eyes.

He was a sincere officer, whatever else he was, and they were filled with purpose.

"I'll get a phone and have 'em send up a man and some gray powder from the station and we'll get those and we'll run out that number. They ain't big, you notice. Look like a woman's hand. Whoever put in them two calls may

have made 'em. Anyway, it's a chance. You boys stick around till I get back."

HE hurried out of the room. Bryce found a fresh cigar and set it alight.

"Looks like there might have been something in Smithson's hunch after all," he remarked.

"If we can show there was somebody here between seven thirty and eight," I said.

"You mean that she didn't do it," Jeppy began and paused and added a single pregnant word, "herself?"

"Just." Bryce nodded. His glance turned about the room. "Swell dump she had here, Jeppy. How'd she keep up the front?"

"Darned if I know," Jeppy frowned. "I never bothered. Wasn't asked to. However she done it, she must have paid her bills."

"Have many callers—men, I mean?" Jim questioned.

"No," Jeppy declared. "You're on a dead card there, Bryce, if you ask me. She—well, she didn't seem to be that sort. Not but what she could 'a' been if she'd wanted. She was a slick little wren. But she didn't appear to wanta. She was a decent little egg. That's why I can't figure how this thing could have happened if she didn't do it herself. I can't see why anybody'd want to bump her off."

"Neither can I," said Bryce, as the door opened and Johnson reappeared.

"One of the boys from the fingerprint bureau is on his way up here, and I run out that number," he announced. "It's the residence of J. J. Raleigh, 2806 Park Drive."

"You mean J. J. Raleigh of the Raleigh Construction Company?" said Bryce.

"The same." Johnson nodded. "An' that ain't all of it, old scout. Raleigh's a widower, as I happen to know, an' so, havin' found his number wrote down on that scratch pad up here, I got hold of the captain of the bell hops

an' asked a few questions, to see if he'd been around here lately. An' I turned up somethin', even if it wasn't what I thought. Nobody'd seen Raleigh, but they had seen his daughter. She was here last night. One of the boys saw her in the foyer, chinnin' with Dick Lorne, last night."

"Lorne?" Jeppy exclaimed. "You mean the Hart girl's lawyer?"

"I reckon," Johnson nodded. "Leastwise, the boy said he knew him by sight, the same as he did Opal Raleigh. He just saw 'em as he was pagin' a party, an' ordinarily that might mean nothin' if it wasn't our havin' found Raleigh's number on that pad. But as it is, the two facts hook up."

I glanced at Bryce. He was frowning again, puffing out his lips till his stubby mustache bristled.

"Opal Raleigh's one of last fall's débutantes, ain't she?" he said slowly. "There was quite a splurge when she came out."

"Don't know," Johnson told him. "I ain't strong on society stuff. But she's old Jake Raleigh's daughter an' she was here last evenin'. An' as soon as that boy gets here from the bureau an' gets them finger-prints on that stand, it might not be a bad notion to see whether she knew the Hart girl."

"You ain't meanin' Opal Raleigh could 'a' had anything to do with— with what happened here las' night?" Jeppy mouthed in a tone that was actually startled.

"I dunno what I mean yet myself. But I'm sure beginning to wonder just what we're up against in this thing," Johnson growled.

## CHAPTER IV.

### FINGER-PRINTS.

I GLANCED at Jim and he closed the eye away from Johnson. There was little doubt but our friend had gone to the right-about inside the last hour in his attitude toward the case.

One could only write that to his credit, however, and I was convinced that from now on there would be no opposition on his part to our search for an understanding of what had really occurred in this room the previous night.

Jeppy, however, voiced a further comment: "Raleigh's a pretty big guy in this burg, brother. An' there ain't really nothin' in his girl's meetin' Dick Lorne las' night. Lots of folks meet here every evenin'."

"Right as usual," Johnson almost sneered. "An' there wouldn't be a thing in it if it wasn't for the fact that Hart or somebody wrote the number of Raleigh's house on that pad. But them two things check. An' I don't know whether you've ever noticed it or not but a big guy can slip on a little thing like a banana peel or the skin of a peach. It's the little things trip folks up."

"Like them phone calls I spotted, eh?" Jeppy suggested.

"Yeah." All at once Johnson's scowl relaxed. I saw his lips twitch. He had a saving grace of humor and now it flashed out. "Like them phone calls, Jeppy, what you picked up from the accounting department an' told me about. If you hadn't done that—"

A rap cut him short. He strode to the door and wrenched it open, admitted a headquarters man, and the two of them went to work.

Ten minutes later the faint traces of fingers on the telephone stand were matters of permanent record. We left Jeppy and the headquarters man searching for any other possible marks which might be used for comparison and made our way down from that tragic suite.

The police car still waited. It was past six o'clock. "Ought to be a good time to find Raleigh and that girl of his at home," Johnson suggested. "We'll run out to his place."

We climbed into the machine and he gave the driver the Raleigh address. The car slid away, nosed its dictatorial



way through the peak of traffic and fled along a quieter thoroughfare.

"It's your idea that the Raleigh girl may have turned in that call for Hubert Mumm, huh?" Jim questioned once we were out of the business district.

"Maybe," Johnson assented. "All we know, of course, is what that kid who trunked 'em says. But if she's tellin' the truth, an' I don't see any reason to doubt it, somebody turned 'em in and that somebody was a woman."

"An' if it was Opal Raleigh, them finger-prints on the telephone stand might be hers."

"Or Hart's. That's why I left Jep an' that boy from the bureau to pick up anything else they could find," Johnson said.

"Oh, sure. But if she was there, she evidently sneaked it without givin' an alarm. An' it's better'n even odds she won't admit it if we ask her," Bryce rejoined. "Naturally she's going to figure that it won't build her up to any great extent bein' anyways mixed up in a murder case."

"Hardly." Johnson nodded. "Still, if a guy ain't careless he can pretty often spot a lie when he hears it. An' the way I figure it, it can't do no harm to ask her."

"If she was in on the deal, no matter how, she's bound to be nervous, an' us comin' in on her—" He suddenly broke off and spoke to the chauffeur. "Hi! Hold up, Larry! Turn around an' follow that car—that blue roadster!"

"What the—" Bryce began as our machine swerved and swung in a quick turn in response to the snapping order. "What's up now?"

"The doll we was talkin' about," Johnson informed him, staring straight ahead down the street at the car we now trailed. "That was her we just passed—with Mumm! Don't let him shake you, Larry."

"Not a chance, inspector," Larry as-

sured him. "He's headin' straight down town an' I'll hang on his tail."

HE proceeded to make good his words for block after block, trailing the blue sportster, above the folded top of which I could see the heads and shoulders of a heavy-set man and a girl. Hubert Mumm and Opal Raleigh.

Johnson claimed he had recognized them and I did not doubt that he had. We had been close to the Raleigh home when he had ordered Larry to turn around. Apparently then Mumm and Miss Raleigh must have just left it in the former's machine. Hubert Mumm and Opal Raleigh. Last night some woman had called for Mumm from the room of a girl now dead. And the girl who now rode just ahead of us with him had been seen at the Glenn Arms, last night.

Traffic was getting thicker. Larry edged in on the tail of the car ahead. He dogged it deeper into the swarming press of the congested district.

But I am sure that neither Mumm nor his companion had any knowledge of the fact. They seemed engaged in conversation unmindful and unsuspecting of any espionage. In the end Mumm swung the blue roadster to the curb in front of a fashionable café and Opal Raleigh stepped out. I marked her youthful grace as she did so, the lines of her modishly garbed body, with its shimmer of dainty fabrics, its sheen of cobweb hose; her face, piquantly attractive in a brunette way, scarlet-lipped, a trifle haughty, with a well modeled chin and a straight cleanly chiseled nose. Then Mumm edged the car away, manifestly toward a parking space, and the girl turned and entered the door of the café.

"What now, sir?" Larry asked.

"We get out," Johnson decided. "Looks like they was goin' to eat. It ain't a bad notion. You go on back." He opened the door beside him and got out.

Bryce and I followed. Larry drove off. We stood on the sidewalk in front of the café.

"But if this is just a guy entertainin' his sweetie at a feed, what's the use of our stickin' around?" Jim inquired.

Johnson gave him a glance. There was something covert in his expression, I thought—something indicative of unvoiced thought in his mind. "You're a nice feller, Jim," he remarked. "An' you useta be a pretty fair cop. Personally, considerin' the time of day, I ain't averse to eatin' a bite myself. An' I'd as lief do it here as anywhere else. The bell hop who runs this place has a darned good chef."

"Bell hop, huh?" Jim grunted. "I reckon he saved his pennies an' started this joint."

"That's just what he did," said Johnson. "Bell hops make money nowadays. There goes Mumm. Come along."

He was right. Hubert Mumm had parked his car and returned. His heavy-set well-groomed figure was just turning into the restaurant door. I caught a glance of a blue shaved face, with a small continental type mustache on its upper lip, before he vanished, and the three of us shoved toward the café entrance.

We went in and checked our hats.

Mumm and Opal Raleigh were just before us, following a captain toward a table plainly reserved. A slender man in what seemed the early thirties attired in meticulous evening dress, stood watching the colorful scene before him.

"Wait a minute," Johnson said and approached him, engaged him in conversation after shaking hands.

"An' now what's he up to?" Bryce growled. "That guy's got somethin' in his mind."

I shook my head watching the two men, noting the glance of the younger turn, as I thought, toward that table at which Hubert Mumm and Opal Raleigh were even then seating themselves.

Then Johnson and he came back and Johnson introduced his companion as David Cox. The latter signaled the head waiter. "Find Inspector Johnson and his party a table on the east side of the floor," he said. "Glad to see you again, inspector. Glad to have met you, Mr. Glace and Mr. Bryce."

In the wake of the head himself, we followed to a table nearly the width of the floor from that at which Mumm and Opal Raleigh sat.

"**Y**OU'RE a slick dick, ain't you?" Bryce grumbled. "Now what's the notion? Spill it. Them folks you're supposed to be shadowin' couldn't hear you now, even if you was to shout. So what's the play?"

Johnson leaned back in his chair. He relaxed. A twinkle lurked in his eyes. "Take a slant that way an' you'll see Cox helpin' them order their supper," he suggested. "I asked him to do that."

"You asked him to? What for?" Jim demanded after a glance which verified Johnson's words. The dapper proprietor was bending in seeming solicitation close to Opal Raleigh's shoulder.

And suddenly Johnson chuckled. "Feller," he said, "you'll be surprised."

"I am surprised," Bryce made a grumpy rejoinder. "You foller them two in here an' then get a table clear across the house."

"Uh-uh," Johnson grinned. "That's right. An' you remember we started for Raleigh's place to ask that girl over there about last night. An' you suggested she might lie. An' I reckon if she was anyway mixed up in this Hart affair, you'd have probably proved right. So I'm tryin' to answer a part of what we might have asked her without her even suspectin' we'd care to ask it."

I looked into his face and laughed. Because Opal Raleigh had seemingly finished her selection and Cox had left

her table, was moving from one to another, pausing a moment or two to speak with one or more of his guests. "Not bad," I said, "not bad."

"If it works," he told me nodding. "That is, if it checks. When we leave here we'll go to the station an' see if it does or not."

"An' if it does?" Jim demanded, scowling.

"If it does, it 'll give us plenty power to make that little dame spill everything she happens to know," Johnson told him. "An' no harm done if it don't."

A waiter came up and we gave our order. But I kept my eye on Cox. He was still making his round of tables, working from the west side of the now crowded café to the east. But I saw that he carried a menu card in his fingers, held gingerly, as it seemed to me, by one edge.

Yet our supper was served and partly eaten before he came to our table and paused. "Everythin's all right, I hope, inspector," he said and laid the card he carried on the cloth by Johnson's plate.

"Fine, Dave, fine!" Johnson assured him.

"I slipped her a fresh card an' nobody's touched it since except me," Cox said. "Well, any time I can lend you a hand just slip me the office." He walked off.

And Bryce sighed. There was an almost accusing expression in his eyes. "I reckon I'm awake at last," he declared. "Finger-prints, eh? Hers? An' if they match, why then she turned in them calls—was in that room last night. An' if she was—"

"We got plenty reasons to ask her some questions, startin' with the fact that she was there," Johnson said. "An' that's a lot better place to start from than merely askin' her to tell us. That's why I asked Cox to slip her a card nobody else had used."

"Oh, I got it," Bryce declared. "You don't need to write it out. An'

it's clever. If her prints on that card are the same as those on that stand in Hart's room, you can knock her over the very first shot. Come on." He shoved back his plate. "Let's go over and see if they're the same."

We paid our check and left the café, nodding to Cox on the way out. And once outside we lost no time in getting to the station through the early evening crowd.

We went in under its green lights and made our way to the finger-print bureau, where Johnson explained his desire to have the prints taken at the Glenn Arms checked against those on the menu card. And having started that process, we went back down to the detectives' room to wait for the report.

THERE was a memorandum on Johnson's desk and he picked it up, glimpsed it and reached for the phone. "Jeppy again," he said.

He put through the call and waited until Jeppy came on the wire. "Yep," he said then, and sat for a moment or two with the receiver to his ear. "You're sure of that? Well, all right, Jeppy. Thanks."

He hung up, set the telephone aside. "He says the Raleigh girl left the hotel in a taxicab with some bird, according to the doorman," he announced.

"Lorne?" Jim suggested.

"Maybe," Johnson frowned. "I dunno where we're headin' in 'this thing, boys. But it sure looks like there was somebody in that room before the May girl went up an' let out her squawk. An' if there was an' if it should prove to have been Jake Raleigh's daughter—oh, the devil!" He sighed.

"Speakin' of the May girl, did she give you any idea of what she wanted to see Hart about?" Jim questioned.

"No. An' I didn't ask her," Johnson confessed. "She just said she had a date an' she had the letter to prove



it. An' the boy on the cage said he'd took her up not five minutes before she gave the alarm. An' it was plain Hart was dead before that. There wasn't any reason to hold her."

"That wasn't what I meant," said Bryce. "I was just thinkin' she might be able to throw some light. It still seems to me that her findin' the door unlocked when she went up there is a point we shouldn't overlook. It couldn't do no harm to see her, I reckon."

"No-o," Johnson conceded slowly. "I don't suppose so. An' I don't reckon it could do much good. She works at the Bohemian. One of these 'adagio' dancers as they call 'em."

The service phone beside him buzzed.

He caught it up and answered. I studied his face. It tensed to a quickened attention, a confirmation of suspicion. "You're sure of it?" he demanded. "There ain't any chance of a mistake. All right, Jackson. Thanks."

He slid the receiver back into place, brought his glance up to Bryce and myself. "And that checks anyway. Them finger-prints is the same. Opal Raleigh was in Hart's room last evenin' sometime," he said. "Come on, let's go over an' see this Molly May."

## CHAPTER V.

### CATCHING A TARTAR.

"AN' that's a hoppin' off point at least, I reckon," Bryce declared as he stood up. "She was in that room, an' she called Mumm at Monks Hall an' the Parkway Club from there. Why?"

"Damned if I know, Jim," Johnson said gruffly. "It don't match. It simply don't match. Opal Raleigh never went there an' mixed a dose of cyanide for that dame an' spilled the stuff on that toy dog."

"An' I ain't sayin' she did," Jim countered. "But she was there by all the evidence. This here is goin' to

take a lot of checkin' up. She was there an' she calls Mumm, an' then leaves with somebody, this Lorne for a guess, in a taxicab; and, once more at a guess, it was before the May girl shows up. Now why was she there an' why'd she call Mumm an' what did she tell him, an' how'd Lorne get into it?"

"Write your own ticket," said Johnson. "Right now it looks like I might 'a' made a bum guess last night. But if I did, then we're up against one of the foxiest plants I've ever seen. It was meant to look like what I called it."

"Uh-uh," Jim nodded. "I've a notion 'plant' is the word. Let's see what the May girl says."

What Molly May consented to say, however, proved of very little help. The manager called her into his office at our request, a slender, blond thing of possibly twenty, nearly naked under the robe she had folded about her when called.

"Hello," she accosted Johnson with a casualness which to me seemed forced, and sank into a chair. "You thought up a lot more questions than you asked last night, or what?"

"One I didn't ask you las' night was what you went up there to see her about?" he returned. "But I'm askin' it now."

I saw her eyelids flicker and narrow in the slight interval before she answered. "An' if you had asked me las' night, I don't know that it'd done you any more good than it's goin' to now."

"Meanin' you ain't puttin' out, eh?" Johnson's tone was gruff.

"Meanin' I ain't discussin' private affairs," said the little dancer. "Say—listen an' get this straight. I told you all there was to tell you las' night. I had this date with Miss Hart, see? An' I went to keep it an' knocked. Then when she didn't answer, I tried the door—. An' it was unlocked. So I looked in an' I could see her sittin' in her chair. At first I think she's

asleep, an' I go in. An' then I see she's dead, and it gives me an awful jolt. I screamed an' run into the hall an' tell a bell hop I met, an' he takes me to the house dick. An' he calls you an' holds me till you arrive. An' that's all. On the level, that's all."

"Uh-uh," Johnson accepted scowling. "How long had you known this Hart woman?"

"Whad'ja mean, Hart woman!" the little dancer bridled. "Let me tell you somethin'. Helen Hart was straight. I'd known her about a year, an'—"

"How well had you known her?" said Bryce.

She gave him a glance. "Say—I'm tryin' to tell you, ain't I?" she demanded and caught her breath. "I knew her well enough to know she was the salt of the earth. She was the one friend I had—the one real friend, I mean, an' now—now—"

Suddenly she caught at a fold of her robe and dabbed at her eyes. "Now she's gone. Why, say, she was so—so darned human. She understood. A girl could go to her an'—an' talk; tell her things, ask her what she'd oughter do. She wasn't only *my* friend, you understand. She was always helpin' some kid one way or another. She'd made that her work. An' to think she'd end up the way she did las' night. I can't hardly believe it yet. You see, I was goin' up there to meet her an' her lawyer, an' at first I thought she was asleep like I said. Then I went over an' her eyes was open, an' I—I touched her, an' her face was—cold."

"Her lawyer, eh?" Johnson caught at her emotion-betrayed slip. "You was goin' to meet her lawyer an' her, huh?"

**M**OLLY MAY narrowed her lids again and bit her lip. "Yes, I was," she said then in a tone from which once more all softness had fled.

"Dick Lorne?" Bryce asked.

"I don't know what his name was,"

Miss May declared. "Anyway, I didn't meet him."

"You don't know him by sight?" Bryce suggested.

"No, and I wouldn't if I saw him," said Miss May.

"And do you know Hubert Mumm?" Jim asked.

"Hubey Mumm, the jeweler?" Miss May questioned. "Sure, I know him, the big bum. Most of the girls in these night shows do, I guess, or did till—" Abruptly she broke off.

"Till what?" Johnson prompted, leaning toward her. "Come through with the rest of it, Molly. Till what?"

"Why, till he took to rushin' this Raleigh girl here lately," Molly told him. "It ain't no secret, not around places like this, at least."

"D'ye mean him an' her are engaged?" Johnson demanded.

"Engaged?" the girl he questioned repeated. "Lord, I don't know, inspector. But they're playin' around a lot."

And there it was again, the connection between Opal Raleigh and the man whom she presumably had called by telephone from the Glenn Arms hotel. There was the association between them coming from the lips of a cabaret entertainer as a thing of common knowledge. I glanced at Bryce and Johnson and read appreciation of the fact in their eyes. I suspected that it inspired Jim's following question.

"Girls in your line of work pick up a lot of dope on the high hats, don't you?"

She gave him a glance and her painted lips curled. "Brother, you'd be surprised."

"Not me," Jim grinned. "Did you ever tell any of that to your friend, Miss Hart?"

"Tell it to her? How'd you mean, tell it to her?" the dancing girl asked.

"Why, just tell her stuff you picked up," said Jim. "She might have made use of a lot of it."

I saw the girl's slender figure tense

and stiffen beneath her robe. I saw her blue eyes narrow and flash. To me it was evident that Bryce was harking back to his suggestion of blackmail as a possible explanation of much in Helen Hart's life. And manifestly Molly May did not miss the implication of his final words. Yet for a moment or two she sat breathing deeply before she spoke in a tone of almost contemptuous comprehension:

"Used it, huh? My Gawd! I suppose it's natural enough considerin' what you're always meetin', but you dicks sure do have filthy minds. Ain't I been tellin' you that Miss Hart wasn't that kind? An' then you sit there an' try to trip me into sayin' somethin' you could twist around to mean she'd do that sort of thing. Well, it's a wash-up if that's your notion. You're all damp. Helen Hart was more like a big sister or a—a mother to us girls. I—I never had a mother since I was a kid. But she was like that—if you can remember your own enough to know what I mean. An' now she's gone, can't do a thing or say a word in her own defense, an' you make a dirty crack suggestin' she would use anything we told her to blackmail some one else. She was white, I tell you, white! Not the head of a blackmail gang!" Her voice quivered, broke. "I call it a—a damned shame!"

"Well, call it anything you like to," Bryce mumbled, his face gone suddenly red. "I've asked you an' you've answered. But there's no use in your getting steamed. An' if you know so much about her, answer this one: Did she have money or—a friend? You know the Glenn Arms ain't a charitable institution."

"Oh, that's it." Miss May appeared to understand. "About her havin' money, I don't know. She never told me much about her affairs. But as for her havin' a friend, let me give you the low-down. It's my notion she'd had her fill of men. Say, she knew 'em. I've a notion she'd—suffered."

"She told you that much, did she?" said Jim.

"No. She didn't," Miss May denied. "But I ain't a nit-wit. I gotta mind. An' she knew so darned much, I simply figured it out that way."

**B**RYCE gave it up and changed the subject. "An' how long," he asked, "was you in her room last evenin'?"

"Why, I don't know, maybe two or three minutes," Miss May returned. "The thing hit me somethin' awful."

"And while you was there, you didn't see anything that might have made you think there was any one else around?"

"In her room?" The girl's eyes widened swiftly. Her lips parted. "Why, no-o." She dragged out the negative sound and went on in a tone of growing excitement. "But I didn't look around—in the bedroom or the bathroom or the closet. Say, d'ye mean that she didn't do it?—that there was somebody there? There could have been easy, I guess. An' they could have ducked outa sight when I knocked. Well, my Gawd!" She stood up a tense little figure in her robe. "Say, is there any way I can help?"

"We was hopin' you might," Johnson took advantage of her changed demeanor. "That's why we hunted you up to-night. We ain't sure what went on there, but we're hep to the fact there was somebody in that room before you got there. An' we was wonderin' if there could 'a' been any connection between what took you there an' the rest of it."

"Huh-huh," she said. Her brows knit in a frown. "It couldn't have, inspector. It couldn't. An' I don't like to spill it to a bunch of bulls. But maybe I'd better, after what you've said. If I do, you'll know I'm shootin' straight with you at least. I got a kid brother an' he thinks he's sort of a sheik. An' he's got himself into a jam. I—well I told Miss Hart about it an'



she arranged for me to meet her an' her attorney las' night an' see if we couldn't fix it up. I—well—the kid took some money, an' I was goin' to make good if this mouthpiece of hers could arrange it. I thought maybe he could, because the chicken the kid was makin' a flash for passed him up here a few days ago an' I think he's cured, see?"

"Sure!" Johnson assented with a heartiness that changed the whole atmosphere of the situation, and smiled as he went on: "An' don't you worry, Molly. Just forget we're a bunch of bulls. We are, but just the same we're human, an' what you've said we've already forgot. Ain't we?" His glance turned to Jim and me.

We nodded, just as a rap came on the door and the manager thrust in his head to inquire:

"How's tricks, inspector? Molly's due on the floor."

"All set," Johnson informed him. "That's all, Molly. Good luck."

"Thanks," she said. "An' if there's any way I can help, why, put me wise. I'd do anything for Miss Hart."

She drew her robe about her and slipped through the door.

"She's good," the manager said. "Want to watch her?"

We rose and followed him to a point from which we could command a sight of the dancing floor.

There was the spot of a flood light upon it. And in its circle of radiance was a girl's slender undraped figure, with a scintillating band about its bust, a scintillating pair of scanty trunks about its hips and thighs. It bent, balanced, contorted itself in time to a throb of music. It was Molly May, a dago dancer—just an orphan girl with a wayward brother, unveiling the beauty of her body before the eyes of a watching mob.

We waited until the dance was ended and she had fled away down a lane between the tables, then made our way outside.

"And that's that," Johnson remarked as we reached the street. "On a bet, that kid come clean at the last. But beyond the fact that Mumm an' the Raleigh girl are playin' around together, where does it lead us?"

"It leads us in jus' one direction," Bryce declared as he found a cigar.

"Yeah?" Johnson questioned. "An' where's that?"

"To Semi-Dual," said Jim, and struck a match.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE ASTROLOGER.

"**Y**EAH?" Johnson repeated slowly. He knew Dual well enough—had even appealed to him more than once in some puzzling matter through Jim and myself, and, as a result, had seen Semi demonstrate his uncanny ability of unraveling human tangles. "Well, maybe."

"I don't mean maybe," said Bryce. "Outside the fact that Opal Raleigh telephoned Hubert Mumm from Helen Hart's room last night, the thing's blind. An' Dual's the only party I ever knew who could see without usin' his eyes."

"Admittin' which," Johnson rejoined, "did it ever occur to you that there might be nothin' more to Opal Raleigh's bein' in that room, than there was to May's goin' there to keep her date? Maybe she had a date with Hart, too. There's nothin' yet to show she didn't."

"Nope," Jim conceded frowning. "And there's nothin' to prove she did, unless it was that house number of hers on that telephone pad. That's the trouble. We ain't sure of anything yet except that the Hart girl's dead an' that she died of cyanide. But we might know more if we knew what led up to it. That's why I say our next play should be to go to a man who knows how to dig up that sort of dope. You know how he works."

The last was a reference to Semi-Dual's use of astrology, that ancient science of the stars and their influence on mundane matters, in his endeavors to throw light upon human affairs. And Johnson was familiar with it, as his answer showed.

"Uh-uh. From what I know of the subject, which amounts to nothin' at all, he might be able to give us an idea or two along the line you suggest."

"Smithson suggested that we ask him to help if we found anything to indicate that her death might have been due to anything but suicide," I took sides with Bryce.

"Well—all right," Johnson assented. "It can't do no harm if he's willin' to sit in, an' it ain't far to the Urania from here. Let's go up."

That settled the discussion. We moved off, reached the Urania after a few minutes' walk and caught a cage to the twentieth floor. We left it, made our way along the corridor to the bronze-and-marble stairs, mounted them side by side and came out into Semi's garden at the top. And suddenly it was as though we had stepped into another world.

THERE was a faint moon, as I remember, and it filled the place with a subdued pattern of light and shadow, etched in silver and black. The perfume of Dual's flowers and shrubs was heavy on the air.

The white cube of the building tower, wherein he dwelt, stood bathed in the radiance of the moon, like some Old World shrine of classic outline. From it soft bells chimed in muted sweetness as we approached. The drip of water from a little fountain beside the central pathway tinkled faintly in its basin as we passed.

Abruptly a door in the tower showed a yellow rectangle before us. In it, as we reached it, Henri, Semi-Dual's one companion in the world apart he had fashioned, bowed.

"Welcome, friends of the master.

He awaits you within," he spoke in greeting and stepped back.

We passed in, crossed an anteroom done in soft browns, and paused at a farther door on which Bryce tapped.

"Come!" a bell-like voice wave invitation.

We entered the room beyond and paused.

Semi-Dual sat beside a great desk on which an electrolier—a life-sized bronze figure of Venus, holding a glowing glass apple in an outstretched hand—cast a golden light. And as we came to a stand before him he rose, showing a splendidly proportioned figure, clad in trailing white robes unrelieved in their virgin color save for an edging of purple on collar and hem and sleeve.

So for a moment he stood while his deep gray eyes searched our faces. And then he smiled.

"Greeting to you, friends on the Path, who come seeking knowledge, not for yourselves, but on behalf of another, as I perceive," his perfectly modulated voice intoned.

"Be seated and lay before me the cargo of your minds, if perchance from a consideration of it we may arrive at an answer to those questions you would ask. Or, wait, shall I ask the question before you ask? You, Gordon—"

He turned his glance to mine, a faint smile still on his lips. "To me it seems that through you, my interest is invoked in this. Open your mind and I will read it. So, there is a woman dead. And her friend—her employer—ah, Smithson, your old chief of the *Record*—asks your aid—to show the manner of her death—whether murder or—suicide."

I nodded. I knew, had seen demonstrated many a time, the almost uncanny ability of reading a man's thoughts which was his. And so had Bryce.

He grinned now as Semi paused. "Bull's-eye!" he exploded, removing his cigar. "Don't never let anybody call you a bone-head, Gordon. That

top piece of yours ain't ivory—it's glass."

Semi-Dual smiled again at his outburst and waved us to seats, resuming his own at his desk. "And now, Gordon, tell me in detail," he prompted. Once more his gray eyes rested on me briefly before he closed them, lay back in his chair and folded his hands across his robe.

And I complied, even as many a time I had complied before, beginning with my call from Smithson, following down the course of events which had since transpired.

While my story lasted, Semi-Dual neither spoke nor moved. He scarcely seemed to breathe. Yet I knew that no word nor intonation of my voice was missed. Back of those closed lids an intelligence like no other I had ever met was apprehending each item as uttered, seizing upon it, making it a thing of record, giving it a value for future use.

And so I gave him each and every detail down to and including our interview with Molly May, with its somewhat pathetic earnest of her sincere interest in the matter of Helen Hart's death, and her sorrow-wrung proffer of any help toward a solution of the problem which she might give.

"A toy dog," he said when I paused, his gray glance shifting to Johnson, "with cyanide sprinkled on its coat. She was holding it when you saw her?"

"Yes. It was sort of crushed up against her." Johnson nodded.

"And there was a photograph of a male child holding a similar dog, on the table?"

"The same dog, the way I saw it," Johnson said.

"A H. yes—the same dog," said Semi-Dual. "The thought was natural enough. A memento, a plaything kept through the years; a symbol of mother-love. The physicians say she had borne a child?"

"Yes." Again Johnson nodded.

"An' that's the way it looked to me—like it had been his an' she'd kept it, an' died holding it an' lookin' at his picture." His voice sounded a trifle husky as though even with him the suggestion of the words had not failed of its effect.

"Precisely," Dual assented. "That is the way it would appear. And there was nothing else?"

"Not then," said Johnson. "Not till Jeppy rung up an' we went there an' found the number of Raleigh's house on that telephone pad, an' the marks of the Raleigh girl's fingers on the telephone stand as though she might have gripped the edge of the thing while she was puttin' through them calls."

"As she might have done under emotional stress," Semi-Dual declared. "Referring now to Miss Hart, about what would you have considered her age?"

"I'd say she was probably twenty-seven or eight," Johnson told him.

"And at what time were you called to the Glenn Arms?" Semi inquired.

"Between eight and half past, as near as I can spot it," Johnson replied. "I know it was eight thirty-five when we got to the hotel, by the clock over the desk. An' as it ain't far an' we run over in a car, why, I'd say Jeppy musta put his call through about, say, eight twenty-five."

"We will assume that to be approximately correct," Semi said and made a notation on a sheet of paper. "And I shall do what I can to answer the more essential question which we must consider yet to-night. For our actions in the matter, as I see it, depend upon a determination as to whether this woman's death was the result of suicide or not. I shall consider that first."

"And you expect to be able to—er—determine that?" Johnson lifted a hand and ran a heavy finger about his neck, between it and his collar.

"Oh, yes." Once more Semi smiled.



Johnson had never been quite able to maintain his poise when confronted by the occult elements of Dual's methods. "That part of the matter should prove simple, I think. I shall erect a horary figure, as it is called, of the event. In it the actors connected with it and some indication of their major line of conduct will appear past any doubt. From that we should be able to certainly determine whether Miss Hart's death was self-inflicted or the reverse."

"If you say so, I ain't doubtin' it will," Johnson conceded. "So at that rate I suppose the only thing for us to do is wait till you see what it shows."

"Not necessarily," said Dual. "It is sometimes well to work while one is waiting. Thereby one may lay the foundations for yet further work. And there are two essentially different though similar points of departure for a first consideration of this woman's death. For while both hinge upon the element of mother-love, the meaning of one must be the reverse of the other. Hence it appears to me there are certain steps which may consistently be taken in the meantime and which you will quite naturally take. That Miss Raleigh was in the dead woman's room would appear to be a thing established beyond a reasonable doubt. Miss Raleigh should be interviewed. That she called the man Hubert Mumm would also appear to be a fact already proved. It might be well to see what explanation Hubert Mumm has to give. And in so far as I can see, it could do no harm to learn what moves this lawyer Lorne has made as the attorney

for the deceased, and whether or not he left the hotel in company with Miss Raleigh last night as you suggest.

"You have said, too, that the girl of the café had a letter from Miss Hart making an appointment, and that she proffered you her help. I would suggest that you ask her to permit you to bring me the letter she has from Miss Hart. Such activities as I have listed should, I think, if properly carried out, provide the three of you with sufficient occupation until to-morrow evening."

"I reckon," Johnson assented and rose. "All right. We'll run out the lines you suggest an' come back to-morrow night."

"At which time," said Semi-Dual, "I shall be in a position to advise you as to whether a mother's love has been merely manifested in a form of pitiful pathos or—betrayed."

"And that's the way he works," Johnson sighed once we were back on the top floor of the Urania, waiting for a cage. "We'll chase these folks all over the town, and in the meantime he'll decide whether this thing was suicide or murder without ever leavin' his place.

"An' while I ain't doubtin' that he can do it, it always gets my goat. Regardless of which, we're going to do what he says. What time do we start in the mornin'?"

"Oh, around nine or nine-thirty," said Jim. "If that Raleigh girl is playin' around with Mumm, as we know she is to-night, she'll probably sleep late. And I'd someway like to see her first."

"K. O. I'll be waitin' for you at the station then," Johnson agreed as the cage came up.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.





*He snatched up the eight-foot lance*

## The Boat Share

*Danger lurks in the rush of a swordfish—but that was not the only danger stalking the decks of the schooner Alberta*

**By WARREN E. CARLETON**

"CHRISTOPHER MIGHTY! Manuel's afoul of a bad un!"

From the after deck of the two-masted schooner Alberta, Captain Hank Lewis's wrinkly blue eyes took in the man in the dory playing the swordfish. Through the lone doryman's hands the line burned and streaked over the brown gunwale. With a sharp "lily iron" harpoon buried firmly in its flesh, the agonized monster bolted to the ocean depths.

But the Portuguese, guiding the cordage coiled evenly at his feet, did not check its downward plunge. His black eyes were anxious, his face blanched under its deep tan.

Between the chunky, middle-aged skipper and the sturdy wheelsman, a

tall, square-shouldered figure with loose yellow oilskins over soiled white yachting clothes braced himself on wobbly legs to counteract the lurches of the schooner in the ground swell. His eyes were blue, his sharp features pale and too liberally coated with anti-sunburn lotion. His light-brown hair was scanty around the forehead.

Unmistakably he was a landsman, whose health, despite his well-trained muscles, was impaired by a severe case of seasickness. Judging from his looks, he was in the middle thirties; certainly his present misery didn't help him to look any younger.

But even the most desperately seasick landsman would have taken an interest in what happened next. For the

line which Manuel held went slack. Still holding it, he scrambled up on the bow thwart of the dory. Rapidly he hauled in the line—reached the ten-fathom knot—

The dory bounced almost out of the greenish water. Manuel pitched forward and landed heavily on hands and knees. The dory swayed, agitated by a power stronger than that of the mild ocean surges, its bottom thumped by a huge tail. Out of the water stabbed a yard or more of a black bony snout, tapering to a point as sharp as the arrow of the lily iron that had goaded the deep-sea fighter to the attack.

Manuel clambered to his feet, grabbing an eight-foot pole, to the end of which a sharpened flat iron file was attached. Leaning over the gunwale, he jabbed it repeatedly under the dory. The thrashing of the big blue form under it increased, the water boiled. Then the turmoil ceased. A reddish tint on the calming surface told that the lance point had punctured the gills of the swordfish, and the battle was ended.

"Godfrey!" exclaimed the skipper, as the schooner curved toward the dory. "Guess I ironed that swordfish in the head—had to strike him quick, he was so swift. That's what made him crazy. I wouldn't of struck him there if I could of helped it."

Alongside the dory, the schooner slowed down. Manuel clambered over the rail, and he and the skipper hoisted the dory and swordfish together on the "taycle." Bert West, the wheelsman, started the engine, and the schooner ranged for more game. Manuel returned to his customary perch on the foremast-head crosstrees, where four of his shipmates were maintaining their all day lookout for the curved black dorsal fins of more swordfish.

Meantime the landsman fell upon the swordfish with a butcher's cleaver. He hacked off the sword, the fins and the big black quarter-moon tail, until the three-hundred-pound body resem-

bled the eight-foot model of a submarine. With an air of immense satisfaction, he returned to the after deck—and then slumped weakly down on the wheel box, his pride in himself suddenly overcome by a roll of the ground swell.

**B**UT the skipper and the wheelsman did not comment on the accidental ironing of the swordfish in the head, nor did they make light of their green shipmate's misery. With his hands behind his back, his sea-booted stubby legs straddled wide apart, Captain Hank pointed to the two other schooners that were ranging over Georges Banks in that locality, their distant sails twinkling in the setting mid July sun.

"Them," the skipper explained to the groggy landsman, "are two vessels o' the swordfishin' fleet, like the Alberta. That first one is Cap'n 'Sunny Jim' Carey, in the Theresa. Queer cuss, Cap'n Jim. Don't like me, fer some reason or other—never speaks me on the Banks, so I don't bother to speak him. Jist nachally give each other a wide berth.

"But that other one"—pointing to the second sail—"that's Cap'n Fred Thomas in his own schooner, the Gray Lady. High-liners o' the whole fleet, Cap'n Fred an' his boys be. Him and me are great friends. He'll drop in on us nights later on, him and his boys. Sociable. When they do come, I want ye should git out your cornet and play some o' them tunes to them that ye played to me 'fore we struck this ground swell that set yer inner cargo to shiftin'."

"The way I feel now," miserably confessed the landsman, "I'll never blow that cornet again."

Captain Hank smiled sagaciously. "It ain't the ground swell that done it," he declared. "It's the effects o' the likker ye've nigh ruined yerself with. After this trip I'll set ye ashore a new man."

But when night came and fishing was knocked off for the day, the ground swell lessened. In the bright starlight the ocean was a vast circular mirror, scintillating like a sea of gems, smooth as glass.

Not far from the Alberta the Gray Lady was jogging, the wheels of both schooners hard aport in becketts; mainsails, foresails and jumbos up to catch what few breeze puffs ruffled the water. Farther to port the Theresa jogged on a similar port task.

On the Alberta's deck the greenhorn had his tarnished brass cornet out, and with new interest in life, was seated on the cabin house, blaring forth "Robin Adair." His lips were a bit furry, but his tones carried clear as a bell across the calm water. And when he had finished, a hearty ovation of hand-clapping, cheers, and the squeals of a hand-pumped foghorn rose from the deck of the Gray Lady. But no applause came from the Theresa.

He followed with other songs, then played "The Sailor's Hornpipe" and other lively airs, reading the notes from a small book of music braced against the coaming under a lantern. At last his lips tired, so he called off the concert for the night. While he was returning the cornet and the book of music to the cornet case, a dory was launched from the Gray Lady. A few moments later two men in black oilskins drew up to the Alberta.

"Come aboard, Cap'n Fred!" Captain Hank greeted. And when the two visitors had hoisted themselves over the rail: "What d'ye think of our Gabriel?"

Captain Fred Thomas's square, hard face took on an ugly frown, and his sullen brown eyes stared challengingly at the convalescent musician. Then he smiled with evident relief.

"Where'd ye pick him up?" he inquired. "I ain't never met him before, I cal'late."

"He's the Widder Carnes's nephew—Wilfred Carnes is his name," Cap-

tain Hank managed the introduction. "The widder sent him with me to git him on the water wagon, besides givin' him a taste o' the fishin' business, seein's he'll inherit the Alberta one o' these days."

"Yeah?" Captain Fred snickered. "Turnin' the Alberta into a gold cure, eh? Wilfred does look like he'd been steppin' sort o' high. When I heard that cornet, thinks I: 'I've heard that fella play before.' Don't you remember, Hank, there used to be a fella ten or twelve years ago on a Bluenose schooner that used to play a cornet off the Grand Banks—a fella that licked nigh ev'ry scrapper in the fleet—"

Captain Hank laughed. "Oh, Lord, you're thinkin' o' Mel Frost!" he said. "Why, him an' Wilfred are no more alike than peas an' spinach—well set up though Wilfred is, Mel would 'a' made two of him. Speakin' o' Mel Frost, though, did ye know he's marine sup'rintendent o' the Tucker shippin' line now, Fred, in New York? Yeah, I see his name in the shippin' news quite often."

"I knew a rich woman got int'rested in him when he was fishin' out o' Gloucester and sent him off to school—that's the last I heard of him, though." Captain Fred eyed Wilfred again. "Cal'latin' to learn how to haul swordfish?" he inquired of the landsman.

"Aunty won't leave me the schooner if I don't," replied Wilfred.

CAPTAIN FRED roared with laughter and beckoned for Captain Hank to go with him into the forecabin.

"The widder's smellin' a rat," declared Captain Fred worriedly.

"Rat hell!" retorted Captain Hank. "I was suspicious o' Wilfred at first, too—but I've changed my mind. He's wrecked himself booze fightin', and his only interest in the old lady is to figger in her will."

"Git him out o' sight, though, when we shift the Alberta's swordfish to the



Gray Lady," advised Captain Fred. "Two seasons now the Alberta's fetched slim catches into Boston, when in reality most o' the swordfish ketched on her trips have been brought in by the Gray Lady.

"It's a wonder the widder ain't smelled a rat a'ready, the way you and me and our crews have been whackin' up between us the one-fifth o' the gross receipts from the sale o' the swordfish that by rights was the widder's boat share."

"She might 'a' got suspicious and fired me," admitted Captain Hank, with a confident chuckle, "if she could find a skipper an' crew who'd sail in a vessel that's got the name o' bein' a hoodoo schooner. That's why it's safe enough fer me to keep on splittin' up the boat share with you and our boys, besides ringin' in on my share o' four-fifths o' the gross receipts like all fishin' skippers and crews rightfully do."

"Long as you're game to keep on gittin' away with it, I am," declared Captain Fred. "But how the widder holds out stumps me, 'less some o' Cap'n Carnes's friends are helpin' her. Cap Carnes was mighty popular when he was alive. He didn't leave the widder any money to speak of. Her earnin's from boat shares since then ain't paid a trip's expenses."

"But she agrees with me after each trip that the Alberta's havin' a run o' bad luck, and that our luck'll change some day," Captain Hank chuckled. "This season will finish her, though, I cal'late—her money will give out, and then you and me can buy the Alberta cheap. No one else will bid fer a hoodoo ship."

"But don't let Wilfred git any proof o' what we're up to, even if he is a chucklehead," repeated Captain Fred. "When'll you be ready fer us to take over some o' your swordfish?"

"The next foggy night," answered Captain Hank. "We've got twenty-eight on ice now—we'll leave four or

five o' that batch in the Alberta to kid the widder along. And if Wilfred should git wise to what we're up to—waal, that ambition o' his to haul a swordfish himself will take care o' him, all right."

The next day, Wilfred's seasickness did not return. Already the color in his cheeks was beginning to match the outwardly seeming high development of his arms and neck and shoulders. He applied the sunburn lotions more moderately. With alacrity he performed his sole task aboard ship—the trimming of swords, fins and tails from swordfish bodies.

As days went by, Wilfred was scornful while he amputated the fins of swordfish after swordfish.

"Nothing to it!" he disparaged the achievements of the dorymen. "Why, any boob could tucker one of those babies out and jab a lance into its gills. When's the skipper going to let me try my hand at it?" he questioned Bert. "If aunty asks me if I've caught a swordfish, I want to tell her I have, and not lie when I do it."

"No hurry," replied the stoical Bert, a humorous twinkle in his slits of eyes. "Jist now it looks like we're in fer a spell o' fog."

"Pshaw—others haul swordfish in fog—I guess I can," scoffed Wilfred, throwing back his square shoulders, already a new man, braced by the health-restoring life aboard the schooner. "Lead me to 'em—that's all I say—lead me to 'em!" he challenged, saturated with self-confidence.

ONE night the fog did come, thick as cow's milk, coursing in rivulets down the Alberta's deck, running off the limp sails like the drip from drainpipes. And in the midst of it Captain Fred again boarded the Alberta. Not in a dory, however—he ran the Gray Lady alongside and worked her so close to the Alberta that he and his crew could jump from one rail to the other. The two crews

formed groups on the Alberta's deck, telling stories and smoking.

The two skippers started for the forecandle. On the way Captain Hank sang out to Wilfred:

"Git your cornet—come below and give us a few tunes. Let the boys gam on deck—Cap'n Fred and me prefer music."

Wilfred obligingly went with them. In the forecandle he played songs and jigs for the two skippers, who applauded and called for more. Between tunes they told stories, boisterously laughing and slapping their thighs, while Wilfred looked on amusedly.

In reality, however, the two skippers didn't care a hang for the music, nor were they really hilarious over their oft-repeated yarns. What they were striving to do was to drown out to some extent, and to hide from Wilfred's attention, the racket on deck caused by the transfer of the Alberta's swordfish to the Gray Lady.

The two schooners were scraping alongside each other, with now and then a pronounced bump that vibrated the forecandle. Voices came from the hold on the other side of the forecandle bulkhead, accompanied by shovel thrusts into the ice in which the swordfish bodies were packed.

"Give us a good old-time jig," suggested Captain Fred. "I feel like takin' a few steps. 'Turkey in the Straw'—you know that tune?"

"Sure—'Turkey in the Straw,'" chimed in Captain Hank, eager to center Wilfred's attention on his music.

"I have to play that piece by note—I don't know it by ear," said Wilfred, laying down his cornet, ready to oblige them. "Wait a minute, I'll get it. The music for it is in a book in my cornet case."

He was on the ladder and ascending to deck, where he had left his cornet case, before either Captain Hank or Captain Fred could head him off.

"Hey—hold on—never mind it!"

Captain Hank shouted after him. But Wilfred was already up on deck and out of earshot.

Up the ladder raced Captain Hank, Captain Fred close behind him. There stood Wilfred, staring wonderingly at the activity of the two crews, whose members were dragging swordfish carcasses from the Alberta's hold and passing them to hands waiting to receive them aboard the Gray Lady.

The two crews, however, were too occupied to notice Wilfred's presence. He ceased watching them, found his cornet case, and returned to the forecandle, the small book of music in his hand. The two skippers retreated down the ladder ahead of him, and when he reached the forecandle they were seated on the bench where he had left them.

But Wilfred seemed to regard the commotion on deck as a part of the regular fishing routine about which any inquiries would only betray his ignorance to the visiting skipper.

"I've got it," he said, opening the book of music and leaning it against the cold cooking range. "Here goes!"

Keeping time with one foot, he enthusiastically launched into the lively strain of "Turkey in the Straw." The two skippers exchanged a wink, then both leaped to their feet and danced an animated breakdown, the forecandle shaking under their sea boots.

It was ten o'clock before the meeting broke up and the visiting skipper and his crew returned aboard the Gray Lady. But before the Gray Lady chugged away into the fog, Captain Hank corraled Captain Fred on a secluded portion of the Alberta's deck.

"That damn sap seems innocent enough," Captain Hank remarked, "but the fact remains, he knows what we're up to—or would know, if he's got brains enough."

"It don't make no diff'rence whether *he* knows or not," put in Captain Fred. "If he gits ashore, he's goin' to tell what he saw on deck, and if he don't

put two an' two together, some one else will. Which'll be jist as bad fer us and all hands."

"We got to git rid o' him," decreed Captain Hank. "We can't afford to have him go ashore and let the cat out o' the bag."

**B**UT Captain Hank waited for another fog, which came two mornings later. The mild south-westerly breeze brought it around ten o'clock, shutting off the Alberta's view of the Theresa, which was ranging a mile or so to the southeast, and the Gray Lady, a mere twinkling speck on the southern horizon.

After Manuel and Dan Morris had each hauled a swordfish successfully in the thickness, while the schooner ranged around their dories, the skipper waddled to the cabin house, upon which Wilfred was sitting, cornet in hand, resting between selections.

"Think ye can haul a swordfish if I give ye the chance now?" inquired the skipper. "I cal'late ye've seen enough of 'em hauled to know how it's done."

Wilfred's face became serious. He did not reply.

"Ain't backin' down, be ye?" goaded the skipper. "Come, come—the boys'll think you're scared, all the talk ye've made about wantin' to haul a swordfish. They'll think you was bluffin'."

"Oh—of course—of course I'm anxious to go!" Wilfred quickly spoke up, forcing a mirthless smile. "But in this fog?"

"Don't worry—we'll keep in sight o' ye," Captain Hank reassured him. "The schooner'll come to ye quick if anything goes wrong. But nothin' will go wrong—swordfish are meek as kittens in thick weather," he lied.

"I'll take my cornet with me, in case the schooner should happen to lose track of me," Wilfred told him. "If you hear this note, you'll know I'm in trouble—that I want you to pick me up."

He put the cornet to his lips and blew a shrill high note, holding it for a lengthy interval.

The skipper stopped his ears with his fingers.

"Christopher mighty!" he shouted. "I'll reco'nize that note, all right! Don't blow it ag'in!" he restrained Wilfred from rendering an encore.

Wilfred smiled and played instead a series of lively bugle calls.

"That's better," the skipper remarked, and started to walk off toward the wheel.

"Starb'ard! Starb'ard!" cried Manuel from the foremast head, pointing excitedly at the black scimitar rising from the surface a few fathoms ahead of the bowsprit.

Wilfred laid down his cornet as Bert West, at the wheel, slowed down the schooner to give the skipper time for a perfect strike. Into the "pulpit" at the tip of the bowsprit scurried squat Captain Hank.

From the waist-high iron hand rail fronting him, he unlashed the eighteen-foot harpoon pole and lowered it over the side of the pulpit platform, while he studied the position of the curved black fin toward which, under Bert's guidance, the schooner was plodding. Unaware of the Alberta's approach, groggy with the young herring and squid it had eaten, the lazy blue swordfish basked loglike in the warm sunlight.

With the shaft of the pole steadied in his left hand, the right cupped over the uplifted butt, Captain Hank stood rigid. The swordfish was now less than a fathom ahead of the bowsprit.

"Hard astarb'ard!" the skipper shouted aft, poising with the pole raised for the shot.

The schooner swung sharply—the pulpit platform curved toward the fin, until the swordfish was almost in the shadow of the bowsprit. If the skipper did not hurry up and let fly the pole—if the swordfish took fright at the shadow creeping over it—

The big tail whirled like a propeller. The blue body settled lower.

Down flashed the pole. A white swirl vanished under the Alberta's prow as the swordfish dived to deep water, the lily iron planted deep in the luckless monster, and detached from the metal shank at the business end of the lengthy wooden shaft. The skipper hauled back the pole by its bib line. Out shot the line attached to the lily iron and strung along the side of the schooner to the deck amidships, where its one hundred fathoms were coiled and fastened to a black buoy keg.

Beside the keg, Benny Prescott, the cook, threw over the rail the remaining coils and the keg itself, which floated on the surface, jerked by the struggling victim of the skipper's deadly harpoon aim.

THE skipper struck at such close range that Wilfred and Bert, standing aft, could hear the *quash* of the iron into its victim. Bert unleashed the painter of the dory towing astern from the after bitt.

"Go ahead—pick up the keg—play the swordfish!" Bert instructed Wilfred, holding the dory up for the landsman to jump into it.

With his cornet under his arm, Wilfred lowered himself awkwardly into the dory. He laid the cornet on the bow thwart, shipped the oars, and rowed out to the keg, which was not bounding over the surface but floating tranquilly in the long, gentle surges. Wilfred yanked in his oars.

He reached over the gunwale, took in the keg. A vivid blue streak flashed under the dory—the slack line sagged out of sight. Up on the thwart Wilfred scrambled like a squirrel and stood on it half erect, momentarily expecting the swordfish to crash against the bottom planking, as it had done when Manuel hauled the fish crazed by a head wound.

Vigorously Wilfred hauled in fathom after fathom of the limp line and

coiled it under the thwart. The Manila strands suddenly tightened and darted irresistibly out through his unwilling fingers. Wilfred jumped down from his perch. The swordfish was putting for the ocean depths as well-behaved ironed swordfish should.

But the plunge of the desperate monster was of brief duration. Again the line went slack, and Wilfred yanked it in. Again he scurried to the elevation of the bow thwart.

With a commotion like the explosion of a depth bomb, out of the fog-veiled water ten or a dozen yards to starboard of the dory the swordfish leaped, arched like a titanic trout, sword and tail shaking mightily, and with a terrific splash, dropped into the water again.

Through the flying spray a thin white furrow cleft the smooth green surface—a furrow that traveled with the speed of a rifle bullet, leaving a broad white wake straight as a plumb line behind it. Then abruptly both furrow and wake vanished. The swordfish had gone under.

Again the depth-bomb commotion, this time so close to the dory that its occupant was drenched by the shower of settling spray. Past the dory—so close that Wilfred could have touched it with an oar—streaked that furrow, sharp as the tip of the swordfish's sword. The wake which the broad blue black left behind rocked the little boat.

Wilfred paid out line again—jumped down from the thwart. The swordfish, however, had not gone under—the white water encircling the dory with a hundred-foot radius marked, through the fog, its random course on the surface.

Wilfred breathed more freely. As long as the swordfish didn't come closer, at the clip it was traveling it would soon exhaust itself. The longer it continued its circuitous charges over the ground swell, the more speedily it would yield to the pressure of the line



that would steadily draw its gills within range of Wilfred's deadly lance.

"Holy mackerel!"

Straight toward the stern of the dory that fine furrow and white wake shot like a torpedo! The swell lifted the dory, changing the position of the back and fin so that the sword was aimed amidships, where Wilfred, helplessly holding the slack line, stared fascinated at the onrushing blue peril.

The lance! Through Wilfred's bewildered brain the recollection that the weapon was lying at his feet flashed like chain lightning. He dropped the line, snatched up the eight-foot pole, held it in both hands, thrust its iron point close to the water in direct line with the jet of approaching spray shot up by the tip of the sword. Projected the pole as far off as he could reach, braced his feet, and waited.

The wooden shaft flew out of his grasp. He fell backward and landed asprawl on the bow thwart. A crash—the splintering of wood—the sidewise swishing of the dory! A sharp pain stabbed through the calf of Wilfred's right leg. The sea—the sky—everything around him turned red.

Water gushed around his ankles. In the midst of it a long black shaft was vigorously waving. Alongside the crippled dory a huge black tail descended in a succession of powerful and rapid slaps on the swirls it was causing.

In the side of the filling dory gaped a wide hole, which widened more with each mighty effort of the swordfish to disengage its snout from the woodwork. Above the gunwale of the punctured side of the craft another shaft rose, jerking back and forth with each motion of the writhing blue back and thumping tail. The wooden handle of the lance! The lance head was buried somewhere in the hide of the great fish, driven deep by the impact from which Wilfred's arms were still numb.

He jumped up. Through the boarding water, past the waving sword, he waded—grabbed the lance handle,

wrenched it and pulled it. Planted in solid bone though the iron lance head was, between Wilfred's yanks and the floundering of the swordfish, it yielded. He hauled it out—drove it again and again into the water where he judged the monster's gills must be.

The red of sea and sky was deepening to black. His strokes of the lance grew weaker and weaker. Higher rose the water around his boots. The pain in his right leg was like the throbbing needle jabs of a dozen toothaches. The dory settled under him.

AS soon as Wilfred had left the Alberta to play the swordfish, Bert West opened up the engine and headed due north—the opposite direction from the landsman's dory. Laughing jubilantly, Captain Hank rushed up to the wheelsman, who had been carefully rehearsed in the course he was to steer.

"That takes care o' Wilfred," declared the skipper. "If ever a swordfish was crazy, that one had ought to be. I had plenty o' time to iron him jist where I wanted to—square in the head."

They listened for the high-pitched note of Wilfred's cornet. But only the distant chugging of the engine of one of the other two schooners in that locality came from the thick fog.

"Wilfred's thoughts ain't on that trumpet o' his jist now, you bet!" chuckled Captain Hank. "He didn't even have a chance to git up a pucker when he got afoul o' that swordfish. We'll jist forgit him, and pick up all the swordfish we can twixt now and night. Cap'n Fred'll take on his last load o' swordfish from us to-night, then we'll clear fer Boston with the dozen I've got picked out to keep the wool pulled over the widder's eyes."

But late that afternoon in the course of her ranging, the Alberta again passed over the stretch of water where Wilfred had last been seen.

"Wreckage—off the port bow!"

shouted Manuel from the foremast head. "It's a dory—what's left of one!"

With boat hooks, the skipper and Bert hoisted it aboard. They at once identified the broken craft as Wilfred's. The dead swordfish was still fast to the tangled harpoon line, and was floating on the surface, white belly up.

"That settles it," decided Captain Hank. "The weight o' Wilfred's boots and ilskins carried his body to the bottom. We'll dip our flag to half mast and cultivate long faces so's we can break the news to the widdier proper."

That night, with a total of forty-one more swordfish packed in the ice of the hold and lying on deck, the Alberta cruised slowly through the fog, the skipper sounding her foghorn to get a response from the Gray Lady and thus locate Captain Fred's schooner. It was not long before the familiar squeal of the Gray Lady's foghorn pierced the thickness. Bert immediately shut off the engine.

While they jogged on port tacks through the undiminished fog, the foghorns of the two schooners kept the crews informed of each vessel's position. Shortly after eight o'clock, the Gray Lady's foghorn sounded closer and her engine chugged. Alongside the Alberta she drew, and the two crews immediately set to work transferring the Alberta's swordfish to the gray schooner's hold.

Captain Hank showed Captain Fred the wreckage of the dory and the flag flying at half mast. The two skippers exchanged a knowing smile.

"It's jist as well," commented Captain Fred. "Wilfred might 'a' gummed the whole works if ye hadn't done it."

More than half the swordfish were transferred when suddenly out of the fog the bow of a schooner widened—a schooner traveling under muffled engine. She was running alongside the Gray Lady's starboard rail before a yell from one of Captain Fred's men

warned the two skippers that an unwelcome visitor was present at the transfer of the swordfish.

Captain Hank stood speechless on the Alberta's deck. Beside him, Captain Fred gasped:

"Good God—it's the Theresa!"

ONE of the Theresa's crew jumped to the Gray Lady's rail, a revolver glinting in his hand. Toward him charged one of Captain Fred's men, a short-handled gaff in his grasp.

But he let out a howl of dismay and retreated as onto the Gray Lady's deck swarmed at least a dozen men in oilskins and blue jackets. Under the lanterns brightly illuminating the transfer of the swordfish, revolvers and pistols twinkled. From the deck of the Gray Lady those of Captain Fred's crew who were aboard her leaped to the deck of the Alberta.

"Drive the damned pirates off!" roared Captain Hank, yanking out an automatic pistol and rallying the two crews to meet the assault. He valiantly led them to the port rail, over which the attackers were already leaping.

But before he could take aim with his pistol, a lithe form in shirt sleeves and oilskin breeches came flying at him through the air, leaping upon him from the elevation of the rail. One hundred and seventy pounds of solid bone and muscle smashed down on the chest of the Alberta's skipper and crushed his plump body to the deck, knocking the breath from him. From Captain Hank's fingers the pistol was wrenched.

Captain Fred rushed to his friend's assistance—only to be met by a pantherish figure bounding up from the deck, and a left fist that rocked his head back with a nauseating uppercut. Captain Fred let out one squawk—then his shoulders hit the deck planking. The pistol he was holding exploded in the air, then dropped from his inert fingers. He lay where he had fallen, knocked out cold.

Bert West jumped in to repel that leader of the invaders who, in the space of a few seconds, had disposed of both skippers. At his head Bert swung the short-handled gaff he had snatched up. Under the smashing blow the leader ducked, came up like a jack-in-a-box, and wrapped his iron-muscled arms around the wheelsman's waist. With a quick wrestling movement of arms and knee, to the deck the invader flung him, and looked around for another victim.

But by that time the two surprised crews were huddling at the starboard rail of the *Alberta*, driven before the attackers who, although armed, had battered down the resistance they had met with bare fists.

"I geeve up!" Manuel begged quarter from a burly fellow in blue cap and jacket. "I don't fight no Coast Guards!"

"That's where you're wise, Manuel," the man who had so effectively led the invaders complimented the Portuguese, while Captain Hank staggered into the group of captives. In his wake reeled Captain Fred, supported by no less conspicuous a personage than bulky and bland old Captain Sunny Jim Carey himself.

Captain Hank stiffened and stared at the attack leader when he heard the latter's voice.

"Christopher mighty!" he bawled, his popping eyes focused on the bare-armed fighter. "Wilfred!"

Captain Fred was still groggy, but sufficiently restored to recognize by the dim lantern light on that side of the *Alberta* the identity of the old sea dog who was leading him. He wrenched himself loose, and screeched:

"What's this mean, you damn' pirate—boardin' us like this, with guns an'—"

"I think you had better save your breath for your court trial," Wilfred interrupted. "You and Cap'n Hank both." He turned to one of the coast guards. "You'll identify Mrs. Carnes's swordfish in the *Gray Lady's* hold by a V cut in the nape of each that I made

with a butcher's cleaver," Wilfred informed him. "There ought to be about seventy of them."

CAPTAIN HANK knew that the game was up. But his curiosity got the better of him.

"How in thunder did ye happen to pick Wilfred up?" he questioned Sunny Jim. "He didn't blow his cornet—we found the wreckage o' his dory. I cal'lated he'd gone to the bottom."

"Waal, Cap'n Hank, it was this way," explained the jovial skipper of the *Theresa*: "Y'see, Wilfred an' me an' these Coast Guard gents arranged 'fore the *Alberta* sailed that if he got the evidence you was swipin' the widder's swordfish, he'd go out in a dory in a fog. An' the signal that he was goin' was to be one long, high-pitched note on the cornet. A set o' bugle calls was to be our warnin' to git his bearin's an' take him aboard the *Theresa*."

"But s'pose I hadn't let him go out to haul a swordfish," queried Captain Hank.

"That would be the easiest way for you to get rid of me, leaving me with a swordfish that you'd ironed in the head," Wilfred answered.

"And I gave you plenty of reason for getting rid of me when I caught you red-handed up to your little game. The reason for your hard luck and the *Gray Lady's* high-liner rating was too apparent, Cap'n Hank—skippers and crews don't stay on hoodoo schooners for love. And any man low-down enough to cheat a widow would stoop to anything—I was prepared for whatever move you might make against me." He significantly patted a bulge in the hip pocket of his oilskins.

"We'd 'a' picked up Wilfred sooner, only we wanted him to kill the swordfish first," put in Sunny Jim. "The *Theresa* was standin' by his dory in the fog durin' the whole battle. The gash the swordfish gave him wa'n't a bad one, only a flesh wound. It cert'inly didn't slow him up none to-night."

he chuckled, glancing slyly at Captain Hank.

"That was because this trip has made a new man of me—more like what I was when I was younger," explained Wilfred. "I came aboard quite run down from working indoors—my seasickness was no bluff, although it helped out my bluff that I was a drunkard sent out to be reformed.

"When Cap'n Sunny Jim sent word to me that the Widow Carnes was in trouble, of course I came right up from New York to help her out. Because it

was Cap'n Carnes who gave me my start when he got influential friends interested in me. A man changes a lot in ten years—I counted on that fact alone to save me from being recognized in case I happened to meet any of my old shipmates.

"But I almost had heart failure that first night you came aboard, Cap'n Fred. Because I'm that Mel Frost you and Cap'n Hank talked about. I told Sunny Jim before I shipped that the confounded cornet was likely to give me away."

THE END.



### *Friday : America's Lucky Day*

IN a recently published news article an American business man bemoans the fact that most people have an unaccountable aversion to making any change or undertaking any important work on Friday. "Unlucky" was the only reason they could give.

That Scotsmen should hold such a superstition is easily understood, for most of their national disasters fell upon Friday. But for Americans it is quite another story. The most auspicious events of the United States history happened on the sixth day of the week.

Friday saw the voyages of Columbus begin: he left Spain, and he first sighted land, on that day. It was on a Friday that he again set off westward and discovered, though without realizing it himself, the mainland of America in 1494.

The first legal document dealing with the New World was issued and granted on this so-called "unlucky day" when the King of England gave to John Cabot his commission to sail west.

On the first Friday of September, 1565, Menendez founded St. Augustine, the oldest town in the United States.

Nor did the Pilgrim Fathers escape from its influence. On Friday, the Mayflower left Plymouth, England, and exactly six weeks later reached the harbor of Province Town and there they drew up the document on which rests the present constitution of liberty. Friday also witnessed their landing at Plymouth Rock, 1620.

It was also George Washington's lucky day. He was born on Friday and most of his military successes took place on that day of the week. On Friday Bunker Hill was captured and fortified, Saratoga surrendered, the French declared themselves on the side of America and the crowning victory of Yorktown was won.

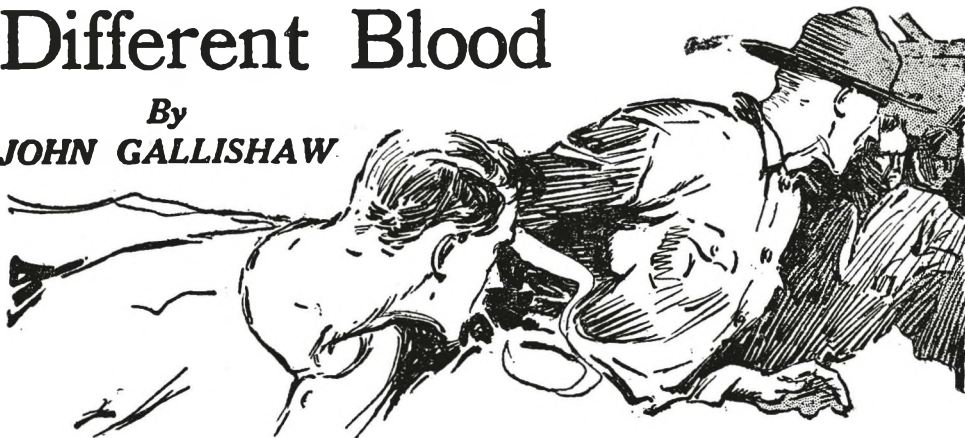
But, most important of all, on the first Friday in July, 1776, at a meeting of Congress, John Adams, seconded by Richard Lee, moved that "the United States were and of a right ought to be free and independent." The motion was carried, and the American nation was born.

Friday unlucky? Maybe, but not for America! *C. A. F. Macbeth.*



# Different Blood

By  
**JOHN GALLISHAW**



*When two men hate each other as Lang and Becker did, one army isn't large enough to hold them both safely, even in war times*

## *Novelette—Complete*

### CHAPTER I.

#### FEUD.

THE feud between Lang and Becker reached its climax one warm Saturday afternoon in April. It came at the moment when nearly all the candidates for commissions were leaving the Officers' Training Camp at Leon Springs for the short week-end leave in San Antonio. There was a large audience to hear Becker's challenge and Lang's retort.

Becker was a burly regular army sergeant, with four enlistments to his credit. To him confinement to camp for a trivial breach of the rules was doubly humiliating. It was almost unbearable to him to reflect that Lang was the cause of all his trouble.

The long line of outgoing automobiles had come to a halt near the Y. M. C. A. hut. Lang, who always carried his slim, steel-muscled body erect, was sitting beside me, when Becker strode close to the automobile. Only the plate glass window of the sedan separated the two, when Becker pushed his own big-jawed, angrily-flushed face close to Lang's lean one, and profanely called him yellow.

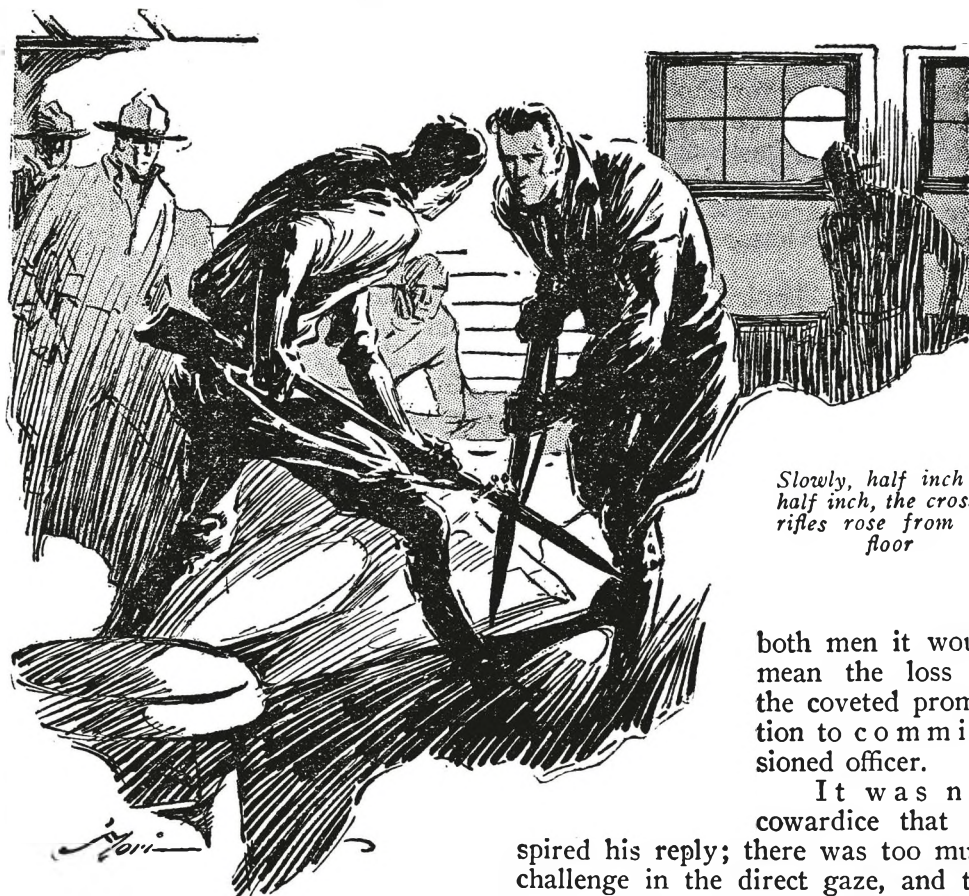
The jealousy between these two had grown and ripened from the moment a typed order had appeared upon the bulletin board in our company barracks announcing that at the Third Officers' Training Camp no commissions would be given higher than second lieutenant, and that from each company only one man would be selected.

The rest would be given the grade of "officer candidates," and would be neither hay nor grass, fish nor flesh; for they would have none of the privileges of officers, and the enlisted men would distrust them.

The rivalry for the commission was the keener because it was an open secret that the Southern Division awaited only the coming of the newly commissioned officers to entrain for the port of embarkation.

It was also whispered that the outstanding men would be retained at Leon Springs for training others, where promotion would be speedy.

ON that warm April afternoon Becker wore no coat, and the rolled-up sleeves of his olive drab shirt gave free play to the rippling muscles of his forearm, which



*Slowly, half inch by half inch, the crossed rifles rose from the floor*

were bigger than the calves of most men's legs.

Physically Becker was the outstanding man in camp. The collar of his shirt was thrown back so that the ridged muscles of his columnar neck showed; and below them his chest bulged barrel-like. Beside him Lang, the Virginian, whose deceptive slenderness was belied by two years of active war service with the Canadians, seemed fragile and pale.

Part of that fragility was the leanness of perfect condition; and the pallor was from the tenseness of his self-restraint. I could see his knuckles grow white as he gripped the side of the automobile in an effort to hold his temper under control. He knew, as we all knew, that a fight at that time and place could not be hushed up. For

both men it would mean the loss of the coveted promotion to commissioned officer.

It was not cowardice that inspired his reply; there was too much challenge in the direct gaze, and too much cold intensity in the tone in which he spoke.

"Before we're through, Becker," he said—and now one hand released its clutch of the automobile door and emphasized the words with short blows upon the door top that gave them a certain rhythmic impressiveness—"before we're through you'll apologize for that."

Beneath his oaklike bulk Becker's nerves had been frayed by the uncertainty of the last cruel weeks. To him the commission meant the fulfillment of a wish he had scarcely dared phrase; it meant his admission into a world at which he had gazed wistfully, a world which had heretofore shut its doors tight against him with insolent signs that read "for officers only."

And the black mark which now kept

him in camp might close in his face the door to the promised land—just as his foot was upon the threshold. To Becker's distorted gaze Lang, who had been an officer in the Canadian Expeditionary Forces, was the man who was to blame for his present state.

His voice was hoarse with rage when he answered.

"Yeah," he shot back, "you an' yer uncle!"

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## CHAPTER II.

### REGULARS VS. CIVILIANS.

BECKER knew, as we all did, that Lang's uncle, William Endicott, was one of the Assistant Secretaries of War, and that the order limiting the appointments had been signed by him. Becker did not know, as I did, that Lang would scorn to ask his uncle to use any influence every bit as much as the uncle would scorn to employ it. Becker had not seen the two together, as I had, on that evening in the previous Christmas holidays.

Lang and I had been boys together. Together we had spent our school vacations with Mr. Endicott. William Endicott was a stout, florid little man, of choleric reactions which were saved from being vicious by his dominating sense of fairness.

When I joined the American Ambulance Service in 1914, after my graduation from college, he opposed it. Yet when he found that this service had meant the loss of American citizenship to many hundreds of Americans who had served abroad, he was the first to sponsor a bill that would restore it.

It was during the Christmas holidays in 1917, when the bill had been repealed, that I had received word to report on January 5 to the Third Officers' Training Camp at Leon Springs. So on a fine crisp winter evening I walked around to Mr. Endicott's house to thank him for the opportunity.

The moment I entered the spacious

library I sensed that something had angered Mr. Endicott. His smooth, cherubic face, with the pursed upper lip, was suffused with an angry flush. As I moved to withdraw he beckoned me to come in.

"You might as well hear this," he said testily. "You probably know all about it already."

The only light in the room came from the glowing flames of the fireplace. Their reflection upon his shiny shirt front gave somehow the impression that there was standing upon the hearth rug a highly indignant robin redbreast.

A strained laugh came from the shadows. I heard some one move toward the electric light switch. The flood of light disclosed Lang. He smiled a swift greeting and turned to face his indignant uncle.

"My last word," shouted Mr. Endicott, "is that I won't stir a hand to get you into the army again."

"But I keep telling you," insisted his nephew, without raising his voice, "that I've had a doctor go over me; and he says I'm as fit as a fiddle."

He was smiling, half in amusement, half ironically; yet, from the concentration of his eyes and the manner in which he swayed back and forth slowly, balancing his weight upon the balls of his feet, he gave the impression of some force held in leash—of being ready to spring.

"The Canadians discharged you after two years at the front as physically unfit for further service," Endicott snapped.

Lang's lean, sensitive face darkened. "That's why I'm here to-night," he said. "I met Archie McCracken last night at the dinner to the Canadian Recruiting Mission."

"McCracken's a trouble-maker," said Mr. Endicott violently.

Lang looked keenly at his uncle.

I was puzzled to see Mr. Endicott's gaze fall guiltily.

"McCracken says you pulled strings

through the British Embassy to have me discharged," Lang accusingly continued.

Mr. Endicott was never one to dissemble.

"What if I did?" he challenged.

It was Lang's turn to flush.

"Then you don't deny it," he said.

"Well, I was a sucker. I ought to have known that a pistol bullet in the foot was too slight to rate a complete discharge." He glared witheringly at his uncle. "And because of your interference a nasty little attaché taunts me with cowardice."

Mr. Endicott's chubby countenance grew purple.

"Don't be a fool," he said tartly.

"You had an accident."

"McCracken," said Lang bitterly, "implied I did it myself to get a discharge."

"THE devil," said his uncle. "So that is why you smashed him in the jaw." Then, as if a new line of argument had occurred to him, he went on hastily: "How do I know you wouldn't always be getting into fights if I sent you to Leon Springs? Those hard-boiled regular army top sergeants won't consider your feelings."

"I'll keep out of trouble," Lang assured him. "I'll model my behavior exactly after yours."

"You're an insolent young pup," said his uncle; "but I suppose you'll make my life miserable if I don't let you go. All right. But if you have the sense that God gave geese, don't let on to any of those regulars at Leon Springs that you've been commissioned in the Canadians, or that you know anything at all about soldiering. They don't like it. They're tough, and touchy on that subject. There was trouble between them and the civilians at the first two camps; that's why this is mostly regulars. But I suppose it's no good to warn you."

He sighed. "I envy you; think of

me. I'm going now to make a speech before six hundred women. Good-by." He shook hands warmly and hurried away.

Almost from the moment that Lang and I found ourselves assigned to Captain Jones's infantry company at Leon Springs I realized that Mr. Endicott had not overestimated the hostility that the regulars felt for the civilians.

There were tales of sergeants grown grizzled in the service, who could fold a horse blanket with their eyes closed, who had been put aside in the tests for promotion because some smooth-faced college undergraduate had been able to describe the operation better on paper.

The regulars were undoubtedly touchy. Almost instantly the company became divided into two factions. The regulars were jubilant over the fact that Captain Jones had himself risen from the ranks. Some of them had known him years before as a noncom.

Some slurring remark about the National Guard earned him the enmity of nearly half the company. But it brought the regulars *en masse* to his defense. The feeling grew when it was learned that he and Sergeant Becker had served together years before. It became violent when Captain Jones suggested that the company select its own first sergeant. The idea was that until the details of organization were perfected the appointment should stand. Then the office should rotate weekly.

Becker, assuming that his record of four enlistments would at once indicate his outstanding fitness, was chagrined to find that a large number of the newcomers were in favor of Lang because of his actual war service. The factions of regulars and non-regulars were about equally divided.

The row of iron cots running down one side of the long bare wooden barracks was immediately preempted by a group of wind-burned, hard-muscled, erect men with shrewd eyes and



mouths trained to chew without movement; who could see sidewise without moving their eyes; and who played poker with the cards compressed to the smallest compass and held close to their chests.

Upon their uniform blouses they wore the silver badges of expert rifleman and expert pistol shot; they knew to an ounce the ration a soldier was entitled to; to a cent the amount he drew for each step of his promotion; nearly all had at one time drawn extra pay for service in the Islands; they spoke familiarly of the voice of the lizards mocking from a dried-up limb; when they talked of a term of enlistment it was a "hitch" or a "fogey." A Mexican was a "spick"; a lieutenant a "shave-tail"; a black mark was a "skin."

This jargon they spoke was, to them, the mark of their superiority in being regulars. Their Bible was the drill regulations; their paradise, now within sight, was the officers' quarters; their god was General Pershing, a hard-bitten regular; and their leader in the company was Becker.

**H**E had the longest term of enlistment, the best-fitting uniform, the shiniest shoes, the biggest muscles, the greatest volume of voice, and he was the most outspoken in his contempt for the theory that brains were as essential as brawn in the make-up of an officer.

"Hard-boiled, see?" he announced, the first evening we were gathered in the barrack room. "That's what yuh got to be. Youse Johns better get that through yer beans. An' lemme tell yuh somethin', see? They's only two real hard-boiled guys on this reservation." Here he paused dramatically and pounded both hammerlike fists upon his chest so that it gave forth a sound like a smitten drum. "Me!" he said. "I'm both of 'em."

In the end, there were enough regulars to insure his selection as first ser-

geant. It may have been that this success was too easy, or that it went to his head; or it may have been that he had no shrewdness of perception, and failed to realize that the men whose cots ran down the opposite side of the barracks were not as inarticulate and cowed as the ordinary recruits that came into the army in peace time. At any rate, he antagonized them at once.

These were, for the most part, men of some standing in their community, called into service through being non-coms in the National Guard. Accustomed to giving orders to their equals, they resented Becker's assumption of their recruitship; they detested his arrogant "Now youse boids, snap into it."

It was inevitable that they should oppose his tactlessness, and equally inevitable that they should fight him in their own way, which was a subtler one than that of the regular army. Where he used a bludgeon, they used a rapier. They made him understand, without actual words being passed, that the length of service which in his circle had always been looked upon as cause for boasting was in their eyes the mark of the ambitionless man.

Being clever, and malicious, and having no real fear of him, such as recruits would have had, they lost no opportunity to taunt him with his shortcomings. He, being inarticulate, could only lash out at them clumsily and crudely.

When he grew to realize that the most innocent appearing remark frequently carried with it the worst barb of censure, he assumed that because Lang's remarks were entirely innocent, they must conceal beneath their apparent harmlessness some viciously poisonous dart.

Thus, his natural desire to acquit himself well, the knowledge that he was not popular, and the uncertainty of the outcome, turned an ordinarily good-natured man into an irritable, suspicious bear, feeling the goads, un-



able to locate their source with certainty, and convinced, without any real proof, that Lang was the ringleader of the opposing group.

AS a matter of fact, it was Tompkins, a lanky ex-newspaper man from Fort Worth, who was Becker's chief tormentor. It was Tompkins who caused his side of the barrack room to go in for the study of maps, the figuring of elaborate firing data. He prevailed upon Lang to take them in their spare time—which did not come often—for marches through the live oakwoods on the outskirts of camp, for instructions in finding their way by compass, an accomplishment scoffed at by Becker and his group, and lauded to the sky by a visiting British officer high in the councils of the Allies.

It was Tompkins who mischievously insinuated that these marches were political expedients of the non-regulars to discuss plans for the discomfiture of Becker's group; and it was Tompkins who insisted in speaking in French throughout one of these trips upon which some of Becker's group had come in the capacity of spy.

Yet Becker saw Lang as his chief rival. Among all the non-regulars, Lang was the only one who had ever held a commission; his background of actual war experience seemingly dwarfed Becker's record of service; and apart from this, he had a way of winning loyalty that was a thorn in Becker's side. In that group any choice of leadership lay clearly between these two.

In one respect Lang was handicapped. The habit of two years' service was hard to break. Where the others had only to perfect themselves by building upon a groundwork of knowledge already existing, Lang had to start at zero; and beside this, he had to unlearn much. Commands were his great stumbling block. He would find himself shouting "Right wheel," instead of "Column right"; and for

three weeks, he suffered over "On right, into line."

Then a little Tennesseean came shyly to him one evening with a set of little wooden blocks to serve as squads; and together he and Lang sat down at one of the tables in the mess hall, while Lang issued commands gleaned from the mouth of one Sergeant Hill, the oracle who spoke from the pages of "Small Problems of Infantry." In return, Lang taught the little man how to handle a bayonet, and much about map-making and compass work.

It was Tompkins who found Becker's tender spot. He was jealous of Lang's facility with languages. Lang fell easily into the rôle of interpreter when a scarred, intensely serious officer of the Chasseurs Alpines, loaned by the French government, found difficulty in making himself clear.

Thereafter, it was the delight of Tompkins, the company's self-appointed practical joker and general "funny-man," to nod meaningfully toward Becker as he addressed Lang in a torrent of meaningless French. Lang, during these exchanges, could not always keep a straight face, although he strove always to avoid a clash with Becker. Yet careful as he was, he could not entirely ignore Becker's attempts to pick a fight.

THE first open trouble between Becker and Lang grew out of Lang's knowledge of languages. As the son of a missionary, his first twelve years had been spent in China, where he had picked up a working knowledge of the language. It amused him to go into the kitchen of the mess hall, and there exchange greetings in a singsong monotone with the Chinese cooks and waiters.

The major, who was second in command of the camp, overheard him one day; and as a result, caused to be posted upon the bulletin boards of the different company headquarters type-written instructions that every man with a knowledge of foreign languages

should report that knowledge to his commanding officer.

"Yella lingo," said Becker, when somebody commented upon Lang's accomplishment. "What 'll it get yuh, tell me that?"

"There's talk," said Tompkins, "about somebody being commissioned to stay at Leon Springs. With all these Chinamen around, knowing Chinese may be the deciding factor, I shouldn't wonder."

Tompkins told me afterward that he made up the rumor out of whole cloth, to annoy Becker; but the big man bit, unsuspectingly.

"Yella lingo," he said contemptuously. "Yella in -yer blood. Yuh gotta have a yella streak in yuh, to whine the way them Chinks do."

Lang was standing close by at the time, and the remark was obviously directed at him. Although his face assumed the expressionless, noncommittal mask which was his defense against ridicule, it was only because he had himself well in control. For a moment I saw his hands clench, saw his lean chin jut forward, his whole body poise, elevated upon the balls of his feet. He was like a panther set to spring, or a mettlesome race horse waiting for the starter's signal.

It was only for a moment. He caught my warning glance, interpreted it, relaxed, and said smilingly: "Anybody that wants to brush up on that compass bearing stuff had better come along outside." He was still smiling when I joined the group about him a few minutes later. Presently he ceased to smile. Tompkins came out, grinning.

"Becker is as sore as a boil," said Tompkins. "I've got him persuaded that the best man in every company is to be retained at Leon Springs as an instructor. And I made clear to him that the major favors Lang."

"You'll get me into a fight with your damnfoolishness," protested Lang. "Lay off."

"Boy, you couldn't keep out of a fight," Tompkins assured him, gleefully. "All I ask is to be the referee."

"I'll keep out of it," said Lang firmly.

"Becker won't let you," asserted Tompkins.

How long the argument might have continued, I don't know. It was interrupted by the bugle blowing the assembly, and the sound of Becker's whistle, and his booming voice shouting arrogantly:

"Now youse boids, snap into it."

### CHAPTER III.

#### IN BARRACKS.

**I**N the end it was a trivial thing that led up to the big rupture. Becker, at the close of the training period, was still acting as first sergeant of our company; and on that bright Saturday, when the April sun of a Texas noon-day made little paths of dust specked sunlight across the long tables of our company mess hall, he was sitting at one end of a table, with a little box of record cards before him.

We were all on edge by then. An extra two weeks had been added to our original training program, so that the embryo officers might familiarize themselves with the British system of bayonet fighting, and with map and compass work. This delay, coupled with the announcement that the only commission to be given would be that of second lieutenant, had strained Becker's nerves to the breaking point.

He had never spoken of his family background until that day; although in every other respect he seemed to be without reticences.

When somebody commented to him about the enforced extension, he said, grumblingly: "I got a kid, see, an' he's out in San Antone right now. Gee whiz, I wuz plannin' two weeks' leave when this camp closed, but when this thing come up, I had him come here.

All I hope is I can take him back all the way to South Boston."

"Well, you know the War Department," said somebody. "You'd better see all you can of him here, bo; 'cause them guys in Washington don't care a hoo-raw about family feelings."

"An' a hell of a lot we'll learn here," Becker went on. "Map an' compass work, an' a week o' English bayonet work. Now, who the hell thought o' that?"

Tompkins, the mischief maker, sprang into action. We had finished an early lunch, and were shining our aluminium mess equipments for the regular Saturday afternoon inspection. Tompkins was sitting next to Becker, and leaned over and began to whisper in the big man's ear.

Over Becker's face a look of resentment spread, that slowly wiped out all other expression as a cloud, slowly drifting over the face of the moon, obscures it. Afterward the lanky Texan confessed that his desire to worry Becker had made him forget the harm he might be doing Lang. He had whispered to Becker that Lang's uncle had undoubtedly extended the training period in order to give Lang a chance to show up well in his favorite subjects.

It was almost ludicrous to see the ease with which Becker swallowed the story. Whatever his previous intention had been, from that moment it became evident that he was determined to pick a fight with Lang, as soon as he pulled out Lang's record card and began to read the notations upon it.

Those who were anxious to see the monotony of the grinding effort broken by a row, knew that Lang was determined to avoid the conflict. Yet all the khaki-clad figures who sat in shirt sleeves about the mess tables felt that they were in the presence of drama.

The heat added to the sense of something oppressive, something demanding, and explosive in the atmosphere. The genial Texan sunshine beating down upon the thin roof of the flimsy

mess hall had combined with the heat from the kitchen to make the temperature of the thin wooden shell like that of a Turkish bath.

We all sat in our shirt sleeves. The sleeves of Becker's army shirt were rolled up almost to his shoulders, so that the tattooed ship upon his muscular upper arm was visible, and his short collar was thrown open to expose his bronze throat and hairy chest.

In comparison with that burly torso, Lang's slim body, despite its wiriness, seemed almost fragile, as he sat by the open window polishing his aluminium mess kit, and holding it up every minute or two to allow the sun to shine upon its surface.

**I**N all that group of more than a hundred men, no two could have been more unlike. Their very faces were opposites. Lang's thin face, sensitive, yet queerly grim, was a strange study in contradictions, the gray eyes being the eyes of a dreamer, the mouth and chin those of a man of action.

When Becker began reading his name from the record card, Lang's face became set in the impassive mask which is the dreamer's defense against ridicule. Becker's broad face, freckled, and ordinarily good-humored, was twisted into the semblance of a bantering grin, a grin so forced that it fooled nobody.

"Once you got a 'skin' at inspection, Lang," said Becker. "It's on yer card."

"There'd certainly be hell," said Tompkins, "if the Germans attacked some morning about breakfast time, and found us short a spoon. We've got to have spoons to win this war."

"That ain't the point," said Becker flushing. "Youse johns don't get the idea. What I mean is, the C. O. himself is comin' round to make an inspection; an' when he comes I want youse boids to snap into it. An' God help any guy that's short any equipment."

Nobody replied. The only sound was

the rubbing noise of polishing rags upon aluminium, and the rattle of dishes, the sizzling of steam and the gurgling of water from the kitchen where the Chinese cooks were washing dishes in hot water, which gave off clouds of steam that sifted through the thin dividing partition and carried with it a strong odor of ammonia.

It was the previous week Lang had been short. He did not appear to have heard Becker's remark. Becker, seeing that this sally had failed to draw a retort, resumed his reading from the record card which he still held in one huge hairy hand.

"I gotta hand in some names," he announced. "I don't know what the captain wants 'em for. Guys wid some education, and previous military training. Now, lemme see. Here's William Endicott Lang, Jr., age twenty-six, height five feet eleven, weight one sixty-five. Occupation before entering the army: Instructor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology."

Becker paused. "Yeah, I know that joint, Boston Tech. That's a college."

"Gee," said Tompkins, in simulated admiration, "you certainly are well informed."

"Aw, yuh make me sick," said Becker, without anger. His enmity seemed to center wholly upon Lang, and he was not to be diverted from his purpose. He went on, reading from the card.

"Next of kin: Elizabeth Bowes Lang, care of the Rev. William Endicott Lang."

A gleam came into Becker's eyes, the gleam that comes into the eye of the fighter who sees a weak spot in the armor of his adversary. "Say, I knew you was a minister's son, Lang," he said, chortling. "All them quiet chaps that looks like butter wouldn't melt in their mouths is ministers' sons."

Lang only grinned, without speaking. The incident might have closed then, except that at that moment one of the Chinese waiters came out and

began to clean up the dishes upon the table near Lang. In a singsong tone, he addressed Lang, and Lang replied, smilingly.

As far as Becker was concerned, it was like the dropping of a match in powder. It must have seemed to him that Lang had ignored his speech and had spoken to the Chinese cook to enrage him. Only a short time had elapsed since the first occasion that Lang had spoken in Chinese. Since then he had been careful to avoid any speech with the Orientals.

The present interchange was a matter only of sentences, the Chinese asking for instructions, and Lang proffering them. Almost as quickly as he had come, the slant-eyed cause of all the trouble had glided silently back to the kitchen whence high cackling laughter floated toward us. But the human tinder upon which he had dropped the match had ignited and was flaming. Becker had thrown off all pretense of anything but baiting Lang.

"THE longer yuh stay in this man's army," Becker pronounced, "the queerer rookies yuh see. Me, I've been round the world; but still that yella lingo don't set very good with me. 'Cause why? 'Cause I never could stand them slinkin', snoopin' quiet, yella guys."

"For cripes sake, come out of it," said Tompkins. "I'm going back to my outfit next week, without a commission; so I don't scare worth a cent."

"I've got nothin' again' you," said Becker.

"No, but you're riding Lang. You and your talk about yellow. There's not a Chinaman in the place that hasn't got better manners than you. There's Chinese in our uniform, too, if you'd only think."

"Listen, Tompkins," said Becker impressively. "I got nothin' to say to you. I'm talking about them yella guys that I see in New York at a dance hall. It had a sign 'Soldiers and

Sailors.' An' I went in, an' they was mostly Filipinos from the ships in Brooklyn Navy Yard."

"Those New York girls certainly fall for the uniform, no matter what's inside it," said a wiry regular sergeant.

"Them guys," went on Becker doggedly, "might 'a' worn the same uniform; but they ain't the same blood."

I breathed a little more easily. Tompkins's comment seemed to be having effect. The conversation was now safely in general channels. But I had reckoned without Becker's tenacity. He turned to face Lang directly.

"They're different blood. And I'm here to say that any guy that talks their lingo, and likes 'em well enough for that must have some yella in him, too."

It was always happening like that, in this strange feud. These two were much alike at bottom: their ambitions were the same, their present interests identical. Had there been no prize from which one might have ousted the other, or had Tompkins failed to fan that flame of jealous hatred and misunderstanding, these two might have come together.

But they were, each in his own way, doggedly tenacious. Because they could not get together for a friendly talk, they continued to be enemies. For that reason Lang's reticence was not entirely a virtue. It served to inflame the other, and was as effective a weapon as he could have employed. Silence could be as destructive as the most scathing reply.

Yet at that moment when it seemed that the dam of silence must be burst, and that there would come pouring through the breach such invective as would scorch and burn, Lang's remarkable control continued. Although there were signs of giving way in the contraction of Lang's mouth and in the twitching of his sensitive nostrils, he continued silently dipping the gray rag in the polishing mixture and rubbing upon the aluminium surface of the dish he was polishing.

I was sitting beside him. Although I could understand the urge that must be in him to lash out at his tormentor, I knew what hung upon his restraint, and I whispered to him:

"Only two more weeks; hang on, old boy; don't let him get your goat now."

Hardly anybody in that room would have blamed Lang for retorting; yet nobody misinterpreted his silence for cowardice. Every one of the khaki-clad figures sitting about the mess tables knew how easily a man might lose his chance at a commission and be returned to his outfit disgraced, with three months' strained effort wiped out and voided. Only half of the original strength of the company remained; the rest had been sent back for different breaches of discipline.

All those nervously tense men saw through Becker's plan. If Lang could be goaded into attacking him, he would then be guilty of the heinous offense of striking a superior officer; for although Becker's first sergeantcy was only temporary, the rights and privileges of the rank were rigidly insisted upon and upheld. To attack him would, more swiftly than anything else, cause Lang's dismissal. Coming out of civil life, he would probably be returned there, to await his turn in the draft.

THERE is a point of pressure at which the strongest bonds of self-control must snap, a point which Lang at that moment seemed to have reached. He had placed the condiment can down upon the ledge of the opened window of the mess hall, where it made a silvery splotch in the bright sunlight, and sat tensely poised, his eyes drawn as if by a magnet to the round face and burly form of his antagonist. The polishing rag, still clenched in his right hand, dripped unregarded drops of gray polishing fluid upon the floor beside him.

He was so intent upon what Becker was saying and so conscious of the



crisis that had arisen, that he did not notice, as I did, that a hand appeared from the outside of the mess hall, and covered the oblong condiment can which he had just laid down. It was the container for slices of bacon, and a vital part of the mess equipment.

Nothing more than that hand was visible. When it disappeared, I heard the sound of hobnailed feet upon the hard-surfaced 'dobe that separated our mess hall from the next. I saw a crouched figure speeding away, heard the clatter of iron hobnails upon wooden steps, and the slamming of a door as the wearer of the hobnails won to his retreat. Tompkins saw what was happening, almost at the moment that I did, and he yelled to Lang.

"Hey, Lang, some guy from the next company was short a condiment can, and he's swiped yours."

The incident helped to loosen the tension. Every one knew that there was no possibility of recovering the can, because once the thief had gained the shelter of the next mess room, there was no way of telling him from all the other khaki-clad figures within. And we all knew enough of the code of the regular army to realize that none of his fellows would give him away. Nobody had caught a glimpse of the culprit's face.

Becker began to chortle. The expression of belligerency seemed of a sudden to disappear from his face, as grease paint disappears from the face of an actor.

"Some hard-boiled regular did that, Lang," he said. "A guy that didn't have no advantages like speakin' Chinese." He was always harping upon that matter of languages. "A hell of a lot o' good yer languages did yuh then, when yuh couldn't even keep yer condiment can."

"Tear out after the guy," suggested Tompkins. He must have known, as well as the rest of us, that pursuit was hopeless; but he evidently saw in the suggestion an opportunity for Lang to

leave the mess hall, where Becker would not be likely to follow him.

Becker by now had ceased to address Lang directly.

"A swell chance there is o' getting that can." He chuckled. "Boy, howdy. Maybe the captain won't be sore when he finds that you're short that can, with the C. O. makin' an inspection. No guy 'll last long in this man's army if he let's a guy get away with his things. I'll tell the cock-eyed world that the only way to get on in the service is to be hardboiled."

He glanced about in a complacent way, breathed deeply until his barrel of a chest was expanded, and placing a hand on each shoulder, flexed his muscular arms.

It was evident from his tone that he was satisfied that now Lang was well on the road to trouble, unaided. Quite clearly, he had given up his attempts to draw him into a quarrel.

**B**UT by this time, Lang had reached the end of his patience. He sprang to his feet, and stood again in that flexed, springy posture that gave the impression of arrested motion.

"So you've got to be hard, have you?" he said in a controlled voice that had in it a quality of cold menace. He cast the polishing rag from him. "Well, once in awhile, all—" But I was able to prevent him from making the time-honored retort which would have caused an explosion.

"Don't be a fool," I said sharply, and pulled him down beside me. As quickly as he had flamed into anger, he cooled down, although I could feel that he was still quivering with excitement and wrath.

The most curious aspect of this feud between these two men was that whenever one was ready to make amends, the other was unwilling, or misunderstood the overtures; or when one deliberately used every means to cause an outbreak, the other held himself rigidly in check.

It seemed at this moment that it was Becker's turn to avoid a quarrel. His glance disregarded Lang, and swept down about the room. He was again good-humored. His tone was quite jocular.

"If youse birds," he said, "want to be ready fer this inspection, you'd better get all yer stuff together. The captain won't want any black marks against this company. Any o' you guys that's short anything'd better go to one o' the other companies, like that other guy did, and swipe it. That's what bein' a regular teaches yuh. If you're short anything, swipe it."

"All right to swipe anything from you, if we're short, Becker?" Tompkins hazarded.

Becker smiled arrogantly, and smote himself on the chest thrice. The red and blue ship tattooed upon the biceps of his right arm began to rise and fall with the motion of his blows, as if upon an actual sea.

"I'd like to see any guy put it over on me," he said in a satisfied tone. "A guy tryin' to swipe my stuff'd be out o' luck. Nothin' any guy'd learned anywhere outside of the regular army'd help yuh to get my condiment can away from me. Look at that."

He raised the can from his equipment, so that all the group might see. Red-painted letters almost covered all one surface. It was plain to the dull-est intelligence that the can was the property of Sergeant George Becker, Troop D, Sixth Cavalry, Tucson, Arizona.

Becker regarded the assemblage amiably. "Lots o' guys," he confided, "uses indelible pencil; but yuh can get that off easy. This stuff is painted on, and there ain't nothin' can get it off." He paused and look good-humoredly at Lang. "I tell yuh, Lang, there's a hell of a lot of time wasted learning the wrong things."

He reached into the breast pocket of his army shirt and took out a small leather framed snapshot of a chubby-

faced, smiling boy. Even though I was separated from Becker, I could see the eager, outstretched arms and the joyous expression.

"That's my kid," said Becker with pride; "he's a year old; and I'll tell yuh that when he's old enough I'll get him into some good business; that kid ain't goin' to be made no sissy; what I'll teach him is to be hard-boiled. Nothin' else 'll help yuh in gettin' a new condiment can before inspection, eh, Lang."

"Oh, dry up," said Lang. "Who cares about your condiment can?"

Becker chuckled. "You do, big boy, if any one does. An' lemme tell yuh somethin'. Carin' is as far as yuh'll get. An' lemme tell yuh something else. If yuh think yuh can steal my stuff an' get away with it, you're welcome. See? I ain't afraid to go out an' leave it here. An' I'm goin'."

HE rose, stretched his huge frame in an elaborate yawn, and replaced the condiment can in a neat geometrical pattern with the rest of the aluminium ware. Arrogantly, with exaggerated carelessness, he swaggered toward the door, still holding the baby's picture in one hand. It was quite clear that he was bursting with pride of fatherhood. His good humor was by now completely restored.

At that moment, had Lang's pride allowed him to sue for terms, the two men might have become friends. But Lang was never a suppliant. Even had he been, Becker's parting words brought to him the humiliation he would suffer in having to explain to his wife that because of this small matter of the condiment can, he could not join her in San Antonio for the week-end.

"No leave fer you, kid," said Becker, pausing in the doorway, which his huge bulk blocked almost completely. "Yuh'll be here with rags and hot water, cleanin' the Y. M. C. A. windahs this afternoon, when we're in San Antone, lappin' up lager."

The door swung idly behind him, slammed two or three times, before coming to rest; Becker's heavy tread sounded upon the wooden steps; silence followed for a few moments, to be broken by Tompkins's remonstrances.

"Well, I don't mind tellin' you-all, that except fer the way Becker adores that kid, he's tough all over."

"You did your share to make him sore," I accused him.

The lanky man looked contrite. "Well, he's been ridin' me, sure enough. I kind o' figured that he'd lose his temper at Lang directly; and I'd get a chance to get back at him. Shows what fools we're makin' of ourselves, takin' this thing too hard. Still, I'd like to see Lang use Becker's condiment can for inspection. Yes, sir, I sure would."

Lang grinned amiably. A twinkle of mischievous laughter came into his gray eyes. It remained there as he walked with a springy tread toward the end of the table upon which the shiny aluminium articles of Becker's kit lay neatly spaced against the brown background of their canvas container, now unrolled to exhibit them. It was still there as he picked up the condiment can, individualized among the hundred others in the mess room, by the glaring red letters that told its ownership.

"Don't be a pig-headed fool," I warned him.

Lang's grin persisted. "I'm not being," he said.

"You steal that an' you will be," said a stocky florid-looking regular close by.

"Stealing," said Lang with pretended astonishment. "Not at all. The owner gave me leave."

"Leave to steal government property," growled the stocky man.

"I would take a wise quartermaster man to tell one condiment can from another," said Lang calmly.

"There's no need to take one that's marked the way that is," interrupted

Tompkins. "I'm kind of responsible for this; and by rights I ought to help you out. You can have my condiment can. It won't make any difference to me, whether I get a skin against me. I'm out anyway."

"I don't need it," Lang protested. "I've got special permission from Becker to take his if I can use anything I've learned outside of the regular army to get off the markings. You're a brick to offer, Tompkins; but I really can get along with this one. To tell the truth I'd rather. It's what you might call a test case. Brawn against brains."

"Well," said Tompkins grudgingly, "don't blame me; I warned you." Then the natural instincts of the practical joker asserting themselves, he began to chuckle. "Boy, I want to see his face, when he finds you've taken it."

"Yeah," jeered the stocky regular across the table. "An' I want to see Lang's face when Becker gets through smashin' it. He's talkin' big now; but he'll be usin' sign language to a trained nurse when Becker gets him told."

**T**HERE was a good deal in what the stocky man said. Becker would certainly be furious.

"Forget about it," I urged Lang, in an undertone. "I'll telephone Elizabeth to drive out here this afternoon, and you can see her. What difference does it make, if you do get a skin and have to stay in? The camp is almost over."

Lang hesitated a moment, and appeared to be about to replace the can.

The stocky regular said, out of the side of his mouth to his neighbor: "I knew he'd crawl." He avoided Lang's gaze.

Lang's gesture of returning the can was arrested in mid-air. He looked deeply at the man who had spoken; then, without a word, strode purposefully back to where his own kit lay by the window. Adding Becker's condi-

ment can to the collection, he rolled them all inside their brown canvas cover, and went silently with them into the kitchen.

The sudden silence that the action evoked was broken by the rapid rise and fall of Oriental greetings that signaled his advent. Like lines upon a hospital chart the sounds fled up and down, ascended, and descended, made peaks and valleys of tone; and settled into a gentle undulation, drowned at last by the sound of gurgling water, of splashing, and of Lang whistling off-key: "When you wore a tulip, a bright yellow tulip; and I wore a red, red rose."

"He'll have a red, red nose when Becker gets back," prophesied the partisan regular.

I was tempted to go back to the kitchen, but I felt that the affair had passed the phase of negotiation. The next twenty minutes passed on leaden feet. It was within five minutes of the time for inspection when Lang returned. I thought it wiser to say nothing as he arranged his mess equipment with meticulous precision. The others followed my example; they were busy with last-minute preparations.

The line of automobiles that came every Saturday afternoon to take the "pass" men to San Antonio was already forming outside. We knew from the shout of "attention" that came from the next mess hall that the commanding officer's inspection had begun. Still there was no sign of Becker.

Through the windows we could glance into the mess hall where the commanding officer walked briskly along the lines of men, peering sharply at the display. He was about to leave the hall when Becker returned, coming up the steps two at a time.

"Now youse boids," he commanded, "snap into it. The commanding officer is almost here." We sprang to our places beside our equipment.

The inspecting party was coming down the steps of the next mess hall

as Becker flung open our door, and stood at attention, holding it open with his broad back. A moment later, as the shadows of two men darkened the doorway, he shouted in a stentorian voice, "Attention!"

Taciturn and sallow, Captain Jones, our company commander, came in, followed by a taller, grayer man, a man with a firm chin, white mustache, and eyes that seemed to burn beneath white tufts of brows. Upon his faultlessly fitting uniform he wore the eagles of a colonel.

As the two officers passed Becker, Captain Jones spoke to him. "First sergeant, come with us," he ordered.

Walking the regulation number of paces behind the two officers, Becker accompanied them upon their round of inspection. Out of the corner of my eye I could see his astonished expression when he came to the brightly-shining equipment of Lang. Complete and resplendent it lay upon the table near the window, where the Texas sunlight sparkled and flickered upon its flawless surfaces.

THE colonel was instantly struck by the brightness of all the utensils. In a pleased tone he said to the captain:

"Will you see that I have a note of this man's name. That's the way I want to see all the equipment in this camp." His eyes lost some of their piercing quality as he fixed them upon Lang. "How did you get them so bright?" he asked in a friendly fashion.

"Ammonia, sir, in the water," Lang answered. "It'll remove everything but paint; and paint you can get off with washing soda and steel wool."

"How did you know that?" queried the colonel. Although Lang's reply was directed at the colonel, it was intended for Becker.

"I remembered it from some reading I did in chemistry, sir," he said. His eyes, fixed straight ahead, held a little twinkle of mischievous amuse-

ment. "Of course steel wool isn't to be found easily; but the Chinese in the kitchen are glad to give it to anybody that knows how to ask for it."

The colonel passed on. Nearly a hundred pair of eyes that should have been fixed in a rigid cataleptic stare turned involuntarily in their sockets to watch the effect of this interchange upon Becker, who had now followed the colonel to the place at which Becker had left his own equipment. Upon the brown canvas, the gap left by the absence of the condiment can was extremely evident.

The colonel noticed it, the captain noticed it; and finally Becker, interpreting the strange look in the faces of the men about the room, peered over the shoulders of the officers, and became aware of what held their gaze.

His was a face upon which emotions were easily translatable. Stupefaction, incredulity, anger, and bewilderment succeeded each other in swift succession.

The colonel's voice, speaking curtly, cut into the bewilderment. "There's no question about whose property this is," he said as he picked up an aluminum canteen with its identifying red paint letters.

The legend was the same as that which Lang had removed from the condiment can; boldly they informed the inquiring eye that this was the property of Sergeant George Becker, Trooper D, Sixth Cavalry, Tucson, Arizona.

"Captain," said the colonel cuttingly, "will you please cancel leave over the week-end—as a skin for carelessness—for the owner of this equipment." Judicially, as if he were merely interpreting a complex passage from a code of punishment, he went on:

"It might be excusable in anybody but an acting first sergeant. The men of the regular army are supposed to show an example to the others." He did not deign to glance at Becker;

ignoring him completely up to the very moment that he had finished his inspection and wished the captain a curt good day at the door.

The captain was clearly displeased as he turned to confront the perplexed culprit. "Sergeant Becker," he said, "I don't understand this." Becker started to speak. "No," said Captain Jones, with finality, "I didn't want any excuses. Even if the colonel hadn't suggested it, I'd have canceled your leave myself."

His displeased glance left Becker, and softened somewhat as it swept the lines of statuesque figures that kept rigid guard over the mess equipments. "The rest of you men are free to go to San Antonio any time you want to."

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## CHAPTER IV.

### AFTERMATH.

THE training quarters devoted to candidates for commission in the infantry formed an unshaded rectangular slope of grayish sunbaked 'dobe. This slope was so marked that from the uphill side the ends of the mess halls jutted out upon the flint-like surface of the roadway like wharves into a harbor; and, like wharves at low tide, they were approached from below by little steps that led to a platform upon the floor level.

Divided from them by perhaps a hundred yard strip of earth were the sleeping quarters that began at the level of the roadway and ended high in air, farther down hill. In this hundred yard space that ran the length of the camp between the mess halls and the sleeping quarters, automobiles cruised upon Saturday afternoons, and came to a halt at the foot of the steps, in much the same manner that fare-seeking "bum-boats" came to a stop at jetties to embark the "liberty" men returning to their ships from shore leave.

The camp was separated from San



Antonio by a twenty-six mile highway; and there was keen competition among the drivers, who collected a dollar from each passenger.

Ordinarily we lost no time in rushing out to take our places in the waiting cars; but on this afternoon, although the space between the mess halls and the sleeping quarters was crowded with automobiles that stretched from the entrance gate of the reservation to the end of the line of buildings, no passengers embarked from our mess hall.

Everybody there waited to see what would be the outcome of Lang's maneuver.

We all knew that Becker had planned to spend the afternoon in town; and that part of his enjoyment he had looked forward to would come from chuckling over the fact that Lang would be kept in camp. That he was furious went without saying.

As he swaggered over toward Lang both his heavy fists were doubled, his broad face was darkened by anger. Lang, still standing beside his equipment, ostentatiously ignored his approach.

"Look here, guy," Becker growled. "I got a bone to pick with you."

Lang looked up. There was no ill humor in his glance.

"You don't say so," he said coolly. "What about?"

"About that condiment can."

"What about it?" Lang inquired innocently.

"You know damn well what about it," said Becker furiously.

At the rage in that reply, Lang's expression changed. There was no misunderstanding in the gray eyes whose gaze met Becker's so fearlessly.

"I took you up on your offer," he said calmly. "Remember, you said that anybody that could take it away from you could keep it." A titter ran round the room. Enraged at the sound, Becker stepped nearer and thrust his face closer to Lang's.

"It's easy to see how you got by with it, all right," he said in a voice choked with anger. "Gettin' them other yella guys to help you, you dirty crook!"

TOMPKINS and I both acted upon the same impulse, as we rushed between the two men, and pushed Lang away. Half a dozen others seized Becker by his brawny arms and pinioned them beside him. By sheer weight they compelled him to sit down upon one of the mess benches, still struggling.

Lang submitted more easily. His thin nostrils quivered, and his breath came fast.

His jaw was set, and his eyes had grown hard and brilliant. Unlike Becker, who gave his captors a difficult time at the other end of the table, he accepted the fact that a struggle would be unsuccessful.

"Let me go," he said in a quiet voice, cold with ferocity.

"Just a minute," I said, and felt a great surge of relief as more men formed a human wall between the two feudists. "Let me go over and talk to Becker, a minute."

Becker by now had grown sullenly quiescent, although the glowering look he cast upon me boded no success to my enterprise.

"Listen," I told him persuasively. "You're naturally sore. This uncertainty has got on everybody's nerves; but it won't last much longer. You must be on the verge of getting a commission, now; and just think of how that kid of yours would feel if you started anything now that caused trouble."

"I'm not starting anything that I can't finish," said Becker, with savage moroseness.

"Think of that kid," I urged, "and get hold of yourself. Lang will understand."

Lang's voice, like ice, came from the other end of the table.

"You called me yellow," he said, "before every one, and if you'll take it back we'll call it off, and start over." It was evident that Tompkins had been engaged as a peacemaker.

"An' if I don't?" queried Becker sullenly.

"Then I'll have to make you," said Lang quietly.

Becker's head came up in astonishment; his lip curled sneeringly. "You and how many other mamma's boys?" he demanded arrogantly. He rose and essayed to plunge through the throng that separated him from Lang. The concentrated wedge of human bodies was too great.

"Just a minute," a voice shouted above the babel of murmurs. "One minute. This isn't the time nor place. If you two nuts don't know enough to lose your chance at a commission, us sane fellows'll keep you from it. This company's record is too good."

It was Tompkins, surprisingly, taking control of the situation. "Now, you all know I've got no ax to grind. But if Becker gets into trouble it will be a black eye for every regular here."

The argument seemed to have weight. Murmurs of agreement commended it. Little by little the tension eased; the two main figures of a sudden took on the guise of culprits threatening the safety of the group, instead of champions whose prowess was to be encouraged.

"If these two insist on acting like children," Tompkins continued, "somebody with sense must keep them apart."

I glanced at Lang. He was now grinning sheepishly. It was a cheering sight.

I held no illusions as to Becker's ability to batter up the lighter man; and I did not want to see my friend, for the sake of his pride, embark upon a hopeless enterprise.

Becker, too, seemed to have recovered from the first fury of his resentment. He stood now gazing at

Lang without friendliness, but without any marked hostility.

"ARE you willing to talk it over with Lang?" Tompkins asked him.

"It ain't going to be just talk," said Becker sulkily. "And the quicker the time comes the better."

Before Lang could make any reply, we were aware of a voice shouting in sudden dismay. "Cut it out, you guys; pipe down."

Almost instantly a man near the door cried out sharply, "Attention!" Upon the heels of the sound Captain Jones appeared.

In his hand he held a sheaf of papers. Singling Becker out of the group, he handed them to him.

"Give one of these to the company clerk, and have him post it on the bulletin board," he said. "And see that the rest of these are posted at the other company headquarters."

He looked sourly at the burly giant, who stood stiffly facing him. "And then you can report," he said dryly, "to the Young Men's Christian Association hut to take charge of the window cleaning detail."

Becker saluted, passed one of the notices to the company clerk, and, keeping a firm grip upon the others, looked malignantly about the room before he followed the captain through the doorway. The men left in the room crowded about the company clerk to hear him read the notice. "'On Saturday, April 12'—yeah ho, that's next Saturday—the camp will be inspected by the Assistant Secretary of War, William Endicott.'"

Tompkins turned to Lang exultantly. "That's the stuff, kid," he said. "Now you got a break. When your uncle gets here, strike him for a staff job; and when you get it give Becker six months in a labor battalion, for me."

The hard brilliancy which for a moment had faded from Lang's eyes returned to them.

"No," he said thoughtfully. "That's a matter I can't ask help on."

"Oh, forget about it," I said. "Becker is a hot-tempered sort of chap, and his bark is worse than his bite. He doesn't mean all that he says. If you were to go to him now, and offer to shake hands, he'd apologize all right."

Lang was reasonable enough. "Perhaps so," he admitted. "When a man is under a strain he does queer things. I guess it was disappointment at not seeing that baby of his when he expected to that got on his nerves."

"That a boy, Lang," said Tompkins cordially. "Now you're talking sense. Come on to San Antone."

## CHAPTER V.

### "YELLA!"

EVERY Saturday afternoon the uniformed men who boarded the outgoing automobiles were as hilarious as a group of schoolboys released from study. Their freedom was like wine in their veins.

Life, which had been drab and monotonous, took on a rosy color; and laughter and banter, repressed for a week, burst their bonds. Anything served as an excuse for noise and mirth. Their desire to laugh freely and noisily could not be denied.

Out of that laughter should have grown friendship and understanding. Yet it was an ironic fact that in that curiously mixed drama in which Lang and Becker played their parts, all the usual values were reversed. The logic of cause and effect seemed swept away by some impish stroke of the gods of irony.

With the stage set for an obvious gesture of reconciliation, the actors always misinterpreted their cues. And on this afternoon this insistent urge to be jocose which should have preceded a joyous tolerance, served only to bring the enmity to a head.

Some there were who might have thought Tompkins blamable. As well blame the scythe for cutting the grass or the switch of the electric chair for the death of the condemned. Tompkins was only the instrument. Some force that Tompkins could not stem was bringing these two grimly together.

Even had Tompkins acted differently, it seems now that the end would have been the same. Like Becker and Lang, like the driver of the car, like all the rest of those eager, nerve-strained human pawns in the great game, Tompkins was only a puppet to be galvanized into action when fate pulled the strings.

One or two feeble acts and words, commonplace and undramatic, were all that Tompkins was called upon to contribute; it was necessary only that they cause the two principals to lock glances. These words once uttered, the commonplace act performed, and Tompkins became again background. Becker and Lang alone held the stage.

That was what happened on that Saturday afternoon as Tompkins joined Lang and me in one of the automobiles, and sat down as gleefully as if he were not marked by fate as the instrument that should turn the shining promise of peace into the dark menace of ultimate disaster.

In our car, besides the driver, there were four of us: Lang and I sat in the back seat, with the quiet, slim young Tennessean, leaving Tompkins to take the empty front seat beside the driver. As the line of cars reached the edge of the reservation, the impatient procession came to a halt while the outer gate was being thrown open. Our car stopped just in front of the ugly barnlike structure that housed the Y. M. C. A.

The dammed-up mirth of the voyagers found a butt in the party of soldiers in blue overalls and rolled-up sleeves who were being disciplined by having to clean the windows of the building from which already came

sounds of singing and of a piano protesting at being overworked.

**A**RMED with mops and water pails, the working party marched along, grinning sheepishly at their luckier fellows. The men in the automobiles began to issue burlesques upon the military commands, shouting "right-left, left-right," in cadence.

Tompkins rose to the occasion; and commanded "Right-shoulder mops; port water pails," in a ringing voice. He was a good mimic; and he issued the commands with the tone and manner of a certain pompous and unpopular captain.

Two comedians in the window-cleaning detail halted and began to carry out the movements of Tompkins's command, using mop and water pails as directed. The others in the group moved ahead.

Their leader turned and shouted good humoredly to the vaudevillians.

"Hey, don't yuh get enough drill, as it is?"

I had not noticed him until he turned. I saw, when he turned, it was Becker. Now, if ever, the moment seemed ripe for a peacemaking. He would pass our car presently, and a nod, a civil comment, the merest comradely word would do the trick.

The buffoons of the detail went through some more comic antics; dropped to the ground, pretended to fire with their mop handles at an enemy; seized imaginary bombs, hurled them overhand; shrank in exaggerated horror from the supposed explosion of an enemy shell. The remainder of the detail kept on. Becker, jocosely shepherding them along, did not notice who was sitting in our car.

He turned, beckoned again to the stragglers, and shouted: "All right, come on; everything's safe."

The funny man behind said with elaborate indignation: "We're not afraid; we're the second line moppers-up." Amid a laugh he depressed his

mop and went through the motions of mopping.

"Try it on the windows," said Becker, and joined in the general chuckle. In a moment he would turn; and he and Lang, smiling at the same thing, might conceivably smile at each other.

In the spirit of jollity that pervaded the whole scene there seemed no room for grudges or clash.

And then Tompkins, the tactless, carried away by the spirit of the practical joker, shouted to the men who lagged behind. In a voice, pitched and accented to imitate Becker's, he hurled his stentorian command:

"Now, youse boids, snap into it!"

To do that sort of thing was like Tompkins, who had the finesse of a ten-ton truck. It never occurred to him that there were moments when he ought not to joke. With the specter of the quarrel laid, he had to resurrect it. And even after he had done it, he did not seem to realize it. He was still grinning when Becker swung angrily round toward the source of the voice.

It was that unabashed grin which misled Becker; for it did not occur to him that any one could have made such open fun of him, poured salt upon the most open of his wounds, and then grinned with the whole-hearted enjoyment of a spectator. He looked beyond the grim-wreathed face of the lanky man and saw Lang's face, set once again in its impassive mask.

**T**HE anger in Becker's glance was a live thing, like lightning; it leaped and sizzled; and as an electric spark leaps from one point to another, that anger, concentrated and focussed, found its magnet in Lang's burning eyes.

In that second all hope of reconciliation was swept away.

It was almost incredible that rage could shake a man as it did Becker. It tore him and lacerated him out of all proportion to the importance of the

happening. His broad face was red and flushed, to the roots of his blond hair, as he strode up to the side of our car.

"All youse National Guard guys," he said in a voice that was hoarse with rage, "is always pickin' on the way a regular guy talks."

In a flash of insight I saw pathetically that Becker was angry because he felt hurt. The tragedy of Becker was that he could not "talk proper English." It was his vulnerable spot, his heel of Achilles. All the vulgarities, all the "hard-boiled" parade of disregard for the amenities was what the psychologists would have called a "defense mechanism."

But to-day the mask was off, and he was pitifully transparent. He had been ridiculed in the presence of so many who had jeered that, like a badgered animal, he was turning viciously to rend his tormentor. And unbelievably, I saw that the big, light blue eyes were savagely winking back tears of humiliation.

Even his voice was unsteady when he spoke. "Maybe," he said, "I ain't strong on English, but I know how to get you told, Lang." He made a spring toward the car. "You're a yella son-of-a-gun."

Even though I instinctively threw myself between the two, I knew at that moment that if these men stayed together the struggle between them could not be averted, and that their enmity would cease only when they had tested to the full each other's strength and courage.

In courage neither was lacking. Becker would glory in such a contest. Compared with Lang he was immense; he must have outweighed him by sixty pounds, yet Lang would not evade an encounter upon those grounds. His courage was of the tenacious kind that would not permit him to give up as long as he was able to drag himself toward his antagonist.

But it would be futile waste of fine

courage to pit him against Becker. And he was not the hot-blooded kind to rush in blindly. I could see that, even now, his passion had not completely robbed him of his self-control. I could see the effort that he was making to restrain himself.

The glass window by the rear seat of the sedan was only partly open, and to reach Becker, Lang would have to brush me aside, where I blocked the door.

Yet after that first moment of swift survey, I should have made no move to keep the two apart. When Lang stirred to reach the door, I allowed him to pass without protest. But he had his anger well in hand when he spoke.

"Before we're through, Becker," he said, "you'll apologize for that."

"Yeah," said Becker, "you and yer uncle."

The Tennessean looked at me. He was a young man of a good deal of penetration.

"Only a miracle can stop 'em now," he said, and shrank back into the corner.

**A**S always, in that unpredictable chain of circumstances, a commonplace miracle saved the explosion. The driver of the car behind us honked his horn impatiently and abruptly. Instinctively Becker stepped back.

Our driver took the hint; the motor roared, the gears clashed; and we rolled forward, leaving Becker standing in the dusty roadway, with blazing eyes and clenched fists, hurling vituperations upon the line of cars that mocked him with raucous honking.

The little Tennessean in the back seat said in a conciliating drawl: "The army shore is hell, suh," and smiled placating at Lang.

Tompkins, even then unaware of how serious things had grown, raised and lowered his shoulders coquettishly, waved a lackadaisical farewell to



Becker, and broke into the old army song:

*"You're in the army now;  
You're not behind the plow—"*

Like fire in prairie grass the song ran along the line of cars, and the cavalcade rolled through the gateway, roaring the refrain. Only in the back seat of our car there was silence. Lang sat rigidly erect, looking straight into space, until at last Tompkins became aware of the importance of the moment.

Before he could do anything more devastating, I checked him with a significant glance and a silencing gesture. He subsided in ludicrous dismay, glancing in puzzled inquiry from my frowning face to Lang's intent visage.

There was no viciousness in Tompkins. His difficulty was that he thought too late. He realized now what he had done; and blurted out swift regret.

"Listen," he said earnestly, "I swear I never thought Becker 'd blame you. I didn't think he'd take it as anything but a joke. Why, before I'd try to get you into trouble, I'd—" He paused for a comparison, found none, and began again: "Listen, let me go back early Sunday afternoon and square it with Becker."

"Don't worry about it," said Lang, easily, and his next words showed that he recognized as I did the inevitable quality of what was occurring. "Something would 've brought it to a head."

"Let me try, anyway," Tompkins pleaded. "I'd love to take a shot at getting you out of it."

Lang smiled, pleasantly, a reflective, half whimsical smile, the smile of one amused at a memory summoned from the past, or a dream only dimly visioned in the future. His words, when he spoke, had no trace of passion. It was as if he were weighing the factors in an impersonal problem, and stating his findings.

"I can't get out of it," he said, "until Becker takes back what he said."

"Get him in the right mood, and he will," I said, busy with a plan that had just come to me. "There'll be a right time and place."

"It happened in front of everybody," Lang murmured.

"You ought to wait till you get your commission," said the little Tennessean, gently.

Lang acknowledged the suggestion with a friendly lift of his eyebrows, and went on in the detached manner of a stage director considering a setting. "To-morrow night, when we all get back from town, the whole company will be together for supervised study."

Then he turned the subject; and from any clew which his manner might give, he had forgotten the episode completely.

## CHAPTER VI.

### BAYONETS.

THE little Tennessean played his little part that afternoon, and then drifted from the stage. He liked Lang, and had been one of the staunchest of his adherents, in a quiet, unobtrusive way. I never knew his name; and I never saw him again.

I remember now, hazily, his dark, delicately molded face, and his softly Southern voice. When we had left Lang at the house where his wife boarded, the little man lingered and said to me, rather apologetically, that he had a suggestion which might bring Becker around to seeing Lang's point of view.

It was almost identical with the thought that I had in mind. The upshot of it was that we spent the afternoon looking up the chubby baby boy of Becker's; and with poetic justice, Tompkins gave up his week-end, and chartered the car that took the little boy and the nurse who looked after him, out to Leon Springs, to spend all day Sunday. The boy's mother was dead.

There were other important things that took my attention in San Antonio, but the little Tennessean, who swore that he intended to spend Sunday in camp, anyway, devoted himself to the baby, and won his way into long and confidential speech with Becker. A word or two dropped to Elizabeth Lang enlisted her aid. When Lang returned to camp the next evening, he was willing to meet Becker more than halfway.

The little Tennessean, bashful and deprecating as ever, met me just before we entered the long barrack room where the company gathered for "supervised study." Becker, he assured me, was sorry for his outbreak, and would make occasion that evening before "lights out" to pave the way to a reconciliation. "If," he added lugubriously, "nobody throws a wrench into the machinery before he gets a chance."

The dulllest part of our whole training was the two hours devoted to "supervised study." Like small boys doing home work that lacked interest, we all sat about in silence, reading assigned paragraphs.

We called the period "stupefied study," because the paragraphs dealt with things remote and alien to our interests. Apparently the West Point idea of learning how to win the war in France was to examine the problems of the Northern cavalry in the Civil War. Since speech was forbidden, the evening promised to be peaceful.

And then Captain Jones, our laconic, but well-intentioned commander, threw into the machinery the wrench that the young Tennessean had feared. Understanding our boredom, and realizing how we fretted and chafed at the enforced silence, he decided to turn the study period into an oral examination in "Small Problems for Infantry," a work devoted to the exploits of that "Sergeant Hill," and presenting in serial installments the great moments of decision which were such common-

places in the life of that illustrious noncom.

Throughout the three months' training we had been allowed to project our imaginations to the extent of imagining ourselves to be the incomparable sergeant. We lay beside Sergeant Hill hidden in deep cottonwood groves while the enemy cavalry in great numbers passed by.

With him we stood, like Ruth and Boaz, "amid the alien corn," while Confederate patrols discussed the strength of their main command. And as we came to know this infallible sergeant, this "Rollo" of noncoms, we knew his cool, imperturbable disposition; his accuracy of forecast; his uncanny skill in sizing up a situation.

We knew that always he would do and say the exactly right thing; and that his orders, instantaneous and forceful, would always be couched in the exact, unvarying language of the Infantry Drill Regulations. It was evident that the winning of a commission depended upon the fluency with which one could rattle off answers to the question:

"What will Sergeant Hill say to his men?"

WITH great decorum we answered Captain Jones's question. But unfortunately Captain Jones was called away. "You carry on, sergeant," he said to Becker.

Becker went to the end of the barrack where the captain had been sitting, and took the book clumsily.

This episode in the career of the valiant Sergeant Hill dealt with the dramatic moment when the sergeant's patrol, ambushed by some Confederates, shot one of the enemy. The circumstances demanded that Sergeant Hill should then exclaim to his men: "As skirmishers, forward." When Becker had stated the problem he asked the usual question:

"What will Sergeant Hill say to his men?"

Tompkins, buffooning as usual, offered a suggestion. "He'll point to the man he dropped and say: 'Another Indian bit the dust.'"

"All right, that's enough kidding," said Becker without resentment. He glanced about the group until his gaze fell upon Lang. He grinned pleasantly. A f t e r w a r d he told me that he thought he would show his friendliness by asking Lang to answer the question; for Lang, everybody knew, had the answers to the "Small Problems" by heart.

Tompkins started to say something, but Becker cut him short.

"That's enough o' that rookie stuff," he said. "Now, Lang, how about it. We'll can the rookie stuff an' get down to cases. What would a regular guy say that knew his stuff?"

It was clear to us that Lang misunderstood Becker's good intentions and thought that it was a deliberate reopening of the conflict. I saw his mouth harden and the chin upthrust, while the rest of his face became the usual impassive, stoical mask. When he spoke his voice had a cutting edge to it. He appeared to be choosing his words carefully.

"Do you mean," he asked, "that he was just a regular who knew his stuff about as well as the ordinary regular top sergeant does, about as well as you do yourself, for example?"

Becker seemed puzzled, yet still friendly. "Oh, just any ordinary ignorant guy'd know what to say."

Somehow, every man in the room at that moment knew that the clash was on again. And Becker himself apparently sensed it, for the grin on his face became fixed and wooden.

"If he was very hard-boiled indeed," Lang replied slowly, "and very ignorant, he'd say: 'Now youse birds, snap into it!'"

There was first an audible gasp, as if every man in the room had reacted simultaneously. Then from somewhere in the rear there came a titter which

changed into a guffaw that was taken up until a great roar of laughter swept the group.

Everybody appeared to join in, except the two principals. Lang's face was still masklike, and over Becker's broad face a wave of crimson swept engulfingly. The unexpectedness of the retort appeared to act on him as might a blow.

What he would have retorted we did not learn because Captain Jones came back at that moment and took over the class again, carrying it on till its conclusion.

In the short interval between the close of the study hour and the "lights out" signal Becker came up to the cot upon which Lang was sitting. The lighter man sprang to his feet and stood facing him, feet braced, hands clenched, eyes blazing. The big fellow was still crimson with rage and outraged dignity.

Standing together thus, the disparity in their sizes was more evident than ever before. Lang lithe, slight and wiry; Becker massive and heavy-muscled.

"Say, you're a hell of a slick guy," said Becker. "A hell of a slick guy. Yuh put somethin' over on a fellah, an' then when he tries to do yuh a good turn yuh try to kid a guy before the crowd. Fer two pins I'd knock hell out o' yuh."

**L**ANG'S eyes measured the big man from toe to blond head. "Just a moment," he said, and walked backward to the shelf beside the bed.

Wonderingly we regarded him. He appeared to be searching for something in his equipment. Tompkins said: "He's giving him back the condiment can."

But when Lang straightened up he held in his outstretched palm two shining bright pins.

"Now," he said, "you've got your two pins, Becker."

Becker swept Lang's hand aside an-

grily. Without another word the smaller man was at his throat. It was exactly as if a terrier were attacking a great raging, snorting bull. There was something bull-like, too, in the bellow of rage that Becker let out.

Although he was taken aback for a moment by the suddenness of the attack, Becker was no coward and was used to rough-house fighting. The first blow of his great hairy fist caught Lang squarely on the forehead and sent him crashing backward among the cots.

There were a dozen of us on both of them before Lang had a chance to rise, and another dozen were between them to form a bulwark. Across this human barrier they glared at each other.

"Look here, Becker," protested the young Tennessean, "you know damn well this isn't fair!"

There was a murmur of agreement from the crowd.

"He started it," said Becker.

"No, he didn't," said Tompkins. "You've been at him ever since this camp started, trying to pick a row, and now, by God, you've done it! You're nothing but a big bully, Becker."

Lang's voice, slightly hysterical, broke in. "All right, I'll take care of myself, Tompkins," he said. "I don't give a damn how big he is, I'll take him on."

And he struggled to escape from the restraining arms of his captors; but the little Tennessean still stuck to his theme.

"Down in our country," he said, "we wouldn't let two men like that fight it out the way they're doin' with their fists. We'd give 'em each a gun, an' then they'd be a fair match. Becker weighs seventy pounds more than Lang. It isn't fair nohow."

"Don't be damn fools," said Tompkins. "There's goin' to be no gun play around here."

Unexpectedly Lang said, with a tremendous effort at calmness: "I'd just as soon call it off."

Months later I found out that what had made him say that was the promise he had made to his wife to avoid if possible any row with Becker, and I knew what an effort the statement must have cost him. It looked as if he were backing down because of the blow that he had received from the bigger man.

Becker evidently thought this to be the case, because he said arrogantly: "Yah, yuh're backin' out, ain't yuh? I told yuh, yuh were yella. I'd just as soon take yuh on, gun or no gun."

"What I meant, Becker," said Lang, "was that I'm willing to call it off if you apologize to this crowd for calling me yellow. But until you do apologize, I'm not going to quit."

"Yuh ought to get the rest o' the National Guard t' help yuh," said Becker.

"Leave everybody but me out of it," said Lang. "If you want to get a gun, I'm willing to take you on."

"That's cheap talk," said Becker, "when yuh haven't got a gun."

"THERE are some empty rifles around," said the Tennessean hopefully, "and you might borrow some ammunition some place on the reservation. Then you could go out in the moonlight and take pot shots at one another."

Eagerly he reached over toward the rifle rack and handed an empty rifle to Becker and another to Lang. We had had bayonet practice during the previous week, and the bayonets in their scabbards were still attached to the rifles. Becker laughed easily.

"'Tain't such a bad idea, at that," he said. "All these guys is tellin' what a good fella Lang is with the bayonet. Let's have a little bayonet scrap. Lang is always sayin' that a light man with a bayonet is better than a heavy man that don't know much about bayonet work." His tone became patronizing. "Them scabbards will keep Lang from gettin' himself hurt."

In a voice that was chilly Lang said: "You can take off the scabbard if you want to, Becker. I'm not scared."

The little Tennessean gave a whoop of glee which turned into a groan of disappointment when the "lights out" signal for the camp sounded. None of us, in the excitement, had heeded the first warning, and suddenly every light in camp was automatically extinguished.

Yet it strangely enough made little difference, because the yellow moonlight poured through the window, flooding the long barrack room with a soft golden radiance that made everything about seem unreal.

There must have been something of the madness of moonlight pervading that room, for somehow there seemed to be nothing unusual or *outré* about the two men standing there glaring at each other and holding their rifles at the "ready" for hand-to-hand bayonet work.

I think that every one in that audience must have agreed that here was the solution of the problem. In this way the two would be evenly matched, Becker's superiority in weight being overcome by Lang's extraordinary skill with a bayonet. The leather scabbards would protect them from bad cuts; yet they could thrust and parry until one had floored the other.

Nobody spoke, as the Tennessean and some other men began to move the cots away to make a clear space. In the same silence the contest began. We might have been an audience watching some representation upon the stage, except that here we knew that the enmity was not simulated. But something of unreality pervaded the whole scene. In the golden radiance of the moonlight the outlines of everything were softened and blurred.

Upon the quiet of that calm, soft Texas night, instead of the usual peaceful hum, there arose the gasps of men, when one or other of the combatants gained an advantage, the scuff-

ing sound of feet slipping upon the bare floor, the labored breathing of the fighters, and above all a warlike sound difficult to describe.

It was metallic, yet deadened; it was almost the sound of steel upon steel; sword upon sword heard at a distance might have produced the sound. Bayonet was seeking bayonet, but the leather scabbards, intervening, transmuted the sound into something less ferocious, made it sound unreal.

From the first Lang forced the attack. He must have realized that he could not hope to wear down the bigger man, but must sweep him off his feet. It was evident that he could handle a bayonet. Yet Becker, despite his weight, was quick on his feet.

FOR the first few moments Becker was wary and contented himself with parrying; for it was apparent to him, as it was to all of us, that the smaller man was a whirling fury, and that his very intensity must soon wear him down, or at least cause him to expose himself.

But Lang, despite his apparent rashness, was cool enough to avoid falling into a trap. So fierce was his onslaught, so deft his change of position, so rapid his thrusts, that Becker soon realized that parrying alone and tentative thrusting would not be successful.

It seemed to us watching him that he changed suddenly into a ferocious and devastating force, as he bore down upon his lighter opponent with all the weight behind his huge frame. Lang had just delivered a low point, which was a thrust directed at the lower part of his opponent's body, and Becker, seeing his opportunity, bore down with all his weight, not easily, as in an ordinary parry, but heavily and swiftly, with the intention of thrusting the rifle out of Lang's hand.

But Lang foresaw the move and, instead of parrying, allowed his own point to fall. Becker's weight, meeting



no resistance, carried his bayonet point to the floor. Yet so swiftly did he execute the movement that Lang was unable to withdraw his rifle to take advantage.

Instead, the result of the attempt was that the two stood facing each other, their bayonet points to the floor, the scabbard crossed like the blades of opened scissors.

Slowly, straining every muscle, Lang attempted to raise his rifle, Becker resisting. Lang was like a farmer trying to raise a heavy forkful of hay to the waiting wagon. We could see the muscles of his arms and back swell under his sweaty shirt, which clung to him like a bathing suit. His mouth was held half open, as if he dared not make the movements necessary to breathing, lest they divert some of the energy needed for this herculean task.

Slowly the crossed rifles left the floor; half inch by half inch they rose, sank, rose again, and then began a steady, snail-like progress upward.

To every movement of Becker's Lang was extraordinarily sensitive. If Becker weakened in his downward pressure, Lang took advantage; if Becker seemed to consider a sudden release, Lang's rifle followed the other up so swiftly that the scabbards appeared to be locked together; and Becker, grimly determined, resumed his downward thrust.

So long did they stay in this posture that it seemed almost an eternity before Lang essayed a new movement, seeking to draw his bayonet back toward him. But Becker, seeing it, tried to meet it by pressing down still harder. It became a tug of war—a tug of war that would result, we somehow knew, in victory for the man who should first win free.

And so we watched, fascinated and then awed, for we saw that the two scabbards were loosened and that slowly the yellow moonlight was shining upon bare steel.

Somebody shouted in a hysterical voice: "Stop it—oh, my God, stop it!"

But we were too paralyzed to act upon the instant, and when we did become awake to activity it was too late. On the instant that Lang felt his bayonet free he sprang back, his bayonet point raised. As Lang closed, Becker repeated his former trick in an attempt to send Lang's rifle spinning.

Had he succeeded he would have caused the point of Lang's bayonet to hit the floor, his rifle would have been sent spinning from his hands, and Becker would have him at his mercy. But, instead, Lang, who seemed instantly to penetrate his opponent's device, allowed his grasp upon his own rifle to slacken.

**I**T was repetition of what he had just done, except that this time he allowed the other's bayonet to slide past his. Becker, carried ahead by the force of his thrust, pitched forward in a movement that drove the point of his bayonet deep into the barrack room floor.

The soft pine boards offered no resistance; the bayonet, driven with tremendous force, cut through it as a knife cuts through cheese. Yet he was able to wrench it clear.

But the delay cost him dear. Lang, keeping his rifle swinging round in the same arc in which it had started, carried his own point far to the rear, bringing the butt of his rifle forward to catch Becker a glancing blow upon the head.

For a moment it appeared to leave the big fellow dazed; it would have felled an ordinary man.

Becker recovered himself so quickly that he was able to parry Lang's next thrust, which ought to have penetrated. It was a high point, delivered straight for the chest, yet so great was Becker's strength that he raised his own rifle and sent Lang's bayonet pointing up into the air. Then swiftly he changed the parry into a thrust.

Almost as a unit the bystanders began closing in. But we were not soon enough. We could hear the sound of ripping cloth as the steel cut through Lang's shirt. We could hear the dull sound that the bayonet made when it struck Lang's shoulder.

We saw Lang's face turn a pasty white in the moonlight, and could read the shock in his eyes, and we could see a blotch of bright scarlet upon the point of Becker's bayonet as Lang tried to shake clear.

But, ironically, by the very thrust that had drawn blood from his opponent, Becker had left himself open; although the bayonet of Lang's rifle was pointing straight in the air, the stock was held firmly in his grasp. With an incredibly swift movement Lang drove forward. The butt of the rifle caught Becker in the groin. With a grunt the giant went over backward, yet without loosening his grasp upon the stock of his own rifle.

So firm was his grasp that the bayonet came away, leaving an open gash in Lang's shoulder from which the blood spurted in a bright stream. We heard the Tennessean say with satisfaction:

"By God, sir, Lang's got 'im!"

Tompkins said in an awed voice:

"For Heaven's sake, don't let Lang kill 'im!"

A sound filled the barrack room—a sound almost like the noise of a breeze upon a heat-scorched night. It was the combined gasp of more than a hundred men.

Another sound drowned it. From outside came the roar of a motor, and almost instantly, through the windows at the end of the barracks near the roadway, the big searchlight which Captain Jones carried on his car for night driving, cast a path of light along the scuffed floor and past the spot where Becker was lying on his back striving to regain his breath.

His eyes were dilated; his hands clutched at his groin; Lang stood

above him, feet braced, hands firm upon the rifle, whose bayonet point was within an inch of the prostrate man's heaving chest.

"Now," said Lang, "speak up, who's yellow now? Be military now: what will Sergeant Hill say to his men?"

## CHAPTER VII.

### OVERSEAS.

THE captain's coming broke the spell that held us. Somebody seized the rifle which had fallen from Becker's grasp as he lay writhing upon the floor. Half a dozen men flung themselves upon Lang and took his rifle away. Somehow the young Tennessean managed to get the rifles back into their racks.

We pulled Lang backward, and somebody helped Becker to his feet. But there was no time to get the cots back into their places, although many of the men sprang, fully dressed, into the cots which still remained in position.

We rushed Lang down into the shadows at the far end of the barracks and forced him down upon a cot. When the captain appeared only Becker was standing, breathing hard and looking stupidly at the disarranged cots.

Officers coming into a barrack room after "lights out" did not turn on the electric lights. But even had he been inclined to do so, Captain Jones did not need them to-night. The moonlight and the light from his car made the nearer end of the barrack as bright as day.

He looked questioningly at the confusion of cots, and, like a wise officer, pretended that he did not see the little group of men huddled at the dark end of the room.

"Get those cots into position and get this room cleaned up," he said briskly, and evinced no surprise when half a

dozen men, fully dressed, sprang to obey. His business was with Becker.

"I'm glad to tell you that you have been commissioned in the Southern Division. It occurred to me that you might like to go in to San Antonio right away.

"In fifteen minutes from now," continued the captain, "I drive into town. If you can be packed by then, I can give you a lift. That will give you tonight in town, so that you can get what supplies you need to-morrow morning, and take a train out to your new post to-morrow afternoon."

Becker said gratefully, "Thank you, sir; that 'll give me the morning with the kid." Hastily he threw on his blouse, and hurried out after the captain.

When he had gone, Tompkins said bitterly: "That's the regular army ring for you; Becker gets the first commission."

"What do we care," said the Tennessean, "I'd give him a general's commission to be rid of him." He added regretfully, "I wish the captain had waited long enough to let Mr. Lang finish up."

All throughout the captain's speech with Becker, Lang had been sitting in one of the cots in the shadow. Now he came forward into the brightly lighted area. The cut in his shoulder was not nearly as bad as we had at first supposed.

"It was a lucky thing for you," I said, "that the captain came in when he did. You might have been up for something worse than disturbing the peace."

Lang's expression, as he turned to answer, was that of a man who had just found himself on the verge of a precipice.

"I guess you're right," he said.

His quick change of attitude was so characteristic that when Becker returned, I was not astonished to see Lang approach with outstretched hand.

"Let's part friends, Becker," he said.

It seemed in that struggle between these two men that whenever one was willing to apologize, the other was not in the mood. Without paying any attention to the words or to the outstretched hand, Becker brushed roughly past Lang, and began to busy himself pinning a notice to the bulletin board near the door. Some one produced a flash light, and read the notice aloud.

THE instant he began to read, the room was in a pandemonium. The unbelievable had happened. The camp was virtually over. Every man in the room had been recommended for a commission. Then at the end came the announcement:

Sergeant William Endicott Lang is commissioned a second lieutenant of infantry, and will remain at Leon Springs as instructor.

Lang continued to stand before Becker, with outstretched hand. There was no question of the sincerity of his tone.

"It ought to have been the other way round, Becker," he said. "You ought to have had the berth here, where you could have the boy of yours close to you. I certainly wish I had a son like him."

Becker did not respond to the overture. "What the hell do you care," he said roughly. "You've got an uncle, ain't yuh? The way I look at it, yuh wouldn't have no safe instructor's job, if William Endicott wasn't one of the secretaries of war."

He walked over to his cot, seized his suitcase in one hand, and waved the other, in an inclusive gesture to the other men in the room.

"S'long, youse boids," he said. In the doorway, he paused and hurled a last contemptuous insult. "Remember what I told yuh about this guy. He'll do all his fighting in Leon Springs."

When the door had slammed behind Becker, Tompkins said, "You ought

to have stuck that bayonet through the dirty slob, Lang."

But I knew that the little Tennessean sensed Lang's dejection and the reason for it. "And to think," he said, "that you had a chance to make him take it back, and now you may never see him again. You're stuck here for the rest of the war."

In the days that followed, appointments to commissions came very fast indeed. My own came, an appointment to the camp adjutant's office at Camp Merritt, New Jersey, and I said goodbye to Lang on the day that his uncle arrived to review the camp.

Divisions were arriving and departing rapidly from Camp Merritt. The Western Division came and embarked; the South-Western Division followed close upon their heels, and in May, the Southern Division took their place.

I had forgotten about Becker until I saw his name on the roll of officers of Company H of the Second Battalion. I was astonished when he came to see me.

He was as big and burly as ever; yet he seemed somehow to have lost much of his self-assurance.

"I'm in a hell of a fix," he said, "my kid's got pneumonia an' I want to go to Boston to see him. Can yuh fix it for me?"

"I wish I could," I said, genuinely regretful, for the big man was undoubtedly worried, "but your battalion is embarking to-morrow. You're in H Company, and G and H Companies go from Hoboken. You'd have been O K if you were with E Company. They go from Boston."

"Couldn't I go with them?" asked Becker.

"I'll try the camp adjutant," I said, and went into the inner office.

WHEN I returned, the expression of the big man's face was pathetic; his eyes held the pleading look of a dog who is being punished.

"The adjutant says that he can't O K it, but you might try your own colonel."

"It wouldn't do a bit of good," said Becker, "Lang'd never let it get to him."

"Lang?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes, William Endicott Lang. He's our battalion adjutant now."

"How come?" I demanded.

"Dunno," said Becker, "an' what's more I don't care."

"I think I could work Lang," I suggested.

Becker hesitated. "Well, there ain't any harm in trying," he said.

I wrote out the pass request for him in the formal stilted language of the army. It was the least I could do. I remembered what Tompkins had said about Becker being completely wrapped up in the little boy. There was no doubt of it. His fingers were trembling as he fumbled with his pocket, and took from it the picture of the baby which I had seen before.

"Say," he said huskily, "I'd rather die than have anything happen to that kid. I'm going to see that kid before I go, if I've got to desert for it."

"Try for the pass first," I urged. "I'll take it up to regimental headquarters for you." I left him there in the camp adjutant's office, thinking as I went of the difference between this side of Becker and the side he had shown in his feud with Lang.

From Lang himself I learned how he had come there. "I worked my uncle to transfer me," he explained. "I couldn't stand the idea of being called yellow."

"And your wife?" I asked.

"She's still in Texas." He paused in embarrassment. "Any day now I expect word that I'm a father." The moment seemed propitious for advancing Becker's cause.

"If I had a son, I'd find a way to see him," said Lang and added with a sincerity there was no doubting. "I'll do my level best with the colonel."

I went back to Becker and told him.

His burst of gratitude was pathetic. "Say, if that guy Lang gets me that pass, you know what I'll do?"

"What?" I said.

"I'll apologize for callin' him yella. If he's as good a guy as that, we ain't got different blood. 'Tis the same blood."

Knowing that these two would be together a great deal in the same battalion, I was glad, for I knew that they could not be together, loathing each other as they did, without some big blow-up.

And then occurred one of those hitches which were so characteristic of the army. The colonel, who had to sign the pass, could not be located. He had gone to New York. Pacing up and down outside my office that afternoon, Becker's face was working convulsively, and he was under a great strain.

"If the colonel don't get back from New York," he said, "by four o'clock, I'm going to beat it. I don't give a damn what happens."

At three thirty a runner came down from battalion headquarters and handed back Becker's request for leave. On it was indorsed "Request denied," and beneath this was the colonel's name, "per William E. Lang."

**B**ECKER stared at it unbelievably. "Say, soldier," he said to the messenger, "when did the colonel get back?"

"The colonel hasn't got back, sir," said the messenger, and turned away.

Becker's expression became wrathful. "If that ain't gall," he said. "If that ain't double crossin'," he said. "If that ain't the meanest, slimiest—"

It did not seem possible that Lang had done this thing, yet there was the evidence before our eyes, and it was clear that the signature was not the colonel's, but had been written by Lang himself in his unmistakable handwriting.

"I guess it's A. W. O. L. for me," said Becker hoarsely.

"There's one chance," I said, "and that is to wait until four o'clock on the chance that the colonel comes back, and go to see him directly."

I wanted to delay him because I felt that there must be some explanation. I could not believe that Lang would have done such a dastardly thing. Becker, fortunately, seemed to have lost his initiative, and to be willing to listen to what I had to suggest.

At five minutes before four we started for the regimental headquarters. The colonel, they told us, might be at the Second Battalion headquarters. Lang was not anywhere about when we reached there. In the outer battalion office we waited for a few moments, while the battalion sergeant major typed rapidly on a machine. He looked up from his typewriter to speak to Becker.

"No, sir," he said, "the colonel ain't here. What company you from?"

Becker told him.

"Funny thing, lieutenant," said the sergeant-major, "our orders have been switched around. E and F Companies are goin' to Hoboken, and G and H are goin' to Boston. Guess you'll be glad of that."

"H Company?" said Becker eagerly. "My company. Say that again."

The man repeated it.

Over Becker's face spread a grin of satisfaction.

"That's the second time that guy Lang's tried to get me and didn't," he said. "And think o' me bein' willin' to apologize to him. I can see myself! That guy an' me's got different blood. Now I can see the kid when I go through Boston to-morrow."

I didn't see either Lang or Becker before they left. In fact I thought I had seen the last of them. But Fate, seeming determined that I should see the end of that feud, sent me overseas a few months later with replacements for the Southern Division. The regi-



ment to which I was assigned was at the front, operating as part of a French division. I was sent to the Second Battalion which had suffered casualties among its officers. Becker, I learned, was now in command of H Company. Lang was still at battalion Heights.

"I ain't seen Lang since we been at the front," he volunteered. "I tell yuh, what I said before was right. That guy is yella. He's got it real soft. All he's got to do is to be cozy in battalion headquarters and pick out a lot o' guys when the word comes down to send up so many officers and so many men. I've got an order here fer a bunch o' officers and men and I'm goin' ter take it up to 'im myself an' maybe I'll get a chance to tell that guy where he gets off."

"Still sore at him?" I queried.

"You bet your life," said Becker emphatically. "That guy done me dirt when that kid o' mine was sick. It was just plain luck that I got to Boston anyway. I'll bet he was sore as hell when that order came through."

"I think you've got this fellow Lang wrong," I protested. I couldn't bring myself to believe that Lang was as vindictive as it appeared on the surface.

"AN' I'll tell you one thing about that guy," Becker continued, "what he learned before he came into our outfit may 'a' helped him in getting that paint off my condiment can, but it ain't done 'im much good since; now he ain't any better off than I am. We're both first lieutenants, only I got my promotion after I'd been in the line. All that guy uses what he knows for is to get him a safe job. First he was battalion bayonet instructor, an' then when there wasn't any more need for bayonet instruction, what does that guy do but get hisself made compass instructor for the battalion. You'd think he wuz the navy. What the hell good is compasses to an army?"

I switched the conversation to chan-

nels that I thought were safer, and kept off the subject of Lang until we arrived at battalion headquarters. Becker's design for picking another quarrel with Lang was defeated by the presence in the regimental headquarters of the battalion commander.

He read the field message with a puckering of brows and swore expertly. "Two companies to go in to-night. Of all the rotten luck that I ever knew! Not a company has got any officers left, except shavetails. C and H Companies it 'll have to be," he said to Lang. Then his eyes lighted upon me. I showed him my orders.

"You're ranking first lieutenant," he said. "You'll take over F Company in reserve."

"Yes, sir," I said, elated.

"And you," he said to Becker, "are still in command of H. All right for the line?"

Becker saluted. "Yes, sir."

"Then, Lang," continued the colonel, "you've got to assign one of these shavetails to the other company. I wish we had some way of promoting people ourselves. All right, gentlemen," he continued, "you may go, you will get your orders very soon."

Although there was nothing to do but accept the dismissal, Becker did manage, in the moment that he was passing Lang, to stoop down and whisper something sneeringly to him. I saw Lang's face pale, heard the quick indrawing of breath, as if he had been struck a sudden and unexpected blow.

After Becker and I had gone a short distance, I made an excuse to return to Lang.

He looked like a man who had been living with some horror for months. It developed that he had not heard from home since he had left Camp Merritt two months before. In some way his letters must have miscarried.

"The censors won't allow any bad news to come through to soldiers," he said. "That's what scares me. If my wife was all right, I'd have heard."

"No news," I said, "is good news."

"You know what that fellow Becker said to me?" demanded Lang, with a characteristically swift change of thought.

"What?"

"That I was staying back here and letting better men get killed."

"Oh, hang it, don't worry about him," I said, "anyway, he's just a little sore because he thinks you crabbed his chance to get leave to go to Boston when we were at Camp Merritt."

Lang laughed. "That's ironic," he said. "Know what actually happened?"

"What?"

"I knew from the first he had no show of getting that leave in the regular way, so I did the best thing I could. The original orders were for E and F Companies to go to Boston, but I just switched the orders around, and changed it so that G and H would go to Boston."

"On your own responsibility?" I asked, awed.

"Yes," said Lang. "Tell you the truth, old man, I couldn't bear the thought of poor Becker leaving without having a chance to see that kid of his. Fact is," he said confidentially, "what's got me worried sick is that ever since I've left the States I've been hoping to hear that I had a child of my own. I haven't heard since we left. Even my father won't answer my cable. And now I'll probably never know. I've a presentiment that I'm not coming out."

"Oh, you're too down-hearted," I said as I rose to go. "You'll probably hear from home any minute now that you're the father of twins," and I left him.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### DIFFERENT BLOOD.

**I**T was very damp and cold in the dug-out on that July evening. I slept only fitfully because of the bombardment going on all about us. **H**

Company, under Becker, was in the line; in support, five hundred yards in the rear, was E Company. Nobody expected anything much to happen, because the last attempt of the Germans had been foiled, and it was common property that they were husbanding all their force for a new offensive on another front. That was why my own company—F—and G Company had been held in reserve so far.

"Them guys up in the front line'd be in a hell of a shape if they needed any more men to-night," my top sergeant confided. "We're only two miles back as the crow flies; but they ain't anybody could find the way through the woods a night like this; and it's about ten miles 'round by the road."

I dozed off just about midnight. Although my watch said five o'clock, it was pitch-black when I felt somebody shaking my shoulder, and heard the top sergeant's voice saying, "There's a message here for you, sir."

In the light of a pocket flash lamp we read the message from battalion headquarters. "We gotta take up a position at 'J 52 B 8.4.' It's one of them Frawg map references," said the top sergeant.

There was no doubt about the urgency of the need, for between the lines of the formal and impersonal orders I read that Becker, attacking at dawn, was meeting unexpected resistance from heavy machine gun fire, and that he could hold out for only an hour or so unless reinforcements were sent.

The excited runner said, "Lieutenant, I've been to G Company. The lieutenant there says that he can find his way and for me to come on 'round and lead you there. He'll pull out right after you do."

I passed the word for my platoon commanders, and in a minute they were gathered around me. They were nearly all new men: none of them knew that country very well; none of them had any maps.

The runner said: "I can guide you. lieutenant, the long way round, but it's the safest way to go, because I can't trust myself to get you there right straight through that wood."

"Let's get going," I said. And we started off on our ten-mile hike, over a road too bad even for motor lorries.

All along the shell-pocked road I was thinking of Becker, and from thinking of him I began to think of what he had said about Lang, and I saw the wisdom of the higher command in keeping Lang as an instructor.

Here and now, in this battalion, there was evidence of the need for men who could take a company through unknown woods to a designated point; the training in compass work which Becker had decried was the very training which might, by saving time, have meant Becker's safety. But nobody was well enough grounded in map and compass work to take the short cut.

Knowing this, our only hope of reaching Becker in time was to hurry as best we might over the long ten miles. I did not even wait for G Company, and in all the ten miles we heard no sound which told that they might be overtaking us.

**A** GRAY, drizzly dawn was just breaking when our exhausted and sweating guide led us through the shattered remnants of the last little village.

We deployed at the foot of a timbered hill from the top of which we could hear the sharp rattle of musketry fire, and the staccato sounds like those of a steam riveter, that meant rapidly-firing machine guns. Then there were occasional bursts of what must have been bombs. Above the timber we could see a sodden yellow wheat field.

The commander of the first platoon said: "We're in time."

And then the firing suddenly died. and was not renewed. Everything must have been dead silence for as

much as two or three minutes, before we again heard the staccato machine gun. But it lasted for only a few seconds and desisted. I gave the signal to advance by rushes.

Slowly in the gray light we crept through the woods, and beyond it into the yellow, dank wheat field—winter-sown wheat that would never come to harvest. Soon we came upon our wounded and dead.

Despite the fact that the wheat field was dotted with dead and wounded men, there was no sign anywhere in front of a machine gun position, although the field stretched ahead for several acres in an unbroken line. A man dragging himself painfully along with the lower part of one leg shot away, enlightened us.

"There's a sunken road," he said, "just about a hundred yards ahead; it runs right across the middle of the field, and yuh can't see it till you're right on it."

It was ticklish work creeping forward in that weird silence, because we did not know what to expect upon our arrival.

In spite of the fatigue of the march our men dashed across that wheat field in a gallant rush and landed in the sunken road. To our astonishment, although it was honeycombed every twenty yards of its length by machine gun nests about which were grouped dead and wounded, Germans and Americans, there were no Germans.

We faced only Americans busily engaged in moving the machine guns to the other side of the road.

"Where are the Germans?" I asked a lean-jawed second lieutenant. He looked at me in astonishment.

"They're retreating. They're withdrawing steadily."

From the ground beside us a wounded man said, in a disgusted tone, "Withdrawing? Hell, we've driv 'em back. They pretty near wiped out H Company, but G Company is takin' 'em fer a nice ride."

"G Company?" I said wonderingly. "It can't be G Company. They didn't leave till after we did."

"I guess I ought to know," said the lieutenant. "It's G Company all right. I'm in command of it now that Lieutenant Lang's knocked out."

Wonder was piling upon wonder. I probed the mystery while I disposed my own men along the sunken road, where we had orders to consolidate our positions. The wounded who were waiting for stretcher bearers were the most voluble. "Lieutenant Lang had just a tiny compass. He brung G Company through the wood by a short cut an' he jumped them Boches with bombs when they wasn't expectin' it."

It explained how G Company had arrived—but not how Lang happened to be in command.

**I** MADE my way over to the machine gun pit where the lieutenant had said I might find Lang. It was clear that this machine gun pit had been the center of the fighting. The enemy had dug a semicircular hole in the side of the road, and from it three machine guns commanded the sweep of wheat field, one in the center and one on each side.

Leaning against one of these machine guns was Lang. His face was waxen and bloodless, his head drooped upon his shoulder, and the lower part of his right leg, as far as I could judge hastily, had been blown off by a bomb.

Although somebody had bound a rude tourniquet around the leg above the knee, it was clear that he had lost much blood.

"Is he dead?" I said to the burly man who was bending over Lang. The big broad face that was turned to me was pitiable in its self-accusation.

"I guess he is," he said bitterly. "And it's my fault too."

"Why," I said, "it's Becker. What do you mean, it's your fault?"

"Lang put his own name down for the officer that had to go into the line

with G Company after I kidded 'im," said Becker. "He got into this on my account, an' when I tried to put a tourniquet on 'im a few minutes ago he wouldn't let me until I apologized fer callin' 'im yella."

There was a faint stirring of Lang's eyelids, a slight quiver ran through his body. Becker seized his shoulder and almost sobbing said, "Yeh, buddy, I apologized once. Fer God's sake, buddy, come to. I'll do it again if yuh say so. Say, if you'll only wake up, buddy, I'll say anything you want. You ain't a yella guy, you're real stuff."

And then the man began murmuring again. "Say, you shoulda seen Lieutenant Lang bayoneting them Boches. Say, he came right into this pit where there was four of 'em."

For the first time I saw that Becker himself was wounded, and that he moved with difficulty.

"The first thing to do," I said, "is to get Lang back to a doctor, and see if there's any chance of saving him."

Somehow in the light of what followed it seems that Fate, who had selected me to see the beginning of that strange feud between these two men, was determined that I should be in at the finish. There seems no other way to account for the stray bullet that came whining down in the wake of the German's retreat and found a lodgment in my ankle.

Although the wound was slight, it kept me from walking, and made me one of the strange procession of stretcher-borne wounded that found its way to the temporary hospital that the French had set up a few miles back.

Once Lang came to, and his eyes opened, so that when he turned his head wearily from side to side he saw me on one side of him and Becker on the other.

He smiled at me—one of those smiles that seems to cost a great deal of effort, that wring your heart strings, and make you aware of your powerless-

ness to help. It was a game smile, but gamier still was the gesture with which he reached across and patted Becker's shoulder.

**A**LTHOUGH Becker was suffering very badly from his wound, and from the exhaustion of the previous night's fighting, he grinned gamely back. By the time we reached the dressing station Lang was unconscious, and Becker was sleeping heavily. My own wound gave scarcely any trouble at all.

The dressing station was back in the little village on the road we had come, along which the rest of our regiment was now marching toward the front. They wasted no time on us there, but put all of us into a waiting ambulance that drove us back to a field hospital.

Except that we lay on stretchers instead of cots, it was well equipped, and as modern as any in a great city. Once on the way there we stopped at the regimental headquarters, where the mail had just arrived.

There were no letters for me. There were some for Becker, and what looked like an old advertising circular for Lang. I was at first inclined to throw it away, but, remembering what he'd said about receiving no mail, I thought that even this might cheer him.

"There's only one chance," said the doctor gravely at the field hospital when I asked him about Lang, "and that is blood transfusion. The difficulty is that most of the men here are so badly wounded or so exhausted that they can't spare any blood themselves. They need every ounce of it to keep themselves going, and we can't ask the staff for any more than they've given."

"I'm all right," I said. "This little wound in my ankle means nothing. I'm just as strong as I ever was."

The doctor brightened visibly. "I'll have a sample taken to see if it's the right kind."

"Right kind," I said, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Some blood," he explained, "won't do for transfusion. Different people have different types of blood. I'll explain the technical difference later. We'll test yours anyway."

I think that the moment when the doctor came back to tell me that my blood would not do to help my friend was one of the most bitter moments of my life. Yet, ironically, my mind switched back to that first retort of Becker's, "It's different blood." And I said involuntarily, "Becker was right."

At the mention of his name, Becker, who had been sleeping heavily, opened his eyes and turned toward us.

"What's the low-down on Lang?" he asked. "Any hope?"

"Very little, I fear," said the doctor. "Our only chance now is to get him farther back to where we can get a blood transfusion. There isn't anybody here that we can call on."

"The hell they ain't," said Becker. "What about me, doc?"

"You can't spare it," said the doctor.

"Say, you got it all wrong, doc. I could spare a lot of it."

The doctor looked doubtfully from one to the other of us.

"You'd better let him try it, doctor," I urged. I knew that Becker would blame himself forever if Lang were allowed to die.

"It'll take a great deal," said the doctor.

"I don't care," said Becker, and bared his arm.

**I**T was not until the following day as we all lay on our stretchers waiting for the ambulance to take us back to the base hospital that I remembered the mail I had been given by the regimental postman. The doctor motioned to the ambulance bearers to wait while Becker read his letter.

"Got anything for me?" said Lang. I lifted up the battered old blue and white envelope so that he could see it. "Looks like a circular," he said.



Becker chortled as he read his letter. "Say, can yuh beat that fer a kid? He's only a year an' a half old and he's walkin' and talkin' already. He weighs thirty-three pounds in his buff, only two months after he's had pneumonia."

Something in Lang's expression checked his exuberance. Lang's fingers were picking nervously at the blanket. In his eyes was that look of pain and hurt, and I knew then that he was thinking and wondering, and putting the worst construction of disaster upon the silence from home in regard to the expected baby of his own.

Becker sensed it, too, and said, in a voice that was unexpectedly tender, "Ain't yuh goin' ter open yer mail, buddy?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon. Won't you open it for me?" Lang asked.

I handed the blue and white envelope to Becker. He opened it clumsily. "Say, it ain't an ad," he said, "it's a cable. Now who the hell sends that hooey to a soldier? Looks like it's about a bill your wife owes." He hesitated in embarrassment. "Your bill and wife son—Don't mean nothin'. You try it." He passed it over to me.

I saw that it was simply a transposition of words. It was a cablegram in which all the words had been pasted on separately by a hurried operator, who had mixed up their order. They ought properly to have read:

Your wife and son Bill both well.

It was signed by Lang's father.

It is queer how emotion hits some people. Lang did not shout; he did not even smile when I read it to him. He seemed to relax into a state of languor, and I could see that tears were starting in his eyes.

He seemed to be oblivious of us and was muttering to himself: "He'll be a year old probably when I see him. First six or seven years with us; boys' camp after that; prep school at fifteen; then at twenty-two—1918 plus twenty-

two. Eighteen and twenty-two, forty. He'll graduate in 1940." And I knew that he was already visualizing his son as graduated from Technology, and I turned to Becker and said so.

"Say," said Becker, grinning delightedly. "Can yuh beat that? 1940 ain't so far away at that. Say, I bet yuh my kid'll be playin' tackle in Technology about then."

"In Technology?" I asked.

"You betcha," said Becker, emphatically. "I ain't too proud to back down when I'm wrong. Say, I tell you what. That kid o' mine is goin' tuh Technology an' learn a lot o' useful stuff like Lang. How 'bout it, Lang? You'll be teaching there likely, and you can keep an eye on him."

"Bet your life, old fellow," said Lang softly. "Why shouldn't I? We've both got the same blood in our veins."

And the two grinned happily.

**B**ECKER called to the French stretcher-bearers, who were leaning against the ambulance smoking casually.

"We're ready to go any time now."

But the Frenchmen continued to smoke calmly, acknowledging the words with a polite shrug and a grin. It was clear to Becker that they did not understand English, so he addressed himself to Lang:

"You tell them Frawgs to get goin'."

Lang spoke crisply in French to the bearers, who instantly dropped their cigarettes and began to move rapidly toward the waiting stretchers.

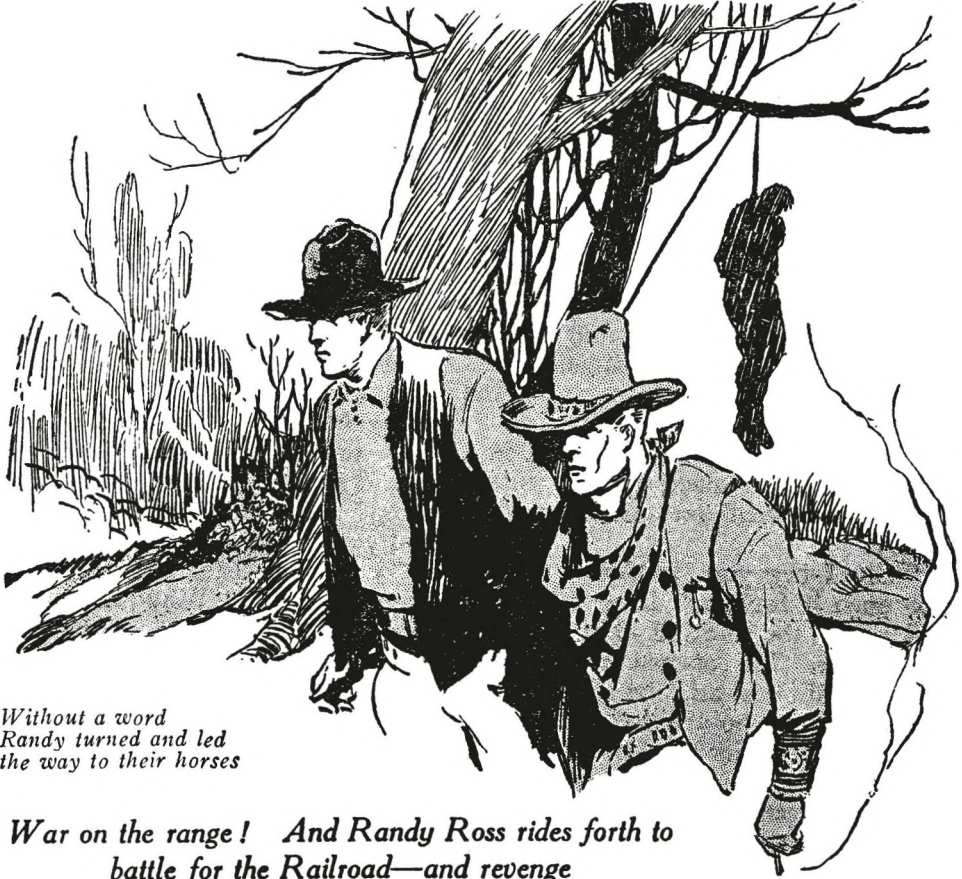
"Yuh sure got action outa them guys, buddy," chuckled Becker admiringly. "What did yuh say to 'em?"

Lang nudged him feebly in the ribs with his thumb and grinned.

"There's only one thing for a regular guy to say," he returned. "I said 'Now youse boids, snap into it!'"

And Becker and Lang exchanged grins of understanding.

**THE END.**



*Without a word  
Randy turned and led  
the way to their horses*

*War on the range! And Randy Ross rides forth to  
battle for the Railroad—and revenge*

# The Saga of Silver Bend

**By J. E. GRINSTEAD**

*Author of "Signed, 'Scada,'" etc.*

## LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

**D**EATH strikes at the Railroad Ranch, located in the bottle-shaped loop the river makes at Silver Bend, when Asa Ross, son of old Railroad Ross, is shot down at a round-up. It is the outbreak of a long-dormant feud. He was killed by Bell Holderness's gang, who were looking on from a distance; and the Railroad men chase them, six-guns roaring. Just before the Holderness outfit get into the timber, one man falls dead; it was Ben Tarleton, scapegrace son of the fiery Southern planter, old Judge Tarleton; and he was shot in the back.

Randy Ross, Railroad's youngest and wildest son, had ducked out after the shooting, afraid to face the sight of death. Two punchers, Old Sankey, and Dolly—a round-faced, fearless little cowboy—set out for the town of Willow Mills, and get Randy out of the saloon. On their way back to the ranch, at the neck of the "bottle," they

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hear two shots—and find the bodies of Peyton Ross, the other brother, and a Railroad cowpoke named Leck.

Randy, unable to dodge the situation, faces his fear of death and conquers it. They take the bodies to the ranch.

All the funerals are held at Willow Mills the next day. The Tarletons—including Zella, whom Randy loves—do not speak to the Rosses. Later Judge Tarleton sternly approaches Railroad Ranch, and demands that Railroad Ross tell him who assassinated his son Ben—for no Tarleton ever ran from an enemy! Railroad told the story of the attack on Asa, and their pursuit of the Holderness gang; but Tarleton angrily denounces Ben's killing as a treacherous murder and rides away.

Randy and Dolly are riding some distance behind Judge Tarleton, on their way to the round-up grounds, when a bushwhacker from across the river shoots the judge, then takes a shot at them. Dolly shoots, and thinks he hit the ambusher.

The judge managed to ride away; but obviously he thought he had been ambushed by the Railroad men, for when four Railroad punchers ride into Willow Mills for the mail, two of them are shot down by men of Holderness's gang, aided by Lav Tarleton—one of the judge's sons—while the other two were sent back with orders either to surrender Randy Ross and the murderer of Ben Tarleton, or to prepare for war. And to add to Randy's troubles, Bell Holderness is now welcomed at the Tarletons' home!

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## CHAPTER V.

### AMBUSH.

**S**OMEBODY had been watching Randy and Dolly from a safe place, as they rode across the prairie, but he hadn't watched long enough. The spy didn't see Cub and Shorty, and he didn't see Sank and

Con, who were riding down another draw, and coming into Silver Bend a quarter of a mile east of where the trail went down the hill.

Randy led down the trail. His mind was in turmoil. The Railroad and its troubles were of course, the main problem; but what was making those troubles? Was it possible that Bell Holderness had started all this death and destruction in order to get him out of the way? Not likely. If Bell wanted him killed, it would be easy enough to have had some of the Holderness gang pot him from the brush long ago. Zella might be one of the pawns in the game, but certainly not the only one, perhaps not the main one. What was it all about? The only answer he got was the crack of a gun and a whistling bullet that narrowly missed him.

They were well down into the open timber of the bend by this time. The shot had come from his left. Randy didn't look to see where the others of his party were, though he knew that Dolly was a little way behind him.

He whirled his horse into the woods as he drew his gun. He had gone berserk. The blood of a hundred pioneer ancestors was burning in his veins, and all thought of fear or caution was forgotten. His only thought was to mix smoke with the man who had shot at him.

He glimpsed two riders in the woods and opened on them. They returned his fire for a moment. Bullets whistled and leaves and twigs fell around Randy, but he pushed on. Into the mêlée came Dolly, and close behind him Cub and Shorty. Still the attackers stood their ground. There must be quite a party of them. It was growing dusky in the woods. Apparently, no hits were scored on either side. Con and Sank heard the shots and came hurrying on. It sounded like a major battle going on as they came up.

"Come on, fellers!" called Randy. "Let's take 'em," and he spurred straight for the group of trees behind

which the enemy had taken shelter. Dolly went with him. Con and Sank sought the flank on one side, while Cub and Shorty took the other.

This was something more than members of the Holderness gang cared to face. They had thought they were going to surprise Randy and the little puncher. Instead, they had jumped six men, none of whom was frightened about being surprised.

The Holderness outfit still had an even break, for there were six of them, but they were not seeking an even break. They gave back for a better position, and made a mistake. Bullets flew among them in spite of the gathering dusk, as they crossed an open glade, going toward the river on the west side of the bend. One pitched from his horse. Panic-stricken, the others fled.

"Crowd 'em, fellers!" yelled Randy. "Get 'em as they cross the river at the old ford."

On through the timber they tore, running into thickets of mustang grape and bamboo, halting to get the sound of hoofs, then on again. Finally, they came out on the river bank, just as five horsemen rode out on the bar on the other side.

Two carbines cracked. One was Dolly's and the other was in the hands of Shorty, whose big mouth spread in a wide grin. He had jerked the gun from Sank's saddle. They saw one man fall, and another grip his saddle horn and lean over, as he plunged into the brush on the other side. Dolly had got a man, so that made three down and one crippled, out of six—and not one of the Railroad men had a scratch, except from briars.

"What the hell did you grab my carbine for?" growled Sank, as silence followed the fusillade of shots.

"Why, Cub and me didn't have any guns."

"No guns! What did you come along for?"

"Just company, I reckon," grinned

Shorty. "Anyway, I got one and crippled another so the dogs can ketch him."

**S**HORTY was the most uncompromising fighter in the Railroad outfit. He always grinned, whichever way the fight was going. He had grinned when Bell Holderness and Lav Tarleton took his gun—grinned because he knew they were making a mistake by not killing him. He meant to kill Bell Holderness and grin at him as he died.

"Well, we'd better stay on this side," said Randy. "The woods are likely to be full of 'em on the other side of the river."

"Apt to be plenty more on this side," said Sankey. "We better—"

"There goes one! Gimme back that gun!" yelled Shorty, as a horseman sprang out of a thicket and headed back up the river trail toward the narrows.

"Don't shoot!" called Randy. "Let's take him alive and make him talk. Come on, Dolly."

Up the trail they thundered in pursuit. It was half a mile to the spot where Randy's horse had been shot from under him earlier in the day. It was a dangerous spot, but they paid no attention to that.

The fleeing horseman didn't have a chance. He was poorly mounted and a poor rider. He didn't try to shoot, but seemed to have his whole soul centered on going away from where he was to somewhere else. As they caught up to him, Randy went on one side and Dolly on the other. Randy reached out, caught the back of his collar, and fairly lifted him from his saddle.

"Oh, Lawd, he done got me now!" moaned the prisoner, as Randy dropped him on the ground and dismounted.

"Pompey, what the devil are you doing in here, this time of day?" demanded Randy. "Don't you know this bend is full of killers?"

"Y-y-y-assir, yassir, I know it now, Mistuh Randy, but—oh, Lawd, help

me! Please, Mistuh Randy, don't you 'member that night I help you on yo' horse out at the mouth of the avenoo, when you—when yo' horse wouldn't stand still? Oh, Lawdy, save me now!"

"Shut up, fool!" snapped Randy, shaking the frightened negro boy as if he were a bundle of rags, which in fact he was. "Catch his pony, Dolly, and let's get away from this place."

They put Pompey on his pony, and all rode back into the bend. Out in the round-up prairie, where no one could slip up on them, they stopped. It was growing dark, but Pompey's eyes and teeth showed white in his shiny black face. That face was mostly eyes and teeth anyway.

He was a skinny little fellow, and perhaps the most skillful and adroit liar on the Tarleton plantation, but he never lied when he was scared, and he was frightened within one inch of his life now. He had been caught fairly in the middle of the battle, as it swept on toward the river, and had run into a thicket like a rabbit. Then, as things quieted down, he had tried to run out of trouble, and here he was.

"Which way did you come in here?" asked Randy.

"I—I come down the river trail, Mistuh Randy."

"Didn't you know it was dangerous on that trail?"

"Nossir, I didn't, but I does now. Oh, Lawdy! Miss Zella, she didn't say nothin' about dat to me. O-o-o, Lawd, save a poor nigger—"

"Shut up! What did Miss Zella have to do with it?"

"Why—she have everything they is to do with it," returned Pompey, quieting down a bit, but still shaking with fright. "She sont me—sont me—to—to bring this here to you," and suddenly remembering his errand, he pulled a note from somewhere among his rags and handed it to Randy.

"Hum! It's too dark to see to read it, and we can't make a light here. Too good a target. Keep him here until I

get back, boys. If he tries to get away, shoot his liver out," and smiling at Pompey's fright, Randy mounted, and rode on toward the ranch house alone.

AS he galloped that half mile, with the note in his hand, Randy thought of many things. Life seemed dark and forbidding before him, but one ray of light shone out of the darkness. Zella was still true to him. She still cared enough for him to send him a note, dangerous as it was to send it, and despite the trouble it might make for her if her father and brothers learned by any chance that she was communicating with him.

He wondered now why he hadn't been man enough to cut out his wild behavior and claim Zella as his own, long ago. That couldn't be helped now, but she should never have cause to think he was wild and irresponsible again. When this mess was over—

He dismounted and hurried to his room, the big room that had been occupied together by the three brothers, from their childhood. The grim, silent, thoughtful Asa, of whom he had always been a little afraid, was not in his familiar seat in the chimney corner. The gentle, kindly Peyton was not by the table with his book.

There was no light in the room. Randy struck a match and lit the lamp on the table. Pate's book still lay there. He glanced at the mantel and saw Asa's pipe and tobacco box. Loneliness gripped him like an icy hand. He tore open the note, and with changing countenance, read:

DEAR RANDY:

I call you that from long habit. I can't remember when I didn't call you that, but now, all is done. I am writing this saddest note of my life, for the sake of that past. I tried hard to believe you were not guilty of the thing my brothers charged you with. There was doubt about you having anything to do with Ben's death, and I clung to that doubt, oh, how I clung to it!

But when my father came home, shot



in the back and dangerously hurt, from ambush; when he told me he saw you and knew that you and some of your men followed him and shot him, there could be no longer any doubt. My love for you has caused me much sorrow. I have often told you that some day you would commit a crime in one of your wild escapades, but I never thought it would be such a direct stab at my heart as this has been.

I'm writing this because I feel that your death and the death of your father could not bring back my dead brother and heal the wound of my father. My brothers and the Holderness brothers have sworn to kill you and your father.

I don't want to see you killed. There are many other places in the world where you could live out your life. Go while you can and hide yourself from the certain death that awaits you here. There have been many sad moments in the years that I have loved you, but the saddest is now, when I say—good-by.

ZELLA.

Randy sprang to his feet, and crushed the note in his hand. That ray of light that he thought he saw was further gloom. He paced the old oak floor in rage.

"The death of me and my father won't bring back her brother, and heal her father's wound," he grated. "No, and what about my two brothers and three loyal, trusted men who were willing to fight my battles? What will bring them back? Go while the going is good, will I? If she thinks I could shoot an innocent man in the back, she never knew me. If she thinks I'm yellow enough to run away from this fight, she knows me still less!"

He sat down to the table and wrote:

MISS TARLETON:

I have your note, and thank you for any good intentions it may have contained, but they are wasted. I have never shot a man in the back, and never shall, unless he commits an assault on me, and then runs, as has happened more than once since this trouble. I can't understand the purpose of your note. If it was to get information as to my purpose, you shall have it. Silver Bend and the Railroad Ranch is my home, and I mean to stay here.

Until now, I have shrunk from the thought of a clash with your brothers. Now, since you tell me that they have allied themselves with my enemies, I shall welcome the day when we meet. You say my death will not bring back your brother. You didn't mention anything that would bring back my two brothers. They were both murdered, if not by your brothers, at least by their allies, and, I take it, with their sanction. I mean that some one shall atone for the death of my brothers. If anything in this note will bring comfort to my enemies, they are welcome so to construe it.

RANDOLPH ROSS.

Randy folded the note, put it in an envelope, and placed it in his pocket. He struck a match, set fire to Zella's note, and dropped it in the back of the old fireplace. He watched it burn. Thus ended his hope of happiness with the only woman he'd ever love.

HE stole out, mounted his horse, and rode back to where he had left his men with Pompey. He didn't want his father to know about these notes; this was his personal affair. When he got back to the men, he said:

"Boys, I don't want it known that I got that note. Go on to the house and eat. Take the mail in, Shorty, but don't say anything about what happened up at town to-day, unless dad questions you. There may be a lot more to tell when I get back, and—"

"When you get back! Where are you going?" asked Dolly.

"Just now, I'm going to take Pompey up to the top of the hill and send him home by the prairie road. He'd get killed before he got halfway through the narrows. You boys go on and eat. Anything I'd eat would poison me the way I feel now."

"I'm not hungry, either," declared Dolly. "I'll go with you. One lone man ain't got much business prowling the bend right now."

Randy said nothing, but he felt much. This little blue-eyed puncher was beginning to mean a great deal to

him. Pompey got on his pony and was given the note. Escorted by Randy and Dolly, he took the trail that led out to the prairie. Out on the prairie they stopped.

"Here, Pompey," said Randy, and gave the boy a silver dollar.

"Thanky, suh, Mist' Randy. You're the onliest one that ever did give me a whole, borned dollar at one time, 'cept-in' Mist' Ben, and he won't never give me no more."

"No, and that's likely to be the last one I'll ever give you. Now, listen to me. Keep your eyes open. If you see anybody on the prairie, don't let 'em come to you. When you hit the bottom, ride that pony."

"Yas, suh, boss! When I hits dat dark ole bottom, I'm gwine make this old pestletail bronc think the ha'nts is ridin' him!"

"Well, go on."

"But, er, Mist' Randy—"

"What is it?"

"If you ever needs me, you knows whar I is. You 'bout the onliest white man I got left since Mist' Ben is gone."

"All right. If I ever need you I'll call for you. If you deliver that note to anybody but Miss Zella, I'm likely to call for you pretty soon and bring a rope."

"Oh, Lawdy, Mist' Randy! Don't talk that way, and me got to go thoo that ole dark bottom. I ain't heavy enough to break my own neck, if you did hang me. Come on here, pony, we's got to travel."

Pompey rode away into the night. Randy and the little puncher sat silently listening until the hoof beats died out.

Randy made no move to turn back toward the ranch. Dolly sat his horse in silence. Great stories are told of ancient knights and their loyal squires. Never was there a greater knight than Randy Ross was at that moment, nor was there ever a more loyal squire than Dolly.

He had been watching Randy all the

year he had been at the Railroad. He had envied that stalwart height, the broad shoulders, and perfect form. He had envied Randy's education. Perhaps he had envied most of all the ease with which Randy could jerk his gun on a running horse and kill a leaping jack rabbit.

He had envied him all this, watching the devil-may-care Randy in the days before he got "busted," as Dolly called it. Since that night, when Randy had reacted so wonderfully to the acid test, and had come out of it so much a man, Dolly's envy had turned to a sort of worship. He was ready to follow Randy anywhere, no matter how wild the adventure, or how slim the chances of coming out of it alive.

"DOLLY," said Randy at last, "I don't suppose my private affairs would interest you. Maybe you didn't even know that I had expected to marry Zella Tarleton."

"Sankey told me something about it that evening we found you at the Cottonwood saloon. We saw her, and—It was sorty for her that I talked to you like I did."

"Then I have to thank her for a service, if she caused you to make a man of the sorry thing I was then."

"I didn't make a man of you," disclaimed Dolly. "I knew you was a thoroughbred all the time. I—I just sorty rode you and quieted you some, and then you done the rest yourself."

"All right, I'll thank you for the riding, but let that all go. I won't forget it. What I'm going to tell you is that everything between Zella and me is over. She told me in that note that she believed I shot her father in the back. When a woman can believe a thing like that of a man, it's time for things to be over. I'm just telling you that, so you'll understand something else I'm going to tell you."

"But maybe she ain't had a square deal, Randy. Maybe somebody has stacked the deck on her. She don't

look to me like a girl that would deal from the bottom of the deck on a fellow."

"Oh, yes, she does understand. She advised me to run. To get out of this mess while the going was good. To play the part of the yellow pup that I used to be."

"No!"

"Yes. But, Dolly, I won't do it. If she had thrown me cold a week ago I might have gone to the devil. I may go anyhow, but not the way I would have gone then. She was all there was in the world to keep me half straight then. There's something else to keep me straight now."

Randy stopped, raised a gauntleted hand to the starry heaven, and went on: "If God lets me live, I'll avenge my two brothers and the loyal men who fell fighting for the Railroad, regardless of whom it may hurt. I held back from tangling with the Tarleton boys. I kept my temper when the old judge talked to dad like he was a dog; all on account of Zella. She has freed me from any obligations. From here on the Tarletons and Holdernesses look alike to me. Let's go."

They turned back down the steep trail that led into Silver Bend and the Railroad ranch. Dolly said nothing, but he was puzzled. Well, he knew Randy hadn't shot the old judge, and was pretty sure he didn't kill Ben. Randy was getting a dirty deal, and he was for him, no matter what he might do from here on.

## CHAPTER VI.

### RANDY SEEKS INFORMATION.

THEY had reached the bottom before either of them spoke again. Randy stopped and Dolly came up to him.

"Dolly, I've got to find out something. I don't know anything about the H Bar ranch. Never was there in my life. Dad has peculiar ideas. He

never would let his cattle drift across onto the Indian lands, even when grass was short on this side and going to waste over there. He always said he never had taken anything that didn't belong to him, and that grass didn't belong to him."

"Well, I reckon he was right about it."

"Yes, I'm sure he was. He said it would keep him out of trouble with fellows on that side, but it hasn't done it. I don't want any of their grass, but I do want to know something about what I'm fighting. I've got to have some information."

"Huh! How are you goin' to get it?"

"Go after it."

"Go to the H Bar, you mean?"

"Yes, if necessary."

"Why, Randy, that Holderness gang would shoot us so full of holes we'd make a picket fence look like a solid wall."

"Maybe not. We've got to get our hands on one of that gang and make him talk."

"Oh, thataway. Sure, come on; let's go."

"Wait a minute. We might find one of them in the cottonwoods, across the river, watching the narrows."

"I think you will find one there," said Dolly grimly, "if somebody ain't packed him off, and you'll find two more layin' on the sandbar on the other side of the river, but you won't get much information from them."

"No, I suppose not. You know that boat the boys built last summer. Know where it is?"

"Yes. It's at the upper end of the slough, but we can't go to the H Bar in a boat. It's four or five mile from the river, up at the edge of the prairie," Dolly pointed out.

"I know, but maybe we won't have to go to the H Bar. We may find what we want closer than that," Randy said with cold menace.

"Meaning what?"

"That somebody stays in that thicket of cottonwoods all the time. They shoot at everybody that goes from the Bend toward Willow Mills, and at nobody that comes this way. We can row up the river on this side, close in to the bank, and they'll never see us. Just above the thicket, we can drift across, tie up our boat, and take a look. I've got to investigate that thicket, and they've shown us that we can't do it in the daytime."

"They shore have. That sounds all right. Let's go," said Dolly.

"Easy, then. They're likely to be anywhere. We'll leave our horses in the big grape thicket this side of the slough."

Their horses hidden, they pushed the boat through the upper end of the slough into the river. Dolly was no seaman.

"All I can do is sit still and look scared," he said in a low tone.

"Just keep quiet and keep your eyes open. I'll work the boat." With noiseless strokes of the short oar, Randy sent the boat upstream.

In the marshes, around that thicket of cottonwoods, frogs were keeping up an incessant din that would cover any noise the boat might make. Well above the thicket they crossed to the other side, got out and tied the boat to a sapling and went ashore.

"We've got to be careful now," whispered Randy. "It's two or three hundred yards down this little point to where their sharpshooters take their stand."

They stole softly on through the dense thicket and had gone a hundred yards when Randy put his hand behind him and touched Dolly.

"Listen!" he whispered.

THERE was the sound of two men walking. They were coming along a trail from opposite directions, and, crouching in the thicket close to the ground, Randy and his little puncher heard them meet.

6 A

"Hello, Steve! That you?"

"Yes," replied a growling voice.

"Well, sit down here on this log. I got a mouthful to tell you."

"Go ahead and tell it."

"Well, I come in here awhile ago to relieve Red. I went down to the stand, and Red was layin' there dead."

"Hell he was!"

"Yes. Some of that Railroad outfit potted him. Are you and Bell sure you can handle this mess the way you set out to do? Because, if you ain't, I aim to slide out while the sliding is good."

"Of course we're sure," Steve said angrily. "We've already got Asa and Pate. That just leaves Old Railroad to lead the fight, and he won't last long."

"What about Randy?"

"Nothing. He don't amount to anything if he's alive, and I don't reckon he is. The Tarleton boys are rearin' to get him, and Bell aimed to run 'em together to-day."

"Huh! Bell is a pretty smooth schemer, but I don't understand him starting this mess the way he did."

"Bell didn't start it. I started it, and he gave me hell for it. Bell's too cautious. We been ready to clean up on the Railroad outfit for a month, and Bell kept putting me off. We could 'a' got 'em one at a time, and nobody known it. Bell's idea was to go over there to the round-up and look things over. Then the next day we'd begin to work on 'em."

"Well, why didn't you work it that way?"

"We would, but trouble is, Bell was after one thing and I was after something else. All I wanted was to clean up the whole Ross outfit, because old Railroad killed my daddy. Began to look to me like Bell never would do anything, so when I got a good chance I let Asa have it. He was the only one I was afraid of."

"Why didn't you get all of 'em?"

"Get, nothing! The whole outfit

come foggin' after us like a bat out of hell, and we run! Then as we went into the timber, Bell shot Ben Tarleton."

"What for?"

"I asked Bell that. He said it had to be done. Said in a pinch we could say Ben shot Asa. Besides that, Ben being shot that way, old Judge Tarleton and the other two boys would think the Railroad outfit done it."

"Bell's smooth, ain't he?"

"Yes, he's smooth, but he's too slow. We'd orto cleared up on Railroad and his boys, and gone on back home. Everybody knows Railroad killed pap, and nobody would blame us, but Bell wants too much."

"What is it he wants?"

"He wants Silver Bend. Says it's the best tract of land on either side of the river from head to mouth. Thinks when they ain't nobody left but the old woman he can get it at his own price, and he can. Another thing he wants is Zella Tarleton, and when Randy Ross is out of the way he'll get her. Oh, he'll get what he wants. He always does." Steve's tone showed his confidence in his brother's shrewdness.

"Why don't a gang just ride over to the Railroad, call Railroad and Randy out, and—"

"Two good reasons. One is, these messes have got to look like gun fights, in case there should be any hereafter about it. The other is that Bell and me wants to stay here awhile yet. Calling Railroad and Randy out and shooting them up wouldn't be no healthy job."

"I thought you said Randy don't amount to anything."

"He don't, Bill. He's yellow all the way through. But still and all, if he was cornered thataway—he's the fastest and best shot in this country."

"Well, what's the program?" asked the other. The listeners had identified him by now as Bill Hayden of the Holderness gang.

"Just to watch for Railroad and

Randy and get 'em. Your job is to watch that trail, and you better get on it. Old Railroad ain't afraid of the devil. He'll be riding up to Willow Mills, and give you a chance. Bell will make the Tarleton boys get Randy, and then we'll be in the clear of everything."

"Maybe so. I don't like the idea of goin' down there and keepin' watch on that trail, with Red layin' there dead," Bill admitted.

"He can't hurt you. I'll send some of the boys to get him as soon as I get back to the ranch. Keep your eyes open. Remember that every Railroad puncher you get will make the rest quit that much quicker when Railroad's gone, and—"

"What's that!"

**I**N his pent-up rage, Randy had moved and broken a twig beneath him.

Steve Holderness and his hired killer sprang up from the log and stood for a moment listening. There was no chance to take the two killers in the darkness, so Randy had to lie still.

"Varmint in the bushes," said Hayden at last.

"Reckon so," replied Steve. "Get on the job, and if anybody comes along do as good shooting as you did when you got Pate Ross and that old puncher."

They parted, and their steps died away in the distance. Presently, Randy heard the thudding of a horse's hoofs, as Steve mounted and rode for the H Bar.

"What are we going to do now?" whispered Dolly.

"We're going to get Hayden," replied Randy, in a tense whisper. "He killed Pate, and I'm not going to wait for any law. We'll give 'em some of their own medicine. From here on, I fight the devil with fire."

Silently they waited for half an hour, then found the trail and walked on down toward the river, letting their footsteps be plainly heard. As they



approached the river, a low voice said:

"You boys come for Red? Got here mighty quick."

"Met Steve on the trail, and he sent us on," replied Randy in a low tone.

"Well, come and get him. I'll be glad when he's gone," and Hayden turned his back to lead the way to where the body lay.

The next moment Hayden lay on the ground, knocked out by a blow on the head from Randy's gun.

"We've got to get away from here!" said Randy. "Come on, those fellows may get here any time," and, picking up the unconscious Hayden, he led the way to the boat.

When Hayden came back to the world, he was lying on the ground under a big tree that overhung the river at the narrows, and near the spot where Pate and old Leck had fallen. His hands and feet were tied, and he felt something at his neck.

"Whu—what are you fellows doing?" asked Hayden, groggily.

"Just waiting for you to wake up," said Dolly. "We're in a sorty hurry. Got anything to say before you go?"

"Go where?"

"I'd hate to say," and Dolly pulled the rope slightly.

"You fellows ain't going to hang me!"

He would have ended in a yell, but the rope jerked taut, and he rose endwise from the ground, kicked a few times, and was still. They made the rope fast and left him there. Without a word, Randy turned and led the way to their horses. Just before they mounted he said:

"Dolly, I know all I want to know now. We've got the man that killed Pate. I mean to hang Steve Holderness for killing Asa. The Tarletons can settle their own scores for the killing of Ben. I don't know any better punishment for them than for Zella to marry Bell Holderness and then find out about that."

"You're too hard, Randy," said Dolly. "She don't know all that. The Tarletons believe you killed Ben, and the old judge told her you shot him."

"Yes, I'm hard. Hard as hell it-self. I've had plenty to make me hard. I'll make Silver Bend safe before I'm through, if you'll stay with me. Even if I have to hang a man to every tree in it."

"I'll stay with you, when it comes to cleaning up the Holderness gang, but I wish you wouldn't be so hard on Miss Zella. She—"

"Never mind. Don't mention her name to me again, and you and I will get along finely," and, mounting his horse, Randy led the way on to the ranch.

In a little more than forty-eight hours Randolph Ross had changed from a wild, irresponsible boy to a strong, purposeful man. And in the last few hours, since reading Zella's note and hearing Steve and Hayden talk, he had turned to a hard man, with but one purpose in life—bitter, bitter vengeance.

He wanted to kill the men who had robbed him of his brothers. He wanted to humble the woman whom he had loved with all his soul because she had doubted him when he was in trouble. He was far on the road to becoming a very bad and dangerous man, and, as the canker ate farther into his heart, he would become worse.

**W**ISE little Dolly knew this. He could see that what he thought he had made into a wonderful man was likely to become a hideous monster.

Randy Ross was desperate now. He would go to any length to put a rope on Steve's neck. Dolly was willing to follow him in that enterprise, but when that was done he wanted to see Randy and Zella happy. As he rode silently along with Randy, he made a resolution to save this naturally fine young man from himself.

When they reached the ranch, Dolly went on to the bunk shack. Randy would have asked him to share that big, lonesome room, for company, but there was such a storm in his soul that Ross wanted solitude, and a chance to think things out. He slipped into the house, but didn't escape the ears of old Railroad. His father was in bed, but hadn't been asleep, though it was some time after midnight. Randy made a light. He had eaten nothing since noon, but he wasn't hungry and felt that he could never sleep again.

Barely had he sat down to his task of thinking when the door opened and old Railroad entered. His hair was tousled, and he was in nightshirt and trousers, with one suspender down.

"Randy, I'm mighty glad you come in. I couldn't go to sleep. I went out and asked the boys about you. They said you and Dolly went off somewhere, but they didn't know where."

"Some of 'em knew. They were lying to you for me, like always. That's got to be stopped. I'm not going to do anything more that I'm ashamed for you to know, or that you'll be ashamed to know. I'll tell you where I went. You ought to know it."

Randy recapitulated the day's events. He told of the killing of Brazos and Keech by Bell Holderness and Lav Tarleton. He told of the running fight in the woods and of capturing Pompey. Railroad's lips twisted in a wintry smile at thought of Pompey's fright. Then Randy told of the note from Zella and what he had written to her.

"I'm mighty sorry about that, Randy. Zella is as fine a young woman as there is in the world. She just don't understand."

"Don't, dad! When you excuse her, I feel like you're accusing me. She didn't have any right to think that I'd do the things they accuse me of doing. She ought to know I couldn't do it. I hope she marries Bell, and then finds out that he shot Ben in the back."

"Stop, Randy! Don't be so bitter!"

"Why shouldn't I be bitter?"

"But you don't know that Bell shot Ben. That was just a guess of ours."

"Oh, yes, I do know it," and Randy went on to tell of the trip to the thicket and the hanging of Hayden.

"Thank God that it wasn't my bullet that killed Ben," said Railroad, fervently. "Judge Tarleton and I have been friends and neighbors always. He's hot-headed and jumps to conclusions, but he's a good man."

"Good man or not, the Tarletons have tied in with the Holdernesses, and they all look alike to me. I'm not going to hunt the Tarleton boys, but they're hunting me and they can find me."

"Randy, I'd hate—"

"Let's don't talk about that, dad. If we meet, we meet, and that's all there is to it. We found out that Hayden killed Pate, and we hanged him. We heard Steve say he shot Asa, and I'll hang him if I live."

"THAT'S all right for them. Randy, but it ought to stop there."

"What about Bell? He's the prime mover in the whole mess," and Randy went over the two reasons Steve had given for Bell's part in the mess.

"Bell ought to hang, too, then. He'll never get Silver Bend."

"Not while I live," Randy vowed.

"Not while anybody lives. Mother and I will make a will that, in the event of your death, we'll leave it to your uncle for his lifetime, and then to his heirs. He won't want it, but he can't sell it."

"That's going a long way around. I know a better way than that to keep Bell from getting it. I don't want to kill him now. I want him to marry Zella."

"Then, after they are married, I want to show her proof that he shot Ben in the back and had her father shot. After that, I'm ready to shoot

Bell, or hang him, whichever comes handiest."

Railroad was appalled at his son's bitterness. Deep in his heart, he wanted Randy to marry Zella, had always wanted it. That very day he had thought of it much. The farmer and his plow were encroaching on the cow country. A few more years and that would be a farming country.

A little work—and Railroad had plenty of money to have it done—and Silver Bend would be a great plantation, five or six times larger than the Tarleton plantation, and better, because the alluvial soil was new and fresh. Randy was the only heir now. It would all be his. With a wife like Zella, a woman of fine breeding and culture, and plenty of money, Randy could go a long way in life. But Randy had dashed all those hopes. Railroad sat with bowed head as Randy went on:

"We can't take the men and go into this fight, as you did in old times, and shoot it out in the open. They won't come out in the open. If we went to the H Bar we might find half a dozen men, and maybe none. They're going to bushwhack and get Railroad riders when and where they can. More than two men together will simply make a better target for them. I'm going to take Dolly in the morning, and hunt where I think the hunting is good. The other men had better work the cattle out onto the prairie and keep them there until this is over, one way or another."

"Maybe you're right," said Railroad, wearily, "but don't take too many chances, son. You're all I got left now. I wish I could ride with you, but I can't. I'm still good for a minute, but I don't last out. My heart beats too fast. I reckon I driv it too much when I was younger. Go to bed and get some sleep. When we get up in the morning, things never look to us like they did the day before," and Railroad tottered off to bed, his mind also full of plans for saving this last

son from a life of misery and bitterness.

## CHAPTER VII.

WHO KILLED ASA ROSS?

LIGHTS burned late in two rooms of the Tarleton house that night. One of these was the great bedroom on the ground floor, where the judge lay, painfully, but not seriously wounded. The bullet had passed through the top of the left hip, grazing it, but not breaking it. The doctor had said it would get well, with proper care, and the patient was now sleeping under the influence of an opiate.

The other light was in Zella's room. A little while after nightfall she had slipped out to the cabin back of the house, where the family servants lived. She asked for Pompey, and was told that he had not come in. On her way to the house she was upbraiding herself for having sent the faithful negro into trouble, when a low voice called her:

"Miss Zella! Miss Zella, here I is," and Pompey stole toward her in the darkness.

"What kept you so long?" she asked.

"Miss Zella, I been skeered outen my nacherl bawn witses," and Pompey proceeded to tell a highly colored story of his adventures in a hurried whisper.

"Did you give Mr. Randy the note?"

"Yes'm, I sholy did, and he gimme a note for you, an'—now where at is that old note," and Pompey fumbled among his rags. "Here she is, an' I's glad to get rid of her. Mist' Randy, say if I give it to anybody else he gwine hang me good."

"All right, Pompey. Run along now. I'll give you something in the morning."

Zella put the note in the front of her dress and went back into the house.

"Huh! Look lak I gwine to come

out of this alive yit. Gwine gimme something in the mawnin'. Hope it ain't no more job that'n. That ol' dark bottom, hoo-oo!" and he went on to the cabin where supper and an expert job of lying about where he had been, were in prospect.

Zella stole up the stair to her room, entered, and locked the door. No one in that house, except herself and the faithful Pompey, would ever know of this note. A hundred times she had received notes in the same manner from Randy, when he had been on one of his escapades. They had always been so penitent and so full of love that she could but yield and give him a chance to make amends.

But this time she couldn't yield. Almost by rote she knew what was in that note, she thought. In spite of her protestations to herself and her written message to Randy, that her love for him was a thing of the dead past, she knew in her heart, as she pressed the note to her bosom, that it was not and never could be.

She opened the note, and, with staring eyes, read the salutation, "Miss Tarleton." Tears sprang to her eyes. She brushed them away and read on to the end, then read it again. She looked about the room, as if for some one to question, then fell across the bed and wept bitterly.

After all her effort, Randy would not save himself. Never had he failed to do anything she asked him to do, when he was in a penitent mood. But he was not even penitent now. What was wrong? Randy, guilty, never would have written that. It was not the old Randy. Had he been falsely accused? At that thought, she sobbed afresh.

For an hour that day, just after noon, she had listened to Bell Holderness and her brothers discuss the killing of Ben and the shooting of her father, as they sat in the room with the judge. She had gone from that room and had written and dispatched her note to

Randy, convinced, she thought, of his guilt.

Now she ceased her sobbing, and lay staring at the ceiling, trying to reason the thing out, not knowing that it is impossible to reason with love; that love is a finished, selfish quality that bears on all things, but suffers none to interfere with it. Strangest of all, delicate plant though it may be, it thrives on adversity.

As she lay puzzling over her problem, she recalled the story Bell had told of the trouble at the Railroad round-up. It had sounded all right then, but going over it now, in her mind, it didn't ring true. Bell never had said definitely who killed Asa Ross. That tormenting question sprang into her mind. "Who killed Asa Ross?" It would not down. Far toward morning, she fell asleep, with that question still revolving in her thoughts.

HER first thought on waking was that she wanted to see Randy, had to see him. This, she knew was impossible. There was danger everywhere in Silver Bend. Then her mind veered to Bell Holderness. She wanted to see him and talk to him. She knew he had spent the night in the house. In Ben's room, in fact. She dressed hurriedly and went down to the yard.

It was a fine, balmy spring morning, and a few roses were in bloom. Zella knew a good many things. Bell Holderness was a handsome fellow, blond, with deep blue eyes, and a pleasing appearance. Bell had said nice things to her many a time. In view of the grief in the home, he had said nothing of that sort to her the day before, but his eyes had been sufficiently eloquent. She knew her attraction for him, and purposely lingered among the roses.

"Wonderful morning, Miss Zella," he said as he came up.

"Yes. It is such a pity one can't be happy on a morning like this. I've been wishing you'd come out here."

"I'd be a strange man if that didn't make me happy."

"I want to ask you something."

"I've wanted to ask you something a long, long time, but never had the courage. Ask your question first, and I'll answer it if I can."

"Who killed Asa Ross?" she shot the question like a bolt, and Bell fairly staggered.

"Why, I—I can't tell you."

"You can't tell me! You saw it, did you not?"

"Yes, but— Sometimes it is best not to know too much about such things."

Zella stood looking at him in silence. He averted his eyes and tried to talk of something else, but failed. The breakfast bell rang, and they went in. Not another word passed between them.

Soon after breakfast, Bell saddled his horse and rode to town. He was thinking of Zella more intently than he had in some time, but the thoughts were not pleasant ones. He knew she had trapped him, caught him off his guard with her question, and that he had come out of it badly. But Bell was the kind of man who can plan and wait.

Another day ought to see Randy Ross and old Railroad disposed of. Randy couldn't stay away from drink much longer. Bell didn't mean to kill Randy—nothing so coarse as that. Either of the Tarleton boys would kill Randy on sight; they had promised to follow him on to town in a little while and lay in wait for Randy. Lav and Cliff had only one purpose in mind now, and that was to meet Randy Ross and shoot it out with him.

Bell was barely out of sight when Zella sought her father. The judge was awake and feeling fairly well. Lav and Cliff were in the room when she entered.

"Do it fair and open like men," Judge Tarleton was saying. "I meant to do it myself the first time I caught

either of them away from home. I don't want a boy of mine ever to turn his back to an enemy, and I'd be disgraced if I knew one of you took an unfair advantage."

"What are you talking about?" asked Zella.

"Talking about shooting Randy Ross," said Judge Tarleton calmly. "Of course, he's got to be shot after what has happened. I might let him go for shooting me from the brush, since I guess it won't kill me, but we can't overlook the killing of Ben."

"Let me ask you all a question. I asked Bell Holderness, but he wouldn't answer it."

"What is the question?" said Lav, impatiently.

"Who killed Asa Ross?"

"Why, I hadn't thought of that. He was killed in a gun fight at the Railroad round-up."

"Yes, I know, but who killed him?"

"What do you mean? Trying to leave the impression that Ben killed him?"

"NO," said Zella, slowly, "but I'm pretty sure that if anybody ever presses Bell Holderness for an answer to that question, he'll leave that impression."

"Now, Zella, you stay out of this," Lav insisted. "It's a man's job, and we'll attend to it. We are not interested in who killed Asa Ross. We know who killed Ben and we know who shot father, and that's all that concerns us."

"Yes, but are you sure you know who killed Ben, and are you sure it makes no difference who killed Asa?" persisted Zella.

"Now, Zella," ordered Lav, "I've told you to keep out of this. We'll attend to it."

But Zella had done the thing she meant to do, namely, to plant a doubt in the minds of her father and brothers. When she was gone, they sat in silence for moments.



"Now what do you suppose Zella knows?" asked the old judge at last.

"Nothing!" snapped Lav, who started when his father spoke, because he had unpleasant thoughts. He had fired one shot in the mess the day before when two Railroad punchers had been killed. He was sure he had not hit either of them, but in a way he had been a party to the killing, and it wasn't a pleasant thought.

"She's just like any other woman that goes crazy over a worthless man. She's got the habit of making excuses for Randy Ross, and she can't break herself of it."

"Why, she didn't mention Randy," said Cliff.

"I wish I knew who did kill Asa Ross," the old judge interrupted. "It might make considerable difference. Maybe you boys better stay out of this until we know more. I don't mean hide, but not hunt for him. He won't run away. He's too much like old Railroad. As Zella says, we don't know these things. We been pretty hot in the collar about Ben being killed, and about me being shot up. I didn't see who shot me. All I know is that Randy and some more fellows were behind me when I entered the timber. I never did see anybody when the shot was fired."

"Well, I'm going on to town," declared Lav. "I don't mean to hole up. I can't promise what 'll happen if I meet Randy."

"I'll stay here with father," said Cliff. "I think he's right. We've always found the Ross outfit on the square. If I'd met Randy yesterday I'd have opened on him, but now I don't know. Since Zella asked those questions, things look different."

But Zella had asked her questions too late, as far as Randy was concerned. The Tarleton boys had sent him word by Cub and Shorty, or at least Lav had, that they meant to kill him on sight, and Zella had written him to leave the country while he could.

He had said the Tarletons and Holdernesses all looked alike to him, and he meant it. He knew a square deal when he saw it, and he hadn't been given one.

Bell Holderness had ridden on to Willow Mills. The place was quiet as a churchyard. The men who had been killed the day before had been buried at nightfall. Willow Mills was but a mile from Red River. Such fights were common, and the town had its Boot Hill, where men who died in their boots were buried and forgotten.

BELL went to the Cottonwood Saloon. It was not generally known, but he owned the place, and the men who worked there were his spies.

"Seen anything of Randy Ross, or any of the rest of the Railroad outfit since I was here?" he asked the bartender.

"No, sir. Had less business last night than we had for a long time. When nobody comes in from the Railroad or the H Bar, business is always dull."

"Hang business," snapped Bell. "I'm interested in locating Randy Ross just now. Where do you suppose he's getting his whisky if he don't come to town or send a hand?"

"Search me."

"I don't want to search you, but I want you fellows to get your grapevine telegraph to work and locate Randy Ross."

"That's it tickin' now, I reckon," drawled the bartender as a lone horseman came storming in from the north, and skidded to a stop in front of the Cottonwood.

It was Steve Holderness. He nodded to the barkeep, poured a drink, and gulped it. Then he nodded toward the door and went out, with Bell following him.

"What the hell are you doing on this side?" snapped Bell, when they were out in the open. "Didn't I tell

you to stay on the other side and ram-rod things over there? I'll handle this side."

"Yes, you did, but you didn't tie me over there. You're so strong for schemes and plans, I come over here to tell you that yore damn plans have busted, and if you don't get from under they'll fall on you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean for one thing that Railroad Ross ain't as near dead old as you think he is. You can recollect, as well as I can, when old Railroad Ross used to be head of the Vigilantes. He hung everybody he caught with an unidentified horse, and a few more on suspicion, just for associating with horse rustlers."

"Yes, I recollect it. What of it?"

"Plenty. He ain't forgot how to handle a rope, and my neck hurts."

"Damn it, quit beating about the bush, and tell what's on your mind."

"Well, last night Hayden went down to the thicket to relieve Red and found him dead. Somebody had shot him. I went there awhile after dark, and Hayden told me about it, so I sent a couple of men to get Red. They got him all right, but Hayden was gone. Meantime Sam come in to the ranch with one leg shot half off. Him and five more of our fellows flushed a covey of Railroad punchers over in Silver Bend just at sunset, and they wouldn't fly. They got one of Sam's men on that side and two more as they crossed the river just below the thicket. Sam's shot right smart, and the doc's gone out there."

"Well, what's that got to do with old Railroad and his tight-rope performance?"

"Nothing, maybe. This morning I taken some of the boys and went down to get the two dead ones and look for Hayden."

"Did you find Hayden? Tell it!"

"Yes, we found him," and Steve looked over his shoulder as if he feared the devil were behind him.

"Where?"

"Hanging in that big oak tree at the narrows, swinging round and round, round and round, in the wind, as the rope turned and twisted. Gosh, it was awful!"

"Did you go over and get him?"

"I did not, and I ain't goin' to. I taken a chance coming over here to tell you about it. That's all the business I got on this side. I'm goin' back, and stay back. If you want Hayden, you can have him."

"Yeah!" sneered Beil. "You was in such a hell of a hurry to start this mess before I was ready. Now it's beginning to pinch, your nerve is slipping, and you want to leave me the bag to hold. Go on back and hide if you want to. Randy and old Railroad won't bother anybody much longer. Some real men are going after them."

STEVE mounted his horse and rode out of town. Bell stood rolling a cigar in his mouth, and watching his brother. Bell Holderness was as cool-headed a villain as that border ever knew. He made his plans and worked to them. If something went awry, he never lost his head.

He had sat in on this game to win Silver Bend and Zella Tarleton; the stakes were high. Steve had gummed the game when he killed Asa Ross ahead of schedule, and Bell had saved the day by killing Ben Tarleton, who was supposed to belong to his gang. Now it appeared that Sam had gummed it again by going into Silver Bend against orders.

Bell had told them to stay out after Asa and Pate were killed, and he'd get Railroad and Randy. He meant to make the Tarleton boys do that job and leave him with clean hands; he still meant to do that. He turned and looked up the long lane. A lone horseman was coming toward him. The morning sun was in Bell's eyes, and he couldn't see who it was. He slipped into the saloon, spoke a few words to

the bartender, and went on into a back room.

Waiting there in that little room, Bell Holderness looked like an arch fiend. His handsome face, which was a cold mask in the company of other men, gave way to a snarling distortion of rage. Another of his plans had gone wrong. The Tarleton brothers said they would follow him on to town. They hadn't done it. Now, he felt sure, Randy Ross was riding into town. He had to be killed. The Tarleton boys ought to kill him, would kill him if they met, but Randy had to be disposed of, and that quickly. He heard a step in the saloon, and a few low-spoken words at the bar. Drawing his gun, he turned the cylinder lightly, raised and lowered the hammer, and pushed the gun back loosely in the holster for a quick draw. It had come to a showdown. If the Tarleton boys didn't come pretty soon he'd go out there and have it over. He knew how Randy drank. He would pour it down greedily until he was drunk, and then—

Bell stood in the little room listening. Only a few low words were spoken, and he could catch none of them. At last he pulled himself together and pushed the door open softly. Not Randy, but Lav Tarleton, sat smoking.

"I've been waiting for you," said Lav.

"I didn't know you had come. Where's Cliff?"

"He decided not to come."

"Do you mean to take Randy Ross on by yourself?" Bell inquired.

"Yes, if I meet him, but—"

"But what?"

"Who killed Asa Ross?"

Again that question smote Bell in the face. This time it turned his face to flaming rage, but before Lav could read it, it changed to the cold, smooth, lying mask.

"Why, I—I don't know who killed him. He was killed in a gun fight."

"Were Pate Ross and old Leck killed in a gun fight, too?"

"Certainly. What difference does it make to you how those fellows were killed? They're dead and it's luck for us that they are. You know who killed your brother Ben. It was the Ross outfit. Two of them are still living, and you and Cliff would be strange brothers if you didn't get them as quick as you can, before they bushwhack you, like they did your father."

"We thought that yesterday. We've changed our minds. We're not going to hunt them. If we meet Randy or his father, we'll let things take their course."

Bell went white with the stress of his situation. Nothing but quick action could save Silver Bend and Zella for him. True to his nature, he became cooler than ever in the face of disaster. All was not lost yet. He had other tricks in his bag. Lighting a cigar, he invited Lav to take a drink.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### DANGLING SCARECROWS.

THE Railroad ranch stirred early that morning, despite the fact that neither Randy nor his father had slept much. Things may or may not have looked different to Railroad. To Randy there had been no change, for he had not slept enough to make a curtain between the two days.

He had some plans himself and he was going to work on them. Bell Holderness and Lav Tarleton had got two of his men the day before. On the other hand, he and his men with him had scored a few times themselves. Dolly had got the man Red, in the thicket. Then they had got three more and crippled one in the running fight at sunset. Then crowning the day's work, he and Dolly had hanged Bill Hayden. Five in all.

Decidedly, they had won a trick in the game of war. The chief winning had been gaining positive knowledge of what the mess was all about. He was

going to hang Steve Holderness if he could lay hands on him, for the murder of Asa, but he was bitterer against Bell than Steve. It might be that Steve had thought he was avenging his father, but with Bell, who was engineering the war, it was just a matter of greed, avarice and lust.

Randy quivered at the thought. Like all jealous people, he wanted to hurt both the persons who caused his jealousy. He wanted to kill Bell Holderness, meant to kill him. He also wanted to humiliate Zella. Not that she could ever be anything to him again, he thought, but he wanted her to suffer for her lack of faith in him.

At that moment he thought he no longer loved Zella, and wondered that he had ever loved her. It was in this bitter frame of mind that he gave the other men orders to work the cattle on the prairie, riding in pairs, and keeping a close watch. Then turning to Dolly, he said:

"Better get plenty of bread and meat in our saddle pockets. I don't know when we'll be back."

Dolly had obeyed, thoughtfully. No song had passed the lips of the usually happy little puncher since Sankey had stopped him that first day. He, too, had slept little. Randy's bitterness against Zella had set him thinking. He felt sure that if Zella knew Randy was innocent, she would fly to his arms. She might easily be convinced of Randy's innocence, but Randy had gone wild. Would he ever forgive the girl? With such thoughts in his mind, Dolly mounted and rode away with Randy.

Railroad Ross was old, but he was far from dead. He had one boy left. He felt that there might be one more little burst of speed in him. Since burying his two sons, he had sat around the house, unwilling to leave his good wife alone with her grief. His old heart had been driven too hard and was in bad shape, but his head was still all right and he had spent the night in thought. It was not enough to save

Randy's life, if he could not save the boy from the bitterness that gripped his soul.

He watched Randy and Dolly ride away toward where they had left Bill Hayden hanging in the tree. A man had to be pretty bitter to want to go back and look at a thing like that. The men were mounting, when Railroad called old Con Bates and Sankey aside, and let the others go on.

"Con," he said, "you and Sankey have been with me a long time. The old Railroad is about on the rocks. You've been in messes with me before, but never one like this. The Holderness boys have picked up a new breed of killers that has drifted into that Indian country from the four corners of the earth. They don't fight like cow-people, but we got to fight 'em. I just got one boy left. If he comes out of this alive, he'll be ruined, unless—"

Railroad stopped. He never liked to tell his men too much. Presently, he went on.

"I've been in this bend more than thirty years. I've never trespassed on the other side of the river, but I may have to do it now. You saw the two fellows that were with the Holderness boys when they killed Asa, Con?"

"Yes, sir," growled Con.

"One of 'em was a hatchet-faced, rat-mouthed, gimlet-eyed fellow they called Bud, and the other was a handsome, gray-eyed devil they called Turk. Would you know 'em if you saw 'em?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I want them two fellows and I want 'em alive and well. If they can be got, you two can get 'em. It may take an hour, or it may take a month. Get 'em and bring 'em here as quick as you can."

THE two wrinkled old riders mounted and rode away, not saying what they meant to do. Railroad had not definitely ordered them to go into the Indian country; but they understood him.

Railroad watched them ride north, toward the bottom of the Silver Bend bottle. He knew they were going into danger, but danger meant little to such men. If it were not for leaving his wife alone, he'd mount and ride with them. His heart might play out on him, but it would be in a good cause.

Knowing Railroad's long-standing policy of keeping to his own side of Red River, Bell had felt that his gang were safe as long as they stayed on their own side. Some one had got Hayden and hanged him, but Hayden must have disobeyed orders and suffered for it the same as Sam had.

Bell sat in the cottonwood, gnawing at his mustache, and trying to evolve a new plan, concoct a new lie, that would drive the Tarleton boys on to hunt Randy and kill him. If he had guessed just how much Randy Ross knew, and just how different he was from the old Randy, Bell would not have been so cool. Unmindful of everything, he went on, planning his next move in this perilous game.

Randy and Dolly rode west from the Railroad and entered the timber. They had seen no one, when they reached the river at the ford where the battle had taken place the evening before. This ford was just below the cottonwood thicket where so much mischief had been done. Directly across from the lower end of the thicket, Bill Hayden still swung in the wind, in plain view from the other side of the river. As they sat their horses behind a screen of brush, Dolly said:

"Shore quiet in the Bend this morning. Ain't heard a sound. Seems like hangin' that gent up has worked like it does on crows. My daddy used to kill crows and hang 'em up around his melon patch. A crow wouldn't come in a mile of it, as long as they hung there."

"Easy on the talking!" warned Randy. "Yonder they come."

Three men rode down to the ford on the opposite side of the river. Two

of them were leading pack horses. The other rider was Steve Holderness. Steve sat on his horse, while the other two men picked the bodies up from the ground and lashed them to the pack saddles. They had finished the job and were ready to go, when one of them glanced up and across the river.

"Good God! Look yonder!" he cried. "It's Bill Hayden, hanging by the neck!"

On the Railroad side of the river, Dolly fingered his gun. "I can get Steve now," he said.

"No!" Randy growled. "Let him alone. I don't want him shot. I'm going to hang him."

Steve Holderness caught an eyeful of the tight rope performance, and hastily wheeled his horse into the brush, calling to the others to come on. Randy and Dolly sat watching until they all disappeared into the dense bottom.

"They won't be so thick around this neighborhood now," said Rand, grimly. "Come on. Let's go across and see what we can find."

Crossing the river, they followed the trail of the five horses over the soft, bottom soil. Twice they glimpsed the Holderness men through the trees, and stopped behind convenient trunks until the others went on. Climbing out of the bottom onto a stretch of open woods they came to the road that led from Willow Mills to the H Bar. Here the two H Bar men turned north with their gruesome pack-horses, and Steve galloped south toward town. It was then that Steve carried the news to Bell.

"We've let 'em get plumb away!" said Dolly, in a tone of disappointment.

"No, we haven't. It's Steve that we are after. He's gone somewhere to tell the news. He'll be back."

THEY turned across to where the road dipped into the bottom again, rode into a dense thicket and stopped.

"Here's where we do some bush-

whacking on our own account," muttered Randy. "Damn that Holderness and Tarleton gang. I'll teach them some tricks at their own game."

Dolly shuddered at the venom in Randy's tone. It had reached the point that the little cowboy shuddered every time Randy mentioned the name of Tarleton.

An hour passed in silent listening, after that. Then they heard the thud of galloping hoofs, coming along the road from the Willow Mills crossing on the river.

"Get set!" ordered Randy.

The horseman came storming on. He was fairly abreast of the thicket when Randy's gun crashed. The horse faltered, stopped and fell. Steve Holderness rolled clear and sprang to his feet, but he was looking into two guns.

"Get your hands up!" snapped Randy. "Take his gun, Dolly. Get a horn-string and tie his hands behind him."

"What's the idea, Randy?" whimpered Steve, as he stood bound.

For reply, Randy threw a rope over a big limb that projected across the road.

"You—you ain't goin' to hang me, Randy?"

"Why not?"

"I—I got a family, and—"

"Asa had some brothers and a father and a mother," said Randy.

"I—I didn't kill Asa. It was Bell. Let me go, and I'll tell you all about it. Bell is back of this mess. I'll tell you what he wants, and tell you what he aims to do—before he does it!"

"I know what he aims to do. Let him do it, if he can. Rope him, Dolly."

There was one wild, gurgling scream, and Steve Holderness swung above the road, in his death struggle.

"That 'll do for to-day," Randy said, thoughtfully, as they crossed the river into Silver Bend. "I haven't slept much the last few nights, and I'm about all in. That 'll give the Holderness and Tarleton gang something to think about, as soon as they find it out.

They'll find it out, too, for somebody will be going from the H Bar to keep Bell advised about what is going on over here."

There were but two safe places that they could rest. One of these was the ranch house. Randy didn't want to go there. He wanted to be alone with his bitterness and his hate.

To be with Dolly was as near being alone as it was possible to be in human company, for he rarely spoke now unless he was spoken to.

The only other safe place was out on the prairie, where no one could ride up on them unseen. Already, Randy was becoming a wild man in some ways. He had been advised that Bell Holderness and the Tarleton boys were hunting him, and he had become watchful.

It was well after noon when they stopped at a clump of trees on a high point, far out on the prairie. They ate a little lunch, then rolled smokes. Suddenly, Dolly stretched out on the ground, and in an instant, fell asleep.

Randy looked at the little puncher in surprise. He himself was not in the least sleepy, though he had slept very little for three nights. He had heard that insane people didn't sleep, and wondered if his own mind was unbalanced. No, he told himself, he was not crazy—yet.

Randy supposed that Dolly had simply been overcome by need of sleep, and couldn't stay awake. The fact was that it was some time before Dolly really went to sleep. He had feigned sleep deliberately, for he knew Randy would have to sleep some time, and Dolly wanted to be awake, and very much awake, when that young man finally succumbed to the demands of nature.

**R**ANDY had plenty of time to think, undisturbed. He watched Dolly as he lay sleeping, as peacefully as if nothing had happened to excite his mind. This little man had done much for him. Had it not been for



Dolly, he would have gone on a debauch the night his brothers were killed. Had it not been for Dolly, he would never have been man enough to face this situation.

And so his thoughts ran on, taking all the incidents for the last three days. It was far toward night when Dolly opened his baby blue eyes, looked about him, and glanced at the sun.

"Reckon I must have slept a nap."

"About four hours," said Randy. "We'd better ride from here if we want to get home before night."

They rode back into Silver Bend, seeing no one as they went. When they came out on the little prairie, they saw four riders just approaching the ranch. Two of them they recognized as Con and Sankey. The other two, they didn't know. When they reached the ranch, old Railroad was talking to the two strangers, whom Randy recognized as the man called Bud and the one called Turk, who had been at the round-up with the Holderness boys.

"What do you want with us?" demanded Turk.

"I don't know yet," drawled old Railroad. "I don't aim to hang you for awhile. If you tell the truth, I may not hang you at all."

"That sounds fair," smiled the handsome Turk, while Bud scowled and darted a vicious look from his gimlet eyes. "What's this truth you want told about?"

"Who killed Asa, who killed Ben Tarleton, and who shot the judge?"

"Don't you know?"

"Yes, we know, but we want to see if you fellows would rather tell the truth about it than be hanged."

"Don't squeal, Turk!" snarled Bud. "They don't know nothin'."

"Maybe not," laughed Turk, "but I'd rather be a live welcher than a dead stayer. Shoot your questions, Mr. Ross, one at a time."

"All right. Who killed Asa?"

"Steve."

"Who killed Ben?"

"Bell Holderness."

"Who shot Judge Tarleton?"

"Red Mangus."

"You know all that, do you?"

"Yes, sir. I saw Steve and Bell do the killing, and I was in ten feet of Red, when he shot the judge, and got shot for his trouble. I didn't even tell anybody Red was dead. I don't believe in laying in the brush and potting people."

"Is he telling the truth, Bud?"

"Oh, hell! Yes, that's right."

"All right. There's a new log smoke-house with a door that you can't break. I'm going to put you in there, give you grub and blankets, and lock the door. When I call on you again, if you tell the same story, I may turn you loose. If you don't—"

Randy listened to all this without a word. When the men were locked in and he and his father went to the house, he asked:

"What was the idea of all that? We know we didn't shoot Judge Tarleton. What difference does it make, anyway? We'll have to shoot the judge and the boys, all three, whenever we meet them. Better hang these two, while you can."

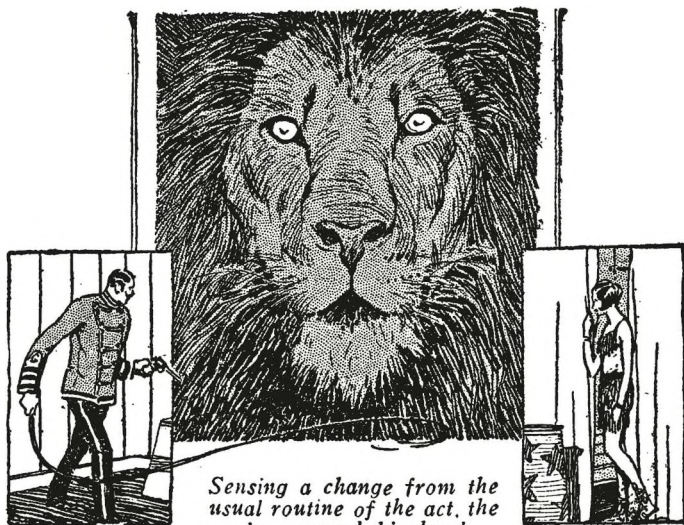
"I give 'em my word, Randy, and my word's generally pretty good. They've got some law on this side of the river, and we're apt to need witnesses before this mess is over."

Randy didn't believe his father was likely to pay much attention to law in a mess like this, but he didn't argue the matter. Instead, he said:

"All right. We'll talk about that in the morning. I didn't know I was sleepy until right now. I want to eat something and go to bed."

Railroad didn't insist on knowing what had happened that day. In half an hour Randy was asleep in bed. He couldn't have kept awake even if he had known what would happen while he slept—and he didn't know.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.



## The Lion Tamer

*Circus life has its tense dramas that are not listed on the program—and lion-tamer Ray O'Donnell played such an unscheduled act with Veni Rhodes and Rigoli of the flying rings*

**By WALTER MARQUISS**

**V**ENI RHODES had made it known that she hated the lion tamer. Veni granted that he was handsome, witty, intelligent, and that some girls might admire, even love, him. As for her, despite the fine courage which characterized her, Veni was afraid of the lion tamer. She was afraid of the gleaming, black eyes which had the power to subdue the raging spirits of two huge and tawny cats, in a long and narrow cage.

As Professor Karloch, he was billed to the public, but all in Roberts' Mammoth Circus knew the cognomen was no more true than the fierce, Kaiserlike mustache which he removed from his lip when he completed each matinée and evening performance. The professor was Irish, as attested by the name "Ray O'Donnell" on the line assigned to him in the pay roll.

Veni was fascinated by Ray O'Donnell's performance, watched it, with quickened pulse and breath, each time it was staged.

The sight of this pair of powerful brutes cringing under the whip of a tall, broad-shouldered man in a rather absurd blue and scarlet uniform filled her with resentment. Her sympathy always was with the animals; perhaps, she mused, at the beginning of a long line of reincarnations, she herself had been a lioness, stalking with the dignity of strength and courage in the freedom of the jungle.

With a final dramatic snap of his whip, Ray sprang through the cage door and down the few steps, bowing in acknowledgment of a crackling applause. With admirable grace, he strode into the canvas lane which led back to the dressing tent, and stopped

before Veni, whose turn on the flying trapeze with Roberto Rigoli would begin in a few minutes. Though he smiled, his ebon eyes burned; and to Veni it was an effort to meet them with a display of forced fearlessness.

"You'd make a good lion tamer, Veni," he remarked as he peeled off the mustache, "with those pretty bright eyes of yours!"

An angry respiration hissed between her teeth.

"If I ever got in that cage with you, Professor Ray O'Donnell Karloch, I'd be on the side of the lions! And you'd need more than a whip to stop me!"

**H**IS look sobered a bit, while she glowered up into his eyes. Her whole body was rigid with the effort; his gaze seemed to press against hers with physical force, prying it aside.

The smile slowly returned to his lips. Her gaze fell uncertainly. She despised herself for it, but it was done; the first time that he ever had compelled such a surrender.

With a proud raising of her chin, Veni swept past Ray, and marched with Rigoli toward the center of the big top.

"That's the way to handle eggs like him," Rigoli said approvingly.

"Oh, shut up!" she snapped, and hurried on, while Rigoli, scowling, gnawed at the ends of his black mustache.

This exchange Ray overheard, and his brows drew together. He had noticed a growing friction between Veni and her teammate, and thinking of the hot gypsy blood in Rigoli's veins, he saw ominous possibilities in the situation.

As Veni watched the professor's performance, so he returned the compliment. But there was a difference. He was not fascinated by hate, but held by love. He could not remember how long he had loved the beautiful little trapeze artist; but he was constantly aware of a bitter soreness, somewhere

within, because of her inexplicable antagonism.

The act of Veni and Rigoli, performed high up in the top of the great tent, was one of the real thrills of the show. It was more than a display of marvelous skill; it was truly as death-defying as it was advertised to be. No life net stretched between this flying team and the ground. The slightest miscalculation by either would terminate the act forever.

Veni and Rigoli were known as the best in their business. To the members of the show, its daring had become routine, and even the thought of an accident to Veni and Rigoli had come to be deemed absurd. Still, Ray O'Donnell had been conscious of an increasing nervousness as he watched them day by day.

Loque, world-famed clown, appeared beside Ray, peering with shrewd eyes up at the lofty rings.

"Say," he asked, "what's the matter with them two?"

"So you've noticed it, too," Ray growled.

"She acts like she's gettin' sick of him; and he ain't enjoyin' it."

"I wonder how she can stand him," Ray mused.

"Well," said Loque, "he can't be beat on a trapeze."

This Ray conceded, but added: "I don't trust him!"

Then, in a blare of music, Loque went bounding toward the rings, followed by a company of gyrating laugh makers. Ray watched Veni and Rigoli, and he breathed with relief when he saw the girl safely on the ground, throwing the customary kisses to the multitude. He turned about, and entered the dressing tent.

Veni kept a few paces in advance of Rigoli as she hurried from the main tent, her shapely legs twinkling between the folds of her satin dressing gown. She was still rankling over her defeat in the brief tilt with Ray. That she could not banish him from her

thoughts served to heighten her anger. Her cheeks blazed, her teeth were pressed tight together.

**S**HE kept out of his way until the evening performance, when she again watched him enter the cage with the snarling Nubian beasts. Rigoli was close beside her, surly and silent. Loque stood near them.

"If anything ever takes Ray's attention off them cats," the clown remarked, "it 'll be good night for him."

"It would be too bad," Veni said, spitefully, "if something happened to give the lions an even chance!"

"Go on!" Loque retorted. "If they was any danger you wouldn't talk like that. If anything was to happen to Ray, it 'd just about finish you."

Her temper mounted. "What do you mean by that?"

"Why, I mean you're in love with Ray, and don't even know it!"

She blazed: "You've got a marvelous crust to talk like that to me! Everybody knows how I hate him!"

Loque, shrugging, walked away.

"Oh, I hate him!" she exclaimed again, as if to herself. But she kept her eyes unswervingly on the cage and its active tenants.

Rigoli seemed to be tasting something in life that was bitter. His eyes felt feverish, his lips worked in and out of a leer.

"That's what you say," he burst out presently. "But I notice you defend him whenever I say anything against him! Old Funny Face is right; you're in love with him. That's the reason you can't be half decent to me any more!"

"I'm as decent to you as you deserve! And when you say I'm in love with him, or any one, you lie!"

Ray was out of the cage, bowing to the audience in the midst of handclapping, whistles and cheers. He started toward the exit.

"I suppose you think you're too good for me," Rigoli sneered.

7 A

"Whether I am or not," she answered, "I certainly wouldn't work with you if it wasn't for my contract! I'm fed up on you and your nasty love-making, and the things you've said."

Rigoli was breathing heavily when Ray came up to them. Veni prepared for another battle; but this time there was no clash of flaming eyes. His glance quickly passed over the girl's face and rested on Rigoli. Veni saw Ray's brows come together and his mouth grow taut. He stepped away and beckoned to Rigoli.

Rigoli hesitated, but his personality was no match for the will of the lion tamer. In grudging obedience, he followed Ray.

"I just want to make one remark to you," Ray said, his black eyes boring in, compelling the other man's gaze to waver and fall away. "If anything ever happens to Veni, you'll answer to me!" His voice was cold and calm, but his hands, gripping the whip which he always carried into the den of the lions, twisted spasmodically. The shaft, almost as tough as an iron rod, snapped to a right angle.

At the sound, Ray glanced down at the broken whip, as if surprised. With a shrug, he tossed the ruined thing aside, and again regarded Rigoli.

"That's all I have to say," he remarked quietly. "You remember it!"

**V**ENI, watching the pair, but unable to hear what was said, was trembling with wrath. Two men, she reflected, were growling like beasts with jealousy over her. Fighting for her love; when one she despised and the other she hated!

The music sounded, summoning her to the ring. Rigoli fell into step beside the girl, and their long march began.

"There isn't any sense of you and Ray O'Donnell quarreling over me," she said crisply as they walked. "I've told you both often enough that I haven't any use for either one of you."

He made no answer. Rigoli was beset by a clammy nervousness. Doubtless it was his agile Slavic imagination which made him feel as if the eyes of the lion tamer were burning like coals into the back of his head. For the first time he felt an actual fear of O'Donnell. It was as if the professor walked only a pace behind him, ready to strike him dead.

Was the man a mind reader, Rigoli wondered? Did O'Donnell know that Rigoli had been struggling with a thought for days? A thought, often recurring when he was angry, that accidents sometimes happened in a circus! If Veni Rhodes were to slip and fall, far down to the dust of the ring, who would know that? Did O'Donnell, somehow, know that he had thought of that?

Even as he held Veni's hand and bowed with her to right and left, Rigoli was shivering. As they mounted together on a perch swung from a pulley in the canvas top, he struggled to pull himself together. Standing with Veni beside him, both waving their arms to the upturned faces below, he seemed to feel the searing of the lion tamer's eyes. What had the professor meant by that cryptic warning?

The knowledge suddenly welled up in him that if Veni should fall, Ray O'Donnell never would believe it an accident. For an instant Rigoli could fancy the feel of O'Donnell's fingers on his throat—fingers which could snap off a whip almost as tough as an iron bar!

The music commanded them to action. Rigoli took his place, the bar of his trapeze behind him. Veni grasped her swing, dropped lightly into a long arc, an instant later alighting like a bird on another hanging platform, fifty feet away.

Once Rigoli swung off in perfect time, and Veni's trapeze flew to meet him. The contact was perfect; they landed together on Rigoli's platform, completing a simple leap and catch. The

next maneuver was more difficult, but it, too, was successfully executed.

For a third time, Veni swung across to her own platform. Rigoli wiped his hands upon a towel which hung to a support beside him, worried because the perspiration had been so heavy. Far away, down the tent, he caught a glimpse of O'Donnell, in his blue and scarlet garb. Though he could not see the man's coal-black eyes, Rigoli fancied that he could feel them. The sweat stood out on his brow. A thought roared in his brain: this time he would miss! No matter how hard he tried, this time he would miss!

HE banished the terrifying chimera, again wiping his palms, and caught the bars of the trapeze. Across the lofty space he saw Veni get ready for the most hazardous feat of their act, a somersault and full turn, performed simultaneously in the air.

They had completed it a hundred times, and experience had cemented their confidence. But now Rigoli was cold with dread. For a moment he stared up at the canvas top, struggling to regain his nerve. He set himself in position, tuning himself to the music, waiting for the precise note at which he should cut loose from his platform.

Even as he swung off, Rigoli knew that he had missed the note by half a beat. His mind and muscles, usually so wonderfully coördinated, had failed to function in their accustomed perfect unison. He tried to cry out in warning as Veni left her platform, but his voice seemed to harden in his throat.

He saw Veni arch toward him, swing fast to the rear, and again dart forward. Dropping back, he hung head downward, bracing himself. The girl left her trapeze, twisting in the air and turning completely over.

Frantically he reached for her. Their hands met, but the junction was imperfect. Instead of joining palms to wrists, his grasp closed around all the fingers

of one hand, catching but two fingers of the other. He saw terror spring up in the eyes of the girl below him, and felt her fingers slipping through his own, moistened by the nervous perspiration.

The audience sensed nothing unusual; but the keen eyes of the lion tamer caught the tiny defection. He sprang forward. Murphy, the ring-master, dropped his whip.

Straining, gripping with painful might, Rigoli held on. The horrible instant passed. Veni swung somewhat awkwardly to the platform, and Rigoli came to rest beside her, clinging to an iron rod for support. She faced him, panting.

"What are you trying to do—let me fall?"

He did not answer, but reached for the pulley-swing that dropped toward him. They descended, made their wonted response to applause, and walked rapidly toward the dressing tent. On finding that Veni was safe, Ray had turned back, and disappeared.

In his own section of the dressing tent Rigoli succumbed to reaction. He sat weakly on a trunk, mopping his forehead. A dozen terrors hemmed him in. He changed his clothes with such trembling that he could scarcely stand; and instead of waiting as usual for one of the circus motor cars, he hurried out to a taxicab, which sped with him to the railroad yards.

In the Pullman he crept shivering into his berth, and lay staring into the black night. In agony he awaited the coming of O'Donnell. His fears mounted as the minutes ticked into hours. The jolting as an engine coupled to the car, the clicking of wheels on rails as the train sped on, told of the passage of more time. And still O'Donnell did not appear.

There was no relief from suspense. He knew that the lion tamer, if he failed to come now, would come later. To-morrow—the next day—

Rigoli's imagination was racing, at fever heat. It painted a vivid running picture, in which he saw Veni go plunging down from the trapeze to lie crumpled and still on the dust in the ring. Then in the dark he again felt the phantom fingers on his throat; fingers so strong that they could break the thick handle of a whip, as tough as an iron bar! He sat upright in his berth, shuddering, struggling with a yell that leaped in his throat.

His excited brain reconstructed the events of the night. The lion tamer's warning, the twisting fingers. O'Donnell's eyes had never swerved until the whip had snapped in two; then he had glanced uncertainly down. What if his attention should be so diverted when he was in the cage?

Rigoli's breathing was labored and hot. He sank down on his pillow, staring in the darkness. A thought throbbed in his brain and repeated itself. If some one should give the lions a chance! If he were to give the lions their chance!

His head roared with pain; he was frightened, too, by the fantastic, morbid trend of his thoughts. Rigoli got out of bed, and stumbled to the rear of the train. At daybreak he was still there, watching in fascination the silver ribbons of the rails, rolling out from under the wheels of the train.

VENI saw Ray again at breakfast. He gave her the usual quick smile, which she tried to ignore, and he made several comments which she answered with monosyllables. When she had finished her meal, he arose and walked with her outside the tent. He seemed strangely deep in thought, and she told herself she was thankful that he didn't try to talk with her. It was enough to endure his company.

"Veni," he said, halting suddenly, "I think you'd better break with Rigoli. Right away."

She whirled to face him.



"Who asked for your advice?" she demanded.

He shrugged.

"You know what nearly happened last night."

She tossed her proud head.

"Do you think you can scare me with your silly jealousy?"

"It's not jealousy, Veni," he returned. Once again her eyes clashed with him. For several seconds she glowered up at him, striving now to convince herself that yesterday's surrender had been no more than momentary.

He shook his head slowly, his eyes remaining fixed on hers, and repeated: "It isn't jealousy, Veni. I've no need to feel jealous of you—I'm the only man you ever loved!"

For the second time in as many days her eyes lowered before his. Because they did, anger surged again; she forced herself to glower back at him once more.

"Why, you—you—how dare you even hint that I—love you?"

He caught her shoulders, held them despite her struggles. He pressed a fierce kiss upon her lips.

"You do!" he said passionately. "I couldn't love you so much, Veni dear, without some return. Life simply couldn't be so cruel."

She tried to wrench herself free.

"I hate you!" she cried. "I hate you!"

"No, you don't!" He held tight to her shoulders. "You love me, Veni, and some day you're going to tell me so!"

"I hate you!" she screamed again. "Go away! Let me go!" She drew back her hand and planted a stinging slap upon his cheek.

His hands dropped, releasing her, and he stepped back. A long, hurt sigh marked his defeat. Perhaps he was wrong about her. He gazed somberly after the girl as she hurried away.

Ray walked slowly to the dressing tent. As most of the performers were

still at breakfast, the inclosure was empty. He entered his own section and sat down upon a trunk, looking for a time into space, meditating upon the events of the past few days.

Loque came in, a peculiarly solemn-looking individual without his enamel-like make-up. He regarded Ray curiously and inquired:

"Well, what's the matter with you?"

Ray glanced up into the homely face of the man to whom nearly every one in the circus, at one time or another, had confided worries, griefs, or troubles. Loque's sympathetic understanding made people want to tell him things.

"Loque, I'm worried about Veni."

The clown's eyes squinted, and he asked: "Rigoli?"

Ray nodded. "I don't trust him. And, if anything ever happened to her—" He hesitated, growing tense.

"You're pretty much gone on the kid, ain't you, Ray?"

This Ray readily confirmed. "But she hates me like poison," he added, sighing.

"How do you know she does?" Loque asked pointedly.

"Listen here, Ray. There ain't no woman hates a man like she says she hates you, unless there's some reason. And Veni ain't got no reason."

"Well? What's the matter, then?"

"Veni's a funny kid, Ray. I think she's got a fool notion bein' in love is sort of like bein' in prison. She's always been free as the air, and she's afraid you'll make her do like you want her to, like you do them cats." Ray made an impatient gesture of denial, and Loque went on: "Some day she's goin' to find out what a swell guy you are, kid!"

**R**AY burst out: "But what I'm most worried about is Rigoli."

"Yes," Loque said, nodding. "He'll bear watchin'. I've got a feelin' Rigoli ain't got 'em all, and some

day he'll crack. Only this mornin' I seen him wanderin' around the lot, mumblin' to 'imself, lookin' wild, like they was something he was scared of."

Several others trooped in, chattering. As Ray arose to leave, Loque gripped his shoulder affectionately, an eloquent gesture of sympathy and understanding.

Throughout the morning Ray saw nothing of Rigoli, anywhere on the lot, although he searched well for the man. He felt a queer, indefinable disturbance, which was not lessened when he went to the tent to prepare for his afternoon appearance.

Finished with his dressing, Ray strode to the door of the main tent, took up his position there awaiting his call. His thoughts were on the ten-minute period to come, in which Veni would be aloft again with Rigoli. Ray looked forward to it with dread.

Pretty little Meda Friend, in her gleaming tights, gave him a smile as she rode past on the white horse upon which she had been performing evolutions in the far ring. Then Ray heard the drawling bark of the ringmaster's voice announcing his act; and he marched out into the big tent. Through a near-by opening in the canvas attendants in red jackets were trundling the long cage containing the two restless lions.

Glancing over his shoulder, Ray saw that Veni had taken her wonted post, from which he could watch his battle with the king and queen of beasts.

Veni was depressed and nervous. She could not forget those terrifying five seconds of the night before; and for hours she had been fighting desperately against a premonition that, today, Rigoli was going to let her fall. That Rigoli was not yet in his place did not help to ease this unwonted trepidation.

There was a sudden startling shout behind her. Loque ran up, concern in his eyes showing ludicrously in contrast to the painted grin on his face.

"Ray's gone? Good Lord!"

A stir of excitement welled inside the girl.

"What's wrong?"

"Rigoli! Gone completely off his nut! Laughin' and ravin' in there. Says he cut the snapper on Ray's whip, so it 'll break off—take Ray's attention off the cats."

"I don't see what that would do."

"You don't? No one but a crazy man would have thought of it. You don't know how much Ray counts on that whip! And besides, Rigoli says he put blanks in Murphy's revolver."

Though conscious of a furious pounding in her heart, Veni remarked quietly: "He's getting in the cage now. I don't think anything will happen."

Several performers, sensing something out of the ordinary, crowded into the opening. Loque said with tense earnestness: "We'll just have to pray that nothin' does happen."

Despite her appearance of calm, Veni's body was painfully taut as she watched Ray enter the cage and stride to the center. Were the big cats, which so long had held her sympathy, to have their turn at last? The beasts eyed the man sullenly, slinking out of reach of his long lash. Veni saw Ray raise the whip and bring it sharply down. The usual crackling report did not follow.

**S**URPRISED at this inexplicable deviation from the routine of the act, Ray was caught off guard, and glanced aside at the snapper of the whip, lying on the floor near the edge of the cage. The male lion, apparently sensing the change from the usual, reared his head, shaking his mane, and produced a mighty roar.

Although Ray recovered quickly, Veni knew that the lion tamer, in the momentary straying of attention, had lost his mastery over the man-eating brutes. He lashed out with the crackless whip, but the giant cats, no longer cringing, roared defiance.

As the male crouched to spring, Ray,

leaped for the cage door, and Veni bounded toward the scene of drama. The ringmaster snapped out his revolver, but five shots fired point-blank only infuriated the beast. A tawny flash, the full length of the cage, caught Ray between the shoulders. He went down heavily, the snarling lion on top of him.

Everywhere men and women were on their feet, buzzing with excitement and horror. Screams shrilled, shouts arose. The lion reared his head and emitted a triumphant roar. With stakes beating between the bars, attendants drove him back.

Other attendants were struggling with the locked door, which seemed to resist their haste-hampered efforts. The lion again retreated to a corner and crouched. His mate, spitting and snarling, stalked back and forth against the rear wall of the cage.

Just as the attendants opened the barred door, Veni dashed up. Without pause or hesitation, she flew up the steps and into the cage. As thousands gasped, she stood astride of Ray's body, her eyes staring at the lion so fiercely that it made her head throb with pain.

The beast snarled and jerked its paw at the girl, but slowly cowered back in the corner. Veni stepped beyond the man's body and caught up his fallen whip, her gaze never wavering.

Strong men caught Ray's legs and dragged him from the cage. The lion roared, sprang again, but the attendants flayed it away from the girl. She leaped toward the door, but the lioness, hitherto content to prowl about at a little distance, spitting and growling, now launched herself in a long bound. The claws of one huge paw ripped the dressing-gown from Veni's body, tore through the silken jersey and bared her back to the waist.

The girl screamed with pain as the claws bit into the white flesh, leaving long, angry scars. She fell headlong

into the arms of attendants outside. The door clanged shut, the imprisoned animals tore about the cage, magnificent and terrifying in their ferocious excitement.

**H**EEDLESS of her own pain, Veni pressed through the crowd to the spot where Ray lay bleeding on the sawdust. His clothing was shredded, and the bare skin, showing through, was massed with lacerations. In an instant Veni had knelt beside him, her arms about him, kissing him.

As the wounded lion tamer was borne tenderly away, Veni heard Murphy's barking voice:

"Ladeez and gentlemun-n-n! I am happy to announce that Professor Karloch is not seriously injured. And it is with regret that I must also announce that a slight indisposition of the great Rigoli has made it necessary to cancel for the afternoon the marvelous death-defying act on the flying trapeze by Veni and Rigoli!"

Loque came darting toward the ring. The clown whispered as he passed:

"Rigoli shot himself just now!"

Veni reeled momentarily, then followed the body of the lion tamer. Loque sprang away, tumbling. Whatever happened, the show must go on!

Ray, though sorely hurt, was in no danger. Roberts, the circus owner, gave up to him the only drawing-room boasted by the show Pullmans, and there he was treated by the circus doctor. During most of the afternoon he slept. It was well after nightfall when at last he stirred and opened his eyes. Blinking incredulously, he passed a hand over his forehead.

It was no dream: Veni was sitting beside him, and she was holding his hand in a tight clasp.

"Veni!" he exclaimed. She bent toward him, and he saw that there were tears in her eyes.

He could say no more than that, for Veni was kissing his lips.

**THE END.**



*Then came the shudder and shock as Asoka struck the wall with his enormous forehead*

## Asoka's Alibi

*Snares and pitfalls surround the path of Ben Quorn and his beloved elephant, as the Brahmins ply their deadly trade of revengeful intrigue*

**By TALBOT MUNDY**

*Author of "Ho for London Town!" "When Trails Were New," etc.*

### LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

**Q**UORN, formerly a Philadelphia taxi driver, has been elevated—by chance, his love of elephants and a wild ride on the back of the runaway Asoka—to the post of keeper of elephants for the Ranee of Narada, on the border of India.

Narada is seething over the tradition-flouting deeds of the nineteen-year-old-Ranee, and the Brahmin priests are plotting to overthrow her. Blake, the English Resident, sides with the Ranee, as does Rana Raj Singh, an independent Rajput prince with a handful of danger-loving followers.

Quorn, who worships the Ranee next to his mighty Asoka, strives during the

mad carnival month of April to keep the minds of the populace centered on his elephants and their antics, rather than on the Ranee's disregard for the ancient ways.

Maraj, a disciple of the old Thuggee—the Thugs—and a lover of pain and killing, is murdering for the Brahmin priests, or—a refinement on murder—making his victims commit suicide and thus damn their souls to wander. He sends a fanatic into Asoka's path, and the man is killed. Quorn, knowing his elephant will be shot as a murderer, races away to hide Asoka—no mean task.

Returning to the palace, he enlists

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Rana Raj Singh's aid. Maraj manages to abduct Quorn, and the elephant tamer, applying his power over maniacs, almost persuades the killer that he, Quorn, will be his disciple in overthrowing the Brahmins themselves. Blake and the Rajputs burst in, however, and rescue Quorn. But back at the Residency, Maraj appears, overhearing their plans.

Bamjee, a *babu* who sides with whoever is most munificent, fears the Brahmins may win, and goes to Siva's temple to bribe the priesthood with what information he has. But the priest who sees him, hating the *babu* for being connected with the Ranee's reforms, secretly condemns him to death. Bamjee, guessing it, tricks the priest into stepping into the trap himself.

Trying to escape from the temple, Bamjee uses blackmail, trickery, and a good bluff—plus some hundreds of rupees—to get knowledge of the Brahmins' plot from one of the priests, and then makes his way out of the temple, hoping somewhere to find his friend Quorn and help the Ranee.

## CHAPTER VII.

### ASOKA IN HIDING.

THE outcast's lot is not a happy one, but there are compensations. The Chandala are regarded as so untouchable that even sweepers will have nothing to do with them. They are not allowed in cities. Such villages as they have are in the jungle, where they are neither taxed nor troubled by the census taker. If they die, they die; and if they rot, they rot; it is nobody's business.

So they are as free as any sort of human being can be, and the proof that they are actually human is that they crave what they have not got—servitude.

They ignorantly ache for a red-hot religion and rules and a boss to deprive them of liberty—a fact which had

made it very easy for Maraj to pose among them as a being from another world.

Quorn had merely taken pity on them and employed them to cut grass for his elephants. He had made a number of journeys into the jungle to show them what kind of grass he wanted, and on one of these expeditions he had found a ruined building, roofless but otherwise serviceable. It had been full of trash and brambles when he first discovered it, but he had made use of the elephants to clean it out, and he was using it now as a place in which to hide Asoka from the machinations of the Brahmins.

He could with fair confidence count on the Chandala not to give away the hiding place because of their ingrained, justified and lively mistrust of any one asking questions or even trespassing into their part of the jungle. It was not very far from Narada—at any rate, not more than twenty miles—and he reached it on Blake's skewbald errand pony not long after daybreak. He was rather surprised that there were no Chandala, lean and dirty-looking, perching on the walls like vultures to stare at Asoka.

He turned the pony into a roofless room beside a heap of hay and limped into Asoka's chamber, where a glance told him that nothing whatever was wrong. Asoka greeted him, gathered him up in his trunk, hoisted him up on his head, and the two went down to the creek for the morning drink and a mud bath.

That took time, because the mud had to be washed off afterward, which meant a long swim and a lot of fooling, so the sun was well up over the trees when Quorn rode back along the jungle glade and reëntered the ruin. He could see, at a bend in the glade, the broken branches that Rana Raj Singh had thrown down to mark and at the same time to conceal the trail down which he and his men had ridden to hide in the *nullah* not far away. It



was probable that one man, or perhaps two, were in the trees on the alert, but it would need second-sight to discover a Rajput scout, even if you knew exactly where to look.

Quorn proposed to himself to get some sleep, although it was a poor place for it because the flies were awful. However, he gathered green leaves with which to cover himself, shook the hay to make sure there were no snakes in it, and lay down, near enough to Asoka to be awakened if the monster should grow restless.

He was watching, through a chink between the leaves, the great body swaying to the rhythm of the spheres, or whatever it is that elephants are conscious of, when Bamjee came cantering down the glade and, after turning his pony into the same inclosure with Quorn's, broke in on Quorn's peace.

"OH!" said Bamjee. "I am glad to see you!"

"Can't return the compliment," said Quorn, sitting up and brushing hay out of his hair. "You're a buzzard of ill-omen. Any time you show up there's grief around the corner. What's eating you? You didn't run me down for nothing?"

"Nothing? What is nothing? If everything is nothing, as the Yogis say, then nothing is everything. Everything is enough. I have every reason. Shall I name one?"

Quorn sighed and filled his pipe. "You look like the wreck o' the Hesperus. Indecent, you, a father of a family, sporting around in a turban and cotton gee-string. I'm ashamed of the elephant seeing you."

"Nevertheless," said Bamjee, "I am the person who will cause you to become a Sirdar. Sirdar Benjamin Quorn: how will that look on the envelope? I know now what the Brahmins intend to do. You shall defeat them with my help. You shall have all the credit, but you must promise to pay me half of the big bonus

that the Ranee will undoubtedly give you."

"Nix," Quorn answered. "Getting's keepings. Play your own hand. You wouldn't offer to deal me in unless you wanted me so damn bad you're fair busting. So shoot."

"Well, I could easily go to the Ranee with my story."

"You can soap yourself and slide to hell with it. I ain't particular."

"If I should tell you what I have ascertained, will you promise to recommend me also for a bonus?"

"No. You make enough off the gum you lick off postage stamps to pay my salary twice over. When I make promises, I know why. And when I don't make 'em I know why. You're why. Get me?"

"Well, if I should take you into my confidence—"

"You mean get me to trust you? Can't be done."

"If I should tell you what I know, and you should use that information, and by using it should not only save the Ranee's life, but also catch the Brahmins in their own trap, would you see that I get credit for it?"

"Mebbe."

"Is that your best bid? Listen, Mr. Quorn. The Ranee appointed you her agent to hunt down Maraj and to connect him with the Brahmins. You may order everybody—troops, police, palace servants, Prince Rana Raj Singh, even myself. I have information, and I am willing to tell you how to solve the riddle—how to give the necessary orders and so snatch fame and reward in the very face of destiny. What will you do for me?"

"You mean if you ain't lying? If you really have that information? I" hold you underneath that elephant while he does a Charleston on your belly—unless you tell me dam-quick every word you know. Sit down there. Spill it. Satan's high hat! You, as naked as a nigger, coming here to try and sell me something that might save



her life? Act your age, Bamjee. Say all you know, and say it quick."

Even his enemies, of whom he has several, say this of Bamjee: that he knows when to capitulate, and that he does it with a good grace. He ignored Quorn's rudeness, threw all stipulation to the winds, and plunged into his story, relating in minute detail what had happened in the Brahmin temple.

"And I tell you, Mr. Quorn, that they are tired of Maraj, even though they do not say so in plain words. They are afraid of him. They are almost as anxious to see the end of him as of you and the Ranee. I think it likely they will snap him in the same trap in which they hope to catch you. All you need to do is ride into the trap and have Prince Rana Raj Singh lie in ambush; each of his men will have a Brahmin on his lance before the day is over.

"But if you tell the Ranee beforehand she will give neither you nor me the credit. And if you tell Prince Rana Raj Singh, it will be the same story—"

A shadow fell between them. Then a hollow voice:

"And if you tell Maraj? What if you should tell Maraj?"

**B**AMJEE almost fainted. Maraj had climbed over the wall and approached from behind them. His maniac eyes looked burned by lack of sleep, and his movement was almost simian, but an intelligence, mocking and masterful, glowed beneath the surface. However dry his eyes might seem, they looked indomitable. He lifted Bamjee by the neck with one hand and dumped him beside Quorn.

Then he sat and faced them both. Quorn noticed that Asoka was beginning to grow nervous.

"Snap Maraj in a trap! That is funny!"

"Hell!" said Quorn. "Of course they couldn't catch you in a trap."

"But I will catch them!"

"Sure you will. O' course you will.

That's a part o' the bargain you made with me."

Genius has nothing whatever to do with education. It is a gift for recognizing the essence of things and what to do about it. Quorn knew nothing about maniacs, just as he had known nothing about elephants until he came to Narada. He could not have explained his method; it would certainly not have occurred to him to say there was something simple about a man whose manhood had been lost in a maze of egotism and murderous cunning.

He did not think about it. He acted, simply.

"Would you break our bargain?"

But Maraj was suspicious. "There is new horse-dung on the track. Whose horses?"

"Mine. Bamjee's."

"Many horses. Whose?"

"Rana Raj Singh and his men. Rana Raj Singh quarreled with the Ranee—pulled his freight. Off in a huff. Nobody knows where he's going, and nobody cares."

Something in the maniac's eyes altered. Cunning beneath cunning readjusted purpose beneath purpose. Quorn noticed a sudden blaze of anger that was instantly suppressed and hidden under too much suavity; but he had no means of knowing that Maraj had listened through Blake's window to the whole of the Ranee's conversation.

"He is after Maraj," said the maniac.

He was being so subtle now that subtlety oozed from his lips in a conceited smile, defeating its own end. Simultaneously Quorn and Bamjee recognized that his conceit could be his own undoing.

"What do you care?" Quorn asked. "Ain't you a match for him?"

"Yes, and for the Brahmins also." He fixed his eyes on Bamjee's. "You did not know, did you, that I was listening behind the wall? I heard you say the Brahmins mean to snap me in the same trap with the Ranee. So they

shall. I will be the bait. I will draw the Brahmins, too, into their own trap. Rana Raj Singh shall find them in it, and destroy them. But, first, they shall destroy the Ranees, so that he shall have the impulse to destroy them. Ho, but we will feed death! And though they close me in a trap without an outlet, can they keep me in it?"

He grinned, glaring again into Quorn's eyes. "Afterward, you and I will keep that tryst—when you have no elephant to think about—nothing to think about except me, your master."

**M**ARAJ got up and stared at Asoka, having glanced first at the ropes that held the monster's hind feet. He was well out of reach of his trunk. He said nothing—did nothing—only stared. But the elephant, already nervous, suddenly grew panic-stricken, screamed, tried to reach him and kill him. He did his best to burst the heel ropes.

Quorn's fingers were on a piece of broken masonry; the intention to crush the maniac's skull with it burned in his brain and his veins, but the stone was too heavy to lift. Maraj turned to him and grinned:

"Soon—soon now you shall learn what it means to be all-passionate, and at the same time helpless. That is agony—exquisite, exquisite agony; dew on the flowers of death. So fragrant! So delicious! Wait and see."

He sprang to the wall in three strides then, vaulted it, and vanished. Quorn went to Asoka and spent a whole hour coaxing him back to calmness.

"Did a boggy scare him? Daddy's big boy! Never mind, we'll show 'em. Nex' time, maybe, we won't have no heel ropes on—and then what?"

Suddenly Quorn turned on Bamjee: "Get a move on, you. Time enough to take it easy when you're dead. Go find the Ranees and tell her every word of what's took place. Don't you leave one word out. And if them Brahmins have already been to her with their de-

mands, you tell her from me to give out that she'll ride Asoka to that there hermitage to-morrow morning. I'll have him saddled and ready and at the palace door.

"She'd better order about half the troops to march behind her, but remember: them guys aren't dependable against the Brahmins, so they'd better start late and come along slow; they're jes' for appearances. I'll see the Prince. And say, see Mr. Blake. Tell him if he wants to see sport and maybe be a bit useful, he'd better ride Asoka with the Ranees. That's all. Get your pony and get out o' here."

When Bamjee had departed, Quorn took Asoka for another mud bath and a swim.

"Lord," he muttered as he rode out of the ruined building, "do you suppose that maniac heard what I jus' said to Bamjee? Well—who cares? I'm betting on the Prince and twenty Rajputs. There'll be a picnic." Then he went on talking to Asoka: "Trouble you make, don't you? Never mind, though, you ain't guilty this time. Use your big bean, or they'll execute you day after to-morrow at sunrise.

"What you're needing is a first-class working alibi, and durn me if I know one. You killed a guy. You've got to offset that somehow. Maybe alibi's the wrong word—I ain't no lawyer. Anyhow you use your bean, you sucker, and I'll use mine, and we'll get you a verdict o' not guilty somehow—somehow. Self-defense? Extreme provocation? No evidence? Hell—none o' them won't do. We got to get an alibi or bust!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A TRAP FOR ASOKA.

**N**ARADA knew that there were tantrums in the wind. It was the time of year when corn-fed elephants go *musth* and men are inflamed by all the tom-tom of the marriage

drums until imagination, like a strange gas, maddens the whole mob.

It was normal in the month of carnival for slumbering resentment of a thousand years of wrongs to blaze into sudden flame and make a smoke-black ruin of—perhaps a street of money-lenders' houses, or a mean mosque, raised by poor Mahomedans whose chaste and inexpensive minaret had too long pointed to a scorching sky.

No agitator needed to harangue hot crowds and tongue-lash lethargy into a spate of violence. It only needed murmurs—of the right sort, from the right source. And it is a strange fact that the more men mock the methods, and the servants, and the outer symbols of religion, that much easier it is for whisperers to stir them to the state where they will stab each other.

Nowhere more than in Narada are the Brahmins hated. Nowhere is it easier for Brahmins of a certain sort to stir with almost noiseless tongue the terrible volcano that resides in ignorant minds.

And so it happened that the Ranee's troops could not march on the day when Quorn brought back Asoka to the city, polished him until he shone, harnessed him with the lightest hunting *howdah*, and rode him, stately as a page of legend, through the crowded streets toward the palace. The troops were needed to the last man—fifty of them—to parade with gleaming bayonets and make rioting look like too risky a gamble.

There were two tales circulating. One was that the Ranee had defied the Brahmins, which nobody minded much, although they shuddered at the sacrilege while they secretly and even openly enjoyed the scandal.

It was the other tale that made men glower when they heard it. It was not enough that the Ranee kept and protected and used an elephant that had slain a very holy fakir. She had employed Maraj to cause the elephant to do it. The Brahmins said so.

And to show how fair and strictly truthful the Brahmins could be on occasion, had the Brahmins not admitted publicly, and now privately, that Quorn truly was the reincarnated Gunga *sahib*? The Brahmins had explained it perfectly: it was just another case of ingratitude to the gods who had provided the Ranee with agents for the accomplishment of holy purposes, in the form of Quorn and his elephant; agents which she had promptly used for unholy purposes.

There could only be one possible end to it. Quorn, of course, would have to suffer for letting himself be so misused. The elephant—the Ranee—well, whoever should kill all three of them might have to be a martyr for it, but inevitably he would turn out to be the agent of the angry gods who would mete out due reward in the hereafter.

As for Maraj, it was obvious now how he had escaped capture and punishment for all those horrible murders. Anybody could understand it now, since the Brahmins had told the truth about it. The Ranee had been protecting him all along. Her offer of a heavy reward for his capture had been nothing but a blind to deceive people. She had been making use of Maraj to get rid of her enemies.

True, many of the people murdered by Maraj had seemed unimportant and not dangerous. It was equally true that some of them had been notorious enemies of the Brahmins.

But there were plain answers to both those questions. In the first place, tyrants grow afraid of shadows, and kill imagined enemies without rime or reason, that being one of the aspects of tyranny. In the second place, people who oppose themselves to religious authority must not blame the authorities if the gods take steps to destroy such opposition.

Nobody should blame the Brahmins for the gods' annoyance. One did not have to like the Brahmins personally, or even collectively, nor need one ap-

prove of all their arrogance, in order to see the unfairness of blaming them for what the gods might do. One did not have to hate the Ranee or to call her beauty ugliness and her generosity meanness, in order to see what a fool she had made of herself, and what a wicked woman she had been to employ and subsidize Maraj.

**B**ESIDES, the Ranee had discarded *purdah* and neglected many of the ancient customs. She had repeatedly defied the Brahmins who are, after all, the fountain-head of wisdom. She had opened hospitals, where people died at the hands of heretical doctors in spite of all the genuine remedies that were smuggled to their bedside.

She had opened a school for women, where women were actually taught, in so many words, that they had rights as well as obligations. She had closed the brothels, which, as everybody knew, were a social safety-valve. And she was proposing to marry a man of her own choosing.

The gods don't tolerate such infidelity for long; when they are weary of it, they act suddenly and swiftly.

So the city was in an expectant, ugly mood, and there were ugly rumors, borne on the wings of nobody knew what. Everybody knew that something terrible was going to happen. Those who owned property were afraid, and those who owned none, or owed money, were belligerently watchful.

The only thing that prevented rioting from breaking out in a sort of spontaneous combustion was the gleam on the bayonets of the Ranee's infantry and the beautifully polished brass of their machine gun, strategically stationed where they could do the greatest amount of damage in the shortest possible time.

The sun beat down on all that mixed emotion like a million discordant cymbals of yellow brass, heat and noise being only different vibrations of the self-same violence.

So as Quorn rode Asoka through the streets he did not receive his usual ovation. Children were not lifted up to look at him. No women threw him little bunches of waxy flowers. And the story of Asoka's slaying of the holy fakir had been so spread and so exaggerated that the throngs in the narrow streets melted away ahead of him; whereas it had always been Asoka's reputation that, though his temper was terrific, he was dignified and patient toward a crowd, particularly if the crowd was noisy in its admiration.

Asoka sensed the change of public sentiment almost, if not quite as readily as Quorn perceived it, and by the time he reached the palace he was already showing symptoms of uncertain temper. Quorn's voice kept him in control and he behaved beautifully under the palace portico while they set the ladder against him and the Ranee climbed into the *howdah*; but as he started off he was rumbling in a way that called for several smart raps with the *ankus* to remind him he was not his own master.

Blake was on horseback and had brought four mounted servants with him. They were a sort of superior *sais*, quite undependable except as grooms, and unarmed, but Blake's own automatic reposed in a holster underneath his shirt; he appeared ill-tempered, in a mood to use that pistol, in spite of his diplomatic status.

Blake was the type of man who, when he does get involved in indiscretion—as every diplomat worth trusting, and every diplomat who ever accomplished anything, must do at times—never retreated but, by even greater indiscretion, usually saved the day. The only thoroughly discreet men are the dead ones, and the ill-served governments are those whose agents never make mistakes because they don't dare. Blake and his servants formed the rear guard, Blake being of the reasonable opinion that his own presence, as a sort of unofficial escort, and official

witness, ought to make the Ranee safer than her own troops would have done.

The advance guard was a party of the sons of the nobility, courtiers all, eight in number, beautifully horsed and splendid in their colored turbans, but unarmed because they were not Rajputs and because, by treaty, the Ranee's troops were limited to fifty men. No non-military individuals in India, except the Rajputs, are allowed to carry even their native weapons, so there was neither sword nor lance in all that party. But by the same law they had the right to suppose they would not be met with weapons.

As they swayed toward the open country the Ranee lay chin-on-elbows in the *howdah*, merely sitting up at intervals to let any one who cared to know it see that she was trusting herself on Asoka's back.

She was in riding-breeches and a turban made of cloth of green and gold. Her white silk shirt was fastened at the throat with an emerald worth her ransom, but except for the diamond aigrette in her turban she wore no other jewelry: she was out to do things and defeat her enemies, not to adorn Narada. And as usual she talked with Quorn as if he were a minister of state who knew all her personal secrets.

"MISS," he said over his shoulder, "I seen the prince, and him and me understood each other. He has all his twenty Rajputs with him. Half have lances and the other half have sabers. And if you want my guess, there's bootleg automatics under cover, but I know the law and I ain't seen nothing. The prince told me he knows a *nullah* near the hermitage where he can hide his men perfect; there's high reeds and a swamp, with the river back o' that, so you can only come at the hiding place by one track. He took along food for men and horses and he aimed to get in there last night, or early before daylight. And he says there's a kind of island in the *nullah*,

quite high, with a clump o' tall trees on it, so he can watch the hermitage and know what's going on."

"Let us hope," she remarked.

"Hope, miss? You can bet your boots he's on the job!"

"I hope," she said, "there will be a job for him to do. It is not so simple in these days for a prince to prove his mettle. Do you know, Mr. Quorn, if it weren't for that—that Rana Raj Singh needs an opportunity to prove to himself that he is fit to be my consort—to himself, you understand?—I would have sought some other way of solving this problem."

"Miss, there ain't no other way. You've got to soak it to them Brahmins good. You can't argue with 'em. They've got laws and rules and spiritual reggulations every way you turn and all amounting to the same thing: Brahmins is right and everybody else is wrong, plus damn-bad, ornery and wicked. Did Bamjee tell you all he knows?"

"Bamjee never tells all he knows, but he told enough. Poor Bamjee! I have sent him to the hermitage."

"Good God, miss! What for?"

"Simply to make trouble on general principles. Since we are to have trouble anyhow, let us have lots of it. Bamjee told me that the Brahmins have sent about a dozen of their number to the hermitage with orders not to move out of it. Rana Raj Singh shall drive them out. When the highest spiritual authorities turn crooked they always ally themselves with the lowest elements, so I don't doubt we shall have the Chandala to deal with. Maraj has probably stirred the Chandala against me. Bamjee says the Brahmins are growing afraid of Maraj and intend to betray him—"

"And Maraj, miss, he means to betray the Brahmins—"

"And the Brahmins, I happen to know through reliable spies, have taken a number of ruffians with them to the hermitage."

"There'll be hell to pay, miss—and no soldiers!"

"Yes, this looks like real opportunity for Rana Raj Singh!"

"And Asoka, miss? You ain't going to have him executed, nohow, are you? Not whatever the outcome?"

"This is his chance, too, I think," she answered.

Quorn thumped Asoka with the *ankus*. "Do you hear that, you big bum? Strut your stuff and think up your own alibi!"

The hell that was to pay began when they had just crossed the wide lower ford of Narada River. The advance-guard, laughing and chatting, drew abreast of a swamp where the reeds were ten feet higher than a man's head. The road they were to follow led around that swamp and then eastward along the river bank. On the right was a porphyry cliff with enormous boulders at its foot, and ahead was the road to the railway station, two days' march away.

ASOKA was the first to fore-sense trouble; he curled up his precious trunk out of harm's way and began shaking his ears. Quorn hardly had time to get a firm grip with his knees when one of the escort threw up his hand and shouted.

With no other warning at all, from two directions—from the boulders and the reeds—at least a hundred water-buffalo came charging down on them in one of those blind, irresistible rushes in which one mind, one terror governs a whole herd and whelms whatever stands in front of it.

The horsemen scattered and Asoka plunged into the reeds, the Ranee laughing gayly as she clung to the *howdah*—until she saw a naked man on a sort of raft open the reeds with his hands, leap carefully from clump to clump of roots and jab at the elephant's rump with a spear.

Asoka screamed with anger. Three more naked spearmen tried to work

their way toward him, but he plunged again out of the swamp at almost the place where he had entered and proceeded to remove himself from that scene at a speed that would have made a horse a Derby winner.

"Hang on, miss!" Quorn cried.

Fear takes hold of elephants as suddenly as typhoons smite the sea. Frenzy as well as fear took hold of Asoka, arousing his whole strength, his entire speed, blinding him, deafening him to Quorn's voice, making him almost as unconscious as a landslide or a monster in a dream.

He crashed into the jungle, smashed the *howdah* roof against a branch, thundered through undergrowth, slid down *nullahs* like an avalanche with earth-banks breaking under him, charged through clinging clumps of thorn-brush, floundered into a wallow where the buffalo had lain, came out of it smothered with mud and butted, squealing like a bucking pony, against a tree that blocked his path. The tree cracked, splintered and fell.

Then, glimpsing through his blood-shot eyes a glade beyond a bamboo thicket, he crashed through the thicket and began to lay the long leagues underfoot.

An elephant driven by terror can run for a day without stopping. Quorn was satisfied to hold on for the present. He was pleased that he had not dropped the iron *ankus*. Branches had whipped his forehead; with his free hand he wiped the blood that had streamed in his eyes; it was the blood that prevented him from seeing what was happening along the glade. The Ranee, clinging to the low brass rail in front of the *howdah* and with her feet jammed under the side-rails, leaned out and touched Quorn between the shoulders.

"Do you see?" she shouted. "Fires!"

He heard the word and used his sleeve to wipe his eyes. Men—Chandala, he could see them now, lean, rusty-skinned, filthy—had set heaped



thorn-wood fires along the glade. They blazed and crackled suddenly as Asoka drew near. They were all on one side of the glade—to the right.

Asoka swerved away from them, until he left that glade where his path was blocked by a wall of sputtering flame, and tore along a left-hand opening between the trees in the direction of the river. The Ranee touched Quorn's back again.

"Can you turn him?"

"No, miss."

"I feel sure we are being driven into a trap!"

Quorn began using every faculty he had. He had been half-stunned by the whipping branches, but he threw off that sensation—or lack of it—as a fighter in the ring does in the minute's interval between rounds.

"Got to think—got to think like hell!" he muttered. "This big bum ain't thinking."

He began to encourage Asoka to run, instead of merely sitting still and letting him. Pitching his voice to the familiar note of command he urged him forward—faster!—faster!—until a shadowy, comforting sense of obedience began to invade Asoka's consciousness.

It seemed to the elephant now that he had obeyed Quorn in the beginning; obeying him, he had outdistanced horror: he was ready to obey again—presently—presently—maybe—when he should feel quite sure.

THERE were fires again now, and more of them, at closer intervals; and through a gap in the trees, ahead, Quorn saw the river gleaming like burnished metal in the morning sun. He saw where the path they were following forked; both branches led toward the river, but the left-hand path was blocked by an inferno of crashing thorn-bush. Certainly the trap was somewhere down the right-hand fork. Men leaped out of the undergrowth with burning fire-brands, taking all

risks, setting the grass alight to drive Asoka down the right-hand fairway.

And then Bamjee dropped out of a tree. It was like a dream. He was torn, disheveled, he had lost his turban. He stood in the midst of the right-hand path and waved his arms. He shouted. Then he fled into the jungle with two of the Chandala following, hard on his heels.

Quorn used the *ankus* then. He used it cruelly. Voice, knees, *ankus*, all together urged the elephant to turn left. Once again Asoka curled his trunk. He did not hesitate. He caught a glimpse of the river between the trees, swung left between two blazing fires that almost singed his flanks and scooted for the friendly water where he knew no fire could follow.

Quorn had forgotten the waterfall. There was a fifty-foot drop, heavy water plunging onto crags, and he could hear the roar of it as the river bank broke beneath Asoka's weight and the monster plunged in head-first, turning almost a somersault, displacing tons of water.

How Quorn hung on he never knew. He was half-drowned. For awhile he was conscious of nothing except the need to cling with heels and hands and knees, and to keep Asoka, if he could, from being swept down-river and on to the crags below the fall. That thought obsessed him.

Almost the first clear glimpse he had was of the river bank a hundred yards away, and of the roaring falls not fifty feet beyond him on his left hand. He could see the pale-green film of the crest of the plunging water. In the same moment he knew that the Ranee was no longer in the *howdah*.

For a moment—just one moment—he ceased to care then whether he went over the falls or not. The universe went blank. He had not known how much he loved the Ranee. Then, as suddenly, a rage took hold of him. He beat Asoka with his fists.

"You big bum! Turn and find her!"

But Asoka was cooling his hot flanks, comfortable, careless—as indifferent to the world he had left behind as he was to waterfalls. He had fled from terror.

He had found peace, that included Quorn with no *ankus* in his hand. Quorn's fists were funny.

He submerged himself, breathing through his trunk that stuck a foot above the water, giving Quorn a bath, too. Possibly he thought his friend Quorn would enjoy that. Then, because the water, and the sense of safety, and the physical reaction made him happy, he amused himself and drove Quorn nearly frantic by pretending that the current was drawing him over the waterfall.

He let himself drift until the water thundered in Quorn's ears and the glassy curve of the descending wave was almost within hand-reach; then he slowly swam upstream—only to repeat the performance again, and again, and again. At last, when he was nice and cool and the thought of grass seemed good to him, he permitted himself to recognize that he was being ordered out on dry land.

Dry land be it, then. But not the bank where horror had pursued him. Whenever Quorn tried to turn him toward the south bank, he submerged himself, pretending he supposed Quorn wanted that; and it was on the north bank that he emerged at last, ten feet above the waterfall, as pleasant-tempered as he had been frantic half an hour ago.

Narada River is deep at that point, banked up by the dyke that forms the waterfall; below the fall it shallows to a ford a quarter of a mile wide. Far across the river Quorn could see a stream of crimson topped with billowing smoke where the thorn fires had caught the jungle undergrowth. There were no men in sight. Doubtless they had fled from the spreading flame. There was no wind just then; the fire was eating its way outward in a circle.

8 A

"Maybe I can get this fool across the ford," Quorn muttered.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE LOST RANEE.

THERE was a well-defined track down the rocks to the foot of the fall, and below that there was a footpath all along the river to the ford. Quorn rode along that, watching the troubled water, half-expecting to see the Ranee's body, mangled by the crags, floating in mid-stream or stranded. But he knew there were alligators, slimy, greedy devils; floating bodies had a slim chance; even the fords were sometimes dangerous for passengers on foot.

All that way along the river bank Quorn was sick at heart and careless even of Asoka's comfort or his destiny; however, he began to be puzzled before long by symptoms that he noticed, and he was more than ever puzzled by Asoka's willingness to cross the river when they reached the ford.

"What's eating you? What's making you forget?" he wondered.

All the way across the ford he indulged in sentimental guesswork as to whether the Ranee's death had not humiliated and broken Asoka's spirit. Nearly every one is capable at times of that sort of imagination.

However, on the far bank he got down to search for what the matter might be, and soon discovered the spear-wound in Asoka's rump. It was nothing serious, although it might be painful, and he understood then that Asoka had been merely asking for attention.

He made Asoka kneel and, having no remedies handy, made a fly-brush of grass at the end of a string that would sway with the elephant's movement and prevent the stinging flies from laying eggs in the open cut.

It was while he was tying the string to the *howdah* rail that Bamjee came.

By this time the *babu* had lost his spectacles. There was hardly a shred of unorn clothing on his body and almost every inch of him was bleeding from the thorns. He was breathless and he fell at Quorn's feet. For a minute or two he lay and vomited. Then suddenly his will power triumphed and he knelt—sputtered—exploded:

"Damn! Loafer! Bloody fool! You wait here? Oh, my God! I saw you on the far bank—didn't you see my signal?"

"Looking for the Ranee," Quorn answered. Then he lowered his voice. "She's drowned."

"Liar!"

"She is. She's drowned."

"Liar, I tell you! I saw her swim—she was washed out of the *howdah* close inshore—caught the grass in her hands and climbed out—scrambled up the bank. He seized her—"

"For the love o' God, who did?"

"Maraj! Pounced on her like a hawk on a bird. He had a trap set. I warned you, and you avoided it. I had to run, and they thought they killed me, but I came back. When Maraj saw you plunge into the river he ran to the place. And when he saw the Ranee in the water he hid himself. I tried to yell to her, but I had no voice. I couldn't whisper! And so she climbed out, and Maraj pounced on her.

"I saw him pick her up—she was kicking—he carried her—he ran—and I ran—he choked her until she left off kicking—then I saw him take her to the hermitage, which is full of Brahmins and cutthroats—and I don't know where the Prince is—and we can't get to the hermitage now—*because the whole damn jungle is on fire! Oh, my God!*"

He lay and beat the hard earth with his flat palms. He beat his forehead on the ground. Quorn lifted him, took him by shoulders and heel and hoisted him into the *howdah*. Then he climbed up to his own place on Asoka's neck,

after he had broken off a short stick for administrative purposes.

"Come on now, and no bunk!"

QUORN was not even quite sure where the hermitage lay, and it was no use asking Bamjee, who was moaning and out of his senses, rolling from side to side of the *howdah*. But Bamjee had told the truth about the jungle fire; the hot-weather wind was rising and the roar and heat and smell of it were coming closer every second.

There were birds and animals in full flight—scores of them—even a leopard that passed within six feet and did not pause to look at a man on an elephant. Asoka, too, was getting difficult to manage.

So Quorn turned down-wind, but headed southward as much as possible, in order to make a circuit of the fire; but he had to make a very wide circuit indeed because of Asoka's nervousness. However, Asoka was willing, and put his best foot forward; they covered five or six miles faster than a horse could have done it, which brought them out of the zone of rolling smoke.

And when they were out of the haze of the smoke Quorn presently saw Blake on horseback on a knoll, gazing under his hand in every direction. He clapped his spurs in and came galloping the moment he caught sight of Asoka.

"For God's sake, where is the Ranee?" he demanded. "What has happened?"

Quorn was laconic. Bamjee stuck his head over the *howdah* rail and repeated Quorn's words after him—adding to them.

"Go to her—for God's sake, go to her!" he almost screamed, and then collapsed.

But in another moment he was on his knees again, and it was Bamjee who first caught sight of Rana Raj Singh and ten of his men moving westward in an extended line with the long

slow-swinging canter that saves horses' strength against emergency.

"Bloody dam-fool! Go back!" Bamjee yelled. But Rana Raj Singh came on at a gallop, drew rein in a dust cloud and sat silent, waiting for Blake to speak first.

Blake told him all that he and Quorn knew.

There was no pause between Blake's last words and Rana Raj Singh's order to his men. They wheeled and, like eleven arrows launched out of eleven bows, they sped back along the course by which they had come, Blake after them, swallowing dust, and Asoka bringing up the rear in no great hurry, since the horses' utmost limit of speed was easily within his scope.

They rode as a blast of wind goes ripping through the scrub. Jungle, *nullahs*, crags and trees went past them like a motion picture, and the horses were blowing heavily when Rana Raj Singh halted at last in full view of a building half a mile away.

It was a domed structure surrounded by a mud-and-stone wall, with plenty of space between building and wall and some trees in the inclosure. Considerably less than half a mile beyond it was another group of trees. Rana Raj Singh pointed to them:

"Ten of my men are in hiding near those trees. One man is up in a tree. They have seen us." He waved his right arm. Blake's keen eyes were not keen enough to read the answering signal from the tree-top, but Rana Raj Singh seemed satisfied; he turned to Blake again.

"I waited," he said, "and grew weary of waiting. I did not understand what was happening in that hermitage, or why the Ranee did not come. A number of Brahmins came. I was astonished; they had their high priest with them—an unheard-of thing. They also brought a lot of ruffians with *lathis*.\* Then I saw the jungle on fire,

and no Ranee. So I left ten men in hiding and rode to see what might have happened. Ah! My men come."

TEN men armed with lances rode in to view from a depression near the trees. They formed into a line with wide-spaced intervals and halted, watching for a signal. Quorn drew as near to Rana Raj Singh as the nervous horse would let him.

"Did I hear you say, sir, that the high priest o' them Brahmins is in that building?"

Rana Raj Singh nodded. Quorn slowly moved Asoka forward until he was in front of all the horses.

"Me and you won't miss this, soldier! Durn your old hide, but you was born lucky. A *habeas corpus* beats an alibi. You *habeas* the *corpus* o' that high priest and a legislature couldn't hang you!"

Rana Raj Singh signalled. The men opposite approached, extending their line as Rana Raj Singh maneuvered his ten to meet them, until they formed a wide arc of a circle with Asoka in the midst. Blake was at Asoka's left, Rana Raj Singh to right of him, and for a moment or two they halted in that position while men's heads stared at them from over the hermitage wall.

There was evidently some confusion in the hermitage. Two men who appeared not to be Brahmins let themselves down from the wall and took to their heels toward the *nullah* where the Rajputs had been hidden.

"Catch them alive," commanded Rana Raj Singh. Two of his men gave chase.

Then a gate of the hermitage opened and three Brahmins approached, waving a white cloth. Rana Raj Singh rode to meet them, Blake almost abreast of him and Quorn on Asoka keeping well within earshot.

"Halt!" commanded Rana Raj Singh. "Where is the Ranee?"

\* Long sticks.

Bamjee came to life and knelt up in the *howdah*, clearing his throat to shout something, but Quorn cursed him into silence.

"She is with us in the hermitage," the Brahmin answered insolently. "She bids you go home."

Bamjee exploded, Quorn or no Quorn. "Liar!" he shouted. "Your highness, that man is the go-between who tells Maraj what to do. I know him!"

The Brahmin promptly played his trump card. "Her Highness the Ranee has apologized to the high priest and has received his blessing. You are to take that elephant away and shoot him. The person known as Maraj has been imprisoned in the hermitage and will be taken to Narada to be tried and executed.

"We ourselves will be the Ranee's escort to Narada."

Rana Raj Singh's men came dragging prisoners. They threw them to the ground and held them there at the lance-point.

"Prince, they say the Ranee is locked into a cell. There are forty more of this sort in there, prepared to defend the place. Maraj is a prisoner, but the Brahmins have offered him freedom if we attack and he helps the defense."

They tied the prisoners back to back by necks, hands and feet. There began to be a great commotion in the hermitage—an uproar—and another Brahmin came running, but not through the gate; he climbed the wall, jumped, fell, hurt himself and limped, hurrying as best he could. He stammered; it was hard to understand him. Quorn, who could see the roof of the building better than the rest could, understood first.

"Hell's bells!" he exclaimed. "Maraj is loose. He's on the roof. He has turned those other guys against the Brahmins! This guy wants us to go help the high priest! Can you beat that?"

"Can you break that wall?" asked Rana Raj Singh.

ALWAYS the easiest thing in the world was to start Asoka smashing things. Quorn's only immediate worry was the risk of damage to Asoka's head, so he chose the mud-and-stone wall rather than the teak gate and sent Asoka charging at it like a five-ton battering-ram.

He heard Bamjee crying, "Oh, my God!" behind him—heard the thunder of the Rajput horsemen closing in behind him, two by two, to burst through the gap he should make, saw—through the edge of his eyes—Blake and Rana Raj Singh slightly to his rear, one on either flank, distinctly heard and felt the *ping* of several bullets, thought he heard Blake answer them, and was dimly aware that a man on the roof was shooting at him, but kept on missing.

Then came the shudder and shock as Asoka struck the wall with his enormous forehead—strained his weight against it—grunted—and a section of the wall fell inward in a cloud of dust.

Asoka staggered through the gap. Behind him the horsemen streamed through, wheeling right and left. And then confusion, in which Bamjee scrambled to the ground by clinging to Asoka's tail and vanished into the building.

Asoka swung a limp trunk, swaying with his eyes shut, more than half-stunned by the impact. Quorn slipped to the ground.

"Lean against that wall, you sucker. Keep your feet. No lying down or you'll kid yourself you're all in."

For a moment or two he watched the elephant, since that was his first charge. He decided Asoka would stand there—at the worst he would hardly stray far—at the utmost worst he might stagger off home to the elephant lines in Narada; but he was likeliest to stand.

He left him. There was fighting going on in every direction—horsemen charging; Brahmins and their own

hired ruffians at throat-grips, some of them rolling on the ground together; other ruffians trying to climb the wall and being skewered by the Rajput lances; two men in the gap to guard that, sabering whoever tried to slip through; and a maniac—a leaping maniac—a prancing, yelling maniac who jabbered in an unknown tongue as he raced around the parapet of the rambling building, brandishing an empty Colt revolver.

"Maraj!" Quorn muttered to himself. "I guess you're my meat!"

But he had no weapon, nor any notion how he was going to kill the maniac. He ran all along the building looking for an entrance. There were dozens of doors, all leading into cells, but he came on a passage at last that led between two cells into a dark hall under a dome, with columns to support the dome.

He saw the Ranee leaning on Rana Raj Singh's arm. The prince's saber was all bloody and there were several dead men lying around the door of the cell from which the Ranee had been rescued. The door had not been opened, it was smashed in, but Quorn had not time to be curious how that had happened—he saw a stairway leading to the roof.

It was narrow. Near its summit stood the high priest, taking refuge there for fear his sacred person might be defiled by the touch of common mortals—much more afraid of that than of being killed or injured. In fact, he did not appear afraid.

Quorn charged up the steps. The high priest retreated in front of him, dreading that Quorn might bump against him. Three steps backward, and he bumped into the door that opened on the roof—it yielded, and there he was out on the roof with Quorn staring at him, until Maraj came prancing along the parapet.

The high priest looked afraid then, as Maraj paused, grinning at him—grinning at Quorn, too; and Quorn

cursed himself for a bigger idiot than any one, because he had no weapon. Maraj twisted the Colt revolver in his hands, broke it as if his hands were a gorilla's, dropped it as if he had never been conscious of it. And then human speech returned to him.

"The oh, so holy—twice born—high priest—who commanded Maraj to be tied and—handed over—in Narada—to the judge—and the executioner!"

**M**ARAJ glanced down from the parapet. Asoka stood beneath him, midway between wall and building, shaking his head, but with his eyes open now. Suddenly Maraj came leaping at the high priest, seized him, crushed him in a right arm that was like a vise. He caught Quorn with the other hand and nearly crushed his ribs.

"You shall come and learn what Maraj knows!"

Quorn's right hand was free; he rained blows on the maniac's face, but their only effect was to make him tighten the terrific grip. The high priest groaned with the agony of in-bent ribs. Maraj hove both of them off their feet and rushed toward the parapet, mounted it, paused there. He laughed so loud that even the fighting Rajputs looked up. Shouting something, in an unknown tongue again, and hugging his captives, he leaped, feet first for Asoka's back.

Asoka moved away from under them—by instinct perhaps, intuition, whatever it is that forewarns animals. Quorn's feet struck Asoka's forehead, which set all three men turning in the air. Maraj struggled, clinging to Quorn and the high priest, trying to turn them under him and break his own fall, but the reverse of that happened; his back struck the earth. Quorn and the high priest fell on top of him, the high priest with a broken shoulder and Quorn shaken up but not hurt otherwise.

He rolled clear. Then he dragged the high priest free, and swung him



roughly out of reach of Asoka's trunk and forefoot that were dangerously close.

Maraj seemed dead—but suddenly he sat up, staring at Asoka. He seemed to remember something about that elephant.

Asoka, too, seemed to remember; he rumbled. Then Maraj saw Quorn, and then the high priest. Suddenly he tried to stand up, but his legs refused to function, so he rolled—he tried to seize the high priest by the leg. Quorn spoke quite quietly:

"There's your alibi, Asoka—soak him!"

It was only two steps forward—one foot on the belly of the maniac, the other on his head. Quorn took Asoka by the trunk and turned him around, led him to where he had left him near the gap in the wall.

"You win," he said, "you great big lucky stiff! I think you done it in a dream. I don't believe you know which end of you is your head. I hope your skull ain't split—you hit that wall a hummer."

Then the Ranee and the prince, and many Brahmins clustering around the high priest, some of them bruised and bloody, and every one of them as nervous as a wet hen because they had been defiled by the touch of low-caste ruffians.

The Ranee's voice—a stern note that

Quorn had never heard before—the high priest answering, and all the Brahmins echoing him in chorus—promises, Quorn supposed—a g r e e m e n t s, to be broken when the time came. Pity she couldn't hang 'em all. He sat down, more stunned than he had realized he was, his head so swimming that it was several seconds before he recognized Bamjee with a big ax in his hand.

"We win, I think," said Bamjee, "both of us! I chopped the door down while the prince was slaying dragons—six men at least! Oh, my God! I chopped with all that going on behind me—think of it! But it was I who released her from the cell—can she forget that?"

Then the Ranee's voice, the Ranee's sweet young face amid a sea of others that persisted in whirling around in a circle. Somewhere in the whirl Blake's monocle and a glimpse of Blake cleaning an automatic with his handkerchief.

"I thank you, Sirdar Benjamin Quorn. Do you think you could make Asoka understand how much I thank him?"

And then Blake's voice: "Gad! I don't know, Quorn—I might—you never know—I might be able to persuade our government to recognize that title. Do my best, old fellow—do my best for you at any time!"

**THE END.**



## ***Uncle Sam, Printer***

**U**NCLE SAM conducts the largest printing office in the world, and most of his publications are free; but he pays an immense price for supplies to run it. This year he advertises for twenty-four and a half million pounds of paper for printing, over seven million pounds of cardboard and wrapping paper, eleven million pounds of postcard stock, and almost thirty-six million envelopes. This does not include printing done by contract, where supplies are furnished by contractor.

*George Parke.*

# Mountain Killers

*Lying in wait for his brother's murderer, Olaf Swensen planned to execute mountain justice—but fate crouched in the background*

**By THOMAS BARCLAY THOMSON**

THE rifle barrel peered malignantly, implacably, over the edge of the huge rock. Behind it, his eyes fixed upon the sun-drenched mountain trail below, lay Olaf Swensen.

A full two hours had passed since Olaf first took up his vigil; yet no sign of impatience did he show. For six months, now, he had awaited this chance to kill Sim Satterlee. What did a few minutes, one way or another, matter to him?

Back of Olaf, above him, in the fork of the giant pine, the thing crouched, jaws slavered, tail twitching. Hunger urged it to leap, but man was not to be thus lightly attacked. The cougar, old, slow on the game trails, had learned the slower speed of man and his puny strength, but animal instinct demanded caution. This man below was armed, himself a killer who lay in ambush.

From far down the cañon, came the ring of iron on stone, followed by heavy oaths, as the driver urged his string of pack-mules up the steep trail.

Yesterday Sim Satterlee, Shifty Sim, had been tried and acquitted of the murder of Lars Swensen, Olaf's brother. Olaf knew that nothing would prevent Sim's hurried flight to the sanctity of his mountain retreat in the fastnesses of Dead Man's Gulch. So, overlooking the trail over which Sim must pass on his way to his mountain aerie, Olaf grimly awaited his coming.

Man and gun were welded in one weapon, grim, purposeful, vengeful. The lion, too, ceased all motion; the twitching tail was stilled.

With effortless stride, the lanky, black-visaged mountaineer slouched along below, trailing the plodding, scuffing feet of the mules. His shifty, darting eyes, afurtive with the uneasiness of guilt, searched vainly for a possible ambush.

Stoical, diabolically cool, Olaf continued to wait until Sim slunk along directly beneath him. He had no chance, now, to dodge back to a sheltering bush, or dart ahead to a friendly turn in the trail.

Shifty Sim's keen, penetrating eyes located that grim, gaping gun-barrel at the very moment Olaf halted him. Sim stood in a tableau not unknown to him; but the rôles were reversed, and fear shook him like a palsy; his vicious black soul turned sick within him.

No doubts had he of the identity of his Nemesis. Many times, lying on his prison cot, awaiting trial, he had regretted his failure to remove Lars Swensen's brother when opportunity offered. His plea of self-defense, so carefully planned, could easily have covered the two cases. The witnesses, in deathly fear of his vengeful methods, would as readily have sworn to a double lie. But perhaps there was still a chance.

Slowly Sim's hand crept toward the bib of his greasy overalls, his piercing glance seeking the outline of his hidden enemy.

"Yust leave your gun be!" Olaf called. The rifle barrel concentrated on a point slightly to the left of, and above Sim's breastbone. Its unwinking stare caused his flesh to crawl at that spot; his heart did queer things. His hand

dropped limply to his side. Clammy sweat exuded from every pore of him, but his eyes still searched the covert above.

"Say your prayers, murderer, for now you die!"

THERE came a long, tense silence. Sim stood without motion, helpless, doomed. In that moment he distinguished the form of Olaf, prone upon the rock, behind the unwavering rifle. And, hopelessly, he cursed an oath-laden prayer, a blasphemous petition for a chance to die fighting. Once more, his hand crept toward the resting place of his well-oiled old .45; slowly, so slowly.

Taunts from the hidden Olaf; more taunts. Revenge is admittedly sweet, and long had Olaf awaited this moment. Again he ordered the creeping hand down.

Shifty Sim was on the brink of collapse. Like so many of his kind—those who kill on slight provocation, and with insatiable bloodthirstiness—he was weak and cowardly at heart.

He sensed a stir overhead; slight, almost imperceptible. The nervous, twitching tail of the crouching Death in the great pine caught the fear-glazed eyes of Sim Satterlee. He traced the lion's tense outline. Would it leap in time, drop upon the prostrate Olaf, thereby liberating Sim and sending his enemy to a tragic death? Or would Olaf, unhindered, press the trigger and snuff out his life?

And then Olaf, the stoical, who thrice had taken upon himself the execution of his mortal foe, broke under the strain. He sprang to his feet, arms upraised; fists clenched, eyes gazing skyward. The loosened rifle clattered unnoticed down the stony slope. Bitterly he cried out:

"Ay can't do it! Ay can't do it! Lars, you hear me? Ay tried, but Ay can't!"

Nerves, drawn taut as steel wires,

snapped into dynamic action. The huge cougar, with a snarling cry, catapulted itself straight toward the spot so lately occupied by the recumbent Olaf, a huge, rapier-armed paw swishing viciously down in vain effort to crush him. A frenzied shriek of warning, defiance, and relief came from Sim, as his hand leaped to his breast and out again, bearing the death-dealing forty-five. The bullet from its muzzle met the lion in mid-air.

Olaf reeled away from this unexpected menace. The wounded lion landed on the edge of the rock directly above Sim Satterlee. His next leap was instantaneous and purposeful. Again Sim's gun crashed its message of death, but in vain. The great cat struck squarely, and the two killers, man and brute, went down in a sickening scramble. The beast's claws raked convulsively and were still. Sim's bullets had done their work too late.

Crushed beneath the body of the dying beast lay Shifty Sim, clawed and mauled almost beyond recognition, his lifeblood spurting from his mangled body.

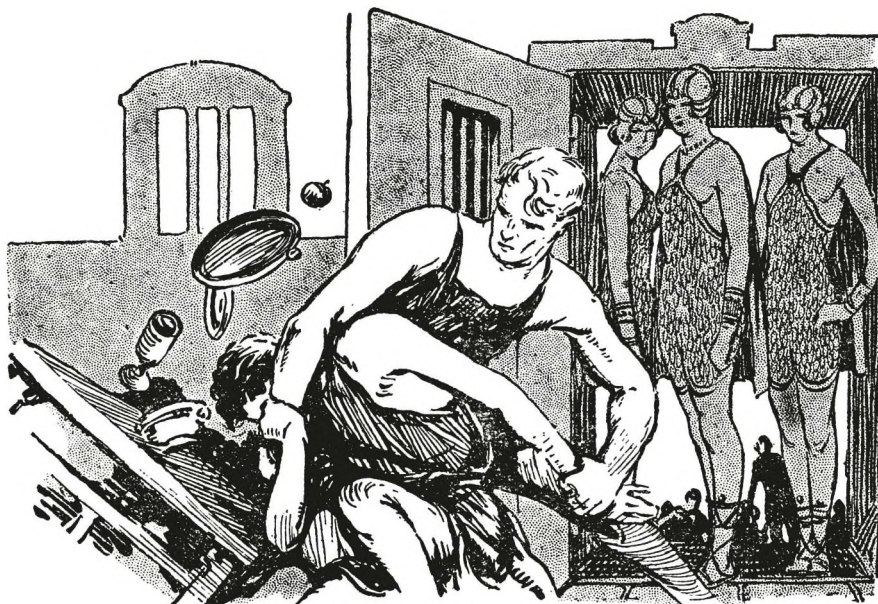
Overcome with shock and horror, Olaf, on hands and knees, crawled down to his stricken foes, idiotically gibbering a mixture of Swedish and English, attempting to express his gratitude to Sim, his late enemy.

Sim raised himself on an elbow, made a convulsive attempt to reach the revolver lying beside him—and sank back, eyes glazing.

"Hell!" he mumbled thickly. "Missed ya with—my—last shot."

Stark incredulity—then the horror of belief—dawned in the eye of Swede Olaf, as the import of the words struck home. Shifty Sim saw. A sardonic, triumphant gleam fitfully lit the hardened countenance, and as he had lived, so Sim died—unregenerate, spurning all gratitude, profanely denying that even for one brief moment he had been a man.

THE END.



*The cell door opened and several Gian women stood there*

# The Sea Girl

*Down beneath the Pacific's floor, in a strange dark world, Jeff Grant and Arturo Plantet struggle against the mysterious power of mankind's enemies*

**By RAY CUMMINGS**

*Author of "A Brand New World," "Beyond the Stars," etc.*

## LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

**I**N 1990 and 1991, the sinking of ships and the falling away of the ocean level confirm the claim of Dr. Plantet, oceanographer, that there are great subterranean caverns under the ocean bottom. He believes that they are inhabited by a race akin to humanity, a race which furnished the basis of humanity's legends about mermaids and titans. This race, he believes, is draining the oceans as the first step in a war against mankind.

Geoffrey Grant, navigator, who is telling the story, and his chum, Arturo Plantet, the doctor's son, see a "mermaid" in a great metallic ball, deep in the ocean. Arturo later seeks the island in mid-Pacific where she had been

seen, and learns from "Nereid," as he names her, of the plans of the Gians, the undersea race. He returns with the warning. Dr. Plantet has invented the Dolphin, a craft which transforms deep-sea pressure into the motion of water between its double hulls, and has a depth range of two thousand fathoms—twelve thousand feet. In it he, Arturo, Jeff, Nereid, and Polly Plantet discover the strange subterranean movement of the Gians' weapons of war against Hawaii. Then he and Nereid return to her home under the Micronesia depths.

There is peace for a time; then the oceans start sinking rapidly. Jeff gets a telepathic message from Arturo, and

**This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for March 2.**

flies to Nereid's island. There he finds Nereid, Arturo, and Tad Megan, a friend of his who had been lost with one of the first sunken ships. In Nereid's craft they descend, through an abyss in the ocean's floor, to the locks that lead to the weird, dark cavernous world of Nereid, under the sea.

Here is a civilization as advanced as mankind's, in a topsy-turvy world under the sea. There are settlements on the floor and on the ceiling of this great region inside the earth. They fly in an "aërocar" to the City of the Mound, which is on the upper surface, thousands of feet above the floor. As they near the palace roof they see that the revolt, which has long been brewing against the "Empress," as Arturo calls her, has prematurely burst. She is engineering the attack on the earth, which will result in the drowning of Nereid's people here. The populace, a race of fair, tawny-haired folk, like Nereid and the pilot of her car, Entt, are storming the palace, where the gray giantess and her Amazons scornfully blind the crowd with a great light flare.

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE SATANIC EMPRESS.

**"T**AD! Raise us up! Are you going to land on the fortress? Get us away from here!"

We skimmed over the fortress. The gray figures gazed up at us. We swung down the slope of the mound, close over the city streets and roofs. The houses seemed, most of them, from six to ten feet high. I saw, on the level area just beyond the foot of the mound slope, the house upon which Arturo and Tad intended to land—a broad, flat roof. There was a dim light on it; in the glow, a figure of a man stood waiting to receive us.

We settled down and came to rest. The roof was oval, fully fifty feet across. It had small flowering shrubs, paths, and a sort of lawn on which we

landed—a moldy brown turf. Off at one end, bathed in the dim light, was a pergola with seats and banks of blossoms. The man stood off there. He came hastening forward as we settled.

"Fen!" Arturo called to him. "Here we are, Fen! We got him. Did you know they tried to attack the Castle? It was discovered. She saw them—in the white glare."

It was Nereid's father. He came and held Nereid in a close embrace, then shook hands with the rest of us. He was an old man, sixty, or eighty, I could not have said which. White of skin, with tawny hair long to his shoulders—a wavy mass of hair, grown dull and dead looking with his age. But he was a sturdy vigorous old fellow, no taller than Entt, slight of build, erect and straight for all his years. And dignified; his loose, dark robe fell to his knees; a girdle bound his slim waist; on his chest was an ornament in beaten white metal of strange device. I recognized it—the device Arturo, and later myself, had used on our flash lights as a signal.

He stood me off and regarded me. "So this—you call 'Jeff'?" He gestured to me apologetically. "I cannot talk the language of yours—the young learn—I am old." His gaze swept me from head to foot. "Strange dress—he is so big, Arturo, as you said it."

"But it's too late for that," Arturo rejoined swiftly. He added to me: "They worship size, these Gian women. I had planned, Jeff, to send you to the Empress Rhana—you are so tall and strong—taller than any man here. She would have liked you."

So that was it. I began vaguely to understand. But only vaguely; it was still all so strange.

They were all talking at once. Partly in my own language; partly in this other, which was wholly unintelligible. Fen, like them all, was plainly agitated. I grasped a few details, mostly from Tad's swift explanations. There were



two races—one small, white-skinned; the other larger—the gray women and their men, who were the ruling class. They were called the Gians. Tad explained: "They have a word *dgie*—it means large. Nereid's people are the *Mdj*. You can't pronounce it, but it suggests Midge—we call them that."

The Midge were the workers—oppressed, downtrodden. They had been for months upon the verge of a revolt. Fen was helping its secret organization; weapons secretly were being manufactured in the underground fire caverns where the Midge worked. But the news of the oncoming water had suddenly stirred the Midge public here to panic; this abortive mob attack on the fortress was the result. The whole City of the Mound was in a turmoil. It could do nothing but harm to the Midge cause.

Such fragments I gleaned. Fen knew that the Gians had opened the great gates to drain our upper oceans. He knew of the demonstration against the Castle, but was powerless to stop it. He had stayed at home to await our coming. His eyes were not affected; he had been indoors, and had escaped the light.

But Entt and Nereid, even now, were almost blinded. They sat together for the few moments while this swift talk proceeded. Our roof was so low that in a bound I could have leaped its parapet and vaulted to the ground. The city lay upward on the slope of the mound near at hand; in the gloom its dull winking lights were visible. The cries of the mob still sounded loudly.

**I**T was decided that we should make our way on foot to the summit and see what was transpiring. Fen was afraid that the thoughtless leaders of the mob might make threats which would warn the Gians and divulge that an intelligent, armed revolution was being organized. He wanted to stop that if he could, and pacify the mob; quell this disturbance.

They took me down into the house. Its oval stone rooms were furnished in strange but obviously luxurious fashion; each had a tiny hooded light. The ceilings were so low that I had to stoop a trifle. They gave me a black suit, like those of Arturo and Tad. Abroad in the city I would thus attract less attention. For my feet there were flexible hide sandals, with thongs to bind them on.

We gathered in a room with an outer doorway. It had all been done swiftly; not more than ten minutes had passed since we landed on the roof.

We were ready to start. There was a sound of swift padding feet in the near-by corridor, and a man burst into the room. He seemed a family servant. He came running in, babbling with fear; and clung to Fen.

I could understand nothing that was said as they gathered for a moment around him. He seemed wholly terrorized. He was a Gian—there was no mistaking the gray look to his skin; his black hair was shaved close on a bullet head—but he was small, certainly not over five feet in height. Dressed like the rest of us in the brief black garment, his figure had a flabby, pudgy look. A fellow, I thought, outcast by his race and come now to be a servant in Fen's household.

A broad, brown girdle bound his waist; it suggested an apon. Under his arm he had a conical hat, with a bushy animal tail like a plume on it. He clapped it on his head; it was grotesquely ornamental to the rest of him. His whining voice seemed pleading with Fen.

Tad came over to where I was standing apart. "Their servant, Bhool. He's afraid to be left here—he says the Midge will break in and murder him."

I could not blame him for that. But he seemed a sniveling, craven fellow. Tad was contemptuous. "He's always been like that—afraid of everything. And a listener in doorways—curious to



know everything everybody's doing and then go into a panic over it. By the code, I'd have had him thrown out of here long ago!"

We took Bhool with us. Nereid, able to see a little now, fumbled for a dark cloak of her own. She flung it over Bhool, so that in the street he might pass unnoticed as a Gian. He was still sniveling. But he eyed me curiously, amazed evidently at my size. In my own world I could never have been termed excessively tall, though in the six-foot class—to be exact, I stood just at six feet two inches. At this time I weighed about a hundred and ninety. With my breadth of shoulder, I was still lean at this weight. The sniveling fellow Bhool gazed up at me awed, and edged away, fearful of me.

We started. The streets at the foot of the Mound were deserted; narrow, rocky streets, hemmed in by the stone walls of the low houses. It was dim; there were apparently no public lights, only the occasional glow from a house window, doorway or rooftop. We walked swiftly, Fen leading with his vigorous stride.

The air in the streets was hot, moist and oppressive. I felt that queer, different thrust of gravity upon me, but I was getting used to it now. I walked like the others, with a solid, plowing tread.

We turned a corner and were soon upon the upward slope. I had expected to find it different, walking uphill in this oppressive air. It was not; I noticed, indeed, very little difference from walking on the level ground.

**T**AD was beside me. "Listen to it, Jeff. Raising the devil up there—"

We were still some half mile from the Castle. Cries sounded, occasional screams ringing clear; and the low, blended murmur of the mob.

But the street here was empty and soundless. In our sandals we padded over its stones. There were street

corners, yawning, empty and dark. Black shadows where low archways opened like tunnel mouths into the house. A woman with a baby in her arms came to a window and gazed at us. Her white face, caught by an inner light was close to me as we passed. Her eyes were stark black with fear.

At a corner a group of men went running past and swung up the hill. They were small, white-skinned folk, and they shouted at Fen. We followed.

As we advanced, the murmur of the mob up ahead sounded clearer. The streets soon were filled. We passed a man, blind and seemingly in a frenzy of fear. He staggered through the crowd. Some one caught him, fought him, led him away.

There were white forms lying in the street. The mob had evidently surged down this far in its first blind panic and many were crushed. We passed the slim white figure of a man whom some one had carried to his own doorstep and dropped. A wailing woman knelt over him; a little girl, curious, half frightened, stood beside the woman, plucking at her robe.

The servant, Bhool, kept close beside me now. His touch strangely angered me; once, I thrust him away.

We forced ourselves into the crowd. No one seemed to notice us. When we came to the palisade, Fen saw an opening in the jam.

"All of us keep together." He forced his way forward. We found a place to climb. It was a metallic fence some six feet high. Upon impulse I put my hands on its top and tried to vault. I sailed over it with astonishing ease, and landed lightly on the other side.

The garden was crowded with people, but there was more room here than in the upper street. Small, upright shrubs stood about, some vaguely white with blossoms. In the gloom it was hard to tell them from the human forms.

We followed a gray stone path. The Castle loomed ahead, with walls some thirty feet high. They stretched out seemingly for several hundred feet—a squat, but widely spreading structure; its walls were turreted at the angles; the windows all seemed guarded with interlaced metal bars. A frowning prison of a building. A black vegetation clung to the walls. There were small doorways along the ground at intervals—black, barred openings with tiny lights in canopies over them.

We tried to keep together. Arturo stayed always close by Nereid, fending her off from the milling crowd. It was a threatening mob, here in the garden. Aimless, apparently without a leader. It milled and struggled, men and women brandishing implements of the field, or huge sticks, and shouting aimless threats. There were many, recovered of the blindness, who fought to press forward. There were others, still blind and in terror, who strove to run away, or sat upon the ground in huddled fright. And still others, lying inert, wholly unnoticed by their fellows.

I whispered to Tad: "Where are we going?"

"Up closer. I don't know."

Bhool whiningly suggested: "This way, masters—"

We faced a broad front entrance to the Castle. A low flight of stone steps led ten feet up to it. Gray figures of women stood in the shadows up there, like guards. There seemed no more than four or five of them. They stood in the entrance way; vaguely to be seen in its shadows—stood silent and motionless. There was about them, these motionless figures, something queerly sinister, as though they held a power that made them impregnable to all this threatening crowd. The Castle itself had that sinister aspect. Its grim silence; its inactivity. It stood, here in the gloom, silently confident. I felt, too, as I gazed at it, an inward sense of fear. A revulsion. As though with-

in these darkly brooding walls fearsome things must have transpired.

THE more courageous of the mob had surged toward the entrance steps which now we were facing. They stood in a ring near the bottom of the steps. But there seemed a deadline beyond which none dared pass; the ground twenty feet out from the front of the steps was all clear. The mob stood calling imprecations and brandishing weapons, but not advancing. Waiting for a leader, perhaps. Occasionally some one would rush forward, or be thrust forward by those behind. But after a step or two, the would-be leader always retreated. And up in the entrance way the gray Gian women never moved.

Fen—with Bhool urging him sideways—led us toward the steps; the crowd was so dense we were soon struggling to advance. I was literally wading through these little people; their bodies felt frail and slight as I roughly thrust them aside. I called: "Arturo, let me over there." I joined him, to guard Nereid in the jam.

Around us a man's cry arose—a cry of triumph. Others took it up. There was a surge of people toward me; behind me I saw them following like a wave. Calling at me in friendly triumph. My height, head and shoulders above them all; my white skin, clear to them in the darkness—they suddenly saw in me their needed leader. They surged triumphantly around me.

But Fen, with vehement words, scattered them. We forced our way to the open space, beyond which was the Castle entrance. We were at one side, not far from the side edge of the steps. I felt hands clinging to me. That accursed, sniveling Bhool; I cast him off.

I had been aware all this time, of a radiance on the castle rooftop. Women's figures were up there in a dull purple glow. We stopped and gathered around Fen. I gazed upward. The gray figure of a man stood promi-

nent on the parapet. He was standing like a grim silent statue. He suddenly whirled, leaped down, and in a moment reappeared. A woman was with him. A group of men came running on the roof with a small bank of steps. The man helped the woman mount them. She came up with a slow regal majesty, the men deferentially helping her. She stood on the broad parapet top, and the man crouched at her feet.

"Rhana!"

A wave of it went over the crowd, followed by a sudden hushed murmur of awe. Then the hush broke; there was a screaming of threats; a violent surging on the mob. But I noticed that no one advanced; and the cries presently died away again into a fear-struck silence.

The woman on the parapet waited serene and motionless. She was no more than fifty feet from me; the purple sheen of light etched her vividly. A woman six feet tall; full-breasted, slim of hip. A flexible heart-shaped shield bound her torso; her gray limbs were free. The shield gleamed purple in the light like smooth polished metal, thin-beaten to mold itself like a sheath about her body.

She stood with figure drawn to its full height. Her head, poised upon a slim neck, was crowned with black hair wound in coils, with a black metallic head-dress. Against the night, her profile showed; slim neck and upheld chin—a nose high-bridged, hawk-like.

She raised her arms as the mob in the garden fell silent. Broad bracelets of metal were on her wrists, and from them heavy gleaming white chains dangled. Abruptly she struck with her arm; the white chain swished and lashed upon the naked gray back of the man crouching at her feet. He cringed, slid off the parapet and vanished to the roof-top. She stood smiling.

This woman, Satanic—

It was a gesture wholly cruel, unnecessary. A blow deliberate, without

anger, without reason save that it pandered to the feminine vanity of her, thus to demonstrate her power. I gazed at that hawklike profile. Almost beautiful; the slim gray throat rising from that full bosom; the firm, but delicate chin; the mouth, firm-lipped, cruelly smiling now.

This woman, Satanic. Ah, there were refinements of cruelty that none but a woman—and a woman like this—could devise! The thought flashed to me, and it was not long before I had cause to remember it!

She slowly raised her arms, with the silver chains dangling. And in a moment, when the silence was complete, she began to speak. Her voice was low-pitched at first—a calm, confident voice. But there was a harsh rasp to it.

The crowd listened to that carrying voice, with the driving sense of power behind it. To every corner of the garden and to the streets beyond it rolled clear. A moment, then she was speaking faster. Fluently; the words tumbling, rising to a climax. She stopped abruptly. She was raised on tiptoe, every line of her tense. Her arms were up, palms toward the faces gazing up at her—a gesture half benign, half menacing. In her pause a faint quavering cheer arose; but under it there was the murmur of threats. She began again, quietly talking above the noise.

Entt, with his blurred sight, had stayed close by Fen. But he seemed fully recovered now. Nereid stood with her father's arm protectingly around her. Tad was there; Arturo and I were a few feet farther away. The black edge of the fortress steps was near us; and beyond the black blob of an upstanding shrub the dark wall bulged out in a sort of turret. I whispered to Arturo:

"What does she say? Can you understand her?"

"No, not much of it." He called cautiously, "Oh, Entt!"

Entt moved over. "Entt, what is she saying?"

**H**E told us. She was assuring the Middge people there was no cause to be frightened. "She says, 'I am going up to conquer the world of light. A beautiful region—my Gian army will conquer it. I will rule everything—prepare it up there for you to come and live so happily.'"

Arturo burst out: "But, my God, Entt—the abyss here will be flooded. You know that. If the gates break—they will break, she expects them to—we'll all have to get out of here soon, a million or two of the Middge people. How can they get out?"

"Wait! She says now she will prepare a way of escape—soon, but just at this present time all is water up there. When the—what you call ocean—is partly down, she knows where the Middge can go and wait in safety."

"She lies!" Arturo exclaimed. "She does not care where the people go, or how they escape!"

"Wait! I listen more—" Entt moved back to join the others.

Again I felt a soft, insistent plucking at me; Bhool cringed at my feet. "Master, look there!"

In the gloom I could see his shaking gray arm; his hand pointing toward the shrub and the bulge of the castle wall.

"What?" I demanded. "Arturo, what does he say?"

Bhool was insistent: terrorized, but insistent. "Masters, look there!"

We saw nothing. Bhool stood up; he was trembling. He took a step toward the shrub. "What is it, masters?"

Arturo strode to the shrub. He poked about it. We three were alone in this small shadowed area.

"Nothing," whispered Arturo contemptuously. "Bhool, you're an accursed whining—"

"Masters, not there." We were standing at the shrub. "Over there, at the wall—a Middge man lying. He is not dead. I saw him move."

We took another step or two. The ground sharply descended; six feet away there seemed a black opening—in the wall—and a faint movement there. It seemed, not as though some one were lying there, but more like light. I recall that I was tensed to leap backward with the premonition of danger. Arturo's hand gripped me.

"What is it, Jeff? Can you see anything?"

We stood tense in the darkness at the brink of the small declivity. Bhool was behind us. He suddenly pushed us violently with a heave of his body. We sprawled forward. I fell to my hands and knees; Arturo was thrown partly upon me. A light was gripping us. It stung; my flesh smarted in its grip—a tangible force of something holding me. I fought with it. Arturo was fighting.

"Jeff—" His voice died in a gurgle. We were being lifted, were sliding into a yawning doorway.

I could not shout; my throat was taut, and closing. With Arturo struggling, half gripping me, we were drawn, sucked inward.

"Jeff—"

The darkness closed; the light was phosphorescent, holding us. With fading senses I slid into a blank, black silence.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE UNDERGROUND CELL.

**I** RECOVERED consciousness to find myself lying on a soft bed. I seemed comfortable, luxurious, with a feeling of well-being and pleasure. I opened my eyes; shuddering memory leaped to me. I sat up.

I was on a low couch of soft, furry skins. In a dim, vaulted stone room. On the bed beside me sat Arturo.

"Well, Jeff!" He smiled at me; relief in his smile. He seemed uninjured, sitting there waiting anxiously for me to recover consciousness.

"You're not hurt, Jeff? Lean back—take it quietly."

My head was suddenly whirling; I leaned against the stone wall behind me.

"They said you'd be all right, Jeff."

My skin was smarting as though it had been burned; but in a moment my head steadied. Strength came to me. I sat up vigorously beside Arturo.

"What was it? Where are we?"

"In the Castle. They got us. That accursed Bhool—"

Memory of Bhool came to me. He had betrayed us. A spy, that Gian. I recalled now, how he had eyed me. How in the garden he had kept edging me away. All under cover of that sniveling cowardice. An actor, that fellow!

Arturo laughed wryly. "I guess so, but I imagine he's a coward just the same. It's a wonder Fen never suspected him. They want you, Jeff, evidently. She—"

"That woman Rhana?"

"Yes. She heard of your arrival. Bhool must have been told to get you."

I tried to stand on my feet, but I was still shaky.

"How long have we been here?"

"I don't know. I've been sitting here watching you, six or eight hours."

"Did you faint, or whatever it was happened to us?"

"Yes. For how long, I don't know. I found myself lying here with you. Then a woman came in, gave me something to drink. She said you'd be all right—that the stronger person always suffered most from the light. I imagine she'll be back—"

I got on my feet. "We'll have to get out of here."

He acquiesced in that. But quite evidently he had already examined our cell—it was no less than that; and he seemed not very hopeful. We were in a stone room some twenty feet square. The rough stone walls had a gleaming black metallic look to them; the floor was smooth burnished metal. The low, flat ceiling barely cleared my head by an inch; it was gray, smooth as pol-

ished steel. There was the couch; a metal table, shaped like a huge cup; and a metal chair.

Arturo followed me about the room. "Not much chance, Jeff. I've been trying to plan something, but I haven't yet decided."

There were two small orifices in the ceiling. From one came the faint purple glow of light; its tiny shade was pushed aside; it spread downward like an electrolier and cast a six-foot circle on the floor. The other hole seemed to be admitting a current of fresh air. The room was queerly dank; beads of moisture were sweating on the ceiling.

There was a small door, convex like the round door to a bank vault. It had a pane the size of my face; I stood and peered through it—a substance as transparent as glassite, brittle evidently, and solid as ancient glass. It seemed fully two feet thick, like a bull's-eye. Beyond it there was the dim vision of a vaulted metal corridor.

The opposite wall, up against the ceiling, held a similar small pane ilke a window. It was level with my eyes; I could see a barred grating beyond the bull's-eye; and outside that, not the garden as I had hoped, but seemingly another corridor.

"No good, Jeff. There's no chance," Arturo said.

**I** FANCIED we might wrench a piece of metal from this bed, or table. The walls were of stone; they crumbled a trifle as I scratched at them with my nails. They might not be very thick—if we could dig our way out—

"And find ourselves—where?" Arturo objected. "That isn't an outer wall. I tell you there's no use trying. Give me time; I'm planning something."

"I know it isn't an outer wall. This woman who brought you the drink—did she come alone?"

"Yes. But there were voices just outside the door."

"If we could leap on her—make a run for it—"

"With others in the corridor?"

"There might not be, next time she comes. Is she armed?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

Nor did he know the inner lay-out of the castle, or whether we were at its top, or bottom. He thought there were two floors.

"I've never been in here before. Tad has, before I came—before we got this revolution under way. She knows about that, Jeff; it's open hostility now. God, we're prisoners here—she'll be coming down to see us. What she'll do to us eventually! That woman, Jeff—" He shuddered. "You don't know—"

"You're not very coherent, Arturo. But you're right enough; it seems to me I know almost nothing about all this."

He was sitting on the bed, chin in hand, staring. I sat down beside him.

"See here, Arturo—haven't you taken a little too much on yourself?"

He seemed suddenly breaking. This pale, slender boy of nineteen was trembling. He stared at me. "What do you mean?"

"You overrode your father. Easy, lad, I want to talk plainly to you. You told your father nothing. Nor Polly—nor me. You've got me down here into this—"

"I wouldn't voluntarily endanger you, Jeff. I didn't mean—"

"Don't be a fool!"

"I've been trying to do my best."

"Of course you have. But I'm trying to show you. You take too much on yourself."

He stared at his feet. "I've only been doing my best."

"I know. But I'm trying now, Arturo, to show you—I'm older than you are—maybe I've got more sense and more judgment than you have—"

He looked up and smiled. "Of course you have. I haven't been reticent, or I don't want to be—"

"You haven't made much effort to take any one into your confidence, Arturo."

"You're wrong, Jeff. Old Fen, and Tad—they wouldn't say I've tried to run them, or force my ideas—"

"I'm talking about myself. And your father and Polly, up there in the Dolphin when this thing began. We may be in a desperate position now, Arturo."

"We are. This horrible woman—"

"I know you're trying to help our world up there, Nereid, and these Middge people as you call them—you're not afraid for yourself. But, Arturo, we may never get out of here alive. The help we could have given—don't you see? You may be wrong. I want to start now, if it isn't too late. I want a chance to use my own judgment, not yours, Arturo. Nor Nereid's, nor Fen's—nobody's but my own, understand?"

The rasp of the cell door opening brought us to our feet. It swung slowly outward.

In the corridor stood the woman Rhana.

SHE stooped and came quietly in. At the doorway, which remained open, a gray woman stood guard. Rhana advanced to the center of the cell. The light from above slanted down on her, and her metal headdress gleamed—a white banded thing of carved metal. Tiny chains with flashing jewels hung from it; at her forehead, a metal image, hideous as a gargoye, raised its beak—a grotesque bird screaming defiance, a red gem for its single eye. The thing was so hideous, it gave her face beneath it a greater beauty.

She had come in with a barefoot tread; her body, incased in the gray heart-shaped sheath, was catlike. A giant feline.

Barbaric creature! But there was a strange aspect of civilized modernity about her also. Her gray limbs were



bare; the chains hung from her arms. Barbaric. The headdress; the heavy metal anklets, with pendent gems tinkling on them as she moved. But mingled with the barbarism was that look of modernity; a narrow black band like soft velvet encircled her throat; across the back of her shoulders, a black cloak hung in folds to her waist; a black ribbon around her neck held what seemed a pair of eyeglasses, with darkened lenses.

She stood for a moment calmly surveying us as we moved instinctively away. Her long gray fingers, with a bank of jewels covering the back of her hand, toyed idly with the hanging eyeglasses.

She spoke. "So you are the big man from the world of light?" Her gaze ignored Arturo; it was fastened on me. Calm, dark-eyed gaze. I felt the power of her then. There is an aura surrounding greatness. It cannot be mistaken. This woman had it, the aura of genius. An aura of evil, a fascination—evil but compelling. She gestured calmly. "Come over here. Stand up—here, near me."

I obeyed. I was alert, tense. I stood before her, taller than she by an inch or two.

"So? They are right—you stand higher." Her voice, with the most perfect use of my language I had heard from any of these people, had a purring, musing quality. She frowned a little.

"So? They told me true—you stand higher."

"What do you want of me?" It was an effort to hold my voice quietly level, but I managed it.

"He speaks, this man, when not directly questioned—"

This darkling gaze. Not like Nereid's, these eyes. Black pools, with a black fire down in them. Her lips curled with a faint irony.

"You are not then afraid of me?"

"No."

"So?"

"Should I be?"

"He questions—he dares!"

Her jeweled hands came up. For an instant I thought she would strike me. But her hands dropped to my shoulders and rested lightly. One of the chains clanked against me.

"He questions—he stares at me—he is not afraid, this man. What is your name?"

She snapped it out with a rasp, so sudden a change it startled me. I jerked away from her involuntarily; but with a leap, feline, incredibly swift, she caught at my shoulders again and twisted me around. I stood docile.

"HE is strong, solid." Her appraising fingers bit into my shoulders. She added, calmly, this time:

"What is it, the name they call you?"

"Geoffry Grant."

She repeated it, memorizing it. "Why is it you come here to my world?"

I said carefully, "My friends are here. We are going back—up there—"

It seemed to amuse her. "So? You have your plans? That is wrong—men should have no plans. Men and children with plans are annoying."

A sound from the doorway made her drop my shoulders and swing around. Bhool came slinking in. He cringed.

She rasped, "What do you want?"

He answered her in his own language, but she checked him imperiously. "We do not talk that here."

"He is tall as I said, great Rhana?"

He whined ingratiatingly. He cast a sidelong glance of triumph at me.

Arturo had been standing back against the wall. He took a sudden step. "You cowardly little hangar-rat!"

I whirled. "Hush, Arturo!"

Bhool, fortified by Rhana's presence, retorted, "Not so cowardly—I did capture you."

Arturo avoided me; he took another step at Bhool, who retreated. I shoved Arturo away.

Rhana exclaimed, "You quarrel? Stop it—" She swished a chain, idly as though at disobedient quarreling dogs. It caught around Bhool's legs; he groveled.

She said frowningly, "You annoy me, Bhool, to want praise. I gave you reward. You forget you have duties not done yet." He slunk through the doorway at her gesture. She added abruptly, "You are interesting, Geoffry Grant—I will come again—" "I'm hungry," I said.

She smiled. "You shall be fed. I would have no man hungry unless he has done wrong."

I added impulsively, "I want to get out of here!" I watched to see how she would take it.

She smiled further. "We all want many things. You are interesting. I will not come again—I will send for you." Her gaze barely touched Arturo. She added to me, "He will die here pleasantly enough. We will leave him when we go."

She turned, and stooped for the doorway. The heavy door closed after her.

"**B**UT see here, Arturo, what was it you planned for me, when you sent for me, brought me down here?"

"That's of no use now, I tell you."

We were sitting on the couch of our cell after Rhana had left us.

"Isn't that for me to judge, Arturo?"

He was suddenly meek. My words had had effect. "You're right, Jeff. What is it you wanted to know?"

"A good many things. What was I supposed to do with this Rhana?"

"I thought," he said, "we could send you to her. Pretend you might help her with the coming war. And you might capture her, perhaps, or kill her.

Without a leader these women would go to pieces. The Gian men are worse—you see?"

"Not exactly," I said.

"Well, she would like you. Easy for you to get into her confidence. She does like you, Jeff; that's obvious. There's nobody would dare speak to her the way you did. It just made her smile—you could handle her."

I had my doubts on that. "She said, take me with her—"

"Her army must be about ready, Jeff. And leave me here to die. Well—"

"But we're going to get out of here," I assured him.

We had decided that all we could do now was wait quietly for the woman to come with food, and be on the alert then to see if we might escape.

We sat for a time, there on the couch. Arturo talked freely. He knew a great deal of the situation, here, and the geography of this strange dark realm. He talked swiftly, at first with no comments.

This main abyss, through which we had flown, was lens-shaped—some forty or fifty miles between the surfaces at its greatest diameter, and in length perhaps three hundred miles. He thought that it lay, not as I had visualized, flat beneath the floor of our Pacific Ocean, but tilted diagonally edge-wise.

We had entered near its upper end, where it reached within a few miles of the ocean bed. We had flown down its length. The City of the Mound, then, must lie two hundred miles or more underground.

There was, at the upper end, no exit except the system of locks down which we had come.

"There's no escape that way, Jeff. The Gians have a few hundred of those sub-sea vehicles. A few are large ones—as large as the locks will take. The locks were built, a generation ago, for this purpose. The Gians have been planning this thing for that long.

Rhana is about ready now. Her army—and all the Gians—will escape upward that way.”

“How many of them are there?”

“Not many. I suppose forty or fifty thousand. They’re all here in the City of the Mound, and in two other cities across on the other surface. They’ll be starting soon. But what about the Middge? A million of them, I imagine. They can’t get through the locks. No vehicles to spare—no room, no time.”

From this main lens-shaped abyss, caverns, tunnels and passageways everywhere opened off, especially at this lower end. It was a vast honeycomb. Tunnels led to caverns and pits glowing with molten fire. There were vast passages, black and unexplored; no one could guess where they led, in this vast honeycomb, the sub-surface shell of our earth—the porous, thick skin of an orange.

There was, near the City of the Mound, a passage a mile or two in width.

It plunged steeply downward. Erroneous term! Who could say, downward, or upward? It led, within a few hours on foot, to another great abyss. A black oily sea lay on one of its surfaces. The black space facing it—floor or ceiling as you will—had never been explored.

This watery abyss they called the realm of the monsters. No human lived there. Fearsome monsters of the deep, and flying things, and things that crawled, were there. Sometimes they would wander through the tunnel passage out into the abyss here where humans had their cities. The passage now was always guarded with flood lights. The monsters feared the light; its faintest glow blinded them; it turned them back. For generations now none of them had come through.

I said, “These people seem very advanced with their science, Arturo. Engineering achievements—why didn’t they wall up this connecting passage

completely? You say it’s only a mile or two wide.”

“THEY doubtless would have,” he said. “But access to the monsters’ realm is necessary. Centuries ago—how long ago no one now can say—a downward pressure of water menaced all this realm. Water from up above—from our Pacific doubtless—must have started breaking through. The rift was on the other side—that black sea of the monsters’ realm. This civilization is far older than ours, Jeff. I’m talking now of some remote past time when we might have been struggling in the Stone Age. Or before that. A rift came, and water menaced all this honeycombed region. The ancient people living here then must have been far advanced in science. And human life was very plentiful and held cheaply.

“There is a system of dams and locks and watergates out there now, Jeff. I’ve never seen them, but I’ve heard them described. Like the dykes and canal gates, and dams of Holland, built gradually over centuries. It must have been a constant battle down here with the pressing water. They fought it. Out there now is a gigantic man-made barrier, with flood-gates, which if the pressure got too great, they could cautiously open to relieve it. Inconceivable to construct, but there it is. Like the pyramids, Jeff; patient toiling of millions of workers for generations. And they had science with them. The gates and wall must be hundreds of miles long, at the least. The gates are all controlled by one small mechanism—in a little fortress gate-house at this end of the dam. They are opened wide now—water is rushing through—”

His voice rose. “The Middge can’t close them. The revolution isn’t ready, the weapons aren’t assembled. We have no weapons ready at all. Nobody is armed, or trained for fighting. A mob attack on the gate-house—she’d see it coming, and laugh at it.”

"But Arturo, there in that other cavern, it must be two hundred miles beneath our Pacific."

He quieted. "I think so. There is some abyss in the ocean floor which we never have yet discovered. That is it, undoubtedly. And from it some gigantic, water-filled passage. That passage, leading downward, ending down here—"

I tried to grasp the mathematics of it. But there was so little upon which to base a calculation. Water descending a passage, even hundreds of miles wide—passing down here through gates equally wide—it might take years to drain all our oceans. The gates were open full now. I recalled the newscasters of New York reporting the tides down a fathom in a day. Ten years, and there would still be water in the Nero Deep. I tried to estimate this abyss here across which we had flown. Fifty—a hundred like it might drain our Pacific.

But this abyss was comparatively small; the realm of the monsters was far larger. Both of them, for the Pacific Ocean is not much over two miles in average depth, would drain it. And what other vast subterranean realms might be down here! Passages a thousand miles in length. Other caverns, under the Americas—under the Atlantic.

But it would take years to drain our oceans. A year perhaps, to fill up the two main caverns here. I said it to Arturo.

"Yes, Jeff. But the gates and the walls and the dams out there won't hold. They'll break under the full surge of water and the erosion. The walls of the upper passage, with that torrent flooding down, will break side-wise—"

He burst into a half coherent description. The scientists of the Midge were able to estimate it. This whole region, from here up to the ocean bed, was honeycombed; and the rock strata themselves comparatively loose and

porous. With the gigantic torrent of swiftly descending water, rifts would be made. Small, then greater. The whole region would collapse. And there were molten fire-pits everywhere. The water would reach them.

I SAID, "Last night, Arturo, the gates were opened for a time."

"Yes. But only a trifle, at the distant end. The water escaped into passages across the monsters' realm. They lead, no one knows where."

"Everywhere," I said. "And that water mingled with the fires of the earth—you remember, Arturo."

He sat up abruptly. "Every volcano was active. Storms, earthquakes—"

"Yes," I agreed. We had been thinking, Arturo particularly, only of this subterranean world. But what about the surface? Our own world up there? Our great nations, our millions of people? My mind went to little Polly.

My imagination widened. This rolling globe in space which we call earth, its teeming millions, its civilization, the gigantic unknown forces of nature, were being tampered with, so that one set of humans might bring harm to another. A titanic whirlpool of events, rushing to overwhelm us.

And in the midst of it all, Arturo and I sat here in this fortress cell. Two tiny grains of sand on a vast beach with the ocean pounding. What could we do about it? Of what use to try? A million minds were groping with it; our great nations, with all their far-flung resources; the Midge scientists down here.

But the human mind individualizes. I saw Polly.

In all the interwoven, complicated affairs of struggling nations, the individual always is supreme. Sometimes, just one individual. The keystone of an arch—you pull it out, and the arch falls. And with the arch, the whole great edifice comes down to destruction.

There was this one woman, Rhana. She had opened these gates, to start these tumbling, cataclysmic events. But might not the gates be flung closed, now while there was yet time? A single small operating mechanism—why, one hand, mine perhaps, might close them. And demolish the mechanism—one hand, mine perhaps, might do it. They would stay closed then. And with it done—that one vital thing like replacing the keystone of a crumbling arch—all these far-flung events would cease.

I leaped to my feet. "Arturo, see here—I've got to get to that gate-house! We must escape from here at once. I think I know how we might do it!"

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### IN THE DARK CORRIDOR.

"ALL ready, Arturo?"  
"Yes."

I shouted at him: "Stop that!"

He picked up one of the small metal chairs and flung it at me. I ducked. The thing was heavy, and crashed against the bed with a violent clang. I ran at him.

He whispered, "Easy. Jeff—you're strong." We wrestled. I flung him to the floor of the cell; the table overturned, clanging with metal against metal like a gong. We lay, listening.

"Think they'll hear us?"

"Yes." I had previously noticed sounds coming down the ventilator from above; occasionally the faint blended murmur of voices as though from a room overhead. "Better keep it up," I whispered. "They may be able to see us."

We rolled, fighting and shouting. In his zeal Arturo turned me over and was sitting on me. We presently heard the sound of our cell door opening; I twisted free, flung him away and leaped to my feet. In the doorway three gray women stood; Arturo lay writhing.

"What—you do—what you doing?" One of the women came in. A woman tall, but shorter than Rhana. She wore a similar shield, and a cloak of brown. She was jeweled.

I was panting, but alert. The chance might come any time. This woman did not seem armed. The two in the doorway stood keenly watching me. They were all garbed the same; they seemed rather more like high-born attendants upon Rhana, than guards.

I said, "He is a fool—I don't want to be here with him." My gaze was contemptuous. The other two women had come into the cell. Out of the tail of my eyes I surveyed them. Seemingly unarmed. I could make a run for it. Arturo was alert. Lying groveling, but tense to spring up at my signal.

Abruptly I relaxed. Men were in the corridor outside. A group of them. I could see weapons in their dangling hands.

"Take me out of here," I demanded. "He sickens me—he is a fool—I will kill him if I stay here."

The woman deliberated. I fancied I saw admiration for me in her eyes. She said:

"You must not fight—bad."

As though we were children! Arturo was up on one elbow.

"I don't like him—I don't like this room. Take me to another—" He gestured overhead. "Up there—this has no air down here—"

If she would do it! I added, "He can come with me—it is the air here—I won't fight—we're both hungry—"

The woman rasped out a sudden command. Two men came into the room. They were about the woman's height; stocky fellows, with bullet heads of close-clipped black hair. Guards, evidently, garbed in gleaming suits of metal cloth, wearing bands about their foreheads with gleaming jewels. In their hands, and hanging against their chests were weapons; a curving, knifelike blade; small girds and projectors.

The woman spoke imperiously to them. She said to me: "We take you—"

Arturo was on his feet, his eyes searching me.

"And him?" I demanded.

"He stay here."

Disappointment flooded Arturo; I flashed him a warning glance.

"But he is hungry," I pleaded.

"I send food."

One of the men pulled at me, but I pushed him off. "I want him to come with me—"

The woman leaped. Her hands went to my shoulders; her dark eyes blazed at me; unreasoning anger in them—she might have done anything—ordered me killed without stopping to think of it. "You talk much. Go!"

With a last look at Arturo, I turned and let them lead me out.

We followed the dim vaulted corridor. The women went ahead with their catlike tread. There were two men beside me; others in front and behind. We passed other vaulted doorways. A turn up a small incline; over a dark interior bridge of metal. It spanned a black void; overhead, the vaulted metal roof was within touch of my hand. Into another larger corridor; this one brighter.

I was alert trying to remember the turns—I would have to get back here some way to Arturo. Or persuade Rhana to bring him up.

THE interior of the building seemed enormous. We turned other corners evidently into another wing; ascended another incline. It was surprisingly long and steep. I realized Arturo's cell must be underground. We came to an upper hallway. I saw a room with barred windows that seemingly opened to the garden. There were lights out there now. We advanced through a room thronged with Gians, men and women. They made way for us; the babble of their voices hushed, and they stared at my tower-

ing figure curiously. We crossed the room. A wide door opened.

I was in the presence of Rhana. She sat at a table. It was littered with flexible sheets—metal, perhaps—like paper, with strange writing upon them. Women sat around her. Men, garbed in vivid clothes of bright colors, were in the room, most of them standing. A man to whom Rhana had been speaking, made an obsequious gesture and hastened from the room. Two other men and a woman came forward to report to her.

There was an air of hurried activity. That outside room with its waiting, excited throng; here, in this inner private apartment, Rhana with her close subordinates, directing the departure. There were broad windows through which I could see the lighted garden; Gians out there, moving about with apparatus; a large aërocar was there, being loaded. Departure for battle. I did not need to be told it was that. It was plainly to be seen.

They stood me before Rhana. I met her gaze, with a level frown of my own. My heart was pounding. These windows were larger, and unbarred. The ground was no more than twenty feet below. I remembered my vaulting over the garden palisade. I could leap from one of these windows and not be hurt. Or, there was a staircase here in the room, leading to the roof.

Rhana was saying: "So? You make a disturbance? How do you dare?"

"I'm hungry. I want to be fed."

Some of these men were armed. There were too many here now. If I could wait here until they went away.

Rhana looked at the women beside her, as though to see what they thought of me. She was smiling with faint amusement.

"You want food—now?"

"Yes." I added boldly: "And here. I want it here with you."

She said something about me to the other women. They nodded, smiled and regarded me with a new interest



—as though I were a precocious child, to be admired and tolerated.

"Here with me?"

"Yes."

A man was near me, standing by an empty chair. I shoved him out of the way, and sat down, as though I were a willful child. But there was something else in the expressions of these women. I was a man; it was to them a new masculinity, instinctively to be admired. The Gian man shrank from my frowning aspect. Rhana said:

"So? You are very bad—but interesting. You shall be fed here, if you do not annoy me."

"I'll sit over there." Another empty chair, much nearer one of the windows. But these women were not fools. Rhana gestured sharply. Two armed men — they looked like beribboned popinjays in their bright gaudy costumes—moved quickly over between me and the window.

Rhana went back to her work. I sat there perhaps an hour. Food and drink came to me. I tasted it cautiously. But I was famished, and glad of the strength it would give me. Strange things—but I ate and drank with relish.

THE activity of the room went on. I could not understand anything that was said. The garden was active—every appearance of bustling, feverish haste. The aëro—a gray thing a hundred feet in length—was loaded and got away. Another, empty, came sailing down to take its place. Gians were arriving. Men and women; and there were children. Food; apparatus—all loaded on the arriving and departing aëros. A line of marching gray men assembled, and were loaded on an aërocar. It left.

I saw not a single Middge. But down in the city I could hear occasional cries. Once, a throng of Gian families—carrying children and household goods—came up from the city escorted by soldiers. There had been a disturbance a moment before; I imagine

a mob of the Middge may have assailed them. Rhana issued angry commands, and several messengers dashed away.

A stream of couriers constantly arrived with what seemed reports from distant localities. Rhana and the other women consulted over them.

The room at last began quieting. There was a lull in the garden. I wondered if my chance had come. But I was constantly being closely watched. There were three of these popinjays near me now. Each had a small black weapon in his hand; they never took their eyes off me.

Rhana at last stood up. Her command cleared the room of its waiting people. The women at the table went up the steps to the roof and vanished. I was alone with Rhana, save for my three men guards. They were still beside me, alert as ever.

She gestured. "Come over here—sit by me. I am tired now. It will amuse me to talk with you."

The guards moved over with me. I sat by her. She began questioning me about my world. The size and the extent of the surface up there. She said nothing of her plans—nor asked me anything personal of myself. They seemed idle questions; generalities. I told her as well as I could, things about our civilization. Our mode of life. Things at random as they occurred to me. But I kept clear of anything which might be of military value to her.

She listened with an eager, absorbed interest. Once, when I paused, she said:

"You talk always of men. Your men must be very strange. Your friend they call Tad, spoke of them the same—men like women—"

I laughed. "Not like women."

"I mean, born to command. To leadership, like women."

I said: "Ours is a man-made world. But we realize, we men are what our mothers make us. There are things in life more important to women than trying to run the world."

She raised her heavy eyebrows. "You think so?"

"Yes. Things only women can do. The best of our women think so, too."

She said decisively: "It is not so here." It amused her. "A world run by men! How absurd it must be!"

I could read her thoughts. She was going to war against men; she felt it a very simple thing.

She added: "You, Geoffry Grant, do not like women born to command?"

She said it with a smile, but there was an edge under it; a tigress's claws lying within the soft paws.

I parried cautiously: "Did I say that? We have had women who were queens and empresses. Women who stood alone at the head of nations."

"So? And they ruled well?"

"Some did. Some did not."

She purred: "You do not like commanding women—like me?" She was toying with one of her dangling ornaments. I could have said I liked Nereid somewhat better, but I did not. I retorted:

"I am only a man. You embarrass me."

SHE seemed annoyed at herself. At her weakness perhaps, for asking a man's opinion. She said: "You are a fool. Conceited because you are big and strong. I will show you—"

She stood up quietly. "Sit still, Geoffry Grant." The chains on her wrists were looped up around her arms to be out of the way. She began unfastening them.

I think it was her intention to flog me. I had been all this time surreptitiously watching my three guards. If I could get one of them near me—snatch his weapon. Or by a sudden rush knock them down—

Rhana unloosed the chains. "I will show you!" Her eyes were abruptly blazing with anger at me. A sound behind made her look around. A man blundered into the room through the farther doorway. He had seemingly

come in not realizing where he was. A Gian from another city perhaps. Her anger turned on him. She leaped at him. My guards rushed for me; one stood with a weapon pressed against me. I remained docile.

The Gian man groveled as the chain struck him. She lashed; and with his cries of pain her rage burst into a fury ungovernable. He lay insensible and bleeding when she had finished. Other men appeared. They carried him away. She wound the chains around her sleek gray arms; came back to me. She was breathing hard, but the fire had gone from her eyes. Her voice was perfectly composed.

"A stupid man, Geoffry Grant, to come in here like that. He will not do it again."

"No," I murmured. "Doubtless not."

My guards had relaxed. They were standing away, but still within reach of me if I leaped. I was tense. Rhana sat down. She began to talk. I scarcely heard her. I was planning how to fight my way out of here. My thoughts ran swiftly, no more than half coherent. Down to Arturo—fighting my way. But that was impossible. I would be caught and killed. But the flood-gates, off there in that distant cavern, must be closed. That was my purpose. Far above my own life, or Arturo's. I could get out of here perhaps, with a rush for one of those windows.

I was answering Rhana mechanically. I would have to leave Arturo, but I could come back for him. These Gians would depart and leave him there to die. Tad and I would come back and release him.

Thoughts are swift-flying things. They flooded me; yet it was all but a moment. Tad. It seemed abruptly that something asked me, "*Where is Arturo?*"

My own thought? No, it was not that. Something else—Tad, or Nereid. I felt the presence of them both, their

thoughts, something of them here—implore me, "*Where is Arturo?*"

I had felt like this, that night in New York. I stirred restlessly in my chair.

"Yes," I said to Rhana. "I think so." What had she asked me? I could not remember. I was recalling the route I had taken up from Arturo's underground cell. And something replied, soundlessly in my mind, "*Oh, yes, I know.*"

Like a thought from Tad, or Nereid. But now it was more than that. Something of them tangibly here. Rhana felt it. She, too, moved uneasily in her chair.

She abruptly stopped what she was saying to me. And added tensely: "You feel it? What is it?"

THERE was almost fear in her voice—the fear of the gruesome, the uncanny, the unknown. Her hand moved along the table edge. The illumination of the room abruptly vanished; darkness enshrouded us. I could see nothing. Then, just the outlines of the windows with the lights of the garden behind them. In the silence I thought I could hear Rhana's breathing. I could sense her near me; and the guards. Make a run for it now! But I could barely see in this darkness; and I remembered that these Gians could see comfortably.

The three guards and Rhana? But there was something else here. Something not to be seen, scarce to be felt. The presence of something. It drove from my mind all thought of escape. I sat stiff, straining my vision in the darkness.

Something here, moving soundlessly. Something touched me! Brushed me gently. I shrank; my chair slid on the metallic floor with a grind. One of my guards, even now alert, moved over and held me firmly. Rhana's voice said softly:

"Did you see anything? Something is here. No, it is gone."

She illumined the room. It was so soft a light it did not bother my eyes, even after the blank darkness. But I realized that for a moment now it might dazzle the sensitive eyes of Rhana and these three men. Her hand was shading her face. The man holding me had an arm against his eyes. My chance had come. I stood up suddenly; knocked his weapon from his hand, and my other fist caught him in the face. He fell without a cry at my feet.

Rhana shouted. I whirled away from her; launched myself at the other two men who stood blinking in confusion. My body struck them full. Under my weight they went down. One of their weapons was discharged—a soundless stab of radiance. It missed me.

In my rush I stumbled over one of the falling men. I went down with him. He was far smaller, lighter than I, and his body seemed queerly, unnaturally fragile. My fist cracked against his shoulder; broke it. I caught his wrist. Gruesomely it snapped with my twist. I held his weapon when I rose, a small, heavy thing of metal. But I did not know how to fire it. I thrust it under the shirt of my suit.

Rhana stood by the table; she made no move. The third man whom I had flung down was up on one elbow. I saw his leveled weapon and leaped aside. He was evidently hurt. He twisted around, but before he could aim again, I seized a heavy metal chair and hurled it. He lay still, with the chair partly on him.

The way was open. I ran for the nearest window. A black metal grating slid up in it; barring it. I turned away; ran for another. I was confused now. Like an animal, caged, rushing one way and another and finding always bars. The uproar was bringing people to the room. Men and women were running in.

I dashed at another window. But the bars came up before I got there.

And another. Two men and a woman were in my way. I scattered them. Some one fired at me. I felt the tingle of the flash, but it missed.

From the table Rhana was working a mechanism controlling the bars. The windows were all closed now; a grating closed the roof doorway at the head of the stairs. People were up there vainly trying to get in.

**T**HE place was in confusion. Shouts everywhere. They had spread to the garden; a gathering throng out there.

It was all a confusion of impressions to me. I made a dash at Rhana; decided against it; turned and ran the other way. There seemed perhaps twenty people in the room. Every instant I expected to be hit by that stabbing flash. The main doorway was still open, and men were coming in. I rushed at them and they scattered. There was another flash, which stung my shoulder. A woman was leaping at me, swishing a chain; the shot caught her and she went down. There was no more firing after that.

In the doorway I was engulfed by half a dozen men who rushed me at Rhana's vehement command. I went through them; waded, kicking, twisting, heaving them off, flinging them bodily away.

I found myself in the entry room. The people in it scattered before me. There were several flashes, but I was untouched. I went through the room with a rush to find myself in a dark corridor. There was pursuit behind me; I could hear the shouts. I ducked into a long, empty, dim room, and went down its length at a full run. All its windows were barred. One of the gratings slid up as I got there.

Rhana was back at her table, I knew, barring every exit of the castle. I ran on, through doorways, always dark corridors—an endless maze. I was wholly lost. Occasionally I encountered a Gian, but none could stop me.

I found myself going down an incline; over a bridge up near a vaulted ceiling. It was familiar. I stopped; panting for breath I stood in the blackness clinging to the rail. An abyss was below me. I had shaken off my followers. I was alone here. In the silence I heard what seemed murmuring water far under me.

Familiar. I had crossed this interior bridge, or one very like it, on the way up from Arturo's cell. I thought I could find my way back there now.

With recovered breath I started. Cautiously—now that I had escaped pursuit, I wanted to avoid any one again finding me. Get down to Arturo; if I could open his door from the corridor side, together we would find some way out of this place.

I moved along. Over the bridge. It was darker here now than when I had been brought up. I felt my way along the stone passage.

I rounded a corner. There was a small dim light. The passage was empty; but I ran squarely into something solid—something invisible. It gripped me.

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE FIRE CALDRON.

**T**AD stood in the garden of the castle, with Nereid and her father. Rhana was on the parapet, talking to the Middle crowd. Tad did not miss Arturo and me; he assumed we were close behind him. His attention was on Rhana. He knew her perhaps better than did any of us. When first he had been brought here, with a vague memory that the freighter on which he had been traveling was sinking, Rhana had taken him to the castle. He had lived there for a time, and had taught her much that she knew of our language.

He listened now to her, but of her language he still understood only occasional phrases. Entt joined him.

"She says the Middge need not fear. She will show them a way of escape from here. Or they can stay—"

"How can they stay?" Tad whispered. "Those flood gates will break in a week or two at most."

"She says, no danger. Or, if they care to go, a passage upward."

"There isn't any. Or if there is, Entt, the Middge can't find it."

"It must be found," said Nereid. "Not where she says—we cannot trust her. We Middge must find it ourselves."

For a long time now the Middge had been secretly sending out exploring parties, but so far without success.

Fen interrupted impatiently: "We listen to her, not talk." Rhana's speech went on. Then she stopped. At her final command the mob began dispersing. Soon the garden was nearly empty.

Bhool stood behind Tad. "Masters, we go?"

Nereid had just suggested it. "My father, should we not go home? There will be messengers there for you by now. You remember? We must go to the meeting in the Caldron."

"Yes, you say right, child. There will be attack upon the gates. We must try to get them closed."

Bhool insisted: "We go now, Masters. I go with you."

It was then they missed Arturo and me. Nereid said: "Arturo, we will start now—"

But he was not behind her. Tad saw her look around; saw her run a few feet, gaze and then run back. He saw her face. It went suddenly blank. And then fear sprang to it. She gave a timid little cry: "Arturo!" She stood trembling and stricken.

She knew then, or guessed, I am sure. She stood, with trembling intense thoughts trying to reach us. But could not.

They searched around the garden. They did not see the dark arch in the wall into which we had been drawn;

Tad thinks it was closed up, presenting only stones.

Bhool searched with them. He whined, "Masters, this is dangerous. If she sees us here, punishment with the chains."

They decided we must have been separated from them, unable to find them in the departing crowd. We would go home; they would find us there waiting.

But we were not there. Instead were three Middge couriers. They had been there some time. Fen listened to them. His old face brightened.

"Good news," said Entt. "A passage upward has been found. At the Caldron the meeting is called now. The weapons are not ready, but an attack will be made."

"On the gate house?" Tad demanded.

"Yes."

Bhool was eagerly listening to what was being said. Tad shoved him out of the way.

"Fen, are you going to this meeting?" Tad asked.

"Yes. Now." He added in his own language: "Bhool, get ready the arras. We will ride."

Bhool left reluctantly. But Nereid did not want to go. We might come back here—she wanted to be here. But they would not let her stay.

Tad left us a note. They would be back in a few hours—three or four at most. Tad was worried over us. But he tried to persuade himself that in a little while we would be in. The note did not say where they had gone, some Gian might come upon it who could read it. He ended in his whimsical fashion: "Go to sleep—it will do you good for what is coming."

Nereid had said nothing. She sat in a shadowed corner. Her face was solemn, fear-stricken. She sat thinking—calling intensely to us. We were both unconscious at this time. She thought once she had reached Arturo.



She leaped to her feet; sank back. "No, it is nothing! He is gone."

Bhool arrived at the street doorway with the *arras*. Sleek black animals, large as a horse, with long narrow faces and bulging eyes. They moved with a panther tread, soundless on padded feet.

THE couriers were already gone. Bhool said: "I will carry her." He indicated Nereid.

"You ride with me," Tad declared, "if you go at all. I don't see why you should."

But the fellow seemed too frightened to stay in the house. Nereid mounted behind her father. Entt rode alone. Tad put Bhool in front of him on the broad saddle.

Like giant leopards the three *arras* loped off down the narrow street. They reached the open country, where the road was a waving gray ribbon over the rocks. Occasionally they were challenged by Midge guards. Then on again.

A ride infernal. The glare grew. The air was steadily hotter, as a sulphurous quality came to it. Down, as though into a legendary inferno. The passage broadened. Its walls spread; its rocky, shaggy ceiling lifted until Tad no longer could see it.

Bhool whimpered: "I do not like it here." But Tad did not answer. If Tad had only known what was in that fellow's mind!

Ahead, the red glare now was solid. The passage was gone. They ascended a gentle rising slope, came to the brink of a crest and stopped.

The caldron of fire lay before them.

TAD had never been here before. He gazed, awe-struck. He was on the lip of a huge circular caldron which lay perhaps a thousand feet beneath this upper rim. A round, shallow bowl. The ceiling over it was too high to be visible; behind the rim,

rocky walls rose up into the black void.

The whole area was a dull glare of red; but soon Tad's eyes grew accustomed to it, and he refused the glasses which Entt proffered. This upper lip of the bowl was bent in a huge circle; it stretched in both directions as far as Tad could see—a small segment of the whole—a caldron here a hundred miles across, at least.

There were boiling pits of red molten fire down there. One was quite close—a mile or so away. It boiled sluggishly, a viscous mass in a giant pot. Its surface bubbled; moved and crawled. Red, with a purple-green sheen on it.

A hundred such pits showed; the distance merged them into a solid red glare.

Far off, there seemed a lake of fire; a cloud of black gas hung over it; rolled slowly upward, and away.

The nearer jagged rocks here on the rim were painted with the lurid red. It hung like a mist everywhere—a monstrous red shadow of it slanted up into the void overhead. The heavy choking smell of sulphur was in the air; a black coil of smoke was drifting up from one side, slanting off on an air-current, a suction toward the further distance.

A scene infernal. Slumbering forces. Restless. Stirring. Nature infernal, here in leash. A slumbering giant down here, breathing uneasily.

And when, throwing off his bonds, the giant rose? Honeycomb passages, breaking upward with his lungs! His surging breath—we at the surface then would call this a volcano. Or if, still far underground, the porous rock strata broke sidewise; shivered, trembled and broke—an earthquake then, to dash a tidal wave against our coasts, to engulf our islands—or with a trembling, quaking earth-surface, to bring down our cities in ruins.

This slumbering giant!

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.





# Argonotes

## The Readers' Viewpoint



### SWORDFISHING

**F**ISHING may seem to be a prosaic enough occupation, but one could seek far before finding more exciting adventure than is the everyday lot of the swordfishermen. Warren Elliot Carleton, who makes his debut in *ARGOSY* with "The Boat Share," in this issue, has been out with these hardy seagoers. Of his experience he says:

"The Boat Share," like all the stories which I have written about the New England fishermen, was suggested by my own experiences aboard fishing vessels. In swordfishing, I am indebted to Captain Robert L. Jackson and the crew of the schooner Hazel M. Jackson, of Edgartown, Massachusetts, not only for the atmosphere of "The Boat Share," but for much of the action in the yarn. It was my privilege to sail with that splendid outfit some five years ago on a three-weeks' swordfishing trip off Georges Banks, and, believe me, an author doesn't have to draw much on his imagination to get a story out of such an event in his lifetime!

Almost every swordfishing schooner returns to the South Boston fish pier—the greatest swordfish market—with tales of swordfish attacking dories, collisions with whales, battles with the great schools of sharks that infest those waters, and close calls from being run down by ocean liners. Sometimes men are wounded or even killed by swordfish punching dories with their sharp four-foot snouts of solid bone.

Yet on the whole the swordfish is too careful of its sword, on which it depends for clubbing to death the smaller fish that comprise its bill of fare, to risk injuring it in a senseless attack. For that reason, ordinarily it is a coward. But a swordfish that is crazed by the harpoon landing in its head loses all discretion, and those are the fellows who do the damage. Fishermen concede that a crazy swordfish is just about the worst sort of customer to meet.

As for myself, I am getting on into the thirties, hold down a job in New York City, and am quite satisfied to stay put for awhile. I've had my share of knocking about on salt water since my boyhood in Plymouth, Massachusetts. But if I didn't have a wife and a three-year-old daughter to keep me steady, I'd sure go through the whole program again.

### ANOTHER NEWCOMER

**W**ALTER MARQUISS is another who makes his bow to *ARGOSY* readers in this issue. In reply to our request for a bit of information about himself, the following arrived:

Walter Marquiss was born on a farm in Illinois long enough ago to justify his shiny baldness. As a child he displayed no signs of brilliance, in which respect he has remained admirably consistent ever since.

Failing completely in college, being too lazy to play football, he ambled into newspaper work. Promptly distinguishing himself as the world's worst reporter, he became a managing editor, and for ten years told real reporters what to do. As an editorial writer on the Quincy (Illinois) *Journal* he achieved note for his keen insight into world affairs by predicting the World War two days before it began. A signed column which he conducted in the same paper was pronounced the most popular feature by three readers who answered a questionnaire.

He has been fired from newspaper staffs in Indianapolis and Gary, Indiana; Chicago, Champaign and Quincy, Illinois; and Cincinnati, Ohio, and has spent much time wondering what was the matter with the Associated Press, which permitted him to work until he was ready to quit. Realizing that his talents were not appreciated elsewhere, he went to New York and hopes that, within the next fifteen years, New York will know that he has arrived in town. He is now engaged in writing fiction, some of which probably is fit to be published.

His most exciting adventure was getting married on borrowed money, and even now he is trying to remember if he ever paid it back.

He is the father of a pretty daughter, whose age is withheld out of consideration for her mother, who looks to be about twenty-four.

**T**HOSE of you who enjoyed "War Lord of Many Swordsmen" will be glad to know that W. Wirt has just turned in a three-part sequel to it. "Swords Are Out" will appear just as quickly as we can get it on the schedule.

Worcester, Mass.

I have read the *Argosy* for the last three years, and I think the best stories were "The

Crime Circus" and "Seven Footprints to Satan." More scientific stories by Ray Cummings, please. I say he's just great! I would like a sequel to "War Lord of Many Swordsmen." Three toots and a cheer for ARGOSY!  
KENT SMITH.

**C**AN the young folks have a few minutes on the floor? Why not? Hear them:

Wichita, Kan.

I am wondering if you will welcome our letter or cast it aside with disregard as most older people do when children try to have their say.

My brother and I range between the ages of twelve to fourteen, and I have sought in vain in "The Readers' Viewpoint" for a letter from your junior readers, of which I know there must be many.

Our mother fully approves of our reading the ARGOSY and, although she works, Wednesday night finds her with the ARGOSY in her hand and quite unconscious of our impatient hurrying.

Your *Mme. Storey* mysteries hold all the thrills and pleasures of a dozen books.

Though I do not care for Western pictures, your ARGOSY Westerns hold a fascination for me, and my brother is a devout follower of them.

Our favorite authors are: MacIsaac, Footner, Cunningham, and Worts.

Cunningham again quickened my interest for Westerns with "Lord of Liarsburg."

We're for the baseball stories, football, and fight racket to the last.

HENRYETTA AND JR.

**A**ND a letter from one who sympathizes with ye editor:

Newark, N. J.

The inclosed is not from the veldt or yet the desert, but from just across the river, and is an answer to the several pros and cons regarding the continued publication of Westerns and the Argonotes column.

One day during the War I dropped into the office of the then Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, who had just issued his celebrated order making the navy bone dry. The editors of several large papers carried caustic editorials; the telephone rang angrily; men walked through the offices carrying large packages of mail. But Josephus seemed as merry as a lark.

"You don't appear very worried by what they are saying about you," I ventured.

"Oh, no," he laughed. "One of my men upstairs is opening the mail and sorting the letters into two piles, those that praise me and those that abuse me. So far, the two piles are running neck and neck."

Every man or corporation who holds a position of responsibility should expect criticism. It is part of the discipline which the world bestows on us.

If it can be endured with patience and self-

control it is fit preparation for the man or men for walking firmly and successfully in the path of great public duty.

If you are doing work that seems to you important, waste no time in winning verbal or written victories, or answering petty criticism.  
MORTON BURES.

**A**ND W. Wirt has made a host of friends who are ready to boost his stock. Say two of them:

Boston, Mass.

Give us some more stories by W. Wirt. He is *good*! Give us some stories by Burroughs, MacIsaac, and the rest of what people call impossible writers. The ARGOSY is the best magazine I have ever read, and I've read plenty of them. I just started to read "The Phantom in the Rainbow," by Slater LaMaster, and can hardly wait for the next part.  
E. CULHANE.

Anderson, S. C.

I am a regular reader of your magazine, and have been for eight years. My favorite authors are Charles Alden Seltzer, Fred MacIsaac, Gordon Stiles, George M. Johnson, W. Wirt, John Wilstach, George F. Worts, and Kenneth Perkins.

Let's have more from W. Wirt. I think "More Than a Double Cross" was fine.  
J. C. BOLDING.

## YOUR CHOICE COUPON

Editor, ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY,  
280 Broadway, N. Y. C., N. Y.

The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:

1.....

2.....

3.....

4.....

5.....

I did not like.....  
because.....

Name.....

Street.....

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



# *Looking Ahead!*

---

*A loyal officer of the British navy was Nathan Andrews—until calamity descended upon him and pitched him into the reeking hold of a convict ship. In those dreadful days a new man was born within him, a man whose gripping story is told in*

## **CAPTAIN NEMESIS**

*A Book-Length Novel*

**by F. V. W. MASON**

A tale of the sea is this; of those turbulent days when the American nation was born; of piracy and of an unrelenting quest for vengeance. The opening installment appears next week in

***The ISSUE OF MARCH 30th***

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## **CHIGAROO!**

*A Complete Novelette*

**by EUGENE CUNNINGHAM**

brings back to our pages Rex Harden, who fought his way through "Lord of Liarsburg." Another outstanding Western novelette is this; a tale of the outlaw bands to whom the cry, "Chigaroo!" is the tocsin of warning and danger.

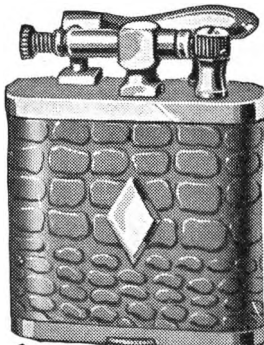
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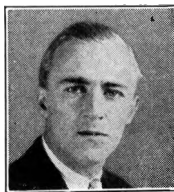
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a source of income that  
many people neglect

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L. A. Emerton, Jackson St., Hanover, Pa., is but one of many men and women trained by the Newspaper Institute of America to make their gift for writing pay prompt dividends. He writes:



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