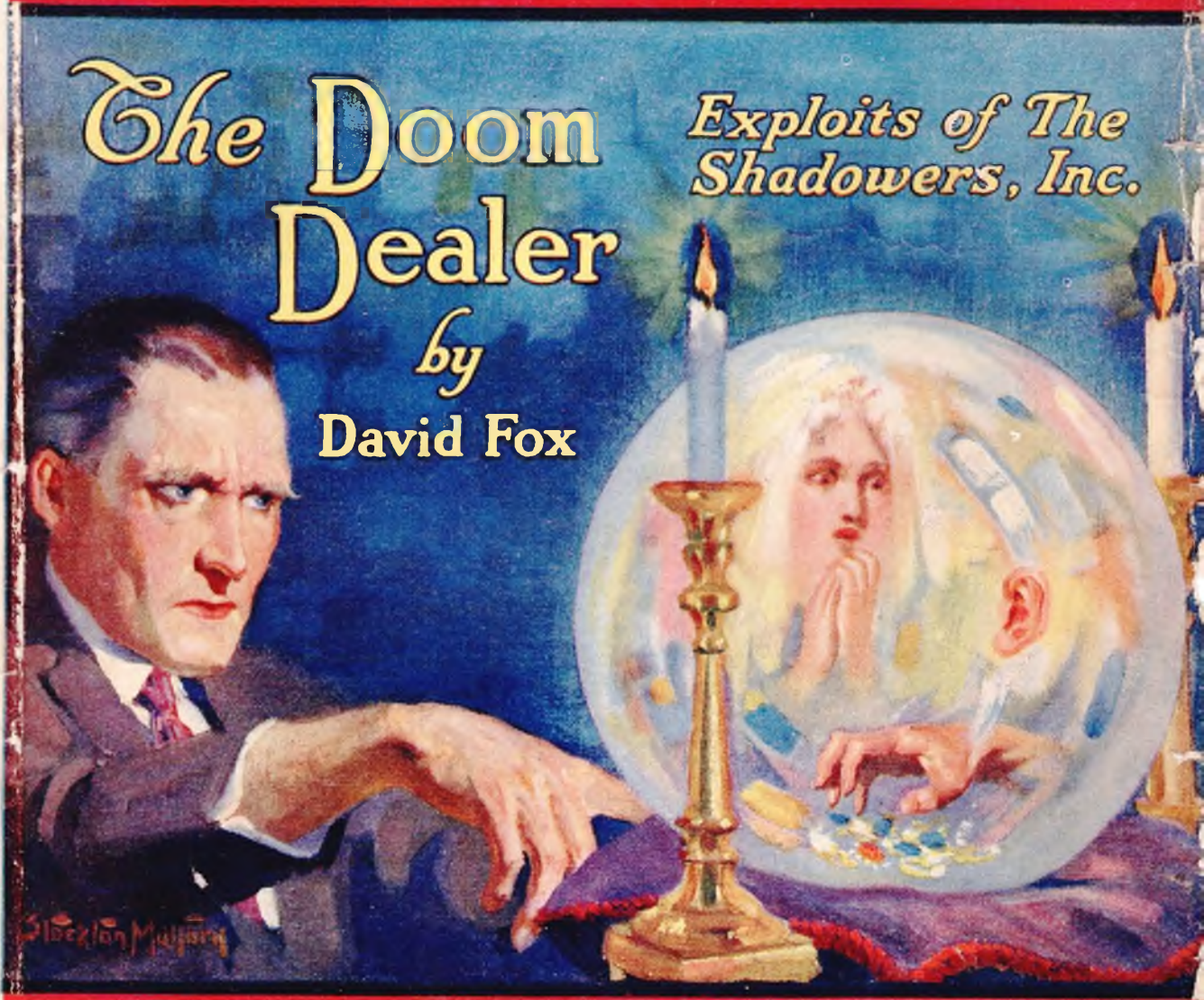
ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY



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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY — FEBRUARY 24, 1923

"We are advertised by our loving friends"

Elizabeth C. Hobart,
Milltown, Maine.

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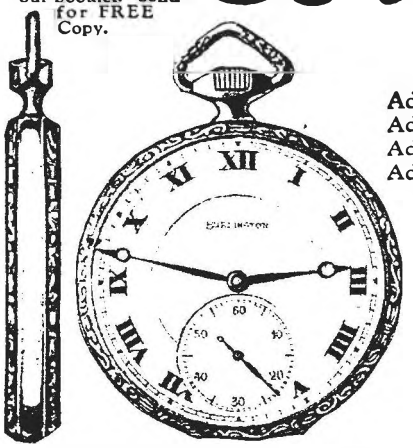
Mellin's Food, properly prepared with milk, furnishes every element a baby needs to grow and develop as Nature intends. That is why Mellin's Food babies grow strong, robust and vigorous.

We will be pleased to send you our book, "The Care and Feeding of Infants," also a Free Trial Bottle of Mellin's Food.

Mellin's Food Company, Boston, Mass.

21 Jewel Burlington

Just Out
Latest Designs in Watch Cases beautifully illustrated in our booklet. Send for FREE Copy.



Adjusted to the Second
Adjusted to Temperature
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Adjusted to Positions

21 Ruby and Sapphire Jewels
25 Year Gold Strata Case
Your Choice of Dials
(Including Montgomery R. R. Dial)
New Ideas in Thin Cases

Only $1.00 Down

Only One Dollar Down will buy this masterpiece of watch manufacture. The balance you are allowed to pay in small, easy, monthly payments. The Burlington — a 21-Jewel Watch — is sold to you at a price much lower than that of other high-grade watches. Besides, you have the selection of the finest thin model designs and latest styles in watch cases. Don't delay! Write for the FREE Watch Book and our SPECIAL OFFER today.

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Get the Burlington Watch Book by sending this coupon. Find out about this great special offer which is being made for only a limited time. You will know a great deal more about watch buying when you read this book. You will be able to "steer clear" of the over-priced watches which are no better. Remember, the Burlington is sent to you for only One Dollar down, balance in small monthly payments. Send the coupon for watch book and our special offer TODAY!

Burlington Watch Company
Dept. 9452, 19th Street and Marshall Blvd., Chicago
Canadian Address: 62 Albert Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Burlington Watch Company
Dept. 9452, 19th St. and Marshall Blvd., Chicago
Canadian Address: 62 Albert St., Winnipeg, Manitoba

Please send me (without obligations and prepaid) your free book on watches with full explanation of your $1.00 down offer on the Burlington Watch.

Name _____

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CXLIX CONTENTS FOR FEBRUARY 24, 1923 NUMBER 4

FIVE CONTINUED STORIES

NOVELETTE AND SHORT STORIES

MISCELLANEOUS AND POETRY

EMERSON HOUGH

author of "The Covered Wagon"

has written a great story for us, the first installment of which will appear next week. It is called

SECRET OF POWDER BASIN

and is a flashing romance of young love and high courage in an Idaho valley, where a wool king matches wits with an oil millionaire. In this four-part novel Mr. Hough has been lavish with his genius.

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, 280 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, and TEMPLE HOUSE, TEMPLE AVENUE, E. C., LONDON

FRANK A. MUNSEY, President RICHARD H. TITHERINGTON, Secretary CHRISTOPHER H. POPE, Treasurer

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PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY.

Entered as second class matter July 15, 1920, at the Post-Office at New York, under the Act of March 3, 1879

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SELL US YOUR SPARE TIME. YOU CAN EARN FIFTEEN TO FIFTY DOLLARS WEEKLY writing showcards at home. No canvassing. Pleasant, profitable profession, easily, quickly learned by our simple graphic block system. Artistic ability unnecessary. We instruct you and supply you work. Wilson Methods, Ltd., Dept. G, Toronto, Canada.

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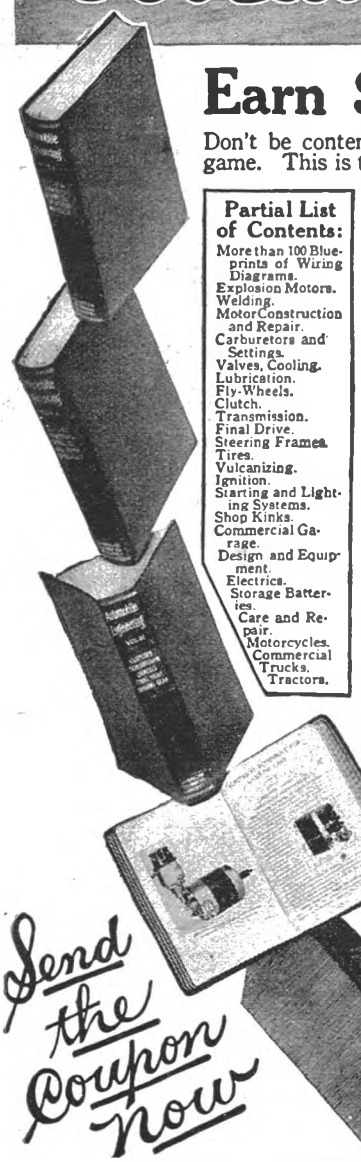
Classified Advertising continued on page 6.

Get Into the Auto Game

Earn $50.00 to $100.00 a Week

Don't be content with an ordinary salary when you can get *big money* in the auto game. This is the biggest year in the history of the automobile industry. Thousands of men who know something about cars are needed to keep them in repair. Big jobs are open everywhere. Get into the game and open a garage of your own.



Partial List of Contents:

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Fifteen great automobile engineers and experts have made it possible for you to learn the automobile repair business without taking any time from your present work. This great library teaches everything that the best auto schools teach—at about one-twentieth of the cost. It lays the entire field of auto construction open before your eyes—explains everything about every make of car. Written in plain, everyday language—easy to read and easy to understand. Over 50,000 sets of previous editions have been sold. This is the 1920 edition—the most up-to-date books on automobiles ever published.

Auto Books — Six Volumes—Shipped FREE

You don't have to pay one cent in advance. Just mail the coupon and use the books for a whole week in your home or shop—then decide whether you want to keep them or not. If you like the books, send us only $2.80 and $3.00 a month until $21.80 is paid. If you don't like them, just ship them back at our expense and you won't owe us a cent.

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American Technical Society
Dept. A-162-B,
Chicago, U. S. A.

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AMERICAN TECHNICAL SOCIETY
Dept. A-162-B, Chicago, U. S. A.

Please send me the 6-volume set of Automobile Engineering for 7 days' examination, shipping charges collect. If I decide to buy, I will send $2.80 within 7 days and the balance at $3.00 a month until the $21.80 has been paid. Then you send me a receipt showing that the books are mine and fully paid for. If I think I can get along without the books after the 7 days' trial, I will return them at your expense.

To insure prompt shipment fill out all lines.

Name.....

Address.....

Employed by.....

$100 a Week
in this
Fascinating Business

EARN big money as a cartoonist! Millions of dollars were spent last year on comic strips, political and sport cartoons, animated cartoons, etc. Thousands of new cartoonists are needed now to meet the ever-increasing demand for this work. Never before have the opportunities in this fast-growing field been so many, so varied or so high-paying.

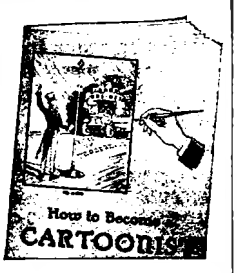
Easy to Learn CARTOONING at Home in Spare Time

Regardless of how little you know about cartooning now, you can easily qualify for a position in this attractive, high-salaried business. This home-study method starts you at the simplest fundamental principles of cartoon-making and takes you through every branch of humorous and serious cartooning. You will be amazed at how quickly it teaches you to draw salable work. Many students of this method began to sell their drawings before they were half through their courses. The training paid for itself long before they finished it.

Learn cartooning this easy way. Enjoy the fascinating life of a successful cartoonist—easy hours, freedom from routine, your own boss, and $3,000 to $15,000 a year for this work that is play!

Send for FREE BOOK

Learn more about the wonderful opportunities in Cartooning, and details about this remarkable home-study method. A handsomely illustrated booklet has just been prepared which, upon request, will be sent to you without the slightest obligation. This booklet gives a thorough outline of the cartooning field, and explains in detail this wonderful new method of teaching Cartooning. Send for it today.



WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF CARTOONING

1136 Marden Bldg. Washington, D. C.

WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF CARTOONING
1136 Marden Bldg., Washington, D. C.

Please send me, without obligation, your Free Booklet on Cartooning and full details of your home-study method of teaching Cartooning.

Name.....
(Print Name Plainly.)

Address.....

City.....State.....
(If under 16, please give age.....)

2 TIRES FOR $9.95

FREE TUBE WITH EACH TIRE

Sensational Cut in Standard Tire Prices!

Two tires for less than the usual cost of one, and a free inner tube with each tire! *No double treads or sewed tires.* Our big volume means best tire values! Act now and cut your tire cost in two. Thousands of steady customers are getting full mileage out of these tires and you, too, can get **12,000 MILES**

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Size	1 Tire	2 Tires	Size	1 Tire	2 Tires
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30 x 3	6.95	10.95	32 x 4½	12.95	20.95
30 x 3½	7.95	12.95	33 x 4½	13.45	21.65
32 x 3½	9.25	14.95	34 x 4½	13.95	22.35
31 x 4	10.45	16.75	35 x 4½	14.45	23.95
32 x 4	11.85	17.85	35 x 5	15.45	25.95
33 x 4	12.35	18.75	37 x 5	15.95	26.50

State whether straight side or clincher

SEND NO MONEY! Shipment C. O. D. express or parcel post. Examine tires on arrival and if not fully satisfied return same unused and your money will be promptly refunded, including shipping charges. **ORDER NOW!**

ALBANY TIRE & RUBBER COMPANY
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Classified Advertising continued from page 4.

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IT takes but a moment to mark the career of your choice, sign your name, clip out and mail. Yet that simple act has started more than two million men and women toward success.

In city, town and country all over the world, men are living contented lives in happy, prosperous homes—because they clipped this coupon.

In every line of business and industry, in shops, stores, offices, factories, in mines and on railroads, men are holding important positions and receiving splendid salaries—because they clipped this coupon.

Clerks have become sales, advertising and business managers, mechanics have become foremen, superintendents and engineers, carpenters have become architects and contractors, men and boys have risen from nothing to places of responsibility—because they clipped this coupon.

You have seen it in almost every magazine you have looked at for years. And while you have been passing it by, more than ten thousand men and women each month have been making it the first stepping stone to real success in life.

Will you still turn away from opportunity? Can you still go on, putting in your days at the same grind, getting the same pay envelope with the same insufficient sum, when such a little thing can be the means of changing your whole life?

You *can* have the position you want in the work you like best, a salary that will give you and your family the home, the comforts, the little luxuries you would like them to have. No matter what your age, your occupation, your education, or your means—you can do it!

All we ask is the chance to prove it. That's fair, isn't it? Then mark and mail this coupon. There's no obligation and not a penny of cost. It's a little thing that takes but a moment, but it's the most important thing you can do today. Do it now!

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☐ Nicholson Cost Accounting	☐ Railway Mail Clerk
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☐ Gas Engine Operating	☐ Plumbing and Heating
☐ Civil Engineer	☐ Chemistry ☐ Pharmacy
☐ Surveying and Mapping	☐ Automobile Work
☐ Metallurgy	☐ Navigation
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City..... State.....
Occupation.....

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This FREE Book Tells How Thousands Make Money at Home in Spare Time

IF you only knew how much money you can make in your spare time—if you only realized how many envied and needed things this spare time money could buy — then you wouldn't wait a single minute to send for this "How-to-Make Money" Book.

And what is more you wouldn't keep on worrying, skimping and scraping to make ends meet without even knowing where the money is coming from.

For this book tells you exactly how you can sell your spare time for a substantial sum each month. Not by selling or canvassing or travelling—but right in the comfort of your own home.

This Book Solves Money PROBLEMS

Would you like to have money to get prettier clothes, new home furnishings, things for the children, a new car, perhaps? If so, then you want this book, for it tells how thousands have solved their more-money problems in a really pleasant and easy way.

All over this country and in Canada too, in hundreds of cities, on farms, in villages, a host of women and men have actually jumped at this pleasant way to make extra money in spare time. Letters from a few of these enthusiastic workers are shown on this page. Read these letters—and remember that what **has been done** can be done **again.**

Turn YOUR Spare Hours Into Cash!

These people and thousands of others started in just as you will, by

mailing the coupon below and reading the free book illustrated herewith. This book showed them the way to more money—through the judicious use of spare hours. And they didn't have to have any special training, any exceptional experience, any unusual talent, in order to succeed.

Earn Money in the Comfort of Your Own Home!

You can spend as much or as little time as you wish, to this pleasant method of making extra money. Some people devote their entire time to it — preferring this new way of earning money to that of working in a factory or even in an office! You don't have to go outside to do this work. Every hour you spend is in the comfort and privacy of your own home. And you are paid promptly—just as soon as you finish the work. You will be delighted! Investigate this plan —it can bring you worlds of happiness by showing you how to earn the money for many of the things you want.

This FREE Book Clearly Explains This Money-Making Method

Just how to go about making money at home; how much you can earn; how to increase your earnings; how to build up a permanent business of your own—all these things are fully explained in the book.

On page five it tells how one woman made enough to start a mushroom farm and buy 40 chickens; page seven tells how another woman makes almost a thousand dollars a year extra money for herself; page eleven tells about the $120,000 in cash which was distributed to workers last year;—in fact almost every page is crowded with just the information you need to open the door to more money.

If you are in earnest, if you really want to turn your spare time into money — send for this **FREE** book today! Learn how others have made money—and how you can do it too.

Since we cannot guarantee that the distribution of this book **FREE** will continue for an unlimited time, you should send the coupon **NOW!**

These People Did!

Here are some earnings just as they are taken from our books for the week beginning December 4, 1922. It is obviously impossible for us to quote a complete list, as checks mailed for this week totalled $3176.76, but this partial list will show you how thousands are turning their spare hours into cash in the comfort and privacy of their own homes.

Name	State	Earnings
Miss Hazel Tripp	Iowa	$21.32
Miss Eva South	Alabama	20.23
Mrs. Emma Domaille	Minnesota	18.[illegible]
Lulu Snead	North Carolina	15.04
Miss Mave Hood	Texas	10.50
Myrtle Bates	Missouri	12.50
Della Sullivan	Washington	19.25
Mrs. Flora Mees	Indiana	11.88
Mrs. N. A. Woody	Georgia	16.88
Miss Arzetta Smith	Virginia	16.88
Mrs. Nick Larie	Wisconsin	12.25
Miss Fanny Perkins	Texas	12.63
M. J. Calfahan	New York	15.00
Virgie Robinson	Arkansas	15.88
Mrs. Ralph Wilcox	Ohio	19.50
Mrs. W. O. Trout	California	15.00
C. D. Snyder	Idaho	14.90
Benny Lanier	North Carolina	10.50
Laura Hayes	Colorado	19.78
George Frey	Oregon	15.00
Mrs. H. J. Thompson	Georgia	15.38
Mrs. Alice Norton	Michigan	15.00
Mrs. Pattye Satterwhite	Alabama	15.50
Mrs. R. M. Anderson	Pennsylvania	10.38
Mrs. J. M. Henry	Oklahoma	16.38
Mrs. Jennie Peeler	Tennessee	13.13
Mrs. Warren Eaton	Indiana	11.75
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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOL. CXLIX SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 1923 NUMBER 4

DAVID FOX—NEW LITERARY GENIUS

Here is another American author who has staked out a claim exceedingly rich in fictional value.—Others may copy the method, but Mr. Fox owns the mother lode of originality.—Our readers salute him as a discoverer.

FOURSCORE years ago Edgar Allan Poe wrote THE MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE, the pioneer detective yarn. Since that long distant date his scientific investigator, who solves crime mysteries by analytical study, has had numerous imitators, sincere in their belief that only a supermind among the law-abiding class can defeat the evildoer.

Chief among these followers of the fashion in detection was *Sherlock Holmes*, the creation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who frankly labeled the forte of his unofficial detective " the science of deduction." This identification of method is only an added proof that the school of the Detective Story had its origin in America.

The trail blazed by Poe is now fairly littered with the time-worn artifices of a master criminal and an even more ingenious Nemesis. All the changes apparently have been rung on the false clew, the innocent suspect, the microscope, the finger-print, the third degree, and the other stock accessories.

Of course, in life the criminal and the detective will forever remain in conflict. In literature, however, they have nearly reached a stalemate. It is again the problem of the impervious armor plate and the piercing projectile, the irresistible force and the immovable object, changed into terms of uncatchable criminal *versus* unfoiled detective.

David Fox was not content to be an imitator. Instead, he chose his own path for the solving of mysterious crimes, and it led him to a decision as satisfying as it is simple. He literally "set a thief to catch a thief," as the proverb has it, or in the words of Plutarch: "Zeno first started that doctrine that knavery is the best defense against a knave."

This is a sane, logical idea, and from it has grown a series of intensely interesting stories embracing the capture of criminals and the prevention of crime. Mr. Fox's rogue-catching creation is the Shadowers, Inc., an organization of reformed criminals who now courageously oppose the evil forces of the underworld and uphold the majesty of the law that once they flouted.

The first of these remarkable tales, THE MAN WHO CONVICTED HIMSELF, appeared in the *All-Story Weekly*, running serially from April 3 to May 8, 1920. It introduced Rex Powell, who had a first-hand knowledge of crime circles, and the members of his detection organization, all of whom had been crooks. They included:

"Professor" George Roper—Ex-Medium and Faker.
Lucian Baynes—Ex-Smuggler and Jewel Expert.
Clifford Nichols—Ex-Counterfeiter.
"Dr." Henry Corliss—Chemist.
Philip Howe—Ex-Cracksman.
Ethel Jepson—Former Shoplifter.

Their first case was that of Horace Punderford, retired merchant, who had gone mad during a spiritualistic séance, and that same hour the house safe had been robbed and a burglar, drugged to unconsciousness, found on the library floor. The Shadowers severally develop that Punderford had been paying blackmail as an echo of his own criminal past and that Mrs. Punderford had reason to fear enemies. Then Lucian Baynes, ex-smuggler, finds a bit of clay on the floor, and with this vague clew, takes charge of the investigation. Thereafter, the Shadowers proceed unerringly to a solution involving Mr. Scaynes, a mystic, who had been present at the séance. Scaynes is forced by "supernatural" trickery to fetch back the clay box containing Punderford's priceless Chinese pearls, and Punderford himself regains sanity.

The second novel of the series, THE SUPER-SWING, was published in the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY in installment form October 29 to December 10, 1921. In this absorbing study of criminality in high places the Shadowers are shown in a battle of cleverness against cunning. Phineas Sneed, a wealthy recluse, appeals to them to protect him against the writer of a threatening, anonymous letter. It is revealed that Jim Peterson, a skilled mechanic who had invented the "super-swing," a device strangely similar to Sneed's private safe, had been railroaded by the false charges of Sneed's personal counsel. Phil Howe, ex-cracksman, takes charge of the case and does excellent work in running down clews, but credit for the solution of the puzzle goes to Ethel Jepson, former shoplifter. Yielding to her womanly sympathy she shields Eva Adair, whom she found detained as an insane person in old Sneed's apartments, even against her co-workers in crime detection. They freely forgive her when it is shown that Sneed had seized Miss Adair's fortune, his villainy quite offsetting their pride in him as a client.

THE DOOM DEALER, third chronicle of the Shadowers' exploits, has to do with what appears to be grim murder. Miss Arabella Wyatt, an enormously wealthy resident of Millerstown, New York, petitions the investigators to sift the death of her fiancé, Ogden Ronalds, which occurred at the altar as they were about to be married. She also has discovered that paste gems have been substituted for her valuable family jewels. "Dr." Henry Corliss, chemist, believes there is a criminal medical angle to the case and he takes charge in behalf of his fellow detectors of crime.

On the next page the reader will find the opening installment of this mystery novel with its highly baffling content. There the skilled ex-crooks are quartering the ground in search of a trail to lead them to THE DOOM DEALER.

No. 1 of "The Shadowers" series, published in book form by Robert M. McBride & Co., New York, "The Man Who Convicted Himself," $1.90 net. No. 2, issued by the same firm as "Ethel Opens the Door," our name, "The Super-Swing," $1.00 net.

The Doom Dealer

By DAVID FOX

Author of "The Super-Swing," "The Man Who Convicted Himself," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN WITHOUT EARS.

MISS ETHEL JEPSON in her inconspicuously smart cape suit and with her fluffy golden hair tucked decorously beneath a jaunty little velvet turban made an attractive picture of demure but self-reliant young womanhood as she swung up the avenue on a crisp, sunny autumn morning.

It was only mid-November, but already a holiday spirit pervaded the air and the unusual number of feminine shoppers abroad at so early an hour betokened the fact that the vanguard, at least, had commenced to take forethought as to their Christmas interchange of gifts.

There was a certain wistfulness in Miss Jepson's guileless blue eyes as she surveyed the luxuriously gowned and furred throng crossing the sidewalk before her from rows of distinctive limousines to the doors of jewelers and specialty shops, yet her glance rested for the most part on the purses of platinum and gold which dangled carelessly from many a patrician wrist, and although she sighed, it was not with envy, but in whimsical reminiscence.

Not many months before Ethel Jepson, apt pupil of Lefty Jane herself, had been one of the niftiest little shoplifters and purse-snatchers of that same exclusive district. Now her daintily gloved fingers itched at sight of the rich pickings all about her, but she shrugged and kept straight upon her way. No more such small-time, risky jobs for her! Wasn't she secretary and office manager for the Shadowers, Inc., that aggregation of six of the cleverest crooks in the country who, under the pretense of running a private detective agency, had already pulled off two of the biggest and slickest hauls within her youthful memory?

She knew they had been big from her share of the loot and her conviction of their "slickness" arose from the fact that although an active participant herself she was still in the dark as to how her principals worked their game. For, even though she knew that there must be a stupendous come-back to it somewhere, it all appeared strictly on the level. Had any one informed her that such was actually the case, that the Shadowers had indeed reformed and were conducting a discreet investigation bureau along unique but absolutely legitimate lines, Ethel would have lifted her small nose even higher in derisive incredulity; but Ethel had still several things to learn about the organization of which she was a loyal, if minor, member.

She had passed the shops of the Thirties and was proceeding northward when all at once her round, childlike eyes narrowed as they encountered a certain face in the heterogeneous group of loiterers about the steps of the Public Library. With instant decision she turned, worming her way inconspicuously into the opposite flowing stream of humanity and retraced her steps down town for a block or two, then abruptly slipped into a side street and started west.

The face was that of an individual wholly unknown to her, but it was remarkable enough to have caught her alert gaze in any crowd even had this not been the third successive morning on which she had encountered it and under circumstances that caused her an undefined but instinctive disquiet.

The stranger was a tall man in the early thirties, neatly dressed, but with a shock of hair which all but covered his ears. His

curiously small, shapeless features were set wide apart in a flabby countenance of an unhealthy, greenish pallor. In the bright, sparkling sunlight the effect was incongruously grotesque and repellent. His pale, blinking eyes peered into the crowd with an eagerness which made Ethel shiver in spite of her intrepid self-assurance, for some sixth sense warned her that she herself, for some inexplicable reason, was the subject of his vigil.

She crossed to Broadway, doubled back through the next block to Sixth Avenue at the rear of the library square and so made her way to Forty-Second Street and the towering Bolingbroke Building where her employers maintained their elaborate suite of offices.

The main entrance opened from the corridor on the seventeenth floor directly into her sanctum, the reception room for the Shadowers' clients. There entrenched behind a curiously inlaid desk and surrounded by hidden mechanical contrivances which her quick brain and agile fingers had soon learned to control, it was her duty to sit and study each visitor, transmitting her impressions to the six-sided central apartment presided over by Rex Powell, founder and leader of the organization.

As Ethel let herself in with her key a peculiarly offensive chemical odor assailed her from behind the sliding panel to the right, accompanied by the faint tinkle of some delicate glass retort. She sniffed resignedly. It was evident that Doc Corliss was at it again, fussing with another of those smelly experiments which, between cases, held him absorbed in his laboratory.

The former purveyor of fake cure-all remedies who had joined the firm as its medical expert was a fat, bald, jolly individual of fifty or thereabout, whose genial, easy-going manner conveyed no hint of the scientific zeal which burned within him. His colleagues, however, knew him to be one of the most profound students of chemistry and toxicology of the age and that he might well have had a string of letters denoting honorary degrees after his name had not the lure of easy money and the credulity of hypochondriacs proved too strong a combination in his youth. It was only now that he was entering upon his own.

Ethel knew nothing of this and cared less. She removed her cape and turban, fluffed out her yellow hair, and seating herself behind the desk, pressed a wisp of a handkerchief to her nose, prepared to endure the effluvium indefinitely. But soon there came the whirr of the deodorizing ventilator and in a few moments Henry Corliss pushed the panel aside.

"Good morning, Ethel." There was a smile upon his broad, benevolent face, but the small, twinkling eyes regarded her with unwonted seriousness. "I've been thinking of a question I wanted to ask you. Mr. Powell said once that you could spot a plainclothes guy a block off. How do you do it?"

"I don't know, Mr. Corliss, it's a kind of a hunch, I guess." The pallid, flaccid face of the man in the crowd on the avenue arose again before her eyes and involuntarily she made a little grimace of repulsion.

"I can sort of feel if anybody's giving me the once-over and somethin' tells me to make my get-away. That's why I was late this morning, dodging a fellow that I saw yesterday and the day before. He ain't—hasn't—trailed me so's I could get wise to it and he don't give me a tumble when I pass him and yet I know he's been waiting and watching for me. I never seen—saw—this guy before two days ago, but somehow he gives me the creeps!"

"What's he like?" Henry seated himself in the great, carved visitors' chair and bent forward with his hands on his pudgy knees.

"Like somethin' that's been dug up!" Ethel shuddered. "His face is all kind of spread out and flat and greeny-gray, and there's somethin' shrivelled and funny about his ears. He wears his hair long to cover 'em, but the wind was blowing when I passed him the first time, day before yesterday, right out here on Forty-Second Street. I could see they looked as though they'd been melted into his head!

"That's what first made me notice him, I guess, and I remembered him yesterday when I ran into him hangin' around on the corner as I got off the uptown bus. This morning I walked, and there he was in front

of the lib'ry steps! I got a flash at him first, though, and I don't think he lamped me before I beat it away in the crowd."

"You don't think he's a headquarters man, do you?" Henry stroked his chin reflectively.

"If he was he wouldn't be bothering with me unless he saw me tryin' to pull off somethin', and I ain't—haven't—worked in more than six months, not since Mr. Powell found me and let me in on this game with you."

Ethel shook her head. "Besides, I never was pinched but once, and then the judge let me off and gave the store dick a lecture for taking up a simple, innocent little girl like me just because a valuable piece of lace happened to catch on my sleeve! Honest, I thought he was going to turn me over to the Gerry Society for safekeeping!"

She grinned impishly and then her face assumed its usual air of serene guilelessness as the entrance door opened and two gentlemen entered together. Both were approximately forty and aristocratic in appearance, but there the similarity ended. The first was blond and blue-eyed, with a small, light mustache, and his slender form was dapper to the point of fastidiousness, while his slightly taller companion had long, black hair, an incipient mustache and goatee, and his huge-rimmed glasses, soft collar and wide bow tie added to the eccentricity of his general make-up.

One might well have been taken for a vapid scion of society and the other for an art dilettante, yet the blond, dapper Lucian Baynes had been one of the most noted — and notorious — of international smugglers before he joined the Shadowers as their jewel expert and connoisseur of antiques, while Clifford Nichols's artistic efforts had been confined to signatures other than his own on checks and similar securities, and to some of the finest specimens of counterfeit engraving which had ever puzzled Washington until he elected to qualify as handwriting expert for this organization of his friends.

Both nodded briskly to Ethel and then turned with one accord to Henry Corliss.

"Is Rex here yet?" Lucian Baynes spoke without his habitual drawl, and Clifford Nichols's slender, tapering fingers played nervously with the ribbon of his glasses.

"No." Henry rose. "Say, what's got into you two? We haven't anything new—"

"We have!" Cliff interrupted. "Come into my study or Luce's studio and we'll tell you about it. It's the very devil!"

"What is?" An eager voice spoke from the doorway behind them, and they turned to confront the youngest member of the Shadowers. Slim and blond as his older confrère, Baynes, Phil Howe's handsome, weak face yet bore slight traces of prison pallor, but his merry, furtive eyes twinkled irrepressibly and his snappy attire was in accord with the latest decree of fashion along the Rialto. Ex-yegg and mechanical genius of the concern, he was frankly of the underworld. The difference between him and the two who had preceded him was marked though indefinable.

"What's the very devil, Cliff?" he repeated. "Has something broken at last? Great guns! I thought yesterday that guy with the funny ears—"

"Phil, suppose we go into that later?" Henry interrupted in smooth, unctuous tones which held a covert note of warning. "Luce has something to tell us first: let's adjourn to his studio. Ethel, when Mr. Powell comes, tell him we must see him at once."

The four disappeared through the panel into the laboratory and thence by way of Cliff's study and Phil Howe's workshop to the sanctum of Lucian Baynes. Ethel produced the latest best-seller from a drawer in her desk and tried to read. The print danced before her eyes, however, and she found herself waiting in a very fever of impatience for the arrival of their chief. So the man with the funny ears was not interested in her alone, but in the whole staff of the organization! She had caught the lightning glance which flashed between Cliff and Lucian at Phil's succinct description and she guessed shrewdly that Doc Corliss's abrupt question as to her ability to spot a detective had been no idle one; he, too, must have been under espionage.

What did that strange, repulsive creature want with the Shadowers? Would it mean another rich haul, or had the bulls got wise to their game and started to close in?

She dropped her book precipitately when steps sounded along the corridor outside and a key turned in the lock, but it did not herald the appearance of the chief. The man who entered was older than any of the rest, with a lugubrious, ascetic countenance and a ministerial bearing heightened by the severe black which clothed his tall, spare frame. Yet there was a glint of humor in his slatey-gray eyes as they met the pretty, flushed face before him.

"Good morning, Ethel. You appear to be excited." There was a bantering note in the well-rounded, paternal tones. "Can it be that another wandering sheep has come into the fold—to be trimmed?"

"I don't know whether it's him or us who'll be trimmed this time, Mr. Roper, but there's sure somebody lampin' the layout!" Ethel lapsed unconsciously into the vernacular. "Maybe it's a top-notcher tryin' to horn in or a dick from the Big Works down town, but it's a cinch he's no come-on. Have you spotted anybody tailin' you?"

George Roper, whose long and nefarious career in every known form of confidence game had given him the keen insight into human nature which made him so invaluable a member of the Shadowers as a cross-examiner of reluctant witnesses, did not resent being placed under fire now by the secretary. Instead he ran his long fingers through his scanty gray locks and eyed her reflectively.

"'Tailing me'?" he repeated at last. "No, my child, but—have you seen the person who is—er—lamping the layout?"

Ethel nodded vigorously.

"Three times and it's plenty for me! He's got a big, round moon face as pale as a ghost and queer, little, squinty eyes that are all that look to be alive about him, somehow, and—"

"Did you by any chance notice his ears, Ethel?" George Roper queried as she hesitated with a little shudder.

"What made you ask me that?" she demanded. "If you've seen him, Mr. Roper, and I've got a hunch you have, you know he hasn't got any ears at all, that is, none to speak of! They're just little funny lumps like putty!"

"I was mistaken, then." He shook his head, but a curious gleam had come into the inscrutable gray eyes. "After all, there are many moon-faced young men who squint, my dear— Hello, Rex!"

The door had opened once more and the sixth and principal member of the Shadowers stood before them. Rex Powell, as his present colleagues had known him during varying vicissitudes of their several careers, would have been a distinguished man in any company, with his tall, lithe, perfectly poised figure, strong, clean-cut features and the touch of silver just over the temples which was the only indication of the approaching middle years. In the life of crookdom, which for so long he had chosen to make his own, he had been an acknowledged leader, judged by the two standards which governed that submerged world; he was always square with his pals and he had never been caught.

Now as he closed the door behind him, nodded to George and smiled at Ethel, his keen glance noted the air of expectancy which pervaded them both and he paused in the act of slipping off his coat.

"Has any new case been brought to us this morning? I am late, but I was unavoidably detained."

"None yet, Mr. Powell," Ethel responded. "Mr. Corliss said I was to tell you that he must see you right away, though—he and Mr. Baynes and Mr. Nichols and Mr. Howe. It's something about a man with funny ears."

She darted a sly look at George Roper and he shook his head at her.

"Ethel, have you been getting the rest of the firm all steamed up about your ghostly young man? Rex"—he turned to the other—"our esteemed secretary is under the impression that some one is showing a mysterious and undue interest in the activities of the Shadowers."

"That would not be beyond the bounds of possibility," Rex replied gravely after a second glance at the girl's flushed, earnest face. "It is one of the factors we must be on our guard against, you know. You may tell me about it later, Ethel, but in the meantime, please ask Mr. Corliss and the others to join us in my office. Come, George."

He pushed aside a panel near the desk and directly opposite the front door which opened into the luxuriously appointed hexagonal inner chamber, closed the aperture carefully behind them and motioned to one of the great chairs about the council table, while he himself took the head. George had barely eased his long frame into the seat when another panel in the second wall space to the left was thrust violently aside and the four other members of the organization precipitated themselves excitedly into the room.

"Rex! We thought you'd never come—" Cliff Nichols began nervously, but Phil Howe interrupted him.

"Has somebody been tailing you, too?"

"I've been worried about you, Rex," Henry Corliss's fat face was flushed with affectionate concern. "Why didn't you phone?"

"You see, my dear chap," drawled Lucian Baynes. "We find that we have all been more or less under espionage for the past few days—except perhaps George—"

He turned inquiringly toward the oldest member of the firm, who nodded a trifle grimly.

"I have not been exempt, either, I find. But Rex will think we have all gone out of our minds—"

Rex Powell shook his head smilingly, but his lips tightened as he gestured toward the other chairs around the table.

"I think I understand, gentlemen. Suppose you tell me one at a time your reasons for thinking we are once more under surveillance?"

He had turned to Henry as he spoke, and the rest waited for the latter's reply as they seated themselves.

"I've been living at the Brixton, that little down town commercial hotel you told me of, Rex. Coming from the Middle West as I do it's been pretty safe for me. I don't think a soul has recognized old Doc Cortland in the respectable, retired druggist, Hen Corliss, but last Monday night I worked late here in the laboratory and I had a kind of a hunch that some one tailed me home, but I couldn't spot them on the way.

"A youngish man was close at my heels entering the hotel lobby, though, and followed me to the cigar stand. He was still standing there when I got my key at the desk and went up in the elevator, but I don't suppose I'd have given him a second thought if it hadn't been for his queer, deformed ears." Henry paused.

"I left the office just after Phil the next night and noticed the same feller tailing him, so I followed along behind. He came right out of Phil's house after a few minutes and hurried away and I lost him, being too blamed fat to chase after the car he grabbed. I didn't know what Phil had in mind, so I didn't bother him then. I went on down to my hotel, meaning to speak to him about it yesterday, but he didn't happen to be around the office during the time I was. This morning Ethel got here before he did and I find that the same unhealthy looking hombre has been watching her for the past three mornings. Now, you boys go ahead."

He settled back with his plump hands clasped over the rotund paunch of his stomach and gazed almost defiantly at Lucian and Cliff, but it was the irrepressible Phil who took up the narrative.

"That's right, what Henry says. Tuesday night I beat it to my room over near the river where I keep my old pants and shoes and the sweater and cap like I used to wear before Rex made a swell of me!"

He grinned and then his boyishly impudent face sobered.

"There was nothing doing around here, and I got a hunch to go down and see a pal of mine on the water front. I no sooner got to my room and started changing than somebody knocked on the door, and there stood a guy with a pasty-colored map. It looked as if it had been stepped on, and there were funny blobs where his ears ought to have been.

"He could hear all right, though, for when I asked him what the—well, what he wanted, he mumbled something about getting the wrong door. I slammed mine in his face, but it was a good five minutes before I heard him shuffling off down the stairs, slow at first and then breaking into a run. I took him for a nut—cokie, maybe—but afterward I got thinking it over, and I didn't go down along the water front that

night. I forgot all about it yesterday, though, and this morning it's handed to me that not only Ethel and Henry, but Luce and Cliff, too—"

"It couldn't possibly have been the same chap, for the description differs in its most salient point," drawled Luce. "As you know, for some time Cliff and I have been sharing bachelor apartments in a quiet old section down near Washington Square. Yesterday afternoon we left the office about four and started for that exhibition of rare autographs and engravings at Cristofero's. Hanging about the entrance downstairs here we both observed a most extraordinary looking individual. His face was as expressionless as though he were drugged and positively ghastly in its pallor and he had enormous, pinkish ears, which protruded through the mouse-colored hair that reached to his collar."

"Ah!" George Roper murmured. "This is getting really interesting!"

"This grotesque creature trailed us to Cristofero's—we found him waiting outside—and then down to our rooms, Rex," Cliff said. "The chap got on our nerves so that we had a bite sent in instead of dining out as we had intended. I suppose this sounds foolish, but if I could give you an idea of that devilishly uncanny face of his—"

"I myself am tolerably familiar with it, except for the huge ears you speak of," interrupted George. "I live near Madison Avenue in a comfortable but somewhat dilapidated boarding house, as befits a retired clergyman on a meager income. Since last Monday afternoon the young man you mention has occupied the fourth floor back. I am convinced of it from the description you have just given me, but I suspected it from a question or two which Ethel put to me just before Rex came. In spite of that slight but significant discrepancy—"

He paused, and Henry's round countenance grew preternaturally grave.

"Do you mean," he demanded, "that Ethel and Phil and I saw the same young man, but *without those ears?*"

For a long moment the six Shadowers stared at each other, and then Cliff exclaimed nervously:

"We're talking idiotic nonsense! We've not all gone mad, and no one can be playing a practical joke on us! What do you think it means, Rex? For Heaven's sake, what's the answer?"

In the instant which followed a faint buzzing sounded upon their ears and a stir ran around the circle, for it was Ethel's secret signal to those in the council room that a stranger had entered the outer office.

Rex Powell glanced from one to another of them with a slight smile as he held up his hand in a warning gesture for silence, and then touched an invisible spring beneath the edge of the table.

"Perhaps, gentlemen," he remarked quietly, "the answer is here."

CHAPTER II.

MARY JANE BRINGS A MESSAGE.

THE voice which came first to the eagerly attentive ears of the Shadowers when the dictaphone switch was opened, however, was that of no stranger, but of their secretary herself, and Ethel spoke in accents of unstudied astonishment.

"Sweet daddy! You've been in an accident, haven't you?"

Henry Corliss half rose from his chair in professional concern, but fell back again at a sign from Rex as a vigorous, slightly nasal feminine voice replied severely:

"Young woman, do I look 's if I was in the habit of going 'round town with my sleeve tore and my hat hanging over one eye? I've heard tell of the traffic in New York being turr'ble, but I'd never have believed a body could get in four smashups in three days! It's a mercy I come myself this morning instead of letting Miss Wyatt try it again!"

Three days! And for three days the strange creature without ears had been dogging the footsteps of the Shadowers! They glanced at each other, and then a faint, metallic, clicking sound came to them. Close beside the panel by which Rex and George had entered a tiny slit, like those in a slot machine appeared in the wall, and through it a narrow ribbon of paper unwound itself sinuously.

Rex nodded to George, who moved over,

caught up the end of the strip of paper and silently studied the message typed upon it as it was unreeled beneath his hands. He tore it off, spread it out upon the table, and they all read:

> Old dame like country school-teacher from movies but looks as if been in battle hat smashed hair coming down face cut but too excited yet to know it glasses broken glove split—dressed in black came out of ark but good quality—wait will try get line.

It was Ethel's private ticker, invented and installed by Rex. By means of it Ethel, operating a tiny, noiseless keyboard concealed upon her lap, communicated to them her instantaneous personal impressions of their visitors. On previous occasions they had gained more than one valuable tip from it. But now the sound of her voice reached them once more.

"'Miss Wyatt,' did you say? I don't think any one of that name is known here."

It was evident that Ethel had regained her self-possession, for she spoke now in the primly artificial tone reserved for possible clients. "Perhaps you have come to the wrong office; but at least you must let me help you; I'm afraid you're hurt!"

"That is blood, ain't it? Never mind, young woman, though I thank you. It's only a scratch, and I always carry a plenty of clean handkerchiefs with me. That's the last one of them taxicabs I get into if I have to go back to the hotel on my hands and knees! I don't expect you do know who Miss Wyatt is, but if this is the office of the Shadowers, as they call themselves, it's where she's been trying to get for three days!" The severe voice was mollified but still emphatic. "If you'll just send for whoever's in charge I'd like to speak to him."

"I'm sorry, but I must have the full name and address," Ethel responded firmly. "It is against the rules."

"Land's sakes, I've lost my hand bag!" the visitor interrupted. "It must have flown off my arm when I shot out of that cab door! Eighteen years I've had it, and it was 'most as good as new!"

The listeners were diverted for a moment as another and shorter reel of paper wound through the aperture. As before, George tore it off and brought it to them.

> Looks like real thing and maybe kind of servant will make sure.

Cliff made a gesture of impatience, but Rex left his chair, and moving noiselessly to the filing case, he opened a drawer and selected a card. He was returning to his place when Ethel's voice came to them, coolly sympathetic.

"It's too bad about your bag, but was there anything in it for the Shadowers? Any message, I mean?"

"Of course! Miss Wyatt's card, and one of them circulars your company sent her about four months ago; it said if ever she wanted anything investigated for her real private and confidential, she could call on them here. It was addressed personal to Miss Arabella Wyatt, of Wyatt Manor, Millerstown, New York, and a fine piece of impertinence it seemed to me; but Miss Wyatt got to thinking—"

The nasal tones broke off abruptly and then went on: "I can't wait here all day and her not knowing what's happened! I'll thank you to send word to whoever runs this business that Mary Jane Dusenberry, Miss Wyatt's maid, is here to take them to her!"

Silently Rex laid before his confrères the card which he had selected from the filing case and they read:

> Wyatt, Arabella Merrington. Aged forty. Only daughter of the late Judge Jeremiah Wyatt and his wife Elizabeth Merrington, both of Millerstown, New York. (See Ogden Ronalds, file X-X.)

"I never worked that burg," Phil remarked. "Is it a live one?"

"What's 'File X-X?'" demanded Henry. "You never mentioned it to us, Rex!"

"I thought our circulars were sent only to society matrons in the city." Cliff stroked his embryo mustache. "Why this middle-aged spinster in a country town? And who is Ogden Ronalds?"

Lucian made a gesture of impatience.

"Rex wouldn't have included the lady among our possible prospects had it not been worth while, and if my memory is

not at fault a notable picture—a Sir Joshua Reynolds, I think—was purchased at Christie's in London some years ago for a Judge Wyatt, of Millerstown, New York."

"Ogden Ronalds'!" George glanced sharply at Rex. "Wasn't he the man who died at the very steps of the—"

But Rex motioned quickly for silence as Ethel spoke once more.

"Well, without a card or circular, Mrs. Dusenberry—"

"Miss!" snapped their visitor.

"*Miss* Dusenberry," Ethel corrected herself in her blandest tone. "It is contrary to my orders, but since you've been in this accident—and three others, you say?"

"Not me. Miss Wyatt was in them, and that's why I wouldn't let her come to-day, although she wasn't hurt, thanks to goodness! Monday afternoon her taxicab broke down on the way here and shook her up considerable; Tuesday morning the one she took run into a post of that overhead railroad, and yesterday another cab slammed right into the side of hers. We only come to the city Monday morning, too. I declare, it's a wonder a body manages to live a week here!"

"I'm sure if you've come all the way to New York to consult the Shadowers the head of the firm will be willing to see you himself."

Ethel had raised her voice slightly, and now the telephone sounded at Rex's elbow. He lifted the receiver to hear her ask in well-simulated apology: "Mr. Powell, would you give a few minutes' time to a lady who has lost the card and circular she was bringing in an accident, but who has come on account of a Miss Arabella Wyatt, of Millerstown?"

"I am engaged for the moment, Miss Jepson, but if the lady suffered any injury or nervous shock in the accident you mention, ask her to step into Dr. Corliss's office, where he will attend her at once. Then I will see her. Very well. Good-by."

Rex hung up the receiver, shut off the switch beneath the table's edge, and turned to the others with his face set in lines of sudden intensity.

"I haven't time to explain now, but until we have learned the details of this case, and decided which of us shall assume the leadership of it, there are certain things which must be done. The man who has been watching us for three days may or may not be connected with this matter. But we can afford to take no chances. Above all, having identified us, he must not be allowed to leave the city should he attempt to do so."

"He may be on his way already—" George began, but Rex interrupted quickly:

"No. I think you'll find him in the nearest long distance telephone booth. Henry, go into your laboratory and fix up this Dusenberry woman's cut face. Don't ask a single question, but just be professionally sympathetic. Take about ten minutes for the job. When you've finished send her in to me.

"Then hurry as fast as you can down to Pink-Eye Mike's and tell him you're going to bring another patient there who may make a little trouble coming in, and you'll want a couple of the boys who you can trust to help get him upstairs and then guard him when you're away. Tell them he'll be brought there in Phil's taxi, No. 06439."

"Hold on, Rex!" Phil exclaimed. "I can't kidnap him in broad daylight without getting run in myself. And how'll I find him and make him take my taxi, with the hundreds of 'em hanging around this neighborhood?"

"George will persuade him," responded Rex, ignoring that gentleman's start of surprise. "Where is your chauffeur's outfit?"

"Here in my locker." Phil's eyes commenced to sparkle. "The cab is right on the stand at the corner, too!"

"Bring it back to the entrance of the building here and watch for George. If he seems to be having a fit, don't worry as long as our friend with the removable ears is with him; but drive them like the devil to Pink-Eye Mike's. If George is alone he'll give you further instructions. Hurry, Phil!"

"You said it!" Phil scuttled like a rabbit through the panel leading to the workshop where in idle times he studied the latest tools and chemicals employed in the safe-breaking art—of which he had until recently been an ardent devotee.

"Look here, Rex." Henry had paused. "Am I to wait at Pink-Eye's till Phil shows up with this side-show freak?"

"No; when you've made your arrangements, and put the two strong-arm boys on the job, come back here and Ethel will have a message for you. Now, George," Rex continued as Henry, too, disappeared, "our man is probably in one of that row of long distance phone booths in the main lobby downstairs. I've seen him there more than once in the last three days."

"You!" Cliff exclaimed.

"Rex, you don't mean to say that chap has been watching you, too!" Lucian had once again lost his habitual drawl.

"I think I have been secure so far from his observation, but I realized instantly from your description that he was the same fellow I'd seen hanging about. George, he is a guest at your boarding-house; if he happens to be in one of those booths wait until he comes out and then be taken ill, a sudden seizure, recognize him and beg him to accompany you home in a taxi.

"He may refuse the poor, stricken, elderly clergyman on the plea of important business—he might even deny living in your house or ever having seen you before—but you will have fallen practically into his arms and the pressure of a revolver against his side ought to persuade him to assist you."

"I get you, my friend!" A slow grin broke over George's lugubrious countenance. "Our young disciple shall willy-nilly perform an act of brotherly love—and reap the reward which so frequently follows in this ungrateful world of getting it in the neck as soon as I have him safe in Phil's taxi! If he is not in one of the booths downstairs I'll scout around to those in the immediate vicinity. It's a good bet he won't go far off till he sees which way the cat jumps. When he is secure at Pink-Eye Mike's shall I, too, return here and await a message?"

Rex nodded. Then as George withdrew he rose, and replacing the card in the filing case, he took from a drawer in its lower section a cover of sober green cloth which he threw over the center table. On this he arranged three ponderous volumes of "Lives of Famous Men" and an old-fashioned brass desk set from behind the property screen of Spanish leather.

The same source provided several stiff portraits in dull, oval, gold frames of stern-looking elderly gentlemen in stocks which took the place of the prints on the walls. A touch upon the electric light switch changed the soft glow in which they had been seated to a warm effulgence as of sunshine. Hinged spaces between the panels leading into the other offices swung about as Rex pressed them in turn and settled again in the walls, revealing false backs lined by shabby, calf-bound tomes from floor to ceiling.

In less than three minutes the luxurious but somber consulting room of the Shadowers had been transformed into a fair semblance of the solid type of law office to be found in any county seat, usually presided over by the local leading lights in jurisprudence. Familiar as Cliff and Lucian were with Rex's method of surrounding their clients with an atmosphere calculated to produce the most favorable psychological effect upon each they chuckled appreciatively at the change which had taken place before their eyes.

"This is delightful, Rex," Luce commented. "I might suggest gold-rimmed spectacles for you and perhaps an alpaca coat. But I fear Cliff and I are hopelessly out of place."

"Not at all." Rex seated himself again at the head of the table. "I think it would be best that I interview the woman in seeming privacy, but I want you both to hear what is said. Go to your own offices and listen in by means of the dictaphones. Quick! There's Henry's signal now!"

A subdued buzzer had sounded and scarcely had the two obeyed than the panel leading to the laboratory opened and Henry ushered in his patient. She was a tall, angular woman of fifty, with thin, iron-gray hair, sharp features and cold blue eyes that gazed about her at first suspiciously and then in reluctant approval as they traveled to the man who had risen and come forward with an air of courteous inquiry.

"Miss Dusenberry, this is Mr. Powell, the president of our corporation," Henry

announced with a flourish of one of his pudgy hands. "Miss Dusenberry has suffered a painful accident, but I am happy to say that she appears too strong-minded for the shock to have any lasting effect. I will leave you now to your consultation."

He bowed in his best manner, and the woman, who had flushed slightly, observed:

"I ain't the kind to keel over easy, doctor, and I want to thank you kindly for fixing up this cut on my face."

She touched the neat strip of plaster half concealed by her rearranged hair. "I lost my hand bag, but if I get back to the hotel without something else happening to me—"

"There is no fee, madam!" He smiled cordially. "It was a pleasure to be of this slight assistance. Good morning."

He nodded to Rex, and as the panel slid back into place behind him the latter drew out the chair beside his.

"Sit here, Miss Dusenberry. You have called on behalf of Miss Wyatt, of Millerstown, my secretary informs me."

"Yes, sir. I'm Mary Jane Dusenberry, and I've been her maid and kind of companion for more than twenty years, since her ma died when she was a young girl. Millerstown's a real quiet place, and it ain't changed much since I can remember except for the coming of the automobiles instead of horses. Nobody moves away and mighty few new folks come, so the families have mostly known each other for generations."

She paused. "I'm telling you all this so's you can kind of understand Miss Wyatt before you meet her. Most everybody's pretty well fixed, and some are downright wealthy. But the old judge, Miss Wyatt's pa, left her a sight more money than the other folks in town have got, and they've always been the leading family. She could have married any young man in our part of the State, but she never so much as looked at a soul till a year ago last spring, when a strange gentleman came to town."

"Mr. Ogden Ronalds?" Rex asked, toying idly with the seal on the old desk set before him.

"Yes, sir." The woman darted him a keen glance. "Mr. Ronalds was a fine man with a way about him that was different, and he swept her clear off her feet. In six weeks they was engaged. The wedding day was set for two months later, but when it come Mr. Ronalds died right at the steps of the altar, just as the minister was commencing 'Dearly beloved—' It was heart disease, they said. Miss Wyatt bore up till after the funeral, which was held from our house.

"Then she took to her bed, and I thought she'd likely die, too; but after a while she was up and about again, only just a shadow of what she had been. Lately, though, she's perked up considerable, but always kind of brooded over Mr. Ronalds's death and the way of it. Since your circular came—well, I could see she was making up her mind about something. Last week she told me that her and me was coming to New York to see your concern without nobody else knowing, and so we did, on Monday."

"H-m!" Rex dropped the seal and straightened in his chair. "At what hotel are you stopping?"

"The Bellemonde. It's more like a castle — a robber's castle, at that, from the prices—but the one the old judge used to stay at was tore down long ago, so we left it to the taxicab driver. Miss Wyatt didn't want to telephone to you and have folks along the line know her business, so right away Monday afternoon she started out to call here. But there was an accident to her cab that shook her up so she turned around and came straight back to the hotel."

The woman's thin lips tightened in a line, and her eyes snapped indignantly. "I never in all my born days heard of such crazy, reckless driving as they allow in this town! Miss Wyatt got in another accident Tuesday morning, and one yesterday, too, when she tried to reach your office.

"So to-day I put my foot down and said if there was any more such chances to be took I'd take 'em. Not knowing the city, we wasn't either of us going to risk getting lost by walking or riding on a street car, and the cab I hired—though I will say the man drove real slow and careful—got backed into by a truck right in front of your door, throwing me clear acrost the sidewalk! Now, Mr. Powell, if you know any ways of getting us to the Bellemonde

alive I wish you'd come and see Miss Wyatt."

"I can return you safely there, I assure you, but we do not undertake cases without knowing their exact nature." Rex spoke courteously but firmly. "You are in Miss Wyatt's confidence, and I infer from what you have said that it is in connection with Mr. Ronalds's death or possibly his estate that she wishes to consult us. Just what sort of investigation does Miss Wyatt require?"

"Well, I ain't taking it on myself to say any more'n I have to, but it hasn't anything to do with what Mr. Ronalds left behind him, if that's what you mean, for 'twas all settled free and clear. But there've been queer doings since, and Miss Wyatt never was easy in her mind about him dying like that, never from the minute he toppled over beside her, there in the church!"

The woman pulled nervously at her split glove and drew her torn cloak more tightly about her. "She hasn't any reason to feel as she does, you understand, Mr. Powell, but she just wants you to go into it all and set her mind at rest."

"We shall be glad to do so; but what are the queer things which have happened since? We have experts for each separate line of our investigations, and I must know who to call upon."

The woman regarded him steadily for a moment and then drew a deep breath.

"I s'pose you'll have to know, and I guess I can trust you. Some of Miss Wyatt's most valuable jewelry, not only what Mr. Ronalds give her, but what was left from generations back in both sides of her family, has been changed, and false stones put in the settings. Moreover, we've had two robberies in the house lately, though nothing was took, and for the past three months Miss Wyatt's been getting letters with no name signed to them, that upset her turr'ble. She's brought one or two down to show you, and some of the jewelry.

"If you know what Millerstown was like you'd realize what a scandal it would stir up to breathe a word to a soul there, and Miss Wyatt didn't know which way to turn nor who to trust. But it's the notion about Mr. Ronalds's death that's preying most on her mind. She can't bring herself to believe that it—it was the Lord's will!"

CHAPTER III.

THE LOST HEIRLOOMS.

THE drive to the Bellemonde in the luxurious seven passenger sedan which had been the first acquisition of the Shadowers upon the conclusion of their last previous case was a comparatively silent one. Rex himself was at the wheel and Mary Jane Dusenberry sat between Cliff and Lucian, considerably impressed by the dignity and aloof reserve in the bearing of the handwriting expert and the jewel connoisseur.

Had she known that this seeming abstraction was but a cloak to conceal a nerve-racking watchfulness or dreamed that in the coat pockets farthest from her side each clutched a revolver, it is possible that she would have walked with less assurance along the corridors of the Bolingbroke and down to the waiting car when, after presenting them and briefly stating their respective specialties in investigation, Rex suggested that they call at once upon her employer.

There had been no sign of the earless man, however, nor of George. Phil's taxi was nowhere in evidence when they left the building. The Bellemonde was reached without incident. They were ushered immediately to the suite occupied by Miss Wyatt.

Mary Jane opened the entrance door with her key and called in a subdued, reassuring tone:

"It's me, ma'am. I've brought some of the gentlemen with me, but I'll put them in the parlor and come right to you first. Don't want to scare her about my accident."

She added the last in a hurried undertone as she led the way into the conventional gilt-and-damask hotel drawing-room and there left the visitors. They heard her brisk footsteps along the hallway and then a little cry in a low, musical, feminine voice.

"Why, Mary Jane! You've been hurt! Oh, when is this all—"

The closing of a door brought abrupt

silence and the three Shadowers glanced significantly at each other as they seated themselves.

"Evidently the mistress does not hold the same opinion of these 'accidents' as the maid," Cliff murmured. "I wonder if she knows our earless friend or guesses his present activities?"

"I was rather surprised that you did not speak of him to the woman, Rex." Lucian turned to their leader. "She's a loquacious individual, and I fancy a great deal more could be drawn from her."

"My dear Luce, we don't even know yet that the fellow has any connection whatever with this case," Rex replied. "My arrangements to get him out of the way were simply a precaution against possible interference; it may be that he has other reasons for his interest in our firm."

"But you don't think so!" Cliff retorted. "By the way, I was, as you know, in—er—enforced retirement when the dramatic death of this chap Ronalds occurred, so I never even heard of it before; but what led you to believe that the circumstances of it would ever bring our present client to our door?"

Rex smiled.

"I'll tell you when the case is finished. Frankly, I did not anticipate any such complications as appear to have ensued. The sending of that circular was as much of a flyer as the others, but we won't discuss that now. We will take up your branches of the investigation in the interval before Dr. Corliss joins us."

He added the last sentence in a louder tone and his companions nodded in quick comprehension, for a door somewhere down the hall had opened and there came the soft, sibilant murmur of silken garments and light but measured footfalls.

A tall, stately woman appeared on the threshold, hesitated for a moment and then came slowly forward as her three callers rose. Her delicately pretty face, innocent of cosmetics, showed the rose leaf complexion of a girl, and her slenderly rounded figure belied the years attributed to her in the files of the Shadowers, but there were fine lines about her mobile lips and gentle, hazel eyes, and through her softly waving brown hair a curious, forked, snow-white lock ran like the trail of a streak of lightning.

"Mr. Powell?" Her low voice halted inquiringly and Rex bowed.

"I am he, Miss Wyatt, and the nominal president of our organization, but we work practically together on all cases. May I present Mr. Baynes, our authority on jewels, false and genuine, and our handwriting expert, Mr. Nichols?"

Miss Wyatt acknowledged the introductions with quiet reserve, and motioning toward the chairs from which they had risen, she seated herself, clasping her long, slim, white hands convulsively in her lap.

"I hardly know how to begin, gentlemen," she said. "Until within the last two years my life has been wholly uneventful. So much has occurred since, so many strange and terrible things, that I find it difficult to place the facts before you coherently."

"Perhaps it may help you, Miss Wyatt, if I tell you that I am conversant with the details of your tragic bereavement in so far as the newspapers presented them to the public," Rex observed. "I understand from your maid that the most important phase to you of the investigation you wish us to undertake is in regard to the sudden death of Mr. Ronalds."

Miss Wyatt bowed her head for an instant, but when she looked up her clear eyes bore no hint of grief, only a shrinking dread.

"Yes. I have been obsessed with a hideous fancy for which I have not a single rational excuse to offer. But it persists and now that I contemplate a change I feel that this—this ghost perhaps of my own overwrought imagination alone—must be laid. The investigation must be as you promise in your note, absolutely private and confidential; no one but Mary Jane and myself must learn of your identity and purpose. I want as thorough and complete an inquiry into the death of Mr. Ronalds as may be possible after the time which has elapsed. I must be assured beyond a doubt that it was a natural one!"

Rex nodded sympathetically.

"I gathered that. But may I ask what this change is which you contemplate making?"

A faint flush mounted in Miss Wyatt's smooth cheeks.

"A neighbor and lifelong friend has asked me to be his wife, Mr. Powell, and I am inclined to accept his proposal."

The low voice did not falter, but she paused as though seeking words.

"No doubt you think it strange under the circumstances that I should continue to look backward, but I can bring myself to take no definite step until my vague, chimerical fears are set at rest. It is like a duty which I feel that I must perform. It is all the more imperative because of a certain shockingly incomprehensible discovery which I have made lately, and the disquieting events that have followed it."

"You mean the discovery that some imitation jewels have been substituted for your genuine ones, in the original settings; that your home has been broken into twice of late, although nothing was stolen, and that you have been the recipient of some anonymous letters?" Rex asked. "Your maid gave me these facts, but not in detail.

"I would suggest that we take up these points first, until the arrival of Dr. Corliss, our medical examiner, who will assume charge of that branch of the investigation which concerns Mr. Ronalds's death. Your maid tells me that you were prostrated for a long time, Miss Wyatt. When you recovered, was everything and every one about you seemingly just as before? Tell me the first untoward happening, no matter how trivial."

"The first incident was the discovery about my jewels. That was in July, curiously enough, just before your announcement of incorporation came," Miss Wyatt responded in a quickened tone. "I have not a large collection, for we are plain people in Millerstown, but a few of my heirlooms were of much intrinsic value, as were Mr. Ronalds's gifts to me. Of their sentimental worth I cannot speak.

"To be brief, a set consisting of pendant earrings, a brooch, and a bracelet all of pigeon-blood rubies; a locket containing a single rare diamond of some note, which had been in my mother's family for several generations; a large, square-cut emerald ring and another set with a deep sapphire surrounded by small, perfect pearls—these are the heirlooms which were changed.

"A triple rope of pearls and a pear-shaped pearl pendant were Mr. Ronalds's gifts. Imitations were substituted for these. I kept them all together in an old safe that had stood until his death in my father's office in the courthouse. Many other trinkets of lesser value that were with them were left undisturbed."

Lucian, who had been taking notes rapidly, looked up as she paused and asked suddenly:

"Was the notable diamond of which you speak—the one set in the locket—*blue*, Miss Wyatt? Can it be that you are referring to the famous Merrington blue diamond?"

"It has been called that among collectors, I believe." Miss Wyatt rose. "I will get the locket and other pieces so that you may examine them for yourself."

"If you will bring the anonymous letters also, Miss Wyatt—I believe you have them here in town with you?" Rex suggested.

"Yes. There were six in all, but as the handwriting was the same and the wording practically so I brought only two. I shall not be a moment, gentlemen."

"Oh, my Christian aunt!" moaned Lucian when their client had vanished down the hall. "The Merrington blue diamond, and she kept it in an old, rattletrap safe! I'll wager they don't even lock the doors at night in that giddy town! When Phil learns of this he will weep for his lost opportunity!"

"I say, no wonder you listed her, Rex!" Cliff's near-sighted eyes were blinking in sheer wonder behind their huge-rimmed glasses. "'Pigeon-blood rubies, square-cut emeralds, ropes of pearls!' She speaks of them as though, except for sentiment's sake, they might be brass buttons! Is this client of ours a female Crœsus?"

"She owns just under the controlling stock in several of the railroads which run through the State," Rex responded quietly. "Miss Wyatt pays taxes on about half the land in the county and there is a prize bull on one of her model dairy farms alone for which the manager has refused thirty thousand dollars, while her canneries—"

"Stop!" Cliff cried under his breath. "I

suppose she writes a neat, copybook hand, too, that a child could imitate! Phil is not the only one who could well bemoan a lost opportunity!"

Rex made a warning gesture and in another moment Miss Wyatt reappeared.

"Here are the letters." She held out two envelopes of a thin, cheap grade. With a slight bow Cliff took them from her and, producing a small magnifying glass, moved to the window. "The jewels—or rather, their settings—are in this bag."

She placed an old-fashioned canvas valise on the table as she spoke, and opening it with a tiny key, displayed several worn leather and velvet cases and two new, rich ones stamped with the name of an internationally famous jeweler. Rex and Lucian came forward eagerly as she removed the latter cases first.

"These are the substitutes for the pearls Mr. Ronalds gave me."

The pear-shaped pendant was of a faint, pinkish luster and perfect in form, set with two small, blue-white diamonds on a platinum chain as fine as a hair. Rex uttered a low, involuntary exclamation of admiration, but Lucian shook his head as he laid it aside and took up the triple rope of pearls. These were graduated in size, the larger ones as big as white hothouse grapes, and they, too, seemed at a first glance to be of extraordinary purity and luster, but Lucian ran them carelessly through his fingers.

"Fake and not particularly well made ones, at that," he announced. "The small diamonds in the setting of the pendant are genuine and of a superb grade, but did you not yourself detect the difference in the pearls, Miss Wyatt?"

"No, I—I put them away and never even looked at them after Mr. Ronalds's death. I could not!" She shuddered and an expression of pain crossed her face. "I only opened the cases in July after my suspicions had been aroused by the rubies. I never wore any of the heirlooms, and they have not been on exhibition since before my mother died; but it has been the custom in our family to send, or take, them every few years to an old established firm of jewelers in Albany to be sure that they are in good condition.

"In July I decided to have them gone over once more and I recalled my father saying that the settings of the ruby earrings and bracelet were loose. I had noticed this myself, and also that the hinge of the pin on the brooch was worn, but when I examined them I found to my astonishment that the settings were tight and the hinge looked as though it had been reënforced, as you see. Then it occurred to me that there was an odd, glassy look to the Merrington diamond; the sapphire in the ring did not seem so deeply blue, and the emerald appeared dull and lifeless.

"I thought that I must be mad to suspect anything, but I got out an old school microscope and examined them more thoroughly. Even with this inadequate aid I could see faint but new scratches on the settings, and I decided to take them myself to Albany, together with the pearls, and learn the truth. Without knowing it, my old jeweler there confirmed my worst suspicions with his first words. He congratulated me upon having taken the advice he had long given me, to have duplicates made and lock the originals safely away in a vault. I did not tell him the truth, but merely said I wanted his opinion of the substitutes. He told me that the rubies, emerald and sapphire were quite good, indeed, but the imitation of the great diamond, extremely difficult to execute in any case, had been rather poorly done and the pearls were of a very low grade."

She had opened case after case and the living fire of variegated coloring that fell over the table made Rex gasp. Lucian drew up a chair, took from his pocket a jeweler's glass, and screwing it into his eye, commenced a minute examination of each piece in turn. At last he looked up with a slight deprecatory smile.

"The small pearls in the sapphire ring are genuine, Miss Wyatt, and the quaint, heavy, antique settings are charming, but I am afraid they are all you have left of your heirlooms. Now tell me, please, when you last looked at them prior to July, just where your safe is kept, and who might have had access to it."

Miss Wyatt flushed again and her low voice held a note of distress.

"It has been the custom in the Merrington family for generations for a bride to wear the blue diamond on her wedding day. About a month before my proposed marriage I told Mr. Ronalds of this and showed him the diamond, together with the other heirlooms. He begged me, however, to wear only his pearls and I agreed. The safe is kept in a closet opening from my father's old library which is in a wing of the house on the ground floor and is seldom entered except to be cleaned and set in order. But any one who comes into my home would have comparatively easy access to it. I did not touch the safe again until after—after Mr. Ronalds's funeral, when I put away the pearls. Although I looked over the other jewels then as a matter of habit my—my thoughts were not upon them. To my knowledge the closet containing the safe has not been opened since then until a few weeks ago."

"This closet is kept locked, I presume?" She nodded.

"The key is always placed in the secret compartment of an old walnut cabinet—a whatnot, we call it—which stands beside the fireplace."

"Is there no burglar alarm system, modern or otherwise, installed in your house, Miss Wyatt?" pursued Lucian. "Surely you have many other objects of great value there? I have been an art connoisseur of a sort for many years, and I distinctly recall the purchase by Judge Wyatt's representative in London of a Sir Joshua Reynolds?"

"Oh, yes. My father bought a Corot, too, and a Rembrandt, as well as several almost equally well-known pictures, examples of the Italian school, but on his death I presented them to our public library," Miss Wyatt replied simply. "There are some old family portraits, but the furnishings of the house are not rare, nor old enough to be of especial value except for some of the antique, heavily carved pieces. A burglary is an event practically unknown in Millerstown and it never occurred to me to have an alarm system installed."

Lucian darted a glance at Rex that spoke volumes, and then as a telephone rang somewhere in the suite he asked:

"Did every one in town know that you kept those valuable jewels in the safe?"

"No, I believe most people thought they were in my vault at the bank or in Judge Tompkins's care. He was my father's old friend and has been like a father to me, as well as my lawyer," she explained. "He often advised me to place them in the bank vault, but somehow I liked to have them near me. Like most people who are alone in the world I have lived much in the past and its associations."

"There's two gentlemen calling, ma'am." Mary Jane's angular figure appeared in the doorway. "Dr. Corliss and Mr. Roper."

"They are the members of our firm whom I have been expecting," Rex remarked in a hurried undertone to their client, and she nodded:

"Ask that they be shown upstairs at once, please, Mary Jane."

"Miss Wyatt"—Cliff rose and advanced from the window seat as the elderly maid withdrew—"I should like to take these letters back to the office to study them in detail if I may."

"Of course." She turned to Lucian, who was busily replacing the jewel case in the bag. "Perhaps you would consider it advisable to take these also, Mr. Baynes?"

"I should, indeed," he replied. "I do not wish to promise too much, but I have reason to hope that I may be able to trace the manufacturer of some of these imitation stones and through him learn the identity of the individual who ordered them. The real Merrington blue diamond alone was valued at something like a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, was it not?"

"A hundred and thirty; at least, that is what a private collector offered for it the last time it was sent, together with the other heirlooms, to the jeweler's in Albany, about four years ago," Miss Wyatt responded. "The rubies in the earrings were exactly five carats each, as were the three in the bracelet, while the one in the brooch was ten carats. The earrings were valued approximately at fifteen thousand, as was the brooch; the bracelet was worth twenty-two thousand five hundred; the square-cut emerald ring, twenty thousand, and the sapphire fifteen. Mr. Ronalds had the rope

of pearls insured for me for eighty thousand, and the pendant for twelve."

Cliff gasped audibly, and after a rapid mental calculation Lucian observed:

"So your loss is something over three hundred thousand, Miss Wyatt? Why did you not report it immediately to the authorities?"

"I can scarcely explain so that you will understand." Her slim hands twisted together in her lap. "I did not think of the loss in terms of money. The pearls had been a gift and sacred, while the blue diamond and the rest were like a living link with the past, and when they were gone it seemed as though they had died, too.

"The news of a robbery of such magnitude would attract countrywide attention, and I shrank from the dread of publicity which an investigation would cause. I felt that further notoriety after my terrible experience of a year and a half ago would kill me. I did not even tell Mary Jane for several days after my return from Albany, even though I learned that the house had been broken into and ransacked during my absence. Then your circular came, and after that the first of the anonymous letters, and I began seriously to consider consulting you. But then it was Mr. Ronalds's death which preyed most heavily on my thoughts and finally brought me to you."

"Dr. Corliss, ma'am," Mary Jane announced, "Mr. George Roper."

CHAPTER IV.

THE INTERRUPTED CEREMONY.

"YOU see, doctor," Rex explained to Henry, after the newcomers had been properly presented and had seated themselves, "Miss Wyatt's jewels have been removed from their settings some time during the past fifteen or sixteen months, and imitations substituted for them. But it is in regard to a tragic event in your line of investigation which preceded these that we have primarily been called upon, and I know you would prefer to have Miss Wyatt tell you the story in her own words."

"Do you mean a death in the family to which there were perhaps some suspicious circumstances attached?" Henry's broad face took on an expression of sympathetic concern.

"Not in my family, doctor; my—my fiancé." Miss Wyatt turned to him. "Had a few more words been spoken he would have been my husband, but he dropped dead beside me at the altar of the church."

"Dear me!" Henry murmured; but his small eyes began to glisten. "This is very sad indeed, and very strange. I do not wonder that you want an investigation. There was an autopsy, of course. What did it disclose?"

"No autopsy was considered necessary. Dr. Morton Weir was Mr. Ronalds's best friend, and he told our coroner enough to convince him that death was due to heart disease."

"Dr. Weir?" Henry repeated inquiringly.

"Yes. He is an eminent physician and the proprietor of a large sanatorium lately established near Millerstown. It was when Mr. Ronalds came up there to visit him and for a rest after a nervous breakdown in the spring that I met him."

She had spoken in a slow, hesitating manner, as though the utterance of each word were painful to her; and now George intervened.

"Dear lady, suppose you tell us the whole story from the very beginning, so that you will be spared the suffering of any needless repetition. I take it that Dr. Weir was a previous acquaintance of yours?"

"Yes. We live very quietly in Millerstown, with practically no formal social functions of the modern sort. The older families have formed a little coterie of their own, in which a stranger is seldom admitted. We were very much disturbed at the idea of a sanatorium being established so near, but Dr. Weir's patients as a rule remain in strict seclusion, and he himself is cultured and charming, quite a gentleman of the old school. On the rare occasions when he finds time to call we are all most happy to receive him."

"This sanatorium of his—" Henry rubbed his double chin reflectively. "Does

he specialize in nervous cases? Are any of them reputed to be of an advanced order?"

"Insanity, you mean?" Miss Wyatt shivered slightly. "Oh, no! It is really a rest cure. Some of the most noted men of the country have been patients of his since the establishment was opened about three years ago. Of course, there have been one or two deaths in cases of severe prostration, and these occasioned some silly, ignorant gossip in the countryside. But Judge Tompkins and all our leading citizens swear by him. One evening a year ago last March I invited him to come and play bridge with the judge and some other neighbors, and he asked if he might bring his friend Mr. Ogden Ronalds with him."

She paused, twining her slender fingers about one another as before; but no one spoke, and she went on:

"Mr. Ronalds had fully recovered from his breakdown, and should have returned to the city, where he held a responsible position with a large corporation. He lingered on, visiting Dr. Weir, however, and it came about that soon I—I was seeing him every day.

"By the middle of April we were engaged, and the wedding was set for the 18th of June. He was a man of sterling character and of most magnetic personality, and I believed myself to be in love with him. I knew that he possessed little beyond his salary, and he insisted that we must live within that; but I was quite content. My own tastes had always been simple. He returned to New York when our engagement was announced to arrange for an extended leave of absence from his firm, and brought me back his dead mother's pearls, which he had had restrung and set for me, and her own betrothal ring."

"Where is that, Miss Wyatt?" Cliff had glanced at her bare hands.

"In Judge Tompkins's safe. I put it away with the pearls, but it must have been overlooked by the person who made the substitution, or considered of too little intrinsic value to bother with in comparison to the rest. I placed it in the judge's care before my trip to Albany."

Turning again to George and Henry, their client continued: "Our wedding was to be a most simple one, and after a brief honeymoon we intended to return to Millerstown for the summer, coming to New York in the autumn to make our home."

"Did Mr. Ronalds ever speak of being subject to heart attacks?" asked Henry. "Did Dr. Weir ever mention it in your presence?"

"Not until about a week before the date set for our marriage, when one afternoon, while we were having tea in the garden, he suddenly collapsed. He recovered in a few moments without aid, but I insisted upon sending for Dr. Weir, from whom I learned for the first time that Mr. Ronalds had long suffered from a weak heart. It was not believed to be a serious affection. I was alarmed, naturally, but Dr. Weir quite reassured me, although he persuaded Mr. Ronalds to return to the sanatorium for the night."

"Mr. Ronalds was not still visiting him, then?" asked George.

"No. After the announcement of our engagement he was compelled to make frequent trips to New York, and between times he stayed at the hotel in Millerstown so as to be near me. The sanatorium is several miles out in the country."

"With what corporation was Mr. Ronalds connected here?" It was Rex who spoke.

"The Interstate Loan & Trust. He had a bachelor apartment at the Mandeville, but gave it up in anticipation of our marriage," Miss Wyatt responded. "Mr. Ronalds appeared to have suffered no ill effects from his seizure until our wedding day came, although, looking back, I seem to remember that he was not quite himself even before that—from the time of his last trip to New York, in fact."

"When was that, Miss Wyatt?" Henry leaned forward with his hands outspread upon his knees. "When did he return to Millerstown from that last trip?"

"On the 10th of June, three days before the heart attack of which I have told you."

"In what way was he unlike himself? In appearance or manner?"

"Both, I think." She spoke hesitatingly. "Of course, it may have been my imagination overwrought by subsequent

events, but it seemed to me that he looked ill and that there was something odd and repressed about him. It never occurred to me at the time, as I was all in a flurry of preparation and perhaps not as solicitous as I should have been."

"Who was present at the—the interrupted ceremony, Miss Wyatt?" Henry put the question very gently. "Please tell me everything that happened as nearly as you can remember."

"I can never forget a single detail, doctor, although there is very little to tell." She smiled sadly. "Only a few of my old friends—Millerstown folk who had known my family for generations—and two or three of Mr. Ronalds's friends from New York were invited. Dr. Weir was best man, and I had no attendant, but entered the church on the arm of Judge Tompkins, who was to have given me away. Mr. Ronalds and Dr. Weir met us at the altar, and even in my exalted, superemotional state of mind it seemed to me that Mr. Ronalds's face was terribly white and set like a—a mask."

"Did you notice his eyes?" Henry asked. "Were they puffed, or the pupils dilated?"

"He did not once raise his eyes to mine after a single glance as I came up the aisle," Miss Wyatt replied slowly. "Dr. Andrews, the minister who had performed the same ceremony for my parents nearly sixty years before, stepped forward. As the organ ceased Mr. Ronalds took his place at my side.

"The opening words of the service were barely spoken, however, when he gave an odd sort of choking gasp and sank to the floor. It seemed to me for a moment that I had turned to stone—I could neither speak nor move—but Dr. Weir bent hastily over him, said something in a low tone to the minister, and then requested Judge Tompkins to take me away.

"That broke the tension, and I think I must have subconsciously guessed the truth from their shocked faces, for I cried out and flung myself on my knees beside Mr. Ronalds's body. But the judge raised me and half led, half carried, me out of the side door of the church. Somehow they got me home. The rest of that day and the night that followed were like some hideous dream. I do not know to this day who came and went about me, except that Mary Jane never left my side, and Judge Tompkins stayed, too, assuring me over and over that Mr. Ronalds had merely been taken suddenly ill, and I would be allowed to see him in the morning. With the morning Dr. Weir came, however, and told me the truth: that Mr. Ronalds was dead.

"I must have been in a sort of stupor for I did not break down nor shed a tear. I merely insisted that the funeral take place from my home; and so it did, two days later. Mr. Ronalds had no relatives, and Dr. Weir attended to all the arrangements, keeping the—the body at the sanatorium until the last moment so as to spare me as much as possible. I don't know what I should have done without him and the judge at that dreadful time!"

"It must have been a terrible ordeal indeed for you, my dear Miss Wyatt!" Henry exclaimed sympathetically as the others sat silent and spellbound. "I, too, wish to spare you all I can now, but there are a few questions I must ask you. Did you see Mr. Ronalds's body in the coffin?"

"I placed my hands over his cold, still ones," she responded quietly. "I kissed his brow and lips, and Dr. Corliss, it may—it must have been a figment of my distraught mind, but it seemed to me that his lips were almost warm!

"There could be no mistaking the stark, waxen rigidity of his face, however, and no matter what the future may hold, I shall see it ever before me! I would not leave even after the service when the casket was being fastened; I followed it to the hearse and saw it lowered into the grave next to my own family plot in the cemetery. I would have lingered still when the flowers had all been heaped upon it, but the judge and Dr. Weir literally forced me to return to my home.

"What followed is a blank, for I was desperately ill and delirious for many days. When I recovered consciousness, weak and all but crushed with the shock of my sudden bereavement, it was with the fixed idea amounting to an obsession that Mr. Ron-

alds's death had not been a natural one; that somehow, somewhere, there had been foul play! A face was always before me, born perhaps of my delirium, for I have racked my brains in vain to recall having seen it in life—the face of a man."

An involuntary but significant glance passed between the five Shadowers. As Henry sat stricken speechless, George Roper took up the interrogation.

"Was it a wide, flabby face, extraordinarily pale with small, almost expressionless features and—er—something odd about the ears?"

"Oh, no!" Miss Wyatt's eyes were wide with amazement as they met his. "I do not recall any one at all answering that description. The face which haunts me is that of a man prematurely aged, with strong features, thin, tanned cheeks, and a scar running down the left one, from the temple almost to the line of the jaw. There are touches of gray in his hair, but his eyes are dark and piercing, and he wears an expression of positively fiendish joy and triumph! It is horrible, and it still remains as vividly before me as when it first appeared! I know that if such a man exists, and I were ever to see him, I should recognize him instantly!"

"That is one of the forms commonly taken by delirium following a severe shock, and the impression frequently lingers, does it not, doctor?" George turned blandly to Henry. "There is a medical term for it in French?"

"The *idée fixe*," Cliff murmured. "Miss Wyatt, may I ask if you made any attempt to ascertain whether such a person had actually been seen in the flesh around Millerstown?"

"Yes. I asked Dr. Weir and Judge Tompkins, and as many other people as I dared without—without arousing their suspicions as to my own sanity, but no one had seen him," she replied. "I cannot in any way connect the strange mental impression of that hideously triumphant face with my—my equally strange feeling in regard to Mr. Ronalds's death. This I have never breathed to a soul except Mary Jane, and then only after those letters came and I decided a few days ago to consult you."

"Yet it is evident from these letters that some one has determined to prevent the marriage you contemplate now." Cliff turned to George and Henry. "Miss Wyatt informed us before your arrival that she is inclined to accept the proposal of a life-long friend, but she will take no definite step until this mystery of the past is cleared up.

"I will hazard no opinion as to the writer of the letters until I have studied them more carefully, but in brief they predict in a vague, rambling way that she will never be a wife. I should say that some one is aware of Miss Wyatt's complex in regard to the death of Mr. Ronalds, and, for a reason as yet unknown to us, is preying upon this secret fear."

"Miss Wyatt"—Rex leaned forward with a very grave face—"did you show our circular to any one in Millerstown, or even mention our organization?"

"No; only Mary Jane; and I told her not to speak of the circular to any one. She is absolutely loyal, and besides she was—well, rather indignant that it should have been sent to me, thinking it an aftermath of all that terrible notoriety last year."

"What did you think of it yourself, Miss Wyatt?" asked Rex quizzically.

"I could only conclude that others—that you—shared my secret doubt as to the cause of Mr. Ronalds's death." She plucked nervously at the soft gray crape of her gown.

"I had just returned from Albany, you know, where my suspicions concerning my jewels were confirmed, to find that during my absence the house had been entered in the night and the whole lower floor turned topsy-turvy. None of the servants had heard anything, and nothing was missing. A few nights later some one broke into the house again, through a window in my father's old library.

"This time both Mary Jane and I heard them, and she frightened them away. They had been ransacking a desk, and a number of papers were scattered about on the floor, your circular among them, but as before nothing was taken. That was the third week in July, and in the middle of August the first of the anonymous letters came. I

thought it must be the work of some crazy person, for Mr. Dilworth's attentions were then only those of an old friend, just as they had been from the moment that Mr. Ronalds came into my life. A second letter came the first of September, and a third a fortnight later, and by that time the neighbors all knew that Mr. Dilworth was—er—interested in me once more."

"You will pardon a question that may sound impertinent. The gentleman you mention is an old admirer?"

Miss Wyatt flushed vividly this time, and a little bubbling laugh came from her lips.

"Frank Dilworth has proposed to me regularly since we left school until—until I met Mr. Ronalds." Her face grew suddenly grave once more. "When the fourth letter came late in September I concluded they were being sent by some malicious gossip—I had heard of a 'poison pen' case or two, although none had occurred to my knowledge previously in Millerstown—and I tried to bring myself to speak to Judge Tompkins about them. But I hesitated, in fear of creating more scandal, especially as Mr. Dilworth had not definitely declared himself.

"I had still kept your circular announcement, however, and was more and more inclined to consult you in spite of my dread of notoriety. The fifth letter reached me almost a month later, on the twenty-second of October, and the last one ten days ago, just after Mr. Dilworth had asked me again to be his wife. I realized soon after I recovered from my illness last year that my grief had burned itself out. I had merely been infatuated with Mr. Ronalds, and only horror and that dreadful uncertainty remained. Now I know that I have cared for Mr. Dilworth always, but I shall never marry him until this—this complex, as you call it, has been dispelled from my mind. I owe it to the dead!"

Rex rose with a glance at the others.

"We will do our utmost to help you, Miss Wyatt, not only in this but in regaining your jewels, discovering who broke into your house and why, and who has been writing these anonymous letters. You must be guided by us, however, and obey our instructions implicitly."

"I am only too glad to do so, Mr. Powell—gentlemen!" she exclaimed. "Just being able to place myself in your hands has lifted a load from my thoughts already!"

"Then I am going to ask that neither you nor your maid leave your apartments again until you hear from me, and that you will receive no one except ourselves or another member of our organization, a Mr. Howe." Rex paused reflectively.

"I wish, too, that you would immediately prepare three lists for me: one of whatever people you know to have been patients at Dr. Weir's sanatorium, another of the guests invited to your wedding, and the third of those present at the funeral and interment. Mr. Howe will call for them, and I will ask you then to tell him of the two occasions upon which your house was broken into."

Miss Wyatt promised, and they took their departure, attended to the door by the sharp-featured Mary Jane. They descended in the elevator in silence, and it was only when they had passed through the lobby and were out upon the sidewalk that Henry spoke.

"Lord A'mighty! If none of you fellers want to boss this job I'll take it myself! Not the jewels, that's Lucian's graft; I mean Ronalds's finish! If I'm right, we're up against a new kind of crime and perhaps the cleverest crook in Christendom!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

The Fighting Signal

By GEORGE C. JENKS

Author of "The Nestorian Tablet," "A Jewel from the Gods," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CHAPTER I.

THE CHIEF MAKES A SWITCH.

THE tenth story of the big Stone & Calkins building, in one of Pittsburgh's narrowest business streets, was an important place. Necessarily, for on that floor were the quarters of the high executives of the world-known contracting firm, including the private office of Andrew Stone. There hadn't been a Calkins for thirty years and more.

Old Andrew Stone, who had started the business as a two-fisted roughneck of sixteen, with a wheelbarrow and a colored man to handle the extra shovel—which, with two pickaxes, completed the original "machinery" of the concern—did not need a Calkins to help him conduct the mammoth enterprise it had now become. Calkins had been useful when he came into the firm with a few thousand dollars. But Andrew Stone had bought him out long ago—at a figure which enabled him to retire with a comfortable competence. Then, still two-fisted, Andrew went on building up the business himself. His aforesaid executives were merely cogs in the great machine of which he was the dynamic driving wheel. There was only one chief.

Road making was the firm's principal line now. With the multitudinous use of automobiles, smooth highways were building everywhere, and a large percentage of the work throughout the country was done by Stone & Calkins. Sections of the Lincoln Highway — concrete, macadam, asphalt, bitulithic, Ligonier block, burnt brick, any

kind of surface on a stone foundation—had been contracted for by the firm, while roads of several kinds elsewhere, in twenty States, had been completed or were under construction.

On this particular morning there was a noticeable tenseness all over the tenth floor. This meant that something had displeased the chief, which rendered likely a sudden squall in any office, no matter how eminent and dignified the occupant.

"Mr. George Duncan!" announced Andrew Stone's private stenographer—a rather disdainful young lady, with bobbed dark hair and Irish eyes. "Shall I bring him in?"

But George Duncan did not wait for the formal permission. He stepped into Andrew Stone's sanctum with a breezy "Good morning, chief! Got your wire and came right down. I reckon you want to know about those men in my gang. Well, I can handle them, and—"

"Shut up! Who cares what you can handle? If you couldn't control the bunch of Bolsheviks working on that mountain, you wouldn't be any good to me. What's the trouble up there, anyhow?"

"Why, chief," replied Duncan, with darkening eye, "there's a mob up there—I don't know about their being Bolsheviks, but they all have a foreign accent and some can't speak United States at all—who seemed to think they could run me as well as the job."

"Want more money?"

"Not so much that as what they call 'recognition.' Talk about better working conditions and so forth. I don't believe they know what they mean by their jargon, but some one has been putting it into their thick heads that they are not treated right, and that I am a tyrant and a bully."

"And are you?" asked Andrew Stone dryly.

George Duncan drew up his lithe form to its full six feet and an amused smile creased his sun-browned face. A handsome young fellow he was, with steady gray eyes, the right kind of chin and a fighting jaw. He passed over his employer's ironical question and went on to explain about the friction which had prevailed intermittently ever since he had been superintending the building of this particular section of the Lincoln Highway over and around the chain of great hills known as the Blue Ridge Mountains.

"I have been on that job six weeks, and uneasiness began to show itself about ten days ago. I didn't bother you about it. I was trying to find out who was at the back of it all. I knew it was an enemy of either yours or mine—perhaps both."

"Quite likely—at least so far as I am concerned," grunted the chief. "I've been making enemies all my life. Did you run the blackguard down?"

"Yes."

"Who is it?"

"I hate to tell you," hesitated Duncan. "Because he is a relative of a man you like and esteem. He had the position I now hold before I went up there, and I know he has never forgiven me for what I have heard he calls 'undermining' him."

"You mean Leigh Strayker, of course!" growled Stone. "You didn't undermine him. If you'd tried any underhand work to get the position, you never would have had it. I'd have seen your game and spoiled it. No, sir; I fired Strayker for cause. It was a strong cause or I wouldn't have done it, because he is the nephew of Titus Calkins, my old partner, one of the squarest, whitest men on the Lord's footstool, and the man who gave me my first real start."

"I'm glad you are convinced that I was not guilty of—"

"Duncan, don't be a blithering nincompoop!" interrupted Andrew Stone testily. "I fired Strayker because he went off on a drunken jamboree and I had a crew of Scandinavians raising hell around my office because work had been stopped and they hadn't been paid. That's when you happened along looking for a job. You told me you'd been building roads for Gallaway & Finn, of Chicago, and that you knew your business. Your credentials looked all right, but I got the Gallaway & Finn office on long distance to make sure. Then I told you to go up on the ridge and take up the work where Strayker had quit. That's all there was to that."

Andrew Stone rose and strode up and

down the room in scowling silence for a minute or two. Then he swung around to Duncan, and banging his fist on the table, went on sternly: "I'm through with Leigh Strayker for good. And, by the gods, my niece must be through with him, too. She'll do that. If Strayker was idiot enough to fall in love with a girl who never gave him encouragement, that's his lookout. He'd never have been in my house if he hadn't come with his uncle, and he was only there twice. Now I find the rotter has been waylaying her outside, and of course she has been polite to him—nothing more. But if he ever dares speak to her again I'll— Go on. Tell me the rest of it."

"Well"—Duncan resumed his narration—"the second day I was there Strayker came up to the ridge, drunk and ugly."

"He's always ugly when he's drinking," commented the chief. "What then?"

"He came slouching up to me, said you hadn't given him a square deal and that he was going to get even with the 'stiff' who had sneaked into his job. I saw he was drunk, so merely told him to get out if he didn't want to be kicked down the hillside. He went away muttering about what he would do to me, and that ended it. I did not think of him again until things began to happen."

"Did you see him with the men at any time?"

"Not at first. The men boarded with coal miners in Dawkins, at the foot of the ridge, until work on the road got too far away. Then they slept in camp. But the seed had been sown in Dawkins. Tools began to vanish, coal cinders were poured into the concrete mixer, a load of stone was *accidentally* tipped over a bluff, wagon and all—"

"And the horses?" interrupted Stone, horrified.

"No, it was one of our new motor trucks. Last Tuesday night, when I happened to be sitting in the dark in my office, looking down the stretch of roadway that we had made ready for the concrete, I saw, in the dim moonlight, that men were moving about near the engine and concrete mixer. I slipped on my high boots, without stopping to lace them up, and went out. By keeping in the shadow of the trees I got near enough to hear one man talking."

"Strayker?"

"Yea. He was telling them that, unless they showed their manhood by doing something which would make me afraid of them, they would soon become even worse off than they had been in their own country, where they had been serfs and slaves. It was a good speech of a demagogic kind," admitted Duncan, with a grim smile. "Especially with the wild gesticulation he threw in with it, and which spoke more plainly than words to some of them who were weak in the English tongue. As he talked, I worked nearer and nearer, when suddenly the gasoline engine began to spit and rumble, and soon was racing like a runaway flivver."

"What was the idea?" cut in Stone quietly.

"Deviltry, you may be sure. The concrete mixer was geared up to the engine and whirling like mad. I heard Strayker's voice: 'This 'll fix things for a while.' He had a long crowbar in his hand. In a flash I saw what he was going to do. I was only just in time. He had the bar raised to hurl it into the mixer, when I caught it—"

"On your forehead?" asked Stone. "You have a peach of a scar."

"That's nothing," shrugged Duncan. "I wrenched the crowbar out of his hand, and as I sent him down on his back it caught me a glancing swipe. But I saved a costly machine."

"I see!" coolly commented Stone. "Well, that's the kind of thing I pay you for. You're expected to protect the firm's property. What next?"

"Nothing, except that I gave Strayker the licking of his life."

"And the men?"

"Wasn't one to be seen. They'd all sneaked away to their shack. That was nearly a week ago, and they've worked pretty well since. But there's liable to be trouble any time unless a firm hand is kept on them."

"I'll attend to that," promised Andrew Stone evenly. "You start for Allbrook, in New York State, the lake region, on that eight o'clock train to-night. There is a

new State road to be built—sixteen miles of it—near Lake Crisco. Much of it is through swampy land, what they call Crisco Marshes. Dan Burns will be your foreman. I sent him ahead last week to have things ready. The laboring work will be done by a convict gang from Allbrook."

"Convicts?" exclaimed Duncan, recoiling.

"Sure! You'll go to the State Prison in Allbrook and see the warden. He'll assign you eighteen men, with a guard. Most of them have done this kind of work before. Your road begins at Crisco Corners, twenty-two miles from the city. You'll have to be careful in the marshy part of the route. Mind you, put in a solid foundation. Don't spare the rocks. You'll have to use some big ones. We can't afford to have any sinking road when we've finished. There's sand as well. Look out for that. And—"

"But — convicts!" interrupted Duncan disgustedly.

"Well, what of it?" snapped the chief. "You'll find them a blamed sight easier to keep in line than those crazy hunkies on the ridge. Come in at four and I'll have your transportation and expense money ready, with written instructions."

"That all?" asked Duncan. He was used to his chief's abrupt ways, and this sudden switch from the mountains of western Pennsylvania to the lakes of central New York did not jolt him—much.

"That's all!" snorted the chief, turning to his desk. But when Duncan was halfway to the door he called out: "Hold on! I'd forgotten something." He raised his voice to a bellow: "Miss Collins!"

"Yes, Mr. Stone?"

"Tell that person in my inner room to come here."

Miss Collins melted away. In a fraction of a minute there stood in the doorway a *vision!* It had come from fairyland some twenty years before, Duncan judged, was in summery fluff which cost more than he would have thought possible considering how little there was of it, had wavy hair the hue of goldenrod shining in the evening sun, dark eyes, dimples, a neat figure, white-gloved hands so small that—

"This is Miss Carrie Latham, my niece, Duncan. She will travel with you to the country place of my sister, Mrs. Chandler, on Crisco Lake. That's all!"

George Duncan felt a little dazed as he went out, but he carried with him a thrilling impression of a demure smile that deepened certain dimples and shone bewitchingly in level dark eyes which made him want to fight somebody—Leigh Strayker, for instance.

CHAPTER II.

BEHIND THE BARS.

WHEN George Duncan, at ten o'clock the next morning, gave his hand to Miss Carrie Latham to help her down from the train to the platform at Allbrook, she soon convinced him that she was *not* going straight to her Aunt Gertrude's home at Crisco Lake, but would see the inside of the State's prison first.

"But the chief's orders—written orders—are that I put you in a motor car which he has arranged by long distance to be waiting for us, and drive you direct to Crisco Lake," said Duncan. "We are not to delay an instant longer than absolutely necessary."

"We'll obey Uncle Andrew's orders, of course," she answered with a smile that knocked Duncan's opposition into a cocked hat. "My visit to the State's prison *is* absolutely necessary. I never was in a prison in my life. It would be just a sin if I missed going into one of the most famous in the country now that I am here. Is that it across the street with its picturesque gray walls? Why, there's ivy and wistaria clinging to the stones and peeping in at the barred windows! Like some ancient castle! Isn't it romantic?"

"But visitors can go in only at certain hours, and this is not the right time," declared Duncan, firing his last shot. "Here is our car, ready for us," he added, motioning to a powerful looking roadster drawn up to the curb.

"Mr. Duncan?" asked a man standing by the car.

"Yes. Wait a minute. Miss Latham, will you step in?"

"No," she answered firmly. "Not until I've been over there. I don't care about 'visiting hours.' I know you can get us in if you like. I heard Uncle Andrew say one day you were the kind of man who could do anything."

George Duncan may have been proof against flattery, but the pleading voice and flashing eyes of a pretty girl, desperately in earnest, was something else again. He had been warned by his chief not to let her know what his business was in Allbrook. She was to suppose he had come merely to see that she arrived safely at Crisco Lake.

Gruff as Andrew Stone was, he had his ideas on what his young niece should see and know, and he had drawn a broad, deep line against convicts or anything connected with them. It was not likely she ever would see them working on the road, and if she did she would not know them from ordinary laborers. All this he had explained to Duncan. Which made the present situation extremely difficult for that conscientious young man.

But any man who can handle a gang of newly arrived foreign pick-and-shovel artists successfully is accustomed to difficult situations, and usually takes them by the neck and squeezes the difficulty out of them. Duncan took the easy course now, because he saw it was the only one.

"Wait here!" was his brief order to the garage man. "We're going over to the prison. Ready, Miss Latham?"

"I'm sorry to give you all this trouble, Mr. Duncan," she said penitently as they stood at the iron-fenced gate waiting for the uniformed guard to turn the lock. "But I have to deliver an address at our Woman's Progress Club in the fall, and this will be just the thing. Besides, I am *so* interested. I was sure you only had to speak to the man inside the railings and he would let us in at once."

Duncan did not tell her that he had just whispered his identity to the guard who already had his name, and she had no idea he had any business in the prison aside from pleasing her. Which, being a very pretty girl, in the habit of having her own way, she took rather as a matter of course.

She glanced about the front courtyard, where two men in dark gray jackets were mowing the lawn, and she admired chirpingly the flower beds, the trellised creepers and the well-kept gravel walk leading to the flight of wide steps up which they went to the main door of the building.

"Why, this looks almost like a large private residence," exclaimed the girl. "Except for the iron bars over the windows," she added with a little shiver. Then, as they went into the reception room: "Oh, I see. This is the office. I suppose the poor men sent to prison for years never come out to this room. How dreadful! I want to see some of them—and yet, somehow, I'm afraid. I wonder what they look like?"

Carrie noticed three men in gray jackets at desks in the rear of the big office, behind a brass railing, who never looked up from their work. Then she glanced cursorily at two smiling, well-groomed young men, in neat business suits, who had desks near the door and who looked around a great deal. One of them—with a carnation in his buttonhole—got up as Duncan spoke to him in a low tone.

Duncan handed him his card, on which he wrote a few words, and the young man snapped his fingers at an elderly, gray-jacketed man who was polishing the railing and who jumped forward at the summons.

"Take this to Mr. Rankin," ordered the young man briskly. "Hurry!"

The gray-jacketed messenger took the card without looking up or speaking and vanished down a short passageway behind the desks. The carnation gentleman gave Miss Latham a chair. Obviously it was more for the sake of speaking to her than anything, for she was hardly seated when the gray-garbed man was back and standing silently in front of the young man, his head bowed as before.

"Well?" snapped Mr. Carnation.

"The warden will see the lady and gentleman," replied the gray-garbed man. And it struck Carrie that his low-whistling voice was that of one who did not often speak.

"Show them in!" was the curt order, and the man in gray, without looking at anybody, walked away to the corridor. Duncan and Carrie followed.

Duncan strategically contrived to slip be-

hind Miss Latham as they entered the warden's comfortable office, with its two grated windows overlooking the yard of the prison proper. He caught the warden's eye and laid a finger to his lip, as he nodded toward the unsuspicious Carrie.

Mr. Rankin understood at once that Miss Latham was not to hear the ensuing conversation, and he turned to his girl stenographer, who had been taking dictation: "Take this lady into your room."

"But I want to go through the prison," protested Carrie rebelliously.

"You can arrange that, Mr. Rankin?" queried Duncan.

"Certainly. I'll take you through myself. But first there is a little matter—"

Carrie was already in the adjoining room, with the stenographer closing the door. Having gained her point, Miss Latham was not unreasonable.

"Now, Mr. Duncan, I have your road gang ready. When do you want them?"

"Right away," was the answer. "Miss Latham is Mr. Stone's niece. I am taking her to Mrs. Chandler's country home on Crisco Lake. Perhaps you know Mrs. Chandler?"

"Only by name. She spends her summers at Crisco and entertains lavishly, so everybody knows her. Never had the pleasure of meeting her myself. I've been told she objects to having convicts working on roads near her. Has an idea they are dangerous. They are not, as a rule. Fight among themselves now and then, but a lot of men working together who are not convicts will do that. I select them carefully. Most are short-term men, sent to prison for comparatively unimportant offenses, and those who have been here a long time are within a few months of the end of their sentences or will soon be out on parole. They are not taking chances of punishment by making any bad breaks. When a man knows he may be brought back here for several extra years if he misbehaves himself, you can bet he's watching his step."

"They don't often run away from road camps?" asked Duncan.

"Very seldom. When they do, they are more or less crazy—hysterical, you know. It's this way: They are out on the open road all day, sit around as they please in the evening till bedtime, and sleep in a shanty that isn't locked on them—doors wide open on hot nights. There is only one guard—unless it is a very large gang. He carries a regular service automatic and a stout stick—that's all. Occasionally a nervous fellow, with an unconquerable craving for liberty, will see the way open and it looks so easy he can't resist. It's too bad, for it means extra time in prison for them."

"If you catch 'em," suggested Duncan with a slight smile.

"Oh, we generally do that," was the warden's careless reply. "They hardly ever get clear away. But *dangerous?*" He laughed amusedly. "Our road camps? Nothing like so dangerous as the average hobo—who is a yegg six times out of ten. Have you ever worked convicts before?"

"Never."

"You'll find they are not at all bad. They'll do a fair day's work if you watch them. Now we'll take the young lady through and I'll give you a private hint when we come to one of your men."

"Are they all short-term men?" asked Duncan. "I'd rather not have any hardened criminals in my crew if it can be avoided."

"All short term except two, who are expert road men. Their prison record is good and you'll find they'll each do more work than any two others in the gang. That's why I'm giving them to you. Wait a moment."

The warden unlocked a cabinet and took from a shelf a heavy canvas-bound record book. He went quickly to a certain page, and ran his finger down till he came to the item he wanted.

"Here it is," he said. "No. 8541, Henry Smothers. Received January 17, 1919. Felonious assault and attempted highway robbery. Five years. If he doesn't forfeit his good time in the meantime, he will be out next spring." He went down the page a little farther. "And here's 8545—Lars Bergen, received at same time for same offense, and also five years. He and Smothers did the job together. They held up the cashier of the firm they were working for, knocked him down and tried to get away

with the pay roll. There was a fight, I believe. Other men working on the road came to the help of the cashier, and—"

Duncan was not listening to the latter part of the warden's discourse. He was staring fixedly at another name on the book—a name he knew, but which he never had expected to see in that place.

The warden quickly closed the tome and locked it up in its place. Its contents were not intended for the inspection of outsiders. "You see," he said, "they'll both be out in a few months. Moreover, they are not regular criminals. They were drunk when they attacked the cashier, and neither had ever been in prison before. Still, if you don't want them—"

"I'll take them," interrupted Duncan. "I don't care what they've done, so long as they are useful in my work." He spoke mechanically. His mind was on that other name that had seemed to flame up at him from the page and fill his soul with bitter indignation.

"I think you'll find them satisfactory," said the warden as he touched a bell that brought his stenographer and Carrie Latham both into the room.

"Can we go through now?" asked Carrie.

"All ready!" smiled the warden.

He ushered them down the corridor, where a guard unlocked a heavy barred door and then another one. This let them into the "reception room," where relatives came to visit prisoners, talking through a strong screen of fine-meshed wire.

"So they may not even touch each other's hands and a child can't kiss its father!" exclaimed Carrie. "That looks like unnecessary cruelty." Her eyes sparkled and her cheeks flushed angrily as she turned away to inspect more closely the grim iron door they had just passed.

The warden, having assured himself the girl was out of hearing, whispered to Duncan: "We had to put that screen in a number of years ago. One day a woman came to see her husband. There was no screen then—just a square opening—and she leaned in to kiss him. As she did so, he suddenly caught her by the hair, dragged her head back and cut her throat. She was dead when they picked her up."

"Where did he get the knife?" asked Duncan. "I thought they were not allowed to have knives at any time."

"He did it with a spoon he had stolen from the mess hall. With a file he sneaked from the shop where he worked he ground the handle of the spoon till it had an edge like a razor. Jealousy was the cause of that crime. This way, Miss Latham!"

The warden led them past more iron doors to the inner yard. Then Miss Latham knew, for the first time, that the gray-jacketed men she had seen mowing lawns and working in the office were convicts, like those in the yard and in the stone halls with their lines of open cells, so narrow and so much like tombs that the girl's face went a ghastly white and she shivered when she stood in one for less than two seconds.

"And men are actually shut up in these places!" she whispered. "Walled up alive! And—and *women!* What awful punishment!"

"It's not pleasant, of course," agreed the warden. "But we have the satisfaction of knowing that in most cases men do not get into prison unless they deserve it."

"But sometimes they don't deserve it," she pleaded earnestly. "Are not some of them found to be innocent when it's too late? That old man in the office who showed us to your room! *He* didn't look bad—only sorrowful."

"He's a lifer, Miss Latham. He was the toughest man in what used to be known as Hell's Kitchen, in New York—a professional thief and a thug. He killed two men one night—shot them down one after the other because they resisted when he robbed them. He was sentenced to be electrocuted—spent months in the death house at Sing Sing. Finally a smart lawyer got him a commutation—to imprisonment for life. He has been here fourteen years."

The warden stepped back to let a man in gray go past. He had a mop in his hand and was washing the stone floor of the hall. Like all in those gray jackets, he kept his eyes down, standing humbly back until the warden saw him and moved. He went on with his mopping, a little distance away, apparently entirely unaware that he was not alone.

Only once, when Carrie accidentally knocked down a broom leaning against a wall and uttered a slight cry as she stooped to pick it up, did a lightninglike flash from his eyes meet a quick look from hers. He went stolidly on with his mopping.

Duncan saw that she went strangely white, although she made quick use of that ever-ready feminine shield of the emotions, her handkerchief. But he was sure her hand trembled as she pressed the wisp of lace to her face, and her voice was not steady as she remarked to the warden:

"He's quite a young man, isn't he?"

"Twenty-six."

"Did—did he do anything very wicked to bring him here?"

"More unlucky than wicked, I should say," was the cool reply. "College man. Knocked down a prominent citizen with his automobile and laid him up for three months. There seemed to have been differences of opinion as to whose fault it was. As many witnesses on one side as the other. But there had been several cases of the kind just before that, and the injured man was influential. So the judge gave him a year and fined him as well. Called it criminally reckless driving."

"I'm sure it was the other man's fault," declared Carrie, with conviction.

"The judge thought not," said the warden. "However, the young man's counsel have been busy, and with good results for their client, I understand. They have produced new evidence, with more witnesses, and public sentiment is in his favor. I'm inclined to think he will be released. Should not be surprised to receive the court order at any moment."

"I hope you will," murmured Carrie. She did not look at the young man again.

"One of your men!" whispered the warden to Duncan.

CHAPTER III.

DUNCAN ACCEPTS AN INVITATION.

CARRIE did not say much after that, as the warden showed them through, although she evinced intense interest in everything. She saw the different cell-blocks, the hospital, with its dozen or so of convalescents sitting on benches in the shade in the yard, and she went into the shops where the convicts were making brooms, mats, shoes, automobile license plates, and other articles for State use. Then she peeped shudderingly into what used to be the death chamber, where murderers were electrocuted before it was decided not to do that grisly work at Allbrook any longer; and she saw the great mess hall, where the prisoners were fed, and where religious services, movie shows, and other exercises took place.

"Prisoners have more privileges than they had twenty or thirty years ago," observed the warden, when they were again in his office after making the rounds. "They are allowed to play baseball in the prison yard, and they often see professional theatrical performances, besides giving some themselves. Sounds like a rather easy life, doesn't it?"

But Carrie turned a stony face to him, shook her head, and with a sober, "I thank you very much, Mr. Rankin; good-by," gave him her hand.

"It was rather a sad exhibition for a young lady," he answered. "But educational, in a way, and therefore worth while, I think."

"I hope that young man will soon be free," was all she said in reply. But once outside the prison gates, she turned to Duncan with tears in her eyes, and murmured: "I wouldn't go through that dreadful place again for anything. Those poor men!"

When they were in the roadster, with Duncan at the wheel and the garage man in a little seat behind, Carrie threw off her gloom a trifle as she told Duncan she would like to do a little shopping in Allbrook before they went to Crisco Lake, if he was sure—positive—it would not inconvenience him. What could he say—what could any man have said, when she turned those dark eyes so pleadingly upon him and spoke in such a pitiful little voice?

So she shopped for nearly two hours, with Duncan patiently waiting for her behind the wheel outside every dry goods and milliner's store in town, while the garage man swore futilely to himself under his breath.

At last they were off. But though the roads were perfect and the engine ran as smooth as honey, and their route took them around wooded hills, through verdure-clad gorges and along the shores of soft lakes which make the region one of the most picturesque in New York State, the girl had little to say. Her usually bubbling spirits had been sobered by the close view she had had of an awful existence which heretofore she had known of only vaguely, and which, in the reality, seemed so much worse than her imagination had conceived.

"Beautiful country, isn't it?" remarked Duncan, after a long silence, during which, as he deftly managed the big machine, he had been content to glance occasionally at the piquant, thoughtful face, with the sun-gold hair rioting in the breeze under her neat little toque, and to thrill at the touch of her arm through his coat-sleeve as she sat close by his side. "God's world, where only His hand is seen, is a glorious place."

"Glorious!" she assented softly. "And to think that there are hundreds—thousands of men whose world is bounded by stone walls and iron bars!" She shivered. "I can't forget the prison—and that poor young man who is in there for no real fault of his own."

"Oh, well—he'll soon be out, from what the warden said," returned Duncan in lighter tone. "Do you know, I'm sorry you went through that place. As Mr. Rankin said, it was a sad exhibition for a young lady. What magnificent roads these are! By the way, did Mr. Stone tell you I am here to build a road sixteen miles long at Crisco, part of it through the marshes?"

"Why, no," she replied with sudden interest. "Then you'll be near us all summer. You'll come and meet Aunt Gertrude, of course. I mean now, when I go in." She paused. "I'm rather afraid to tell aunty I went into the prison at Allbrook. She has such a horror of convicts or anything connected with them."

Duncan wondered what Aunt Gertrude and Carrie would say when they learned that his workmen would be of that gray-jacketed company for whom the girl had expressed so much commiseration. He decided not to tell her now.

They were near their journey's end, and as the car swung around a curve, giving them a glimpse of the placid waters of Lake Crisco, Duncan looked to his left and gazed along a stretch of rough road, through the woods, that it was his task to convert into a smooth, solid, State highway.

He could see the big tar machine, the ponderous double roller, the portable engine and other paraphernalia for the work, and he noted a line of men in gray clothing drawn up in military array, with a uniformed prison guard facing them. A large motor truck, in which he knew the prison crew had come from Allbrook, stood near. He saw the girl was not looking that way.

Duncan remembered that the men had started from Allbrook more than an hour before he got under way with his roadster, after the shopping expedition.

"I'm afraid I can't go in to see Mrs. Chandler now," he said with sincere regret. "I must get my men to work. Everything is at a standstill until I get there. At some future time I shall be delighted—"

"Then come this evening."

"But—but," he hesitated. "I'm afraid I spoke thoughtlessly. I am not on Mrs. Chandler's visiting list. She may not care to have a plain fellow, whose business it is to build roads and control rough men—"

"Mr. Duncan," she interrupted a little stiffly, "have you forgotten that my uncle—Aunt Gertrude's brother—builds roads? We shall look for you this evening."

In a few minutes he slowed down the car on the winding private road which brought them with a sweep to Mrs. Chandler's imposing front steps. The large, hospitable-looking house stood on an eminence, affording a wide view of the surrounding country, with terraced lawns reaching down to the shore of the lake. The Chandler home was conceded to be the most beautiful residence in that part of the State.

Before he could reach down to shut off the gas Carrie was out of the car and standing on the steps, the light wind from the lake blowing her gauzy draperies as well as her hair bewitchingly.

"A dryad!" thought Duncan. Beyond question, he had it bad.

"We'll see you to-night?" she queried.

"Yes," he answered, stepping out of the car and raising his hat.

"Then, *au revoir!*"

He stood there till she was at the top of the steps and had disappeared in the wide doorway. He waited a moment or two on the possibility that she might come out again. Then he stepped into the car, sighed softly, frowned sternly at the garage man, who from his rear seat had been watching Miss Latham trip up the steps and was still gazing abstractedly at the doorway that had swallowed her up, and drove away.

"I wonder what she thinks of me!" muttered Duncan as he headed the car for the road camp at Crisco Corners.

CHAPTER IV.

A MAN'S A MAN FOR A' THAT.

WHEN Duncan arrived at the camp and had sent the garage man back to Allbrook with the roadster, he decided that things looked like business. The long wooden shanty, with its weather-tight roofs and walls, its small windows and well-made doors—one at either end—was already erected. It had been done by a small prison gang in advance, under Dan Burns's supervision. The cook stove, under a roof of its own, was alight.

The men were going to have dinner, and the aroma of coffee was pleasing to Duncan's senses after his twenty-two-mile drive. For a gentleman who rather believed he was falling in love he dispatched a most creditable man's-size meal.

Dinner over, he directed Burns to start his men with pickaxes and shovels to dig out the road for the stone foundation he meant to put in. Bowlders and big stones first, then smaller ones, the whole rolled as solid as could be done with the great steam roller weighing several tons. After that would come smaller stones, well rolled down, then the hot tar and a top dressing of fine gravel. George Duncan knew how to make a good macadam road. That was why he was working for Stone & Calkins. He found the prison guard an old-timer in his business, who had not much faith in convicts. His name was Murtagh.

"They're on their honor," he said scornfully, as the two stood watching the laborers at work. "I don't believe in it. The only sure way to deal with convicts is to have them locked up behind stone walls. Mind," he added hastily, "I don't say some of 'em ain't straight. See that young fellow at the end of the line, working by himself? He knocked down some guy with his car, and got a year for it. He's as decent as they make 'em. Obeys orders and never lets a peep out of him, though I don't suppose he ever did a day's work with his hands in his life till he came to the big house at Allbrook. He had only just come out of college, and he went into an architect's office in Woodhampton. That's where the college is, you know—big university, for women as well as men."

"Oh, he was at Woodhampton?" remarked Duncan thoughtfully. He recalled hearing that Andrew Stone's niece, Miss Carrie Latham, was to be graduated from that same university the coming year. "What's this young man's name?"

"Bennett he calls himself, and he says it's his real moniker. Know what he's going to do when he gets out? He's going to Woodhampton—the architect firm he worked for will take him back—and he's going to make the people take him up—college crowd, society, church and all. He says he was not to blame for the accident, and that wipes the prison stain off him."

"Why does he go to Woodhampton, where everybody knows him? I should think he'd do better in a strange city, where they may never have heard of his trouble," observed Duncan coldly.

Murtagh screwed up his eyes and the corners of his mouth in a shrewd grin. "Whisper!" he said softly. "What makes any man do things that seem away off from common sense? A woman, isn't it? Well, that's the answer."

Murtagh continued to grin at Duncan, as if desirous of telling more. But he had no chance. Duncan turned away to speak to Dan Burns about some detail of the work, and the next minute was in his office—a small shack close by—going over specifications and surveyors' figures with his foreman.

"I'd like to go over the whole route, Dan," he said at last. "Can you lend me that flivver of yours?"

"Sure!" responded Burns. "I'll bring her around for you in the flick of a lamb's tail. Wait here."

In five minutes Burns returned, sitting at the wheel of a small "get there" motor car, which he said would go joyously through any kind of deep mud and over the stoniest of roads, without fear of punctures and utterly regardless of splashes and scratches.

"She's a dandy!" declared Burns proudly as Duncan took his seat. "I drove her all the way from Pittsburgh, and she landed here without a squeak, rattle or carbon knock in the whole works."

The inspection trip convinced Duncan that he had his work cut out for him in building this road, while the swamp section promised special difficulties of its own. At one spot, where a crazy wooden bridge spanned a creek running down from the hills, he made a mental note that a concrete structure would be needed, and that it would have to be of reënforced strength to stand up against the torrential rush of water which would surely come down with the spring break-up.

He made other memoranda from time to time, so that when at last he got to the other end of the sixteen miles over which he was to build the new road, he was prepared to lay out an intelligent plan of campaign for the entire operation.

About the time that George Duncan, sitting in the sturdy little car, with a notebook in his hands, took a last survey of the end of his route, preparatory to driving leisurely back again, the young convict, Bennett, who had worked his way along until he was completely hidden from his fellow laborers in the wood which overshadowed the road, suddenly dropped his shovel and darted into the tangled undergrowth and saplings that made up most of the thicket.

Like all the other men in the gang, he had taken off his gray jacket when he began to work, so that, in his dark woolen shirt, there was nothing to distinguish him from any ordinary day laborer. His soft cap, which would have stamped him "convict" at once to any one familiar with the prison dress, he had stuffed into his pocket.

He carried the gray jacket in his hands until he reached a high and dry spot, where he hung it over a tree limb. Then, with his coarse prison handkerchief, he carefully wiped his hot, wet face, completing his toilet with a pocket comb. He had no mirror, but he contrived to part his hair fairly straight and to smooth it down. When he had finished his simple grooming, he was a rather attractive-looking young fellow, even in that rough garb.

For perhaps half a minute he stood still, listening. He could hear plainly the strokes of the picks as the men broke ground for the new road, and now and again there came to him the rumble of harsh voices, with a boisterous laugh. When the guard is not close by, convicts may enjoy a little mild skylarking, and even if he is present the average prison official may not interfere, so long as they keep on with their work.

The perspiration again stood out on Bennett's face, and he opened and closed his fists nervously as his thoughts raced along without coming to an entirely satisfactory conclusion.

"What will she say?" came mechanically from his dry lips. "And yet, I *must* see her!"

He made his way to the edge of the woods at a considerable distance from where the prison gang was at work, and after reconnoitering stepped out into a road that was not more than half a mile from the spacious grounds of Mrs. Chandler's palatial summer home. He had cut off a big corner by forcing a path through the wood.

For a short space he stood still under the trees, looking about with the furtive caution of a hunted animal. Then he walked boldly down the road till he came to the Chandler front gate. As he entered the grounds he found himself face to face with Carrie Latham! She had been gathering roses.

She shrank back for an instant; then, as a smile drove away the perplexity that fought with astonishment in her widened eyes, she held out her hand frankly, with a low-spoken "Jack!"

A few moments of silence; then: "You forgive me for coming?" There was pitiful pleading in his broken tones. "But, Carrie, I *had* to speak to you! There is only one person on earth that I feared might see me in that place. Until you knocked down the broom and I looked up at you—breaking a prison rule in doing so—I had cheered myself with the conviction that that person never *could* be a witness of my disgrace. How could I imagine that you might visit that prison while I was there?"

She touched his arm with an involuntary tenderness that meant sympathy, but did not speak.

"But, Carrie," he went on earnestly, "even if I am a convict, I'm not criminal. I'm sure you believe me, but I want to hear you say so—for the sake of our steady friendship. That's why I have taken this chance of seeing you alone. You forgive me, don't you?"

"You needn't ask that," she answered softly. "And I believe you, of course. But surely, with all your friends, it could have been prevented."

"There are times when your friends can't help you," he said ruefully. "And this was one of them. Can we be seen from any of those windows?"

"Only from one of them—the library—and no one is in there," she told him. "But in this pergola, near the gate, we can talk without being seen. Aunty is lying down." In the pergola she abruptly asked: "Why didn't you take my hand? I know. You thought because I'd seen you in that dreadful building in Allbrook I did not expect you to. Here it is."

The worship in his eyes as he took the soft fingers in his grasp for a breath's period and then pushed her hand gently back seemed rather to embarrass her, for she went on rapidly:

"It happens that I know why you were there. The warden told me. He also said he thought you would soon be released, because your lawyer had proved it was not your fault. You see, it happened after I'd gone home from Woodhampton, at the end of the term, and I don't think there was anything about it in the Pittsburgh newspapers. If there was, I didn't see it. I don't read much in papers, except the fashions, theaters, weddings, and so on. Uncle Andrew says girls shouldn't read about crime. It's none of their business. But, Jack!" Her eyes opened wide in hope and an eager smile brought the dimples into action as she said triumphantly: "Why, Jack, you've already been released. You must have been, or you wouldn't be here. Isn't that splendid? But why are you dressed like that? Couldn't you get at your clothes before you came out to Crisco? Never mind! I'm going to introduce you to my aunt. You look as if you were on a fishing trip, and men wear all kinds of queer things when they're fishing. So it 'll be all right. Of course, I won't tell aunty about your—your misfortune. And she'll be glad to see you because she has heard me talk about you so much. She believes in girls having men chums, when they're the right sort, and—"

It was with a sad smile that Jack Bennett stopped the enthusiastic girl. "I am still a prisoner, and the reason I am here is that I am working in the gang that is building the new road," he explained. "I slipped away just to tell you why you saw me in disgrace, and with the purpose of letting you know just why I am a convict. If I'd known that you already had been told, I might not have come."

"Then Mr. Duncan's men are all prisoners? I didn't know that," she said slowly. "But, Jack, what about your lawyer—about your being released? I thought—"

"That will come in good time, I hope," he broke in as he moved toward the entrance of the pergola. "But there was one other thing I came here to speak about. Mr. Duncan—"

The quick light that came into her eyes at the name, and the eagerness with which she said "Yes?" as if urging him to explain rapidly what was in his mind, was not lost on the other. It may have been the reason that he faltered as he went on: "You will see Mr. Duncan, will you not?"

"Probably."

"Soon?"

"Ye-es," she answered slowly. "I think so."

"Then please tell him to be on his guard

and to watch his convict gang—particularly two men called Smothers and Bergen."

"Why, what do you mean?" she cried with an agitation that somehow sent the sting of a vague jealousy to the heart of John Bennett. "What are those men likely to do?"

"I don't know," and his earnestness was that of simple truth. "I don't know."

"Couldn't you tell Mr. Duncan?"

"Not any more than I have told you. Besides, Mr. Duncan, from what I've heard of him, is not the man to take counsel of a convict. Good-by. I must hurry back. Perhaps I shan't have been missed. I hope not. It would mean punishment. But—punishment or not, I've seen you, and the rest is of no consequence. Good-by."

And so, incoherent, and with a burning at his heart that was not there when he came, he left her and hurried back to the wood where he had left the badge of his condition, the gray convict jacket. Inside his rough shirt, close to his breast, was a white rose.

CHAPTER V.

A FACE AT THE WINDOW.

DUNCAN got back from his inspection trip in time for supper. After that he washed, shaved and dressed in clean linen and a new business suit he had brought with him. Then he went up to meet Mrs. Gertrude Chandler.

It was a two-mile walk, but in the early evening, with a cool breeze from the lake in his face, this was only gentle exercise, and Duncan reached the summit of the high flight of steps at the Chandler home without a quickening of breath or pulse, until a girl in filmy white, whose shoulders and bare arms shone entrancingly in the subdued wine-colored light of the hall lamp, came out to the front door and gave him her hand. Then he felt himself panting.

If Duncan had known that, only some three hours before, she had given her hand with equal freedom to one of his convict crew, possibly he would have panted harder. However, that is merely by the way. Certainly Miss Carrie did not seem to be thinking of any one just now but the tall, well-built young man upon whom she was smiling so charmingly.

"I was watching for you," she told him, with a touch of coquetry that made him grin fatuously. "Here's aunty, just inside."

Carrie had given him a glance from one side of her dark eyes that had driven away much of his usual sound sense and aplomb, but he managed to take, with a look of humble ecstasy, the graciously extended hand of Mrs. Chandler, while he murmured something about the great pleasure he felt in being permitted to come to her home. She immediately set down Duncan as a sensible and well-bred young man.

Mrs. Chandler was a buxom lady, probably in her late forties—if one may speculate on such a subject—and she looked enough like Andrew Stone to establish her relationship at a glance.

"It was very good of you to take so much trouble to bring Carrie," were her first words. "She tells me she made you go through the State's prison at Allbrook with her. She's a strange child. I'm sure it must have bored you."

"Not at all," negatived Duncan hastily. "I enjoyed it, positively. Miss Latham's comments on what she saw were both shrewd and interesting."

"And there was one poor man—getting quite old—who was in there for life. Just think of it, aunty—for *life!*" interjected Carrie.

"I suppose he had done something to cause him to be sent to prison," was Mrs. Chandler's response, given in a tone that told she wanted to drop the subject.

"He killed two men, the warden said," explained Carrie. "Of course he shouldn't have done it. It was very wicked. But if you saw that poor man, with his head down, looking so heartbroken and—"

Her aunt raised a very plump hand protestingly. "Now, Carrie, please don't. You know I have a perfect horror of convicts, and I don't want to hear about them."

"If you were to *see* some of them, I'm sure you'd think as I do. I only pitied the poor men, and so would you if you realized what their life is."

"I should do nothing of the kind," was Mrs. Chandler's emphatic rejoinder, as she motioned to a man in livery to bring forward a chair for Duncan. "Men who are sent to prison are no longer members of the community." She seated herself near her visitor. "They are outcasts—pariahs! I believe if I were to see one anywhere near my house I should faint. But, thank Providence, there is no fear of that. They are kept safely in prison, where no one sees them except their keepers and"—playfully tapping Carrie's arm with her fan—"self-willed girls who always want to go to forbidden places." She shuddered. "I don't understand how you could bear to look at them."

Carrie thought of her late visitor in the pergola, and did not answer. As for Duncan, Mrs. Chandler's next words threw him into a cold perspiration.

"Carrie tells me, Mr. Duncan, that my brother, Mr. Stone, is about to build that new State Road from Crisco Corners through the marshes," she said complacently, "and that you are in charge of the operations. I am *so* interested in road building—as everybody *must* be who uses an automobile—and I shall come over and look at the work some time if you will permit me."

"Delighted, I'm sure," returned Duncan, trying to look as if he meant it. "It will give me great pleasure."

"You won't mind my talking to your men—questioning them, and so forth?"

"Go as far as you—I mean, it will be a treat to all of us," blundered Duncan desperately, inwardly cursing his rotten luck. "When will it be convenient for you to come—and talk to the men?"

"Well, it may be some weeks," was the reply. "I have a number of house guests coming, which will keep me occupied. But, as soon as I can, I shall ride over—"

"I may go, too, aunty?" put in Carrie. "And talk to the men?"

"You will go if you wish it, of course. But *I'll* talk to the men. It isn't the sort of thing for a well-brought-up young lady. For myself, I love to see men of brawn accomplishing things. What can be finer than the man who makes the highways, in the splendor of his God-given strength, delving and striking mightily in the sacred cause of progress? As Longfellow says—I think it was Longfellow: 'The brightest gem in Nature's crown is an honest workingman.' Perhaps, dear, Mr. Duncan would like some music."

"I should enjoy it of all things if Miss Latham—"

"What shall it be?" she asked, laughing, as she fluttered to the piano, leaving Duncan, who would have liked to follow, anchored to her aunt. "A little jazz?"

"I said *music*, Carrie!" boomed her aunt with a shocked look.

"Plenty of people call jazz 'music.' It's only a matter of preference," rejoined Carrie. "But we have other goods on display," she added. "Chopin, Tchaikowsky, Brahms, Schubert? Here's Schubert's 'Serenade.'" She was turning over her sheet music. "Or perhaps you'd rather have—"

"The 'Serenade,' if I may make a choice," interrupted Duncan. It happened to be one of his favorites. Mrs. Chandler silently approved his taste. Of course, Carrie played well, as all American girls of her type do, while Mrs. Chandler, also true to type, talked incessantly through the music. What she talked about Duncan could not have told clearly. It seemed to be a jumble of reminiscences before and after the war, and the scene of the different incidents ran all the way from Pittsburgh, Chicago and New York to Paris, London and the Riviera, and back again.

By throwing in a conventional word here and there, he managed to keep the conversation flowing, but when Carrie, looking over her shoulder, asked him if he wouldn't sing, he gave one politely inquiring look at Mrs. Chandler, to which she bowed a gracious assent, and was at the piano looking over songs and duets before the good lady had settled herself comfortably in her rocker for the half doze with which she habitually enjoyed musical evenings.

An hour—or two hours, or more—Duncan never could be sure how long they had been singing together—had passed, and for the second time they were going over a duet from an opera whose music both much

liked, when Duncan chanced to glance at one of the long French windows whose shades were drawn up, only the filmy white curtains hiding the outside night.

What Duncan saw—or believed he saw—was a man's face staring into the room, and then swiftly withdrawn. The curtains rendered the features indistinct, but Duncan felt sure he had recognized them.

For the next half hour, while he sang a solo and afterward two duets with Carrie—it was wonderful how their voices harmonized, she said—Duncan never removed his eyes from the window, except when they ran swiftly to another window farther along, but which would not afford from the outside such a comprehensive view of the room. But he did not see the face again.

The moon had come up when Duncan, reminded of the flight of time by a somnolent snort from Mrs. Chandler, who immediately became preternaturally wide awake, prepared to depart. He thanked her for a delightful evening, and turned to apologize to Carrie for allowing her to tire herself by playing for so many hours.

"I never get tired playing, especially when I have some one to sing with," she answered; then, looking out of the open door: "What a lovely night!"

Mrs. Chandler had relapsed again into a doze, and when Duncan took his hat from the man he found that Carrie had walked out to the porch. She had picked up a lace scarf to throw over her shoulders, and was gazing in mute admiration at the placid lake, in which the moon's reflection showed like a great silver bowl floating just below the surface.

"It seems strange, when you think of it, that this same moon is shining on that great prison we saw this morning, and perchance some of its light even finds its way to the cells through those dreadful iron-grated doors," she said, half musingly. "I hope so. You'll have some light on your way home, Mr. Duncan."

"Yes, it will be quite convenient," he answered. "But—"

The conversation drifted in other directions, and if it became sentimental under the influence of the calm, moonlighted night, why, that was what one might expect when a young man and a beautiful girl stood together in such a place as this quiet porch.

It would be idle to follow their desultory talk. It need only be said that it was a repetition of what has been said thousands of times under similar conditions, and that two hearts beat perhaps a little more wildly than usual.

When, in the end, Duncan took her hand in farewell, and then ran down the steps and out through the grounds to the open road, his step had never seemed so light, nor his mind ever in such a ferment of pain and pleasure subtly intermingled.

He had walked a hundred yards or so along the highway in the shadow of the wood from which John Bennett had stealthily emerged a few hours before, when suddenly a man's figure stepped out of the shadow full in his path.

"Well, Duncan?"

"Well, Strayker?"

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNLOOKED-FOR RIVAL.

"WHAT are you doing in this part of the country, Strayker?" asked Duncan coldly, breaking a silence of some seconds, during which each looked the other over, while watching sharply for any belligerent move. "I thought you were in Pittsburgh."

"I suppose I may come to New York State if it suits me," was the truculent retort. "It's none of your business, but I'll tell you that I am visiting a friend of mine who has a cottage on the lake, and that my main object is fishing."

"A harmless amusement, so long as you do not violate the State laws by using nets, spearing at night, catching fish out of season, and so on. Well, I'm going home to bed."

Duncan stepped forward, but Strayker kept in his way. Duncan raised his right hand menacingly, and Strayker fell back a few paces, but still in the direct path of the other.

"That's right!" snarled Strayker. "Play the bully and threaten with your brute

strength a man who merely wants to speak to you. If you'll drop your fists I'll tell you quietly just what I have to say."

"And if I don't choose to drop my fists," rejoined Duncan, "what then?"

"What then?" echoed Strayker. "Just this: I'll give it to you in as loud a shout as I can command—and I have fairly good lungs—which will be heard pretty far on this still night, and will surely bring an audience—probably including the girl you have been mushing with for the last half hour on that porch up there, and who—"

It was lucky for Leigh Strayker that he had been watchful and was prepared to leap aside when he saw danger coming. Otherwise, Duncan's fist would have found its mark and the colloquy would have come to an abrupt end. But Strayker had carefully backed away before he began his last sentence, and was thus able to keep out of reach of one blow at least.

"Don't let your temper run away with you, Duncan," he sneered. "It won't alter facts. I've been watching you ever since you came out on that porch."

"And before that you were looking in at a window, eavesdropping on a private home," rejoined Duncan scornfully.

"Was I?" grinned Strayker. But the grin was more like an angry wild beast snarl. "I won't say whether I was or not. But this I have to say to you: you'll never get Carrie Latham; you'll never reach the point even of a flirtation with her. She was polite to you to-night because you brought her from Pittsburgh, and her aunt told her to invite you to the house so that a sort of obligation could be wiped off. Get that, Duncan?"

The jeering tormenter had been careful to retreat still farther and was prepared to dodge into the wood if Duncan should become too demonstrative. From this vantage point he continued his tirade, the points of which he had evidently prepared in advance.

"Here is the case in a nutshell, Duncan. You hate me, and I hate you. You hate me because you can't shake me off, and I'm here to interfere with certain little schemes you have up there in the Chandler place. Keep cool!" Duncan's shoulders had heaved ominously. "What I'm telling you is good for you to know. Not only have you tried to steal from me the girl I'm going to marry some day—"

"You contemptible cur!" came with gusto from Duncan.

"Abuse proves nothing," snapped Strayker. "Calling names is kid work. As I was saying, you have tried to steal my future wife, and in addition to that you have twice, by underhand methods, robbed me of a position with Stone & Calkins that I could have filled better than you in both cases. That section of the Lincoln Highway on the ridge was mine, and I'd pleased the old man with it till you came snooping around and worked me out. Now here is this Crisco road, which should have been mine. In fact, I know the chief intended to put me in charge until you got hold of him. You know what members of labor unions call a man who has taken their jobs. It's an ugly word. Duncan, and—"

"Get out of my way, you lying skunk!" burst out Duncan, whose wrath and indignation had been fast reaching the boiling point. "I won't listen any more."

He strode forward, and Strayker backed into the wood, where, in the black shadow, he was invisible. But his tongue kept on busily.

"Wait a moment," he jeered. "You'll listen as long as I have anything to say. You could never get at me among these trees, and while I'm not afraid of anything you could do, it doesn't suit me to fight with you just now. I have a better plan than fisticuffs, anyhow; I just want to tell you that no man can injure me as you have and get away with it. I'm going to have revenge. Mark that!"

"You drunken fool!" retorted Duncan, addressing the darkness whence the other's voice had come. "It was your own fault you lost your job on the ridge, and any chance you might have had for another with Stone & Calkins you threw away by setting on those men to give me trouble and destroy the firm's property."

"That's what you say," was the retort. "I would not do anything of that kind. But there are other ways of getting even with you. As for Miss Latham, take my

advice and keep away from her. The cottage where I live is straight across the lake from the Chandler place, and I can see anything that goes on there. There isn't a caller that I can't watch as he comes up on that porch. I have a pair of strong field-glasses, and it is easy for me to make out features, as well as every little move."

"I'm afraid I shall have to horsewhip you yet, Strayker," remarked Duncan sadly, as he prepared to walk on.

"Don't horsewhip *me*," mocked Strayker, with an additional note of angry malice. "Do it to the man who is trying to steal the girl away from both of us. And, by the Lord Harry, he may do it yet—if he isn't stopped. It looks to me as if he'll soon have the inside track if we don't look out. So far as *he* is concerned, you and I are on the same side. That's why I'm warning you."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. As I have told you, I know about all that goes on around the Chandler place. This afternoon I chanced to be fishing and my boat was near the shore. I saw a man meet Miss Latham—somebody she seemed very pleased to see. They talked a moment. Then they went into that pergola you may have noticed. They were in there for some time. When they came out I could see they were talking to each other in the sort of way that only a man and girl who are pretty close friends ever do. Before they went in she had laid her hand on his arm, and I was waiting to see him put the arm around her—but he didn't. When at last he went away she stood looking after him until he dived into this wood out of sight."

"Who was the man?" demanded Duncan, trying to control his hoarse, agitated voice.

"Who was he?" almost shouted Strayker. "Why, he was one of your road gang—a *convict!* That's who he was."

"What?"

"I've told you. He was a convict, and Carrie Latham—Andrew Stone's pet niece, wealthy, carefully educated, and always protected against anything connected with the seamy side of life—was holding his arm and talking confidentially in a place where they supposed no one could see them. You can make what you like of that, but it can mean only one thing. So, if you have to horsewhip anybody, that convict is your man."

"Who is he? What convict was it?"

Strayker laughed irritatingly. "That you can find out for yourself. Look over your gang and try to decide which one would be likely to win the heart of a wealthy young heiress. I'm not going to tell you. Perhaps he'll confess if you ask him. That is all now, Duncan. Good night!"

Strayker did not speak again, and George Duncan, after lingering a few minutes to see whether he would come out of the thicket, walked slowly home to the camp, trying to decide what he ought to do.

CHAPTER VII.

THE URGE OF BATTLE.

THE calm judgment that often follows a night's sleep—even when it is broken, as was the case with George Duncan—decided him to let events flow along as they would, without interference from him. Whatever truth there may have been in Strayker's malicious narration, Duncan could not see that he would improve matters by asking questions. Of two things he was positive. One was that Carrie Latham would never marry Leigh Strayker; and the other, that whatever may have been her reasons for talking to the man in the pergola—if indeed the whole incident were not a vile invention of Strayker's—her purity of intention or innocence of deed were not to be questioned.

So, as the weeks went by, during which he pushed vigorously his work on the new State road, he spent other evenings at Mrs. Chandler's home, where he established himself as a favorite with that hospitable lady and found many opportunities to talk with Carrie.

More than that, he was introduced to the various guests who came and went at intervals, and, as he laughingly confided to Carrie one evening when they found themselves alone on the porch, he was plunging headlong into "society."

Of course, among these visitors there were young men who were attracted by the beautiful, quick-witted girl, and who would have liked to establish more or less confidential relations with her. But if Duncan felt a touch of jealousy now and then because some one was monopolizing her for most of the evening, he was always consoled afterward by a smile meant only for him, or by the friendly touch of her warm, soft fingers.

Of course, he knew which was the convict referred to by Strayker. But Bennett behaved in all respects as a well-disciplined man in his position should. He was quick to obey orders, showed industry, as well as an intelligent idea of the purpose of such tasks as were set for him, and had little to say to his fellow laborers. Duncan felt that to talk to Bennett would yield no satisfaction.

Twice within a month Carrie Latham came in the powerful little roadster which her aunt had assigned her for her own use, and walked along the road with Duncan to see how the work was done. If Bennett saw her at such times, he made no sign, and Carrie, though she asked questions occasionally of other men near, never addressed herself to him.

Duncan noticed this, but he well knew that this did not prove they never had met, as Strayker said they had. The two might have been endeavoring to ward off suspicion.

Duncan had seen Strayker fishing from his boat two or three times, and once they had passed each other on the road leading to the Chandler home; but neither had spoken. Strayker pretended not to see the man he had confessed he hated, and Duncan, after one glance, had ignored the other also. This meeting on the highway had been two weeks after their stormy interview. Duncan had not seen him again, and finally decided that the fishing trip had ended and that his enemy had gone home. As for Strayker's threats, they never had made any particular impression upon him.

At the beginning, in their joy at exchanging close confinement behind stone walls and iron bars for the freedom of the camp, the convict crew had worked well and seemed contented. With few exceptions, they were willing and promptly obedient. Duncan began to think men from State prisons were more useful material on a job of this kind than the uncertain class he had dealt with on the ridge.

But, as the novelty of being out in the open wore off, they began to slow down. Frequently Duncan was obliged to "jack them up" more or less sternly. He wouldn't stand laziness, he told them.

The road had reached a stretch through a swamp, the most difficult and unpleasant part of the operations. The men's feet got wet as they labored in the deep slush to lay the foundations, and mud and water flew in their faces, they complained. There were incipient signs of turbulence, sometimes approaching downright mutiny.

Duncan clenched his teeth and kept the disaffected gang up to the scratch by main force of will. He showed them that he was not afraid to work himself. He plunged into the swamp with them and got his own feet wet. He threatened to send some of the worst grumblers back to their cells at Allbrook.

Still things dragged. The men were quarrelsome and loafed when Duncan looked the other way. He felt trouble brewing. The worst offender was Smothers, who had been committed to prison with Bergen for five years for highway robbery.

Smothers was a stocky man, of swarthy complexion, with long, gorillalike arms, and was phenomenally strong. He was surly and lazy, and Duncan had caught him more than once watching him malevolently. Because he tried to shirk his share of hard work whenever he could, the other convicts hated Smothers. On his part, Smothers hated everybody, including Duncan.

The climax came one day when some one threw a stone which grazed Smothers's cheek, drawing blood. With an oath, he threw down his shovel, declared he was badly hurt and must quit for the day.

"You get to work!" ordered the guard, Murtagh, angrily. "I saw that. You're not hurt. You can't do any slacking here. Pick up that shovel."

Smothers folded his long arms and stood defiant.

"Pick up that shovel, Smothers!" It was Duncan's voice, and its mildness was dangerous, as Smothers might have known if he had not been blinded by obstinacy and rage.

Smothers did not obey, and at once Duncan could see that a crisis had suddenly arisen. The impulse of bystanders to plunge into a conflict is a psychological phenomenon recognized the world over, particularly among men who have once overstepped the law and naturally crave the excitement of battle. All the men working near who had witnessed Smothers's defiance came sidling over, silent and menacing.

"Look out, Duncan!" whispered Murtagh. "They mean mischief. They are going to rush you." He whipped out his heavy automatic.

"Don't shoot!" ordered Duncan in a low voice. "I can handle this."

With the coolness of one whose daily dealing with unruly men had developed a skillful rough-and-tumble fighter, Duncan measured his distance, and with a leap, was on top of Smothers.

He seized the fellow's right wrist with his left hand, and locked the other arm to his side with a scientific grip. A swift "back-heel" sent Smothers to the ground, with Duncan's knee on his chest.

The discomfited ruffian did not speak, but the look he gave his conqueror was murderous.

"Will you pick up that shovel, keep on with your work and behave yourself if I let you up?"

Smothers did not answer, but Duncan detected a gleam of terror in the man's eyes as he turned them to one side. He followed the look just in time to see a heavy shovel swinging in the air over his head. At the same instant a storm of howling profanity broke out from the usually silent crew, as every convict hurled himself savagely into the fray.

With a mighty effort Duncan dragged Smothers aside, just as the ponderous shovel buried itself in the earth. Then Bergen, the man who wielded it—a blond giant whose blue eyes seemed to shoot forth steel sparks—pushed past Duncan and fell upon his fellow convict.

Murtagh seized Duncan's arm and dragged him to his feet.

"Hell's broke loose!" he shouted. "I knew it was coming! We'll have to let 'em fight it out."

"We can't do that," replied Duncan resolutely. "We'll have to stop them! We *will* stop them! Where's Burns? These wild beasts will kill each other."

"Well, what of it?" rejoined Murtagh. "Let 'em! Small loss! You've never seen a convict free fight before, I guess. I have—lots of 'em. You can't do anything. We'll have to wait till they're tired. Then we'll round them up. Wow! It's a dandy!"

CHAPTER VIII.

MEN IN THE RAW.

ANY prison official can testify that a mêlée, in which every convict within reach takes furious part, is liable to spring up at any moment when a number of men are caged together. It is the policy of the authorities to keep knowledge of these affrays from the public as much as possible. So the outside world never hears of many a conflict in which the participants become maddened wild beasts, fighting till they drop and setting all discipline at defiance.

Wardens and guards dread an outbreak of this kind, not only because it sometimes leads to an attempt at a general escape, but for the reason that the effects of the bloodthirsty hysteria are seen for many days afterward in sullen rebellious demeanor and a disruption of the orderly routine essential to the successful conduct of a penal institution.

As Murtagh told Duncan, he had sensed the approach of a battle for some time. As soon as the men began to be uneasy and dissatisfied, it was a certainty that eventually they would fall upon each other in a lust of deadly strife which must simply wear itself out. One cannot reason with a mob of homicidal maniacs.

The big blond Bergen had driven another blow with his shovel at Smothers, but a small man stepped in and saved him—not because he cared for Smothers, but for the sake of taking an active part in the fight.

With a pickax, the small man struck the shovel out of Bergen's grasp and laid him half senseless with the pick handle.

Thenceforward Duncan could not follow the fracas in detail. He had a confused vision of many men in a whirlwind of deadly contention. He saw them tearing at each other's throats with one hand, while they struck with shovel, spade, crowbar, pickax—any kind of weapon they could get hold of—with the other.

In one place four or five men had gone down in a struggling heap, using fists, nails, teeth, heavy boots, and even their heads as battering rams, in the frenzied endeavor to maim or kill.

Big, jagged stones used in the road foundation were hurled hither and thither, or gripped by fierce men who battered the faces of their foes without letting the stones go. Some threw handfuls of gravel where no stones were handy.

With all this violence there was a never-ceasing yelling, swearing, squealing, grunting and bellowing, which told of the letting loose of a primal ferocity that had thrown these blood-maddened creatures back to the very beginning of things, æons ago, before the distinction between man and what we call the lower animals had raised human beings above the level of the unreasoning brute whose instinct it was to kill for the very love of slaughter.

Then men had been on a hair-trigger, their nerves on edge, and it needed only the suggestion of a conflict, like the throwing down of Smothers by Duncan, to set them off. The tumult raged up and down. In some way the body of fighters had become cut up into three groups, so that there were three separate battles. Smothers was the leading figure in one, with Bergen, who was again in the fight, prominent in another. Here and there lay a man who had been knocked down and was unconscious.

Duncan had come to the conclusion that Murtagh was right—that the seething caldron of brutelike strife must be left to spend itself, when suddenly a woman's voice rose in an agonized scream.

"Great Heaven!" shrieked Duncan. "*Miss Latham!*"

In some way the girl had found herself in the very center of the three groups of madmen and evidently did not know which way to turn.

Only for an instant, however. As Duncan shot forward, like a human torpedo, he sent his fist straight to the chin of Bergen, who, grinning satyrlike, was about to seize her arm. At the same instant a sturdy figure in convict gray hurled itself at Smothers, who also was approaching the girl, and sent him toppling headlong over the yellow-haired ruffian whom Duncan had knocked down.

"That was good work, Bennett," said Duncan as he recognized the convict. "I'll take care of Miss Latham now."

Bennett seemed to have been unaware that Carrie was clinging trustfully to his arm. Now, as, beginning to recover her poise, she allowed Duncan to draw her gently away, he said to the latter respectfully:

"I beg your pardon, sir. The lady over there is beckoning."

"Oh, yes, it's aunty," exclaimed Carrie. "I brought her down to see the road-making, and here is all this dreadful disturbance. She never *will* forgive me."

"Mr. Duncan!" called out Mrs. Chandler. She was standing on a heap of stones, the picture of terror. "What does all this mean? Who are all those horrid men? Is this the way you build roads? It looks to me as if those men are fighting."

"They *are* fighting, aunty," put in Carrie. "They are not building the road just now. They are convicts, every one of them."

Mrs. Chandler uttered a scream of horror. "*Convicts?* And you knew it when you brought me to see the work on the road. Convicts! Oh, the awful creatures! And you were down among them!"

"That wasn't intentional," protested the girl. "I was looking for Mr. Duncan. You know that man who said he was a foreman told us we'd find him near the bridge. Before I knew how it had happened those men were all about me. Then Mr. Duncan came, and—oh, it was splendid the way he knocked that big man down."

"Nonsense!" interposed Duncan, a little sheepishly. "That's all in a day's work. Besides, Bennett, that young fellow over there knocked down the other man."

"Which is Bennett?" asked Mrs. Chandler, raising her lorgnette to take a general survey. "Why, he is dressed like all those others, in gray, with dark shirts. You don't mean to say that he is—"

"He is one of the workmen. That is all I know. Probably he wears a dress like the convicts for convenience."

Duncan glanced at Carrie with a slightly puzzled expression. Then, as if he understood her motive in this rather implausible explanation, he shrugged slightly and asked Mrs. Chandler if she would like to go over the part of the road they had completed, and then see where it was still under construction.

"That bridge over there will interest you, I think," he added. "It is wonderfully strong for its size, and we are rather proud of it."

"Thank you, Mr. Duncan, I've seen enough for the present," she answered stiffly. "Carrie, are you ready to go home?"

"I should like to see that bridge first, aunty. Mr. Duncan says he'll be able to take us in about five minutes, when he has looked after his men."

"Oh, very well," consented Mrs. Chandler, her good nature asserting itself. "I'll go and sit in the car till Mr. Duncan is ready."

Duncan escorted Mrs. Chandler to Carrie's roadster that was waiting a short distance away. He turned to see whether Carrie was coming, too. Then he hardly knew whether to issue a harsh order or to let a peculiar state of things remain as it was. The girl was talking earnestly to Bennett, and she did not seem to care who saw the proceeding.

"Some time I'll understand, I suppose," he muttered. "That damned Strayker said it was so. Could he have been telling the truth?" Then, as he came to the guard, he asked coolly: "Any of the men badly hurt?"

"Naw!" answered Murtagh scornfully. "Nothing that we can't fix ourselves. Four or five of them bruised and cut some. But we'll patch them up with the emergency kit. I'll do it. You needn't bother. Better round up the others and get them to work. The trouble's over now—till they get another crazy fit, and work is the best thing for them."

But Duncan was gone. He had caught a momentary glimpse of a man's white face from the ditch at the side of the newly finished road—the face of Leigh Strayker.

Duncan raced the three hundred feet that lay between, but when he got there and looked down, the ditch was empty.

CHAPTER IX.

A SLIPPED COG.

THAT he had seen Leigh Strayker's face in that ditch Duncan was positive. It was daylight, and his sight was keen enough to recognize any one he knew at that short distance. Where had he gone in the very few seconds it took Duncan to reach the spot?

He dropped into the sloppy ditch without hesitation and closely examined the huge bowlders that had been laid for the lower courses of the foundation.

A large number of these had been used, for it had been necessary to go deep into the mud to find a solid bottom. Duncan had built roads through marshland before. Surmounting these bowlders were rough stones averaging the size of a man's double fist, and on these again were much smaller ones that had been through the steam-driven stone crusher which was part of the equipment of the work. When all this had been smoothed by the heavy roller it made a solid, flat surface, ready for the gravel and the hot tar.

The bowlders had been put in carefully, so that they would not shift under the weight they were to bear—on the principle of a stone wall of irregular blocks. This had been supervised by Duncan and Dan Burns at first. Later, it was found that Bergen and a man in the gang known as Jerry—at present stretched out with a very sore head—as well as Smothers, had had experience in this kind of work. So they were left largely to themselves, with an occasional inspection by Duncan.

With experienced eye, Duncan looked along the wall, after assuring himself there was no one in the ditch, and that Strayker

was not hiding behind the buttress of the bridge. Everything seemed right until he bent a little closer to look at a large bowlder which did not appear to fit as snugly as the others. Then he saw that two others were slightly out of place.

He placed a tentative hand against the large bowlder and found that it yielded a little. He was about to give it a harder push when an idea came to him and he slipped along the ditch and took up a position behind the concrete pier under the partly built bridge, where he could watch without being seen.

For a few minutes nothing happened. Then, as he saw—and it made him gulp—that Carrie Latham was walking along the road with Bennett, evidently looking for him, the big bowlder fell out into the ditch, leaving a large irregular hole in the foundation.

He had only time to note that while the bowlder had seemed like a solid square mass of granite, too heavy for one man to lift, it was in reality nothing more than a thin slab, cunningly fashioned so that there were two knobs of stone inside by which it could be conveniently handled, when suddenly there was the rumbling of rough oaths from somewhere, two of the smaller bowlders came tumbling out after the large slab, and Bergen and Smothers, mud-stained, flushed and excited, squirmed from the opening in two twisted, disgruntled heaps.

They jumped to their feet and scurried along the ditch out of sight.

"What the deuce?" ejaculated Duncan.

Then, as a thin spiral of gray, fetid smoke issued from the hole, a dull roar sounded in the depths of the rocky foundation, mingled with the muffled scream of a man in agony.

"It's in there!" shouted Bennett, who now stood on the edge of the road. "Let me get in!"

The young convict jumped into the ditch, and without hesitation plunged into the hole.

"Look out!" he yelled from within, a moment later, and a large stick of dynamite, the fuse still burning, came flying out and was buried in the water and mud of the swamp.

Bennett's face appeared for an instant at the opening. "Is the fuse out?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Duncan. "What does all this mean? Let me get in there?"

"It isn't necessary now," declared Bennett. "But help me get this man out."

He vanished momentarily, then reappeared half carrying the limp form of Leigh Strayker, which he propped up at the opening, so that Duncan could seize him by the shoulders and drag him out. As the white-faced, practically helpless Strayker sank down at the bottom of the ditch, he glared malignantly at Duncan.

"Damn you!" he swore feebly. "If you hadn't the devil's luck, as you always have, I'd have spoiled your road, and—and—sent that convict lover of Carrie Latham to hell at the same time." Bennett had come out of the cavity and stood before the raving Strayker. "Yes, *you*, I mean. Now I suppose you'll get her. Well, I don't care. You'll beat Duncan out of her, and he'll always have the pleasure of remembering that a convict stole his sweetheart. I doubt whether she ever would have had me, anyhow. I said she should be my wife, but I knew my game was up when she made dates with this fellow." He laughed in a horrible, mirthless way. "A convict! Lord, what a joke!"

"What were you doing in that place under my road?" demanded Duncan sternly.

"That stick of dynamite ought to tell you. If those two yellow sneaks, Smothers and the other one, hadn't been such cowards, they would have fired that fuse and several others, and all would have been right. Your road would have sagged from end to end, and the old man would have lost so much on the contract he never would have forgiven you. Five hundred dollars forfeit for each day of delay after a certain date would have come near breaking his bank roll, and surely would have got you fired. That's what I was after."

He stopped to breathe hard in convulsive sobs, and with difficulty took from a pocket a white handkerchief which he pressed to his lips. A crimson stain told the story. Duncan bent down to put him in a more comfortable position.

"Take your hands off me!" he snarled.

"A lump of that rock tore loose and fell on my chest, and my back is hurt, too. But I'll get well! Even if I thought I was going to die I wouldn't want your help. You think you can build roads and no one else can beat you with the chief. Well, I arranged with those two jailbirds to show you where you were wrong. I'm a good road-builder, Duncan. It was a simple thing for me to devise a cavity in the foundation, braced with timbers, and to make a niche where we could put a dynamite stick. I didn't do the work myself, but those two convicts are pretty smart, and, under my direction, they made a good job of it. They both hate you. Besides, I was going to pay them well, and then help them to make a get-away. They know there are other charges against them so that they would be arrested outside the prison gates if they served their time. But they double-crossed me. What else could you expect from a measly convict?"

"Wait a moment," said Duncan as Strayker, with an effort, staggered to his feet and leaned against the foundation wall. "Murtagh!"

The guard had been standing on the road, looking down at the ditch for some minutes, but Strayker had not seen him. "Here I am, Mr. Duncan."

"Who is this man?" demanded Strayker, vaguely suspicious.

"He's one of the guards at Allbrook State Prison," answered Duncan.

"Oh, I see—in charge of your convicts. Well, he'd better get after Smothers and Bergen. They're probably miles away by this time."

"No, they are not," said Murtagh quietly. "I have them both in the shanty under guard, with handcuffs on. What did you want me for, Mr. Duncan?"

"I want you to look at this man Strayker and tell me if you ever have seen him before."

"Sure," replied Murtagh confidently, after one look. "I never forget faces or a record. He's Richard Glover. Received at Allbrook Prison in 1919 from Binghamton, sentenced to three years for forgery. Pardoned at end of a year through influence of a rich uncle in Pittsburgh. Yes, I know him. I could swear to him in or out of court."

"It's a lie!" shouted Strayker.

"No, it isn't," declared Duncan. "It happens that I've seen the prison record, which sets forth that Leigh Strayker, alias Richard Glover, was received from Binghamton, as Murtagh says. He was paroled on the guarantee of Titus Calkins and Andrew Stone, both of Pittsburgh, who each gave a bond of ten thousand dollars to deliver the body of the aforesaid Leigh Strayker, alias Richard Glover, to the prison at any time it might be demanded."

"It's a lie!" shrieked Strayker. Then, as the crimson showed on his lips again, he threw up his arms convulsively and dropped to the muddy bottom of the ditch.

"Well, he'll never have to go back to Allbrook, that's sure," coolly remarked Murtagh as he took the dead man's handkerchief from his nerveless hand and spread it over the gray-white face. "But he had no license to sneer at convicts; I'll tell you that."

"What is the real truth of it, Jack?" It was Carrie Latham's voice unexpectedly breaking in. She had come just in time to hear Murtagh's statement. "How did you know there were threats against Mr. Duncan?"

John Bennett smiled at the sound of her voice, and sighed at the same time as he noted her intense eagerness. "You hear those things in prison by what is called the underground telegraph. There is a regular system of communication between the men which I cannot describe, although I learned all the prison news, like everybody else. A chance word dropped by a guard is the beginning very often. I had been told that I would be one of Mr. Duncan's road gang, and I knew Smothers and Bergen would be there, too; when I found the two men were planning for a get-away and to injure Mr. Duncan, I made up my mind to take a hand against them just as a matter of common decency."

"I never suspected it until that fight broke out," said Duncan as he and Bennett both climbed up to the road, leaving Murtagh with the dead Strayker. "But I thank you just the same."

"You needn't," said Bennett coldly. "I did it only because I felt it my duty, without any particular thought of you. By the way, that fight was the signal they had arranged for blowing up the road."

Carrie stepped up to Bennett and took him gently by the arm. "Now, Jack, don't be too modest. You and I were chums at college in Woodhampton, and I know that you're four-square in every way. You've done a noble thing, and—take *this!*" She kissed him full upon the lips.

Then, with a blush and a little gurgling laugh, she nodded a farewell, took George Duncan's arm and whispered: "Take me to aunty in my car."

John Bennett followed with misty eyes the two sauntering figures as they went up the road. He saw that she was holding George Duncan's hand and had become oblivious to everything save the tall, smiling young man, who was bending over to murmur something in her ear. Something clicked in his throat, as, with fingers clutching a dead white rose inside his shirt, he muttered:

"Of course! How else could it be? I'm a fool!"

THE END.

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THE NEXT NUMBER

WINTER'S dying on the stage—
Softly sob the strings!
Dressed and waiting for her cue,
Spring is in the wings.

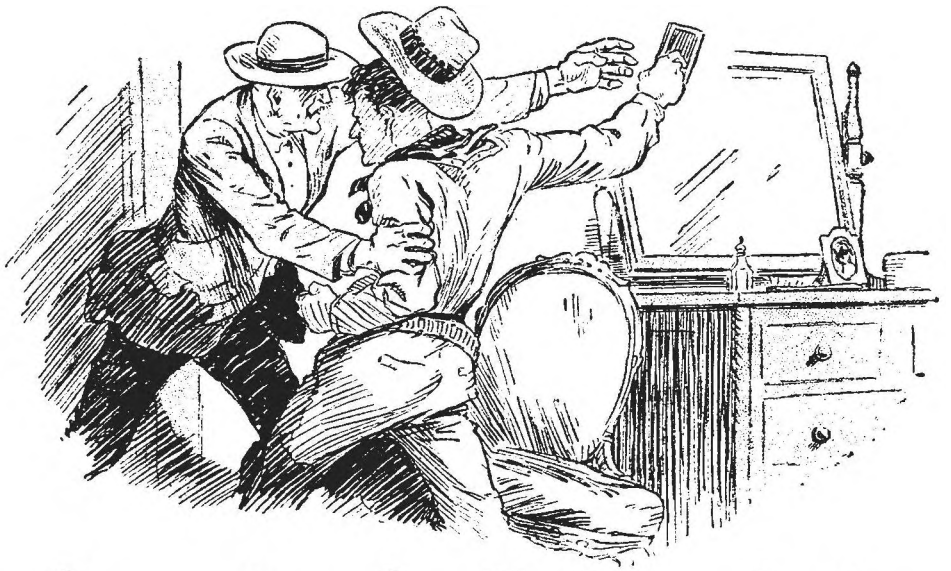
She's the star, the favorite
Of Earth's vaudeville;
S. R. O. sign's always out
When she's on the bill!

Hurry, Winter, we can't wait,
For we glimpse her there,
Waiting in her fine green gown,
Blossoms in her hair!

Winter, don't prolong your act,
We want you no more—
We are tired of your turn,
You'll get no encore!

Winter's dying on the stage—
Softly sob the strings!
Dressed and waiting for her cue,
Spring is in the wings.

Roselle Mercier Montgomery.



Smoke of the Forty-Five

By HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

Author of "Whispering Sage," "Desert Law," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I.

A MYSTERIOUS old-timer rides into Standing Rock, Nevada, and becomes an overnight guest of the Palace Hotel after pointedly refusing to sign the register. The motto of the West was that a man's business is his own business, and this horseman's silent, watchful attitude indicated that his long trek up from the desert had been for a private reason. A patron of the hotel bar is panic-stricken at seeing this man, having thought him dead of violence many years before, and hastens away to confer with a confederate. Their verdict again is death. Under cover of night the stranger is murdered in his bed in a manner to make the act appear suicide. Johnny Dice, cowboy, is dissatisfied with the coroner's verdict, which runs counter to circumstantial evidence, and he impulsively quits his job on the Diamond Bar ranch to turn volunteer detective. His chum, Tony Madeiras, a vaquero of Basque blood, joins him. Johnny's investigation at once points to old Jackson Kent, owner of the Diamond Bar and father of charming Miss Molly, as the murderer.

CHAPTER VI.

OUTSIDE THE LAW.

JOHNNY DICE lay abed the following morning until half past seven o'clock, shamelessly reveling in his freedom from toil. At five Hobe and the others, Tony included, had trooped down to breakfast. Fifteen minutes later the Diamond Bar boys had headed for the shipping pens to resume where they had left off the previous evening. Tony, helpless with nothing to do, waited with growing impatience for the appearance of the prodigal.

Specters of doubt, tantalizing ghosts of indecision troubled the sleeping Mr. Dice. His pugnacious face wore a frown. Every now and then his mouth would straighten and his jaw would shoot out to an alarming prominence. Maybe a dramatic gesture

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with his hand would follow. Johnny seemed continually to lose the decision in this silent fighting, for he would try it first on one side and then on the other.

Big Hobe had always found a bucketful of cold water a most excellent antidote for these symptoms; but Johnny was suffering from more than just too much sleep. He had closed his eyes convinced that he could put his hand on the guilty man. His deductions had been honest, sensible. Old man Kent was as guilty as all hell! Subconsciously, doubt had crept into his mind.

Jackson Kent had become such a meek, painfully righteous person these last few years that he seemed to lack the spinal stiffening a killer must possess. If he had been accused of taking nickels out of the collection box, one might have believed it of him; but murder? No! You'd have to have the reason for the crime, the whole, inside story of it before you could go out and expect men to believe you. Jackson Kent was a rich man, a figure of some importance in Shoshone County politics.

"Yes, we grant all that," whispered perverse little fiends in Johnny's ear, "but isn't it men like Kent who, free from popular suspicion, commit crimes of this sort? Wasn't his position in the county, his very respectability his best safeguard?"

Wild-eyed, Johnny sat up suddenly, his red head shaking doggedly. He looked about the room as if searching for the little devils that had romped through his sleep.

A grunt and an indulgent smile followed as he threw back the covers. "I'm sufferin' from that psychic stuff," he muttered. "Or is it food I need?"

His watch in his hands, he went to the door and called down to Vin: "Hey, Vin! Give me food or give me death! I'll be there *muy pronto, muchachito.*"

Vinnie had a steaming breakfast on the table when Johnny entered the dining room. "By Chris', Johnny, you sleep lak' meel-lion-aire. How you theenk I run theese bus'-ness, breafuss h'eight o'clock?"

"Aw, go on, you old dude!" Johnny laughed. "I'll be borrowin' money from you before I git through."

It was only talk on Johnny's part, but the Basque chose to take it seriously.

"That's all right wit' me, Johnny." Vin shook his head solemnly. "I don' refuse you, Johnny."

"Oh, how sweet those words, 'I will lend you.'" Johnny said airily. "But not yet you won't, *señor*. Little Johnny has plenty *dinero*. Is the old man gone?"

"*Si!* Hobe and heem go half past five. Leetle while ago the old man come back alone an' tak' the train for Winnemucca."

"Winnemucca?" Johnny Dice's eyebrows lifted. Was Kent running away?

Hobe entered then to square the Diamond Bar debt with the hotel. The barroom was deserted, and the foreman, peeking into the dining room, saw Johnny and Vin. He came in and settled himself in a chair opposite the former.

"Go and figure up yore bill, Vinnie," he said to the Basque. When Vin had left, Hobe turned his inquisitive eyes to Johnny. "Last night was a terrible bust round here, wa'n't it?"

"It's all jake with me, Hobe. Don't you fret."

Ferris got up and walked back and forth a step or two, glum, his chin on his chest. "I reckon it ain't all right with me, though. I ain't exactly what you'd call a straw boss with this outfit—not after all these years. If it wa'n't for the girl I'd ask for my time."

Hobe dropped back into his chair.

"Reckon I couldn't face her, though. She knows he's slippin'."

Johnny's knife and fork came down slowly, a peculiar dryness creeping into his throat as he thought of Molly Kent. Fool that he was, he had forgotten her! Yet, others, Hobe for instance, found time to think of her and consider her happiness.

And Johnny had been only waiting for Ferris to finish, to voice his suspicion of the old man.

The thought sent a shiver through him. Whatever old Kent had done he was still Molly's father. Johnny shook his head as he asked himself if he could send her daddy down to Carson to be hanged. He'd damn himself for a meddling fool before he'd be a party to that. Molly Kent meant too much to the old Diamond Bar hands. No wonder Hobe thought of her. Hadn't he

taught her all the things a girl living on the range must know—riding, shooting, mansense, and all the rest of it?

Why, hadn't he—Johnny Dice—broken her first pony? Hadn't he even tried to persuade Hobe into letting him show her how to ride that little coffee cooler? And there had been parties, too, at the big house; a girl's pride in the day's work well done; implicit faith in the Diamond Bar's ability to come through in a pinch.

Cold sweat stood on Johnny's brow as he asked himself if he could fail a girl like her.

No, not in nine million years. His voice was husky as he spoke to Ferris.

"Where's the old man?"

Hobe answered without looking up. "Gone to Winnemucca. Coming back to the ranch from there."

Nothing more was said for a minute or two. Vin called to Hobe, then, and Ferris pushed back his chair.

"Might as well pay up and go back to the cars," he said dolefully. "We'll be through come noon."

Johnny got to his feet with the foreman.

"Listen, Hobe," he said, "did I make a fool of myself last night, lightin' into the old man thataway?"

Hobe rubbed his nose thoughtfully. "N-o-o-o," he drawled. "One was bad as the other. He surprised me. He'd been havin' such a good time with doc all evenin'."

"Huh? Doin' what?"

Johnny's face was white with an emotion that Ferris was at a loss to understand.

"Playin' pinochle. I went outside to sit down after supper. The old man came out with me, and went across to doc's place. I sat out in front till the freight pulled up. Rain drove me in. Doc and him was still at it. I could see 'em through the window. I could tell he was winnin'."

Johnny heaved a sigh of relief. That his solution of last night's murder was knocked flat caused no rancor in his heart. Thank God, he had not given voice to his thoughts. Gallup would have laughed him out of town.

Ferris, far shrewder than he looked, had caught the signs of the anxiety which possessed Johnny. "Say, Johnny," he inquired, "just what is it that y'u ain't sayin'?"

Johnny winced at this directness, but he answered with a question seemingly irrelevant to it.

"Did you touch that dead man last night, Hobe?"

Ferris cocked his head. "Of course," he said.

"Wasn't the body warm?"

"Sure was. The man hadn't been dead over thirty minutes."

"That's the way I figured it."

If the man had been dead only half an hour and Hobe had been watching the old man during that very time, then to a certainty Jackson Kent had had no hand in the killing.

Still there was something unsaid between them. Ferris felt it. He put his hand on Johnny's shoulder as they started for the door. Johnny stopped in his tracks. A flash of his eyes and the big man had his answer.

"Johnny!" he gasped. "No! My God, no! The old man didn't do that!"

"Did I say so?" Johnny demanded vehemently.

"No. But y'u were thinkin' it. Up in the room last night it was my idea, too. I wondered if y'd suspect him."

Johnny could afford to be belligerent now.

"You bet I did. I suspect every damn man in this town until I prove to myself that he's innocent. That it wasn't him is all right with me. I couldn't have gone after Molly Kent's dad. There ain't no one else in this town with any strings on him as far as I'm concerned. I'll git the man."

Hobe knew this was not mere talk.

"What are y'u goin' to do now?"

"Git busy! Like as not I'll drift out to the ranch some time to-day and git my stuff. My address is where I hang my hat until I've put this puzzle together."

Calling the waiting Tony, the two men went down the street.

"You forget anythin' I said last night, Tony," Johnny advised the Basque. "It's out—complete. Git that!"

The direction in which they were going made Tony ask their destination.

"I'm goin' to have a talk with Brackett. Let me do the palaverin'."

The liveryman had not yet seen the corpse, so Johnny's statement that the big stallion belonged to the dead man was a surprise to Brackett.

"Do you mind, Ed, if I have a look at the horse?" Johnny asked.

"No harm in that," Brackett answered. "Nobody know his name, you say?"

"Total stranger, Ed. There might be some mark or somethin' on his stuff."

This brief minute of importance appealed to Ed, and the three men began searching for some mark of identification. The missing saddlebag escaped Brackett's attention.

The search was a barren one, bed-roll, saddle and slicker being without any tell-tale mark. The stallion's brand, a circle dagger, had been overburned years ago.

"Didn't he have nothin' up to the hotel with him?" Ed asked. "Man would have an extra shirt and socks."

"Wasn't a thing up there, Ed," Johnny said truthfully. "Guess we can give up lookin' here."

When they had left the stable Johnny asked the Basque:

"Did you git what I found?"

"No. Me, I get not'ing."

Johnny smiled.

"The silver buttons on the bridle," he explained. "Both of them marked alike—C. T. I never heard of no brand like that. It's his initials. That's somethin' else to keep under your hat. That's a real clew."

"How you know, pleece, those t'ing ees clew?"

"Know? You don't have to know. A clew is just a clew. All we've got to do is to keep on gittin' them. We're goin' to saddle up and fan it out to the ranch and git our stuff. I'm through lookin' for evidence round here. If you saw that man on the North Fork three days ago, I just about know the way he took into town. He must have got on to the North Fork from the west. If he did, he came through Winnemucca. Ain't no other way he could have got out of the hills. I'm goin' down to old Winnemuc and prospect around."

"*Cuidado!*" Tony whispered. "Here comes Gallup."

They were almost in front of Aaron's house before they came abreast of him. The coroner's eyes were snapping. Even his mustache seemed to stand at attention, bristling as it were with anger.

"Well, I suppose you little boys have been havin' your fun this mornin'." He snickered contemptuously. "You take a word of advice from me, Johnny Dice—a fool and his money soon depart!"

"Say, Aaron, that's not bad. Not bad at all, but you paste this in your hat, and let it stick to your rickety old slats—I go, oh, yes, but only to return. In other words, I'll be back! And somebody's goin' to burn the *frijoles* when I do." Johnny's voice became velvety as he added: "And there ain't no one in this little old town makin' me go, either, *señor*."

"No?" Gallup inquired with sarcastic politeness. "Don't you be too sure about that."

Tony motioned to Johnny to come along, but the boy pushed him aside. "Suppose you enlighten me on that last remark," he said to Gallup.

Aaron did not dodge the issue. "With pleasure! You git out of town by noon or there'll be a warrant out for your arrest for disturbin' the peace. You can't make a fool out of me and git away with it."

Tony's jaw set at the word arrest. Johnny met the threat with a smile, but he did not take Gallup's words as easily as he appeared to take them.

"You can't shut me up any other way," he explained for the coroner's benefit, "so you're goin' to have Roddy throw me in jail, eh? You politicians certainly stick together, don't you? I'd like to see that scarecrow sheriff go up against a real man."

"If you flatter yourself that you're one, you hang around."

It was on Johnny's tongue to make a fitting retort, to dare Gallup to bring up his reserves, but wisdom of a sort checked the hot words. He had set himself to do a certain thing. Shooting it out with Jasper Roddy would not accomplish it.

Tony's eyes were smiling now—a smile as guileful as his race was old. That Basque smile under fire is one of the little ways by which the children of the far Pyrenees an-

nounce that they are not Mexican. That smile is something to consider if you are involved personally. Johnny caught it and understood.

Gallup was waiting for an answer. Johnny found one of little truth, but it caught old Aaron.

"Other business, my dear Mr. Gallup, forbids my doin' battle with you and yours to-day. But some other day, dear sir!" Johnny's tone was too extravagantly polite. "That little gun-play last evenin' still absorbs my attention, Aaron. I could almost tell you who killed that man."

The seriousness with which Johnny stated this last fooled even Tony.

Gallup's eyes wavered ever so little as Johnny stared into them. "Let's hear his name," Aaron demanded uneasily.

"You ask that—you of all men?" Johnny exclaimed, piling on the coals now that he had Aaron on edge.

"Why shouldn't I ask?" the coroner almost roared. "Are you hintin' at somethin'?"

Thus did Aaron deliver himself temporarily into Johnny's hands.

"Why, ain't you the party what proclaimed long and loud last night that that dead man killed hisself?"

Gallup swallowed hard.

"That's all, huh?" he cried angrily. "Sounded to me like you was puttin' me under suspicion."

"Ain't I?" demanded Johnny. "I aim to, if I haven't. I suspect every man in this town to-day. And in your case, I couldn't begin to tell you all that I suspect about you."

"Mouth talk—sluff, that's all anybody can git from you!" Gallup shook his fist in Johnny's face. "When I talk, I say somethin'."

"Yeh, your body's all right, Aaron, but your brain is dead. You go down to Brackett's place and find out a thing or two. That dead man's horse and outfit is down there."

Tony's smile melted to one of almost positive enjoyment as he saw Gallup's dismay. This bit of information thoroughly upset Aaron. Truly, this Dice person had put one over on him!

"You meddlin' insect!" Gallup screeched as he stamped away. "You've got two hours to git out of town. You'll find I know eighteen or twenty little ways to shut you up!"

Johnny sped him on his way with a laugh that curdled the old man's soul.

At the corner, Johnny stopped to gaze at the retreating figure of the coroner, now a block away. Turning into the crossroad they waited until Gallup entered Brackett's barn.

"Come on, Tony," Johnny urged. "I've got a strange desire to see the inside of Mr. Gallup's house. You stay in front. I'm goin' through the window. Move up and down. Whistle if he comes back."

Johnny did not wait for the Basque to caution him. The window was open, and without any effort Johnny hoisted himself over the sill. Five minutes later he was back, and with Tony, started for the Palace.

Once in their room, Johnny pulled out the dead man's gun. "We're outside the law now, all right," he muttered. "But we got the reason for goin' to Winnemuc!"

"Those gun?"

"Sure, those gun," Johnny laughed. "That's a brand new firin' pin in that pistol. I'm goin' to find out who put it there. They ain't no gunsmith this side of Winnemucca. Roll your stuff and we'll drift."

Five minutes later they were ready.

"Mebbe you suppose Gallup fin' those bridle buttons?" Tony asked as they started down the stairs.

"Not a chance, *muchachito*." Johnny patted his pants pocket. "I don't leave nothin' behind."

CHAPTER VII.

IF THIS BE LOVE.

SHORTLY after five o'clock that same day, Johnny and Tony emerged from the lava beds to the east of the Diamond Bar stronghold. Below them, its fringe of poplars glistening in the sunlight, stood the comfortable old house and its outbuildings.

The trail from town led across miles of uninteresting flats, alkali patches and finally

by means of much tortuous winding through the lava beds. A haze, as of smoke, hung in the sky. The air was warm. At midday it had been hot in the open. Sage hen and mountain quail rose before them, the old cocks and hens so heavy that the frantic flapping of their wings as they got into the air made the horses throw up their heads every time they flushed a covey.

Sleeping in a saddle is a little trick the rangeman soon acquires. Many times on this same trail Johnny and the Basque had ridden with closed eyes, their minds in dreamland. Not so to-day! And wherever men toiled north of the Humboldt this exception held true. This day was one of the awaited ones—one of those few, brief days of Indian summer when the desert smiles and relents. Perhaps because the time is so short, God pours the wine of life with a lavish hand. Mexican *peon,* Basque *pellado,* argonaut, prospector, cowman, herder—not one but answers to the spell of this magic which the red gods long ago gave to the tribes.

And yet this marvelous day found a peculiar sadness in Johnny's heart. Restless, untalkative, he had ridden the long miles, little understanding the misery which was in him. The sight of the old Diamond Bar house seemed to furnish him with an answer, for he squinted his eyes to blot out some sudden emotion. Was he homesick? Was it the knowledge that he would not be riding this trail again that was setting so heavily upon him?

Johnny need not have wondered longer. He had discovered the truth. And this day of days had only accentuated his unhappiness.

This was *his* country. He knew every mesa, draw and coulee as a city boy knows his own block. Far horizons, towering peaks—they were landmarks to him; things of life, with personalities. There were things here that he loved because they were beautiful—colors unequaled, vistas beyond comparison.

To say that he ever referred to it in these or similar terms would be more than the truth. But he felt it; answered to the tug of it. And Johnny Dice was not an emotional person.

And yet men called his chosen land a desert. Passing strange it is that so ill an name suffices.

When they reached the house they found it seemingly as lazy as the day. Charlie Sam, the Chinese cook, lay sprawled upon a bench in the sun. He did not so much as move as Johnny rode past him. Little Hughie High, who combined the duties of ranch blacksmith, filer, and man of all work, had been tinkering with the windmill. He waved a careless hand from his perch above them, but made no word of greeting, fearing to break the undisturbed comfort which so rarely came his way.

A wide hall led through the ranch-house, in back of which stood the bunk-house. Beyond that, at some distance, were the barns and corrals. On the side of the house facing the men's quarters, with a door opening onto the hallway, the old man had his office, a big square-shaped room.

On stated occasions when it pleased old Jackson to unbend he escorted whichever of his men he had invited into his sanctum, down that long, wide hall to the front door. Only at such times did the Diamond Bar hands tread those precincts.

Tony went on to the bunk-house, but Johnny stopped and whistled a call. It went unanswered. His roving eyes searched the yard and windows, but Molly Kent was not to be seen. Walking around to the front of the house, Johnny peered through open doors. Tony had gone around to the rear of the place by now, and Johnny saw him as he stepped into the bunk-house.

Left alone with his thoughts, the boy stopped and listened. Only the penetrating sound of Charlie Sam's snoring broke the stillness. Cautiously, Johnny whistled again. His embarrassment grew as he waited. Minutes passed, and a boldness he had never known in his days as a Diamond Bar man took possession of him. Crossing the threshold he tapped on the door of Molly Kent's room.

Light as his tap had been the unlatched door moved back an inch or two. The delicate perfume which he had always associated with Molly reached his nostrils. Unknown to himself, he trembled.

She was not here; his good-by would

have to go unsaid. He extracted some slight degree of comfort from that. Good-byes did not come easily to his lips.

An overwhelming desire to push back that door and to stand for just one minute in the room which she had sanctified with her presence all these years took possession of him. There, in her room he'd say his farewell to her.

From his pocket he brought forth a mysterious little package—a mouth organ. This was in answer to an often expressed desire by her. Johnny had not spared his money in purchasing it. He had had it sent all the way from San Francisco. He looked at the package as if asking it to answer him.

"Yes," he murmured; "this 'll be best. I'll just leave it on her dresser for her. Maybe she'll guess it's from me."

The inside of that room was a revelation to Johnny Dice. Never before had he been face to face with feminine daintiness of this sort. From the chintz curtains and colorful cretonnes to the array of mysterious articles spread about him this room was as different from the rest of the house as day is from night.

Something sang in Johnny's heart as he reached out to place his gift on Molly's dresser and found himself gazing at his own picture in a neat little frame hung to one side of the girl's large mirror.

The picture was an old-fashioned studio photograph portraying the subject in one of his saddest and most miserable moments. Johnny's pride had long since forced him to destroy the copy he had kept for himself. But there it was in her room!

The world suddenly became a paradise. Even on Johnny the day had not been wasted. He smiled sheepishly on catching sight of his own reflection in the glass. He began to ask himself important questions. Between Molly and him there had never passed a word beyond the province of friendship. She was a rich man's daughter, and forty a month is no inducement to hold out to young ladies of her means. And then, too, it didn't lead to steady employment if one made eyes at owners' daughters. There were some social barriers even in Nevada.

Now, that he was leaving, matters matured very rapidly in the boy's mind. What sort of a fool had he been all these years not to have known that he was over his head, that Molly Kent meant more to him than any other being who had come into his life? An hour ago he had told himself he was blue because he was leaving the country and the Diamond Bar behind. That was a lie! Own up to it, now. It wasn't the Diamond Bar or the purple shadows on the Tuscaroras that he was going to miss. No! It was Molly Kent!

And Molly? Johnny's teeth clenched under his tightly pressed lips as he gazed once more on that picture of himself.

"She don't hate me, at least," he murmured half aloud. "Who'd ever thought she'd 'a' kept that thing all these years? Why—and there's those little silver spurs I brung her when she was just a kid. Real silver, they was, too."

Johnny put his hand on them tenderly. He seemed to have difficulty in breathing. Emotion was welling up in him to a point which made him reel. The mouth organ was placed on the bureau. He wanted to get outside, to think, to tell himself that he had not been dreaming, that life still went on.

Was it because of Molly that the old man had been so short with him? The thought galloped through Johnny's mind. Did Jackson Kent see in him a possible suitor for her hand—an undesirable, financially irresponsible suitor? Had there been talk, whisperings behind his back? Had Molly said anything? A dozen questions leaped to his mind. He shook his head wearily as he turned for the door, anxious to be away from this house which only a few minutes before he had been loath to leave. Another step would have taken him to the door, when he stopped, mouth open, his eyes bulging as if they could not believe what they beheld. Slowly the foot which he had poised in mid-air came down; but the accusing finger which he had pointed at the thing beside the door did not waver.

"Great God!" he groaned. "That's the picture I've got in my pocket!"

It was, beyond question. Set in a small gold frame hung beside the door was an

exact duplicate of the photograph he had found in the dead man's wallet.

With cold fingers he held up the picture that he drew from his pocket until it rested beside the one on the wall. They were the same!

Eyes transfixed, Johnny stared on and on, and as he stood there spellbound, the door opened. Jackson Kent faced him. Something too big for words held the two for a brief second. Johnny was the first to react. Surreptitiously the hand holding the picture moved to his pocket, but he was too late. The old man had been staring at it.

Fingers of steel caught and held Johnny's arm. The surprise had died out of Kent's eyes. They were flashing now with a madman's fury. The boy could feel the man's hot breath upon his cheek. Johnny heard the other's voice break as he fought for speech.

Then, with heaving lungs, old Jackson cried out:

"Give it to me! Give it to me—do you hear?" His voice arose until it became almost a scream as he demanded: "What are *you* doin' with *that* picture of my little girl?"

Kent's hungry fingers lunged for the coveted photograph. Johnny's eyes had narrowed to mere slits.

"No!" he exclaimed. "I keep that picture. It belongs to a dead man!"

CHAPTER VIII.

STRAIGHT TALK.

JOHNNY had immediate cause to regret his melodramatic words.

"Give me his name! Tell me who he was!" the old man shouted.

And obviously Johnny could not answer truthfully. He pondered lie after lie without finding one to pass muster. Kent saw his helplessness.

"You can't answer, eh? Well, maybe you can tell me what you're doin' here in this room."

"Tony and I came to git our stuff," Johnny replied.

"Your stuff? It ain't in here, is it?"

"I had a little present for Miss Molly. I wanted to leave it where she'd git it. I reckoned I'd not be seein' her again, soon."

"Present?" Old Jackson's lips curled contemptuously. "I'll bring all the presents she needs. You been treated most like one of the family round here, so you show your gratitude by shinin' up to my girl, eh?"

"You know that ain't so," Johnny answered heatedly. "Hobe and me has been bringin' her little things nigh ten years."

"She was a child then. And you carryin' her picture around. I won't have it! Damn it, I won't! My girl ain't intended for no forty-dollar-a-month cowpunch. I want that picture."

Johnny shook his head. Less angry than he had been, he said:

"I can't give it to you. If Molly says she wants it, all right. I'll give it to her. Ain't no talk goin' to make me change my mind about that."

"She'll tell you quick enough." Kent raised his voice to cry out her name.

"No good doin' that," Johnny advised. "She ain't here."

"I'll find out whether she is or not. You git your stuff now. Take your presents with you, too."

Johnny had never been dismissed in this fashion. Tight-lipped, cheeks burning, he shook his head. "No," he muttered, "I'd not do that."

"Well, I'll take care of it, then."

And he caught up the harmonica and hurled it through the open window. "You git your stuff," he thundered.

The lust to tear this old man's body with his hands surged in Johnny Dice's soul. And yet, Molly was his daughter! The thought struck Johnny with a double significance. Jackson Kent had identified the dead man's treasured keepsake. But why had that man carried Molly Kent's photograph? Questions began stabbing at Johnny's brain.

Molly had had nothing to do with the man's death. Hobe had given the old man an alibi. But there was a draw to this affair which could not be argued into nothingness. Molly was mysteriously away from home; Jackson here when he had left for Winnemucca, and always that picture of

the girl in the dead man's wallet to be explained.

In a sort of daze Johnny got his blankets and other gear and placed them upon his saddle.

Kent had roused Charlie Sam and set him to ringing the ranch-house bell. Only little Hughie answered the bell's imperative summons.

"Where's Molly?" the girl's father demanded.

"Now, that's a hard question to answer," Hughie replied. "Never a word did she say to me. She got her horse herself this mornin'. 'Twan't later than eight when she rode off. Charlie, here, must have talked to her."

"No talk," squint-eyed Charlie Sam declared. "Me plack lunch. She damn big hurry."

"One of you must have seen whichaway she went."

"Left here headin' for Argenta," Hughie exclaimed. "I was over there last night for the mail. Brought a letter for her. Mayhap she's ridden out with the answer."

"She ain't been in Argenta," Kent said positively. "I—got off there myself, and borrowed a horse from Matt Pease. I'd 'a' passed her on the road if she'd been headin' there."

Kent's words explained his presence to Johnny. Argenta was a flag station halfway between Standing Rock and Winnemucca. The old man could easily enough have done as he claimed. But where could Molly have gone? If she had gone south, she must come to the railroad. Surely she would not have bothered with lunch had she set out for Argenta or any neighboring ranch.

Beyond question she had not gone to Standing Rock or else Johnny and Tony would have passed her. That left only Winnemucca as a possible destination. Hughie's observation that she had been "all dressed up" only added to Johnny's conviction that he would find her there. But why had she left without leaving a note for her father? And why the long ride when she might have caught a train at Argenta or Standing Rock? Wasn't it plain that she hoped to go unquestioned? But what had she to conceal? Could the letter which Hughie had brought be the answer?

Johnny glanced at the old man, who was pacing back and forth, mumbling to himself. His concern for his girl swept away some of the boy's angry feelings. Old tyrant that he was, no one could deny his love for Molly.

"She shouldn't do these fool things," Johnny heard him say. "Runnin' off without a word! She's only a girl; only a child." He stopped to catch Johnny's eye. "You come in here a minute," he ordered.

Tony sighed impatiently as Johnny and the old man went inside.

When the two men reached the office Kent shot his demand at the boy without a second's delay:

"I want that picture!"

"I told you I'd give it to Molly if she won't let me keep it. That's my answer. I never knew till an hour ago what she meant to me. I'm tellin' you fair, now, that I'm takin' my orders from her."

"Well, you're armed and so is the Basque, but I'll have my say before very long. You stay 'way from my daughter. You're a fool if you're countin' on puttin' her between us. She's my girl! Keep your picture! She'll be askin' for it quick enough. Don't let me hear that you're showin' it round, makin' talk. By God, there won't be room enough in this State for you if you do."

"Your opinion of me does credit to you, don't it?" the boy snapped back. "Funny you didn't find me out long ago."

"You keep your back talk," Kent roared. "Where you goin' when you leave here?"

Johnny smiled enigmatically.

"That's a fair question. I'll ask you one, and we'll be even-Stephen. When you left Standing Rock this mornin' you told Hobe you were off for Winnemuc. I'd admire to know what made you change your mind."

"What do you mean?" gasped the old man. "My comin's and goin's are my own business. Are you hintin' at somethin'?"

"No, I ain't hintin'. But in spite of all hell I'm doin' some tall thinkin'."

" You can give it a name if you're half a man."

Johnny turned away sadly.

" I guess I don't measure up," he said slowly. " And, besides, I'd hate to give tongue to it. But I'll say this much "—and he wheeled on old Kent again—" I'll answer your first question. I'm goin' and goin' when I leave here. And I'm goin' to keep on movin' till I find out who killed that man in Standing Rock. Till I do, my address is in my hat. I know you've got the low-down on me. Well, let it ride. No matter what you think, I shoot square. You're rich, you've got big friends; I know what you can do to me. Hop to it! But don't you ever forgit that while I live I love your daughter. And if I ever amount to anythin', and she'll have me, I'll come back and marry her. And you can please go to hell!"

CHAPTER IX.

TWO OLD MEN.

THE following morning at eleven o'clock Johnny and Tony sent their tired ponies across the new-fangled concrete bridge which spanned the Humboldt on upper Bridge Street.

Winnemucca lay somnolent in the midday sun, the street so deep with dust that it softened the sound of their horses' hoofs to a dull pad-pad as they continued on past Rinehart's general store and the new State Bank building. The two men had ridden all night. In fact, they had put a staggering number of miles behind them since they had left Standing Rock the preceding day.

Johnny swung off his horse in front of the Eldorado Hotel. He had long since decided that he would find Molly registered there. His method of ascertaining this was indeed strange, for, instead of going to the desk where the register lay open to public view, he made directly for the bar. Whitey Carr, the bartender, nodded to him. Johnny said " How?" and ordered a drink. It was to win this bit of recognition that he had entered the room. He had been there often enough to have more than a nodding acquaintance with Whitey and his co-workers. In truth, Johnny's intimacy with the craft was well-nigh universal.

Being remembered, and thusly armed for his attack on the register, he searched for some written sign of the girl's presence. Her name did not reward him. Whitey Carr saw his perturbance and through the swinging doors he called:

" Who you looking for, Johnny?"

Johnny's desire to find the girl outweighed his desire for secrecy.

" Lookin' for the old man's daughter," he called back to Whitey.

The bartender shook his head positively.

" Ain't been no females here in two days," he said. " That is, exceptin' some show folks."

There was no need looking for her at the other hotels. If she were in town she would be here. Johnny's face wore a frown as he stepped to the door and motioned to Tony to come in and eat.

" She ain't here," he said to the Basque. " We got to eat, though. Soon as I get a few victuals inside of me I'll prospect around."

The restaurant was a long, narrow room set with high stools before a wooden counter. Tony tried to make talk, but the boy was more intent on watching the few passers-by on Bridge Street, hoping against hope that he might catch a glimpse of the girl. But he finished his meal of ham and eggs and pie without this coming to pass.

When he had paid their check he said to Tony:

" You'd better git a room and turn in for an hour or two. I'll be back soon. What we got to do won't be done in a day."

" For why you leave me behin', Johnny?"

" I ain't leavin' you behind. I tell you we need sleep. We may be headin' back for Standing Rock to-night. You turn in."

Leaving the hotel, Johnny went down the street to Dan Secor's shop. Old Dan ran a second-hand store and pawnshop in addition to his business of gunsmithing. He was going home for dinner when Johnny hailed him.

" Hey, Dan," the boy called, " I want to see you a minute before you go. Open up for a second."

"That's you boys," the old fellow growled. "Sit here all mornin' long 'thout nary a customer, and soon as I gits locked up you flock in. What you want?"

"Dan, I want you to take a look at this gun. D'you ever see it before?"

Dan had to put his specs in position before he could answer.

"Sure, put that firin' pin in myself. That's an old Ross pistol."

Johnny was all smiles.

This was the first bit of luck to come his way this day.

"I reckoned you'd fixed it up."

"Ain't yore gun, is it?" old Dan questioned. "Leastways it wa'n't you had it in here to be fixed."

"No. I just came by the gun accidental-like. I'm right interested in the man what owned it, though. Suppose you got his name in your books."

"Umph—umph!" Dan grunted. "Ain't neither. I 'member he waited here while I put in the pin. Had quite a talk."

Johnny's face fell. Old Dan's words had dropped him from the clouds to the bottomless pit. What mattered it that he had traced the dead man's movements back to Secor's shop? His surmising was proved correct, but the murdered man's identity remained a mystery, and that had to be solved before he could proceed with any assurance of success. Johnny cursed in his chagrin. Could you find two men in a hundred who would have a gun repaired while they waited? Of course not! It was just a trick of fate's to thwart him. It wouldn't happen so again in a thousand years.

"You seem right put out," Dan rejoined. "Man ain't done nothin'?"

"Not a thing. Say, you mind tellin' me what you two talked about?"

"Don't know as I do. Wa'n't nothin' puss'nal; 'twas mostly cattle talk, him askin' after the brands folks was runnin' along the river. You know, light talk—two old men."

The old gunsmith took off his glasses and gazed vacantly into space, as if beholding some pleasant vista of almost forgotten years. "Yes," he murmured, "two old men. Him and me had been in Sante Fe 'bout the same time." Dan clucked his lips at the memory. "Them was the days; riotin' ever' night, hell poppin' over in the Tonto, Injuns puttin' on the paint every now and then."

The old man paused abruptly. Then:

"Say, Johnny!" he exclaimed. "Come to think on it your man did say somethin' puss'nal. Asked me what folks said of old Kent's daughter."

"What?"

Johnny's exclamation was whipped out with such force as to startle old Dan. Here was that draw again—Molly and the dead man. Every place he turned he came face to face with it.

The gunsmith misunderstood the boy's attitude. "Why, Johnny, they wa'n't no harm in the question. I told him folks said only good things of Molly Kent. And he didn't seem to set no great store by my answer. Said he was goin' over to the Piute reservation; didn't say he was, but I knew it because he asked me if he could git to Standing Rock from the North Fork without a-comin' way back here."

Johnny began to understand that the talk the two men had was of vital importance, even though old Dan saw nothing of value in it. The boy wondered if he should tell the old man of the murder. Another day and he would know of it, anyhow. Better make an ally of the old man and get him to hold his tongue. And then, too, the surprise of telling him now might startle him into recalling some other bit of conversation.

This logic made Johnny decide to tell him.

"Dan," he began, "when did you have that talk?"

"'Bout six days ago, I reckon."

"You ain't sure?"

"Less see—yes, I'm sot on that. 'Twas the first of the month."

The first of the month; this was the sixth. Tony had seen the man on the North Fork five days ago. It fitted in!

"He didn't say who he was goin' to see over in the Injun country?"

"Don't reckon he did."

"That's goin' to be awfully important, Dan, because this man got hisself killed night before last."

"No! Not killed?"

"Killed dead. Old Aaron says he killed hisself. It's a lie. He was murdered. I'm aimin' to find out who did it. And, Dan, when folks git to talkin' about it down here, I want you to be dumb. That man got a rotten deal. Ain't nobody but me goin' to square it. What do you say?"

"I say yes. You ain't askin' me nothin'." He shook his head. "Killed, eh? And him lookin' to be so handy with a gun. It wa'n't no fair fight."

"You said somethin'. I know he was on the North Fork. Went to the Rock from there. But there was two days in between. Do you suppose he was on the reservation all that time? Can't you remember who he was goin' to see over there? Was it Ames, the trader, or the agent? Maybe it was old Thunder Bird!"

"No, Johnny, he didn't say. But, by God, he did tell me he was comin' back! Said he'd be here Saturday."

"Saturday? That's to-day." Johnny whistled a surprised note or two. Dan watched him as he walked back and forth, hands thrust deep into his pockets. "Saturday," the boy muttered. "Comin' back here. Say, Dan, what in hell 'd he be comin' back here for? Was he aimin' to meet somebody?"

"That might 'a' been it. Or mail—he might 'a' been expectin' a letter."

"That's it!" Johnny pounded the counter vehemently. "He was comin' back for his mail!"

Johnny was so excited that the noontime pedestrians stared at him as they passed.

The boy was unmindful of them until a girl's mocking laugh reached his ears. He turned, then, to stare her down; but the expression on his face changed with magic swiftness, for standing there watching him, her face pressed close to old Dan's window, was Molly Kent.

She had been watching him these many seconds. A roguish light swam in her eyes as Johnny's mouth sagged with amazement.

"Ride him, cowboy!" she called. "Ride him!"

It was the old Diamond Bar battle cry.

Johnny shook his head dully. "I'm damned!" was all he could say.

CHAPTER X.

MOLLY KENT.

SWEET Molly Kent was as a flower blooming in the grayness of wind-swept Winnemucca. Johnny wondered how she contrived to be so clean and pressed. He had been to San Francisco and seen the fashionable folk of Grant Avenue. Molly could have walked among them this day to their envy.

On the range she wore fitting clothes, but never, Heaven forbid, the side-show "cow-girl" costume which Western girls are popularly supposed to wear. Brown tweeds of a sensible cut, and boots to match the best, served her. If she made any concession to the popular idea it was in the wearing of a small sombrero. Johnny had seen her so attired times enough to have overcome his awe of her. This new dress of to-day, however, was thoroughly disconcerting. Wise Molly divined his embarrassment and, womanlike, enjoyed it.

The flash of her gleaming white teeth only added to the boy's uneasiness. It was so much better to observe girls of her type from a distance. Not that she was merely pretty or in a true sense beautiful. Molly's chin was too masculine for that, her eyes too wide-set. And yet it was her eyes and that very chin which compelled attention. There was sense in this girl, a clean body and a clean mind. Loyalty, too, spoke.

Others had noted these things, also. Men do. Yes, and most women, too. Springy step, well-rounded ankles, glorious body, the touch of color in the cheeks glowing against her black hair—they all spoke of youth, of rare vitality. Here was a human being come thus far from the Master's mold unmarred. And this in a rough country. It was no mean compliment to Jackson Kent.

Poor Johnny! He sensed these things and felt himself ugly, awkward, hopeless before her. At this moment he would have fought any man so rash as to claim that she could ever care for him, Johnny Dice.

Taking pity on him, Molly ended his misery by breaking the spell which held him.

"I thought you were going to strike that old man," she said half seriously. "I'd like to know what you are doing down here."

"Business," Johnny answered dryly.

"Well, the Diamond Bar is shipping from Standing Rock, isn't it?"

Molly's eyes held his provokingly.

"It is," Johnny drawled nervously.

"But you're not. That is what you are trying to say, Mr. Dice."

Johnny nodded his head ever so slightly. The smile left Molly's eyes.

"Father and you again, Johnny?" she asked anxiously.

"Just me this time, I guess. No matter. I got my pay. But let's talk of somethin' pleasant, if there if any such."

The girl's gayety did not return so easily. "I just can't be pleasant by request, that way, Johnny," she said honestly. "I want to talk to you about this before I start for home."

"When you leavin' here?"

"Not before morning."

This suited Mr. Dice.

"You rode in, didn't yuh?" he questioned. Molly grinned in spite of herself. "Folks to home all worried about you," the boy went on. "Your daddy tearin' hair and cursin'. I figured you was down here, and I looked for you at the hotel."

"Don't you tell me what you thought when you found I wasn't there. Of course I wouldn't go to a hotel. The Langwell girls would never forgive me if I did. Don't tell me *you* were worried."

"That would be kinda hard for me, wouldn't it?" Johnny drawled.

Molly laughed outright at this. "Next to injured feelings, there's nothing like self-pity to make a person miserable, is there, Johnny? Now you tell me, is father out looking for me?"

"Certainly is. You'd better send a telegram over to Argenta. Hughie High will be down there to-night for the mail."

"Of course. I don't understand what brought father back from the Rock so quickly. Was it anything to do with you?"

And now Johnny lied. "I'd hate to think so," he told her.

Shrewd Molly was not more than half convinced of this.

"And the business that brought you here?" she inquired.

Apparently, a violent itching of the Dice scalp followed, but the girl insisted upon an answer.

"Er—private business," Johnny said lamely; but to Molly it carried an air of mystery.

"Well, you meet me at the hotel about two. I wish father had stayed at the Rock another day."

Johnny turned back to Dan's place, but the old man had slipped out. So, left to himself, the boy promptly began to worry over Molly's farewell words. It was plain enough that she had hoped to make her hurried trip without her father knowing of it. But what reason could she have for that? The question stayed with Mr. Dice. The girl was nervous. He could tell that. Coming to Winnemucca had always been something of a lark. Well, he had failed to find any spirit of vacation about her to-day. A blunt question or two would follow this afternoon!

Johnny had voiced his need of sleep, but now that he had the opportunity he made no effort to resign himself to it. For one thing, he wanted to think over that trip to the reservation. Western men did not go romping over the hills to Indian country for the thrill of going. It had been one of the dead man's last acts; perhaps the one which had led to his death.

The boy could argue a dozen reasons for the man's going there. Instinctively he felt it held the answer to the riddle he was trying to solve. Another talk with Dan was urgent, and then a visit to the Agency. Johnny could talk the Piute hand language. If necessary he would stay there for days until he had talked to every brave on the reservation.

But that was something for this afternoon or to-morrow. For the immediate present he had a matter of equal importance in mind. Perhaps nothing would come of it, but it was certainly worth the effort. Johnny was as certain now as he had been when Molly had interrupted him in his talk with Dan that the stranger had been coming back

to Winnemucca for his mail. It was the boy's intention to verify this at once.

CHAPTER XI.

MORE THAN A BET.

NOONTIME was an hour of leisure at the post office, due to the fact that without exception the east and west mail trains arrived in the very early morning or late afternoon. This suited Johnny. Strolling up to the window he found Miss Nannie Price, the assistant postmistress, in the act of artistically dissecting an orange.

"Mr. Allerdyce!" Nannie gurgled. "You *are* a stranger, even though handsomer than usual."

"Now, you stop, Miss Nannie, ma'am," Johnny grinned. "A new neckpiece ain't deceivin' you thataway."

Nannie laughed. In common with many others she was fond of Johnny.

"You're not expecting any mail?" she asked.

"No, ma'am, not exactly. Fact is, Miss Nannie, I want you to do me a favor. And it ain't downright reg'lar, either."

Nannie perked up at once. "Oh, Mr. Allerdyce," she cooed, "I'm dying to know what it is."

"Well, I'll tell yuh. There was a man over in Standing Rock the other night, and nobody could find out his name. I just bet I could. I know he was allowin' to come back here, and I surmise he gets mail here. His initials are C. T. I told myself if anybody answered to that down here, you'd know it."

"C. T.?" queried Nannie, her memory being put to question. "C. T.—Charles, Chris, Chester, Cleve—Cleve von Thurlow? No, that would be C. V., wouldn't it? Humph! Beats me." And to show how positive her statement was she reached for the letters in the T pigeonhole. Thumbing them with a practiced hand she ran over them speedily. Johnny's heart was pounding heavily, for he was having the secrets of the United States mails opened to him. Putting Nannie on her mettle had won where a more direct method would have failed most miserably.

Johnny's elation began to wane as the girl went on through the handful of letters without pausing, and then as he was about to give up hope, Nannie flapped a letter to the counter.

"That's him," she exclaimed. "Crosbie Traynor! Must be because here's another for him. Where was he from—Flagstaff?"

"That's right," he assured her. "From down Arizona way. Crobie Traynor! Well, ma'am, it's sure my treat. Next time you go by the Eagle Drug you stop in. There'll be a box of candy there for you."

"You shouldn't do that, Mr. Allerdyce," Nannie protested very prettily. "You know that I usually do remember names; but we've been so busy."

Johnny was in no mood to complain of this willing worker. "My laws, of course!" he hastened to say. "Fools shouldn't be coming around botherin' you."

And Johnny, further to show his gratitude, purchased a dollar's worth of stamps, for which he had absolutely no use. And, of course, Nannie's percentage didn't hold good on the deal, either.

Johnny's pace, when he had turned back on to Bridge Street, slowed materially. He was too full for words. To go back to the hotel would be to share his success with Tony, and he was not yet ready to do that. As was habitual with him, he wanted to be alone to digest this latest discovery. He found the proper place for it in the deserted waiting room at the Espee station.

His continual repetition of the dead man's name might have been a funeral chant, so often did he sound it.

"Crosbie Traynor." A pause, then: "Crosbie Traynor. I've got the tracks cleared now! I'll see the Injuns first; but if I'm stopped there, I'm goin' on, even if it's clear to Flagstaff!"

CHAPTER XII.

MOLLY EXPLAINS.

TWO o'clock found Johnny mounting the stairs to the Eldorado's parlor. Molly awaited him, but the boy found her cast down. Her appearance prompted him to plain speaking.

"Listen, girl," he said. "There's somethin' wrong. Now, tell me what it is. I felt it this mornin'. It ain't your way to steal off, and that's what you did this trip. You're worried, and I know it."

"I am, Johnny," Molly answered readily. "I'd have told you without your asking. I did come here hurriedly and without a word to any one. Maybe I've been foolish, but it sounded so genuine that I had to do as I have. I won't talk in riddles any longer. Hughie brought me this letter night before last. It rather upset me, and, then, too, I was curious. I want you to read it."

Johnny's face whitened as he obeyed her, for without question it was a communication from Crosbie Traynor.

The letter ran:

MISS MOLLY KENT, Diamond Bar Ranch:

Please do not be alarmed by this letter. One who wishes you well writes it. Although I am a stranger, I have traveled many hundred miles to see you.

I am an old man—old beyond my time. Seeing you is one of the two ambitions I have left me. Let the fact that I have loved your mother, living and dead, these forty years, explain my interest in you. It is of her that I want to talk to you.

Will you come to Winnemucca on the sixth? I'll look for you in the parlor of the Eldorado Hotel at noon.

For reasons that you will understand then, I hope you will come alone and that you will not go to the shipping pens until you have seen me.

My name would mean nothing to you, so I will sign myself just

YOUR FRIEND.

A sigh escaped Johnny as he handed back the letter.

"Well, what do you make of it?" Molly asked earnestly.

The boy could only shake his head. Here was the final proof of the dead man's interest in the girl Johnny loved. What lay in back of it was still a closed book, but certainly Traynor had felt himself close to her.

His death may have been without connection with his proposed intention to see Molly, but Johnny just could not believe it.

There was old Kent's attitude toward Johnny; the whole sorry business at Standing Rock; the bickering; the stupidity of men who were solid citizens.

Was it all a play, a staged show to block justice?

The boy tried to close his eyes to the pictures his sorely puzzled brain conjectured, but in spite of every resolve an inner voice kept on dinning in his ears: "Jackson Kent killed this man! Hired it done! Paid for it!"

But why? Molly's mother? What other reason could a rich man have for ordering a crime of this sort?

It was not to be supposed that Johnny's excitement would escape Molly's eyes. In comparison she was less nervous than he.

"Are you reading something between the lines?" she demanded. "Your face is white."

"Miss Molly, how long have you been waiting?"

"On and off since eleven. But tell me, shouldn't I have come? Don't be mysterious that way, Johnny. You actually frighten me."

"No harm in coming," he told her. He was only marking time. Johnny knew that he would have to tell some part of what had happened to the man who had written her this letter. "Can you make a guess as to who wrote that note?" he went on, still playing against the minutes.

"Why, no. I haven't the slightest memory of my mother. And I do believe the man was what he claimed to be."

"He was," Johnny answered succinctly. "What you intendin' doin' now?"

"I thought I'd wait here the rest of the afternoon."

Now he had to tell her.

"No use doin' that, little girl. No use at all."

Johnny's manner brought the girl to her feet.

"What *are* you saying?" she asked falteringly.

"He won't come." The words left the boy's lips slowly. "The man you're waiting for is dead!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

High-Jacked!

By GEORGE BRONSON-HOWARD

"STICK 'em up!"

"What!"

"Put 'em up, quick—your hands, of course. Don't do a hesitation dip now, or it 'll cost you something you might want to keep."

The two men faced each other in the dark alley. That is, it would have been dark had not the moon risen late and just now it revealed to the newly dehospitalized soldier the face of his accoster.

He remembered the man's voice, one of those from back in "the joint." Into this, a liquor-selling "honkatonk," he had stumbled by accident, out of which he had hurried because he was weak and weary. It was not a nice place: "joints" aren't.

But for the weak, pimply faced Sicilian Moor to imagine that he—four years in the war: three in the hospitals: his companions in these last three years, every one, those who had taken the "long chances" and got the worst of it.

Before that, thirty-eight hours hanging on the barbed wire, head one way, boots another; hit by shrapnel, deluged by liquid fire, heavy with sniper's lead; until he had breathed in the poison gas gratefully when it came his way, hoping for euthanasia—the easy death.

Instead, they had brought him in, grafted new living tissue and membranes on him from German boys of fourteen and fifteen—the last call of the Landwehr brought only boys and graybeards—and had patched and sewn and cut until they got him in shape for recovery. All this at the Duchess of Westminster's Base at Toul, where the first Canadian to win the V. C. was on his right, and the second American to win the Legion of Honor for his Lafayette Escadrille work was on his left!

Have you any idea of what it meant to win these honors? How difficult? How truly fearless these men must have been?

And now to be "stuck up" by a cheap,

common, little joint bird, who had mistaken his weakness for drunkenness, his liberality —" the custom of the country " was his motto—for " sucker " stuff!

He laughed—deliberately. As he imagined it would, this brought the gun into his ribs—from behind, of course—and an angry voice whispered sibilantly:

" Kick in with your jack, your souper, all your junk—"

" Cuff buttons, too?" asked Phil Knott, late major B. E. F., and brevet lieutenant colonel attached G. H. Q. A. E. F. by M. I. 5 of Carlton House Terrace—the soft, gentle-voiced spy catcher once renowned through three armies.

His question gave him his chance to turn. The man shrank into the shadows. Knott noted with contempt that he wore the conventional domino mask of cheap fiction instead of the black handkerchief tied over nose, mouth and eyes—as professionals did.

" For any one may have a silk handkerchief on him, whereas a mask is awful hard to explain if the coppers fan you, as any time they might if you get a ' rep,' " his old top sergeant had told him—among other things. And this " top " had been internationally known for naming the law " the common enemy." " Only a sucker goes out on the heel with a mask in his kick."

Remembering this, Knott laughed again.

" Say," demanded the would-be gunman, peevishly, " why don't you—"

" Why don't I what?" asked Knott in his gentlest voice. " If you won't let me put down my hands, how *can* I ' kick in,' as you say—"

" That's right," considered the other sulkily. " Wait 'll I fan you for a shieve or a gat—"

Pushing his pistol hand deftly against the abdomen of his prisoner, his weight pressing its muzzle into Knott's ribs, his fingers began the " fanning." But as Knott instinctively knew, he put too much weight behind his pressure, so that when the ex-soldier executed a right-about face, the amateur " stick-up man " went sprawling.

Knott had done nothing but step smartly aside, and the sheer weight that rested against him behind " the gun " had sprawled its holder flat. As he came down the wrist bone of the hand holding the weapon was suddenly oppressed by a sharp and sudden pain—the result of which was to send the weapon flying beyond his reach.

Without apparently moving his body, the toe of Knott's boot had come down heavily upon this pivotal and most vulnerable point with all his weight behind it, and a second later, he was ten yards away with the butt of the automatic pressed hard against the depression above his own hip and the muzzle steadily covering the other's torso, as the amateur picked himself up.

The gentlest of voices had become suddenly harsh and hard, and although still low-pitched, carried.

" On your way—quick. I count ten slowly, which gives you your chance to make the grade. Be out of sight before I get to ten, or you're liable to lose something that's of no value to anybody but yourself. Get! One—two—"

The fellow had disappeared around the alley corner before three-quarters of his allotted time had elapsed.

" Eight!"

Knott finished counting with his former adversary's final exit and pocketed the automatic. The adventure would have ended there had *he* anything to say in the matter, but Miss Fortune ruled otherwise.

For while the ex-officer of the Army of Occupation waited warily lest there be others in on this attempted assault—waited not only in the shadows, but within a niche of an old brick wall, another man slipped into the alleyway from the street, and taking advantage of all opportunities for " caves," worked his way toward the former divisional intelligence officer.

And in such a manner that, even had he wished to do so, Knott was unable even to wing him.

A dangerous opponent apparently! Knott stiffened as he always did when danger—actual danger approached. He could only see the fellow intermittently when he slipped past the patches of light that percolated from the late moon through the branches of trees behind the brick wall or fell in pools from those promontories on the far side—the steep, high-pitched roofs of the old houses.

As he neared Knott, the hand that held the former attacker's automatic gripped its butt with fiercely forced fingers. Once again its muzzle was depressed until it found its dead line.

Apparently unaware of the actual whereabouts of his opponent, the newcomer hedged and hesitated, not knowing he had selected for his hesitation a spot not five yards from where the other's figure was flattened against the wall. It seemed enough for the newcomer that he was hidden, shrouded in shadows. He did not seem to sense the fact that, having been in the dark now some little while, Knott's eyes had become those of a nyctalops—one who can see in the dark.

Every patron of a movie palace knows what it is to stumble in blind, but to walk out, in the same darkness, seeing.

It seemed to Knott that the newcomer should have been sentient to this simple phenomenon. Evidently, however, he was of the same simple stratum of "half-wise sucker" as his first antagonist.

Well—better end it immediately, thought the ex-officer, for he was weary of such work.

However, seemingly, it had to be done. He—Knott—dared not move without revealing his whereabouts and evidently the other man meant to maintain his static position indefinitely until, by some slight sound, he could identify his enemy.

No sense in waiting until *his* eyes became nyctaloptic, too!

So he spoke again in that hard, harsh, but curiously low-pitched voice that carried so far and seldom failed to exact obedience.

"Put up your hands fast! Good! No! Not so good. Take 'em down again. Let 'em fall flat to your sides. Now, lift up the skirts of your coat clean above your armpits—I want what's in your back pocket, or under your arm or in the armholes of your waistcoat—vest, I suppose you say!"

The other's arms had risen automatically. Now they fell in the same manner, and Knott's further warning was unnecessary.

"Let 'em lie lax until you lift your jacket. If one of them even approaches a side pocket, its wrist is going to be shattered—understand me! One false move and you're through for the night. Keep that in mind. And you'll carry an arm in a sling for many a day and maybe won't ever be able to use it again. Now get that jacket up fast and turn around as you do it. And remember when I fan you—which I understand is the appropriate verb—I'll be watching your feet as well as the rest of you."

He approached, adding:

"Don't misapprehend my intentions. I didn't start this thing. You and your friends *did*. Now, I mean to go through with it—go the limit. Whatever you may have on you in the matter of money or valuables is going to go with me. It's an easy guess that anything on you of that sort is stolen. Yea, and stolen from the weak, the helpless, the hopelessly drunk, for hounds like you don't dare to try it out on anybody else."

With a quick, practiced hand, Knott made his examination. In the war he had under him close to half a thousand men who needed daily inspection.

Now there were no pockets to unbutton. Remained only the lining of the jacket. And, in its examination, Knott's sensitive finger tips soon located something back in the lower left point of the coat skirt.

Without troubling to discover how it had been "ditched" there, he slit the lining with the golden pocket knife attached to one end of his watch chain.

A long, thick, bulging wallet smacked the pavement smartly as it fell. Knott let it lie for the moment. He was already in possession of the man's lethal hardware—a silly little thirty-two caliber revolver, a bunch of master keys, with a picklock or so attached, a silver phial, too small to contain anything except perfume or poison. Knott suspected vitriol, the last card of the most merciless sort of murderer. Nothing else of importance unless some letters could be counted as such.

"Right!" he commanded crisply. "Now travel fast. Let me see the last of you before I count ten, at which time I fire. I've done this once before, you know, and it can be done before I count eight. See if you can beat that record up the alley!"

"Going to take it all yourself, huh?" demanded the hitherto silent man, gaining the

courage for what he evidently intended as a scathing sneer. "Going to let me go, so you can pocket the proceeds? Going to—"

"I'm starting to count," warned Knott. "One—two—three—"

His voice, low-pitched as ever, had taken on that hard, harsh inflection which every old-time offender in any of his army outfits sometimes dreamed of, to awake in an agony of dread. Evidently it had not lost its usual effect, for this fellow had started even before Knott reached his second numeral.

He counted with sufficient distinctness, for all the low pitch of his voice, that the fellow should continue to hear him until he was safely around the corner.

"Broke to-night's record all right," Knott murmured, and smiled boyishly as he stopped at "six."

Then, but with laborious care lest he unnecessarily expose himself, he dropped flat on the rough bricked walk and reached for the wallet he had cut from the second fellow's coat lining. Picking it up from the grass-grown cobblestones he pocketed the thing and grinned again.

"I guess there's enough in it to give every convalescing overseas 'buddie' at 'the fort' a pack of cigarettes and another one of chewing gum," he was thinking. "Well—we'll chance a retreat—now that we have a couple of popguns. Although this little old thirty-two wouldn't really hurt anybody. And I aim to hurt whoever starts anything with me again to-night. The third man wins—*a permanent home!*"

He not only thought all this: he said it aloud besides, and in that curiously distinct, low-pitched danger tone of his. Wanting every one, hidden but within earshot, to hear each word, he enunciated with extraordinary distinctness.

Then, keeping his back flat against the old brick wall, he moved slowly down the alley, away from the street he had originally quitted, the one to which his two adversaries had flown. His slow, sidewise gait proved to be unnecessary, however, for none approached him—either from front or rear. The narrow old alleyway lay silent and deserted before him and behind, its grass-grown cobbles revealed here and there in pools and patches of moonshine. By its light was also brought out the steep and sloping roofs of the ancient antebellum houses, with their peep-eye dormer windows just below their stacks of chimney pots, and a cotton-wool cloud or two that flecked itself across the rotund face of the big yellow moon!

A great night for the open, albeit a bit chilly, and chilly air meant coughing to his gas-seared lungs. Nearing morning, too! But sleep still as far away as ever!

Never mind: by the time he got there, the first sunrays would be gilding the crocuses and the daffodils. And the lilacs had been promising to burst into bloom with almost any dawn.

So, buttoning up his coat to his chin—lest he cough—Knott started off with the long, swinging stride of the veteran route marcher. Soon he had left far behind him the most ancient section of the old city, and was well on his way toward a certain wildwood—wild still, despite a century or so of being a public park. Although surrounded by the houses and people of the ultracivilized, it still deserved the Druidic name it bore.

II.

KNOTT thrust both hands deep into his pockets. Both encountered "guns," the Mauser automatic of his first antagonist, and the little thirty-two of his second antagonist.

To the latter owner belonged also the bulging wallet that kept it company.

He considered seriously returning all this junk. Why not go and give them back, and—

Miss Fortune—who can so easily change both her name and her face and become Misfortune—intervened again. She transformed the chilly north wind into the mildest of zephyrs freighted with the perfume of lilacs fresh from their bath of moon-kissed dew.

The joint was instantly forgotten! Knott's stride became a match for his eagerly sniffing nostrils. The moon, becoming a pale white ghost of its former self, was sliding down the arch of the western sky.

He suddenly realized that he had been up all night. It was that way with him sometimes; especially when those old wounds of his began to ache. The surgeons had never even attempted to get it *all* out, those scores and scores of minute bits of searing, scorching shrapnel case that had come gyrating against him from all directions while he hung helpless on the barbed wire.

So nights came, yes, even after three years of hospital, when what *hadn't* come out worked its sweet will upon his poor, strained tissues. And he couldn't sleep! And that was how he had happened to stumble into the joint, it being the only sort of place that kept open at such hours.

Anything was better than being alone at these times.

Anything was better than to lie sleepless, living that horror of four years of war all over again.

He had had quite enough of four blank walls and eyes that stared out of the dark. Three years of hospitals!

What a fool he had been; he, Phil Knott, American, to mix himself up in other people's quarrels. Just because he had happened to be in London in '14 and had seen the quiet, still bodies of women and old men and little children after a Zep raid! An hour later that night he had left the Authors' Club, crossed Whitehall Court, and, having served his military apprenticeship as a Maryland militiaman, left the War Office a verbally appointed cadet officer.

A month later he had been a second lieutenant in France. While he lay in the Duchess of Westminster's base hospital at Toul, a few months before the armistice, he had been breveted a lieutenant-colonel that he might draw the latter's pay.

And it took up nearly all the space in the top tray of his trunk to hold the various jewelers' cases that housed his "decorations." Lately he had thrown the cases away and piled up the medals in one big, heart-shaped, suede-covered box.

What was the good of all that stuff when one couldn't sleep and one's old wounds ached and—

Seven years gone out of his life! Gone! Just plain *gone!* And, meanwhile, his people had died. He had no one now.

III.

You must not imagine these thoughts distracting his attention from the perfume of the lilacs. That is, not for very long. Nothing like as long as it takes to tell you about it. He might have paused for a few seconds or so. Then, suddenly, the perfumed breeze drifted lazily past him again, and he was striding toward the woods where the lilacs grew.

Soon his soles were crunching the gravel of the formal gardens through which one must pass before reaching the woods. As the first level rays of the sun fell warm upon his cheek, he removed his hat. As he strode on, they gilded his chestnut-colored hair.

He was personable enough still, and somehow clothes looked better on him than on the average person. And, for all the berserker rage that obsessed him in battle, he was curiously gentle. Dogs came up to him, sniffed him, then thrust their muzzles into his palm to be stroked.

And women trusted him and told him things. Some of them a good many, by the bye, had even loved him. He liked women, nice ones, that is: those who weren't "up-stage," who did him the honor to be natural with him, not to lie to him, no matter how much they lied to other men—even their husbands.

Nevertheless, being a "square shooter"—as he phrased it—he wasn't quite willing to take what a great many women wanted to give him when he had nothing to give them in return.

What he called "nothing," that is; even if it *was* what *they* wanted — or thought they did. Actually, they would soon be wanting a good deal more.

But even if he had had *that;* even if he *loved* one, really; what was the use? All his money was gone. Two people couldn't very well live on his half-pay as a retired British officer. Not *his* kind of people.

And he was just dehospitalized; just beginning again. It would be years before he got on his feet in his profession, regained his former status.

And so it was just as well he didn't care about any woman. It would have been just his luck to fall in love with a poor one instead of one who had something of her own. And he couldn't stick the kind he didn't care for, beautiful and moneyed both though they might be.

IV

HELLO! What's this? Alone at this hour? Such a kiddy looking girl, too! And crying! No, not crying! Sobbing out her blessed little heart!

Pretty, too! That is if one might judge by the hair and general contour! She had her face covered by her hands while she sat in that secluded arbor among the lilacs and cried and cried and cried.

Well groomed she was. He liked that. But what was such a girl doing out at six thirty in the morning?

In the most casual manner possible—for Phil Knott was one of the few men who could do that sort of thing and get away with it—he seated himself beside her in the sunlight of dawn, and gently but firmly took those hands down from her eyes, passing her a fresh handkerchief as he did so.

Somehow, as women always did, she took him for granted. He opened up the gold mesh bag that lay beside her on the seat, got out her powder puff and her lip stick. Apparently she did not need rouge. She didn't carry any anyhow, because he looked for it.

While she used these things, he turned away.

"Tell me when?" he directed, over his shoulder.

It didn't seem to take her long. When he turned at some sort of agreeable noise she made, he gasped.

Golly! She *was* a pretty kid! No wonder she didn't need rouge. Her cheeks were the color of wild roses painted on old ivory! Old ivory is perhaps the only way of explaining it. It is Knott's way of telling it, anyhow.

"Except they were alive—vital—vibrant. But that's as near as I can get to the color to tell about the wild roses painted on old ivory. I mean the color of the miniatures they used to do fifty or a hundred years ago.

"Then there were her eyes! I can't describe them. Nobody could, except that iris and pupil seemed the same color. So that they appeared extraordinarily large, liquid, altogether lovely.

"Confound words anyhow. They aren't flexible enough. I can't tell you about her eyes, except to say they were—well—just wonderful!

"And her hair! Now, if I say it was black, you'll go thinking she looked like some Spanish creature or other. Not that kind of black—not blue black. And yet not brown. You see something like that color of hair in the English and Irish ports.

"I believe, if I remember my ethnology, that there was a strain in the Danes that accounts for it. 'The Black Danes,' they called them. Very clear skinned, not at all Latin in looks, but with black hair.

"Sometimes you see it in Irish girls, too, this hair and those eyes. I've cross-examined them. Gentlewomen, I mean; likely to have titles—that sort! And they admit descent from Norse pirates who ravished their coasts; you know those old vikings ravished everybody's coasts.

"And I'm told the Norman nobility—the gentry and nobility of Normandy have that strain. They were Norsemen, too. Came there under Rollo—I believe his name was. I never saw any Norman girls, though, who looked *like her!*

"I never saw *anybody* who looked like her! Never! Not anybody!

"Well, she glanced up at me and then away, and I saw she was going to cry and sob again. So I did the first thing I could think of. Told her the funny story about the amateurs who had tried to high-jack me!

"That is to say, *I* thought it was funny. But she didn't! She—"

But enough of the Knott ellipses. Not that one blames him for being elliptical; considering what followed, he could hardly be expected to be anything else.

For if he hadn't amused her he had done something just as good: shocked her out of self pitying herself. Suddenly she saw her-

self in this stranger's place—this strange stranger's place.

" Why, you might have been *killed*," she found herself saying, quite unconscious of the fact that her shock was all due to the fear that he might well have been. And, then, he would not be there talking to her.

Nor did she seem to realize that this was the first time she had ever spoken to, or even been addressed by some one not properly vouched for.

He assured her lightly that one who had lived so many years within sound and reach of the big guns was hardly likely to be bothered much by little ones.

" They aren't dangerous anyhow, unless they come out smoking," he concluded. " A man who's going to shoot does it when he draws. Otherwise the other fellow may beat him to it—if you see what I mean. And these things—"

He indicated both weapons with a gesture of good natured contempt; for, on drawing them from his pockets to show her, he had discovered that the Mauser was only a .25. At her shudder he ceased to smile, and dropping the wallet that had come out with the .32, " broke " the latter and shook out the greasy bullets on the grass behind the green garden bench; following this action instantly by removing the Mauser's magazine.

This he pocketed. Meanwhile, instinctively, the girl had picked up the pocketbook which had fallen on the gravel at her feet.

" What's in it?" she was amazed to hear herself inquire. Even more amazing was his answer that he really did not know.

" Enough to buy cigarettes for all the permanent casualties at the fort," he concluded lightly. But turned suddenly serious:

" Poor chaps! They were heroes three years ago. They're only annoyances now. It breaks your heart to see the blind ones learning to make baskets, and the ones without arms trying to typewrite. And mostly they volunteered: didn't have to go. They—"

" So did you, didn't you?"

" What?"

" Volunteer?"

He frowned slightly and tried to tell her more about the " total losses " who were receiving " occupational training." But she would not have it so. To hear her rain of persistent questions, personal questions, was the only way one could have believed she asked them: she, the repressed convent-bred product, the latter-day Victorian type of young gentlewoman: she, who had been sent abroad for her education lest she come to be like the " flapper " type of debutante of to-day.

So that he, being neither a liar nor accustomed to answering women rudely, was compelled to reply. Without seeming to do so, she had pumped him dry within a quarter hour of everything connected with the one subject he loathed—his war service.

And then, imperiously, she demanded his name. Like one in a trance, he handed over the only type of card he possessed: that one engraved for him by M. I. 5, and dictated by his superior officer. When he had protested against the use of the initials denoting his decorations, his C. O. had informed him that they had been added because they gave extra authority to any statements he might make in the propaganda work he was then engaged upon for use in America.

She gasped up at him: " Why—why—you never said a word about how you became a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor, or a Knight of St. James of Compostolla, or—"

" Oh, that knight business was the bunk," he informed her happily, glad to be on safe ground again. " Just happened to pull a few Spanish non-combatants out of a little hole in Flanders. Perfect rot giving anybody a knighthood for—"

She shook her head at him—the head of a sixteenth century page, with its shock of straight, lustrous black hair, bobbed just below the ears.

" Please stop," she said faintly. " You were one of those who gave so much and got so little—unless you accept your honors at their face value. Now, oh, yes: you really don't know what's in the wallet?"

She pronounced it " rilly," but that was because this was the euphonic thing to do. And all she said was euphony. Knott had never heard a voice that held so many nu-

ances of modulation: especially here in America where voices are harsh, strident—or affected.

"Let's look," he suggested, coming out of another trance. And so they looked together! And when they had done so, the girl gasped again. And this time it was a gasp indeed!

As for Knott, he sat staring fish-eyed from girl to wallet, from wallet to girl; not only at its amazing contents, but the connotation between them and his companion's choked incredulity.

Finally she found a still small voice in which to say:

"Look, please!"

She was thrusting upon him a copy of a "morning" paper issued at midnight, which had been lying beside her on the bench. Her small gloved fingers clawed across its front, then its back page, and finally the index finger pointed out a few brief paragraphs, close set in heavy type.

Skipping the headlines and the earlier outline of story, Knott read:

> Mr. Lowenstein has made it sufficiently emphatic in his advertisement—which will be found elsewhere in this issue—that the return of certain papers—valueless to others, but invaluable to him—is the paramount issue. Indeed, he guarantees a reward more than generous, along with the assurance that "no questions will be asked."
>
> Nor will he admit that the loss of his wallet occurred under anything remotely resembling "suspicious circumstances." Yet it is whispered about the down town joints of the old quarter that Mr. Marcus Lowenstein was high-jacked somewhere in the vicinity of the Owl and Lantern, after somewhat carelessly exposing the quantity of cash he carried when paying his bill in the latter drum.
>
> He had his way to make between the Owl and Lantern and the garage where he had left his rather conspicuous red roadster. And he went on alone through a maze of old streets as silent and deserted at that hour as they are crooked—in both senses of the word.
>
> He emerged therefrom at the garage without enough money to pay for his car's parking! And drove at once to the office of this paper just before it went to press to insert his advertisement: (See Page 9: Lost and Found).
>
> The writer of the foregoing article, having been tipped off by telephone, read his advertisement while it was being paid for, and sought to turn into facts what he has already stated as his suspicions.
>
> But without avail.
>
> So that all he can do is to wish Mr. Lowenstein luck, and to apprise the lucky finder of a wallet monogramed "M. E. L."—in gold leaf upon sea-green elk skin—a wallet containing twenty one-hundred-dollar yellow backs, two for five hundred, four checks each signed differently and each for larger amounts than the sum total of the cash, and various other valuable holographs—undescribed in the advertisement save that they are valueless to any save the owner—that Mr. Lowenstein is not only quite willing that the aforesaid finder should keep the cash in question, but will add to it another thousand if the remainder of the contents is handed over to him at his hotel this morning.

"My God!" Knott breathed.

The girl had been following the aligning of his eyes as he read. Now she pointed. "That's the hotel over there. No doubt about this being the wallet. Evidently you 'high-jacked' the 'high-jacker,' as our writing friend might have said."

"Are you sure that I—"

"Didn't do the original 'high-jacking'? Obviously. Your little affair happened about an hour ago, didn't it? This one occurred in time for the Jewish gentleman to insert his advertisement in the *Telepath*—which means before midnight. Q.E.D."

"But—"

"Why would the Lowenstein high-jacker be so hoggish—and, incidentally, imprudent—as to attempt another holdup that same night? That what troubles you?"

Knott nodded, amazed at the evident intellect inside the bobbed black-haired head of the sixteenth-century page-boy girl.

"Answer is: he wouldn't. Correlation follows that through the issuance of that very newspaper in your hand; others became aware of the amazing and audacious act of Mr. Lowenstein's attacker, and were proceeding to make his gain his loss. In fleeing from them he encountered you, just after you had suffered from an insult to your intelligence. Of which you expected a repetition."

"But he—"

"He, on the other hand," she continued calmly—she seemed to have forgotten that it was but a few moments since she had been sobbing—"was aghast at encountering another ally of the enemy he had im-

agined he had eluded. Hence made no attempt either to escape or explain, such gentlemen as he supposed you to be being popularly credited with 'croaking a guy just to see which way he'll fall.' I am once again quoting from the writing person of the *Morning Telepath*. And you, I presume, gave him the impression that you rather grimly 'meant business.'"

Knott laughed rather nervously.

"Oh, I say—" he began.

"You've already said it," she interrupted firmly. "Now go across to that hotel and transact some further business. This time with Mr. Lowenstein. Take him at his word. Hand him the wallet, and ask for the extra thousand. I'll hold the rest of it for you until you come back, in case he is up to some cheap police stunt. If you don't return in"—she glanced at a tiny jeweler's trick that a black ribbon and a sapphire-set black-metal buckle bound to her wrist—"say fifteen minutes, I'll follow to the hotel and use this money to buy you bail."

She had weeded out the twenty and two yellowbacks and had thrust them carelessly into the breast pocket of a silk blouse which, for all her appearance of casualness, she was careful to button; then to fasten, almost to her throat, the tweed coat that covered it.

It was characteristic of Phil Knott that he failed to question her right to issue instructions. Nor did it, for the slightest fraction of a second, occur to him that she wouldn't be there when he returned.

She *was* there, right enough, but the allotted quarter hour was up and she was pacing the gravel restlessly, the low heels of her smart little English boots crunching it down, the toecaps sending bits of it spinning.

So that she did not hear Knott as he came noiselessly across the grass, head erect, eyes and lips a smile, and, as she turned on one heel, grinding down the gravel, came instantly face to face with him, only the green bench between them.

Her eyes asked a question. He answered it by opening one clenched hand, in the palm of which lay the twenty-third yellowback: this one for a thousand.

"May I ask you to take charge of this along with the rest?" he inquired breezily; and, as it passed from his hand into hers, two pairs of hands gripped each the other across the back of the green garden bench.

"I'm so glad," he heard her falter. "I know this means so much to you—with your half-pay pittance."

"Yes," he agreed gravely. "It *does* mean so much to me with my half-pay pittance—now!"

"Now?" Her confidence had flickered down to a mere nothing. She was beginning to be a little afraid.

"Now!" he nodded, and paused to inhale a passing breeze that bore with it the perfume of the lilacs, all the sweeter for being sun-kissed as well as moon-kissed and dew-bathed.

"Yes, now! Because," he added reflectively, "I couldn't very well ask anybody to marry me on that same half-pay pittance."

Her eyes rounded at this, and he saw in them the same look he had noted before when she had been a thing of body-shaking sobs.

"You've—you've been wanting to ask somebody to marry you?"

He nodded again.

"And lack of money was all that prevented you?"

He nodded for the third time, noting out of an unpretentious corner of one eye that she was taking something from the pocket of her silk blouse and smoothing it out behind cupped palms. When he saw her transfer the twenty-third yellowback from one hand to the other he forbore to smile.

"Te-tell me about her?"

"I don't know anything about her to tell. Except that she's very little and very sweet and very poor and not happy at all. But I mean to make her so. And I mean her to make me so. Not that it 'll need much making. For she's enough like a boy to be my little pal, and enough of the girl to be my little sweetheart all the time."

Her eyes shone with strange lights as she asked:

"How long have you known her?"

" Ages—ago. But I remembered the moment I saw her."

" Remembered what?"

" Her!"

Again it seemed she was smoothing out the twenty-three yellowbacks in her cupped hands. And again it seemed she was about to be the sob-shaken lady.

" An old sweetheart?"

" In a way. She must have been. ' When I was a king in Babylon,' you know. Or, ' When you were a tadpole, and I was a fish.' Otherwise, I couldn't have fallen in love so fast—after so many years of wondering why I couldn't fall in love at all."

She had ceased to smooth out the stuff in her hands. They lay, very small and still, almost lax in her lap.

Presently she whispered:

" You haven't told me anything about her yet."

Their eyes met. Her lids drooped, her long, black, curling lashes brushed her cheeks.

Then he leaned forward and whispered almost into the pink, coral-tinted ear beneath the bobbed black hair:

" You haven't told me anything about her yet yourself."

For all his gentlest of approaches, her glance was that of a startled fawn. All the boyishness left her. From under the lowered lids and curling lashes her look was pleading.

" Her? I? Her?" she stammered. " Why—what do *I* know about her?"

" You're her," was his ungrammatical answer. But neither seemed to note its lack. " Poor little kid! It happened the minute I saw you sitting here sobbing, and pulled your hands down from your eyes. So you see I've loved you ever since I saw you."

" Half a long hour ago," she mocked.

But there was anything but mockery in her mind. She was thinking fast. If she told the truth: that the great Renaissance treasure house of paintings, tapestry, and objects of art—the great white-stone structure that dominated the park—that one could see even from the hills of the Druid wildwood—was her father's, and would be hers some day; that she had fled the house in a passion of pique because that old-school Victorian gentleman, who had had her educated abroad to avoid all " flapper " influences, had stormed and raged because, that very afternoon, she had yielded to temptation and let her coiffeur bob her black hair; if she had told her poverty-stricken hero-lover with his " half-pay pittance," anything like this, she would lose him.

Afterward—

Just for the tiniest fraction of a second she swayed toward him; her little gloved fingers played with the leather strap about his wrist.

It was enough. She was in his arms now. The twenty and three yellow-backed bills fluttered unheeded on the grass behind the green garden bench. Her boyish hat joined them, while the breeze that was perfumed by the sun-kissed, moon-kissed, dew-bathed lilacs fluttered the silken strands of her bobbed black hair until they fanned his face.

There was a perfume that permeated them sweeter than all the lilacs in the world. He breathed it in as an acolyte at an altar inhales the incense.

Then suddenly he buried his face amid it, and her arms went about his broad shoulders—and she clung to him.

When he had found her hat and given it to her, along with the twenty and three yellowbacks, they both looked away as though a little ashamed. Then each caught the other smiling secretly.

Presently he said, quite seriously:

" We can have breakfast in a little place I know, a sort of an inn with an arbor. And by the time we've finished, and a taxicab has taken us there, the license bureau will be open. Then—I rather fancy a marriage in a church myself—"

She nodded vigorously.

" But, sweetheart, before we can be married, before we can be anything to each other, there is one thing I *must* know—one thing you *must* tell me?"

She was scared now, and looked it.

" Wh-wh-what's that, dar-darling?"

He looked at her steadily as he answered: " *Your name!*"

The Four Stragglers*

By FRANK L. PACKARD

Author of "The Miracle Man," "Pawned," etc.

CHAPTER XI.

THE GUTTERSNIPE.

A CLOCK somewhere in the house chimed the hour.

Midnight!

Polly Wickes arose hastily from the corner of the big leather-upholstered chesterfield in which her small figure had been tucked away.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I had no idea it was so late. Every one else has been in bed ages ago."

"I think," said Howard Locke gravely, "that it is our duty to stand by that last log. It's been a rather jolly fire, you know. I—"

"That is the second one you have put on after having made the same remark twice before," she accused his severely.

"I know," he acknowledged. "I'm guilty—but think of the extenuating circumstances."

Polly laughed.

"No," she said.

"This is positively the last," he pleaded. "There may not be any excuse for a grate fire to-morrow night. Have you thought of that? The wind is still howling, but the rain has stopped and the moon is coming out, and—" His tongue was running away with him inanely. He stopped short.

"Yes?" she inquired demurely.

The great dark eyes were laughing at him—teasing a little.

"Well, confound it," he blurted out, "I

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for February 3.

don't want you to go! This has been a day and an evening that I shall never forget—very wonderful ones for me. I don't want them to be only memories—yet."

He met the dark eyes steadily now. The laughter had gone from them. He found them studying him for an instant in an almost startled way—and then the eyelids drooped and covered them, and she turned her head a little, facing the portièred window beside the fireplace of the living room in which they stood, and the color crept softly upward from the full, bare throat, and stole into her cheeks.

He caught his breath. He felt his pulse stir into a quicker beat. She was very lovely as she stood there with the soft, mellow glow of the rose-shaded lamp and with the flicker of the flames from the firelight playing upon her.

"Just this last one," he pleaded again.

She hesitated for an instant, then sat down slowly on the chesterfield once more. And as he watched her, there seemed to have come a curious quiet upon her. She did not look at him now—she was staring at her hands, which were tightly clasped together in her lap.

"Very well," she said in a low voice. "I think that I, too, would like to have—that last log. There is something that I want to say—that I meant to say this afternoon on the yacht. I—Mr. Locke, do you know who I am?"

She would not look up. He could not see her face. He knew what she meant—Mr. Marlin's words of the day before flashed upon him.

There was something of dreariness in her voice, something that strove to be very bravely defiant, but was only wistful. An almost uncontrollable impulse fell upon him to touch her face and lift it gently, and make her eyes meet his again. There would be an answer there—an answer that he had not yet dared put in words.

What right had he to do so? A day of dreams on the yacht to-day—that, and yesterday. Two days! He had known her no longer than that—

He found himself answering her question automatically.

"What a strange question!" He was laughing—speaking lightly. "Of course I know who you are."

"Yes," she said gravely, "you know that my name is Polly Wickes—but do you know anything about me?"

He came and stood a little closer to her.

"I think I know *you*." His voice had lost its lighter tone.

A little flood of color came as she shook her head.

"Did Guardy tell you anything about me on your trip down here?"

"No," he answered.

"I didn't think he had," she said. "He has always been opposed to either of us saying anything about it to any one. Dear Guardy! I know it is for my sake and that he believes it makes it easier for me, and generally it does; but—but sometimes it doesn't." She stopped and looked up suddenly. "But I do think it is more than likely that Mr. Marlin, in his queer ways, has said something. Has he?"

"Look here," Locke demanded impulsively, "does it really matter—does it even matter at all? Mr. Marlin did say something, as a matter of fact—yesterday, down there at the boathouse, you know."

"What did he say?" she commanded in turn.

"Why," he smiled, "something about London, and selling flowers."

"Well, it is quite true," she declared slowly. "That is exactly what I was—a flower girl in London—on the street corners."

"I sell bonds—when I can—and wherever I can." He was laughing again—he was not quite sure whether he was striving the more to put her or himself at ease. "I can't see any difference on the basis of pure commerce between the two—except perhaps that the flowers are the more honest offering of the two. Bonds sometimes are not always what they seem."

She shook her head.

"That's very nice of you, Mr. Locke," she said. She was studying her clasped hands again. "But—but of course, as you quite well know, that has nothing whatever to do with what I am saying. You know London, don't you?"

"Why, yes; a bit," he answered.

"Yes," she said. "I think you do. Indeed, from what you have said to-day, I am sure you know it better than any American I have ever met before: and, indeed, far better than most people who live there all their lives.

"And so—and so"—her voice broke a little, then steadied instantly—"it is not necessary to go into any details, for you will understand quite well when I say that I lived in Whitechapel, and even there where only the cheapest room was to be found, and that when I sold flowers I did not have any shoes—and to the police I was known as a gutter snipe."

He was beside her, bending over her.

"My God, Miss Wickes—Polly," he burst out, "why do you hurt yourself like this?"

He had called her "Polly." The name had come unbidden to his tongue. It had brought no rebuke—or was it that she had not noticed it?

"I would hurt myself more," she asserted steadily, "if I felt that those around me could have any justification in believing that I was purposely masquerading in order to deceive. That would be hypocrisy—and I hate that!" She flung out her hands suddenly with a queer, little, helpless gesture.

"Oh, I wonder if you understand what I mean; I wonder if I am explaining myself—and if you won't at once think that I am utterly inconsistent when I say that at school no one knew anything about my former life? But, you see, I have never felt that I was called upon to make the intimate things in my life a matter of public knowledge.

"And in that respect I can quite understand Guardy's attitude in wishing me to say nothing about it, for, in so many cases, and especially at school, it would have just supplied a fund for gossip, and—and that would have been abominable."

"Of course it would!" There was savage assent in Locke's voice. "It's nobody's business but your own."

"Oh, yes, it is," she answered instantly. "It's Miss Marlin's business—if I come here as a guest."

"Yes," he agreed quickly; "but you *have* told her, and—"

"Wait!" she interrupted. "Yes, I have told her: and now I have told you. But your two cases are entirely different, and I am not altogether sure that my reason for telling you is entirely to my credit, because it—it is perhaps like the child who confesses when he knows he is sure to be found out. You couldn't be here with poor Mr. Marlin very long before you knew.

"Do you understand? I couldn't bear the thought of you, or any one, thinking I was deliberately trying to hide the truth, or that, when there was reason to do so, I was afraid or ashamed to speak out myself."

"I wish you hadn't added that 'any one,'" he said in a low voice.

She did not answer. She was staring now into the fire. And he, too, stared into it. It was full of pictures—strange drab pictures. He knew Whitechapel—its stark, hopeless realism: he knew its children—without shoes. Was that what she saw there now?

The fire was dying—beneath the one remaining log, almost burned through now, there were only embers. They glowed here and there and went out—black. Like some memories!

He looked at her again. Her face, that he could see now, seemed strangely pinched and drawn. Her hand toyed nervously with a frill of her dress. And something seemed suddenly to choke in his throat, and a great yearning came—and it would not be denied.

"Polly!" he whispered, and leaning over, caught her hand in his.

With a quick, sharp indrawing of her breath as of one in sudden pain, she arose to her feet and drew her hand away.

"Oh, why did you do that?" she cried out.

"Because," he said, "I—"

"No, no!" she cried out again. "Don't answer me! I didn't mean that you should answer. It is only that *now* there is something else that I must say. I—I—" Her voice broke suddenly.

"Don't!" he entreated huskily. "Polly, there is nothing to take to heart. What could it ever matter, those days? They are gone now forever. You exaggerate any possible bearing they could have on to-day.

"Suppose you were a flower girl, that you have known poverty in its bitterest sense—would that matter, could it possibly matter to any one who was not a contemptible snob, or to—"

"There is something else now that I must say." She was repeating her own words, almost as if she were unconscious of any interruption. "You—you make me say it. I—I never knew my father."

She was gone.

He had had a glimpse of a face pitifully white, of dark eyes that fought bravely against a mist that sought to blind them; and then before he could move or speak she had run from the room—and he stood alone before the fireplace.

And in the fireplace the last log fell spluttering, throwing out its dying rain of little sparks, and lay a broken thing between the dogs.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MAN IN THE MASK.

AGAIN a clock somewhere in the house chimed the hour. And again.

One o'clock.

Two o'clock.

The embers in the fireplace had long since turned to black charred things. Locke raised his head. Two o'clock! He had not been conscious of it when the last little glow had died away. He had turned out the light when Polly had gone—and had sat there staring at the dying fire. He had not put on another log. The fire was dead now—quite dead. He had been staring into a black fireplace—that was as black as the room itself.

Two o'clock!

He stood up, and going to the windows, flung back the portières. It was still blowing hard; but the moon was out now, showing through the scudding clouds. He brushed his hand heavily across his eyes. It was very still in the house; but the stillness itself seemed a disquiet, untranquil, chaotic thing. Polly! Yes, Polly had filled his thoughts during those two hours—Polly, and Captain Francis Newcombe.

But he had not forgotten withal the bizarre appointment he was to keep with Mr. Marlin in the aquarium—at a quarter past two. One would not be likely to forget so extraordinary a thing in any case, no matter what might meanwhile have intervened—even if Mr. Marlin had not been so grotesquely persistent in his reminders. A dozen times that day the old man had plucked significantly at Locke's coat sleeve or signalled mysteriously with his finger to his lips; and twice, with a childish titter, the old man had come upon him unexpectedly and had said exactly the same thing on each occasion.

"Tee-hee, tee-hee!" the old man had tittered. "It is all right for to-night, my boy—you will see—you will see. And they thought I was a fool. Do not say a word. Keep quiet—keep quiet—you will see."

What would he see? What would he learn? Much—or little? Would it be only the babble of a sick brain? Queer, strange, almost impossible conditions in this house! Where would they climax—and how? Whose hand held the trumps?

His eyes fixed suddenly on a spot across the lawn. Something seemed to have moved there. Fancy, perhaps; or a shadow cast by the swaying branches. The moon was just coming out from under the edge of a cloud—another moment and he would be able to tell if there were anything there.

Yes! A woman emerging from the path that led to the shore. The figure began to cross the lawn, approaching the house.

And then Locke's eyes narrowed suddenly in astonishment. It wasn't a woman at all; it was a man wearing a long gown, a dressing gown. It was Mr. Marlin. And the man kept cocking his head from side to side; and he appeared to be carrying something under the dressing gown—at least, his arm was crooked up as though he held a bundle there.

Locke smiled now a little grimly, as the old man disappeared around the corner of the house. It was almost a quarter past two. He would find Mr. Marlin in the aquarium.

He drew the portières together again, and leaving the room, went out into the reception hall beyond. There was no light showing anywhere and he was obliged to feel his

way along. The aquarium was in or, rather, composed in itself, a little wing built at the rear of the house, but connected therewith by a short, covered passageway. He knew the way quite well—he had been there with Polly on that first day.

That *first* day! That was only yesterday—it was incredible, impossible. His mind was running riot as he groped his way to the rear of the main staircase and into the wide passage that ran parallel with the length of the house. But the whole place was incredible! The house itself was like a great hotel with its corridors and its endless number of rooms! This was Mr. Marlin's room here at his right, and—

He stood still. A door on his left had opened. It shut again instantly—and then he could hear it being cautiously reopened a little way.

"Don't you move!" said a voice in a fierce whisper. "Don't you move! I can see you! If you move I will shoot you!"

Locke found his muscles, that had suddenly grown tense and strained, as suddenly relaxed. He could see nothing—the door wasn't wide enough open—but it was the old madman's voice. Strange, though! How had the man got there? That wasn't Mr. Marlin's room—Mr. Marlin's room was on the opposite side of the hall. Yes, of course, there must be an entrance into the house there of some sort.

"It's Locke," he announced quietly. "That's you, Mr. Marlin, isn't it?"

"Hah!" ejaculated the other. "You, my boy, eh? Well, that's quite different. Of course, it's you. You know the value of being prompt. Excellent! Excellent! Be very quiet—but hurry! Follow me. We have only a little time."

Locke could just make out the old man's form now as the other came through the door—and then in the darkness it was lost again. But the patter of footsteps ahead of him, hurrying along, served as a guide. He followed the other to the end of the hall, turned into the covered passageway, and was halted again by the old man, this time at the door of the aquarium.

"Tee-hee!" tittered his host. "They think they are dealing with a fool. Wait! Wait, young man, I will see that the window shades are all down before we turn on the light—though there will be no one here to-night except ourselves—tee-hee!—they will be somewhere else!"

The old man opened the door and disappeared. And now Locke, as he waited, and although he listened, could not hear the other moving around inside—what sound the old man made was drowned by the noise of running water through the pipes that fed the tanks, and, added to this, the low, constant drip and trickle that pervaded the place.

Presently the lights went on.

"Here!" cried the old man. "Come over here!"

Locke blinked a little in the light as he stepped forward. It reflected bewilderingly from the glass faces of the tanks that were everywhere about. He joined the old man in the center of the aquarium. Here there was an open space from which the tanks radiated off much after the manner of the spokes of a wheel, and this space was furnished as a sort of luxurious observation point, so to speak, for a heavy oriental rug was on the tiled floor, and ranged around a table were a number of big easy chairs.

From under his dressing gown now the old man took a package that was wrapped in oiled silk, and laid it on the table.

"Money!" he cried out abruptly. "Hah! We know its power, young man, you and I!" He began to fumble with the cord that was tied around the package; and then suddenly commenced to titter again.

"Did I not tell you I was being followed, always being followed? Well, last night they followed a wrong scent. Tee-hee! Tee-hee! I told you you would see who was the fool! They are there to-night—digging—digging—digging. Tee-hee! Tee-hee! They will dig the place all up before they are sure it is not there."

Money! That package! Locke's lips tightened imperceptibly. Was this, as he had more than half expected, what he was to "see"—the half million dollars at last that Polly had seen? And what did the man mean by "wrong scent"? And "digging"?

"Yes, of course, Mr. Marlin," Locke

said quietly. "Of course, they will! But who is it that is following you?"

The old man dropped the package from his hands and leaned across the table, his eyes suddenly ablaze.

"If I knew I would kill them!" he whispered. "It is everybody—everybody!"

"Perhaps you are mistaken." Locke spoke in a soothing tone. "Did you see anybody following you last night?"

"It is not necessary to see"—the whisper had become suddenly confidential—"I know. They were there—they are always there—watching—eyes are always watching." He broke into his silly titter once more. "Tee-hee, yes, yes; and we are being watched by thousands of eyes to-night—look at them—look at them—the pretty things—see them swimming all around you—but they look and they say nothing—and they do not follow me."

His voice was rising shrilly; he began to gesticulate with his hands, pointing with darting little motions at one tank after another. "Do you hear? You need not be afraid because they watch. They will not follow us."

Locke sat down leisurely in a chair facing the old man across the table. He was rather curious about this mysterious digging of last night, a little more than curious—but, also, it was necessary to calm the maniac's growing excitement.

"I am quite sure of that, Mr. Marlin," he agreed heartily. "We should be perfectly safe here, especially as you say that you have succeeded in making whoever was following you watch somewhere else. That was very clever of you, Mr. Marlin."

The old man put his finger to his lips.

"I'll tell you where it was, young man," he said. "The old hut in the woods behind the house. They think it's there. They think that's where I hide the money. And they'll keep on looking there. It will take them a long while. They will be looking there to-night—and perhaps to-morrow night, too. And then they will begin to follow me again.

"But it will be too late—too late for many, many days, because the time lock will be set—ha, ha—God supplies the time lock, young man—you do not understand that—but can you imagine any one opening a time lock that God has made?"

Locke took refuge in a cigarette. Apart from some mare's nest in an old hut, it was quite hopeless! The old madman's condition was growing steadily worse. There was a marked change in even the last twenty-four hours. It did not require any professional eye to discern that.

"I think," suggested Locke conversationally, "that you were going to show me something in that package, Mr. Marlin."

"Yes," Marlin replied instantly, and as though quite oblivious of any digression. "That is why you are here. Listen! You will tell your father about it. I do not ask others to do what I do not do myself. Your father must do the same. He must get all the great capitalists of America to do likewise—it is the only thing that will save the country from ruin and disaster. Look!"

The old man ripped off the cord and wrapper, and there tumbled out upon the table, each held together with two or three elastic bands, a half dozen or more small bundles of bank notes. "See! See! Do you see, young man?"

Locke, with difficulty, maintained an impassive countenance. He had expected something of the sort, but it seemed somehow incredible that a sum so great as Polly had named should be represented by those few little bundles scattered there on the table in front of him.

He picked one of them up and riffled the notes through his fingers. It contained perhaps a hundred bills, each one of the denomination of a thousand dollars—one hundred thousand dollars. He laid the bundle back on the table. Others were of like denomination; others again of five hundred. The full amount of a half million was undoubtedly there.

"Do you know how much is there?" demanded the old madman sharply.

Locke regarded the money thoughtfully. To name the exact amount offhand might aggravate Marlin's already suspicious frame of mind.

"I can see that there is a very large sum," he remarked cautiously.

"A large sum!" echoed the madman ag-

gressively. "And what do you call a large sum, young man?"

"Well, at a guess," said Locke quietly, "and basing it on that package I have just examined, I should say in the neighborhood of half a million dollars."

The maniac thrust his head forward across the table, stared for an instant, and then suddenly burst into a peal of wild, ironical laughter.

"Half a million!" He rocked upon his feet, his peals of laughter punctuating his words. "Bah! There are five millions, ten millions, fifty millions there!" He shook his finger under Locke's nose. "Do you hear what I say, young man?"

The blue eyes had become alight with a mad blaze; hectic spots began to burn in the withered cheeks.

Locke nodded his head in a slow, deliberate manner—as the most effective thing he could think of to do by way of calming Marlin. The whole place, the surroundings, the grotesque shapes swimming around in the tanks everywhere he looked, the eyes of the queer sea creatures that all seemed to be fascinated by that fortune which lay upon the table, the constant drip and trickle of water, the crazed old man who rocked upon his feet and laughed, were eerily unreal.

That seahorse in the tank that faced him from just beyond the other side of the table, for instance, seemed to be a most bizarre and unnatural creature both in shape and actions even for one of its own species! Half past two in the morning, in an aquarium with a madman and a half million dollars! Again, by way of appeasing the other, he nodded his head.

"Listen!" cried the maniac fiercely. "You must help me. Men are blind, blind, blind! Europe is crumbling, nations are bankrupt, chaos is everywhere. Everything else is decreasing in value; only the American dollar climbs up and up and up.

"Sell, sell, sell while there is time! Commercial houses are tottering, dividends are not being paid, the employment of labor becomes less and less—the end is near. And fools cling to their business enterprises; and their capital shrinks and is swallowed up and lost. Lost!"

The man was working himself into a frenzy. His voice rose in a shriek.

"*Lost!* Do you not see? Do you not understand? Money alone has any value. And the less money there is left in the world, and the more that is lost, the greater will be the value of what remains. It will multiply itself by the thousandfold.

"Look! Look what is on the table here! It will become a wealth beyond counting in any case, and if no one will believe me then the more it will be worth because there will be the less money to compete against it. Millions! Millions! Hundreds of millions!

"But I am not selfish. I do not wish to see the ruin of the world.

"And you—*you!* You will now be responsible. They will not listen to me because they say I am mad—I, who alone have the vision to see, and the courage to act. But your father will listen to you and he will believe you, and the great financiers of America will follow your father, and—"

Subconsciously Locke was aware that Marlin was still talking, the crazed words rising in shrieks of passionate intensity—but he was no longer paying any attention to him. He was staring again at the glass tank, behind and a little to one side of the old madman, that contained the seahorse.

The creature was most strange! It was only a diminutive thing, but, unless he were the victim of hallucination, it had taken on an extraordinary appearance. It seemed to possess *human* eyes; to assume almost the shape of a face—only there was a shadow across it. The water rippled a little.

The seahorse moved to the opposite corner of the tank—but the eyes remained in the original spot.

Locke leaned nonchalantly back in his chair, although his lips tightened into a thin, grim line. They *were* human eyes, and the shadow across the face was a mask. Where did it come from?

He began trying to figure out the angle of reflection. The face of each glass tank, of course, with the deeper-hued water behind it, was nothing more or less than a reflecting mirror.

What was that dark straight line above

the eyes? To begin with, the reflection must come from somewhere behind him, and well to one side of him. Taking into consideration the position in which Mr. Marlin stood, it must be the left-hand side.

The tanks, then, that would seem to answer that requirement became instantly limited in number—it must be either the first or second tank of those that formed the left-hand side of the alleyway nearest to where he sat, and that, like the spoke of the wheel, led obliquely to the wall. He could not see the wall, but—

Yes, he had it now. There was a window there. That dark line above the eyes was the window shade—raised six inches or so from the sill. It could easily have been accomplished—even if the old madman had carefully drawn every shade and shut every window in the place, as presumably he had. The drip and trickle, the running water, would have deadened any little sound made in forcing the window, and after that to reach in and manipulate the shade would have been but child's play.

Locke's eyes shifted now to Marlin. What was to be done? The old man, still rocking and swaying upon his feet, still flinging his arms about in mad gestures, his facial muscles twitching violently as he shrieked out his words, was already verging on a state of acute hysteria.

Even to hint at the possibility that they were being watched would not only have a probably very dangerous effect upon the maniac, but would in itself defeat any chance of turning the tables on that watcher outside the window! Whose eyes were those, whose face was that behind the mask?

Intuitively Locke felt he knew—the trail went back, broad and well defined, to London. Newcombe! Captain Francis Newcombe! Who else could it be?

His jaws clamped hard together now. How turn intuition into a practical, visible certainty—by stripping that mask from the other's face?

The eyes were still there in the tank.

His mind was working keenly, swiftly, now. Suppose he made some excuse to leave the aquarium and stole around outside to that window? No; that would not do. In the first place, he probably could not get away from Marlin; and, if he could, he dared not, for the length of time it would take him to accomplish any such purpose, leave the old man alone with that money on the table and subject to attack from an open window only a few feet away.

There was only one thing to do. The man outside the window there, unaware that his presence was known, would naturally not consider that he—Locke—was a factor to be reckoned with when, say, the madman left the aquarium here to return the money to its hiding place, wherever that might be; and therefore if he—Locke—could manage to keep ward over Marlin without being seen himself, the man out there would almost certainly rise to the bait and bring about his own downfall.

The money was in evidence for the first time; its whereabouts known—and the man in the mask would be illogical indeed if he allowed it to be restored to the security of a secret hiding place without making an attempt to get it when an opportunity such as this apparently presented itself.

But against this was a certain risk to which the old man would be subjected; if not a physical risk, then a mental one—which latter, to one in his condition, would probably be the more dangerous of the two. And then there was the chance, too, that if luck turned an ugly trick the money itself might be in jeopardy.

The maniac's unconscious coöperation must be secured. The hiding place was somewhere outside the house. That was obvious, both from Marlin's nocturnal habits, and from the even more significant fact that the old madman, in coming to this appointment here to-night, had brought the money with him from somewhere outdoors. Also it seemed to be no secret that he roamed abroad at night. Polly had spoken of it without reserve.

It was, therefore, but fair to presume that one as interested as was the man outside the window, and particularly if it were Newcombe, was in possession of this knowledge, and being in possession of it was equally capable of putting two and two together, and would expect the old man to go out again to-night—with the money. If then, without unduly alarming him, Mr.

Marlin could be persuaded to remain in the house with his money to-night, it would not only be the safest thing the madman could do, but would afford him—Locke—if he were right in his supposition, an excellent chance to trap the man in the mask while the latter waited for his prey to come out.

Locke, leaning forward now, crossed his arms on the table and nodded his head earnestly at Marlin. One corner of the table at least was distinctly visible from where the window would be along that little alleyway between the rows of tanks, but he was careful not to glance in that direction. The reflection of the masked face still showed in the same place.

What was the old madman saying? Well, it didn't matter, did it? He interrupted him now.

"You are right, Mr. Marlin," he said gravely. "I agree with everything you have said. It is a most serious situation. I had no idea that there existed any such vital and immediate necessity of realizing cash for every description of asset that we can lay our hands upon. And I had no idea of the immense potential value that this money here on the table, for instance, possesses. As you say, when the crash comes it will be worth untold millions—a fabulous amount."

"Yes, yes!" agreed the old man excitedly. He began to pat and fondle the bundles of bank notes. "Millions! Millions! Hundreds of millions!"

"The amount is so vast," said Locke, still earnestly, "that I cannot help thinking about what you said in reference to being followed out there in the woods last night. I don't think you should risk any chance of being followed to-night when you have all this great wealth with you, even though you are quite sure you have put whoever it may be off the scent, and that he, or they, will be busy somewhere else. I don't think, if I were you, I would go out of the house again to-night."

The madman straightened up, and for a moment stared at Locke; and as he stared the red spots began to overspread his cheeks, and the pupils of the blue eyes seemed to enlarge and darken. And then with a sudden sweep of his arms he gathered the bundles of bank notes together, wrapped them up frantically in the oiled-silk covering, and thrust the package under his dressing gown.

"Hah!" His voice rose in a wild and savage scream. "You think I should stay in the house, do you? Hah! I see! I see! That is what you want me to do, is it? You want to trick me! You are one of them—one of them—one of them!

"You could never find the money where I hide it! You could never open God's time-lock! So you want me to keep it in the house to-night where you can get it!

"And you think that I am a madman and cannot see what you are after! You are one of them—one of them that follows—follows everywhere—and watches—and watches!"

He burst into a wild peal of laughter—another and another. He clutched fiercely at the package under his dressing gown. His face was distorted. His free hand pounded the table; saliva showed at the corners of his lips.

"For God's sake, Mr. Marlin," cried Locke, "listen—"

"One of them! One of them!" screamed the old man, and turning suddenly, dashed for the door.

Locke's chair overturned with a crash as he sprang to his feet, and darting around the table, started to follow, but the maniac by now was already at the door.

The younger man saw the other's hand snatch at the electric-light switch. The aquarium was in sudden darkness. He heard the door slam. He groped his way to it, and wrenched at it.

The old madman had locked it on the outside.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FIGHT.

FOR a moment, grim lipped, Locke stood there at the door. He had accomplished exactly the opposite to what he had intended—the old man, the money, were both in infinitely greater peril now than under almost any other circumstances of which he could conceive.

He did not blame himself—the vagaries, the impulses, the irrational promptings of an insane mind were beyond his control or guidance. It was the last thing he had expected the old maniac to do. But it was done now; it was too late to consider that phase of it. There was work for his own brain to do—he hoped more logically.

He turned sharply now, and began to make his way as best he could in the darkness toward the window at the end of that aisle of tanks outside of which he knew the masked man had stood. He dared not show any light here, although by so doing he would have been able to move more swiftly.

The man who had been at the window was almost certainly gone now—to watch for the old maniac's appearance outside the house. And Mr. Marlin would assuredly, and as quickly as he could, scurry outside to hide his money away again.

And even if the man in the mask had had no previous knowledge of the old madman's strange nightly movements, which would be a very unsafe assumption on which to depend, he would have *heard* enough at the window, if not to know, then, at least, to expect that the maniac's one thought now would be to secrete his money, and that the hiding place—this time-lock that God had made, as the old man had called it—was somewhere outside the house. But the watcher's new lurking place might still embrace a view of the window, and if he, Locke, climbed out with the light behind him—

He was at the window now. He smiled grimly. He was pitted against no fool; but then he never had been fool enough himself ever to place Captain Francis Newcombe in that category!

The man in the mask had left no telltale evidence of his presence behind him. The shade was drawn down; the window closed.

Locke lifted the shade now, raised the window quietly, and stood for an instant listening, staring out. He could see little or nothing, other than the swaying branches of trees against the sky line; and there was no sound save the sweep of the wind which was still blowing half a gale. And now he swung himself over the window sill, dropped the few feet to the ground, and crouched against the wall, listening, staring again into the blackness.

Nothing! The moon, burrowing deeper under the clouds, made it even blacker than it had been a moment ago. He straightened up and began to run toward the front of the house. It was perhaps a case of blind man's buff; but there was not an instant to lose, and, deprived of any aid from the sense of either sight or hearing, he was left with only one thing to do.

From the living room window a little while ago, he had seen Mr. Marlin *coming* toward the house from across the lawn, after having presumably just unearthed his money from its hiding place; the chances were that it was in that direction the old maniac would *return* now.

Locke ran on, stumbling, half groping his way through what seemed a veritable maze of out-buildings here at the rear of the house. The minutes seemed to be flying—wasted. The old maniac, if he had left the house the moment he had run from the aquarium, must by now have had a good three minutes' start; and if the man in the mask had at once picked up the trail, then—

No, he was not too late! He had reached the front corner of the house now, and across the lawn, where in the open space it was a little lighter, something, a blacker thing than the darkness, moving swiftly, caught his eye. It was the figure of a man running toward the trees in the direction of the path that led to the shore, and from which old Mr. Marlin had emerged earlier in the evening. And now the figure was gone—lost in the trees.

But he, too, was running now—sprinting for all he knew across the lawn. It was perhaps sixty yards. There was no time to use caution and circuit warily around the edge of the woods. He might be seen—but he had to take that chance. He would not be heard—the soft grass and the whine of the wind guaranteed him against that. It was a little better than an even break.

The figure he had seen was not, he was sure, that of the maniac. The long, flapping dressing gown would, even in a shadowy way, have been distinguishable.

If he were right, then, in his supposition, the figure he had seen was the man in the mask, and Mr. Marlin was already in there on the path leading through the woods to the shore.

A cry, sudden, like a scream that was strangled, came with the gusting wind. It came again. From the edge of the lawn now, Locke leaped forward along the path. Black, twisting shapes loomed up just ahead of him. He flung himself upon them.

A low, startled, vicious snarl answered his attack. After that there was no sound while perhaps a minute passed, save the rustle of leaves and foliage, the *snip* of broken twigs under swiftly moving, straining feet.

Locke was fighting now with merciless, exultant ferocity. It was the man in the mask he was at grips with—it was not the dressing gown alone, the *feel* of it, that distinguished one from the other; he had even in that first plunging rush in the darkness felt his hand brush against the mask on the man's cheek.

It was all shadow, all blackness. To this side and that, close locked together, he and his antagonist now swayed madly. The man's one evident desire was to break away from Locke's encircling arms; Locke's purpose not only was to prevent escape, but to unmask the other—the moon might come out at any instant—filter through the branches—just enough light to see the other's face if the mask were off.

A peal of laughter rang out. It was the madman. Locke, as he fought, more sensed than saw the old man's form close to the ground, as if the other were groping around on his hands and knees. The peal of laughter came again; and then the old maniac's voice in a triumphant scream:

"I've got it! I've got it! Money! Money! Money! Millions! Millions! Millions! It's all here! I've got it! It's all—"

The voice was dying away in the distance. Locke laughed a little with grim, panting breath. Whether it had been dropped or had been snatched from him in the first attack, old Marlin had now obviously recovered his package of bank notes. He was gone now—running to hide it again, of course. In any event, the maniac and his money were safe, and—

His antagonist had wrenched free an arm. Locke's head jolted back suddenly from a wicked short-arm blow that caught the point of his chin. A sensation of numbness seemed to be trying insidiously to creep upward to his brain—but it did not reach that far—not quite that far—only it loosened his grip for an instant and the shadowy form that he had held appeared to be floating away from him.

And then, as his brain cleared, he shot his body forward in a low, lunging tackle. The other man almost eluded him, but both his hands caught and clung to an arm.

The man wrenched and squirmed in a savage frenzy to tear himself free. There was a sound of the ripping and rending of cloth—something showed white in the darkness—the other's sleeve had torn away at the armpit.

A white shirt sleeve! It was a beacon in the blackness. The man would not get away now. There was something more tangible than a shadow—something to see.

In a flash Locke shifted his hold, and his arms swept around the other, pinioning the man's hands to his sides—tighter—tighter. Neither spoke. The only sounds were hoarse, rasping gasps for breath.

Tighter! Locke felt the sweat break from his forehead as he strained. He was bending the man backward now—slowly—surely—a little more.

No—the man was too strong—the pinioned arms were free again, and Locke felt them grip together like a vise around the small of his own back.

They lurched now, swaying from side to side like drunken men. The mask! To get at the mask! They were locked together, the chin of one on the other's shoulder—straining until the muscles cracked. Locke began to raise his head a little. The hot breath of the other was on his cheek now—and now his cheek rubbed against the other's mask.

An oath broke suddenly from the man—quick, muttered, the voice unrecognizable in its labored breathing; and, seeming to sense Locke's intention, he suddenly relinquished his grip, snatched for a throat hold

instead, and, missing, began then to tear at Locke's arms in an effort to break away.

And then Locke laughed again grimly. It would avail nothing to snatch at the mask and get it off in the darkness here, if by so doing, with his own hold on the other gone, the man should get away. There was another way to get the mask off—and still maintain his grip.

They were holding now, seemingly as motionless as statues, the strength of one matched against the other in a supreme effort. The sweat stood out in great beads on Locke's forehead; his arms seemed to be tearing away from their sockets. He could feel the muscles in the other's neck, as it hugged against his own, swell and stand out like great steel ridges.

And then slowly, inch by inch, he forced his own head around until his face was against the man's cheek. He could just feel the mask now with his lips—another inch—yes, now he had it—his teeth closed on the lower edge of the mask, chewed at it until he had a still firmer grip—and then he suddenly wrenched his head backward.

The mask came away in Locke's teeth. He spat it out. His antagonist was a man gone mad with fury, now; and with the new strength that that fury brought he strove to strike and strike again; but Locke only closed his hold the tighter. To strike back was to take the chance of the other breaking loose. It was too dark to see the man's face, though the mask was off now; but it could only be a few yards along the path to the open space of the lawn out there—and the moon would not always be fickle—it would break through the clouds, and—

They were rocking, lurching, twisting, swaying in their wild struggle—and now they circled more widely — and branches snatched and tore at them, and broke and fell from the trees at the sides of the path. And here Locke gave a step, and there another, working nearer and nearer to the edge of the lawn.

And then suddenly there came a half-choked cry from the other. The man had tripped in the undergrowth. Locke swung his weight to complete the fall — tripped himself—and both, with their balance gone, but grappling the fiercer at each other, pitched headlong with terrific force into the trees at the side of the path.

And Locke was for an instant conscious of a great blow—of strokes of fiery light that smote at his eyeballs with excruciating pain—and then utter blackness came.

When he opened his eyes again a moonbeam lay along the path, and a figure in a long dressing gown was passing by. He was dreaming, wasn't he? There was a sick sensation in his head — a giddiness — and besides that it gave him great pain.

He raised himself up cautiously on his elbow, fighting to clear his mind—and suddenly his lips tightened grimly. There was something ironical in that moonbeam—something that mocked him in disclosing a figure in a dressing gown instead of a face that had been unmasked yet still could not be seen.

He looked around him now. He was lying a few feet in from the edge of the path, and against the trunk of a large tree. Yes, he remembered now. His head had struck against the tree and he had been knocked unconscious. And the man who had been masked was gone.

He rose to his feet. He was very groggy, and for a moment he leaned against the tree trunk for support. The giddiness began to pass away. That was old Mr. Marlin who had just gone by. Well, neither the old madman nor his money had come to any harm, anyway! He stepped out on the path, and from there to the edge of the lawn. The madman was just disappearing around the corner of the veranda.

Locke put his hands to his eyes. How his head throbbed! How long had he lain there unconscious? He took out his watch. His eyes seemed blurred — or was it the meagerness of the moonlight? He was not quite sure, but it seemed to be ten minutes after three.

It wasn't very easy to figure backward. He did not know how long he and the maniac had been together in the aquarium, but, say, half an hour. Starting then at the hour of the rendezvous, which had been at a quarter past two, that would bring it to a quarter of three; then, say, ten minutes for what had happened afterward, including

the fight, and that would make it five minutes of three. He must therefore have been lying in there unconscious for at least fifteen minutes.

The man who had worn the mask was gone now — naturally. But perhaps it would not be so difficult to pick up the trail. Captain Francis Newcombe's room offered very promising possibilities—and there was a torn coat sleeve that would not readily be replaced in fifteen minutes!

He made his way now across the lawn, and up the steps to the veranda. He tried the front door. It was locked. Of course! He had forgotten that he had left the house by crawling out of the aquarium window. There was no use going back that way because the old madman had locked the aquarium door. Mr. Marlin, though, had some means of entrance—and if that door through which the man had so suddenly appeared in the back had meant anything, the entrance the old man used was likely to be somewhere in the rear. But Mr. Marlin would probably have locked that, too, behind him.

He looked up and down the now moon-flecked veranda, and began to try the French windows that opened upon it from the front rooms of the house. The first two were locked, as he had expected. It was only a chance, but he might as well begin here as anywhere else. He tried the third one almost perfunctorily. It opened at a touch.

"I'm in luck!" Locke muttered, and stepped inside.

He turned the knob to lock the French window behind him, and found the bolt already thrown. Queer! He stood frowning for an instant, then stooped and felt along the inside edge of the threshold. The socket that ordinarily housed the bolt bar was gone. The same condition therefore obviously existed at the top, as the long bar had a double throw.

He straightened up, a curious smile twitching at his lips now, and making his way silently to the stairs, he reached the upper hall, stole along it to the door of his own room, and entered. Here, from one of his bags, he procured a revolver; and a moment later, his ear to the panel, listening, he stood outside Captain Francis Newcombe's door.

There was no sound from within. Softly he began to turn the door handle—the door would hardly be locked; that would be a misplay; one didn't lock one's bedroom door when a guest in a private house. No, it was not locked. He had the door ajar now.

Again he listened. There was still no sound from within. Was the man back yet, or not? The absence of any sound meant nothing, save that Newcombe was probably not in the sitting room of his suite—he might easily, however, be in either the bathroom or the bedroom beyond.

Locke swung the door a little wider open, stepped through, and closed it noiselessly behind him. Again he stood still, his revolver now outthrust a little before him. The moonlight played across the floor. It disclosed an open door beyond. Still no sound.

Locke moved forward. He could see into the bedroom now. The bed was not only empty, but had not been slept in. He turned quickly and opened the bathroom door. The bathroom, too, was empty.

Captain Newcombe had not, then, as yet returned. With a grim smile Locke thrust his revolver into his pocket. It was perhaps just as well — the time while he waited might possibly be used to very good advantage! Newcombe's baggage was invitingly at one's disposal—the Talofa, with its confined quarters, and where, on the little vessel, it was always *crowded*, as it were, had offered no such opportunity!

Locke opened one of the bags. His smile now had changed to one of irony. Barring any other justification, turn about was no more than fair play, was it? He possessed a moral certainty, if he lacked the actual proof, that the captain had not hesitated to invade his, Locke's, cabin on the liner and go through his effects.

He laughed a little now in low, grim mirth. He wondered which of the two—Newcombe or himself—would be the better rewarded for his efforts?

There was little light, but he worked swiftly by the sense of touch, with fingers that ignored the general contents, and that

sought dexterously for *hidden* things. His fingers traversed every inch of the lining of the bag, top, bottom, and sides. He disturbed nothing.

Presently he laid the bag aside, and started on another, and suddenly he nodded his head sharply in satisfaction. This one was what was generally known as a Gladstone bag, and under the lining at one side his fingers felt what seemed like a folded paper that moved under his touch. The lining was intact, of course, but there must be some way of getting in underneath it—yes, here it was!

Rather clever! And ordinarily quite safe—unless one were actually looking for something of the sort! There was a flap, or pocket, at the side of the bag, the ordinary sort of thing, and at the bottom of the flap Locke's fingers, working deftly, found that the edges of the lining, while apparently fastened together, were made, in reality, into a double fold—the lining being stiff enough, even when the edges were displaced, to fall back of its own accord into place again.

He separated the edges now, worked his fingers into the opening, and drew out an envelope. It had been torn open at one end, and there was a superscription of some sort on it in faded writing which, in the semi-darkness, he could not make out. He stood up, and went quickly to the window to obtain the full benefit of the moonlight. He could just decipher the writing now:

> Polly's papers which is God's truth.
> MRS. WICKES (X) her mark.

For a moment he stood there motionless—but his eyes had lifted from the envelope now and were fixed on the lawn below. The window here gave on the side of the lawn with the trees at the rear of the house in view. A man had just stepped out from the shadow of the trees and was coming toward the house.

Locke stared, even the envelope in his hand temporarily forgotten, as a frown of perplexity that deepened into amazed chagrin gathered on his forehead. The figure was quite recognizable, even minutely so. It was Captain Francis Newcombe. It accounted for the missing sockets on that French window, perhaps—but the man was as perfectly and immaculately dressed as he had been that night at dinner. There was no torn coat—no missing coat sleeve. The man he had fought with, the man in the mask, had *not* been Newcombe.

He laughed now—not pleasantly. He had obviously been waiting here for the wrong man. There was no need of waiting any longer—unless he desired to be caught himself. Queer! Strange! But there was the envelope. Polly's papers! What was it that was "God's truth"? At least he would find that out!

He thrust the envelope into his pocket, closed the bag, and returned to his own room. He switched on the light, hurriedly took the envelope from his pocket again, and from it drew out two documents.

He studied them while minute after minute passed, then, dropping them on the table before him, he stood with drawn face and clenched fists, staring across the room.

Polly's birth certificate! The marriage certificate of her parents!

He saw again the agony in the dark eyes, he heard again the agony in the voice that had proclaimed a parentage outside the pale. And a great oath came now from Locke's white lips.

He flung himself into a chair beside the table. He fought for cool, contained reasoning. These papers—Newcombe! Did it change anything, place Newcombe in any better light, because it was some other man who had worn that mask to-night?

He shook his head in quick, emphatic dissent. It did not! He was sure, certain of that. The trail led too far back, was too well defined, too conclusive.

And even to-night! What was Newcombe doing out of the house at three o'clock in the morning? Ah, yes—he had it! The old maniac's words came back with sudden and sure significance: "Digging—digging—digging. . . . The wrong scent. . . . The hut in the woods at the rear of the house."

Locke gnawed savagely at his lips. That was where Newcombe had come from—the woods at the rear of the house. It meant that the captain was the one who had been tricked by Marlin's cunning, which could

never have happened if Newcombe had not been stealthily trying to find the hidden money; it simply meant that Newcombe was the one who had been on the wrong scent—and that some one else had been on the right one!

His face was set in lines like chiseled marble now. Who was this "some one else"? Was the question very hard to answer? The field was very limited—*significantly* limited now! He wasn't wrong, was he? He couldn't be wrong! And there was always the torn sleeve!

Locke's eyes fixed upon the two documents on the table again. Captain Francis Newcombe! No; it did not make him any the less a guilty man because it was not he who had worn the mask to-night. Newcombe stood out sharply defined against the light of evidence which, if only circumstantial, was strong enough to damn him a thousand times over for what he was.

And here, adding to that evidence, was the proof that Polly's identity had been, and was being, deliberately concealed from her. It opened a vista to uglier and still more evil things—things that only a soul dead to decency, black as the pit of hell, could have conceived and patiently put into execution.

A child—a guttersnipe, Polly had called herself—*rescued* from naked poverty and the slums of Whitechapel by a man such as Newcombe, whose only promptings were the promptings of a fiend! Why? Was there room to question further why Captain Newcombe had years ago adopted such a ward—when now before one's eyes those years were bearing their poison fruit?

Polly's introduction into this family here was even at this moment being traded upon to effect the theft of half a million dollars. That was too obvious now to permit denial. Newcombe was making of a girl, high-minded, pure-souled, a hideous cat's-paw. Yes, yes! All that was clear enough. But why should Polly have been deprived of her rightful name, her claim to honest parentage? Was it to weld a stronger bond of gratitude—or make her the more helpless, and therefore the more dependent upon her guardian? Where were these parents? Dead or living?

There was Mrs. Wickes—Mrs. Wickes, who posed as the mother! Well, there were certain quarters in London where those who strayed outside the law could be made to talk. Mrs. Wickes should be able to furnish very interesting information. It was not far to Whitechapel and London—by cable.

His mind, his brain, was working on—but now suddenly in turmoil and misery despite all effort of his to hold himself in check.

Polly! Polly *Gray!*

She loved this monster—that she thought a man and called her guardian. Not the love of a maid for a lover, but with the love, the honor, the respect and gratitude that she would give a cherished father.

The truth would break her heart. The love her friends had given her, turned to their undoing! The shame would be torture; the self-degradation, the abasement that she would know, would be beyond the bearing. Her faith would be a shattered thing!

Locke's clenched hands lay outstretched across the table. He drew them suddenly together and dropped his head upon them.

"And you love her," he whispered to himself. "Do you know what that is going to mean? You did not count on that, did you? Do you know where that will lead? Do you know the consequences?"

He answered his own questions.

"No," he said numbly; "I don't know what it is going to mean. I know I love her."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MESSAGE.

POLLY WICKES, from her pillow, stared into the darkness. There had been no thought of sleep; it did not seem as if there ever could be again. She had undressed and gone to bed—but she had done this mechanically, because at night one went to bed, because she had always gone to bed.

Not to sleep!

The tears blinding her eyes, she had groped her way up the stairs from the liv-

ing room where she had left Locke, and somehow she reached her room. That was hours and hours ago. Surely daylight would come soon now; surely it would soon be morning.

She wanted the daylight, she wanted the morning, because the darkness and the stillness seemed to accentuate a terrible and merciless sense of isolation that had come so swiftly, so suddenly, into her life—to overturn, to dominate, to stupefy, to cast contemptuously aside the dreams and thoughts and hopes of happiness and contentment.

And yet, though she yearned for the morning, she even dreaded it more. How could she meet Howard Locke—at breakfast? She couldn't. She wouldn't go down to breakfast.

The small hands came from under the coverings, and clasped themselves tightly about the aching head—and she turned and buried her face in the pillow. She might easily, very easily, evade breakfast—and postpone the inevitable for a few minutes, even a few hours. Why did she grasp at pitiful subterfuges such as that?

She was nameless!

That phrase had come hours ago. It had scorched itself upon her brain—as a branding iron at white heat sears its imprint upon quivering flesh, never to be effaced, always to endure. She was nameless. It wasn't that she had not always known it—she always had. But it meant now what it had never meant before.

Until now it had been as something that, since it must be borne, she had striven to bear with what courage was hers, and, denying its right to embitter life, had sought to imprison it in the dim recesses of her mind—but now in an instant it had broken its bonds to stand forth exposed in all its ugliness; no longer captive, but a vengeful captor, claiming its miserable right from now on to control and dominate her whole life.

She had thought of love—it would have been unnatural if she had not. But she had never loved, and therefore she had thought of it only in an abstract way. Dream love—fancies.

But she loved now—she loved this man who had so suddenly come into her life—she loved Howard Locke.

And happiness, greater than she had realized happiness could ever be, had unfolded itself to her gaze, and love had become a vibrant, personal thing, so wonderful, so tender and so glad a thing, that beside it all the world was little and insignificant and empty: but even as the glory of it and the joy of it had burst upon her, she had been obliged to turn away from it—not very bravely, for the tears had scalded her as she had run from the living room—because there was no other thing for her to do, because it was something that was not hers to have.

She could never be the wife of any man. She was nameless.

Why had she ever found it out? It might so easily have been that she would have never known. That—that no one need ever have known!

She was sure that even her guardian did not know.

She smothered her face deeper in the pillow as she cried out in anguish. She could have had happiness then—and—and it would have been honorable for her to have taken it, wouldn't it?

She lay quiet for a little while. No; that was cowardly, selfish. If she really loved this man, she should be glad for his sake that she knew the truth, glad now of the day when she had found it out.

She remembered that day. It seemed to live more vividly before her now than it ever had before. Mrs. Wickes—her mother—had—had been drinking. The words had been a slip of the tongue; a slip that her mother, owing to her condition at the time, had not even been conscious of.

Mrs. Wickes had been garrulously recounting some morbid crime that had remained famous even among its many fellows in Whitechapel, and, in placing the date, had stated it was two years after Mr. Wickes had died. Later on, in the same garrulous account, she had again referred to the date, but had placed it this time by saying that she—Polly—was a baby not more than a month old when it had happened.

And on that day when she had listened

to her mother's tale she had still been but a child—in years. She could not have been more than twelve—but she was very old for twelve. The slums of London had seen to that.

And so, the next day, when her mother had been more herself, she had asked Mrs. Wickes, more out of a precocious curiosity perhaps than anything else, for an explanation. Mrs. Wickes had flown into a furious rage.

"Mind yer own business!" Mrs. Wickes had screamed at her. "The likes of you a-slingin' mud at yer mother! Wot you got to complain of? Ain't I takin' care of you? If ever you says another word I'll break yer back!"

She had never said another word. In one sense she had not been different from any other child of twelve then, and it had not naturally caused any change in her feelings toward her mother; nor in the after years, with their fuller light of understanding, had it ever changed or abated her love for the mother with whom she had shared hardship and distress and want. She thanked God for that now.

Her mother might have been one to inspire little love and little of respect in others; but to her—Polly—when she had parted from her mother to come here to America, she had parted from the only human being in all the world she had ever loved, or who in turn had ever showed affection for her.

She had never ceased to love her mother; instead, she had perhaps been the better able to understand, and even to add sympathy to love and to know a great pity, where bitterness and resentment and unforgiveness might otherwise have been, because she, too, had lived in those drab places where the urge of self-preservation alone was the standard that measured ethics—where one fought and snatched at anything, no matter from where or by what means it came, that kept soul and body together—because she could look out on that life, not as one apart, but with the eyes of one who once had been a—a guttersnipe.

And now?

Now that this crisis in her life had come—what now? She did not know. She had been trying to think calmly, but her brain would not obey her—it was crushed, stunned. It ached even in a physical way, frightfully, and—

She raised her head suddenly from the pillow in a sort of incredulous amazement—and immediately afterward sat bolt upright in bed.

The telephone here in her room was ringing. At this hour! Her heart suddenly seemed to stop beating. Something—something must be wrong—something must have happened—Dora—Mr. Marlin! It was still ringing—ringing insistently.

She sprang from the bed, and, running to the phone, snatched the receiver from its hook.

"Yes, yes?" she answered breathlessly. "What is it?"

A voice came over the wire—a man's voice, rising and falling creepily in a singsong, mocking sort of way:

"Is that you, Polly—Polly Wickes—Polly Wickes—Polly Wickes—Wickes—Wickes——P-o-l-l-y W-i-c-k-e-s?"

It frightened her. She felt the blood ebb from her cheeks. There was something horribly familiar in the voice—but she could not place it. Her hand reached out to the wall for support.

"Yes." She tried to hold her voice in control, to answer steadily. "Yes, I am Polly Wickes. Who are you? What do you want?"

She heard the sound as of a gust of wind from a door that was suddenly blown open, the beat of the sea, then the slam of a door—and then the voice again.

"Polly—Polly Wickes." The words seemed to be choked now with malicious laughter. "Why don't you dress in black, Polly Wickes—Polly Wickes—for your mother, Polly Wickes?"

"What do you mean?" she cried frantically. "Who are you? Who are you? What do you mean?"

There was no answer.

She kept calling into the phone.

Nothing! No reply! The voice was gone.

She stood there staring wildly through the darkness. Black—for her mother—dead! No, no—it couldn't be true! That voice—

yes, it was like the horrible voice that had called out the other night—she knew now why it was familiar—

Terror stricken, the receiver dropped from her hand.

Dead! Her mother dead! It couldn't be true! She began to grope around her. The chair—her dressing gown. Her hands felt the garment. She snatched it up, flung it around her, and stumbled to the door and along the hall to Captain Francis Newcombe's room. And here she knocked mechanically, but, without listening for response, opened the door, and, stumbling still in a blind way, crossed the threshold.

"Guardy! Guardy! Oh, Guardy!" she sobbed out.

Newcombe was not asleep. Quite apart from the fact that he had got to bed only a very short while before, the cards that night had gone too badly against him, and he had a savage sense of fury that would not quiet down. And now, as he heard his door open and heard Polly call, he was out of bed and into a dressing gown in an instant.

Polly out there in his sitting room—at half past four in the morning! And she was sobbing. She sobbed now as he heard her call again:

"Guardy! Guardy! Oh, Guardy!"

This was queer—damned queer! His face was suddenly set in the darkness as he crossed the bedroom floor—but his voice was quiet, cool, reassuring, as he answered her:

"Right-o, Polly! I'm coming!"

He switched on the light as he entered the sitting room. It brought a quick, startled cry over the sobs.

"Oh, please, Guardy!" she faltered out. "I—I—*please* turn off the light."

"Of course!" he said quietly—and it was dark in the room again.

He had caught a glimpse of a little figure crouching just inside the door—a little figure with white, strained face, with great, wondrous masses of hair tumbling about her shoulders, with hands that clasped some filmy drapery tightly across her bosom, and small, dainty feet that were bare of covering.

And as he moved toward her now across the room, another mood took precedence over the savagery he had just been nursing—a mood no holier. It might be queer, this visit of hers; but that glimpse of her, alluring, intimate, of a moment gone, had set his blood afire again—and far more violently than it had on that first occasion when he had seen her here on the island two nights ago.

It brought again to the fore the question that, through a cursed nightmare of happenings, had almost since that time lain dormant.

Was he going to let Locke have her—or was he going to keep her for himself? How far had she gone with Locke? They had been a lot together.

Well, that mattered little—if he wanted her for himself he would ***make*** the way to get her, Locke and hell combined to the contrary! The woman—against her potential value as somebody else's wife! Damn it, that was the wonder of her—that she could even hold her own when weighed on such scales. And there were lots of women.

He had reached her now, and touched her, found her hand and taken it in his own.

"What is it, Polly?" he asked gently. "What's the matter?"

"It's—it's mother," she whispered brokenly. "The telephone in my room rang a few minutes ago, and some one—a man—and, oh, Guardy, I'm sure it was the same voice that we heard when we were in the woods the night before last—asked me why I didn't wear black for my mother. It—it couldn't mean anything else but—but that mother is dead. Oh, Guardy, Guardy! How could he know? How could he know?"

Captain Francis Newcombe made no movement, save to place his arm around the thinly clad shoulders, and draw the little figure closer to him. It was dark here, she could not have seen his face, but it was composed, calm, tranquil. Perhaps the lips straightened a little at the corners—nothing more.

But the brain of the man was working at lightning speed. Here was disaster, ruin, exposure if he made the slightest slip.

Again, eh? This was the fourth time this

devil from the pit had shown his hand! The reckoning would be adequate!

But how was he to answer Polly? Quick! She must not notice any hesitation. Tell her that Mrs. Wickes was dead? He had a ready explanation on his tongue, formulated days ago, to account for having withheld that information. Seize this opportunity to tell her that Mrs. Wickes was not her mother?

No! Impossible! He had meant to use all this to his advantage, and in his own good time. It was too late now. He was left holding the bag!

If he admitted that Mrs. Wickes was dead, he admitted that there was some one on this island whose mysterious presence, whose mysterious knowledge, must cause a furor, a search, with possible results that at any hazard he dared not risk. Polly would tell Locke—Dora—everybody. It was impossible!

But against this, sooner or later, Polly must surely know of Mrs. Wickes's death, and—

Bah! Was he become a child, the old cunning gone? He would keep her for a while from England — travel — anything — and, months on, the word would come that Mrs. Wickes was dead, and found in the old hag's effects would be Polly's papers.

The one safe play, the *only* safe play, was not alone to reassure the girl now, but to keep her mouth shut. Above all, to keep her mouth shut! But—how? How? Yes! He had it now! His soul began to laugh in unholy glee. His voice was grave, earnest, tender, sympathetic.

"He couldn't have known, Polly," he said. "That is at once evident on the face of it. How could any one on this little out-of-the-way island possibly know a thing like that when I, who am the only one who *could* know, and who have just come direct from England, know it to be untrue. Don't you see, Polly?"

He had drawn her head against his shoulder, stroking back the hair from her forehead. She raised it now quickly.

"Yes, Guardy!" she said eagerly. "I—I see; and I'm so glad I came to you at once. But—but it is so strange, and—and it still frightens me terribly. I don't understand. I—I can't understand. Why should any one ring the telephone in my room at this hour, and—and tell me a thing like that if it were not true?"

"Or even if it were true—at such an hour, or in such a manner," he injected quietly. "Tell me exactly what happened, Polly."

"I think I've told you everything," she replied slowly. "I don't think there was anything else. When I answered the phone, the voice asked if I were Polly Wickes, and kept on repeating my name over and over again in a horrible, crazy sing-songey way, and then I heard a sound as though a door had been blown open by the wind, and I could hear the waves pounding, and then the door was evidently slammed shut again, and the voice said what I—I have told you about wearing black for my mother.

"And then I couldn't hear anything more, and I couldn't get any answer, though I called again and again into the phone. Oh, Guardy, I can't understand! I—I'm sure it was the same voice as that other night. What does it mean? Guardy, what should we do? Who could it be?"

A door blown open by the wind? The pound of the waves! Where was there a telephone that would measure up to those requirements? Not in the house! Captain Newcombe smiled grimly in the darkness. The private installation was restricted to the house and its immediate surroundings. Therefore, the boathouse! The boathouse had a phone connection. And there was still an hour or more to daybreak! But first to shut Polly's mouth.

"Polly," he said gravely, measuring his words, "I haven't the slightest doubt but that it was the same voice we heard in the woods: in fact, I'm quite sure of it. And I'm equally sure now that I know who it is."

She drew back from him in a quick, startled way.

"But, Guardy, you said it was only some one cat-calling to—"

"Yes; I know," he interrupted seriously. "But I did not tell you what I was really suspicious of all along. With what I had to go on then, it did not seem that I had any right to do so. It's quite a different

matter now, however, after what has happened to-night."

"Yes?" she prompted anxiously.

"There can be only two possible explanations," he said. "Either some one is playing a cruel hoax; or it is the work of an unhinged mind, an irrational act, a phase of insanity that—"

"Guardy!" she cried out sharply. "You mean—"

"Yes," he said steadily; "I do, Polly. And there can really be no question about it at all. Can you imagine any one doing such a thing merely from a perverted sense of humor?—any one of us here?—for it must have been some one of us who is connected with the household in order to have had access to a telephone. It is unthinkable, absurd, isn't it?

"On the other hand, the hour, the irresponsible words, their 'crazy' mode of expression, as you yourself said, the motiveless declaration of a palpable untruth, all stamp it as the work of one who is not accountable for his actions—of one who is literally insane. And then the fact that you recognized the voice as the one we heard two nights ago is additional proof, if such were needed, which it very obviously is not.

"You remember that we had seen Mr. Marlin in his dressing gown disappear under the veranda a few minutes before we heard the calls and cries and wild, insane laughter. My first thought then was that it was Mr. Marlin, and I was afraid that either harm had, or might, come to him.

"I sent you at once back to the house, and I ran into the woods to look for him. I did not find him; and, therefore, as there was always the possibility then that I had been mistaken, I felt that I should not alarm any of you here, and particularly Miss Marlin, by suggesting that Mr. Marlin's condition was decidedly worse than even it was supposed to be.

"Is it quite plain, Polly? I do not think we have very far to look for the one who telephoned you to-night."

He could just see her in the darkness, a little white, shadowy form, as she stood slightly away from him now. One of her hands was pressed in an agitated way to her face and eyes; the other still held tightly to the throat of her dressing gown.

"Oh, yes, it's plain, Guardy," she whispered miserably. "It's—it's too plain. Poor, poor Mr. Marlin! What are we to do? It would hurt Dora terribly if she knew her father had done this. I—I can't tell her."

"Of course, you can't," said Newcombe gravely. "Your position is even more delicate than mine was the other night. I do not see that you can do anything—except to say nothing about it to any one for the present."

"Yes," she agreed numbly.

She began to move toward the door.

"It's not likely to happen again," he declared reassuringly; "and, anyway, you can make sure it won't by just leaving the receiver off the hook. Do that, Polly." And then, solicitously: "But you're not frightened any more now, are you, Polly? A mystery explained loses its terror, doesn't it? And, besides, the main thing was to know that your mother was all right."

"My mother—"

He thought he heard her catch her breath in a quick, sudden half sob.

"It's all right, Polly," he said hastily. "Don't think of that part of it any more. Everything's all right."

"Yes; I—I know." Her voice was very low. "It's — all right. I — good-night, Guardy."

She had opened the door.

"I'll see you to your room," he suggested.

"No," she answered; "I'm not frightened any more. Good — good-night, Guardy."

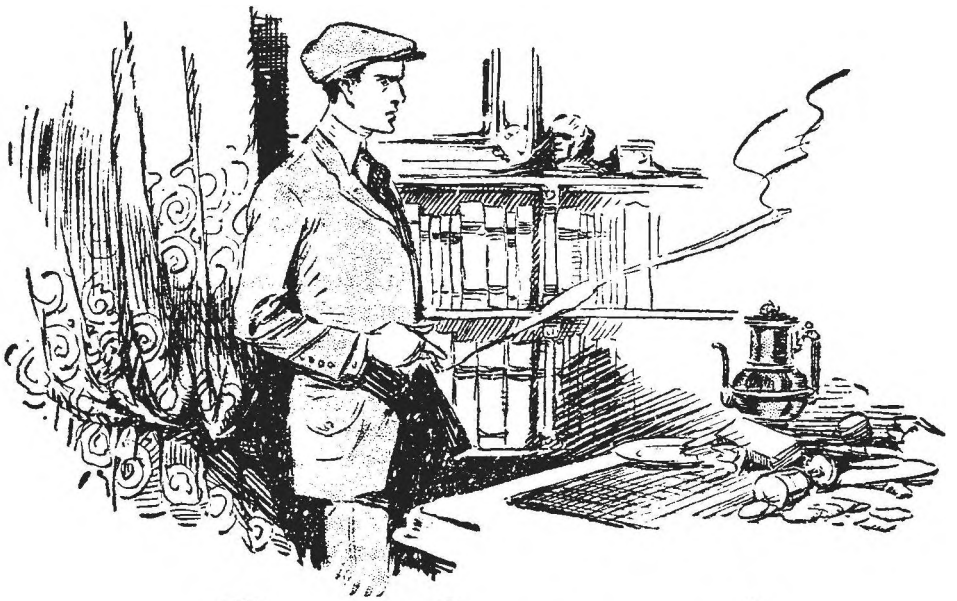
"Good-night, Polly," he said.

The door closed.

Captain Francis Newcombe stood in the darkness. And for a moment he did not move—but the mask was gone now, and the laughter that came low from his lips was a mirthless sound, and the working face was black with fury. And then he turned, and with a bound was back in the bedroom, and snatching at his clothes began to dress.

There was still an hour to daybreak.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.



Exploits of Beau Quicksilver

By FLORENCE M. PETTEE

I.—A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH

THE big bulk of the chief spat a number into the phone receiver. The line simmered under the heat of his intonation.

Came the tantalizing drawl of Central, "They don't answer."

"I tell you," roared the chief, "I know he's there. Hold your thumb on. Throw a light there! Wake up!"

In an aside he rasped to an assistant, "He must be there. Just in from that Everglades murder—"

There was a rattle on the wire.

"What's that?" demanded the irate police head.

"They don't answer," repeated the girl at Central with blithe scorn.

The chief banged up the receiver. "Here, Dean, take my place. Keep on eye peeled for anything doing. I'll go over myself. Damnation! Where is that fellow Quicksilver?"

"That no one but Quicksilver himself knows—*unless he chooses*, you can bet," swung back the chief's understudy.

"I'll find out," rapped that impatient dignitary. "Got to get him instanter. This Whitney case is too big to be bungled—can't let any one take a sniff at it but Quicksilver. Queer business!"

Chief Cartman slammed the door after him. He flung himself into his car waiting at the curb. He stepped on the gas until the motor shot ahead like an enraged comet. It reminded him of Beau Quicksilver on the chase—playing a hunch with every nerve strung to capacity speed and acuteness. For the exquisite detective—" that damned dude dick " to the underworld—was an enigmatical crime chaser—a mercurial mystery master. Like a chimerical will-of-the-wisp, he lunged to the answer in each cryptic case. No wonder they dubbed him Quicksilver. He ran through a fellow's fingers just like mercury. There had never been another sleuth like him—not even a forty-second cousin to him. No one could fathom how he landed the goods. His methods were just that elusive.

And finical! Why, a spoiled operatic star couldn't equal him for temperament! The fellow wouldn't touch a case with the tip of his nobbiest cane if the thing didn't interest him. They couldn't beg, hire or steal him to it.

" Nothing doing!" he would call back with languid insolence, as he irritatingly flipped the ashes from some imported cigarette end. " That crime smells stale at the outset. It's racy Roquefort or nothing!" And when Beau Quicksilver opined thus it meant finis. The case was dead for him. But when some baffling mystery turned up! Ah, then the scintillating sparks flew! There was a flash of Quicksilver. Followed the startling showdown!

The chief left his car at the curb. He pushed viciously at a button in the brown stone apartment. The bell went singing sibilantly through the house.

There was an irritating, arrogant wait. Cartman jabbed an encore at the bell.

Then a slight, gray-clad servant opened the door with ludicrous caution. He spoke in a whisper. Unquestionably Quicksilver's man, Shunta, regarded his elusive, temperamental master with great awe. But his hero worship was catered to only at arm's length by the coolly aloof Quicksilver. Shunta's fearful adulation suggested the deep-down admiration of the small boy for Georges Carpentier, or the gawky-legged girl's first devotion to Maude Adams.

" Where is he?" demanded the chief. " Isn't he here? Why doesn't he—"

" Yes," gently admonished Shunta. " He's here. Only he ordered me to stuff the telephone. And not until your second ring at the door here would he let me answer. ' That's Cartman,' he said. ' Thinks he's steering a real crime here. Tell by the way his thumb stuttered on the second jab at the bell. Shunta,' he told me, ' inform the chief of police that it's just two minutes to spill the new idea. Not a second longer unless it's real mystery and not some bludgeoning bump-off!' "

Fuming internally, the chief went up behind the pussy-footed Shunta. He didn't relish the coming scene. For Beau Quicksilver was a veritable tiger when in one of his moods. Yet again he would weep at the mere sound of pathetic music. An obtuse riddle, Quicksilver! A regular Sphinx at times, and then affably human. Nobody ever knew where to find him next.

With awed deference Shunta bowed the chief in. Cartman shut the door firmly behind him. The room was darkened by drawn shades.

Then a blinding flash of light seared the darkness.

A cool, domineering, petulant voice ordered, " Go back and shut that door again! Make it soft—pianissimo. *Pronto!* Where do you think you are? In a blacksmith's shop? Well, you can cut out the anvil chorus here."

A figure lay on the luxurious couch. There was a tall glass on the taboret beside him. He was clad in the most elegant of silk pyjamas. Imported Chinese embroidered sandals covered the feet. There was a bandage under the thatch of thick, but carefully brushed hair. Yet the line of linen could not conceal the height of the forehead. The dead white accentuated the smoldering, almost feverish brilliancy of the tired gray eyes. The purple shadows of complete exhaustion lay beneath the fiery orbs. Despite the fatigued and fretful lines on the oval face, the features stood forth delicate, sensitive, but baffling in their elusive suggestion of hidden strength. And the jaw whispered of the martial force of a Napoleon.

"What do you want?" querulously inquired Beau Quicksilver, with weak, lackluster interest. "Can't you see I'm done to a frazzle? If you have come here on some fool's chase, I'll throw you out of the window."

This suggestion from a mere bag of fluff, tipping the scales at one hundred and fifty-five pounds, caused the big chief an acute attack of internal merriment. His quick anger receded before the amusing, bantamweight idea.

Then unbidden Cartman helped himself to one of the Sheraton chairs in the fastidiously furnished apartment.

But Beau Quicksilver wasn't even regarding him. The detective smoked as though it were a physical effort even to expel the thin circles of consuming tobacco.

The chief leaned forward purposively. He breathed of leonine strength. He spoke with the staccato incisiveness of a rapid-fire gun.

"Just got a hurry call to the Whitney house."

Beau Quicksilver stopped smoking. The cigarette dangled forgotten from his fingers. At last the sleuth's burning eyes were on the big man from headquarters.

"It's murder!" rapped Cartman.

The fastidious figure sat up. He tossed the cigarette onto a copper tray.

"Cyrus Whitney has been done for—shot to death in his den," finished the chief.

Beau Quicksilver leaped from the couch. He ripped off the bandage. He sped like some unleashed thing gripped in the fury of an overwhelming urge.

Fatigue had dropped from him like a cloak. The peevish irritability of a moment before had vanished. It was as though dark and rumbling clouds had suddenly been blown away by a whiff of quickening ozone. Again the air was surcharged with mystery. It quickened him like some dose of super-strychnine.

The new and rejuvenated Beau Quicksilver plunged through a door, kicking off his slippers into the room. He moved like a dart from a joyously strung bow.

"I'll be with you in a jiffy, Cartman," he called out blithely. "Just let me fall into this new tweed suit of mine."

Fifteen minutes later a completely rehabilitated Quicksilver left the house for the Whitney mansion and the major crime it concealed.

II.

SOME uniformed men saluted respectfully as Quicksilver slid past them to the main door of the Whitney house. The place was one of the show spots. The big banker, now cold in violent death, had been a financial power of the first magnitude.

"Rotten business, sir," greeted a man from headquarters.

He guarded the death chamber, a room at the rear of the house on the first floor. It was known as the dead banker's favorite study. It had appealed to him because of its quiet location. Thick trees dotted the fine lawns outside. And there was a high wall surrounding the estate. Cyrus Whitney had loved night solitude as a tonic from the wear and tear of momentous daily affairs.

Beau Quicksilver nodded abstractedly to the would-be agreeable comment of the blue-clad figure. "Don't let me be disturbed by any one, Daniels. You understand. I want to be alone with my thoughts —*where it happened*."

"I get you," was the reply. "I'll fend them off. Trust me."

"Thanks, Daniels. I do."

Without another word the lithe, tan-clad figure of Beau Quicksilver entered the silent room. The hush of death was upon it. The air breathed of the untoward. It smelled of crime.

Quicksilver stood just inside the door. His thin nostrils were dilated. His deep eyes seemed unconscious of the magnificent furnishings—and of that stark, cold figure, once dominant in high finance, but now laid low by the Czar of Violent Death. For a moment he stood motionless. Then he shrugged his slim shoulders. Slowly his gaze swept the room.

He saw the heavy drawn shades. He noted the massive bookcases lining two of the walls almost to the ceiling. Evidently the dead man had been a lover of literature as well as a money master. He saw the heavily upholstered furniture depressing the

thick pile of the carpet. Then his eyes went to the figure of the dead man.

Cyrus Whitney's body sagged forward on a huge mahogany desk near the middle of the room. His velvet dressing jacket, gray in tone, bore an ugly brown splotch which spread out in the vicinity of the heart. The utter abandon of the pose suggested that he had died instantly — had fallen forward a dead weight. The chair was rather close to the desk. Dishes were scattered about at rakish angles upon it. A damask napkin, grimly splashed with brown, dangled disconsolately from one of the stiff knees.

Beau Quicksilver strode forward a step. This was not common death—the finding of a body amid the broken dishes and the nearly devoured viands of a hearty meal. Rigorously ignoring further details on the littered desk top, he examined the body itself.

Cyrus Whitney had been shot through the heart—a clean-cut, expert shot with a medium caliber revolver, seeming a .32. Death must have been instantaneous.

Slowly the detective's eyes went to the objects on the desk. The mahogany had evidently been freed of papers and work-aday things for the coming of the late repast. A small platter showed a mere fragment of chicken; there were scraps of potatoes and vegetables. The salad plate was empty. The coffee cup lay smashed with its contents staining the desk-top and spattered down the side. A goblet was overturned. The dinner plate had skidded over the polished top when the inert body had struck it and flung the dishes helter skelter. But the big desk top had been large enough to keep the disturbed china from falling off.

Beau Quicksilver jerked up suddenly. His gray eyes narrowed. With a nervous gesture he brought out his platinum cigarette case. While he was striking a light his slitted eyes never left a single object which appeared half covered by an overturned plate.

Crackers and cheese lay on this under plate. And the cheese showed plainly the clearly defined outline of tooth prints.

But this was not all!

For the line of tooth marks there showed the peculiar outlines of a bicuspid and the first incisor — distinguishing characteristics anywhere.

For a moment the slim sleuth puffed away with scarcely the flicker of an eyelash. But within that subtle brain thoughts were swirling with lightning rapidity. One other thing he saw and filed away in his mind for important future action.

Then in a twinkling he brought out a pair of silk gloves and slid them on. He stooped and gently raised the fallen figure.

Cyrus Whitney had been a big man, heavily upholstered. Yet the lithe form of Beau Quicksilver raised the dead weight with no apparent effort. One began to sense beneath the super-smartly clad exterior the trained muscles of a Japanese athlete.

With expert, flashing movements Quicksilver continued his rapid examination. Once he frowned suddenly. Then he replaced the body as it had been. With extraordinary care and dexterity he deposited the cheese within a little lacquered box in one of his pockets.

Then he strode swiftly to the door.

"Daniels," he rapped, "I am ready to ask questions. Have one of your men send the dead man's son, Ray Whitney, down to the library on this floor."

As Beau Quicksilver entered the room just named, he went directly to the fireplace. With a gesture of repugnance he dropped his silk gloves onto the smoldering blaze. They turned to tongues of flame. Next he produced a silk handkerchief and carefully wiped his hands. The handkerchief followed the silk gloves. With a dismissing shrug of his shoulders he turned to face Ray Whitney.

The money magnate's son was of the bulldog type—heavy featured, low browed, and bull necked. His shoulder breadth would have made him an admirable model for Atlas. Its girth was splendid. It suggested the far spaces and twelve-cylinder lungs.

"Were you in the house last night?" instantly lunged Beau Quicksilver.

Ray Whitney nodded somewhat curtly.

"All right. Give me all your movements up to the discovery of the crime."

The dead man's son shifted his big bulk. "Not much to tell. Came in about eleven, and went directly to my room. Didn't even see my father. He was an owl for late hours. Made it a daily habit to work or read until twelve thirty in his den. Was aroused by thundering knocks before daylight this morning. It was Stanley, the first man down. He'd noted the lights burning as they showed through under the door of the study. My father never left them on—fussy about useless extravagance. Stanley entered and discovered the dead body. He then alarmed the house. I called the police. That's all I know."

"Was your father in the habit of eating a late repast?"

"Always. We dine early. So every night Henry carried him a tray full of grub at twelve o'clock."

"Was it Henry's custom to return for clearing away the dishes after your father had retired?"

"No. Father was fond of old Henry. He made him go to bed after he had delivered the tray at midnight. The dishes were cleared away in the morning."

"Did your father like cheese?"

Ray Whitney stared at the foppish figure. A bit of a smile crept to his features, to be banished immediately.

"You've said it," he responded. "He was a nut on cheese. Insisted on it every night, both at dinner and with the midnight feed."

"Thanks—that's all."

"W-what do you make of the thing?" blurted out Whitney. "Will you ever be able to put your finger on the fellow that did it? Father's enemies were legion, you know. Might as well search for a particular leaf on a tree."

"I've got a scent," admitted Beau Quicksilver, "and it smells like cheese!"

With a blank expression on his heavy features, young Whitney went out.

The other inmates of the house merely corroborated the heir's statements. And each new bit of substantiating testimony simply strengthened the odor of the cheese clew. For one vital significant fact had stood out from the first. Moreover, it whispered of masterly cunning.

Beau Quicksilver's eyes were strangely bright as he sped away from the house. Subsequently the trailing of the truth was systematically begun.

III.

At four o'clock that afternoon Penn Markham, Quicksilver's assistant and confidant in crime, slipped excitedly into the apartment. He, too, was slight of build and approximately the mystery-master's height. His face also bore the brand of flashing intelligence.

He found Beau Quicksilver in the nattiest and completest of riding togs. The famous sleuth was evidently just in from a swift trot on Nemesis, his big black horse.

"Got it," rapped out Markham. "You couldn't miss it. And he didn't just recall them from his notes and charts!"

"Well," cut in Quicksilver, "spill it! What's the answer?"

"Parker Long is the man. He's known to be at swords' points with his victim."

Beau Quicksilver nodded. "I know the fellow. A born gambler. And a desperate plunger in the Street. A crack shot and a member of a number of sporty shooting clubs. A fellow known for his colossal nerve. The thing begins to fit in."

"To fit in!" echoed Penn Markham. "Why, it's done. It spells doom! It's like his fool presumption to gamble with discovery like that. The fellow always had a grim sense of humor. But this is irony—plus."

Beau Quicksilver said nothing. He merely stepped to the phone. Tersely he rapped out a number.

"Ah, is that you, Long? Quicksilver speaking. What do you say to a canter on the Speedway? I know you're strong for it in the late afternoon. . . . All right. Suits me perfectly. I'll be there on Nemesis quick enough to please you."

"Thunderation!" snorted Penn Markham. "Going to hobnob with him horseback and then break the glad news! You are a cool one. Going to drive him tandem up to police headquarters! Course he'll canter docilely ahead of you, and just joyously stretch out his wrists for the brace-

lets when you give the word! Rotten form, Quixie. Guess that Everglades stunt you just pulled off has fagged you. You're riding to a fall, old man."

"Well, I'm not falling easy," retorted Beau Quicksilver—and was gone.

IV.

In a decrepit old farmhouse some miles away two men paced back and forth restlessly. The Falcon, slick jewel thief and crafty crime plotter, showed drawn lines about his mouth. And that bulldozing ruffian, Peter Scarlet, had faded a shade from his usual ruddy, overfed hue.

"If you hadn't been such a damned glutton, I'd feel easier," raged the Falcon. "Might have known you couldn't get by swell food—and toddy. I know you must have dropped something—left something behind, you filthy hog!"

For once Peter Scarlet didn't show fight. An uneasy expression filtered over his swinish features. He pulled at the lobe of his left ear, an unconscious habit he had when greatly disturbed.

"We've been here two nights now," went on the Falcon, nervously biting at his thin underlip in a futile effort to steady it. "And the very first night, in the dead of darkness. I heard a chawing and a gnawing like some devil ghost trying to tell me that you'd left tracks behind. Like the dead itself railing against respectable food gobbled up by a swine of a killer over the thing he'd made a corpse. All through the night I heard it gnawing—gnawing. And when I got up to look? Nothing! Not the sign of a mouse or a rat. After that first night I saw—you know whom. He swore there hadn't been a rat in the house for a year. Scarlet, if it isn't mice, what the hell is it?"

Uneasily Scarlet twitched at his ear lobes again. He attempted a superior smile. But the effort was a failure, as both men knew.

"Ask the devil! I don't know. I've piped it from the first. Didn't mind for a stretch. But when it kept up, hour after hour—well, nary a wink for mine. Eyes glued open—ears twitching to hear. And not a thing to put us wise as to what *is* the answer!"

"It's teeth chewing! Like yours chewed—that night," shivered the Falcon.

"Hell!" protested Peter Scarlet feebly. But he continued to tug at his ear lobe. And his gross, florid face went a shade paler. "What's the use of standing here chewing it all over? If something's going to happen—well, let it! Come in and down a bite of grub. The stuff is getting cold on the table. Put it there myself before you let loose on the shaky chaw-chaw, you damned croaker!"

"There you go again!" snarled the Falcon. "I believe you would stuff yourself if you saw the gallows waiting for you."

Peter Scarlet shrugged. "Surest thing," he boasted. "Full belly makes a dead weight. Dead weight—taut noose."

"Oh, cut your poor jokes," flung back the Falcon, snuffing another shiver.

They entered a little room which they were using for a dining room. The table had been hastily set. Peter Scarlet flung himself heavily into a chair. His big, hairy hands grabbed at the food with bestial eagerness.

Suddenly he stopped. No morsel of food went to his lips. He pointed a spatulate finger at something on the table. His digit shook slightly, an index of sleepless hours—with some unseen thing gnawing away within him.

Jumpily the Falcon leaned forward. His eyes bulged from the sockets. His breath wheezed sharply.

For Peter Scarlet's blunt finger indicated a slice of bread with a huge bite missing. The marks of the teeth were plainly visible. The Falcon got up hastily. He shrank away from it as though it were the plague. His ghastly face twitched.

"I-it-it's a w-warning," he muttered hoarsely. "The h-house is h-haunted. H-he's come back to hound us!"

Peter Scarlet stared first at the shivery and fearful imprints, then at the Falcon's horrified countenance. The big criminal attempted to shrug his shoulders; but the effort ended in a shiver. Craftily he tried to conceal it. It would never do to let the Falcon see how craven fear was gnawing away in that spot where once good food and strong drink could silence anything.

The Falcon cried out shrilly: "Look! Look!"

He pointed a shaking hand at something which had fallen to the floor.

Peter Scarlet leaned over, pushing back his chair.

On the floor lay the napkin which the Falcon had dropped when he rose hastily. In a corner of the damask square something stared forth evilly, accusingly. It was the bloody print of teeth.

"God! There's blood on them," mumbled Scarlet to himself. "Whose blood?"

But the Falcon's every sense was strung tight. He heard the low words.

"Whose blood!" he blurted. "It's your blood!"

A wave of red seemed to flame from Peter Scarlet's pig eyes. The veins stood out on his bull neck. His great, hairy hands doubled into menacing fists. He advanced threateningly on the Falcon.

But the Falcon's eyes were not upon him. They seemed to be looking beyond him, quite unconscious of the red fury in his face. The Falcon's gaze was basilisk. His jaw dropped stupidly. He was like a man who sees a ghost—a terrible, avenging specter from which there is no escape.

Instantly the fear frozen there banished Scarlet's red choler. Instinctively he faced about, his gaze following the direction of the Falcon's horrified stare.

"H-he-he's h-here," blubbered the Falcon.

As Peter Scarlet looked, a huge cretonne-covered chair by the door began to move, slowly, surely.

For a moment the big criminal stood frozen to the spot.

Then he dashed forward. He flung the chair aside, yelling:

"Come out of there, you—"

But there was no one there. Only the floor sneered up at him—the floor and something else. For on it there lay a piece of cheese showing the marks of gory teeth.

Peter Scarlet staggered against the chair. The sweat dripped down his brutish features. His breath came quickly. Then—the door opened silently, swiftly. The Falcon screamed.

A smart, tweed-clad figure stepped in, nonchalantly unbuttoning a chamois glove. Beau Quicksilver stood there, his slim shoulders barely grazing the sturdy door closed behind him.

The sight of him slightly sobered the staggered Peter Scarlet. This was something he could understand. This was that damned dude detective—Beau Quicksilver. With a roar like an enraged bull, Peter Scarlet charged at the slight figure, his gross head lowered.

As his filthy breath almost fanned Quicksilver's features, the detective dodged and neatly tripped the great bulk. And Peter Scarlet, lunging with every ounce of rage in him, banged head first into the door. He dropped like a rotten apple from the sheer force of the impact and lay stunned.

The Falcon had crumpled up in a chair. They were beaten, and he knew it.

"G-God!" he moaned. "I felt it coming. Take me away from this place. It's damned—it's accursed. I'll spill the whole thing. Take me away! Lock me into a cell. It will be heaven beside this hell-hole—and the sound of teeth always gnawing—gnawing—"

His face was a blob of twitching whiteness.

Beau Quicksilver lunged to a window and beckoned.

V.

"I'll hand it to you, Quicksilver," admitted the chief. "You've pulled a humdinger. It's a big day when we get the goods on those two long-deserving blackguards. But I'm not clear on the details yet. I understand that a bite in a piece of cheese tipped you off. Careless play for a hardened crook like Scarlet!"

"Wrong," retorted Quicksilver. "The toothprints in the cheese were not made by Scarlet. We traced them from our enlarged photographs to the office of Dr. Lance Rainford, the swell West Side dentist. He didn't recall them merely from his notes and charts; he even had the original mold. For the fatal teeth belonged to a superb false set, a set cast from the mold made for Parker Long."

"I know Long—but where are the teeth leading us?"

"Not to the criminal—at first. You see, when I went horseback riding with Parker Long, he proved an ironclad alibi. He removed his set of false teeth before my very eyes. One of the damning teeth from that all-important set was missing. Luckily for him, he broke out that telltale tooth accidentally the night before the crime, when dining with Judge Rutledge. The jurist's substantiating word is gold.

"Long hadn't found time to go to his dentist for repairs. The marks on the fatal cheese were made from a duplicate set struck off from the original mold to incriminate Parker Long—a known enemy of Whitney. The dentist has confessed. He wouldn't talk at first. But when I told him that the Falcon and Peter Scarlet were in custody, and had blabbed the whole thing, he broke down and confessed."

"But how did you dope it out that Scarlet was the killer, that *he* planted the cheese with the indicative, damning prints, and that the Falcon's brain plotted the thing at the dentist's instigation to incriminate Parker Long?"

Beau Quicksilver smiled whimsically as he tenderly dusted his velvet hat.

"I called a *post-mortem* on the victim's stomach. It proved that Cyrus Whitney hadn't taken a bite before he fell dead amid the untouched food. *Yet the food had been devoured.* There is only one criminal who is glutton and ghoul enough to gorge himself over the body of the man he has just slain. That man is Peter Scarlet. The rest was easy. Thanks to some clever haunt stuff, pulled off by the aid of a little electrical appliance, I produced the ghostly gnawings.

"It was a simple thing to do a bit of realistic chair-tipping by running a fine wire through a nail hole in the farmhouse floor to a covered chair leg. Nothing particularly clever about getting around without being seen with my men previously posted outside—I've been having the scoundrels shadowed, you know. The toothmarks salted away in the farmhouse were very effective. The most hardened crook fears to the point of maudlin terror what he cannot understand. So Conscience and Nemesis were my most valued allies."

"You can count ten, Quicksilver," grinned the chief. "I'm down all right. It's a knockout!"

Next Week: "AN EYE FOR AN EYE."

HIS GIRL'S CHAMPION

"MY girl's dresses are not so swell
As what you see in society dramas
At picture shows;
But say, I'll tell
The world, her clo'es,
Though recut hand-me-downs of her mamma's,
S, p, e, double l—spell
CLASS.

"My girl—what if she hasn't got
All of the looks she sort of wishes
She might have had,
She has a lot,
None of 'em bad.
I wouldn't swap her for both the Gishes,
And that's n, o, t—not
GAS."

Richard Butler Glaenzer.

More Lives Than One

By CAROLYN WELLS

Author of "The Green Stain," "Vicky Van," etc.

CHAPTER X.

BARHAM LEARNS THE TRUTH.

PERHAPS most people will agree that the dreariest experience they have ever known has been the returning to their homes after a funeral has been held there.

No matter how much some kind friend stays behind to rearrange the furniture and restore things to their natural and normal aspect, the house looks different—the place seems empty.

After Madeleine's funeral, Andrew Barham came into his house, accompanied by Mrs. Selden and several friends or relatives from out of town.

Barham would willingly have given a goodly sum could he have gone off by himself to his own rooms, but that was not to be thought of. He knew he was obliged to stay, to hear his mother-in-law and her guests mull over the funeral, as if it had been a social function—to discuss the flowers, the music, the people present, and every detail, down to the very appearance of the dead Madeleine.

These things, having been worn threadbare, Marcia Selden next invited attention to herself and her lonely and forlorn life as it must be henceforward.

"You still have me, mother," Barham said kindly, as she bewailed her utter desolation.

"Oh, you!" Her tone was scathing. "You would be only too glad to put me out of your house."

"Don't say that," he expostulated, "I'm sure I've never given you reason to think such a thing. My home is always open to

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you as long as you choose to live in it. And I shall always do my best to make you happy."

"Happy! As if I could ever be happy again, without my dear Madeleine. But I'm an old woman—I probably shall not trouble anybody for long."

A new black-bordered handkerchief was somewhat ostentatiously flaunted and several feminine voices murmured polite denials of the last statement.

"Yes," went on Mrs. Selden, who was thoroughly enjoying her martyr role, "I shall soon follow my darling to the land beyond."

"Well, meantime, mother," Barham tried to turn the trend of conversation to a pleasanter theme, "I shall do all I can to help you bear your loss—"

"Yes, you've sympathy to spare, because you need none yourself. You don't care that our Maddy is gone forever!"

"Now, Marcia, stop that," her sister remonstrated. "It's unfair to Andrew. He and Maddy were all right—a whole lot happier together than you and your husband ever were!"

"Sarah, you hush! I won't listen to such slander! Andrew, will you put Sarah out of the house?"

"Oh, come now, mother, we don't want Sarah to go until after dinner, anyway."

"Dinner! I'd like to know who could eat dinner, after the scenes we've just been through! You are a heartless lot. No one but me really mourns our darling."

"Yes, we do, Marcia," her sister said, "but these things have to be borne. I lost my dear daughter, too, you know—"

"Oh, you, Sarah! You have no more heart than a turnip! Now, I'm a sensitive nature, an affectionate nature—"

"You are, mother," Andrew Barham said sincerely. "But let us try to bear our sorrow bravely and help one another—"

"Andrew, you make me sick! You and your preaching! Pity you weren't a minister! Claudine, take me to my room. I must be alone."

"She'll stay alone about five minutes!" Mrs. Beresford said as Marcia went away with the long-suffering Claudine. "What are you going to do, Andrew?"

"I don't know, Sarah. I am more than willing to do my duty by Madeleine's mother, but you see how impossible she is. Nothing I say or do pleases her, though I honestly try. Of course, I can't send her away, nor can I persuade her to go. But I don't see how I can live with her. It was easier when Maddy was here, but now—well, I shall do whatever she wants."

"She wants just to stay here and ballyrag the life out of you," said Marcia Selden's sister with true insight.

"Then she'll have to do that."

"And you'll stand it?"

"It isn't 'standing it,' Sarah. It's simply doing my duty, as I see it, by my wife's mother. But I shall most certainly reserve the privilege of going away as frequently as I like, for as long as I like. The house and servants will be at her disposal, but I couldn't bear to be here all the time."

"Of course, you couldn't, Andrew. You're quite justified in going off all you choose. You might take a trip to Europe."

"I might go to Kamchatka! But I'm not deciding on anything at present. You must know, Sarah, there's a lot yet to be done in connection with Maddy's death."

"Oh, that—yes. Of course, that artist person killed her. Can't they get hold of him?"

"Apparently not."

"But you don't have to mix up with it, do you, Andrew? I should think you'd rather never know who did it, than to dig into what may be a horrid—scandal—"

"What do you know about Maddy's secrets, Sarah?"

"Don't ask me, Drew. If you want to know anything—go to her friends. They'll be ready enough to tell you."

Andrew Barham went off to his own rooms to think it all out. He had a small library of his own, quite apart from the great book-lined place Madeleine called the library, and here he went and locked himself in, bidding the servants refuse him to all comers.

What should he do—what could he do, regarding several great and important issues? Perhaps the first was his mother-in-law. That, he soon settled. He would let her be the unquestioned head of the

house, so far as management and home rule were concerned.

Then, if her irritable temper and unpleasant disposition made him too uncomfortable, he would go away either permanently or for long journeys. It was a little hard to be pushed out of his own home, but his loyalty to his dead wife and his sense of duty to her mother made no other plans possible.

Next, he must clear up this business of Maddy's wrongdoing. He didn't know exactly what it was that people meant by their veiled innuendoes, but he proposed to find out. Then there was that matter of the Thomas Locke studio to be taken up. What he should do regarding that, he hadn't decided. It would take a good bit of thinking. He wondered if the police would ever track down Locke. If the artist would ever be brought to book and asked concerning his acquaintance with the wife of Andrew Barham. And, if so, he wondered what Locke would say.

As Madeleine had said, Drew was always wondering.

And he sat now in deep thought, his mind racing from Marcia Selden to Thomas Locke. From Madeleine to—well, to himself, Andrew Barham, who, after all, was the biggest factor in his wonderings.

Finally, he picked up the telephone and called Nick Nelson, who got around to him in the shortest possible time.

"Well," Barham said, after they had discussed matters of lesser moment, "out with it, Nick—all about Maddy. Tell me the worst. As you know, very frequently other people know more about a man's wife than he knows himself."

"I'll tell you, Drew," Nelson said, gravely, "because you ought to know. To begin with, Maddy played bridge for far higher stakes than you ever dreamed she did. She would lose hundreds, sometimes thousands, in an evening."

"Maddy! Thousands!"

"Perhaps not often thousands, but almost always hundreds. She was what they call born to bad luck, always held miserable hands—"

"Oh, come now, Nick, hands even up in the long run."

"Not always. Not with some people. But, anyway, Maddy was an erratic player, and a wild one. If she won a pile, she'd raise the stakes and lose it all on a final rubber or something like that. She had all the impulses of the born gambler—she must have had a gambling ancestor—and yet, she always paid."

"How could she?"

"That's just it. She borrowed at first, Drew, from all her friends. Her funny code of ethics let her owe a loan, but not a card debt."

"She wasn't unique in that respect."

"No; well, when she could borrow no more, when she had exhausted her mother's generosity—and purse, probably—she resorted to—I can't say it—but she knew secrets about her woman friends that she threatened to tell unless they paid her."

"Blackmail!" Andrew Barham gasped.

"You needn't use the word. It seems Maddy was just gay and laughing about it. She'd run in to see a friend, she'd hint of something she knew—and then she'd ask for a loan of a few hundred, or more, according to the importance of the secret."

"How did she learn these things?"

"Oh, every woman knows her neighbor's secrets—and they often hold them over each other's heads, as a rod in pickle. But they rarely get money on them—they'd be afraid."

"Maddy knew no such thing as fear."

"No. But she didn't realize that what she was doing was really a crime. Well, then, maybe instead of paying her, some woman would tell a bit of scandal about some other woman. That would give Maddy a fresh start. Anyway, that's the way things were."

"How did you learn it all?"

"Emmy Gardner told me. She came to me in real distress, fearing Maddy would get into trouble. Emmy asked me to come to you about it, but I didn't think it was my business to do so. I didn't know whether Emmy was actuated by real concern for Maddy, as she pretended, or whether it was but malicious revenge."

"Good old Nick, for telling me now. The next thing, is to keep it secret. Can that be done?"

"From whom?"

"From everybody who doesn't already know it—but primarily from Mrs. Selden. I hope she'll never find it out. She idolized the child, and it would grieve her so deeply."

"We can probably keep it from her—unless some busybody tattles."

"Claudine knows."

"I've been told that Maddy used her schemes on Claudine—"

"No!"

"So Emmy said. But the details don't matter so much, Drew. You can fix Claudine more easily than any one else."

"This explains a horrible note I got from a Mrs. Gibbs—saying she is a creditor of Maddy's."

"Well, ask her for a statement. Those women will be glad to keep still for fear something might come out about themselves. What I'm worried about is this murder trial."

"Trial? How can there be a trial with no one to try?"

"I mean the murder inquiry. The plans of the police include only two main issues: to find Locke and to learn all about Madeleine's past."

"Why the latter?"

"They think that will give them a line on the motive for the murder, and perhaps a hint as to the murderer."

"Wasn't it the artist?"

"Maybe and maybe not. I'm interested in that chap, Drew. Do you know, after the murder—I mean, supposing for the moment that he was the criminal after the deed, he calmly walked down the stairs, gave his masquerade costume to his servant, put on his hat and walked out of the front door, saying to the doorman he'd be back in a few moments! Did you ever hear of such colossal nerve?"

"Never! How could he? Perhaps he didn't do it, after all."

"And then he went out to Fifth Avenue, and climbed up to the top of a bus and went off."

"How do you know all this?"

"It seems somebody saw him—some woman who lives next door, I believe, and she was watching the revelers that night."

"And they've never seen or heard from him since?"

"I believe not, unless since I've seen the people down there."

"You speak as if you knew them."

"No, but I saw several at the inquiry, and they're not bad at all."

"What do you mean by not bad? I don't suppose they're Hottentots."

"No; but they seem really interesting. Seem to have more—personality, more brains than some of our own crowd."

"They wouldn't have to be overburdened at that."

"I know it. And they say—that is, Mr. Jarvis told me—that Locke is a very worthwhile chap."

"Not a heavy villain, then?"

"No; sort of a dreamer, and rather intellectual. Says he's a good pal—"

"Look here, Nick," Barham interrupted him. "If Locke didn't kill Maddy, who did? Could it have been any one that is mixed up in this other matter? This blackmail—yes, I will use the word. I never mince phraseology! My wife did blackmail her friends, and in so far as I can, I'm going to make good her debts and hush up the whole matter. I am responsible for everything Maddy did, just so far as I can be responsible. Now here's my point. If it could be that somebody who had been her victim is at the bottom of this murder business, then I don't want it found out. See? I'd rather Maddy's murderer should go unpunished than that Madeleine's name should be dragged through a trial and all that, whereby her life secrets must be laid bare."

"I see." Nelson thought deeply. "But, Drew, it is impossible, as I see it, with the murder occurring down there, as it did, that there should be any connection between it and the bridge business. No, it couldn't be. The more I think it over, the more I think there was some mistake. I mean Maddy was thought to be some one else—the blow was intended for another woman."

"I hadn't thought of that. It might be." Barham looked hopeful. "It would be awful enough, but I'd rather that, Nick, than to know that somebody really wanted Maddy's life."

"Well, the thing to do is to get Locke. Then, if he's the good sort that Jarvis thinks him, and if he didn't do it, he can doubtless help us a whole lot."

"But if he didn't do it, why is he hiding?"

"There you go again—round the circle! I don't know, I'm sure—but there could be reasons, say he's innocent, but there's circumstantial evidence against him. Say, he's innocent, but he's shielding somebody else. Say, he met with foul play himself."

Barham nodded. "Ingenious, but not very plausible. However, I doubt he'll ever be found. And, in that case, they'll drop the whole matter, won't they?"

"Not so long as they can think of some other way to look. That Hutchins is an alert sort, and Dickson is a smart man. Also, they're interested. It's an unusual case, and a picturesque case. Forgive me, Drew, but you're so sensible, I'm sure you can see for yourself, that a mystery culminating in the death of a society belle is more intriguing than an ordinary case of murder. Then there is Pearl Jane."

Barham looked up. "Who's she?"

"She's the Miss Cutler I spoke to you about. Did you ever hear such a name? Pearl Jane! Well, it seems she was found bending over the body and there was blood on her sleeve—also there was blood on Locke's sleeve—"

"Locke's sleeve! Why, you haven't told me half! Locke's sleeve!"

"I mean the sleeve of the costume he wore at the ball. The monk's robe—not his own coat. You see, he flung the robe to the Chinese servant as he left, and they afterward found a smear of blood on it."

"What do the Square people think about their fellow artist? Do they suspect him?"

"They seem not to know much about him. They seem not to know much about one another. As Jarvis says, they keep pretty much to themselves and when they get together for an occasional hobnob, they just talk shop."

"I see." Barham didn't appear deeply interested.

"And then, too, it seems this Locke is in the habit of going off on sketching trips or something and staying for days at a time."

"I suppose all that's in my stenographer's report—I've not had time to read it yet. Now, Nick, as to hushing up this miserable business of Maddy's. Shall I go to see the women, and beg or bribe them to keep still about it?"

"Can't I go for you. I hate to have you subjected to—"

"I don't care what I'm subjected to, and, of course, you understand, it's for her sake—hers and her mother's. I could bear it, if I had to, the nine days' wonder and all that, but I can't have my dead wife's name held up to scorn if I can prevent it by any possible means. Any suggestions, old chap?"

Nelson looked at the man before him. Barham's fine face was set in that firm way his friends knew so well. Not so much stubbornness as bulldog determination and perseverance. Nelson knew that Andrew would move heaven and earth to save his wife's reputation.

And it would be a terrible thing to have such a stigma on her memory. It would have been bad enough had the story been made public while she was alive, but to be disclosed after her death, and to fall heavily on the already overburdened soul of Andrew Barham, would, Nelson felt, be almost too much for the man.

Yet Barham's face seemed to indicate that he yet hoped to cope with this trouble. It seemed to gleam with a will power that would find some way to meet the enemy, to brave the impending disaster, to conquer the danger.

His strong white teeth were set together with a certain forcefulness of his lower jaw, that betokened to Nelson's keen eye not only a decision, but a desperate will to make good that decision.

"No positive suggestions, Drew," Nelson said, in answer to his query, "merely a negative suggestion not to go ahead faster than need be. It's not at all certain that those women will tell anything. More likely, they won't. Why would they? Everything they say against Maddy would implicate themselves."

"But others—those who know about it, yet are not deeply involved—"

"Oh, give them the benefit of the doubt.

I don't believe they would tell just to make trouble—"

"I know them better than you do, Nick. I've heard Maddy and her mother talk gossip until my hair fairly stood on end at the tales of woman's inhumanity to woman. Yet your advice is good in the main. I'll go slowly, but I'll find out and pay such debts as that the Gibbs woman speaks of, and I'll call on Emmy Gardner and Rosamond Sayre—they were Maddy's nearest friends—and see what they can do to help me."

"And ask them to try to keep the whole matter from Mrs. Selden."

"Yes. Now the thing is, the police. Do you suppose they've any inkling of this thing as yet?"

"Can't say. All I know is they're trying to probe into Maddy's secrets, and—it's a house of cards."

"Yes; in more senses than one!" Barham smiled ruefully at his melancholy joke. "Well, I can't sit still. I chafe at restraint or inaction. Let's call up that Hutchins and ask him. You do it."

Not anxious for the job, but ready to help his friend, Nick Nelson called up the detective. Hutchins didn't know Nelson was at Barham's house when he was asked to speak freely.

"Well, yes," he said, as Nick intimated his interest. "I did get a line on that matter. It seems the lady was—well, she was pretty rash in the measures she took to—to replenish her exchequer! I'd rather not say these things over the telephone—I'd rather not say them at all, but as Mr. Barham's counsel, you've a right to know. Yes, Mr. Nelson, I did find out some things and when you want to see me, I'll come and talk to you about 'em."

"Tell him to come to-morrow," Andrew directed, as, with his hand over the transmitter, Nelson reported. "At your place."

So Nelson asked the detective to come to see him next day, and incidentally asked him to keep the matter to himself, at least until they could confer over it.

"Never fear! I won't say a word, till I have to. It knocked me fair between the eyes! I never heard of such a thing before. No wonder what happened, did happen!"

Nelson hung up the receiver and turned to Barham with a troubled face. He repeated his whole conversation with Hutchins, and said:

"I begin to think, Drew, that it *was* something to do with all that, that brought about Maddy's fate."

"But how, *how*, Nick, could any of our crowd be mixed up with that painter? You don't think he was a gambler, do you?"

"Oh, Lord, no! Jarvis says he doesn't think Locke knows one card from another. Those people never play cards."

"Then how, or why, would any of that lot have anything against Maddy?"

"I can't see that they could, but some one else might have planned to meet her there."

"Who knew she was going? Why did she go? How did she know of the place? Why—"

"Let up on that, Drew. We know she *did* go there, willingly, and intentionally."

CHAPTER XI.

AT THE STUDIO.

AFTER Nelson had gone home, Barham sent for Claudine.

"How is Mrs. Selden?" he asked first, when she entered the room.

"She's a little calmer, sir. But now and then she has a spell, half hysterics, half grief. And—I'm sorry, Mr. Barham, but I can't stay on."

"What, Claudine, you would desert us at this awful crisis?"

"I should never have left Madame Barham, I loved her. But Madame Selden—I do not love."

"But stay for a time, Claudine, for my sake. What could I do with Madame Selden, without you? She wouldn't take kindly to a new maid, I'm sure. Stay a month longer, Claudine, at double wages, will you?"

"Yes, *monsieur*, I'll do that. Don't think me mercenary, but I want to save up the money for—for—"

"I know, Claudine, you're to be married. Now, tell me, did my wife owe you money—aside from your wages?"

"Yes, *monsieur*," Claudine said, after a slight hesitation.

"How much?"

"Five hundred dollars."

"Whew! Where did you ever get so much?"

"It was my savings. Madame said if I would lend them for a little bit, she would return it with a large fee—bonus."

"You will be paid, don't worry. Claudine, did she say anything else? Did she ever say that if you didn't lend her what she wanted, she—"

"Yes, *monsieur*." The maid spoke very simply. "She did. I understand—I knew it was wrong—but what could I do? She knew something—ah, it was the tiniest peccadillo—but it was my Carl. He—he—"

"Never mind, Claudine, I don't want the details. Now, if I pay you double what madame owed you, and double wages, will you stay with Madame Selden for a time—say, until your marriage, and also—say no word to any one of—of Madame Barham's affairs?"

"I will—yes, *monsieur*, I will."

"Very well. Now, one thing more, Claudine. Who knew that Madame Barham was going to a fancy dress party that night?"

"Nobody—not even Madame Selden. Ah, yes, Madame Sayre came over, but for a moment, while I was dressing madame, and perhaps she knew, I don't know as to that. When Madame Sayre came, my madame bade me leave the room."

"I see. Very well, Claudine, you may go. Remember all I have said."

Alone again, Barham gave himself up to thought once more. The man did little else but think these times. He had canceled his business engagements, he read not at all, he refused himself to all but the most insistent callers, and though kind and deferential to his mother-in-law, he saw as little of her as possible.

Marcia Selden forgave him this, for she was now deeply engrossed in going over her daughter's possessions. Barham had given her all of Madeleine's personal belongings, even her jewels, and it was no inconsiderable gift. He had recommended that some souvenirs be presented to friends, but this was merely suggestion; all decisions were to be Mrs. Selden's own.

She was like a child with a new toy, and kept Claudine busy making frequently revised lists of the beneficiaries.

It was a troublesome process, for no sooner did Marcia Selden decide on a gift, than immediately the thing took on a new value in her eyes, and she wanted to keep it for herself.

Barham, discovering all this, thanked his lucky stars that he had chanced to provide her with such an absorbing occupation, as it left him more time to himself, more time to think.

After hearing of Rosamond Sayre's call on Madeleine the night of the masquerade, he determined to see her, for there might be some bit of information to be gleaned from her.

The appointment to meet the detective at Nelson's was not until four o'clock, so he telephoned Rosamond to ask for an interview before that. She graciously consented to see him, which surprised him a little, as her note to him had been merely a formal expression of sympathy.

As he neared her house, however, he found himself dreading the call he had come to make. Yet, when they met, Rosamond's manner put him quite at his ease, and he was glad he had come.

"You dear man," she said, holding out both hands. "I'm glad to see you—do sit down. I've wanted to tell you in person how sorry I feel for you, and how I wish I could do something to help."

"No, Rosamond, there's nothing any one can do to help. I'm grateful for sympathy, of course, but—the truth is, nothing helps. The awfulness of the whole thing is beyond all help. Now, let's be frank. I've come to ask you a straightforward question. You played bridge a lot with Maddy, didn't you?"

"All the time, practically."

"Did she—did she ever borrow money from you?"

"All the time, practically."

"Pay it back?"

"Not always—sometimes."

"And—Rosamond, you've no idea how hard it is for me to say this—but I must—

if you didn't lend it—did she ever—threaten—"

Mrs. Sayre gave a broken little laugh.

"Of course she did, Andrew. She used to threaten all of us. You see, Maddy played in horrible luck, and she always wanted to recoup. But, good gracious, man, don't take it so to heart! That was nothing that she should say she'd tell our little secrets if we didn't lend her a hundred or two. Why so upset over it?"

"But—but, Rosamond, it isn't so trifling a matter as you say. There's—there's a pretty bad name goes with that sort of thing."

"Oh, well, don't use it in connection with Maddy. Forget it, Drew, nobody is going to hold it up against her. Especially now—the poor girl is gone. Have you any—any idea—"

"Who killed her? No, not the slightest. And that's another thing, Rose. Claudine says you were over at the house that night, and up in Maddy's room while she dressed. Did she tell you where she was going?"

"I was only there for a minute, and—well, I may as well tell you, she called me over to ask me for some money."

"She did! And you let her have it?"

"Oh, yes, that is, I agreed to take it to Emmy Gardner's for her. I did so, but the poor girl never came to get it."

Barham mused. "What did you think that night, when she failed to come?"

"I—oh, I didn't think much about it. Maddy always did as she liked. Harrison went with me, and we spoke of Madeleine's absence, but we didn't think of it seriously at all."

"No, I suppose not. Didn't she tell you, Rose, that she planned to go to the Locke place before she went to Emmy's?"

The man looked at her earnestly, as if much depended on her answer.

But Mrs. Sayre said: "No, I don't think she did. No, I remember now—she said she was going on an errand first, but she didn't say where."

"And didn't she have on that fancy dress?"

"No; she only had on a kimona—a dressing gown."

"And you came right home from our house—and you went right to the Gardners? Forgive me if I seem inquisitive—I've a notion in my head."

"I came home and dressed," Mrs. Sayre said, striving to remember. "Then I went down to my dressmaker's for a few minutes for an important fitting, and then I came back and picked up Harrison and we went to Emmy's."

"What time did you get there?"

"A little after eleven—I remember we were the last to arrive. Why all the catechism, Drew?"

"Nothing." His brows came together in perplexity. "I just want to find somebody to whom Madeleine mentioned that artist chap. How did she come to go there?"

"Can't you imagine?" Pretty Mrs. Sayre wrinkled her own brows.

"No, I simply cannot. I never supposed she knew such people."

"What do you mean by such people?"

"People outside her own circle or circumstances."

"Well, apparently she did. What are you going to do, Drew, as to finding out—"

"The truth? I'm not obliged to do anything, Rose; the police have it in charge. And to tell you the truth, I believe I'd rather never know the murderer than to have Madeleine's past dragged out to the light and all this miserable bridge business made public."

"I don't blame you!" Mrs. Sayre nodded her head emphatically. "I should think you'd very much rather have the whole affair hushed up and utterly forgotten. Do have it that way, Drew; all Maddy's friends would prefer it, I know."

"It isn't up to me to decide." Barham said with a sigh, and soon thereafter he took his leave.

"I still can't find out where Madeleine heard of Locke," he mused as he went on to Nelson's office. "I can't seem to find out anything! Well, there's one thing I am sure of!" By that time he was at the door.

"Well, Mr. Barham," Hutchins said, "your reward offer has borne fruit already."

"What, you've found Locke?" And Barham showed real interest.

"Not quite, but a man has put in an ap-

pearance who claims to be Tommy Locke's brother."

"Has he a brother?"

"According to this chap he has. But between you and me, I ha'e me doots. You see, any one can lay claim to the relationship, and since Locke isn't here to pass on it, who's to prove or disprove it?"

"Can't you wait a bit, and see if Locke turns up?"

"Just what we're going to do. Now, Mr. Nelson, suppose you tell Mr. Barham your plan."

"Why, Drew, I've been thinking that I might go down to the Locke place and rake over everything. I know the detectives have done it, but I think I might find some clew they overlooked."

Barham gave a slight smile. "I remember hearing a man of your stamp say, not long ago, that he had no detective instinct."

"That's just it," cried Nelson, triumphantly, "I believe a man with common sense and a good pair of eyes in his head might find out more than one of these transcendent sleuths."

"It doesn't sound much to me—but if you're anxious to go, go ahead. What, exactly, are you going to look for? Footprints?"

"No." Nelson refused to smile. "No, but I believe in among Locke's letters or papers—"

"He hasn't any," said Hutchins.

"Well, that's suspicious in and of itself. If that man tore up or destroyed all his papers the day before he disappeared, then that proves to my mind that he meant to disappear. There's that."

"There's that," Andrew agreed. "But where does that get you?"

"That's what I want to know, Mr. Barham," Hutchins said.

"Oh, well," Nelson gave in, "if you two are both down on my plan I'll give it up. What better can either of you propose?"

"I propose we give it all up." Barham said, speaking gravely.

"The whole hunt?" exclaimed Hutchins. "Withdraw the reward?"

"Well, Mr. Hutchins, let us put all our cards on the table. You have found, I understand, some very damaging information against my wife. Please do not try to spare my feelings. I can meet the blow. I am prepared for it. Just how much did you find out?"

"Since I know you want me to be frank, I will simply state that I learned that Mrs. Barham was in the habit of using a form of society blackmail to extort money from her friends."

"From what I have learned, I believe that to be the truth."

Barham spoke with an infinite sadness in his voice, but with his head erect, as if he cared for no word of regret or sympathy.

It was true that the man's sensitive pride revolted at thought of any pity or even kindness. He preferred to bear his burden alone, and except from his very few near and dear friends he wanted no recognition of the state of the case, beyond the bare facts that must be faced.

"First, Mr. Hutchins, I shall ask you to keep this matter from Mrs. Selden, if it be possible. I think I am within my legal as well as ethical rights in asking this. She is an old lady and devoted to her daughter's memory. The grief of such a disclosure would almost kill her."

"Rest assured, Mr. Barham, she shall never learn it from me—or from any of our people."

"Next, I should like to hush up the whole affair. If this is not possible—with the full consent of the police—then I am ready to face the music, to let the law take its course. But I am quite prepared to pay a goodly sum to have the case forgotten—and this is in no sense compounding a felony, or even doing anything dishonorable. It is merely an expression of my willingness to let the murderer of my wife go free in order that the wrong-doing of my wife may not be made public. Is there a chance of that, Mr. Hutchins?"

"Not a chance!" The detective shook his head. "Of course, the plan you propose is out of the question, as you yourself would see, if you thought over it a little more. Also, the machinery already set in motion cannot now be stopped. The posters are out, offering a reward of ten thousand dollars for the capture of the murderer, or any information that leads to that result."

"Not for the finding of Locke?" asked Barham.

"No; I received your message in time to omit that part of it."

"Yes, I changed that," Barham said in answer to Nelson's unspoken question. "You see, it can do no good to get Locke if he isn't the murderer. I mean, it isn't worth ten thousand dollars to get him just to talk to."

"No," Nelson agreed.

"Now, go ahead with your hunt," Barham said, "and, look here, Nick, I rather cotton that the plan of yours to go and search the Locke apartment, and I believe I'll go with you."

"Good!" Nelson cried. "I'm sure it is a good idea, and I do believe we might find something of interest, if not evidence. Shall we go now?"

"Would it be better to go at night?"

"No," Hutchins said, "let's go now—let's all go. I'd like to see how you people work."

"I don't dignify it by such a high sounding term as that," Nelson smiled. "More like playing at detecting. But there's always a chance."

So the three, in Barham's car, went down to the studio of the missing Thomas Locke. The place looked much as it did the day Nelson attended the inquest there, but not much as Barham had seen it the night of the *bal masque*. Then it had been gay with lanterns and flowers. Now it was in its plain, every day furnishings. It was properly in order and tidily cleared up by the Chinaman. He had not been allowed to sweep or dust, however, lest he disturb what might eventually be clews or evidence.

"Uninteresting place," Barham said, glancing round the studio. "No color—no atmosphere."

"Now, I like it," Nelson said. "It is restful compared to the glaring and tawdry effects in many such places."

"Well, go on with your sleuthing, Nick. I'll watch you." Barham sat down in one of the fireside chairs. Nelson looked a little at a loss, but began to make a raid on a desk that stood in a corner.

"Here's a big bunch of letters, Drew; you look these over while I dig up more."

But inside of ten minutes Barham informed him that the sheaf contained nothing at all but receipted bills for canvases, paints and brushes.

Nor did further search produce anything of more importance. Nelson went back to the smoking room, and, disinclined to go there again, Barham remained in the studio. Hutchins followed Nelson, hoping to get a grain or a nugget of information.

Left to himself, Barham opened a few of the cabinet drawers. Nelson had been through them all, and as he said, they held nothing but painting things or trifling knick-knacks.

"Where's the Chinaman?" Nelson asked as they returned to Barham.

"It's his day off," Hutchins explained, "though he has most days off now. He doesn't seem to know what to do. You know he heard from Locke, Mr. Barham?"

"No, did he?"

"Yes, Locke said he could pay the small bills and that he—Locke—would settle the larger accounts."

"Then, Mr. Hutchins, you must realize that Locke will never return. To my mind, it is self-evident that though he is near by—at least, in the city, he is clever enough to remain hidden."

"Not necessarily in the city," said Nelson. "He may have telephoned on a long distance."

"Right," Barham agreed. "At any rate, he is quite capable, as it looks to me, of taking care of himself, and keeping in hiding as long as he chooses. I think, if you please, Mr. Hutchins, I will take a look in the den. I hesitated, as it is a place of painful associations, but there is a chance I might see something of value."

But when Andrew Barham stood in the little room, at the very spot where his wife was, doubtless, felled to her death, he could see no shred, no bit of evidence.

The tears were in his eyes as he turned away. One of the heavy bronze book-ends still stood on the table, the other had been taken away by the police as the weapon of murder.

Then, still in the spirit of investigation, the three went into Locke's bedroom and bathroom. Nothing met their eyes that offered

any ground for surmise or conclusion. Slowly they retraced their way downstairs.

"Come on, Drew," said Nelson as he followed the detective down.

"In a minute," Barham replied, pausing for another glance into the den.

It was by no means a morbid curiosity, but there were many conflicting feelings in Andrew Barham's mind just then.

He wondered.

On the way home in the car, Hutchins having remained behind, Barham said: "I can't see, Nick, that the police are making any headway whatever. I can't see but Locke has them just where he wants them—if he wants them anywhere."

"Where does he want them?"

"Oh, I mean, he has things all his own way. Apparently, he means never to come back. There's not a thing in the place of value—that's what I noticed especially. There's not a personal thing that he could possibly care for—oh, of course, there are his pictures—but I can't imagine any one caring greatly for those."

"Mere sketches, they looked to me—and yet, I rather liked them. Good soft coloring and all that."

"All alike, weren't they?"

"Pretty much. Well, granting Locke is out of it, and his stuff there, as you say, of no value, then—don't you see, the police are going to concentrate all their efforts on the finding out something in Madeleine's past life that will explain the murder."

Barham sighed deeply. "Of course they are. Of course I see it. And that's where you come in. What can we do to stop them?"

"I can't think of anything. Your offer of money went nowhere."

"Nowhere at all. I suppose we can't build up a man of straw for them to hang their suspicions on."

"Just now they've enough of that scandal about Madeleine to whet their appetites for more. They're like a pack of vultures, they want to get a lot of back history—"

"Oh, I say, Nick! That might apply to a newspaper—a yellow one—but not to the police!"

"Well, to these detectives. They're so eager to get a feather to stick in their cap that they'd go any lengths to dig up horrid old gossip to help along!"

"But if the horrid old gossip chances to be the truth—as it is in this case, who can blame them? Lord knows I want to hush up the whole affair, but if it can't be done, it can't."

"Then you think it must all come out?"

"Looks so. I can hush up the women—not one of that bridge pack but would keep her mouth shut for a few hundred dollars. And they have affection for Maddy, too. They hadn't so much when she was alive, but now they're tender toward her memory. It's the police who will make the trouble, and the reporters, and worst of all, the exaggeration. If they'd tell the truth—that would be bad enough. But they'll multiply everything by four and then double it."

"Yes, I suppose they will. Did you notice that picture of the girl on the side table in the den?"

"No; what girl?"

"The one I told you about, with the queer name, Pearl Jane. She has bobbed hair, rather curly."

"No, I didn't see any such picture."

"Oh, well, I think I set another picture over it, as I was digging about. That's why. Wild-goose chase going down there at all. But I really thought we might turn up something."

"There's no chance for clews, Nick, if that's what you mean. Whoever killed Maddy was too clever to leave a clew. That much is evident to me."

"Yes, and to me, too," said Nelson.

CHAPTER XII.

CHINESE CHARLEY TALKS.

CHINESE CHARLEY was proving a puzzle to the police.

As his wages were paid to the end of the month, his notion of duty kept him at his post until the expiration of that time. Then he explained he would go away and get another place, unless he had different orders from Mr. Locke in the meantime.

"You are in touch with him, Charley!" Hutchins accused him.

"Touch?" said the Chinese blankly.

"You hear from him. He writes you? Telephones you?"

"No," said Charley.

But Hutchins believed he lied.

Since the caretaker was there, however, Glenn continued to stay in the studio apartment day and night. This would continue until the end of the month; then, if Locke had not been heard from the house agent said he should lock up the place until the paid-up rent had expired and then rent it to some one else.

So matters seemed to be shaping themselves to a general permanent arrangement of forgetting Tommy Locke. There was nothing else to do. Hunt was being made, search was being kept up, yet there was no sign of the missing man, except the vague reports of his telephoning his servant and friends. Nor could these be verified.

Henry Post declared he had not heard from Locke. Kate Ballon said she had not, while little Miss Cutler refused to answer questions about it. Charley was equally taciturn and Hutchins despaired of ever finding out anything.

But the very day after Nelson and Andrew Barham had visited the studio, Charley, while tidying up, gave an exclamation.

"What's doing?" asked Glenn, who sat by, reading a paper.

"Nothing," and the Oriental's face was a blank.

"You Chinese rascal, you found something. Tell me what, or I'll have the law on you!"

"Nothing."

And "nothing" was all Glenn could extract from the wily Charley. He watched him closely all day, but could get no inkling of the discovery he had made, if any.

The only effect it seemed to have was to make the Chinaman do some searching on his own account. Several times through the day, Charley sneaked into the studio or the den or the bedroom, choosing opportunities when Glenn was elsewhere, and swiftly pulled out drawers, opened cupboards and rummaged in boxes.

When Glenn came upon him he immediately looked as innocent as a cherub, and pretended to me emptying an ash tray or picking up papers.

"You're a caution, Charley," Glenn said. "I wish I could see into that carved ivory dome of yours."

"Yes," said the imperturbable one.

That afternoon Charley dressed himself in street clothes and went forth on errands. Returning, he informed Glenn that he had been to pay the caterer's bill and also the house agent's rent.

Glenn looked at him, astonished.

"Where'd you get the money?" he asked.

"Found in—in cubby drawer." And Charley pointed to a certain pigeonhole in Locke's desk.

"What? How'd it get there?"

"Misser Locke—he put."

Apparently the Chinese was greatly enjoying the other's amazement. Though the yellow face was grave, the slant eyes were flickering with sly interest.

"Mr. Locke put it there! Are you crazy?"

"No clazy; no, sir."

"How do you know he put it there?"

"Note say so. Note to Charley."

"A note to you? Come, now, this is too much. Have you seen Mr. Locke?"

"No see Misser Locke, but get note. He put."

"He put! You— You'll be put in jail if you—"

"Just for 'cause pay bill? Good bill?"

"Let me see your note."

"All burn up."

"Look here, you. Do you mean you found money and a note there, that weren't there before? That Mr. Locke has been here and left money for you to pay his bills?"

"Thass right. Money for me, for caterman, for agent man. Dassall."

"Well, next time he comes—"

"He no come more. He good-by."

"Oh, he's good-by, is he? Well, I think you're making up this whole yarn. That's what I think."

"Yessir."

But Glenn didn't think so; he knew better, though not for a moment did he believe the money or note had been found in that pigeonhole. He concluded Locke had gone to Charley's home — the Chinaman went home nights. Glenn was sure that

Locke had been to see him, and by judicious payment had stopped his mouth from undesired disclosures. Anyway, Glenn decided, that was all he could make of it.

He called up Hutchins, but failed to get him. He went to bed that night with one ear alert, hoping "Misser Locke" would pay another call.

His hopes were not fulfilled, and next day he told Hutchins of Charley's story.

"I know," Hutchins said, staring at Glenn. "There's something else doing, too. It seems Henry Post and that Miss Vallon have each had a letter from Locke. They were ready enough to tell of it; ready, too, to give us the letters. But, confound it, how has that chap the nerve to stay around here—"

"A letter doesn't mean he's around here."

"No; nor does a telephone call. But if he put that money where Charley says he did, he must be in this vicinity."

"Oh, I don't believe the Chink. Locke sent him that money by postal order or something like that—"

"That's neither here nor there, anyway. The point is that apparently Locke has no intention of returning to this place at all. Now, if that is so, he's staying away because he is guilty. If he were an innocent man why wouldn't he return and help straighten things out? I can't see it any other way than that Locke did know Mrs. Barham, and did kill her. His very coolness and nerve in writing letters and telephoning and all that proves the possibility—the probability—of his being just the sort who would commit a murder, and then walk out the front door, saying, 'Back in a minute.'"

"That's all so." Glenn tried to look wise. He was an humble underling, and he was secretly elated at being thus talked to by the great Hutchins.

"Of course it is." Hutchins went on. He was really only thinking aloud, and used Glenn merely as a target for his speech. "So I'm more than ever convinced that Locke is our man, and that his murder of Mrs. Barham was premeditated and prearranged. Now, here's that yellow streak again! What is it, Charley?"

"I talk you, alone, Misser Hutch."

"No, I don't think you will. You'll talk to me right here before Mr. Glenn. He's my brother and my father and my grandmother."

"Yessir. Then, Misser Hutch, I ask you help me. I know things."

"Oho, you do! Well, Charley, if you know things, I'm the man to help you. And whatever you know, out with it. You may forget it."

"No, I no forget."

The Chinaman was serious now, and obviously deeply troubled.

Hutchins winked at Glenn, but said no word, fearing to disturb Charley's thoughts.

"I have errand to do for Misser Locke," he said at last. "I no can do alone."

"All right," Hutchins said, cheerfully, "I'll help you. Do we start now?"

But Charley looked graver still, and shook his head.

"It's to lady," he divulged. "Pretty little lady."

"Miss Cutler?" Hutchins guessed.

"Yes, Missee Cutler."

"See here, Charley, is she Mr. Locke's girl—you know—sweetheart?"

"I donno. But Misser Locke he want his — his jewel thing — his luckee — and Missee Cutler—she got it."

The secret came out in a burst of confidence, and his tale told, Charley wilted. His waving arms fell limp, and his excited face returned to its normal stolidity.

Hutchins held himself in, and strove to answer casually.

"Oh, yes—that's easy. Miss Cutler has Mr. Locke's jewel—a lucky piece, you say? And Mr. Locke wants it. Of course he does. He'd have no luck without it. Well, let's go and get it from Miss Cutler. Or did he give it to her? Is it hers now?"

"No! Oh, no!" Charley fairly shuddered. "He not give it to her. She take it—Missee Cutler take it—from—from—dead lady!"

Charley's eyes now glowed with horror, even fright. But whatever the meaning of this strange story he was telling, he was certainly in earnest. There was no slyness now—no roguery. The man was deeply stirred by some emotion — some sense of duty.

Hutchins's own calm gave way.

"Miss Cutler took it from the dead lady! From Mrs. Barham? What are you talking about?"

"Go easy," Glenn whispered. "He'll shut up or bolt if you're not careful."

"Right, Glenn." Hutchins put a guard on his impatience. "When did she take it, Charley?" he asked. "When did Miss Cutler take the lucky piece from Mrs. Barham?"

"After—after she dead—oh, oh!" His long, yellow hands flew up and covered his eyes. Clearly he was envisioning a horrible memory.

Hutchins's mind worked like lightning.

"Charley," he said, "who killed the lady? Who killed Mrs. Barham? Did Mr. Locke do it?"

But no answer came. The slant eyes seemed to be of glass, so meaningless, so unalive they became.

"If he knows, he won't tell," Glenn urged. "Get at it in a roundabout way."

The next day Hutchins realized that he was taking advice from an humble inferior, but at this moment the suggestion sounded good to him, and he acted on it at once.

"Yes, Charley," he said; "yes—about that lucky piece, now. Was it a jewel?"

"Donno what you call. But like a fly-away. All same, dead lady had him in her hand."

"After she was dead?"

"Yessir. Then I see Missee Cutler take him out of dead lady's hand and put him away, in her blouse. So."

Charley tucked his hand into his house jacket, with quite evident imitation of a woman concealing a treasure trove in her bodice.

"Charley"—Hutchins looked at him sternly—"why are you telling this now? Is it true? If it is, why didn't you tell at first?"

Charley looked troubled.

"I like Missee Cutler; but"—he sighed deeply—"I like my Misser Locke more. You make Missee Cutler give me lucky piece for my Misser Locke?"

"I will indeed—if she has it. You say you saw her take it—from—here, Charley, come into the den and show me."

Hutchins led the way and Charley obediently followed. Glenn, after them, wondered if they were on the verge of an important revelation or if the Chinaman had them "on a string."

"Now," Hutchins said, watching Charley steadily, "where was Mrs. Barham — the dead lady?"

"Here." He indicated the spot where Madeleine had been found.

"And where was Miss Cutler? How?"

"So." And the Chinaman crouched over the place as one might who was intently examining an unconscious body. With his long yellow fingers he made motions of extracting a small object from the hand, and so graphic was he that Glenn was horrified.

"Missee Barrum here," Charley explained, as if he feared his dumb show was not intelligible. "Missee Cutler lean over —so—and pick luckee from dead lady's fingers."

"Where were you?" Hutchins asked, sternly.

"Here." Charley rose and hurried to the little back hall. Then, standing just outside the partly open door, he peeped around it, as if spying on the scene he had just portrayed.

"I can't seem to think this is all made up," Hutchins said to Glenn in a breathless aside, "and yet it is incredible. Do you suppose Pearl Jane—"

"Killed Mrs. Barham? I do not!" Glenn looked positive. "But I believe this dumb show business. Charley never invented all that. Moreover, Locke is after that lucky piece—or whatever it is—and Charley, who is all devotion to him, wants to get it for him."

"When you get it, Charley," Hutchins said, "how will you get it to Mr. Locke?"

But now the shrewd look returned. "I do," was all the reply Hutchins could obtain.

"I was pretty sure that girl was mixed up in the affair somehow," Hutchins said reflectively, as he looked at Glenn.

"She could be mixed up in it and yet be entirely innocent of crime," Glenn persisted, for his heart had been caught in the tangles of Pearl Jane's bobbed hair.

"She could. And if you feel that way about it, you'd better not go with me over to her place, which is where I'm going right now. You'd better not go anyway, as I propose to take Charley, and if we leave this place unguarded, friend Locke may come in and camp here."

"No such luck," returned Glenn. "I wish he would. But I've no desire to go and see or hear you bait that young woman."

"I know you haven't. But listen here, Glenn. That young woman was found by me, crying, in that closet in that back hall there. She had a smear on her sleeve that looked to me like blood. When I went to see her a few hours later, she had washed the stain away. I saw the mark of it left. She said—or rather Miss Vallon said, they had washed away a few drops of cocoa. Somebody else said it might have been a red smear from a lipstick. Every woman carries those nowadays.

"But, I say, if that smear was lipstick or rouge or cocoa, why were they in such a hurry to eradicate it? Why did they notice it at all? Also, in that same cupboard was the monk's robe which Locke had tossed to Charley and which Charley had hung up there. That, too, had a smear of blood on it. Now, add the fact that Charley saw Miss Cutler bending over the body; that he saw her take something from the dead woman's hand and conceal it in her bosom; add the fact, or at least my strong conviction that Miss Cutler has had one telephone message, if not two, from Locke, since his disappearance. Perhaps romancing a little, remember that the girl was in love with Locke and may easily have been jealous of this strange woman, perhaps no stranger to her—oh, well, there's enough, to my way of thinking, to get busy on."

Glenn had nothing in particular to reply to all this. Taking Charley with him, Hutchins started off to see Pearl Jane.

But her little place was closed and locked. Nor was Miss Vallon at home. The janitor said the two ladies had gone away together, and had left word they would be back in two days.

"If ever!" exclaimed Hutchins when he heard this. He was angry, for he feared that, like Locke, the two women had gone for good and all.

The janitor reassured him, however, saying the two frequently went off for a couple of days, and he was positive they would be back.

Hutchins had half a mind to get a warrant and search Pearl Jane's rooms, but he wasn't quite sure enough of the credibility of Charley's story.

At any rate, no one else knew of it, and if he could make the Chinaman keep quiet, and could pledge Glenn to secrecy, the matter could await the return of the two women.

So he told Charley that if he said no word of it all to any one, that probably the lucky piece would be recovered, but if he told there was no chance of it.

This made the boy promise, and Hutchins believed he would keep his word.

Glenn, too, agreed to be silent, and Hutchins turned his attention to the Barham side of the question for the next forty-eight hours. It was his plan to work from Locke to Mrs. Barham and back again, hoping to get some data on one side that would dovetail with facts on the other.

Glenn slept soundly that night. He was not a heavy sleeper, usually, but after any mental excitement he felt exhausted and glad of a good rest.

Though on guard in the house, he was not required to stay awake at night, Dickson deeming it highly improbable that any intruder would put in an appearance. Nor had any one done so, to Glenn's knowledge, though Charley's story of finding money and a note on the desk looked like it. But Glenn doubted the details of the story and felt sure the Oriental had made up that part and had really received the messages by mail or in some such way at his own place.

So, when toward morning, Glenn heard a faint sound, he didn't at first think it might mean anything of interest. He listened, however, but he heard nothing more.

A moment later he saw, or thought he saw a mere speck of light as if from a pocket flash light held by some one in the den.

Glenn was a good watchman, and his getting up out of bed was absolutely noise-

less. So was his progress across the room and into the little back hall.

From here he could see—even as Charley had seen—the spot where the dead body had been found. And there, bending over, as Pearl Jane might have bent over, was a dark figure—that of a man—searching the floor.

The tiny flash light gave but a point of light, but by its single ray the intruder was intently, eagerly looking for something.

Awaiting his time, Glenn continued to watch. The man's motions were so slow, his actions so deliberate, the policeman felt sure he could spring at him when he got ready and still catch him unawares.

The man's back was toward Glenn, but he felt certain it was Locke. He could see dark hair, rather long, beneath the soft, dark hat. He caught sight of a flowing tie. These things, he had been told, spelled Locke.

Slowly, still, the man turned to the near-by table. This was getting pretty close to Glenn's hiding place, and he concluded the time was ripe.

The man reached for something on the table, and at the same moment Glenn burst in upon him, crying, "Hands up, Mr. Locke! Come quietly, now."

The man raised an astonished face, and at sight of Glenn, tousle-haired, wild-eyed, and clad only in pyjamas, gave way to an irrepressible smile, exhibiting two gold eye-teeth, and then, quickly snapping off his little flash light, he sprang aside and made for the studio door.

But Glenn was too quick for him, and though it was pitch dark, he was guided by the sounds, and the policeman slammed the door shut just before the other reached it.

At bay, the intruder met Glenn in a hand to hand fight, by no means a desperate one, but both men were in earnest, and the wrestling was steady and forceful.

Glenn found his opponent was holding his own, and incidentally edging nearer and nearer to the hall door, which, if he gained, would let him down the front stairs.

This Glenn aimed to prevent, but, finally, by a sudden push the stranger sent the policeman flat against the wall, winded and off his balance.

He recovered in a moment, but by that time the other had gone through the hall door, slammed it behind him, and could be heard running down the front stairs.

As Glenn opened the door at the top of the stairs, he heard the street door flung open, and when, after the shortest possible interval he himself was down at the street door and running down the steps, no one was in sight.

Baffled, he looked one way and another. Just then Officer Briggs came along on his beat.

"What's up?" he cried.

"Locke! Chase him!" Glenn cried. "He just got away!"

"Locke!" Briggs echoed. "Which way?"

"I don't know—he just ran out this door—"

"He never did! I should have seen him. Where was he?"

"In the house—upstairs—he fought me." Glenn suddenly awoke to the fact that he was unconventionally clad to appear on a front stoop, and made for the house door again.

"Chase him, Briggs," he urged.

"Aw, chase yourself," Briggs returned. "'Twas a nightmare you had. Go back to bed."

"No, it was no nightmare," Glenn returned; "but I know what did happen. He fooled me! He slammed this door and then ran back through the hall and out that way. We've lost him!"

"You poor fish!" said Briggs.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LUCKY PIECE.

WHEN Hutchins heard of the nocturnal visit, he raised his eyebrows.

"I told you he was a slick one," he said to Glenn. "I don't blame you, though. You did your best. But he had the advantage in knowing the ways of his own house, and being able to run around in the dark."

"Aw, I know this house well enough," Glenn declared. "I haven't lived here a week or more without knowing where the

doors and halls run into each other, and all that. But it was his fighting that put me out of commission."

"Jiu-jitsu?"

"Not a bit of it. But skillful, clever wrestling—like a professional. Why, I hadn't a show. He didn't hurt me a bit, but he just—well, he just sort of set me on one side. Then, as you say, he did know, even in the dark, just where he wanted to get to, and he got there."

"And fooled you beside."

"Yes, and fooled me beside. Of course when I heard the front door slam open, I supposed he went out that way. And there little cutie had swished the door open, with a flourish of trumpets, and then had whisked himself through the house and out at the good little old back door, so he had! Had the nerve to leave that flying open behind him, too!"

"Don't worry, Glenn. If you had caught him you couldn't have held him, and if you'd locked him in he'd have gotten out! I tell you he's as bright as they come if he is an artist."

"Well, what next? He'll not come here again."

"How do you know? Did he get what he was after?"

"What was he after?"

"I don't know. What did he get?"

"I don't know that he got anything. But I haven't looked around at all. I was so sore—mentally, not physically—that I just went back to bed, and I'm only just through my breakfast now."

"Let's give the place the once over. I don't think there was anything of value for him to take; but he was after something and we may get a line on it."

"Why, of course, he was after his lucky piece, as Charley calls it."

"Yes, if it was Locke."

"If it was Locke? Who else in thunder could it be?"

"Might be lots of people. Hello, what's this?"

The two had wandered through the studio, looking for any bit of evidence, and finding none, and now they were in the den. On the floor in a corner lay a strange looking object.

Hutchins picked it up and held it out at arm's length.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he ejaculated, though he rarely gave way to such elaborate ejaculation.

The occasion seemed to justify it, for the thing he held up to Glenn's view was a wig, of rather long, black hair.

Glenn's eyes grew big and round as he gazed.

"That's it!" he cried. "I grabbed him by the hair once, and it seemed to slide! Gave me the creeps! I'd forgotten that. My Heavens, Hutchins, what does it mean?"

"It means," the detective said slowly; "well, it might mean something else, but I'll say it means that your friend of last night wasn't Locke at all, but somebody rigged up to look like him."

"Yes, that must be it. An ordinary burglar, disguised as—"

"No, by no means an ordinary burglar! Rather a most extraordinary one! One who was so bent on getting in here that he made up to look like a man for whom a reward is offered! That's going some!"

"But it must have been Locke, for he came in with his own night key—that is, he must have done so, or how did he get in?"

"Well, a chap smart enough to make up like Locke is smart enough to get a key somewhere or somehow. But why? *Why?* That's what I can't understand. It can only be that there is some incriminating evidence still here regarding that murder. Nothing else would bring about such elaborate preparations."

"Mightn't be elaborate. Just slapping a wig on your head isn't such a great game."

"No: but this is just like Locke's hair—"

"How do you know—except by hearsay?"

"That's so, Glenn; I don't. But all the descriptions of Locke sound like this thing looks."

"It was Locke, Hutchins. I saw his two gold teeth gleam. I've heard over and over again about those two gold teeth."

"So have I. Well, no one would carry disguise so far as that. It must have been

Locke. I have it. He's had his hair cut, to escape detection, and coming back here, he put on a wig to be different from what he really is now."

"Pretty good—but not good enough. I'll tell you! It was that brother of Locke's. He'd likely have gold teeth, too. Such things run in families—and he impersonated his brother to get something here in the house."

"I never thought that brother person was really a brother," Hutchins said gloomily. Things were getting beyond his ken.

"Where's the girl's picture?" Glenn cried, looking around. "Ha! It *was* Locke. He took the picture—the painting of the Cutler girl! That's what he was after! Oh, these young lovers!"

"Bah—I don't believe it. It's too foolish. What was it? A photograph?"

"No—a little painting; pretty, almost like a miniature. I think Locke painted it himself."

"I think he didn't. He paints landscapes—"

"Some artists do both. Well, maybe he didn't paint it—but it's gone, and I bet he took it. He stopped at that table where it stood the last thing before he left the room."

"Maybe he took it then—but it's of small importance. The fact that Locke is in love with the little Cutler girl—or she with him—hasn't much to do with our finding the murderer of Mrs. Barham. That's what I'm after."

"Well, I think this wig business and this fellow that broke in last night are important matters. And I'll bet old Dickson 'll think so, too. Don't pass it up, Hutchins; sleuth it out. If it was Locke, why did he come, and—"

"And if it wasn't Locke, why didn't he? But I'll tell you what we'll do. Put it up to Charley. See if he knows anything about it. Maybe Locke always wore a wig. Maybe he wanted to affect that long hair business, and couldn't do it on his own."

Charley came at their summons and gazed stolidly at the wig when asked to observe it.

"Whose is it, Charley?"

"Donno."

"Is it Mr. Locke's?"

"Donno."

"Did Mr. Locke ever wear a wig? Come, you must know that?"

"Donno."

And even threats of jail, or intimations of worse punishment, could not move the Chinaman to admit any knowledge of the wig or even the slightest interest in it.

Nor did Dickson seem as much impressed as Glenn thought he would be. He opined it might have been some sneakthief who had donned a wig merely to disguise his own appearance, or it might have been a curiosity seeker, of whom there were plenty about. He could see no explanation of Locke's presence there, for if he wanted to come to his own house as secretly as all that he would have disguised himself—not attempted to look like himself.

But Glenn persuaded Hutchins to take the wig with him when he went to see Miss Cutler, for, he said, she could tell whether it was really like Locke's hair or not.

"It's a mighty fine wig," Glenn went on, "and it was made in Paris. See—here's the maker's mark."

"That's no clew," Hutchins scoffed. "All good wigs are made in Paris. It's a very expensive affair, too, which proves that it never was made merely to look like Locke on a midnight marauding expedition. That wig was made for a special customer, and for a special purpose. It has since fallen from such high estate, and is, most likely, the property of an artist's model who is posing as *Hamlet* or a wandering minstrel. By the way, like as not, it was worn here at the masquerade. Then when friend burglar started upstairs he saw it somewhere about, and clapped it on his head by way of disguise."

"Oh, you can make up fine-sounding talk, but if you'd seen that chap, as I did, bending over that spot in the den, you'd know he was no burglar. He was Locke himself, or somebody who wanted to appear to be Locke."

"You said that before." Hutchins grinned at Glenn and registered extreme weariness.

All the same, when Hutchins set out for his interview with Pearl Jane he did carry

the wig with him, and he did hope to learn something about it from the girl. She did not want to see the detective at all, but he had told her over the telephone that she must, and that she must see him alone. He gave her no choice in the matter, and advised her to be at home when he called, which would be immediately.

So he found her waiting for him. While she was calm, he could note an undercurrent of nervous excitement and a frequent tremor as of overwrought nerves.

"Now, Miss Cutler," he began, not at all unkindly, but decidedly, "I can't help feeling you've not been entirely frank with me when we have talked together. This time I hope you will be, for I may as well tell you that, unless you are, you may be questioned by other people who will not be so patient with you as I am."

"What do you want to know?" Pearl Jane struggled hard to preserve her composure.

"First, what did you take from the hand of the—of Mrs. Barham—that night as she lay on the floor of the smoking room?"

Pearl Jane grasped her throat to stifle a cry.

"Now, don't do that." Hutchins spoke a bit sharply. "Hysterics won't get you anywhere. You've tried them before. Don't scream, or burst into tears, for if you do I shall only wait till you're over it."

"Aren't you perfectly horrid!" The gray eyes flashed angrily at him.

"Yes; I have to be—to keep you from being so! Go on, now; answer that question, so we can go on to the next."

"I didn't take anything—"

"Look here, my dear young lady—let me say from the start, falsehoods are barred. If you're just going to tell stories, you can tell them to some one else. I've no time nor inclination for anything but the truth. I think I'd better take you over to the police station for a hearing."

"No, no! I'll tell the truth. But—but skip that question. Ask me the next one."

"This is the next." Hutchins looked grave. "Did you kill Mrs. Barham?"

"No, no, no!" Again hysterics were imminent.

But the face she raised to Hutchins's was so imploring, and withal so appealingly sorrowful, that Hutchins was forced to modify his manner a little.

"I don't believe you did," he said heartily, after a deep look into her eyes. "Now, have you any idea who did?"

"That I refuse to answer." Her eyes flashed. "You can take me to the station or to prison, or you can take me to the electric chair—but I shall never tell you if I suspect any one—any one at all."

She lay back in her chair, rather exhausted by the vehemence of her own speech. She looked very young, she seemed very alone—but underneath her young helplessness there seemed to be a strong power of will that Hutchins began to see was unbreakable.

"You care for him as much as that, then?" Hutchins said, his voice sinking to a whisper.

"Yes," said Pearl Jane, and her face glowed with a soft flush.

Then, realizing that she had been trapped, she flew at him like a young tigress. "How dare you? You think that is fair—right—to trap me into an admission? Mr. Hutchins, you are more guilty of falsehood than I! You have no right to—"

"There, there, Miss Cutler—yours is an open secret. You couldn't keep it if you wanted to. Now, let me tell you that it will be better for Mr. Locke in the long run if you will be frank about him. Are you engaged to him?"

"No."

"Do you—or did you—expect to be?"

"Those are questions you've no right to ask."

"Very well—perhaps I haven't. Now, Miss Cutler, do you know whose this is?" He flung off the paper and held up the wig suddenly before her astonished eyes.

She gazed at it as if hypnotized. She wasn't scared—she seemed not to be overcurious—but she looked at the thing with a mild wonder, as a child at a curious novelty.

"Where did it come from?" she said, and gave a puzzled smile.

"Of whom does it remind you?"

"Of Mr. Locke. It is exactly like his hair."

"Do you think it is his hair? I mean, do you think he wears a wig continually?"

"That's what I'm wondering. I don't know, I'm sure, but I do know that's Tommy Locke's hair, or just exactly like the hair I've always seen on his head. Oh, nonsense! No, I don't believe he wears a wig habitually. Why should he? He's a young man."

"How old?"

"I don't know exactly. We've judged him at twenty-eight or twenty-nine. That's not old enough for a wig!"

"It is in the case of some people. Why do you smile?"

"It's so funny. If it is his, and he hasn't another, how queer he must look! Do you suppose he is bald?"

Miss Cutler shook her own short, thick locks, and then she became serious again. "Where did you get it?" she asked.

Hutchins told her the whole story, and asked her opinion.

"No, it wasn't Tommy," she said. "It was some of the boys dressed up for a prank. It doesn't seem funny to you, I dare say, but the boys do ever so many things that they think funny but no one else does."

"But this funny person took your picture—the little one in the den."

"That one! Why, that is one of Mr. Locke's chief treasures. Jamieson painted that. How dare anybody steal it! Can you get it back?"

"But perhaps it was Mr. Locke himself who took it. He would have a right to, you know."

"Yes." Again she blushed that soft, pretty pink.

"Where's his lucky piece?" asked Hutchins suddenly. It was his theory that these suddenly sprung queries brought results before the victim was aware of it.

"What lucky piece?"

"The one you took from Mrs. Barham's hand."

He could see the effort she made, but this time it was successful. She conquered her emotion, controlled her voice, and said calmly: "Mr. Hutchins, you spoke of that before. What makes you think I took anything from the dead woman?"

"You were seen to do so."

"By that lying Chinaman! I refuse to answer if he is your informant."

"But he saw you; he was directly behind you. You leaned over and took the thing; and in doing so you touched your sleeve to her wounded forehead, thus making the smear which you afterward washed out."

"No, you are all wrong; I did none of those things."

"Then—then you won't mind if I look about a bit for it. You see, if I look through your place and announce that I can't find it, they won't send somebody else to look—somebody with a warrant."

He hated to frighten the poor child, but it had to be done. He had learned the most effective way to deal with her.

"Look through my things!" she cried, staring at him.

"Yes. If you haven't it, as you say you haven't, you can have no objection. And, truly, if I don't some one else will."

"Go ahead," she said, and sat watching him.

In a perfunctory fashion Hutchins pulled open a few drawers of her writing desk and work table. He wasn't really looking; he was watching her face, hoping to learn from its expression what way to turn.

Nor was he in error. She fell easily into his trap. With no thought of being studied, Pearl Jane did all he could hope for. When he was looking in some places she drew a long breath of contentment and satisfaction. Again, her breath would come quickly, her eyes turn dark with apprehension, and her tightly clasped hands tremble.

So he knew at last that what he sought must be in an upper drawer of an old secretary. He reached up for it, and as he saw the look of utter despair on her face he pulled out the whole drawer, a small one, and lifted it down.

But his find was not a "lucky piece"; instead, it was something far more gruesome. For, wadded up in a corner of the drawer was a long white kid glove, stained on the fingertips with a brownish tinge—unmistakably human blood.

It did not need her heartbroken cry of dismay to tell him he had discovered her secret, and he came slowly toward her.

"Miss Cutler, is this yours?"

"No—oh, no."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!" indignantly.

"Then, whose is it?"

"I don't know."

"Why is it here?"

She braced up. Whatever the reason, perhaps sheer desperation, she sat up straight, drew herself together, and answered:

"I found it on the floor near the body of Mrs. Barham."

"When you leaned over her?"

"Yes. I did lean over to see if she were dead or alive. I was horribly frightened, but I thought it my duty to see that, at least."

"And she was dead?"

"I think so. I tried to feel her heart, but I couldn't—there was such elaborate fringe and tinsel on the bodice. So, I—well, Mr. Hutchins, I think I rather lost my head. I had never seen a dead person before—like that, I mean—and I don't know what I did. I grabbed the glove—"

"Why?"

"I think I had a half-formed fear that it might belong to some one I knew—that crime might be suspected—"

"But it's a woman's glove."

"I know. But is a woman never guilty of crime?"

"Murder?"

"It has been known, hasn't it? And isn't the weapon that was used—a heavy weight—more the thing a woman would use? Can you imagine a man throwing that at a woman?"

"Yes, more easily than I can imagine a woman doing it. You are romancing, Miss Cutler; you are saying all this to turn the tide of suspicion away from the man you love—away from Thomas Locke. You suspect him yourself, but you want to shield him. That is why you went to the dead woman. That is why you bent down over her. You thought you would remove incriminating evidence, if you could find any. You opened her hand—the dead woman's hand—whether you found anything in it or not. What did you expect to find?"

"Nothing." Pearl Jane was sullen now. She kept her eyes down, her head turned away.

But during the conversation Hutchins's ever busy eyes had found something else.

"Miss Cutler," he said, this time very suddenly, "was it the scarab?"

Her frightened stare told him he had guessed right.

"What—what scarab?" she breathed.

"Mr. Locke had a scarab—a lucky piece. Charley calls it a Flyaway! That's what made me think of it, when I saw where you have hidden the thing. And a wonderfully clever place! You certainly are a marvel!"

"I don't know what you mean—"

"Oh, yes, you do know what I mean. If you don't, I'll show you."

Unfastening his cuff-link and pushing back his sleeve, Hutchins thrust his arm into a globe of goldfish, and from among the little stones at the bottom he brought up a stone scarab.

"A valuable one," he commented, looking at its Egyptian inscription. "And more valuable, I suppose, for its lucky powers. And the dead woman had this in her hand?"

"Yes, she did!" said Pearl Jane angrily. "Make the most of it!"

"I most certainly shall," said Hutchins gravely, and with the scarab and the stained glove both in his possession he went away.

CHAPTER XIV.

"TOMMY!"

DICKSON listened to Hutchins's story with a very sober expression.

"I may be wrong," the inspector said finally, "but I certainly do believe that girl did it. For, on the face of it, Hutchins, what else is there to think? She is in love with Locke, that's sure. I'm not so sure he is in love with her, and you know, 'a woman scorned' is—"

"Is the devil and all. But I can't see that slip of a youngster killing anybody."

"It was done on a sudden impulse—that's clear. Nobody throws a heavy bronze weight premeditatedly. It looks like a woman's deed to me. Of course, this presupposes an acquaintance—probably more than that—between Mrs. Barham and the artist. But we have to suppose that—there is no other assumption that allows for her coming there at all."

"She could have come out of the usual curiosity of the upper circles to see what the Bohemians do at their revels. That's not an unknown proposition."

"I see you're prejudiced in the girl's favor. I can't blame you for that. But we must look facts in the face. The visiting lady had in her hand the lucky piece which is evidently greatly prized by Locke. He even sent a note to Charley to find it for him. Now, we know that Mrs. Barham had it in her hand when she died. Maybe she was killed for it."

"Oh, that's too fantastic!"

"Not at all. You don't know what that thing may mean to these people. Haven't you read stories about—"

"Yes, I know. The Idol's Eye—a great ruby or emerald stolen from a Persian god; but those things were real gems. This scarab is a curio—"

"Scarabs—certain ones—are more valuable than any gems. However, that does not matter, if it's the superstitious value of the thing, which I am sure it is. Now, say that Mrs. Barham was mixed up with Locke, say that Miss Cutler was jealous of her, say that Mrs. Barham did steal the scarab. Isn't it at least possible that the girl, unable to get it back, and frenzied by rage and love both, picked up the bronze and threw it almost involuntarily, of course, not meaning to kill her?"

"It is possible, certainly." Hutchins looked anxious. "But I wish we could find some other theory."

"I wish we could, too. But what else is there? Then you see, if the girl did it, and if Locke knows it, why, that's the reason he has lit out. He's afraid he'll be questioned, and he's evidently shielding that girl."

"That makes Locke in love with the girl."

"Very likely he is. Perhaps the other woman was an old flame. Well, I can't explain all the turns and twists of an artist's love affair, but I still think it was the girl who threw that book-end."

"People have no business to have such things around," growled Hutchins.

"Don't be silly. In a moment of blind rage, anything handy becomes a weapon. Look how often a paper cutter is used to stab, merely because it lies ready to hand. Let's see the scarab again."

With the air of a wise owl Dickson studied the ancient stone.

"I don't know much about these things in a scholarly way," he frankly admitted, "but I do know this. If this thing is a real tiptopper among scarabs, and I think it is, a connoisseur would know all about it, and probably know this identical specimen. They're all recorded—the famous ones."

Hutchins looked surprised as this erudition on Dickson's part.

"Then we can trace it," he said.

"Yes—if it is a famous one. Take it up to the Metropolitan Museum—that's the quickest and surest way to find out. Now, as to the glove—and there's another sure-fire clew. Haven't you an odd glove in your collection of trinkets found on or near the spot?"

"Yes—and it seems to be a mate to this one. But that doesn't prove anything."

"Not alone, but in connection with the fact that Miss Cutler hid this glove, and the other was found right where she was seen to be—well, it's decidedly cumulative evidence! Now, what we want is some—even one—connecting link between the artist and Mrs. Barham. Until we get that, any other man at the party may have been the hero of this tale, instead of Locke."

"It was his scarab."

"Yes, that's so, and doubtless the whole tragedy centers around him. But we must get a thread of connection somehow. If you should go to Mr. Barham again, or to that Nelson, wouldn't they tell you if they have run across anything?"

"I should think so, but Mr. Barham is

getting queer about it all. At first he was ready to move heaven and earth to learn how or why his wife came to go to that party. Also, he offered the reward, you know. Also, he was keen to find and punish the murderer. But now, he's—well, sort of apathetic. Doesn't seem to care what we do, so long as we don't bother him."

"What does he do—with his time?"

"I don't know. Nothing special, I guess. But he has taken up some of the more important matters of his business—he's a big consulting engineer, you know. He canceled everything at first, but he's picking them up again."

"That's natural and to be expected. Doubtless they're most important deals, and he really has to give them his attention. And why shouldn't he?"

"Why, indeed? Well, I'll see him to-day, and Nelson, and I hope to goodness they'll have something to tell me that will turn you off the track of that poor girl."

"I hope so, Hutch, but don't let your sympathy for beauty in distress blind your eyes to facts and evidence."

With a shrug of his broad shoulders Hutchins went off, hoping against hope that he could clear Pearl Jane. It was too absurd to suspect that pretty little thing, but, as Dickson had put it, there was a chance that she had lost her temper and had thrown the missile. Women were uncertain, at best.

And Hutchins had to admit to himself that Pearl Jane was exceedingly uncertain. He had seen her gentle, pathetic, sweet, and then sullen and obstinate, all in the same five minutes. Yes, she was a peculiar personality.

After due deliberation he concluded to go to see Andrew Barham before he saw Nelson. He didn't know himself just why he made this decision, but it was really due to a lurking hope that it would turn out better for the girl that way.

By telephoning, he learned that Barham was not at his office that day, but at his home. This was by no means unusual, and Hutchins started off for the Fifth Avenue house.

He was admitted and ushered into a sort of family living room, where, to his surprise, he found Mrs. Selden as well as her son-in-law.

"I asked to have you brought here, Mr. Hutchins," the lady said, looking at him with a condescending interest, as if he were some necessary but unattractive piece of furniture. "I desire a few words with you myself."

She paused, perhaps expecting some burst of delighted surprise at this honor, but Hutchins merely made a slight bow of acquiescence.

"What have you done toward the finding of my daughter's murderer?" she asked. Her commanding air seemed to imply that she expected a full and satisfactory report of the police proceedings. She sat bolt upright in a high-backed chair. Her gown was most fashionably made, though of the deepest mourning that could be devised. The hem of heavy crape reached nearly to her waist line, and the crape bodice had such a high neck and such long sleeves that none of her throat and only her fingertips could be seen. Her white hair showed large ornamental hairpins of black dull jet, and her handkerchief was as deeply black-bordered as it was possible for a handkerchief to be.

Very aristocratic and very imposing was her appearance and manner, but Hutchins was by no means overcome with awe at sight of her grandeur.

"We have done all that we found to do, madam," the detective returned, speaking respectfully but by no means humbly. "Rest assured, the work is going on; but so far, the evidence is slender and the clews are few."

"I am quite sure it is your fault if that is so," Mrs. Selden said raspingly. "I doubt very much if your board or company or whatever it is, has put on sufficient men or sufficiently skillful men."

"Mother," Barham remonstrated, "Mr. Hutchins is himself the principal detective on the case, and his record is a fine one—"

"Will you hush, Andrew? I do wish I might be permitted to say half a dozen words without interruption. I know you want to do the talking yourself, but let me remind you that Madeleine was my daugh-

ter as well as your wife. And, I may add that I am far more deeply concerned and anxious about the discovery of her murderer than you appear to be. Mr. Hutchins, have you questioned everybody that was at that infamous revel?"

"If you refer to Mr. Locke's studio party—yes, madam, they have all been questioned."

"And you made no arrest?"

"No information was received from the guests that warranted any arrest."

"Ah, you couldn't have questioned very closely or very intelligently. It is impossible that my daughter should have gone there without knowing some one—somebody who was present."

"That seemed to be the case. Therefore, we assumed that your daughter must have been acquainted with Mr. Locke himself."

"With Mr. Locke! My daughter know a common artist! Never! She might have gone there to see about having her portrait painted—"

"Mr. Locke is not a portrait painter."

"Perhaps some other painter was there who does do portraits of society ladies."

"I can think of none such." Hutchins hastily sized up this new idea in his mind, but it seemed to promise nothing. "She would scarcely attend a party where she knew no one, merely to make arrangements for a portrait," he said, as if thinking aloud.

"Do not presume to say what my daughter would or would not do, sir. That is outside your province. Remain within your own rightful boundaries of thought and speech."

Hutchins looked at her. He had never been treated quite like this before. And apparently Andrew Barham didn't dare call his soul his own even in his own home.

But Barham was by no means afraid of his mother-in-law. His hesitancy to rouse her temper was partly because he so hated the scenes she made and partly because he really felt a tenderness and true sympathy for the mother of his wife.

Still, he couldn't quite allow this. So he said: "Please, mother, try to remember that Mr. Hutchins represents the dignity of the law, and so, even aside from his own merits, commands our respect and courtesy."

Mrs. Selden took him up.

"Andrew!" she exclaimed. "Will you never cease scolding me? You omit no chance to reprimand me, to hold me up to the scorn of others. Shouldn't you think, Mr. Hutchins, that a man would be a little kindly inclined to one who is the mother of his wife? But, no, all Mr. Barham ever says to me is by way of fault-finding and reproach."

The black handkerchief was pressed against the tearful eyes, and Hutchins, not feeling privileged to side with either, said nothing.

Barham repressed an angry impulse, and said with a kind but a long-suffering air: "Not quite that, mother. I never forget our relationship—"

"But you'd like to forget it! You'd like to sever it! You wish I'd go away and live by myself."

"I don't admit that—but let's not discuss it now. Mr. Hutchins is here on business, I think. Perhaps you will leave us alone for a little—"

"That I won't! And have you cook up some scheme by which the crime will be glossed over and forgotten?"

Hutchins broke in then with a definite determination.

"Mrs. Selden," he said, "if you will let me, I will give you an idea of what the police have accomplished and are now doing."

"Are there any new developments?" Barham asked.

"There are," Hutchins replied. And then, seeing no reason why Mrs. Selden shouldn't know the details as well as Barham himself, Hutchins told the whole story of the scarab.

He told of the mysterious note Charley had received, asking him to find the "lucky piece." He told of Charley's futile search and subsequent call on the detective for help. He told of Charley's description of seeing Pearl Jane bending over Mrs. Barham and taking something from her hand.

Andrew Barham listened with an inscrutable face and immovable countenance. He

sat with folded arms, his eyes intently fixed on Hutchins's face.

Mrs. Selden, on the contrary, was nervous and excited. She said little, for Hutchins peremptorily bade her be silent when she interrupted. She, too, was deeply interested. She twisted her handkerchief till it was a mere wisp, picked at her gown, and now and then broke into weeping.

Barham didn't look at her. He sat, listening to Hutchins, saying no word, but seeming like a man in a trance. Hutchins went on with the tale, and came to the scene at the home of Miss Cutler. He told of finding the scarab in the goldfish bowl, where she had so cleverly hidden it.

"Have you the scarab?" Barham asked, speaking for the first time during the recital. "Is it really valuable?"

"You know scarabs, Drew," Mrs. Selden said. "You brought some home from Egypt, didn't you?"

"Yes, mother: but I'm not a real connoisseur. Mine are good specimens—but not by any means famous ones. Is Locke's, Mr. Hutchins?"

"I don't know. I'm going to take it to the museum and have it sized up. Want to see it? I doubt if it's what you call famous."

He took the stone beetle from his pocket and handed it over.

Andrew Barham examined it with interest, after courteously offering it for Mrs. Selden's inspection. She merely glanced at at, saying:

"It looks like all the others to me."

"I don't think it is a king's scarab," Barham observed, as he examined the thing. "I'll just take it to my library a minute, while I look it up in a book I have."

He was gone but a moment, and returned, saying:

"Just as I thought, it seems to be a good one, but not a royal scarab. Doubtless, as you intimated, the value to Locke lay in its associations or perhaps a superstition, rather than in its money value."

He gave one more glance at the stone he held, and then handed it back to Hutchins, who wrapped it in its bit of paper and returned it to his pocket.

Then Hutchins told them about the stained glove he had found hidden in Miss Cutler's room, and at last his hearers began to realize that the detective was leading up to the announcement that the police suspected the girl of the murder. He had told the story slowly, for he wanted to catch, if possible, any facial expression or any involuntary exclamation that would hint at a knowledge on the part of the husband or mother regarding Madeleine Barham's acquaintance with Locke.

But he could get nothing of the sort, and though his quick eyes and ears were eagerly waiting there was positively nothing to be learned from Barham's stony calm, or from Mrs. Selden's nervous agitation. And so, at the end of his recital, he merely asked Barham his opinion as to the possible guilt of Miss Cutler.

"Of course she did it!" cried Mrs. Selden, not giving Barham a chance to reply. "Could anything be clearer? I don't know why you haven't arrested her already! It's so palpably true—she was jealous—"

"Don't go so fast, mother," Barham said quietly. "How could that unknown girl be jealous of our Maddy? You're not imagining, are you, that Maddy had a vulgar intrigue with some artist? I can't imagine any such case as that—even if you can."

Mrs. Selden was silenced for once. She could easily imagine the girl's jealousy; but she, too, was at a loss to apply that jealousy to her Madeleine.

"Nothing can ever make be believe that my wife knew those people socially," Barham declared. "I cannot understand her presence there at all, but whatever her errand was, it was something other than social. Don't ask me to explain her elaborate costume, quite evidently prepared for the occasion. I don't know anything about that. Maybe it was mere idle curiosity to see a bit of studio life. But it is impossible that Mrs. Barham was there as a social guest."

His arms were still folded across his chest, his gaze was still cold and direct, and Hutchins saw at once that whatever the truth of the matter might be, Andrew Barham believed implicitly in the statements he made.

"That is true," Mrs. Selden agreed. "I think, Andrew, you might exert yourself a little more to learn what took Maddy there. But I must agree with you"—she seemed to hate to do so—"that my daughter never went there as a guest. I mean as one of the social circle there. She had a later engagement at the home of a friend; so, you see, she merely stopped at the studio place *en route*. Either it was to see about a portrait or to satisfy a bit of curiosity—or both."

"Could it have been in any way connected with Mrs. Barham's—er—bridge habits—"

Alarmed lest Hutchins tell something disparaging to Maddy, which he hoped to keep from the knowledge of Mrs. Selden, Barham rose suddenly and said:

"That reminds me, Mr. Hutchins—I have an important engagement. If Mrs. Selden will excuse me, will you walk along with me toward my destination?"

The detective agreed, and, once they were outside the door, Barham told him of the ruse.

"You know much concerning my wife's bridge debts," Barham said; "and if necessary, it will have to be made public. But unless it is, or until it is, I want to keep it from Mrs. Selden. It would distress her beyond measure."

Hutchins marveled at the character of a man who would be so careful of the sensibilities of a woman who so trampled on his own; but he only said:

"I can't see now the slightest connection between Mrs. Barham's bridge cronies and the tragedy of the studio. Unless such comes to light, her bridge affairs need never reach the ears of the public."

Their ways diverged then, Hutchins going to the museum to inquire about the value of the scarab.

The authorities there told him practically the same as Barham had. It was a genuine antique scarab, and was worth perhaps a hundred dollars; but it was by no means a museum piece or an especially fine specimen of its period.

So, Hutchins concluded Locke valued it mostly for some sentiment or association. This, however, had no bearing on its value as evidence against Pearl Jane Cutler.

That young lady put in a pretty miserable day. She knew not whether she would yet be accused of murder—or of being an accessory after the fact; whatever that meant! She conferred with Kate Vallon, and then she went to Henry Post for advice and counsel.

They could say little, except to express sympathy and indignation at the suspicion cast on her.

"You didn't do it, P. J., did you?" Post asked.

"No," she said dully; "but if I had, I should say I hadn't."

These artists seemed not to have very deep susceptibilities. Both Post and Rodman Jarvis, though good pals of Locke's, had practically no help to offer Pearl Jane. In their circle, every man was for himself, and every woman also. They were not hard-hearted; they were merely cold-blooded and absorbed in their own affairs.

"They'll never arrest the kid," Post said to Jarvis. "Why worry? And, for all I know, there may have been some affair between Locke and the Barham woman. I keep out of such messes all I can."

And Jarvis, though ready to do all he could for Locke in his absence, had no wish to take up Pearl Jane's burdens.

Kate Vallon was devoted to the girl, and wept with her and gave sound and really good advice, which included, among other things, a sudden and secret disappearance.

"It's the only thing," Kate said. "That's what Tommy did, and you must go. I'll help you off, and I know just the place for you to go."

But Pearl Jane doggedly refused to do this. No reason would she give, and Kate retired in dudgeon.

Left to herself, Pearl Jane moped and worried, and at last, about ten o'clock, she began to think of going to bed.

And then her telephone bell rang.

"Hello," she said listlessly, and an answering voice said "Hello."

Like a wave of revivifying joy the sound went to her heart, and softly, as if half afraid, she breathed, "Tommy!"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

Good Business

By ELLIOT BALESTIER

THIS is an epic of Finance—High and Low.

Peter S. Doddridge was a financier of both varieties.

To be sure his claim to be considered in the first class was founded solely upon the fact that his office was on the forty-eighth floor of the Astrakan Building, but in the other his preëminence was unquestioned.

Not that Peter was a crook—at least, in the technical police sense. His business was always conducted strictly within the law.

Before he had even hired an office he had expended a retainer on a lean and hawk-faced lawyer expressly to guard against any such contretemps, and that same lawyer now enjoyed a fine position on his payroll.

He was occupying also one of Peter's stiff-backed chairs in the private office one snowy, blustering winter afternoon, but though his legs were elevated at an easy angle upon the edge of a scrap basket, he did not seem to be enjoying himself at all.

For some minutes he stared gloomily at the swirling snow that wiped out the wonderful panorama of the city, river and harbor, like a white curtain drawn across the window.

Then his sophisticated gray-green eyes shifted and wandered almost curiously around the little office.

It was a small place, neatly and comfortably furnished in a strictly business way; a cozy, homey, little office, inspiring trust and confidence in the spider whose parlor it was, and Peter himself matched it. He looked like a solid, successful business man of country antecedents—or a millionaire who was used to it.

In fact, Peter was an artist in his way, and the slight, grim smile that curved the lawyer's lips as he took in the details of the office and its owner was a tribute to the genius of the man.

Peter caught the smile, and frowned, his deep-set, pale-blue eyes gleaming angrily.

"Well," he snapped, glaring across the desk, "what in Hades are you grinning at, Wallace? Can't you say something? You're glib enough when I don't need your advice."

"I've given you my advice," replied Wallace doggedly. "I say the law is dead against you. You can't do it; and if you do you can't get away with it. I say keep out of it. Stand from under. *That's* my advice."

Doddridge hurled his half-smoked cigar furiously into the cuspidor, and leaning across the desk, wagged a somewhat pudgy forefinger under the lawyer's nose.

"The law!" he snarled. "I asked for advice and you give me 'the law.' Look here, J. Warren Wallace, do you think I'm paying you more thousands a year than you ever expected to see, to tell me the *law?* I can hire a thousand lawyers for ten dollars apiece to do that. I can look it up myself—for nothing. If it *wasn't* against the law what in blazes would I want a lawyer for?"

Wallace slowly removed the cigar from his mouth, lowered his feet from the basket and sat up.

"I can't advise as you wish," he said at last, "I really can't—not conscientiously. It—it wouldn't be professional."

For a full moment Doddridge stared at him in amazement, then he sat back in his chair, a slow, satirical grin spreading over his face.

The meaning of it was not lost upon Wallace, and his sallow face flushed a little.

"Oh, I *have* a conscience of a sort," he growled resentfully, "and professional ethics, too—I do my best for the man who pays me; I won't advise a client to make a fool of himself—or *let* him, either, if I can help it. You've yet to get in wrong from following my advice."

"I'll admit that," replied Doddridge, who had recovered his normal poise and calm. "But hitherto, Warren, your advice has jumped more or less with my desires."

Wallace turned his chair, and leaning his elbows on the desk, faced his client squarely.

"Look here, Peter," he asked abruptly, "why the dickens are you so keen on nicking that roll, anyway? It's only a piking twenty thousand at the most. It isn't worth the risk. It isn't good business."

Doddridge hesitated, frowning, and again his eyes retreated behind the shaggy thatch of brow.

"I don't care a hoot about the money," he snarled at last harshly. "You can have it yourself when we get it. I don't want it, but"—he hesitated again—"but I *do* want to break Clifford," he went on vindictively. "I will break him—if it costs me a hundred thousand to do it."

Wallace stared at his client in blank amazement. In the first place to the best of his knowledge and belief, Peter had never even heard of Philip Clifford until a few days before when that young merchant from New England had answered one of Doddridge's attractive but specious ads. The man was, so far as Wallace knew, only one of the thousands of suckers, come-ons, prospects, who rushed in frantic shoals to the promoter's net; and, secondly, never before had he believed his client capable of a human emotion that was not wholly subservient to the business of making money.

No wonder he was surprised when Peter calmly proposed dropping everything else and going after Clifford's paltry twenty thousand by methods so desperate they could hardly fail to end in disaster. And he was still more surprised when Doddridge made it plain that it was not even the inadequate spoil—but simply sentimental revenge he wanted.

For a moment Wallace could do nothing but stare.

"But—but for Moses's sake—*why?*" he asked at last.

"Because—" began Peter bitterly. Then he paused, and recovering command of himself, smiled coldly. "Because it's good business," he went on in a tone that forbade further questioning. "Suppose we get down to it."

II.

J. WARREN WALLACE shivered and drew the collar of his light overcoat closer about his throat as he stood on the bleak platform of the Keenborough "depot" and watched the tail lights of the clanking local disappear in the gathering twilight.

In New York spring had already won her annual victory, but here in Vermont, winter still lingered. Beside the railroad track and on the hill beyond, patches of blackened snow and ice were in evidence; and the unpaved road, at noon a six-inch sea of black mud, was rapidly turning to a dirty brown, as it stiffened and congealed in deep ruts and corrugations under the frosty touch of the keen evening wind.

"Bus ter th' Bliss House!"

"Free bus ter th' Imperial Ho-tel. This way!"

"Hack, boss? Want a hack? Take yer anywheres fer a quarter."

Wallace shivered again as he reluctantly refused the offers of a conveyance, and slowly picked his way across the tracks and up the hill to Main Street. There were reasons why it was best to walk: J. Warren usually had a reason for most things he did—especially personally disagreeable ones.

Fortunately, however, he did not have far to go; at a distance equivalent to three or four city blocks he paused before a comparatively large three-story brick building, over the plate glass of which was a sign:

PHILIP CLIFFORD & CO.

General Dry Goods Emporium

Clothing and Gents' Furnishings

Upholstery and House Furnishings

While above the second story, in large gilt letters running the full width of the building, was the laconic but suggestive announcement:

FURNITURE, CASKETS AND CARPETS

Wallace smiled a little grimly, and entering, approached a clerk.

"Is Mr. Clifford in?" he asked genially.

The clerk looked him over with frank curiosity. "Sure," he replied. "Guess he's around back somewheres. Hey, Phil!" he added, raising his voice. "Stranger out here to see you."

"All right, just a minute," replied a cheerful voice from the back of the store, and a moment later a tall, well set-up, good looking young fellow, a few years under thirty, advanced with the buoyant, assured step of success and perfect health. Indeed, with his broad shoulders, bronzed face, and virile, open-air atmosphere he looked more like a vigorous young farmer than a dry goods merchant.

"Well, well," he hailed, heartily clasping his visitor's hand with a grip that made the city man wince. "Mr. Wallace, by glory! Well, you're the last one I'd guessed when Tom called, but I don't know any one I'd be more glad to see. How's Mr. Doddridge? Chipper as ever, I hope. By glory, there's a fine man for you. Ain't many in his class nowadays."

Wallace smiled a little sardonically. "No," he replied dryly. "There are not. He's all right—never better; sent his regards to you, so I thought I'd drop in on my way to the hotel and deliver them."

"Hotel!" exclaimed Clifford. "Well, I guess not. Neither of those hash houses for any friend of mine. Just wait till I telephone Hilda and you come home to the farm with me. I was just going, anyway. That's my car at the door.

"Nonsense," he insisted, breaking in on Wallace's polite protests. "It won't be any trouble at all and I'd be downright hurt if you didn't. So'd Hilda. The farm's only two miles out, an' I've a telephone and two cars—to say nothing of horses, so you won't be cut off from the world a minute."

In the end Wallace accepted the loan of coon skin coat and cap and followed his host out to the car; under the warm furs he smiled; things were working out very nicely.

Clifford was jubilantly excited.

"Well, by glory, this *is* fine!" he cried as they jolted over the deeply rutted road. "Now, if Mr. Doddridge were only here it would be perfect. I've been trying to get him to come up so I could repay some of the kindness he's shown me. Cleared up most two thousand dollars in the last four months—and didn't lose anything on that 'Star of Hope' mine deal, either. By golly, that *was* white of him to tip me off in time to get out before the smash."

"Oh, that's Doddridge," returned Wallace; "it's his boast that if his patrons don't win much sometimes they never lose through him. That mine fiasco was one of his few

mistakes. He was in it pretty deep himself."

"No! You don't say!" exclaimed Clifford anxiously. "Hope he got out all right."

"Oh, yes; nearly so," replied Wallace carelessly. "He dropped about twenty thousand—holding on until all his patrons had a chance to unload. Nothing to bother him, though."

Clifford laughed. "Well, by gosh, I wish I could lose twenty thousand without its bothering me. That would just about wipe me out—store, farm and all."

For some minutes he drove in silence, save for some forceful comments on the condition of the road, but Yankee curiosity had been restrained as long as was possible.

"Up on business?" he ventured at last tentatively.

"Why—er—yes," returned Wallace hesitating and obviously embarrassed. "That is, I—"

"Oh! Now don't you answer if it's private," broke in Clifford, deeply chagrined at what he deemed his thoughtless impoliteness to a guest. "If it's none of *my* business say so right out. It's what I deserve for being so blamed snoopy."

Wallace laughed, but it was a forced and somewhat annoyed laugh.

"Oh! Not at all," he said hastily. "What I meant to say was that I'm up on business—for—er—some one else—er—oh! Confound it! Why shouldn't I tell you. Doddridge told me I'd best keep quiet until I'd looked the land over, but he wouldn't mind my telling you. In fact, if he'd thought, he'd probably have suggested it, for I dare say you can assist me materially."

Clifford brightened visibly. "Well, now if I *can*, that 'll be great. I'll do all I can, anyway—but if you'd rather not tell me don't hesitate a minute to say—"

"Oh, that's all right," soothed Wallace. "Come to think of it, I don't see why Doddridge or I didn't think of you in the first place, for I guess it was your boosting of Keenborough and Vermont in general, the last time you were in New York, that gave him the idea.

"The fact is, Clifford, Doddridge wants to buy a place up here, and you know when he wants a thing he wants it right away. But he's lived in the country himself—and—well, you know most country folks *do* consider a city fellow fair game. His idea was that if he came out openly in the market for a farm, prices would jump a hundred per cent. That's why he told me to keep still."

"He isn't far wrong at that," returned Clifford, grinning, "and I can help a lot if you let me do the dickering—as though it was for myself—you won't get stuck much."

It was quite dark when the cheerful lights of the big white farmhouse came in view; and cheerful the place proved to be; the very atmosphere of it breathed good fellowship, hospitality and homely comfort.

Nevertheless, alone in the big, low-ceiling room—with its huge, high bedstead and massive, old-fashioned furniture—to which Phil had conducted him, that he might "wash up" for supper, Wallace felt oddly uncomfortable; out of place; as though he had suddenly been transported to another sphere where the atmosphere was too highly rarefied for him to breathe.

Sentiment, however, is not, as a rule, a strong point with New York lawyers of Wallace's type, and presently, with a somewhat sneering laugh at his own expense, he—quite literally—followed his nose to the regions from which sundry appetizing odors emanated.

There, in the hearty welcome extended to him by Phil's young wife, Hilda, and the former's father—a fine, white-haired old fellow, still straight-backed and stalwart at seventy, Wallace almost forgot the object of his visit.

Indeed, he was conscious of a distinct sensation of repugnance when, later in the evening, as he and young Clifford were sitting alone together before a roaring log fire, Phil himself brought up the subject.

It was a very superficial sensation, however, and it had entirely disappeared by the time he had framed an answer to Clifford's tentative question.

"Well, to tell the truth," he said with some hesitation, "Doddridge was rather vague as to his requirements himself. He wants a country place—not too far from the village—a farm of anywhere from fifty acres up, the larger the better, with a good house

and buildings—modern improvements and all that."

Clifford scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Well, now, that's a pretty big order," he replied slowly. "There are some good *houses* for sale near the village, but they haven't more than an acre or two of land; and there's any quantity of deserted farms he could buy for little or nothing—but there are no livable buildings on them.

"Of course," he added, "there are some fancy farms—gentleman's farms around, that rich city men have fixed up for summer homes, but I don't know of any of 'em in the market—and, anyway, they'd want a fortune for 'em. Eh! About what did Mr. Doddridge calculate he would spend, anyway?"

"Well, of course he wants his money's worth," returned Wallace, "but he set an outside price if I could get *just* what he wants—of fifteen thousand dollars."

"Fifteen thousand!" gasped Clifford. "My glory, I never thought he'd want to go that deep for the little time he could spare way up here. If—" He paused and struck his knee with his clenched fist with an exclamation of annoyance.

"Oh, why didn't I know—a month ago—a week—three days," he cried. "It was just exactly what he wanted. Five hundred acres—fine old stone house—everything—just a mile beyond here, and it sold to a Boston chap for eighteen thousand. *I* could have got it for fourteen, I'll bet—fifteen, anyway; Mrs. Stockwell only got ten for it when she sold it originally to old man Blake, but that was twenty years ago—"

"Mrs. Stockwell!" exclaimed Wallace, leaning forward in obvious excitement and dismay. "Are you speaking of the old Stockwell place? Do you mean to say old Blake has *sold?*"

"Yesterday," replied Clifford disgustedly. "Just yesterday. If I'd only known"—he stopped suddenly, struck by the strangeness of the lawyer's words and attitude and the implication to be attached to them—"Why," he asked a little coldly, for he was more than a little hurt at his guest's evident lack of frankness and trust, "did *you* know anything about it?"

Wallace drew back in apparent confusion and chagrin; but he recovered himself almost immediately.

"Only that there is such a place," he replied with a laugh. "I made some inquiries in New York, you know, and I'd hoped my job was to be an easy one. I was going to speak of it to you, but to tell you the truth I had forgotten the name of the place until you mentioned it."

"Oh!" observed Clifford, a trifle laconically. He was only a country storekeeper, but he was far from a fool, and it struck him that Wallace's excitement and disappointment was not quite adequately accounted for by his explanation.

However, being absolutely frank and ingenuous himself, and loath to believe evil of any one, he forced himself to accept it at its face value.

"Well, I'm mighty sorry," he went on after a somewhat awkward pause. "I'd have been glad to have Mr. Doddridge get it—not only to have him as a neighbor, but also because it used to be my wife's home—in fact, she was born there—I have pleasant recollections of the old place, too—as a youngster.

"You see, Hilda and I were cousins in a way," he went on as Wallace looked interested, "that is, her mother, Mrs. Stockwell, was father's stepsister. She was much younger than he, of course, and he practically brought her up. She married Stockwell, rather against father's wishes, though he was supposed to be rich—but when he died—Hilda was only a couple of years old then—it turned out father was right, for Stockwell's affairs were all tied up and everything had to be sold—even the old home. So, you see, I've a personal interest in the matter."

"I see," said Wallace. "And it strikes me we're letting ourselves be discouraged by a trifle. The land is still there; as likely as not this Boston chap would be glad to turn a thousand or two on his bargain, and if I know Doddridge, he won't stick at that or even five. Let's wire him. You can phone a telegram, can't you? And to-morrow you can tackle the new owner."

Clifford sprang up joyfully. "By glory, that's so!" he cried. "And Cooper—that's the Boston man—is still at the Bliss House,

I think. You write the telegram and I'll send it right away."

III.

QUITE a number of well-informed persons insist that an ounce of feminine intuition is worth a pound of masculine reason.

They may be right, I don't know; the point is that in the privacy of her chamber that night Hilda Clifford's intuition began working overtime, and the results were not at all favorable to J. Warren Wallace.

Summed up briefly, she didn't like him; she didn't trust him, and she *believed* he would bear watching. She said nothing, however, preferring to do the necessary watching herself; for the present at least.

The next morning Wallace elected to remain at the farm. A telegram had come from Doddridge raising his limit to twenty thousand, "if absolutely necessary," but requesting further details before going a cent over that.

It would be best, Wallace decided, for Clifford to see Cooper alone—as if he were acting on his own initiative—at first, anyway, and meanwhile he—Wallace—would wander over to the Stockwell place, and look it over.

Mrs. Clifford's practical suggestion that she drive him around the country a bit, and let him size up some other, and more easily acquired properties, he sidetracked, with objections and excuses, that seemed to that acute and very pretty young woman far from convincing, and satisfied her more than ever that her policy of watchful waiting was the correct one.

That it bore fruit her conversation with her husband that night proved. He wasn't very well satisfied with himself, for he had failed with Cooper—the man refused to sell at any price—but she did not, as she usually did when things went wrong, offer either sympathy or encouragement.

"So Wallace is going on the early train?" she began tentatively.

"Huh—huh!" returned Phil, a little morosely. "What's there for him to stay for? He saw Cooper this afternoon, and couldn't move him any more than I could. He just won't sell."

"Well, why should he?" Hilda asked. "He's only just bought," and added, after a moment's silence. "What is there about the old place that makes Mr. Wallace determined to have it at any price?"

"Just suits him, I suppose," replied Clifford, carelessly, "or Doddridge rather. These millionaires want what they want when they want it. The price don't bother them."

Hilda sniffed. "Huh!" she returned, "he comes up here pretending he knows nothing about the country at all; then you discover—by accident—that he's aiming for the Stockwell farm and knows all about it; is all cut up when he finds it's sold; won't even bother to look at any other place, and is willing to pay twenty-five per cent more than it's worth. It's mighty queer."

Phil grinned. "Maybe he's got a tip there's hidden treasure somewhere—or expects to strike oil or gold—they're both common in Vermont."

Hilda refused to smile. "Are trowels and empty shot bags and geologists' hammers part of a New York lawyer's traveling outfit?" she asked curtly.

"What?" exclaimed Phil, staring at her.

"He had them," she answered shortly. "He left his suitcase open and I saw them. More than that he took them with him when he went to the farm. More than *that*, the bag was *full*—of something—when he came back. He had it under his coat, but I saw it, and he borrowed paper and twine from me, and took the package with him when he went to town with you after dinner."

Half disrobed, Clifford sat down suddenly on the edge of the bed.

"My glory!" he said at last blankly. "He stopped at the post office, too. Said he had a package of papers he'd forgotten to deliver to Doddridge, that he must send at once."

"That ain't all he sent Doddridge, was it?" asked Hilda. "Sent him a telegram, too, didn't he—in cipher?"

"How'd you know *that?*" demanded Phil more bewildered than ever. "Did that snooping, gossiping Jim Conners call *you* up, too? He's a fine operator."

"No, he didn't," returned Hilda, "but I found a copy of it—in Mr. Wallace's trash basket, where he'd written it out in English first—and then the code words. Just listen to this":

"PETER S. DODDRIDGE,
"Astrakan Building, New York:
"Believe Wilson is right. Looks to me equal to finest Limoges kaolin. Practically unlimited supply. Am sending sample special delivery. Blake has sold Stockwell place. New owner obstinate. Will see him myself this afternoon. Wire result of analysis as soon as possible.
"J. WARREN WALLACE."

"What do you think of that?" she added triumphantly.

Phil dropped a shoe on the floor with a crash, and stared at his wife bewilderedly. "What in heck is kalomine—kalsomine—whatever it is?" he asked blankly.

"Ka-o-lin," corrected Hilda. "It's a potter's clay—the white kind. I looked it up in the encyclopedia—the Limoges kind is the finest there is—what they make Sèvres china of. It's worth—I don't know how much."

"Well, what do you think of that!" said Phil unoriginally. "And it's been on the old place all these years. My glory! If only Aunt Hilda—your mother—had known that before she died."

Hilda sighed. "If she only had," she said regretfully. "Well, she didn't," she added. "But *we* do, Phil Clifford, and it's up to *us* to make the most of it."

"'Us,'" gasped Phil, startled. "What—what on earth are you talking about?"

"Sense," snapped Hilda shortly. "You got to buy the Stockwell place, Phil. Now wait, I've thought it all out. You can raise twenty thousand easy enough on the store and the farm, and the three thousand mother left me, makes twenty-three. Wallace only went to twenty. A thousand or so more may turn the scale. And *you* can't lose, because the land is there anyway, and even if it turns out Wallace is mistaken, my three thousand will cover the loss. *I'm* not afraid to risk it."

"But—but would it be fair to Doddridge?" objected the conscientious Philip. "He really—"

"Was he fair to you?" demanded Hilda. "Did he trust you at all? He's had his chance. Now it's yours."

Phil shook his head, half convinced. "I don't know," he said doubtfully, "it don't seem right. I suppose I could let him in on the development end though. I'd need capital to get the thing started. But, my glory, Hilda—it's risking everything. Just think if anything went wrong—and then —"

They argued on. The old clock in the hall clanged the hour of midnight before they finally slept, and the conservative Philip was still unconvinced; but he was wavering.

He was still wavering when he drove Wallace to the early train the next morning, but when an hour later a night telegram arrived—phoned to the farm by the operator and repeated to the store by Hilda, all doubt left him.

It was from Doddridge to Wallace and was not in cipher. It read:

Kavaland's expert reports sample best produced in America. Offers contract for entire output. Buy at any price. Go to it.

Clifford put on his hat and hastened to the Bliss House.

"Cooper?" said the clerk. "Well you're just in time, Phil. He's leaving this morning. He's in his room packing up now."

"Glory! I'll go right up then," exclaimed Phil, hurrying to the elevator.

He found Cooper, a little foxy-eyed man, with a pointed gray beard, piling things helter skelter into a suitcase, and his reception was not cordial.

In fact, Cooper glared. "What's the use bothering me," he growled. "Don't you see I'm in a devil of a rush. I haven't time to talk. Just got a cable from London and I've got to catch the English steamer from New York to-morrow morning and get to Boston first before the banks close."

"But I'm offering you twenty-one thousand—a bonus of five thousand dollars," persisted Phil. "That's a fine profit for two days. Yes—I'll make it twenty-two."

"It wouldn't matter if it was fifty thousand," snarled Cooper. "I couldn't wait for it. Now for Heaven's sake forget it."

"I'll make it twenty-three thousand," cried Phil desperately, "and we can close the deal this afternoon."

"I tell you," roared Cooper, "I won't take it. I can't, damn it. I can't wait—unless," he added with a malicious grin, "you're prepared to come across in *cash,* before the three o'clock train leaves—I could cut out my Boston trip then."

"I'll do it," said Phil.

Cooper straightened up, dropping the suitcase on the bed, and looked at him in surprise.

"*Can* you?"

"I wouldn't have said so if I couldn't," returned Phil shortly.

Cooper regarded him keenly for a moment. "I guess that's true," he said at last. "I made some inquiries about you yesterday after you called and you seem to stand A-1 here. By George, I'll risk it anyway. You give me your word, Clifford, that you will have twenty-three thousand dollars in cash at Lawyer Hitt's at two-thirty this afternoon and I'll stay over. I'll have the deeds drawn and ready to sign, and can catch the three o'clock for New York."

IV.

PROMPTLY at two-thirty Philip Clifford arrived at Lawyer Hitt's office, twenty-three thousand dollars in crisp yellow-backs in his pocket.

He had had a hard day; not that there had been any difficulty in raising the money—his name was good at the bank for 'most anything—but it taxed the ingenuity of his frank nature to avoid and sidetrack the inevitable curiosity and questions of the bankers who had known him from birth.

At two-forty-five, the duly executed deeds to the old Stockwell farm safely buttoned in the same pocket, Phil assisted Cooper to his car, and drove him—slowly on account of the deep mud—to the station.

Philip was elated. But he did not see the pair of hard pale blue eyes, set far back beneath a beetling gray thatch of brow that glowered vindictively at him from behind the curtains of a room on the second floor of the Imperial Hotel.

Neither did he notice particularly the fact, that just as they passed the somewhat dingy but ornately named hostelry, Cooper drew a large white silk handkerchief from his pocket and rather ostentatiously blew his nose.

He saw the Boston man safe aboard the rattle-trap local that would carry him to Springfield, where he could connect with the New York express. Exchanged a few words with the curious telegraph operator, and returned to the store to telephone Hilda the news.

At the store a salesman detained him half an hour or more, so it was after four when he started for the town hall to record his deeds.

A good deal of his elation had passed. The reaction had set in, and he was beginning—not to doubt the wisdom—but to appreciate the seriousness of the step he had taken. Would his father approve if he knew? The old gentleman when he finally retired shortly after Phil's marriage, had turned the management of everything over to him.

He was a full partner in both the store and the farm and held power of attorney from his father to act for him in everything, but shouldn't he have consulted the older man before taking so grave a step? To be sure there had been little time to waste, still—

He glanced up to meet a pair of pale blue eyes fixed upon him with an expression that for a moment startled him. Then as he recognized the man to whom they belonged he sprang forward with an exclamation of pleasure.

"Mr. Doddridge!" he cried heartily. "Well, this is a surprise. When did you get here?"

"How are you, Clifford?" replied Peter coolly, "I was just going to see you on my way to the train. I caught the midnight from New York; got here early this morning; sorry I can't stay longer, too; you have a nice little town here. But I'll be up again."

"Yes—er—I hope so—er—wish I'd known you were in town—I'd have had you out to the farm to dinner," said Phil, rather embarrassed now that the first flush of surprise was over.

He felt uncomfortably like a thief; he had a guilty feeling that he wasn't acting just squarely and was half tempted to make a clean breast of it. But Doddridge was speaking.

"Oh, I was pretty busy anyway," he was saying. "Wanted to drive out to look over a place I've just bought."

"A place you've bought!" repeated Clifford blankly. "Here?"

"Why, yes," replied Doddridge, "I thought you knew—the old Stockwell place."

"The Stockwell place?" Clifford's lips were dry; the blue eyes were staring at him; smiling balefully; piercing him; seeming to read his very thoughts.

"Certainly, I've just been recording the deeds. Got it for an even twenty thousand cash, too. Wallace wired me the fellow was obstinate so I thought I'd run up myself. *I* had no trouble. Lawyer Parker drew up the deeds and we signed them at two o'clock. I had to chase Wallace up to look at a clay pit I wanted over in Massachusetts anyway."

"Clay pit! In Massachusetts!" Clifford was repeating the words like an automaton, his brain reeling under the blow; refusing to grasp the significance of the calmly spoken sentences.

"Why, yes," the voice went on, as inexorable as Fate it seemed to Phil. "Didn't Wallace tell you. Some white clay I'd got track of. Kaolin they call it; big deposit; very valuable. Well, I'll have to get along, my boy. Give my regards to your father. I used to know him years ago—before you were born. Ask him if he remembers 'Little Peter Punkin' Head,' that's a nickname the boys gave me at school. Good-by."

He turned away, but Clifford sprang after him.

"Wait, wait!" he cried hoarsely. "Mr. Doddridge—I've been swindled—robbed! I just bought the Stockwell place, too—not two hours ago—from the same man—for twenty-three thousand—in cash!"

Doddridge turned with uplifted brows, his eyes drawn together and glittering strangely; but not a spark of pity appeared in them.

"You bought the Stockwell place," he repeated coldly, "and for such a price! Why?"

Clifford could not answer. "I—I—" he choked.

"I think I see," Doddridge went on harshly. "You *seemed* interested in that clay pit of mine. So you've been prying; reading telegrams not meant for you perhaps; you got the idea the clay was on the Stockwell place—is that it—and so you tried to double-cross me? You are well served."

He turned away again, but again Clifford stopped him.

"No! No!" he protested. "Wallace was gone. I thought—I intended—oh! for God's sake tell me what to do. I'm ruined—everything I have—my father's money—my wife's—"

"The best advice I can give you," returned Doddridge icily, "is to grin and bear it. The only other thing you *can* do is to notify the police of Springfield and New York. Not that it will do you any good; a crook as clever as this one would undoubtedly have his getaway prepared—probably had an automobile waiting for him at the next station. Good-by."

He turned away again, but paused once more to glare at the disconsolate figure of the broken man before him.

"Don't forget my message to your father," he said sardonically. "Remember! 'Peter Punkin' Head!' And congratulate him for me on the squareness and cleverness of his son."

V.

PETER S. DODDRIDGE sat in his office and grinned cheerfully at his lawyer who with long legs elevated on the edge of the trash basket, chair tilted back at a precarious but comfortable angle and a cigar in his mouth, stared gloomily out of the window.

There was no curtain of snow before it now. It was open, and the fresh odors of spring blew softly in.

"Well," observed Doddridge with a "Ha! I have eaten the canary" air, glancing at the fat package of bills on his desk. "I told you it was good business. Our friend—er—Cooper—er—did very well this time. How do you like Vermont?"

Wallace shrugged his thin shoulders irritably. "Ugh!" he growled, "that place gives me the willies. Say, Peter, why don't you put me on. Those folks struck me as pretty good people. What have you got against them anyway?"

Doddridge drummed on his desk for a moment, staring thoughtfully at the pile of bills.

"Well," he said at last, "I might as well tell you. You're not likely to try to blackmail me and the statute of limitations has run anyway."

He paused, and methodically lighted a fresh cigar.

"Twenty years ago," he went on slowly, "I was cashier of the Keenborough bank, Warren; I had a lot of property, too, and a wife—and—and a baby—a little girl." His voice softened strangely, faltering for a second, but he recovered himself almost at once.

"I was quite rich for the time and place, young and happy and—a damn fool. I got to speculating; got in wrong; got some of my friends in wrong on my advice—got the bank in wrong.

"Well—it came to the point where it was beat it before sunup, or the striped suit for mine. I had it all fixed. All my property was in my wife's name. I was going to fade away, and by and by she'd sell out and join me with the money—enough to make a new start.

"That's where old Clifford came in. He was a relative; head of the family and a big man in the town. He chased me out into the world with less than a hundred dollars; made my wife sell out—for the benefit of the bank and the suckers, and *prevented her joining me.*

"Then he wrote me that he was going to give it out that I was dead; bring up my—my child—in that belief—and threatened if I ever turned up or communicated with any of them he'd send me up for the limit. It killed my wife within three months—and he never even let me know when she died.

"Well, I changed my name, and went to work, but I didn't forget *him*, only the memory got kind of clouded over with the years—until Philip Clifford bit on one of my baits—and it all came back. That's all—only to-day *he pays.*"

For some minutes the two smoked in silence; Doddridge grimly; Wallace with a curious expression that was not wholly readable.

"Hum," said the latter at last, "the old man pays all right—only they *all* do—the woman, too."

Peter grinned. "Getting soft in your old age?" he asked.

"I'm sorry for the girl," Wallace replied. "She's the brains of that bunch. It was her put Phil up to buying the place—partly with her money. I heard them talking it over. He didn't think it was fair to you. He was going to let you in anyway; they had it all fixed. You were to have a half interest and supply the coin for marketing the stuff. Yes, I'm sorry for Hilda."

The malicious grin was suddenly wiped from Peter's face and he sat up gripping the edge of the desk with both hands.

"Hilda?" he repeated harshly.

"Yes, Philip's wife. Hilda Stockwell. He married his cousin, you know—a mighty pretty girl."

He shot a keen, but covert glance at Doddridge, but the latter was paying no attention to him. He sat quite rigid; his face suddenly drawn and colorless—his eyes staring blankly at the wall.

"Hilda," he muttered once, in a tone of wonder.

Then suddenly he relaxed; a touch of rather grim humor crept into his hard eyes and an odd smile curved his lips. He leaned forward and pressed a button on his desk.

"Take a telegram," he said curtly to the stenographer who answered. "'Mrs. Hilda Clifford, Keenborough, Vermont. Have found Cooper. Money recovered. Am mailing certified check. You two stick to dry goods. Doddridge.'

"Mark that rush and send it off at once. Then draw a check to the order of Hilda Clifford for twenty-three thousand dollars and bring it to me to sign. That's all.

"And, Wallace, you get to Hades out of here—I want to think—" he grinned quizzically, "think of some more 'good business.'"

Last Hope Ranch

By CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

Author of "Riddle Gawne," "Brass Commandments," etc.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TEST OF COURAGE.

TEMPLIN did not see Lisbeth again that day. That was because he did not go into the house, even for supper. She came to the door and called him and he answered that he wasn't hungry.

He felt that he would not be long at the Last Hope, now; and he didn't want to force his presence upon Lisbeth. His conversation with her had resulted in the conviction, to him, that Lisbeth did not care for him in the way he had wanted her to care; she had mocked him, had shown him that his hopes had been absurd and impossible.

It had been strange how he had clung to his hopes. He had known she didn't like him, even though she had succeeded in letting him know that she was grateful for what he had done. Still he had gone on hoping.

He was hoping no longer. He'd stay, of course, until he had it out with Blaisdell; until he was convinced that Lisbeth would be safe. Then he'd get out of the country, carrying his ridiculous thoughts with him.

But, anyway, he had kissed her. That was something. Even though she hadn't reciprocated, he'd ride with a memory which he could treasure during the long hours when he would be alone.

And he had grown spiritually and morally since he had met Lisbeth. Until he had come to the Last Hope his regrets for the things he had done hadn't bothered him very much. He had had no plan for the future, had contemplated nothing constructive.

Now he was thinking that perhaps he could change his mode of life, might remodel it, and he was beginning to feel ashamed of himself. His last talk with Lisbeth had done it, he believed. She had shown him in a way that had really been very gentle, and very kind, that he wasn't worthy. His shame had been that he had realized the truth of her words, of the things her words had implied.

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But he wasn't so sure, after all. She had misunderstood him. It made no difference to him that he knew that a great many people were going about the world lamenting that they were misunderstood. He wasn't lamenting. No one would ever know that he felt he had been misunderstood. Nor did he intend to play the martyr. Perhaps this mood was merely temporary. As soon as he left the Last Hope behind he would be himself again.

At dusk he made a round of the Last Hope buildings. He stood near a corner of the corral fence scanning the faint horizons. Not a moving thing disturbed the desert; there was no motion anywhere.

He saw a light in the house, in the kitchen. He waited, watching, until he saw Lisbeth walk between the lamp and a window. Then he strode toward the house.

At the edge of the veranda he saw something glitter in the lamp light that issued from one of the kitchen windows. It was Kane's gun, which he had dropped when he had fallen into the dust at the veranda's edge. He stooped to pick it up and a bullet droned over his head.

He heard it thud against the wall of the house; heard the distant report of the rifle.

From Big Sandy. Blaisdell had come that way. While he had been moralizing. The trouble was that Blaisdell was shooting at what he must have thought was a stranger. Templin was still attired in the Eastern clothing. But it was almost dark, and Blaisdell wouldn't be particular.

So ran Templin's thoughts as he dodged around the nearest corner of the house and ran to the rear door. It was open. He slipped inside, into the kitchen, to see Lisbeth standing in the center of the room looking as if she were on the verge of fainting.

"Blaisdell!" he said shortly.

Not waiting for her to answer he leaped to the lamp which sat on the kitchen table, blew out the flame and seized Lisbeth. Swinging her off her feet he carried her up the stairs and into Stanton's room.

"Lie down on the floor in the center of the room!" he ordered. "Get your father there, too! Don't move. No matter what happens, you are to stay right here!"

Her hands were on his shoulders. He could not see her face, but he knew by the steadiness of her voice that she was almost as calm as he.

"Are there many?" she asked.

"I don't know," he answered. There was a strange leap in his voice; the muscles of his shoulders felt like iron to her fingers.

"My God!" she whispered, marveling. "I believe you like to fight! I believe you welcome this!"

"Sure!" he said. "This ends the waitin'. I've fought this fight every day for more than a week!"

"You'll be careful?" she said. "You won't take any chances such as you took this morning?"

"Not a chance," was his grim reply. "Get down on the floor," he added. "They know you are in the house because they must have seen your shadow through the kitchen windows. But they might shoot; there's no telling." He again swung her off her feet and laid her down on the floor. She stayed. He went to the bed, lifted Stanton out of it and placed him on the floor beside Lisbeth.

He felt Stanton stir.

"Blaisdell's here," he said to explain his action.

"I heard the shot," said Stanton; "I heard you bring Lisbeth up. You're a mighty good man to have around, Templin. Be careful. I'm feeling pretty good. I've got a rifle in my wardrobe. I'll take a hand in this when I get a chance."

"If you draw their fire be sure to keep Lisbeth on the floor!" warned Templin. "If they get into the house you'll not want to do any missin'!"

He stepped across the room, opened the door, and closed it behind him. They could hear him descending the stairs. After that there was a seemingly unending period when there came no sound at all.

Despite Stanton's protests, Lisbeth began to move away from his side. She was crawling toward a window.

"Don't!" warned Stanton. "They must be near by now. If they see you they'll shoot! They may think you are Templin!"

"Father; he can't fight those men alone!" she said firmly. "He'd have no

chance. They'll kill him. After he is killed what would we do? We'd have to fight! We may as well do it now and help him as much as we can."

"Templin won't take any unnecessary chances," Stanton told her. "This isn't the first fight he's been in."

"It is fortunate for us that it isn't his first fight," she answered. "We ought to thank God that he came here. If it hadn't been for him Blaisdell would have both of us by this time."

She did not continue toward the window. Stanton heard her opening the door of the wardrobe.

"Lisbeth," he called sharply; "let that rifle alone!"

"I am going to help him," she said quietly. "It isn't fair! He's doing this for us. He did not have to come here. He might have left the country. He was getting tired of living as he had lived. He told me so. Not in words, perhaps, but in other ways. His life means as much to him as ours does to us, even though he pretends it doesn't!"

She moved to him and laid the rifle on the floor beside him.

"Use it if you think you are strong enough," she said, "or when you have to. It isn't likely they will get upstairs, but if they do you may be able to help."

Silently she moved to the door; he heard the lock click softly as she went out.

When she reached the top of the stairs she saw there was no light below. The living room was a black void. But she reached the bottom of the stairs and stepped upon the floor of the living room, standing there for a little while in an attempt to locate Templin.

The darkness outside was not as intense as in the house. Through the windows of the living room she could discern the dim tracery of the corral fence, and peering steadily through the living room door out of one of the kitchen windows she could see the black bulk of the stable.

She moved toward the kitchen, thinking she would find Templin there. She had not taken half a dozen steps when she heard his voice, close to her shoulder.

"I told you to stay upstairs!" he said sternly.

"I intend to stay here, Templin," she returned firmly. "This is my fight!"

She heard him laugh, lowly, vibrantly, with a note of strange exultation in his voice. It was the first time—no—the second time—that she had known him to exhibit passion. The first time had been when he had kissed her.

She felt his hands on her shoulders—both hands. Gently he turned her so that she felt she was facing him.

The cold steel of a rifle barrel pressed against her shoulder where his right hand rested. He had gone to his room for the weapon; he was holding it by the muzzle by a thumb and the index finger.

"I won't argue with you," he said. "I didn't expect you'd stay upstairs. You are the bravest woman I ever met.

"But Blaisdell's got some mighty dangerous men with him. Shootin' is their trade. Keep down as much as you can. Below the window sills. If they get into the house you hop upstairs. If they get inside that will be your last hope.

"If I ain't around by then I expect you'd better—" He paused; she felt his fingers tighten on her shoulder.

"I know," she answered quietly; "I know what you mean. Blaisdell will never take me; I shall not let one of them lay a finger on me while I live."

"I'm to blame for this," he said. His voice was hoarse, regretful. "I ought to have sent Meeder for Norton long ago. I reckon I was too stubborn, as you said. I've been stubborn all along."

She wanted to tell him that he hadn't been stubborn; that she thought no man could have been more considerate or more self-sacrificing; but the regret in his voice had brought a queer constriction into her throat, so that words would not come. She stood silent as she felt his hands drop from her shoulders; stood where he had left her while he moved around the room and into the kitchen. After a long wait, when she began to fear that he had gone outside, she felt him near her again.

"Here is your rifle," he said. His voice was low, steady, and there was a note of command in it. "It ain't likely they'll do any shootin' at the house, knowin' you are

inside. But if you shoot, they'll come right back at you, thinkin' mebbe you're a man. Don't shoot unless you have to. Keep watchin' the rear of the house. If they do any sneakin' they'll probably come that way. I'm goin' out to try an' locate them."

Her voice came now with a gasp of apprehension for his recklessness.

"You won't go out there, Templin! I won't have it! You'll be killed!"

"I reckon not," he said confidently. "It's dark, an' I can keep myself mighty near invisible. I sized up the country pretty well the other day, an' I'll know what I'm doin' all the time."

"But if anything happens to you I won't know it, Templin!" she persisted. "If there is any shooting I shall be thinking you are the victim. Templin, I won't have it; I don't want you to go!"

"Shucks!" he said. "You've been pretty brave. Don't spoil it now. I'm sure goin'."

He was inflexible; she knew her objections were futile. But she caught his arms and held him tightly, shaking him a little.

"You'll be careful, Templin?" she whispered. "Please, please be careful!"

"I ain't gettin' myself killed if I can help it," he said, laughing lowly.

His hands were again on her shoulders, for she had suddenly released her grasp and was standing with her head drooping forward. Feeling her close to him he was tempted, and for an instant his grip on her shoulders tightened.

But he had given his word that he would not again transgress; and his hands slid down her arms to her hands. He lifted both and kissed them. Then he dropped them and moved away.

For a time she stood waiting, expecting him to speak, to warn her that he was going. But no sound reached her. A silence which grew deep and portentous, seemed to engulf her.

Several minutes passed. She felt she could no longer endure the suspense. She called to him, saying lowly, quaveringly:

"Templin! Templin! Where are you?"

No sound came back. She was alone. For an instant she yielded to an abject terror and sank weakly down upon the lower step of the stairs.

She did not remain there long. She dared not play the coward when Templin was outside facing death for her.

So she got to her feet, found the rifle which he had stood in the corner nearest the kitchen door, and moved on her hands and knees to one of the kitchen windows, from where she could see the big level that stretched into the luminous plains.

CHAPTER XXII.

FOES IN THE NIGHT.

TEMPLIN'S bedroom window had been open. After he left Lisbeth he went to the window and stood for some minutes peering outward, his head close to the casing.

Outside the window, and close to the wall of the house, were some bushes that fringed the Last Hope garden—the garden which had given Philippe Mendezo his tasks before he had chosen to make a fool of himself in the cholla house.

Beyond the bushes stretched the garden itself. It was filled with low-growing vegetation, although it was entirely possible for one of Blaisdell's men to conceal himself in it by lying down.

For a time Templin watched the bushes and the garden. He could barely see the outlines of the cholla house, which was toward the front and at a little distance from the veranda, and he was convinced that Blaisdell's men had not yet surrounded the house. At any rate, Templin had to get out.

He opened the screen, which was hinged, and gently swung it back against the wall of the house. For an instant he stood in the window opening, bracing himself for the shock of a bullet.

Nothing happened. He felt a fierce exultation as he threw one leg over the sill, paused an instant and then slid to the ground. Flat on his stomach he wriggled to the shelter of the bushes fringing the garden. He crouched there for a time, intently peering into the somber darkness surrounding the house.

Nothing moved. From inside the house the darkness outside had not seemed so dense. Now that he was outside he dis-

covered that he could see no better than when he had been inside. The glittering points of the stars gave forth a faint sheen of light; a luminous mist that swam high and did not penetrate the blanket of darkness that covered the earth.

Templin moved away from the bushes. He went through the garden, gained the dense blackness that hovered around the cholla house. He circled the cholla house. He carried his rifle by the middle, balancing it; he had drawn his six-shooter and kept it close to his side so that it might not come in contact with the bushes that grew close to the walls of the building.

There was no Blaisdell man in the vicinity of the cholla house. Templin stood near one of its corners, peering toward the ranch-house. He could discern its corners, the roof. He could make out the outlines of the veranda, and against the star haze he could see the white, dry alkali level in front of the veranda. He was convinced that he could see any object that would attempt to move across the level toward the house.

Templin's chief reason for leaving the house was that he hoped by his absence to keep Blaisdell and his men away from it. They had seen him enter, or rather, they had seen him run around a corner toward the rear, and they would naturally think he had gone into the house.

They would surround the house as soon as possible, he thought; then they would wait for what they thought was a reasonable time, or until they lost patience, and then they would attack. An attack would mean getting Lisbeth into danger. If he could locate them before they attacked he could delay the attack upon the house.

The bullet they had sent after him had seemed to come from the direction of Big Sandy. His observations during the last few days had made him familiar with the river, and it was toward a wood that fringed it that he began to move when he decided that no one as yet had approached the house.

In order to cross an open stretch that began at the edge of the garden and extended to the wood he had to resort again to wriggling on his stomach. It was a slow, tortuous method of travel, and when he reached the wood he drew himself to a sitting posture and rested. He did not move for several minutes, until he was certain that the wood concealed no man but himself. Then he went swiftly and noiselessly toward the sloping banks of the river.

It was while making his way through some brush along the top of the bank nearest the house that he heard a sound not made by himself. A low, peculiar whistle reached his ears. It seemed to him to be more than a signal; to his mind, alert to catch the significance of all things that came under his observation, the whistle sounded suspiciously like an inquiry.

He answered it, duplicating it with all the accuracy possible.

Immediately a voice reached him. It was low, guarded:

"Is that you, Borton?"

Templin waited. The real Borton might be near.

But there was no reply to the voice, and Templin whispered lowly:

"Yes."

"Wa'al, why in hell didn't you say so?" said the voice impatiently.

At a little distance from Templin, not more than a dozen yards, some brush crackled slightly, thus enabling Templin to locate the owner of the voice. If he had kept going along the bank of the river he would have stumbled upon the man.

"I've been hearin' you," came the voice again—a low whisper. "How in hell did you git around thar so soon?"

Templin knew Borton; he also recognized the voice. It belonged to Keegles, perhaps the most cruel and ruthless member of Blaisdell's band. Keegles had always hated Templin; he would hate more when he discovered that Templin had killed Kelton, his friend—if he did not already know it.

Imitating Borton's voice to the best of his ability, Templin answered:

"Shut yore rank mouth. Some one will be hearin' you!"

"I ain't carin' a damn!" returned Keegles. "Blaisdell's dead sure thet guy Templin went into the house. I ain't figgerin' thet way. Thet damned Templin ain't nobody's fool, even if he does look like one,

an' I ain't admirin' to poke around hyar runnin' the risk of havin' him sneak up on me an' slittin' my windpipe. Templin would do it!"

"Sho," answered Templin.

There was a short silence. Then Keegles's voice again:

"I'm comin' over, Borton."

Instantly the brush crackled again. The man's big bulk loomed out of the darkness, came toward Templin.

Templin stood erect, waiting. The man came nearer. His hands were stuck out in front of him as he groped his way along the bank. Lowly and viciously he was cursing the impeding brush and the precarious footing. He was mumbling profanely when he reached Templin and bumped into him.

"Why in hell didn't you keep a-callin'?" he demanded querulously. "I've mighty near knocked my nose off runnin' into—"

Templin struck swiftly and truly with the butt of his six-shooter. Soundlessly the man lurched against him. Templin caught him lest he crash through the brush and arouse the curiosity of any other Blaisdell man that might be near. He laid the inert body down and crouched, listening.

"Who in hell's makin' all that noise?" came another voice, seemingly from a little distance beyond the spot where Keegles's had come from before he had advanced to Templin's place of concealment.

The voice was Borton's. It was evident that he had not been close enough to hear the whispered conversation between Templin and Keegles.

Templin did not answer. He wanted to find Blaisdell and he was reluctant to kill unless he was compelled to.

He had hit Keegles hard, and he had no doubt that he had killed him, but he could not continue that method of disposing of the outlaws he met. There was always the danger of missing a blow, and he could not expect every man he met to be as trusting as Keegles, or as easily fooled.

But if he should meet Blaisdell and kill him, the outlaws would undoubtedly withdraw, for he knew none of them were very enthusiastic over the thought of fighting him. He knew Keegles had voiced the opinion of the band.

He knew Borton well. He disliked the man. Borton was a talkative fool, blatant, irritatingly conceited. He was always meddling in things that did not concern him. He didn't want to get close to Borton, for Borton would insist upon talking. He'd have to kill him.

Therefore, Templin moved farther into the brush, toward the house. He dropped to his hands and knees beside a clump of manzanita, circled it, and halted. Borton must have seen him, for his voice came again.

"That you, Keegles?" he said in a whisper. His voice was sharp, suspicious.

"Yes," replied Templin, imitating Keegles's voice. "Keep yore damned trap shet!"

Borton grunted, moved forward. Against the faint starlight Templin saw him rise out of some bushes. He was headed straight for the manzanita clump, guided by Templin's voice.

Templin did not rise. He was not as bulky as Keegles, and he felt Borton would recognize that fact and become suspicious too soon. If he kept down Borton would have to come close before he could see well enough to discover his mistake.

"I ain't likin' this job none," complained Borton when he had almost reached the manzanita bushes. "But I'd sure admire to burn a hole through that damned Templin! I'd have done it when he was goin' toward the house, if he hadn't got a notion to stoop an' pick up somethin'. Curious how that maverick gets out of things! Blaisdell would have plugged him long ago, he says, if he hadn't wanted to watch him. Reckon Blaisdell thinks he's a damned curiosity!

"Keegles, what in hell you doin' there, settin' down? You scared Templin's goin' to pot shot you from a window? Shucks. Templin's takin' no chances. He sure knows us boys is out to get him for downin' Kelton!"

Borton had fired the shot, eh? They knew about Kelton. Givins or Stagg must have talked. They were out to get him. He knew that; had known they would try to kill him. But it was strange how the expressed intention irritated him. Borton

had put it into words, had made it vital, imminent. Before Borton had spoken it had been merely a remote possibility.

Borton wouldn't be the one to do the killing! He had for once talked too much; he had literally talked himself to death.

Borton continued to move toward Templin. Templin did not move until he was close to him, until he was standing within arm's length, peering forward. Borton's eyes must have been exceptionally keen, for even though the darkness was dense there beside the manzanita bushes, he seemed to discover something strange in the appearance of the man he thought was Keegles.

"What in hell you wearin', Keegles?" he asked, his voice full of puzzled inquiry. "You look all white, kind of."

The herringbone suit and the gray hat! Templin had forgotten them! The alkali dust he had wriggled through! He certainly would be visible to any one who looked closely at him.

He rose without answering.

"Hell, you ain't Keegles!" said Borton, startled.

Templin heard the slap of his hand against the leather of his gun holster. He drew his own weapon, stuck it deep into Borton's stomach. The report was muffled by Borton's clothing. As Templin shot he grasped with his left hand at a faint glitter that came from Borton's side. Borton's gun went off, but the bullet went downward, for Templin's left hand had struck it, depressed its muzzle.

Borton pitched into the manzanita brush, groaning. Templin ran toward the brush that fringed the edge of Big Sandy, leaped through it, and landed in the sand of the river bed.

He ran up the bed of the stream, keeping in the shadow of the perpendicular bank on the side nearest the ranch house. At a point where some gnarled trees overhung the bank he halted and reloaded his six-shooter. Above him along the bank he could hear the brush crackling; heard the voices of men.

He had diverted the attention of the outlaws. For some time they would not think of trying to enter the house. And if they found Borton before the man died they would know an enemy was moving about among them.

Naturally their thoughts would go to Templin. They'd be careful, suspicious of every moving or stationary blot they saw in the darkness. But, unless they stayed close together, they would hesitate to shoot for fear of hitting one another.

Templin did not believe they would draw together at once. It would be some time before news of what had happened to Borton would reach all of them, for the first man to reach Borton, if Borton could talk, would not recklessly expose himself.

It would be the same if Borton did not talk. The man who found him would understand that Borton had not shot himself, and no doubt they all knew that when Borton had shot at Templin the latter had gone around the rear of the house. Finding Borton shot would prove that Templin had not gone into the house, but was moving about too closely for comfort.

Templin was reasonably safe as long as he did not get into the open. He meant to find Blaisdell.

He climbed the bank and sank upon his stomach under a low-hanging branch of one of the trees at the top.

There he waited. Here and there he could hear a stealthy tread as some one moved about in the darkness. Once he caught an indistinct blur and knew he was looking at the shape of a man. But he could not shoot without betraying his place of concealment to his enemies.

Evidently they had discovered Borton. Voices came from the vicinity of the manzanita thicket; a loud groan. Borton was still alive; they had reached him; no doubt he had talked.

Templin was motionless for a time, trying to locate a voice that seemed to come from a point near him and slightly to his right, up the river. The voice sounded like Blaisdell's, but was so low that Templin could not be certain. He meant to find out, so he crawled through some scattered sagebrush toward the spot from which the voice had seemed to come.

He was a long time in getting close enough to hear the voice distinctly, and when he did get close enough the voice

seemed to move away. But not until he had caught one word:

"Templin."

The voice was Blaisdell's. Blaisdell, he supposed, had been informed of what had happened to Borton. Blaisdell would go to Borton. But the spot where the man had fallen would now be an exceedingly dangerous place to linger in. The outlaws would search the vicinity and their trigger fingers would be nervously agitated.

He would stay away. If they couldn't find him near the spot where Borton had fallen they would scatter. Then he might find Blaisdell.

Templin could see the house from where he had halted. He was screened by a big choya bush around which grew a thicket of sage and ocatilla. It seemed to him that the darkness was not so dense, for the house was plainer in his vision, its outlines clearer than when he had looked at it from the cholla house. Also, objects near him were becoming distinguishable.

His quest could not last much longer, for the moon was rising. Over southeastward he saw the mellow, effulgent glow which heralded its coming.

He had failed to consider two things—the moon and the Eastern clothing. It would not be long before it would be impossible for him to cross an open space without drawing the fire of his enemies. Much as he regretted it, the rest of his fighting would have to be done in the house. That was, of course, if he could reach the house without getting himself killed.

He meant to go back the way he had come. He crawled on his hands and knees through the sage until he regained the spot under the trees from where he had heard Blaisdell's voice. Dropping to the bed of the river, he hugged the bank as he made his way toward the place he had landed when he had leaped from the bank immediately after shooting Borton. It was still dark along the bank, though he observed that he could now distinguish the windrows of sand in the bed of the river toward the middle.

He paused in the shelter of some overhanging weeds and listened. The hum of voices reached him. No doubt the outlaws were congregated about Borton. He could distinctly hear some of them, those whose voices were loudest.

"Hell, it wasn't Templin, I tell you!" said one. "Borton says the guy wore store clothes; that he looked like a damned Eastern dude!"

"Borton hurt bad?"

"He's cashed in! Hell! He was bored clear through! They found Keegles right over there with his head busted. He can't live, either. Seems to me that for an Eastern dude the guy which put them boys out of business must be a hell-roarer of a fighter. Unless he snuck up on 'em an' give it to them from behind!"

"You said Borton was shot through the stummick."

"Yes; that's so. An' Borton's gun was let off."

Templin moved away. He stayed close to the bank, following the bed of the river until it brought him opposite the spot where he had first heard Keegles. Keegles's body had evidently been carried away, for there was no sign of him, and there were none of the outlaws visible in the vicinity.

Templin climbed the bank and dropped into a thicket close to its edge.

Straight ahead of him to the north he could now see the fringe of brush around the garden. The cholla house was clearly outlined; a subdued light seemed to envelope it. The moon was casting its first faint light and the roof of the ranch house was bathed in it.

Templin would have to move fast if he expected to reach the house without being observed. But there was a clear sweep of open ground before him which he would have to cross as he had crossed before, by wriggling on his stomach. He had just dropped to the ground when a rifle crashed spitefully.

The report seemed to come from the rear of the ranch house.

Templin leaped to his feet and bounded across the open toward the cholla house. He had not taken twenty strides when crimson streaks of fire flashed from various coverts along the river bank, and bullets droned and whined past him as he ran. Had the light been better he might not have

been able to reach the safety of the cholla house.

But he made it, ran around it. Then he dropped to his hands and knees and started through the garden toward the window of his room.

Halfway through the garden he heard another shot from the house and then another. Followed a short silence, which was shattered by a woman's scream—high, shrill, expressing terror.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SHOWDOWN.

TEMPLIN gave no further thought to concealment. He straightened, and moved with long, swift leaps toward the window. Again crimson streaks stabbed the semidarkness; he heard the thud and jar of bullets striking the wall of the house. One seared his flesh high up on the right shoulder as he leaped and dove head foremost through the rectangle of the window.

He landed on his hands and knees, but was up in a flash and through the bedroom door into the living room. It was dark in the room, and for an instant he stood, peering into the gloom around him.

Then he heard a sound that seemed to come from the kitchen, and he dimly discerned a black bulk that appeared to be moving. He drew his gun as he leaped forward; met a flame spurt; felt his flesh again seared as though by a white-hot iron.

He dove toward the floor striking upon his left shoulder. By the flame spurt he had caught a flashing glimpse of a man's face, and as he struck the floor he snapped a shot at the spot where the face had appeared.

He heard a grunt, a curse. The flame spurt came again. But he had rolled out of line and the bullet missed him. His own gun crashed again. He heard another grunt, muffled, guttural. Then a fall. And then a groan. A tense silence reigned.

He got to his feet and leaped into the kitchen. A gun roared from the floor, and he replied to it, shooting downward into a black shape.

There came another silence. He stumbled over something; kicked it out of the way. By the weight and length of the object, he judged it to be a rifle.

Lisbeth's?

He thought it was. He searched for her in the darkness, and found her lying on the floor near the man he had shot.

He knelt beside her and listened to her breathing. It was regular, though fast. He now heard voices outside, near the door; the reports of rifles, cries of anger.

He felt that Lisbeth had merely fainted; he could detect no wound.

"Lisbeth!" he whispered. "It's all right; he's gone!"

She moved, clung to him.

"Templin!" she said quaveringly. "Thank God it's you!"

She struggled, sat up; he could feel her shuddering as for an instant she remained passive in his arms. Then as though suddenly remembering what had happened, she fought to get to her feet, crying frenziedly:

"Blaisdell! He's here! Two men came in. I shot. One called the other Blaisdell. Blaisdell went upstairs while the other man held me. He'll kill father; he'll kill him!"

Templin released Lisbeth and ran toward the stairs. He heard her following; he knew she could not be kept back. He was up the stairs in half a dozen bounds. But at the landing he halted to stare in astonishment down the hall. The door of Stanton's room was partly closed; light streamed from between the door and the jambs.

There was sound in the room, but not the sort of sound that Templin had expected to hear when he reached the top of the stairs.

Voices reached his ears—Stanton's and Blaisdell's.

Templin did not stop to listen to them; he moved forward, pushed the door open. Before him, standing near the center of the room, was Blaisdell. Seated on the edge of the bed in which he had lain many days was Stanton.

Stanton's face was frightfully pale; his gaze was directed downward. His hands, extended on each side of him as though to brace his body against falling, were gripping

the bedclothes. The rifle Templin had brought to him was lying on the floor at his feet.

Blaisdell was rigid, erect. His arms were folded over his chest, his head was bent forward a little, as though he were staring searchingly at the man seated on the bed in front of him.

Neither man appeared to know that Templin had entered the room; each was intent upon his thoughts.

Templin became conscious of a slight movement behind him; he felt a touch, a trembling touch on his arm, and knew that Lisbeth had come.

Silently he turned and drew her back along the hall.

"He's all right," he assured her. "He won't be hurt. But Blaisdell's lightning with a gun. If he starts to shoot, you'll be in line. Go into your room and wait. It won't be long."

Silently she obeyed. Templin stood in the hall until she vanished through the dark doorway. For an instant he paused to listen to a strange tumult of sound outside—paused to smile grimly. Blaisdell's men were evidently shooting at one another, thinking they were shooting at Templin. Not all of them had seen him leap through the open window.

He halted again in Stanton's room, just inside the doorway.

The men had not changed positions. But Blaisdell was talking.

"Where's the letter, Stanton?" he said.

"I can't find it, Blaisdell."

Blaisdell laughed. "You'll never be able to find a thing that hasn't been lost!" he said. "Jefford never wrote such a letter. Stanton, I'm going to kill you! Get up on your feet!"

Stanton rose, faced Blaisdell.

He was the Stanton Templin had seen when he had first reached the Last Hope. His eyes were steady. His face was white, but alight with a high courage. Stanton was not guilty! A guilty man could not face death in that manner.

"All right, Blaisdell," he said, his voice low but unwavering; "I'm satisfied. I suppose you think you are justified. And you've got the advantage." He now smiled with strange mirthlessness. "It might have been different if that rifle had been loaded. I heard you coming; you would have died when you opened the door."

"God's way of squaring things, Stanton," said Blaisdell.

He dropped his hands to his sides. The right hand began to move upward, the elbow moving slowly back.

"Blaisdell!" Templin whispered the name.

Blaisdell stiffened. His right arm stopped moving, seemed to assume an ironlike rigidity. He drew a long breath. He made no attempt to turn.

Stanton's muscles had seemed to leap at the sound of Templin's voice; his eyes were aflame with a terrible joy as he stared at his deliverer. Then without uttering a sound he collapsed to the edge of the bed and sat there, his eyes closed, his body trembling.

"Damn you, Templin!" said Blaisdell. "Why do you interfere? I'll kill you for this!"

"I'll bore you if you move a finger, Blaisdell!" said Templin. "You've been about to kill an innocent man. Twice Stanton's told you about the letter Jefford wrote him; once when he was loco, an' now, when he's in his right senses. If you had any sense you'd believe him.

"Blaisdell, your judgment is warped because you've been thinkin' about your vengeance. God does his own killin'; He's got no authorized agents runnin' around with a gun correctin' wrongs.

"Since you've been out in this country you've done a damned sight more wrong than you accuse Stanton of doin'. If God was lookin' for some one to square an account for him I would say you'd be the last man he'd think of—an' then he'd bust you one in the eye for presumin' to be worthy.

"I ain't doin' any preachin'; I'm tellin' you a few things you don't seem to know. If you're thinkin' of goin' on livin' you're goin' to make some damned straight promises right now!" He closed the door behind him.

"What do you want me to promise, Templin?"

"That you'll quit devilin' Stanton. That you'll not bother his daughter; and that you'll stick your head out of the window here an' tell your gang to hit the breeze back to the cache. You'll stay here until I turn you loose."

Blaisdell's answer was a swift leap sidewise. The leap brought him close to the lamp, which was standing on the dresser. His left hand brushed against it. It crashed to the floor; its light flickered and went out as Blaisdell's gun roared, seemingly in answer to Templin's.

Blaisdell appeared to leap for the wall beside the dresser. But a shaft of clear light from the moon, which at last had risen, gleamed full upon him, disclosing a crimson splotch on his left cheek.

He seemed not to know that the moonlight was upon him, for he made no attempt to avoid it. His gun spouted fire in a continuing stream, the belching lances reaching toward Templin.

Templin was cooler, more deliberate. His first shot had seared Blaisdell's cheek. The second shot did not come until Blaisdell leaped into the patch of moonlight on the wall. The third, and the last in Templin's gun, came with the last roar of Blaisdell's weapon.

Blaisdell flattened against the wall, fairly in the patch of moonlight. His arms were extended, though drooping slightly. He seemed to be pinned against the wall. Then he dropped slowly, turning half around as he fell. He lay motionless, oddly huddled, in front of the dresser, where the moonlight did not strike him.

The door behind Templin opened and Lisbeth stood in the opening. She saw Templin, a shadowy figure in the room, standing erect in its center. The light was not good, but she recognized him, ran to him.

"Norton is here!" she cried; "Norton and a posse! And Dr. Meeder!"

She had reached Templin's side; she saw his face. It was ghastly pale, but there was an ironic smile on his lips.

"Then I reckon we'll be thankful for both," he said.

He reeled and she threw her arms around him. But he was too heavy. He slipped from her grasp and went down gently, as though tired to the point of exhaustion.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A NEW DEAL.

TEMPLIN'S thoughts were all of the past. The events of the last few weeks would be his memories tomorrow. He'd have time to go over them thoroughly, to bring each incident forward and examine it. He'd have some pleasant memories; some that were not so pleasant. But he'd have them.

Also, he'd have a new knowledge of women. He'd never realized how desirable women were until he found he could not have the one he wanted. He'd never want another. If he couldn't have the one he wanted he'd have none. No second choice for him.

He'd come pretty near dying. He knew that. Six wounds. He didn't believe Blaisdell had given him all of them, though he had felt several strike. Blaisdell had been almost too quick for him. In that test which long had been threatened he had pretty near lost. Well, that was past.

Blaisdell was dead; Norton's posse had caught a number of the remaining members of the band; they had found the bodies of Borton and Keegles, and the man in the kitchen, who had held Lisbeth while Blaisdell had gone upstairs to kill Stanton. The outlaws who had got away would probably scatter. Blaisdell, the guiding spirit, had held them together.

Stanton and Dr. Meeder had spent a lot of time with Templin. Lisbeth, too, had seemed to hover around quite a little. They all had treated him with much consideration and gentleness.

That was all right. He expected that. But the thing he wanted he couldn't get.

Lisbeth hadn't told him that directly. He had overheard it. It had been while he had been lying in Stanton's room in a state of semi-consciousness. They had thought him unconscious. They were standing in the doorway, talking about him.

Perhaps they had been talking for some

time. He didn't know. The first words he had heard were in Meeder's voice.

"Oh, he'll get well. There's no doubt of that. Strong constitution."

"Father will have to treat him well; will reward him."

That was Lisbeth.

"Reward him? Do you mean your father will give him a job? Or money? Shucks! What do you think he came over here for?"

"I don't know, doctor."

Lisbeth again.

"You'll have to know, Miss Stanton. If I am not mistaken he'll tell you when he gets well. But don't tell me you haven't seen some signs that he loves you!"

"He is an outlaw, Dr. Meeder. What would people say?"

"The world—people! Shucks! What do people always say? Some would condemn, others would applaud. If they knew Templin as I know him, as you know him, they'd do no criticising."

"I sometimes think I am afraid of him, doctor."

"I suppose that's natural. He's got a bad reputation. But I don't think his heart has been in the business. He never killed anybody for the love of killing, so far as I have been able to determine. And he's more of a man right now than a number of men who would profess to be horror stricken over the things he's done."

"But he has been in the habit of stealing cattle. He told me that."

"That's not a heinous crime. A great many of the big owners, who would hang Templin if they could catch him, are guilty of the same offense. The difference is that the big men don't make a profession of stealing."

Templin heard no more of the conversation. When he again opened his eyes Lisbeth and the doctor were gone.

He had heard enough. If Lisbeth loved him she would have defended him. She knew he loved her, for in her conversation with Meeder she had tacitly admitted it.

He had avoided her after he got up. He wouldn't put himself in her way. For three weeks he had kept out of her sight as much as possible. To-night he was standing near the far end of the pasture fence staring at the darkening western horizon.

There was a light in the kitchen of the ranch house. Lisbeth was there. Getting supper, he supposed. He wasn't hungry. He'd not bother Lisbeth any more. Nor Stanton.

He didn't belong here. He never would belong. Concede that Lisbeth loved him, would marry him? Happiness for a while. She'd begin to see that she had made a mistake.

Of course, he'd always be gentle and considerate with her, but being gentle and considerate wouldn't wipe away the blot on his life. She'd always be thinking of it; he would see little furrows in her brows at times, and he wouldn't dare to ask her why they were there. He'd know. She'd be embarrassed before people who might chance to visit them; she'd think people were talking about her.

Suppose a child came? A girl? Say a boy. What would be the difference? People would point the child out and that would hurt Lisbeth.

It would be hell, that was all there'd be to it! Son of Ned Templin, the outlaw. Daughter of Ned Templin, the outlaw. Same thing.

The laws of life were inexorable. He'd done some sacrificing in his time. He'd not ruin any one's life. Not Lisbeth's, anyway. He'd sneak off.

He made his preparations very deliberately. He walked around the pasture fence to the stable. He stood for a little while in the door watching the house, his throat curiously constricted. It was something like the feeling that had come over him when he had left home.

No home cheer for him. No intimate association with friends. No relatives betraying concern or even interest in his welfare.

He got his saddle and bridle off their pegs. He carried them to the corral fence and hung them on a post while he uncoiled his rope.

He looked at the horses in the corral. He'd take the black he had ridden to Wilcox and to the cache. Stanton couldn't object to that, as it had been with the black

that he had saved Stanton from Blaisdell, and Stanton ought to be thankful enough to let him have the horse. Besides, he was leaving the roan horse.

He was curious about his feelings at this moment. How scrupulously honest he had become! In the old days he would have taken the black horse without a thought of the fairness of the thing. But not now. He didn't want to make Lisbeth feel bad; didn't want her to think ill of him.

He roped the black, put saddle and bridle on him, swung up and rode down along the corral fence toward Big Sandy. As he rode he kept looking back to see if he was observed. But no one was looking. Meeder had gone back to town several days ago; Norton and his posse had stayed for two days, scouring the country for the remnants of the Blaisdell band.

And Norton had made proper apologies for suspecting him of the killing of Putt and Barkwell. Norton had thanked Stanton when the latter confessed. Stanton had saved him a job, though he was amazed to hear that Putt and Barkwell had been members of the band.

The light was still in the kitchen. Stanton and Lisbeth were invisible. After a while they'd call him. Maybe the fact that he didn't come in for supper wouldn't surprise them. During his convalescence his appetite hadn't been normal. He'd missed a great many meals.

But in the morning, when they called him and he did not respond, they would look into his bedroom, to find that the bed had not been slept in. Then they would look over the horses in the corral, to find the black missing.

Perhaps they'd be glad to get rid of him. All right. But his heart was heavy as he crossed Big Sandy and headed the black westward. Two hours later he was sitting motionless in the saddle on the brow of a hill staring at the moonlit plains below.

He'd followed the best course, he knew. He couldn't have faced Lisbeth to say good-by to her. He'd have made a fool of himself—he who had always taken pride in his self-control. Better to go away without saying anything. No heartaches then—only his own.

Down around the base of the hill he rode into a little wood. He went up again, to a bench. He again halted. He hadn't been making much time. But it was just as well. He had no destination; no one was expecting him.

He sat there long, watching the plains below, noting how the moonlight played on the peaks of some distant mountains and illuminated the dark bases of the foothills. There was sadness in the scene, a somber beauty and dignity, a colossal mysticism that baffled the mind of man.

He rode on. As he rounded the bench which he had been riding he saw a sinuous white line winding northward. It was a trail that led to the cache. Back farther other trails merged into it. He had ridden it many times; he would never ride it again.

But he wanted to take a last look at it, and so he rode downward, then upward, along a broad shelf that led around the shoulder of a hill. He heard a sound on the trail ahead, and pulled the black down, to let him go forward at a walk. He had to swing wide to avoid a jutting shoulder. And then the wide white trail was straight ahead of him, shining like silver in the moonlight.

He halted the black, straightened in the saddle, caught his breath sharply. Amazed, incredulous, he leaned forward. There could be no mistake. Sitting quietly on a horse not more than twenty or thirty feet distant, directly in the middle of the trail where the silvery moonlight streamed down into her face, was Lisbeth Stanton!

And now he felt suddenly guilty. He sat looking at her, saying nothing. She rode forward, halted her horse close to his and looked at him.

"Templin," she said, very gently, "why did you try to run away without letting me know?"

"It was time to quit botherin' you," he answered. "There's nothin' at the Last Hope for me."

"Nothing, Templin?" she said, gentle mockery in her voice. "Not even me?"

"I'd lost hope of that," he said. "I heard you tellin' Doc Meeder that you were afraid of me."

"Oh, that!" she said with a hysterical

little laugh. "I remember that conversation. I was trying to justify you, Templin, trying to put myself in the place of people who—who might criticize. I—I couldn't do it, Templin; I couldn't consider you so—so cold-bloodedly.

"Why, can't you see, Templin? I've come all this distance after you! I saw you bring your saddle and bridle out; saw you catch up the black horse, saw you ride away without—without saying anything to anybody. Do you think I would have come if—if—"

His hands were upon her shoulders; his eyes were alight with an amazement so great that it made her smile, even though she wanted to cry with joy over the knowledge that at last he was beginning to understand.

"Lisbeth," he said steadily, "you know what I am—what I've been. I've been seein' things differently of late. Since I first saw you. I've been bad. Maybe I'll stay bad. When things don't suit me there's a fire in me that starts to roarin' an' I can't stop it. Knowin' that, you're willin' to—"

"I've come all this distance for you, Templin," she said. "Are you afraid to—to try to go as great a distance for me?"

"Afraid!" he said. "Yes," he added; "I'm afraid of you; afraid that I'll never be able to be the man you ought to have! Lisbeth," he added as he leaned closer, "I'll try mighty hard."

"And I will help you, dear," she said. "Between us perhaps we can do things in the world that will help to compensate for the past."

"Perhaps," he answered.

They sat for a little while on the silvery trail above the plains, and then at last they rode downward, along the trail that led toward the Last Hope. Both were upon the black horse, for those who love must needs be close together; while Lisbeth's horse, having assisted in accomplishing what his mistress had set out to accomplish, was rewarded with a free rein and the sweet grasses that grew beside the trail.

THE END.

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WEATHER WISE

NO need have I to daily read
The weather news to know
If there is going to be a thaw,
Or how the wind will blow;
I see "umbrella" at a glance
In word or look or circumstance,
A "pleasant" forecast is quite sure,
An open book is "temperature."

When there is going to be a siege
Of icy cold, the news
I get by secret radio,
And shiver in my shoes;
A "stormy" sign I read with ease,
And "fair and warmer" and a "breeze"—
Oh, I have grown so weather wise.
Watching the signals in Her eyes.

Jeanne Oldfield Potter.

The Execution of Ed

By KARL W. DETZER

ED was a self-made cat, and therefore he was superior. His ancestry was vague, his antecedents were unimportant, his infancy was forgotten. He lived in a successful present, and his attitude toward the beggar cats in the alley back of Engine House No. 9 was condescending.

In the quarters of the fire engine company, where a man's record under stress outweighs the social register, Ed walked with a swagger strut and the air of one confident in his superiority. He did his duty well, sitting up nights with the men on watch. He was tidy. He didn't argue. In fact, he rarely replied when spoken to, except by an annoyed lashing of his furry tail which Hennisey said meant that he heard you but didn't think what you said was worth much.

It was Hennisey who brought Ed to the house of Engine No. 9, one winter morning three years ago. There had been a fire in an old warehouse and the men labored in icy jerkins on ladder and fire escape from midnight till a late, smoke-haloed dawn. And when at last the flames had been driven back and the men of Engine No. 9 groped into a charred window and along a steaming black passage, they heard a faint cry from the crumbling roof.

Hennisey was ahead, prowling through the gloomy ruin. He stopped and lifted a gauntleted finger.

"I hear it," he announced; "a kid it sounded like, or a lady. Listen."

The other firemen stood swaying wearily, but with ears alert. Again the little cry came from above. Old Captain O'Connell stepped forward, masking his excitement under stiff authority.

"Scatter, lads; scatter an' find her," he ordered.

Some of the men hurried into the darker

passages of the ruin. Others explored the heaped, wet masonry and plaster in the corners. But Hennisey, finding a foothold on a wall below a wide hole in the roof, crawled out on top.

"Found!" he shouted down after a moment. "Some o' youze he'p me down—my other foot, cap—good: now steady!"

His fellows lowered him to the floor. Flung across his shoulder he carried a limp kitten with ice on its matted sides, and wide, astonished eyes, like a baby whose mother lets pins stick. For a moment the men of Engine No. 9 stared first at the kitten and then at its rescuer.

"It ain't exactly what I'd call a roarin' beauty." Captain O'Connell expressed first opinion.

"And it ain't exactly what I'd call dressed up and lookin' for a prize right now." Hennisey felt that a scornful defense was due his own daring and the cat's puny size. "It's needin' a drink an' a shave an' a mother's care for a few days, I'm thinkin'."

So from that moment Hennisey took upon himself the duty of stepmothering the cat. He bought double cream at the delicatessen, warmed it on the stove in the engine room, and thawed out the refugee's frozen throat with a teaspoonful at a time. On the second night after the fire he burst out exultantly from the rear room which he had converted into a temporary hospital.

"He's singin'!" he shouted to the other men. "I took him on my knee and he began to sing in his stomach."

Ed prospered. He fattened and took on dignity. He formed a solitary night patrol to the dark storeroom, to the furnace cellar and the alley. Under his watchful nose the old quarters became mouseless, and when he came upon a prowling alley cat at the back door, he was seen to question the intruder cautiously and then order him to trot on his way.

Hennisey was Ed's chief playmate, commissary and admirer. To each recruit fireman on the staff of Engine No. 9, he extolled Ed's feline virtue. When necessary he shielded him from too numerous admirers, and on Sunday afternoons displayed him to the visitors.

So it was annoying, to say the least, when Captain Kelly, who was known throughout the department as a fussy old gentleman who should be wearing cotton in his ears at night instead of sleeping over the alarm bell, succeeded Captain O'Connell as chief officer. He viewed Ed at once with an undisguised animosity. He referred to him as "that dirty animal," and on his first morning lectured to the members of Engine Company No. 9 upon the hideous diseases which might lurk in the soft fur of any household pet. On the second day he was positively rude. He threw a rubber boot at the unsuspecting Ed when the latter curled up on the desk for his customary afternoon nap.

But it was the third night—a night which firemen on the late dog watches delight to recall—when sentence was passed.

Ed's sharp, short-haired ears had quickly learned the sound of the joker, that grim little humorist which taps out the alarms in every station. "Five — five — five," then "nine"—such is the signal which sets Engine No. 9 into precipitate action. It told Ed he had business of his own. The scampering men, the great swinging doors, the roar of the motor annoyed him. Whenever the joker rattled out an alarm for Engine No. 9 to bestir itself, Ed sought the seclusion of the coal bin.

No member of the company responded as rapidly. It mattered little how preoccupied he was or where, his route was the shortest one to the cellar. He made a gray flash across the floor to the cellar stair, and with one wild leap from the top step, paws outspread, eyes wrinkled shut, he scooted in frenzied desire for safety.

On this third night in his new station, Captain Kelly yawned, loosened his suspenders and stretched his arms above his head. But before he turned upstairs toward the sleeping quarters, he made a final march of inspection around the engine house in search of scorned regulations.

He had reached the foot of the cellar stair when he stopped. "Five—five—five—nine!" The joker awakened, coughed, and called the company into action. Captain Kelly turned back, doubled his fists, and started to run.

But Ed had heard the alarm, too, and

was responding with all his feline energy. Even before Sharkey, who was on watch, could reply with two quick taps upon the rubber button, before Hennisey or Sullivan or O'Byrne could tip forward in their chairs, Ed had awakened and was intent upon his own duty. A furry bolt of lightning crossed the floor and turned the sharp angle of the stair. There at the top, just as Captain Kelly's broad, bald head rose in its path, it lunged from its haunches and spread feet and claws in the final leap of twelve full steps to the bottom.

The captain stopped in his haste under a screaming horror, flung his hands aloft, and shrieked like the siren of his own truck. Ed, meeting this unexpected obstacle, strove valiantly to free himself, but Captain Kelly fought terror in the dark by gripping the cat by its tail. It was an unfair advantage. Ed resented the flank attack and clawed vigorously. Captain Kelly, finding physical combat fruitless, bestowed his entire energy upon oral effort.

Ed, happily released, fled to the coal bin and combed his whiskers sulkily, while upstairs the enlivened members of Engine Company No. 9 carried their flustered leader to his place of command beside the driver. The gong crashed, the doors swung back, and the engine began its race one hundred seconds late. Sullivan, who rode the running-board, made heroic but unsuccessful attempts to appear sympathetic. Captain Kelly growled at him.

Other companies were through with their work and returning to their stations by the time Engine No. 9 arrived at the scene of the fire, and it was left for a battalion chief further to upset the dignity of Captain Kelly by inquiring politely how far that gentleman had pushed his machine by hand. The members of Engine No. 9 rode back to their house in silence, and watched their commanding officer climb down from his seat in an ague of vindictive temper.

"Did you fall, sir?" asked Hennisey, the solicitous.

"No."

"Why, I thought I heard you holler, sir." The unabashed Hennisey heaped coals.

"You thought wrong."

"You wasn't ill?" Hennisey's interest was so touching that his fellow firemen gathered behind the massive car and stuffed their gloves into their mouths to hush impending outbursts.

"No, I wasn't ill, neither." Captain Kelly poked behind the steam radiator with a broom. "But I'm sick of cats. That dirty, disreputable beast has got to go, and go now!"

"Yes, sir." Hennisey stood unmoved, his head tilted at one side, surveying the bald pate of his superior.

"You understand?"

"Yes, sir. But if you'll pardon, sir, did he bite you?"

Captain Kelly's emotion surged within him. With slow dignity he dropped the broom into the corner and walked to his desk behind the polished oak alarm stand.

"Turn to, men," he ordered, "and find that cat. And keep on hunting till you've found him. Then bring him to me."

Sullivan was the first to obey. He opened the front door, and whistling dismally, strode out to the sidewalk.

"What are you making that noise for?" Captain Kelly sensed disrespect.

"It ain't a noise, sir. I'm whistling. I'm whistling for Ed."

His superior officer strove vainly for a reply scathing enough to suit the offense, and failing, contented himself with bulging his eyebrows.

Hennisey, leader by virtue of his length of service rather than his ability to command, formed the searching party.

"Sullivan," he ordered, "you hunt in this floor, and hunt good. You, O'Byrne, go up to the squad room, and don't be careless. Look in the lockers—all of them."

"Never mind my locker," Captain Kelly put in.

"Very well; don't look in the captain's locker, O'Byrne. But listen at the cracks. You never can tell."

"Keep away from my locker," warned the wrathful Kelly.

"All right, sir. But you can't be too sure. Ed seems to have took a liking to you, you know, and he's likely to be sleeping on your bed, else in your locker."

Captain Kelly decided that as far as the

present situation was concerned, silence was the better part of repartee.

"Sharkey, you hunt in the alley out behind," Hennisey continued, looking wisely at his house mate. "Be sure to search real careful around the coal chute; sometimes he sits there when he's been annoyed. I'll look in the cellar."

The men scattered to their search. Captain Kelly pulled his chair against the wall under the clock and awaited their report.

Sullivan, by nature a careful individual, began his operations upon the huge truck. He climbed slowly over the front wheel and peered up at the driver's seat.

"He ain't there." He spoke softly to himself, yet not so guardedly that his remarks should be lost upon the irate captain. Then he crawled under the machine, and there was a great rattling of chains and axes and nozzles as he sorted over the litter in the apparatus box that swings below the ladders.

"And he ain't there." Captain Kelly maintained heroic calm. Sullivan stood awkwardly in the center of the room and gazed at the walls and ceilings. His mild eye circled the bare chamber till it rested, pensively, upon Captain Kelly's coat, hanging on a peg by the door. This he approached stealthily, and leaping from a full two yards, gripped that inoffensive garment in a strangling embrace. With an air of surprise he ran his hand over the broad back, and picking up the left sleeve, he touched the patched elbow critically. Then lifting the coat, he shook it.

"He ain't there, neither," said Sullivan.

His tone was so innocent that Captain Kelly gripped the rungs of his chair and suffered the tortures of a martyr. He watched, while the other finally took the broom which he himself had used in his search behind the radiator and repeated the performance, to such exacting detail that a duller eye than the captain's would have seen the subtle touch of an actor at heart.

"If you make any remark about his not being there," Captain Kelly roared, "I'll file charges against you in the chief's office."

Sullivan, who had opened his lips for just that announcement, closed them in silence. He got down, instead, upon his hands and knees and looked under the chair in which Kelly himself sat, bristling.

Hennisey, in the meantime, had descended the cellar steps and walked straight to the coal bin. He found Ed, as he had expected, still brooding upon an undeserved ill treatment.

"You've been sentenced, cat," Hennisey whispered, "and it's up to me and you to make a getaway. That's a good feller. You know I ain't goin' to hurt you. Now let's beat it."

Sharkey, in response to Hennisey's hint concerning the coat chute, had the grating open by the time the latter reached it.

"Take him," Hennisey directed, "and run up the fire escape. Tell O'Byrne through the window to take my old locker, the one I had the holes bored in for my rattlesnake, and carry it up to the roof. Put Ed in it, and put some bricks on top of it to hold him down. And then tear things up in general, so's to show your heart's in your work."

Sharkey tucked the offended Ed under his coat and climbed the fire escape. Hennisey turned back to the cellar. After pawing through an old cupboard with a sagging door, he drew from it several burlap sacks and some cast-off garments, stored there to await the need for polishing rags. He bundled the rags together and slipped them into the sack.

Then he returned to the coal bin and deliberately rubbed his hands from the coal to his face. Thus prepared, he sat down upon an overturned bucket and sent inarticulate shouts, cut into with dramatic yowls, upward into the engine room.

As if it were a signal, the other searchers hurried to the cellar, and even Captain Kelly ventured as far as the top of the dim stair of his misfortune.

"Got him?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, he's in a sack. I don't know how long I can hold him," Hennisey panted.

"Good. You other fellows go down there and fill that tub. Fill that tub, I tell you." The men had hesitated on the steps.

"It ain't right," Sullivan objected.

Captain Kelly corrected him.

"Whatever I say around here is right," he shouted. "Fill it up."

"But you can't *kill* a cat, cap'n, not by drowning. It 'll come back and sleep on you," urged the inventive Sullivan.

Captain Kelly paused, his judgment in conflict with his authority. He remembered, dimly, some such story of felines brought to unhappy ends, and his spine chilled at the thought of a dripping spirit bedfellow. But his position demanded obedience.

"Fill it up," he ordered for the third time, and water sounded in the tub.

"I don't like to do it." Hennisey's voice choked. "I don't like to see a poor harmless creature put out of the way like this, and besides, I'm against killin' cats. You better do it."

In the half light of the cellar he held the suggestive sack in the direction of his superior. That gentleman immediately backed farther up the stairway.

"Do what you're told," he directed fiercely, and Hennisey, shaking his head and muttering that he could not be held to blame, plunged the sack of old trousers under water. There followed a great splashing, augmented by sundry cries from Hennisey and Sharkey, who leaned close over the water.

Slowly the disturbance subsided. Then an ominous silence settled on the cellar.

"Hold it under ten minutes more," Kelly spoke with the air of one released from long, unpleasant strain, "and then thrun it into the ash can."

Captain Kelly returned to his desk and Hennisey, with great solemnity, held the sack against the bottom of the tub, while his gallery of convulsed co-conspirators flattened their hands over their mouths. When the drowning was successful, Hennisey lifted the dripping sack and carried it into the dark alley. Swinging it around his head, he flung it far into the center of a vacant lot, and returning to the ash can, rattled its lid until he possessed no doubt that Captain Kelly had heard the sound.

He went back to the apparatus room, humble and with downcast eyes.

"Hope no harm comes of it to you, sir," he addressed his commanding officer.

"What do you mean—harm?"

"My grandmother, who was up in such things, always told me that any one *what ordered*"—he stressed the words—"what *ordered* a cat killed, would get a visitation."

"And what's a visitation?" Captain Kelly strove to retain indifference.

"After the party goes to bed, sir, the cat comes and gets in."

"Well, no cat's going to get on my bed. I tended to that."

"I remember," continued the adroit Hennisey, "of a man in my county as had one of his hands drown a cat. Well, sir, about midnight, or it was just exactly midnight, the cat clumb out of the river and run to this party's bed and clumb in."

"And then?" Captain Kelly's interest had been stimulated.

"And the party hollered. That made the dead cat so mad—"

"Dead cat!"

"Yes, sir, it was dead. Kind of a spirit cat, my grandmother says. It bit him on the toe."

Kelly laughed uneasily.

"That's a kid story, Hennisey. Never believe it."

"My grandmother knows it's true. She heard this party holler."

"Get busy," Captain Kelly ordered testily, "and clean up the engine."

O'Byrne, left on watch, picked up a frayed copy of "Our Little Ones," which an indulgent old lady had contributed to the fire department for reading matter, and settled himself for three hours of watchful repose. Captain Kelly looked around at the faces of his other men. They were blank, expressionless faces, open as children's, nor was the least innocent that of Hennisey.

"Ain't you going to bed?" the captain asked finally. "I'm going up and try to get a holt."

He mounted the stair slowly, followed by his minions. They disrobed, which in the bunk room of an engine house consists briefly of placing a pair of high boots with trousers thrust into them at the side of the bed, unbuttoning one's shirt, snapping out the light, and turning on one's side.

They had lain for an hour in silence. Captain Kelly turned over restlessly. Had the lights been flashed on unexpectedly he

would have seen Hennisey and Sullivan with their pillows stuffed into their mouths, indulging in silent, restrained mirth.

Ed, however, was not so cautious. Unaccustomed to penal servitude, he clawed at the sides of Hennisey's box on the roof. As the hours passed he became more and more incensed at his captivity. He had trusted Hennisey and Sullivan and Sharkey. His trust had brought him this.

Unmindful of the fact that at this moment he was supposed to repose in the ash can in the alley, a dripping corpse cat, Ed could restrain his anguish no longer. He lifted up his voice and wept.

In the bunk room the effect of his sorrow was electrical. Hennisey stiffened from a final sleepy convulsion and Sullivan opened his eyes wide and listened. But Captain Kelly, who had been lying awake in tortured expectation, leaped from his bed with a roar which would have awakened the soundest of sleepers. He flashed on the light and saw Hennisey, Sharkey, and Sullivan, their eyes tight shut, oblivious to the prowling spirit of the departed Ed.

Captain Kelly faltered. But before he could convince himself that it had been merely imagination, Ed once more was overcome with emotion, and another wail tortured the roof tops. Hennisey, Sullivan, and Sharkey slept on.

Trembling and glancing back fearfully over his shoulder, Captain Kelly crept to Hennisey's bed and shook that servitor with great spirit.

"Hennisey!" he cried. "Hennisey!"

"Goo' mornin', sir. Time get up?" Hennisey hardly moved his eyelids.

"Get up Hennisey—Sullivan—Sharkey. Listen!"

Slowly the three sat up in bed. Their rebuking glances demanded an explanation.

"Didn't you hear it?" Captain Kelly addressed his question to Hennisey.

"Hear what?"

"Why — that — er — noise, man; that noise!"

"No, what was it like?"

As if in reply to his earnest interrogation, Ed again cried out in the anguish of an imprisoned spirit. Hennisey and Sullivan, already decided upon what course to take, glared at Sharkey. But none of them betrayed by a blinking lash that he had heard.

"There! What was it?" the frantic captain implored.

"What?" Sullivan asked blankly.

By this time Ed himself had become convinced that his voice was not loud enough. His next cry would have started panic in an asylum for the deaf, but in the bunk room of Engine No. 9 it was met by calm inattention, except on the part of the captain.

"Do you mean to say you can't hear it?" Commander Kelly climbed into his boots.

"I don't hear nothing," Hennisey remarked. "But I got a cold, maybe that's why. What's it like?"

"It's—it's that dead cat."

"Cat?" Hennisey betrayed astonishment and apprehension.

"Yes—now, listen! That's it. Listen!"

"You must be imagining things, sir. Must have et something what wasn't good for you."

"But I hear it—tain't no imagination. I hear it plain."

"A cat? Why, then it must be like I said." Hennisey brightened to his subject. "Poor dead Ed must have come back. That's like they always do; no one can hear them but their murderer."

Captain Kelly collapsed upon the edge of his cot. He held his hands over his eyes and rocked back and forth.

"You sure it ain't in the bed? Hennisey ventured.

His commander's reply was a leap that a trained athlete might envy. For a moment he stood in the center of the room, mopping his face with the tail of his unbuttoned shirt. Slowly, with outstretched hand, poised to spring from whatever might be hidden, he approached his bed, and gingerly, one at a time, removed the coverings.

Ed, in the meantime, lost hope of awakening his one-time friends and crouched down to a ruffled and uncomfortable night. Fifteen minutes passed and no more phantom meows came down into the bunk room.

"Still hear it?" Hennisey asked anxiously.

"No." There was relief in Captain Kelly's reply.

"Then maybe it won't come no more to-night," Hennisey explained; "not till to-morrow night."

"To-morrow?"

"Yes, sir. My grandmother, she says it comes back every night, sir, about the same time."

"Come back every night?" The horrified Kelly repeated the words solemnly as their awful meaning broke upon him.

"For seven years," continued Hennisey; "or nine, I don't remember which, if you live that long. Now this gent my grandmother knowed, he was fortunate. It only lasted three weeks."

"What did he do?" The captain grasped a dangling thread of hope.

"Him? He died, sir, in fits, after three weeks, which was lucky for him."

"Sure it was." Sullivan shook his head as he meditated upon the future possibilities of Captain Kelly's punishment.

Hennisey settled himself back upon his not immaculate pillow, and Sullivan and Sharkey, who had arisen trouserless, returned to their cots.

"Turn out the light, will you, Sullivan?" the merciless Hennisey directed. Then sleepily he bade the captain good night.

"Never mind the light," that worthy ordered Sullivan. "I'll mind it when I'm ready to go to sleep."

The quarters of Engine No. 9 were quiet the rest of the night. When O'Byrne finished his watch at three o'clock and stealthily climbed the stair to awaken Hennisey he found the bunk room brightly illuminated and Captain Kelly sitting up in bed.

Shortly after daybreak the men of the company arose and slid the brass poles to the lower floor. There was a snorting and sputtering at the basins as they performed their quick toilet, and an odor of strong coffee drifted from the stove in the rear where O'Byrne prepared the breakfast. Captain Kelly wandered about the engine house, ill at ease. He refused breakfast, except for three cups of coffee, which he drank black.

As soon as he had eaten, Hennisey went aloft. Slipping out of a bunk room window, he climbed the fire escape to the prison of an incensed Ed. He opened the box carefully, prepared to drop into it the cat meat which he had hidden in his blouse.

But Ed was an opportunist. The opening slit fired his captive spirit with desire, and before the astonished Hennisey could resist, the animal had clawed through his hands and leaped, howling ugly imprecations, to the fire escape. With his reluctant savior following in desperate chase, he tumbled down the iron steps and burst through the window into the engine room.

The captain, who had been standing in an attitude of dejection at the bottom of the stair, looked up just in time to see the glaring eyes and expanded tail of his late victim whisk past him on the way to the cellar. When Hennisey, who followed in a fever of anxiety, burst upon the scene, his commander's eyes had swollen to the size of silver dollars. Unabashed, Hennisey began to whistle. He admitted later that his usually accordant notes were this time off-key and somewhat gasping.

Captain Kelly stood speechless until Hennisey had reached a point opposite him. Then the truth slowly opened before him.

He had been the victim of his men, but, even so, relief overcame all other emotions.

"Hennisey," he gasped, "where you going?"

"After me polishing rags, sir, for the engine."

"What was that come downstairs ahead o' you?"

Hennisey turned, interrogation written upon his uneven features.

"Ahead of me, sir?"

"That's what I said. What come down ahead of you?"

"Nothing, sir, as I see. It wasn't the—" he stuttered. "It wasn't the spirit of that poor dead cat again?"

"Hennisey, it *was* that cat, and I don't think it was a spirit either."

"Not his spirit?"

"No, I don't think so, and if you'll be so kind as to come out in the alley, I'll make sure."

The reluctant Hennisey followed his striding master to the alley. The ash can stood as he had left it, and it was with failing heart that he witnessed Captain Kelly walk directly to it.

"Open it," Kelly commanded.

"Sorry, sir, but I don't like to disturb him in his last resting place."

"Open it!" The order was curt.

"I believe, sir, as it would mean bad luck, lookin' at his face, and I don't intend it. If you want to open it, do it yourself. There's nothing in regulations about opening ash cans, and besides, I just washed my hands."

Captain Kelly approached the receptacle nervously but with decision. Standing back at arm's length, he removed the lid and held it across his chest like a shield while he surveyed its interior from a safe distance. The other members of the company who had followed him stretched their necks as each in turn looked into the empty tin container.

"He ain't in there," remarked Sullivan, with such innocence that Captain Kelly could trace no sign of defiance. "But he was very dead when we laid him away."

Hennisey gazed in spellbound astonishment, first at the vacant can, then at his mates, and finally at the captain.

"Are you sure, sir, that when you was running around last night you didn't come down and get him?" he asked apprehensively.

Captain Kelly disregarded this final impudence. He stood long, staring into space.

"Then he ain't dead," he finally remarked to himself. And as if to prove his assertion, Ed walked out of the engine house door, stretched his neck and looked rebukingly at the members of Engine Company No. 9.

"Why, Ed!" Hennisey scooped the mistrustful cat into his arms. "Where did you come from?"

"He ain't a bit wet." Sullivan touched the soft fur gingerly. "And he's alive, cap'n. What 'll we do with him, try drowndin' him again?"

Hennisey had started toward the cellar door. Now he turned back, blinking his eyes and assuming a sad, compassionate expression.

"Never mind drowning him," Captain Kelly ordered. "And never mind putting him away."

There was a gratified silence.

"And what's more," Captain Kelly added uncertainly, "never mind starting no foolish stories around the department. What's happened is happened. Let me hear any one of you going telling it, y' understand, and there'll be charges preferred ag'in' you, every one of you."

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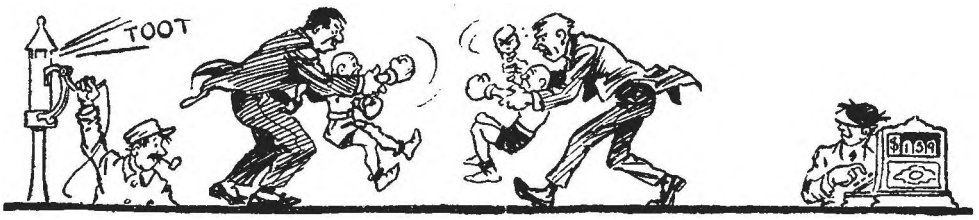
LOVE'S EXTRAVAGANCE

THOUGH men could make sky's stars,
Or fashion earth's rare flowers,
Could find Life has no bars
To hold their magic powers—
I should, with new surprise,
Seek beauty in your eyes.

Though Music's self should live,
My soul would not rejoice,
If Heaven her songs should give—
Enough, for me, your voice.
Your love is all I ask.
To love you well—my task.

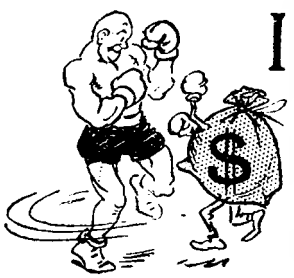
Harry Varley.



IZZY KAPLAN'S KOLUMN

Received via W. O. McGEEHAN

THE MARQUIS OF RAZBERRY RULES



I SEEN in the poipers where Chim Corbett, which he used to be a box fighter, but is now in the ecting business, has rewrote the rules which was inwentioned by the Markwitch of Queensberry. I th nk Chim Corbett stole the ideer from me, on account it was my intentions to fix up some new rules for the box fighting as soon as the holiday rush to collection what is owing me is over. The toughest part of the holidays is not the selling. It is the collectioning. Anybody could get a customer, but to get his money it takes brains, and also it is very hard on the feet.

The trouble with the Markwitch of Queensberry rules in the first place is that the Markwitch of Queensberry was an emeture and there never was no emetures which they had any ideer about business. Look at the emeture ectors and the emeture photografters. You never heard of any emetures who made any money, did you?

When the Markwitch of Queensberry wrote them rules the box fighting business was prectically in its infanticide like some feller said it about the moving picture business the other day. In them days box fighters was ectually loafers, and they would be henging around saloons, which in these days there ain't no saloons for them to heng around in, and if there was there wouldn't be no room for them to heng out on account the rush of trade.

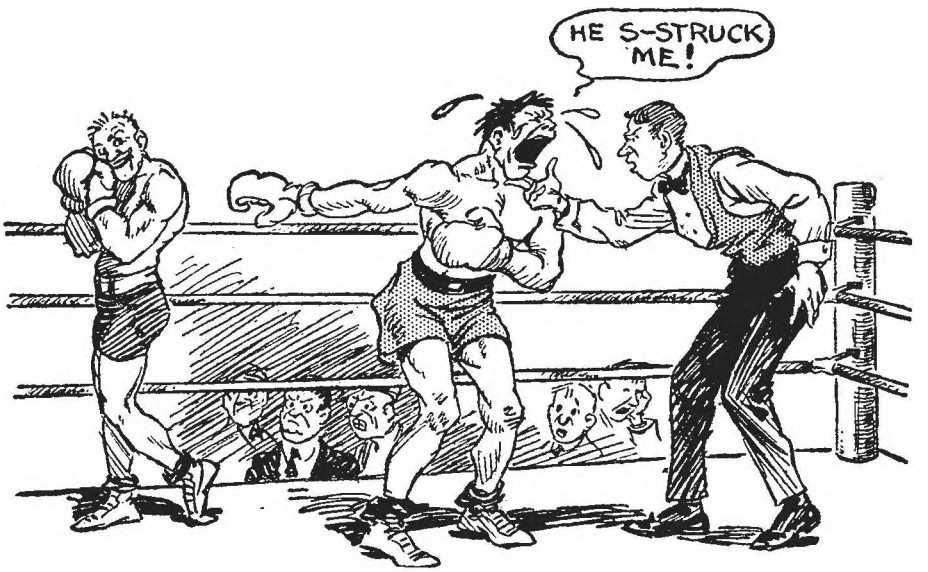
Another thing in them days they never charged no admission to the box fighting. That ought to convince anybody that the Markwitch of Queensberry never had no business sense at all, so any rules which he would write them couldn't be taken in a series way by sound business men. You know what I am meaning, though a sound business man never would make no sound at all. I ain't knocking the Markwitch. I am chust saying that his ideers was rotten.

Look at the rules he wrote. It don't say nothing about the menegers or the promotioners. All it says is about how the box fighters shouldn't hit below the belt and how they should have thoity seconds' rest between the rounds. Anybody could told you that ain't enough if a feller is really tired.

Chim Corbett himseluf would told you that was a mistake. He only had thoity seconds to rest himseluf out in Carstein's City when Mr. Fitzsimmons hit him on the solar perplexus, and before he could really get his breath the bell rang on him and he couldn't do business no more that afternoon. When a box fighter is tired he ought to have a longer time to rest. Most box fighters which they had to go out of business

would tell you the same thing. They were ruined on account they only had thoity seconds.

Another thing what is the metter with the old rules is that they wouldn't let nobody go into the ring with the box fighters. That is hard on account when a box fighter wants to get an adwice from his meneger he ain't got the chence to ask him nothing. There is so much noise in a box fighting that a meneger ain't got a good opportunity to give adwice right from outside the ring. Besides, adwice to a box fighter is confidential, anyhow, and you wouldn't want to mention it so loud that the opposition firm would hear it. They might steal some of your ideers and it wouldn't be right for a box fighter to be knocked out by one of his own meneger's ideers.



BOX FIGHTERS IS GETTING TOO ROUGH.

I am changing that part of the rules so that a box fighter could take a smart feller like me into the ring so that he wouldn't have to be bothered by doing his own thinking. Most box fighters is ruined because they got to do their own thinking, and a feller which he ain't used to thinking couldn't done it. Thinking is something that requires a lot of prectice, and you know I got it.

Another rule I would change is the one about foul blows. From my personal obserwation most of the trouble in the box fighting business comes from fellers being hit on the chin. Chimmy Chonson, the box fight meneger which they call him the Boy Bendit on account he is so smart, told me confidential that he would have had a lot of champeens and made a lot of money only the other fellers hit them on their chins and ruined all the smart plens he made.

In my new book of rules it says that a smesh on the chin would be a foul punch. I am meking this rule not on account of the box fighters because it wouldn't hurt their brains much to get a smesh on the chin, but it is for the protection of menegers which they got their time and their money inwested in box fighters.

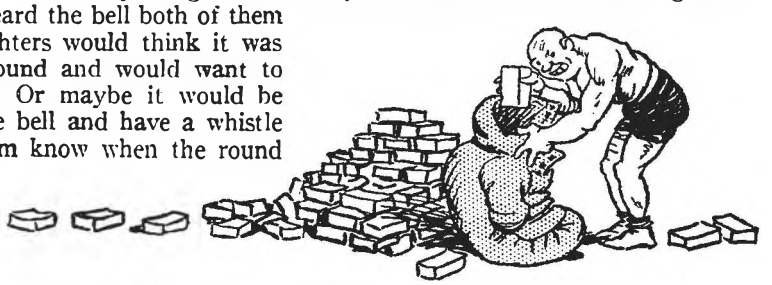
If, in the opinion of the reverie, the box fighters is getting too rough and are losing their heads he could put them both out of the ring and the two menegers could stay in alone and arger the thing out in a businesslike way. Menegers will watch their own wallets during the argerments and no mistakes would be correctioned at the box office. If a meneger gets oxcited and takes his hends out of his pockets to arger that would be his own fault and the other meneger would have a right to put his hends in the pockets without the reverie calling a foul on him.

It shall be a rule that the chudges of box fighting should have a cesh register and

a edding machine at the ringside and should keep the points on them. When a box fighter lends a smesh on the eye they would ring up so much for him on the register and also put it down on the edding machine so there would be a honest check against the register. My personal experience teaches that sometimes a cesh register would be made to seem ineccurate by fellers which has made a life study of them. The edding machines is hard to call a liar.

When the two box fighters is both tired out and the menegers is both hoarse from giving their adwice the chudges could retire into the office and belence the books. When they are gone over by the head chudge, which he should be an expert accountant, the gate reseats should be divided and there shouldn't be no appeal from the diwision unless a meneger could prove that something was subtractioned from the edding machine.

When the Markwitch of Queensberry wrote his rules they never had none of the modern inwentions. The only thing is to do away with the bell on the cesh register on account if they heard the bell both of them loafers of box fighters would think it was the end of the round and would want to be sitting down. Or maybe it would be better to keep the bell and have a whistle instead to let them know when the round is ended. Most of the box fighters worked in fectories before they became loafers, anyhow, and would know what the whistle meant. Them that never worked at all could be taught.



THERE AIN'T A LOT OF FOOLISHNESS ABOUT HOW MUCH THE GLOVES SHOULD WEIGH.

Of course the reveries would be pretty busy calling off the prices. He would have to be saying: "Credit Benneh Leonard with twenty-six dollars for a smesh in the eye," and "Deduct fifteen dollars from Chack Bernstein for not blocking a sock on the ear." The menegers could have assistants watching the cesh registers to see that the price of every punch is made right and they could call time out to look at the figures which the register would show. Also the customers would know who was ahead.

I showed the new rules to Benneh Leonard the other night. Me and Benneh are chust like that. Benneh told me that it would be a pleasure for a box fighter to work with them rules. He had been thinking of selling out his box fighting business which he built up for himseluf on account the old rules wouldn't give a business man no opportunities to expand and his brains was almost a nuisance to him in the ring. He said he would indorse my rules personal.

In my rules there ain't a lot of foolishness about how much the gloves should weigh, on account I wouldn't go into the metters that don't metter nothing. I am taking up only them things which is really important in the box fighting business. Them old rules only covers the points that nobody don't care nothing about.

For instance the old rules is strong about how you shouldn't hit a feller below the belt. I would like to esk the Markwitch of Queensberry one question. What if the feller should be wearing suspenders? That shows how foolish the old rules really is and how you could get around them.

I wouldn't take nothing from the Markwitch of Queensberry rules, not even the name. I am calling my rules the Markwitch of Razberry Rules so everybody would know they are ebsolutely different.

MISS RACHEL S.—No, the writer of this column is not marritched. I am still singular on account a feller with my brains got to be careful or maybe he would be marritched to a woman who was too dumb to appreciation him.—I. K.

Next time IZZY KAPLAN will write about BREACH OF PROMISE.

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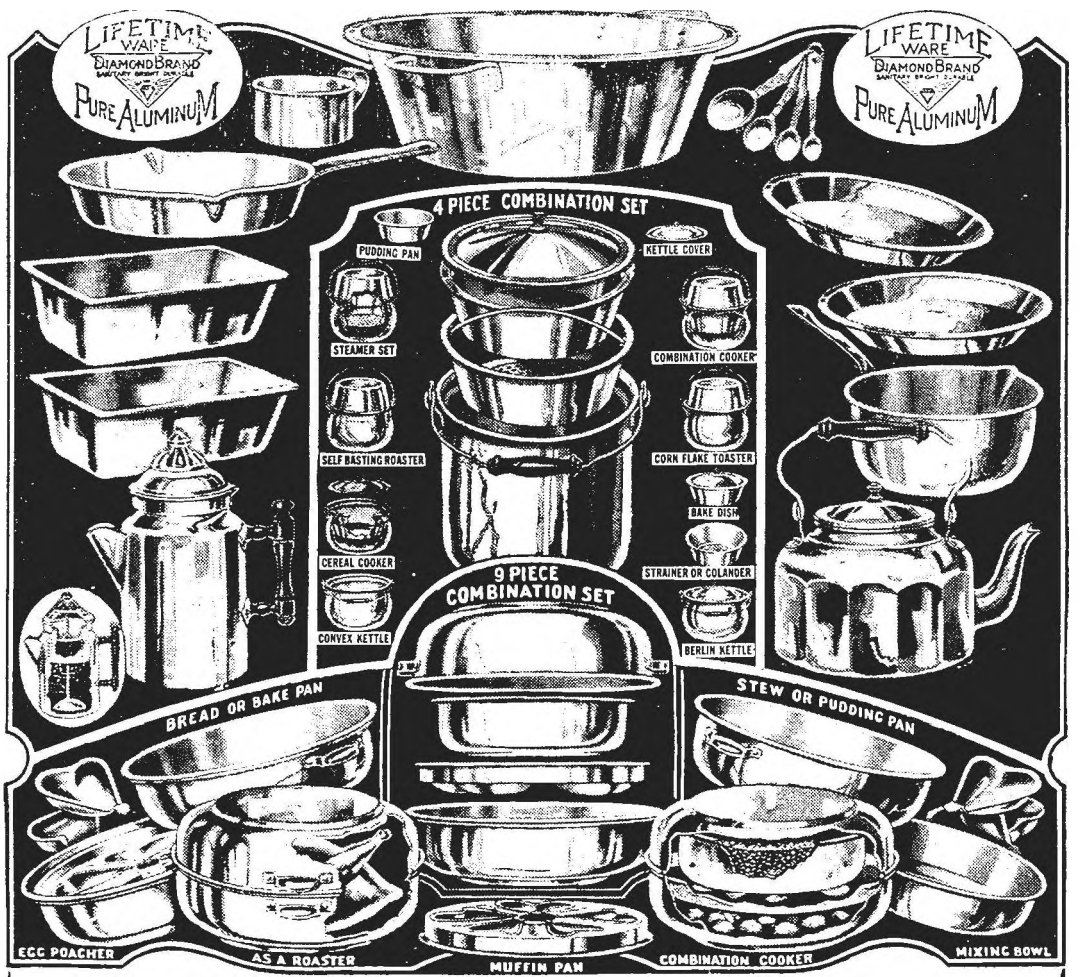

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