ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

JULY 24

PRICE 10¢

TWO NEW SERIALS
Begin In This Number

The Rider o' Spook Hollow
by Charles Francis Coe

The Print of a French Heel
by Fred MacIsaac

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXIX CONTENTS FOR JULY 24, 1926 NUMBER 2

FIVE CONTINUED STORIES

NOVELETTE AND SHORT STORIES

POETRY

If another man stole your sweetheart, would you go and take his? That's what Jimmie Curtin did—without stopping to think!

Beginning next week:

WITHOUT STOPPING TO THINK

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WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXIX SATURDAY, JULY 24, 1926 NUMBER 2

The Rider o' Spook Hollow

By CHARLES FRANCIS COE

Author of "Trickery Trail," "The Ranch Beyond," etc.

CHAPTER I.

DISASTER.

TOD JENNINGS, after four years of service at the Loop K ranch, was becoming worried. The owner of the ranch, John Rogers, was slowly changing in his attitude toward the young rider who had served him so well. Tod could see that strange things influenced the owner. His first concern was a thing which he dismissed with a shrug on several occasions, but which, despite his best efforts to discount it, persisted in returning.

Nan Rogers, John's daughter, had shown a noticeable preference for Tod, and other riders on the place winked knowingly when the two young people were seen together.

It was an understood thing that a wedding was inevitable, and Tod, with his frank face, his easy manner, and his unfailing generosity, was commonly accorded fitness for so vast an honor.

At first, John Rogers had smiled happily as he saw that his lovely daughter was being submerged in the blissfulness of love. He was quite satisfied with the match, as Tod Jennings had, on more than one occasion, shown the manly traits which were his, and, above all things else, Rogers wanted to see his daughter marry a man who was a man.

But of late the rancher seemed worried. He frowned about his work, and refused to talk about the morose attitude which became more noticeable in him as each day passed. When he began to show displeasure toward Tod, the entire ranch became aroused by the queer condition. Speculation on the cause became rife.

Slim Willett said that the whole cause was something new in the life of the rancher. He went so far as to point out that, even though the wedding of Tod and Nan had been regarded as a sure thing for many weeks, only now Rogers was beginning to chill toward the young rider.

"An' why?" he persisted as though in fortification of his theory. "Easy! Because this damn Bram Goud is swayin' the old man! Ever since that gent was salivated out at Spook Hollow, Rogers has been listenin' more an' more to anythin' that Bram says! I hate to see it, myself!"

Others agreed with him, and the avidity with which men often greet a new idea showed itself in the manner in which they urged Slim on in the expounding of his suspicions.

"I can't see where Bram rates it!" Slim went on. "Lookit the way he made that las' shipment! Rogers told me hisself that the cattle didn't bring half the price they would two months from now! But he goes right along lettin' Bram have his say an' his way!

"It's 'nuff to make a gent wonder if Bram ain't runnin' the whole works, and leavin' Rogers to wonder how it all happened. He acts like he's got somethin' on the old man!"

Tod Jennings himself arrived at the bunkhouse at this juncture, and spiked the conversation effectively.

"Shut up, Slim!" he snapped. "If you ever get hung it'll be 'cause you talk so dern much!"

Riled by the directness of Tod's rebuke, Slim flashed forth the thought which really was uppermost in his mind:

"It's either that, or Bram is cuttin' you outa the gal!" he cried. "How else can you explain it when a foreman starts runnin' a ranch just like he wants no matter what the owner hisself says about things?"

The shaft hurt, as other riders could see. Jennings's jaw clamped resolutely and he glared back at Willett a moment, but he controlled the hot words which leaped to his tongue's end. There was a moment of tensity before he drawled:

"I reckon Nan 'll decide that," he offered easily. "If she finds that she wants Bram 'stead o' me—well, ain't that her business an' my hard luck? I'm derned if I see where it should fret you any, Slim!"

"I'm only tryin' to tip you off, Tod," Willett said in placatory tone. "Every man on the ranch wants to see you git that gal!"

"I wanna get her, too!" Tod announced quite frankly. "I reckon Nan 'll decide—just like I said. It ain't right fer us to be talkin 'about her, anyway. We better shut up."

"It's right to be talkin' about the way the ranch is bein' run! An' the way this Bram Goud is runnin' high, wide, an' han'some on our time an' our money!" Slim thundered, suddenly roused by the encouraging glances of other riders. "Damned if a gent ain't got a right to kick a little when he sees a place like this goin' to hell in a bucket! You worked here four years, Tod; I been here three myself—an' I've allus done my best, too!

"Why wasn't you made foreman when Bram come in only six months ago? You was marryin' into the family—as any fool could see! Yet the old man digs up this here yawpin' Yaqui, an' brings him in here to ride over us! An' what's he done? Nothin' but send us all off on fool errands—an' sell steers fer half of what they'd bring later on!

"Damned if I ain't sore, Tod. I don't rile up easy, but if Bram's got somethin' he's holdin' over the old man's head—I'm ready to find out what it is an' bust loose plenty—either that or pack up an' git out!"

"Don't talk foolish, Slim," Tod returned in a friendly tone. But, despite his affected light-heartedness, and the feigned uninterestedness with which he accepted the suspicions of the other, he had to admit to himself that they coincided strangely with some of his own thoughts.

What Slim charged was true. Bram Goud was not running the Loop K efficiently; he did not go about his duties like a man who knew ranching should. Again, there were queer missions that took many of the riders away at the same time, and Tod was unable to see why this should be so.

Slim, sensing that he had scored in spite of Tod's nonchalant attitude, persisted in his arguments.

"Be honest, Tod," he urged. "I seen the old man meet you this mornin'. Was he anythin' like he used to be? Did he grin, an' slap you on the back, an' tell you that you wasn't bein' a paid a han'some salary for ridin' with his daughter? I used to hear him do that!

"An' what did he do this mornin'? I needn't tell you! He grunted as sour a greetin' as a man could give another, an' never even hesitated when he passed you by! Why, do you s'pose?"

"He's—he's got a lot to think of, I reckon," Tod grunted dubiously.

"You bet he has! That's what's worryin' me, too. What is all this that he's started thinkin' about? It's all since Bram Goud come along! An' he ain't been here only since that gent was plugged out to Spook Hollow!"

"Slim! What the hell you gettin' at?" Tod demanded in tense voice.

"Nothin'! I'm just tryin' to git at somethin'! I'm tryin' to figger what's to be done fer the old man. He ain't hisself; he ain't been in the bunk house in three months—an' he used to come over three, four times a week an' take a whack at the deck with us!

"He's changed plenty, the old man has! An' all since this Piute comes rarin' down onto the place an' allows he's goin' to tell folks how to earn a livin' by punchin' cows! Well—he's had his chance, an' I don't think he knows a hackamore from a Gila monster! He can't tell me nothin' about nursin' mollies, I'll swear to that! An' I'm sick o' it! I'm ready to kick out free an' plenty, an' find myself another job!"

"Other jobs ain't any too plentiful, Slim," Tod said in queer tones. He had seen that, though Slim spoke on the spur of the moment and while he was angry over some trick of the new foreman, he nevertheless expressed sentiments that had been long in the making, and his words reflected the attitude of others there. If the riders were to rebel, Rogers would be left in an almost helpless condition.

"Better watch your step when it comes to quittin'," Tod continued. "I admit that Goud don't seem to know a heap about tossin' beef—but let's not be hasty— we—"

He paused to glance over his shoulder as a shadow fell across the bunk house threshold. Bram Goud, his heavy, dark face twisted into a malignant sneer, stood regarding him coldly.

"So I ain't on my job, huh?" he demanded. "Well—ain't that hell, now? You was figgerin' to tell me a few things, mebbe, huh?"

"I was just sayin', Bram," Tod began to explain calmly, "that we—"

"You needn't tell me what you was sayin'!" Goud snarled. "Didn't I hear it all myself? Tryin' to cause trouble among the boys, huh? Losin' out on the gal has soured you ag'in' the gent that has been payin' you for four years!"

Tod had gone white under the words, but with a masterful display of control, he pressed his lips tight and did not respond. Goud, seeing that he could not provoke Tod into a move that would place him in a bad position when explanations became necessary, sneered audibly.

"Goin' to tell me what you was sayin', eh? An' I stood right here an' heard it all! I reckon I shoulda let you go along with your lies—"

"With my what?" Tod interrupted ominously.

"With your lies!" Bram snarled back, apparently goaded by the calm with which his outburst was greeted. "You heard me! I needn't say no more!"

"You're right there, Bram!" Tod said slowly. "What you just said is plenty!"

With these words, his brown fist clenched into a weapon as hard as a stone. In a sweeping arc it flew upward and outward, and found resting place upon the unshaven chin of the foreman. Much as though he had plunged into the deepest slumber, Bram Goud snored sonorously, his great body sprawled inert on the ground.

A moment Tod stood over him, his eyes snapping fire, his fists still clenched, and his expression that of hope that the fallen man might rise and continue the fight. But it took a great deal of water from the bucket to bring Goud back to himself. Even Slim Willett smiled in satisfaction at the completeness of the knock-out.

"Not bad, Tod!" he grinned appreciatively. "Has you ever seen a steer trip when he was runnin' hell bent? That's what Bram made me think of when he flopped off'n the end o' your lunch hook!"

"I've been a damn fool, boys!" Tod groaned after a moment. "I played right into his hands! He'll fire me the minute he can wiggle that chin o' his again!"

"Then he'll fire everybody else on the joint!" Slim roared. "How about it, boys!"

There came a chorus of assents, and as he heard them a look of deeper concern spread over Tod's tanned face.

"Don't say that, fellahs," he urged. "Stop an' think a minute! If we all quit—an' this shorthorn really has got somethin' on the old man, what's goin' to happen to him? By quittin' you'd be playin' right into his hands!

"I'm askin' every man to stick tight no matter what happens—an' I'm askin' it fer the old man, an'—the gal. Who'll promise me that? Who'll do it fer them?"

"Hell!" Slim growled. "I'd do it fer you quicker'n anybody else this side o' hell, Tod! I hate this coyote plumb plenty—but I sees your point an' I'll stick!"

"Me, too! You bet I'll stick!" another cried. And Tod's face lost its set and worried look as others chimed in and agreed that, come what might, they would remain at the Loop K until things were adjusted.

Then it was that the water bucket had been brought, and the riders gathered around the sprawled foreman and drew high glee from the copious applications of the fluid that were dashed into the ugly face.

Finally he sputtered and gasped; his twisted legs kicked convulsively, and his eyes opened. He glared about him gathering his senses. Standing over him was Tod Jennings, an eager look in his eye, his hands ready for further action.

"Hit me when I wasn't ready, huh?" Goud growled, his hand going to his chin, tremblingly. "Awright! There'll come another time when we kin settle that. Right now, though, you kin pack up yore gear an' drift!

"Show up at the ranch house, an' I'll see that Rogers gives you what you got comin'!"

"Be damned careful that he don't give you what you got comin' some day, Bram!" Tod said slowly. "Whatever it may be!"

The foreman rose and led the way to the house, Tod close at his heels. Behind them the riders gathered at the bunk house door, and Bram Goud might well have been thankful that he did not look back and see the frowns that were gathered on the various faces.

CHAPTER II.

INDICATIONS.

JOHN ROGERS, his face showing plainly that he had seen some of the events just closed, met them on the porch outside the room he used for his office. There was a haggard look that clung to his features like a reflection of inner pain. Yet, too, Tod could see that his jaw was set firmly, and there was determination in the set of his shoulders.

"Make up this man's time, John!" Bram growled, and Tod gasped at the officious manner in which he spoke. He shot a quick glance at the rancher to see what effect the words and intonation might have had upon him.

Rogers's face paled noticeably and his lips twitched, but the hangdog look in his eyes persisted, and instead of speaking the words which Tod felt were uppermost in his mind, he wet his dry lips nervously.

"What's up, Bram?" he queried.

"Make up his time," Goud repeated roughly, "I've fired him beginnin' ten minutes ago!"

Once more Rogers moistened his lips uncertainly; then he glanced at Tod, and the latter felt his very heart wrenched at the look in his old friend's eyes. It was a look of fearful helplessness; one that seemed to whisper of a desire to do one thing and a necessity for doing exactly the opposite one.

"Tod's been ridin' fer me quite a spell, Bram," he said finally. "Ain't there some way we kin—"

"Give 'im his time!" Bram Goud snapped, and as he spoke, he half turned to face the older man and Tod caught the threatening glance which he flashed him. Rogers seemed actually to recoil under the glare, and the truth of Slim's suspicion that Bram had some secret knowledge he was holding over Rogers's head was suddenly made graphically clear to Tod.

It served to stay his hand. When Goud had spoken to Rogers in such a manner it had been Tod's first impulse to shake the foreman into some respect for his employer, but that glance, pregnant as it was with hidden power, proved a factor unexpected. To enrage Bram then, to do anything which might make him use that power, might work irreparable harm to John Rogers.

So Tod remained quiet, his eyes flashing from one to the other of the men, and his mind, stunned a little by the surprising discovery that Slim's statements had found verification beyond dispute, groping hopelessly for some key to the situation.

"It makes it right hard, Bram," Rogers persisted finally. "Tod, here, was goin' to marry Nan. I reckon—"

"I wish to the Lawd you'd hand 'im his time, John!" Bram snarled. "I took all them things into consid'ration when I fired him! You ain't thinkin' o' doubtin' the wisdom o' my judgment?" The words came with a sneer, and a peculiar, faint, yet clearly discernible tone of threat.

"No," Rogers said in a hollow tone. "No, I ain't thinkin' you don't know what you're about, Bram. Only—Tod is young an' mebbe apt to say things—well, I was hopin'—" The rancher was floundering helplessly, groping about for some unexpected idea which might serve to keep Tod at the ranch, yet wholly terrified at the thought of crossing the foreman.

"It's done, John," Goud persisted. "The brand is run an' it can't be blotted out! This gent is fired to hell off this ranch, an' I want him to git his money an' git out afore the sun sets! As to marryin' the gal," he finished suggestively, "that ain't none o' my business—but I got a few ambitions in that there direction myself!"

Tod's fists clenched as he heard the words. Mere thought of such as Bram Goud speaking the name of Nan Rogers enraged him. But once again he showed remarkable control of his emotions; for he caught the look of pain, mistrust, almost horror that flitted through Rogers's eyes.

"I reckon you better give me my time, boss," he said evenly. "Me an' this here cactus chin had a run-in that landed him flat on his back. I'm right sorry, but—well, mebbe the other boys might lose their respect fer him if I was kept on after that!"

Into the last sentence Tod managed to insert all the cynical tone that was needed to make Bram Goud see that he had the respect of none of the boys mentioned. The foreman began a snarling utterance, then thought better of it and lapsed into a sullen but triumphant silence. Rogers shot Tod a look of infinite gratitude for having made the difficult decision for him.

"In that case, Tod," he mumbled half-heartedly, "I reckon there ain't nothin' else to be done! I'm right sorry you lost yore head, though. Come along inside an' we'll fix up."

"He gits paid up to to-day, John," Bram Goud snapped. "He don't git no time additional."

Rogers went into the office, and Tod followed silently. Bram remained on the porch a moment, during which he rolled a cigarette and vindictively struck a match into flame with his thumb nail. When he had lit his smoke he stepped from the porch

and sauntered toward the corral, where several horses were penned. Rogers heaved a sigh as he saw him go.

"Tod," he said as he reached for the big check book, "I'm plumb broke up over this thing. I don't—"

"I'd like to know what in hell's wrong on this place!" Tod said frankly. "Things have been goin' to the dogs ever since that yap landed here. You must see it, boss. You're too smart not to know what's happenin'—"

Rogers jerked his arm forward so suddenly that the check book clattered from his grasp. His hand clenched Tod's with a fervor that made the flesh sting.

"Don't say nothin', Tod!" he whispered. "My Lawd, lad—don't make such remarks as that!"

Then, as if he had again gained some degree of control over himself, he released his grip and, in confusion, turned again to the task at hand. Tod, amazed at the depth of feeling Rogers had shown, could think of nothing to say. A million thoughts crowded his brain, but none of them lent itself to words.

He watched as Rogers figured the amount due on a separate slip of paper, then dipped the pen and wrote the check. Tod could not miss the trembling of the fingers that held the pen. The room was silent as a tomb but for the scratching of the metal over the paper. Finally the rancher tore the check free, and held it fumblingly between his fingers.

"Tod," he said after again wetting his lips, "nothin' I can say would do any good toward tellin' you how I feel over this. I ain't got any idee what Nan'll say!" As he spoke his eyes roved furtively over the room, and his face twitched nervously. He was totally unlike the hale and hearty rancher that Tod had known for years. His present attitude was utterly foreign to him; he seemed broken in spirit.

"I'd like to know who's runnin' this ranch!" Tod snapped as he rose and reached for the check.

"Don't talk like that, Tod!" Rogers cried. "Can't you see how I'm placed. Bram's the foreman. I told him to run the place!"

"There's somethin' damn funny, just the same!" Tod persisted. "You ain't yourself no more'n day's night, boss! Why not speak out an' let your friends do somethin'."

"My Lawd, Todd," Rogers exploded, "if you're a friend o' mine—and if you love Nan don't ever say that agin! You don't know what you're talkin' about! Lawd knows I got trouble enough without havin' you start—"

"I won't start nothin', Rogers," Tod snapped a little testily. "This is your place, an' Nan's your daughter. I allus gave you the best work I had in me, an' if this is the partin' o' the ways I don't s'pose there's any use makin' it last too long!"

He took the check from the rancher's nerveless fingers and glanced at it. It was drawn just as Bram Goud had said it should be. The fact rather hurt Tod. He felt that Rogers should at least have paid him for the balance of the month to tide him over until he could locate a new job. However, he folded the check and pocketed it without comment.

Then it was that Rogers reached for his keys, unlocked a small drawer in the upper portion of the desk, and drew forth a large roll of bills. He peered through the window in the direction of the corral, as though making certain that Bram Goud was not where he could see what was happening.

"I drawed that check like he said," Rogers muttered as he fingered the money, "'cause there ain't any use in makin' useless trouble! But right now, Tod, I'm tellin' you that you don't leave this place like that!"

As he talked he had been counting out money, and Tod saw that two hundred dollars in large denomination bills had been extracted from the roll taken from the drawer.

"You'll take this here, Tod," Rogers announced, "just to kinda tide you along till you locate agin! An' don't say nothin' about it."

Tod snatched the bills and threw them in a heap on the desk.

"I won't take a damned cent I didn't earn, boss!" he cried angrily. "You think I'm goin' to sneak around like a kid from

that yawpin' lizard Goud? Not me! You can say all you like an' do as you please, but I'll say this much: I can see you was afraid to draw a check 'cause that would leave a record o' what you'd paid me. An' you are afraid he'll see that record an' raise more trouble fer you! Lawd only knows what's come over you, Rogers—but you're a damn poor father for Nan if you let things go like this!"

"Don't!" Rogers pleaded stridently. "Good Lawd, Tod, are you goin' back on me, too?"

"Goin' back on you! I'll go through hell fer you! An' yet you leave this here Goud come in an' run me off the place with a day's pay to reward four years o' work!

"He's a dirty lyin' dog, this Goud, Rogers—an' I'm tellin' you so fer your own good. The quicker you git rid o' him the better off you're goin' to be!"

Rogers seemed on the point of speaking, but once again that haggard, fearful look gripped his face, and he ran his tongue again over his lips, his hands accompanying the gesture in a shrug of helplessness. Mistaking the meaning of his silence, Tod wheeled toward the door.

"Sure! I'll go!" he snapped. "Keep your damn sneaky money. An' when you grow back into the man you was I'll stand by you no matter what this chicken thief says or does!"

He stalked from the room and out onto the porch. As he passed the window he could not refrain from a glance through it, and there he saw Rogers, his arms sprawled across the desk and his face buried deep into them. For a second he hesitated; then from the direction of the corral he saw Goud returning, a grimace twisting his evil face.

That decided him against the impulse to return and attempt again to draw Rogers's secret from him. His chin set squarely, and his shoulders flexed under his riding shirt as he stepped from the porch. His course to the bunk house, where he intended packing his gear, would take him directly past the grinning foreman. Not by a fraction of an inch did Tod deviate, and some twenty yards from the porch they met.

"On your way," Bram Goud sneered caustically. "An' don't lemme see you on the premises agin!"

Once more that hard brown fist lashed forth, and once more Bram Goud measured his length in the dust. From the direction of the bunk house came a hilarious shout:

"Crease the stiff, Tod! Crease him good and proper!" Tod turned and saw Slim Willett waving an encouraging hand toward him. "I'm rushin' powerful fast fer the water bucket!" Slim called; then he sauntered deliberately to the bench where the water stood, and just as deliberately strolled to the foreman, where he dumped the entire contents full into the whiskered face.

Tod, heedless of the manner in which his victim fared, went to the corral when his simple gear was packed. He roped his pony, threw a saddle onto the animal's back, and turned to say a last farewell to the riders who were there to see him off. Bram Goud was propped into a chair on the porch, and Willett smilingly assured Tod that two of those punches a month was quota enough for the best of men, whereas two in one day was sufficient to "poison even a pup like Bram Goud!"

"S'long, fellahs!" Tod called. "Don't ferget that you promised me somethin'! You're goin' to stick here fer the gal an' the old boss—an' you're goin' to stick plenty!"

"We're stickin' fer you, Tod!" one of the riders called sharply. "The boss is a right gent an' the gal an angel—but we're stickin' fer you—an' we'll help you git the gal, too!"

As if the words had summoned Nan Rogers to the scene, she appeared around the corner of the bunk house. Her beautiful face was deadly pale, her eyes sparkling with a strange light that bespoke no small degree of fear.

"Tod!" she called. "Tod, wait a minute! Please—please don't go!"

The young rider reined in as she approached. The other riders emulated his example as he removed his sombrero. The girl was at his side, her small, tanned hand gripping at his stirrup.

"Tod—please—what is it? What terrible thing has happened?" she begged.

"I been fired," said Tod simply. "Bram Goud—"

"Bram Goud let you go!" the girl gasped in amazement. "But don't go, Tod! See father at once! It is—why, it's silly!"

"I seen your father, Nan," Tod said slowly, his mind going back again to his interview with the broken rancher.

At the words the girl's face blanched even more, and she caught her breath unbelievingly. But there was a look of understanding in her eyes, too, that Tod could see.

"And you're going just the same?" she asked, a hard note suddenly evident in her voice. Tod nodded.

"Then—kiss me good-by, Tod!" she snapped, holding up her arms. "Kiss me good-by!"

It was the first time he had ever kissed her. Somehow the world seemed suddenly brighter as he felt the warm pressure of her lips. For a blissful moment he held her thus, feet clear of the ground, lips pressed fast against his own.

Then she drew away and whispered to him:

"If you love me, wait for me at Willow Slip to-day."

Once again he kissed her, and the riders grasping the meaning of the scene set up a rousing cheer. During the commotion Tod found ample time to signify to Nan his understanding of her message and his assurances that he would wait at Willow Slip.

Then he set her again on the ground, and roweled his mount into a gallop that carried him rapidly away from the Loop K.

CHAPTER III.

MYSTERY.

AT Willow Slip Tod had ample time to think over the amazing events of the day just drawing to a close. Myriad questions presented themselves to his baffled mind, and he could not find the coherence of thought with which to deal with them. His mind seemed possessed suddenly of an utter lack of concentration.

One moment the haggard face of his old friend, Rogers, would emblazon itself poignantly upon the screen of his imagination; the next, his lips were athrill with the remembered kisses of Nan Rogers.

When Tod had stumbled from the porch of the ranch house to walk toward the sneering Bram Goud his very soul seemed plunged to the depths of dejection. That was but a short time ago, but now the greatest happiness he ever had known was his! Nan Rogers, in a manner that he suddenly realized was quite typical of her, had proclaimed to the world her love for him.

Looking back, he could see where he had always felt rather certain that his worship of her was returned, but even so the pride of having others know, and the joy of certainty was a soul-filling godsend! Yet it was tainted by the interference of Bram Goud.

Tod no longer entertained the slightest doubt that Slim Willett was right when he attributed to the foreman some hold over John Rogers. He had long suspected such a condition himself, and the events of the afternoon had sufficed to clear away any lingering doubt on the matter.

And to add to the problems thus created, Bram had openly declared his ambition to marry Nan! If Rogers was sufficiently in the power of this man to let him ruin the ranch, Tod wondered how far that power might go toward influencing Nan. It had already been proved that Bram had hold enough so that he ran the ranch about as he pleased.

If John Rogers was so dominated by Bram Goud that he would permit his property to deteriorate rather than assert himself, then it was not unreasonable to believe that he was dominated enough to be forced into crowding Nan into an unwelcome marriage with the foreman!

Nan, Tod felt, would do anything under the sun for her father. They idolized each other as was evident in the way of their living. No sacrifice would be too great for Nan to make for John Rogers! By the same token, Tod hoped, none would be too great for the father to make for Nan.

If that hypothesis was to be relied upon, and Tod felt that it was, then there was a balance, and should Nan signify a willingness to sacrifice herself to Bram Goud in

order to save her father from some unknown menace the father was just as apt to meet the weapons of the foreman in order to save his daughter.

And as he pondered the endless problems which had been suddenly presented to him, Tod saw that the sun was sinking behind the hills to the west. Purple peaks that reared themselves into the heavens like great, jagged teeth reflected the light of the dying day.

He twisted his body that his gaze might envelop that weird gap in the range which people had named Spook Hollow. It was more than just a hollow. As he looked upon it in the fading light it appeared to him as a gaping aperture in the phalanx of mountains that glowed dark and ominous before the setting sun.

What secret did Spook Hollow hold? What was the soft, soughing voice that roused its sleepiness when the shadows of night lay like a blanket over its isolated reaches?

Then, like a flash, his lips reminded him again of the lingering kisses that Nan Rogers had placed upon them, and Spook Hollow, with its weird reputation, its sepulchral voice and its mysticism faded into a happiness that seemed complete in spite of obstacles that might be reared before it. And Tod settled into a wait that was filled with anticipatory gladness.

The shadows had crept downward from the peaks and were lurking uncertainly about Willow Slip before Tod was roused by the pounding of hoofs. He rose in glad welcome, and from some distance away appeared the form of Nan Rogers as she spurred her horse into a gait that only a girl of the plains could maintain. He waited, hat in hand, until she came to a sliding stop, and slipped expertly from the saddle.

Then he held forth both hands, and she unhesitatingly took them in her own and looked up into his beaming face.

"I must talk with you, Tod," she burst forth excitedly, and though he craved mightily for her lips and words of love from them he controlled the impulse to hold her close and spoke to her in kind.

"Talk away, sweetheart," he smiled. "I could listen to you forever!"

"Tod," she began in the manner in which he had come to expect, "you know that I love you! You know that there is nothing under heaven that I would not do for you. I want you to know just what I think. I want to know just what you think!"

She was looking up at him, her lips slightly parted, her face strained and animated with the emotion he loved to see there. He had a feeling that no star which might rise that night would compare with the luster of her wondrous eyes. But he answered impulsively, earnestly:

"I love you, Nan, worship you! There is nothin' you could ask that would be half enough fer me to do fer you!"

She sighed happily, leaned closer to him, and he yielded to the impulse to embrace her.

"That is all that matters in a sense, Tod," she sighed when again they stood apart. "For no one ever needed love and help more!"

Something deep within him stirred, and he assumed a manner of confident mastery over the situation.

"Tell me all about it, Nan," he suggested. "We gotta stick mighty close together."

"You won't—go far away from me, Tod?"

"Not fer all the gold in the world!" he answered.

"Then listen. Something terrible has come over father of late. He is not himself. This man, Goud, seems to own him, body and soul! Whatever he says, father does."

Sensing that Nan had guessed the things which were taking place at the Loop K, Tod made no pretense of assuring her that her suspicions were unfounded in fact. He met the situation with a frankness that pleased the girl.

"I reckon I've noticed that, too, Nan," he admitted. "An' I ain't the only one neither. Slim Willett reached a point where he couldn't smother his feelin's no longer—an' that was what started my trouble this afternoon."

"Tell me what you think, Tod," she pleaded.

"Honey—I can't think!" he declared

with commendable truthfulness. "I been suspectin' things fer many a long day, but I never had anythin' def'nite to tie suspicions to till this very day. I saw your father didn't want me to go—but when Bram said I went, an' even told how much I should be paid, I knew that he had your father under his thumb."

"I've seen it for a long time," Nan sighed. "Father has been different, Tod. He hasn't been himself at all."

"I should think you'd be able to git more from him than anybody else. He thinks more o' you than anybody on earth does—but me!"

For that pretty speech he received as a reward a pressure of the hand that thrilled him infinitely. However, the girl's response to the statement left much to be desired.

"I've asked him," she said unhappily. "I've pleaded with him, but it does no good. He evades me, tells me that I am reaching an age when I think queer things, and that I mustn't mind."

There was a moment of silence, after which Tod spoke with a deal of conviction in his tones.

"Somethin's happened within the last six, seven months, Nan. I've seen your father goin'—well, goin' down hill like fer about that long. Ever since Bram showed up at the ranch, in fack!"

"Do not be afraid to speak out to me, Tod," Nan urged. "I can see it all as well as you. I am not the kind to grow hysterical over such a thing. That is the last thing which would help. What I want most to know is the thing which father fears, and the thing which will release him from the spell this Bram Goud seems to have cast over him!"

"That's what we all want most to know," Tod burst forth vehemently.

"All?" the girl asked. "Then others at the ranch have noticed it, too?"

"There ain't any sense in hidin' things from you, Nan! Yes! Others has noticed the change in your father. He's grown a heap older in these last six months. He's lettin' Bram run the ranch as he likes. An' he don't say a thing when Bram sends four or five o' the boys hikin' out over the range fer no reason whatever.

"I hate to hurt you, or scare you, Nan, but facks is facks. Slim noticed it. He busted loose to-day an' was goin' to quit—"

"Don't let the boys quit us, Tod," the girl pleaded earnestly. "That would be the last straw. Father seems not to realize that they are his best friends, his only chance."

"They promised they would stick, Nan," Tod assured her. "Stick through thick an' thin, they said." And once again he felt the thankful pressure of her hand, and the passing caress of her lips upon his. But even that failed to dispel the disappointment which had come to him when he discovered that Nan Rogers could add no mite of information to the meager store with which he had to work.

"Your father ain't ever said a thing which might show us what's got hold o' him lately, Nan?" Tod urged after a moment of silence.

"Not a thing, Tod. Time and again I have tried to make him tell me, but he will not. All that he does is plead with me not to speak of things like that, and tell me that I do not understand, and that my imagination is running riot."

"Has Bram—bothered you any?" Tod queried nervously.

"That—beast!" the girl grated in tones he never had heard her use before. "Oh, how I hate that man!"

"He ain't—bothered you personally?" Tod asked, ground between anger and happiness at her denunciation of the foreman.

"He — oh, Tod — he mentioned — marriage to me!" Nan admitted. "It was all so sudden—and so ridiculous! I told him that I could not consider such a thing, that I—loved you!"

"Yeah!" Tod cried eagerly. "An' then what did he say?"

She leaned close again, her hands resting now upon his forearms, and her eyes dulled with a light of fear.

"He said, Tod," she began slowly, "that all things change, even love—and that I would change—or be changed!"

"The dirty rat!" Tod grated hotly. "What did he think was goin' to change you, sweetheart?"

"He didn't say—but as he spoke, he turned away from me and pointed out here

toward Spook Hollow, Tod! And then after a moment he laughed confidently, and said that nobody ever knew what might happen."

"He pointed right at Spook Hollow? That's dern queer! What's Spook Hollow got to do with who you marry, Nan?"

"Not only did he point, Tod," the girl whispered in awed tone. "He told me later that Spook Hollow held a secret that I might know some day—and when I learned it, it would change my love for you and make me love him!"

"Well, what the—" Tod growled.

"I told him that I never could love him, that he had no right to speak to me like that!"

"An' then?" Tod urged.

"Then," Nan said nervously, "he said to ask father who had rights at the Loop K and who did not. He deliberately flaunted in my face his strange power over dad!"

"You told your father?"

"I did. I asked him what Bram Goud meant by such conduct."

"An' your father said—"

"The same old thing, Tod. Evasion! Imagination!"

Suddenly Nan buried her head against his breast, and her lithe body shook with wrenching sobs that seemed to tear at the very heart of Tod. But he showed a strange wisdom for one new at the art of love. No words crossed his lips; instead he folded the girl close to him until she had regained control of her feelings. His hand patted gently upon her shoulder.

"Then what happened, honey?" Tod suggested softly after her sobs had subsided.

"Then I mentioned Spook Hollow, Tod," the girl stumbled on in shaking voice. "And when I did, father rose from his chair, and his face was first purple, then deadly pale, and he pleaded with me never to mention the place again and asked me what I knew about it!"

"Did you tell him what Bram Goud had said about it, honey?"

"Yes. At first, he seemed immensely relieved, then he looked worried, and that night I lay awake and heard him walking the floor like a man demented."

"It's all damn queer to me!" Tod growled after a long silence. "But there's this much to be said: Spook Hollow seems to be tied up with Bram Goud an' your father."

"But, Tod," Nan cried in heart-rending tone, "every one is frightened to death of Spook Hollow! They say that dead people appear there in the dead of the night—and that their voices—"

"Shucks!" Tod grunted reassuringly. "You ride along home now, sweetheart. Since knowin' fer sure that you're mine, Spook Hollow don't hold no terrors fer me!"

He caught her close again, kissed her repeatedly; then helped her mount, and stood silently watching as she dashed away into the gathering gloom. She would reach the Loop K for dinner, he knew.

Then, with the fears of Nan to consider, he turned and gazed at the ominous gap in the mountain range. For no apparent reason Spook Hollow seemed suddenly to have assumed a separate entity, a sinister personality that leered at him from out the western sky.

As he watched night fell, and the gap in the range faded from view much as though it might have closed its mighty fangs and was content in devouring its prey.

CHAPTER IV.

GOSSIP.

WHEN Tod had promised Nan that he would not go far away his subsequent whereabouts was obvious until matters were adjusted between them. There was but one place where he could go, and that was to the desert town of Salvation.

The place was but eight miles away, and when Tod had finished his wondering contemplation of Spook Hollow he mounted his pony and turned the animal into the trail which led toward the town. He knew Salvation. In the last four years the place had become a sort of home to him.

Several of the men in the town were his good friends, and so far as he knew, he had no enemies there. The place would rise

in amazement when it learned of Tod's dismissal from the Loop K. And in that realization still another problem presented itself to Tod's mind.

If he were to tell that Bram Goud had discharged him against the desire of Rogers, then every one must see at once that Goud was the man whose orders went at the ranch. The inference men would draw from this fact must essentially be the correct one. They would know that Bram held some secret of Rogers's and speculation was certain to become rampant. Where would that speculation lead?

Should it lead to the disclosing of the secret it might very easily accomplish the ruin of Rogers; and to ruin Rogers was to strike directly at Nan also! Obviously the thing to do was to keep a close mouth, and see that the boys at the ranch were instructed to do the same thing. Only in that manner could Rogers be protected.

As the pony fell into an easy lope that Tod knew would land him in Salvation for a late supper, Tod gave his thoughts entirely to perfecting a campaign that would end in freeing John Rogers from the grip which Goud seemingly had upon him. He saw that he must be circumspect in anything which he did, and he saw also that Rogers was the last man who would be of any help because of the fear he had of Goud.

So engrossed was he in his thoughts that the flickering lights of the little town appeared on the horizon before Tod had achieved any plan other than a frothy determination to delve into matters and restore things to normal at the Loop K. He stabled his horse, and told the man in charge that he was taking a week or so for loafing purposes. Then he went to the hotel, which served also as dance hall, barroom, and restaurant. Lem Stagg—"Honest Lem," gamblers called him—owned the place, and Tod was sure that the man was his friend.

Few people were in the restaurant when he entered, but he saw that Stagg was in a far corner of the room finishing a rather late supper; and as he entered the man motioned to him to comé and join him at the table. Tod went willingly. Stagg was probably the biggest man in the town, and in whatever future developments there might be Tod would be glad to have him on his side.

"Evenin', Tod," Stagg greeted, not bothering to rise from his seat, but extending a big hand in hearty clasp.

"Howdy, Lem. Can you feed a starvin' hombre?"

"Set down an' throw back yore ears, Tod," Stagg grinned heartily. "This here joint can feed you any hour o' the twenty-four!" He called lustily to a white-aproned figure who wallowed toward them with a ladle in his hand and fire in his eye.

"It's tough stuff, Milio," Stagg grinned, "but here's a pard o' mine that has rode a long ways an' needs fillin'. I told him you'd fix him up plenty an' not care a hoot about workin' a little overtime to do it."

The man seemed mollified somewhat and grunted an assent, though he limited his effort by suggesting that steak was the easiest thing he could do and it would cook while he was getting ready to get out. Tod gladly accepted the steak diet, and allowed diplomatically that he knew it would be cut thick and cooked right if Milio was on the job.

When the cook had left Tod got a surprise. Lem Stagg leaned across the table and spoke in low tones:

"Had a little jam out to the Loop K, didn't you? This gent with the heavy mug an' hairy chin fired you, didn't he?"

Despite his desire to treat such matters lightly that they might not assume their true dimensions in the eyes of the others, Tod betrayed his surprise and chagrin. Stagg laughed softly.

"I'm thinkin', Tod, that you better lay out all the cyards an' let's see what they looks like. I ain't said much o' anythin' to the fellahs in town—an' I ain't goin' to. But it shore makes my ears sing to hear o' John standin' fer a thing like that!"

"There ain't much of a story, Lem," Tod said cautiously. "I lost my head a mite an' hung a punch on Bram's chin. After that he almost hadda fire me!"

"I'm only tellin' you this to let you know what's in the air," Stagg went on

evenly. "I ain't tryin' to make it my business less'n I can do you a good turn, Tod. This Bram Goud ain't my style."

"I know that, Lem," Tod assured him impulsively. "I reckon I need a heap o' time to think. I figgered in a day or two I'd have the head an' tail o' the thing—"

"Ashamed of it, are you?"

"Nope. I don't like bein' fired, but I reckon anybody that was needin' a hand wouldn't be afraid to put me on just because Bram Goud fired me from a place where I'd worked four years!"

"I'm an older man than you, Tod. I see some things you don't, mebbe. If you ain't ashamed o' being fired, then you must have some other reason for not wantin' this thing known."

The man's eyes were boring into Tod's, and he acted very sure of himself in forcing what amounted virtually to a cross-examination.

"I got a reason," Tod admitted slowly.

"We'll let it rest right there," Stagg grunted. "I kin see that you don't want to talk about it. But get this: if things break bad fer either John Rogers or you, I'm with you right across the boards!"

"Thanks, Lem. I reckon I know that. It ain't that I'm afraid to trust you—"

"You don't need to trust me much, Tod. I'm guessin' right clost to the truth! It's either the gal or the old man that you're tryin' to protect! If it was the gal, you'd go straight to the old man an' git things fixed. Therefore it must be the old man himself, an' I'm wonderin' what you're tryin' to protect him against."

The penetrant analysis of Lem Stagg thus served to break down all Tod's elaborate schemes for keeping the affair silent until he could get on the track of the mysterious influence which was grinding John Rogers to the earth. He was confronted by the fact that already his dismissal from the Loop K was a known fact, and he knew that men would be surprised by it because of his long term of service there and the general knowledge that Nan Rogers and himself were in love with each other.

"Lem," he said after a pause of several moments, "tell me how you know about this so quick. I waited out in Willow Slip to see a party. Has somebody from the ranch come in an' talked?"

"Yep. Bram Goud hisself! He rode in here an' told me not to let you have no credit on the ranch account!"

"Well, the low-down!" Tod fairly burned the words as he said them, and his hand dropped instinctively toward his gun. Such an insult was a little more than he could stand.

But Stagg grinned slowly and again reached out with his great hand and pushed Tod back into his chair.

"Ain't that the best thing he could do, Tod, if he wants you to lose yore head an' do somethin' crazy? Ain't that why he did it?"

Once again Tod saw the logic of the older man, and it served to calm his outraged temper a little. As Stagg talked on he was rather glad that Bram had done the despicable thing.

"I told him that I wouldn't give you a dime drink on Loop K credit," Stagg said, "but that anythin' you wanted from me you could have on yore own face. He kinda growled somethin' under his breath at that, an' I finished him off by statin' that I'd rather have yore business on tick than anybody else's fer cash."

"How'd he take that?" Tod demanded.

"Well, o' course I know who you stopped to see at Willow Slip—"

"You do? How the devil you know that?"

"Well, Bram told me. He said—"

"That skunk followed 'er from the ranch an' seen that she met me in the Slip, huh?"

"He shore did. An' when he seen your goin' away hadn't made a bust between you an' Nan, he comes hittin' it fer here an' tries to put you in bad so's you won't hang around, see?"

Tod smiled a little at what Bram's thoughts must have been at seeing Nan and himself embrace, and knowing that his dismissal from the Loop K had not altered the girl's feelings toward him. Once again Lem Stagg guessed his thoughts:

"He said that you was right sore, Tod. He said that Nan only met you out there to tell you that she had changed her mind

an' send you on yore way. That was what made him think you'd come in here an' sting us all on ranch credit, he said."

"He brought her into this damn stuff, eh? Ain't he as low a dog as ever lived, Lem? I'll soak his chin every time I meet him fer that."

"Don't be too free with yore hands, Tod. He's all that you say of him, I reckon—but remember he's got somethin' on John that 'll play hell if he ever uses it straight out."

"You know that?" Tod cried eagerly. "Do you know what it is, Lem? I'll damn quick put a stop to it!"

"If I knowed what it is, Tod, I'd put a stop to it myself. John Rogers an' me lived out here afore you was born, I reckon! He's the kind of a gent we need here! He built that ranch into what it is, an' every man in town has benefited by it."

"Have you ever talked with John about it? Wouldn't he talk with you?"

"Tod, I tried. The old man is like a clam when it comes to talkin' about it. He tells us we're crazy an' imaginin' things—an' all the time we sit tight an' see this crook ruinin' John an' the ranch both."

Before Tod could make answer to that desolate response the cook appeared with the supper and spread it before him. He fell to hungrily despite the turmoil of his mind, and Lem Stagg remained at the table as he ate. Between mouthfuls Tod asked a question here and there, but could get no helpful knowledge. Finally he adroitly turned the conversation to the subject of Spook Hollow.

"There never was a neighborhood 'thout a ghost, Tod!" Lem grinned. "Even back East there's allus a empty farmhouse in each town what is haunted—or s'posed to be. That's the way it is with Spook Hollow. The Injuns used to have speerits that flew around the pass there in fiery chariots an' the like."

"I reckon I don't believe a heap in the spooks out there, Lem, but I've heard so much lately—" Tod grumbled.

"That killin' done that!" Stagg snapped. "Back in the old days they was s'posed to be a claim in the Hollow. Some ol' prospector showed up an' struck a vein there, the yarn ran. He made friends with the Injuns, but they finally busted loose an' scalped him plenty afore they burned him at the stake.

"Then the ol' folks heard that waterfall in the south end o' the Hollow an' said it was the ol' man amoanin'. The lights they see is as crazy as the rest o' the yarn. Git a man to thinkin' fool things, an' he'll soon be seein' 'em too! Each fellah that tells a ghost story tells it a little bigger'n the other fellah."

"But this gent was killed out there, wasn't he, Lem?"

"I guess so. I didn't see him myself. But a gent kin git hisself killed right easy. Just 'cause he got hisself shot up out in Spook Hollow don't mean a spook done it. Spooks don't use six-guns, does they?"

He threw back his head and laughed rather heartily at the idea of a ghost with a gun in its hand. Tod joined in, but there was a hollow note in his voice as he did so. There was certainly something out at Spook Hollow—something that John Rogers knew and dared not speak of, something that Bram Goud knew and would not mention, and which was a great enough thing to ruin Rogers's life.

"Did you know the gent what was salivated, Lem?" Tod asked.

"Shore! An' I ain't s'prised he got it, neither! He was one o' these sneaky gents that's allus got money an' never does nothin' fer it."

"What was he doin' at the Hollow?"

"Dunno! You find folks like him 'most anywhere! Two fellahs from town here was ridin' through the pass when they spots him layin' aside a bowlder. They git off an' find he's been dead two or three days; so they ups an' buries 'im. They tells about it in here, an' bring along his six-gun an' his hat an' boots."

"An' that ain't but how long ago?" Tod insisted quietly.

"Six months, I guess. Ever since they been springin' these here yarns about voices an' lights agin."

"Who was the gents as found 'im, Lem?"

"Mike Trop an' Rod Caspar. Mike runs a little saloon down the street, an'

Rod spends most o' his time there. I reckon he's got a little int'rest with Mike."

Tod was on the point of asking further questions, when the swinging door between the restaurant and the bar was thrown open violently. Through it rushed a rider whose eyes were dilated with living terror, and whose features were pale as the winter moon. He looked about him wildly for a moment, then stumbled toward the table and looked at Lem Stagg:

"Fer Heaven's sake, Lem!" he muttered thickly. "Tell me I ain't crazy!"

"What'n'ell's the matter o' you?" Stagg demanded, rising from the table and shaking the fellow by the shoulder.

"Comin' through Spook Hollow," the man stammered—"comin' through just arter dark—I met a rider!"

"What the hell of it? Ain't you met riders afore?" in disgusted tone.

"Not dead ones, Lem," the man answered sepulchrally. "Not dead ones. This rider was Dave Gaard. I was so close to him I couldn't be wrong, an' when I whooped he laughed—laughed like he used tuh, Lem—with that damn catch in his voice."

Stagg dropped into his chair and looked like a man who himself had seen a ghost.

"Who's Dave Gaard?" Tod demanded quietly.

"The gent what was salivated an' buried at the Hollow six months ago," Stagg grunted.

CHAPTER V.

HOT LEAD.

"OH, my Lawd!"

The words came in a guttural moan, and all three men turned instinctively toward the door leading to the kitchen. There stood the fat and terrified Milio, and it was evident that he had heard the words of the frightened rider who had seen the ghost at Spook Hollow.

In spite of the tensity that seemed gripping at his throat, Tod could not refrain from laughing at the cook. He believed so intensely that the man had actually met the spirit of Dave Gaard that his face was as pale as the rider's. He had arrayed himself in his best shirt, and tied under his several chins a bright red neckerchief which now contrasted startlingly with the pallor of his moon face.

"Oh, my Lawd!" he repeated, his teeth chattering and his grotesque figure swaying on the short, crooked legs. "Hants, he says! He seen hants! Dead men ridin' hosses!"

"Shut up, you jackass!" Lem Stagg growled violently. "Why the devil should you have to hear this thing? Of all the mavericks that 'd swallow a yarn like that, you're the worst!"

The rider sank into a chair, and Tod saw that his hands trembled as he gripped the table edge with them. His terror was very real; he firmly believed that he had seen that which he so dramatically related.

"Don't be sayin' that, Lem!" he said after a moment. "I swear to Heaven I seen it. I was comin' through the Hollow fer to save that ride around Saw Mountain. It was just gittin' real dark, an' you know how the shadows are out there. I'm lettin' the hoss pick his way through the trail, when all of a sudden he shies off fast an' near throws me.

"Right then I sees that somethin' is standin' near me in the shadows! I ain't skeery like some folks. If I was I wouldn't o' come through the Hollow, would I? I tries to put my pony towards this thing, which looks mighty big an' stands mighty still just to one side o' the trail! The hoss shies more an' I fin'ly gives him the spurs plenty.

"With that he jumps ahead, an' I ain't three feet from this thing. Fer a moment I was scared, at first. That made me mad, so I pulls in close, an' this damn thing don't move an inch! When I'm so close I can touch it the whole face lights up, Lem! My word o' honor! It lights up white an' plain—an' it's Dave Gaard!

"My Lawd—don't I know Dave Gaard? Ain't I seen him a thousan' times when he was alive? I admit I near fell off the saddle, an' my pony was sweatin' an' rearin' like we was ridin' onto a puma! He was there, damn it all. I ain't crazy—I know!"

"What happened then, friend?" Tod

asked soothingly. He saw that the man had to tell some one of the thing which was driving him almost out of his mind.

"The damned thing never moved, an' all of a sudden the face fades out, an' only this big hoss an' a body is there. I'm three feet away from it! I admit I'm convinced; I yipped like a Injun an' spurred fer open country plenty! As I go this thing laughs easy an' soft, but I coulda heard it a mile! It was Dave's laugh! That same laugh, Lem, he used to have when his voice would catch that queer way. I never heard another laugh like it; I knows damn well I'm right!"

"Too bad you didn't tackle it, friend," Tod said slowly.

"Oh, my Lawd!" groaned Milio again. "Tackle a hant, he says! Tackle a hant!"

"That's easy to say in here!" the rider snarled. "I ain't no coward! But out there with that damn silence an' the whisperin' that goes on all the time—an' then meetin' up with a thing I know as well as I know Lem—an' that thing bein' dead fer six months, an' buried within a hun'nerd yards o' where I met up with it! Hell, man! You wouldn't o' tackled it neither!"

"Me fer a drink, boss!" the cook sighed. "I can't make it clear in to the bar. I'll buy this here an' pay fer it; kin a waiter bring it tuh me, boss? Oh, my Lawd! Hants!"

Milio sank into a chair, and Stagg called to a waiter and ordered drinks for all the men. Tod noted that he drank his with an avidity that bespoke no little nervous tension, while the rider who had related the astounding tale gulped his in one swallow and beat a tattoo on the table with the glass as his shaking hand replaced it. They laughed again as the cook, endeavoring to swallow the stimulant in one gulp, strangled a little, sputtered, and then, with a violent snort, lost all the liquor in his mouth.

"This here is George Lenz from over Liberty way, Tod," Lem Stagg said then by way of belated introduction. "Him an' Dave Gaard knowed each other plumb well!" There was a tone in Lem's voice which indicated that he was no less impressed by the wild story than was Tod himself.

"You an' this Gaard was friends, Lenz?" Tod queried.

"Nope. Dave Gaard didn't have many friends, Tod," Lenz answered. "I knowed him right well, though—too dern well to be wrong to-night!"

Surreptitiously Tod slipped his boot over onto Lem Stagg's toe, and by a slight pressure indicated that he had a scheme in mind and would not like interference. Then he spoke to Lenz again.

"Just whereabouts in the Hollow did this thing happen, Lenz?"

"You know the Hollow?" Lenz asked.

"I only been out there once in my life, but I got a fair memory of it."

"Well, the pass that runs through the notch narrows down to a ravine about a mile from the down slope comin' this way—"

"A mile into the Hollow from this side o' the mountain, you mean?" Tod asked.

"Right. That's where the waterfall is, an' that's where them damn whispers come!"

"It was right there you seen this here—thing?"

"Exackly. The Hollow saves a gent a lotta time comin' here from Liberty. I was tryin' to make it here in time fer chow—but I don't want nothin' to eat now!" he finished frankly.

"I'd like fer to meet up with a real ghost, Lenz," Tod said slowly. "I'll be ridin' out there, I reckon!"

"Oh, my Lawd! Huntin' fer a chanst to meet up with hants!" Milio groaned, and as he spoke he staggered from his chair and toward the bar. Tod called sharply to him, but the cook gave no heed. Through the swinging door he burst and into the bar. From there could be heard his voice muttering about ghosts, and the fact that Tod was insane enough to seek an encounter with one who rode a horse, had a face which "lit up" and "went out" at will, and which laughed a hollow laugh that could be heard for miles!

Immediately there was commotion in the bar. Milio managed to get a drink, and then some fifteen or twenty men who were there for an evening's gossip, gathered about him and quickly got his story. Tod, in

disgust, heard the tramping of their feet as they burst into the restaurant and demanded that Lenz repeat his tale.

They showed every man's curiosity in anything that breathes of the unnatural, and Lenz, like a man who is sure of himself and willing to defend a story that none is apt to believe, related in detail what had happened.

Tod listened closely, and every word checked with the manner in which the story had been told originally, though Lenz was beginning to regain some control of himself in the company of others. When he finished the yarn he turned abruptly to Tod:

"I don't know yuh, friend—but I gather yore a friend o' Lem's," he said. "An' what I'm goin' to say comes straight from the heart! Don't make a crack about wantin' to meet up with this thing! It all looks a damn sight diff'rent here than it does out there! Don't be sayin' you'll ride out there an' coax fer to meet up with it!"

"I never seen a ghost," Tod said slowly, infinitely disappointed that the whole town should thus have learned of his statement and his purpose.

"I've heard gents talk like that before!" one man grunted. "I ain't sayin' I believe in ghosts, but I ain't sayin' I wanna be ridin' through the Hollow, neither!"

Tod accepted the inference that he was boasting without comment. But even as various men expressed their opinions pro and con, he felt the undertone of belief in what Lenz told. The man was well known, not a drinker nor a talker, and one in whom most of them had faith. The result was that they met this new occurrence uncertainly, and without any great desire to go too far toward undergoing a similar experience.

"I ain't afraid tuh say that hereafter I rides around Saw Mountain!" Lenz admitted after a moment.

"Me, too!" grunted the one who had taken exception to Tod's avowal that he would like to ride out to the Hollow. "Only a damn fool goes monkeyin' with things like that! If Dave is a speerit an' walks aroun' a bit o' nights, then the only one that needs do any worryin' is the unknown gent what salivated him, I'd say! 'Slong as Dave sticks out there I ain't fer botherin' him none!"

"He's just the kind of a gent that 'd come back to worry folks!" another mumbled.

Then the talk fell into a desultory exchange of theories and opinions, and one or two of the men took the affair as an excuse to indulge to the point of maudlinity. Because he did not wish to attract attention to himself, Tod remained about the place for some time.

He arranged with Stagg to get a room, and planned that after the bar was running full swing and he was less apt to be noticed he would leave his room, saddle up, and make the two-hour ride through the mountains to Spook Hollow.

In his own mind he made no attempt to fathom the story told by George Lenz, though he was very certain that the man told only the truth of what he saw, or thought he had seen. What he based his plans upon was that Bram Goud had referred to Spook Hollow in his conversation with Nan Rogers, and that out in the Hollow was the trail to what he must discover if he was to save Rogers from the foreman and the girl from misery.

So long as the secret lay in the Hollow, Tod thought, the Hollow was the place to begin his hunt. Just what events of the night might achieve in that direction could be ascertained only by meeting the issue fairly and first hand. If there was a ghost at the Hollow, then that ghost was the secret, or would lead to it. So far it was the ghost which offered the first opening Tod had been able to find.

He went to his room and spread the blankets which he had brought from his saddle roll. Then he looked carefully to his gun, rolled himself a cigarette, and sat down to think things out. He remained there for nearly an hour, and the sounds coming from below told him that, spurred on doubtless by a first class ghost yarn, the men of the town were celebrating in the usual manner.

It was then about ten o'clock. At just the time he had left Nan Rogers at Willow Slip, George Lenz had been meeting this strange ghost at Spook Hollow. And

none could implicate Bram Goud in the affair directly because at the same time Bram had been talking to Lem Stagg.

Downstairs he paused long enough to purchase a bag of tobacco. Lem saw him and walked over for a few words.

"Goin' out, Tod?" he asked.

"Yeah. I thought I'd git a little air, Lem," Tod smiled.

"You headin' fer the Hollow, Tod?" Lem insisted.

"Shore! You might as well know, in case the ghost salivates me with his hot breath an' leaves me there dead!" There was lightness in the tone and banter in the words, but they seemed lost upon the shrewd Stagg.

"I ain't a believer in ghosts, Tod," the man said under his breath, "but I knows George Lenz dern well, an' what he says he saw—well, he saw!"

"I'm only hopin' I'll have the same luck, Lem!" Tod answered evenly. Then he strolled casually toward the door, manufacturing another cigarette as he walked, and leaving a faint yellow trail of the tobacco flakes behind him on the floor. At the door he leaned against the jamb, struck a match, and inhaled the smoke deeply. It was a bright, clear night, the moon having climbed into the heavens and spread a soft black and white light over the earth.

"A good night fer ghosts, I should think," he mused as he stepped onto the porch. "I'm hopin' they think so, too."

He sauntered down the street a short distance, his manner that of a man out for a stroll and puff before hitting the blankets for a night's sleep. But when he was a little distance away from Lem's place his step quickened and he turned a corner that led toward the stable where his pony was kept.

He was on the dark side of the street, for which he was thankful. He wanted none to know of his intention. Halfway down the block there was an open space for some distance before he could reach the cluster of buildings of which the stable was one. He hurried a little as he crossed that patch, for there were no buildings to cast a friendly shadow over the street.

He sighed thankfully when he had negotiated the strip and had seen no one. Back in the shadows of the buildings again, he hurried on toward the stable. There was the faint glow of a lantern in the low building, and he knew that he would not have trouble finding some one to let him in to his pony.

With the stable still forty yards ahead, he passed by a narrow alley between two others of the buildings. Here darkness was almost complete, and he did not know what it was that attracted his attention first—possibly a weird sense of human contiguity which manifested itself at the first slight motion in the dark.

Ever suspicious, he whirled to face the shadows. As he did so, a form appeared close at hand. He did not have time to locate it definitely; he was merely certain that something was there. Then there came a blinding flash before his eyes, he felt a mighty crashing in the neighborhood of his head, and there was a roar that told him a pistol had been fired.

For a fleeting second he fought for consciousness, then all became black, and his knees gave way under him. He did not hear a hoarse curse muttered in the shadows of the alley nor the sound of running feet as he crumpled into a heap on the ground.

CHAPTER VI.

A MESSAGE.

WHEN next Tod opened his eyes he found himself back at the hotel, with Lem Stagg bathing his face and head in hot and cold water, and a doctor near by preparing bandages and pungent smelling fluids. He made no effort to speak. He had a feeling that his head was afire and some one was standing at his side methodically banging away at his ears with a sledgehammer.

"Dern close call that," he heard the doctor say. "It's a wonder the powder an' flame didn't burn his eyes out anyhow!"

"They got him when he crossed the alley next to Trop's place!" Lem growled. "Must 'a' waited right there an' stepped out close to plug him as he walked past."

"I don't see how he's livin' this minute,"

the doctor went on. "How they ever scraped over his skull at that distance is beyond me plenty!"

"They was crouched in the shadows, doc," Lem answered. "Down low they was, a-waitin' fer him to come. When he crossed that open space with the moonlight shinin' on 'im, they marked him sure. Then when he gits close, whoever it was steps out an' blazes away quick. It looks to me like Tod might 'a' heard 'em an' whirled round to fight back."

"I reckon that's what he done all right. It saved his life, too. The ball was fired from a gun that was pointin' up from the ground, an' it cut across his temple just under the skin. I swear it's the closest shave I ever seen. If he hadn't turned, it'd gone plumb clear through his head!"

"Daylight may show us some marks that will lead us to the gent what pulled this trick," Lem growled ominously. "A damn fine thing it is a man what ain't never hurt anybody can't walk through the street at night!"

"The sheriff's on the job," the doctor grunted. "That's his job! Mine is fixin' up this youngster's dome, an' I reckon I'm plumb ready to git goin' if you'll move that basin an' git outa my way."

"The sheriff better do his job, doc," came another voice, which surprised Tod infinitely. "If he don't, by Heaven, I will!"

Tod tried to speak, but he was too weak, too blinded and mentally dulled by the incessant pounding in his head. Lem Stagg admonished the speaker.

"Don't be talkin' too damn much about salivatin' folks, Slim!" he said. "The sheriff 'll do his job awright!"

"I said he would, Lem!" the other replied, and Tod realized that Slim Willett from the Loop K was in the room. It was all inexplicable to him. He tried to fathom it, but his mind staggered under the burden, and when the doctor poured some liquid against his head the pungent odor of it crept into his nostrils and his stomach was turned to the point of nausea.

Still he fought for consciousness. Sometimes the words of the others came to him coherently; at others it seemed that they were shouting from miles away, and that their voices were weak and indistinct. And through it all the doctor fussed over him and laid fiery things on his bruised head. But it ended finally. He felt his head laid back, and the doctor went away. He was more than happy over that, and wondered why he had been unable to send the man away long before.

Again, where had Slim come from? How had he got back to the hotel? As each of these perplexing things bore down upon his mind he felt their weight overcoming him. Finally he surrendered to a sweeping drowsiness that gripped him and minimized the importance of all things but sleep.

When again he awoke he knew that day had come. The little window of his room, bright with the outdoors sunshine, was the first thing that he saw. He knew that he had been hurt, but was surprised to find that his head did not ache badly nor was his stomach upset.

"Hello, Tod!" came the voice of Slim Willett. "Lawd, man, how you can cork off when you feel like it!"

It was the ideal salutation to bring Tod back to normalcy. He smiled a little wanly, and rolled his eyes toward the sound of his friend's voice.

"I'm afraid to move my head, Slim," he muttered uncertainly. "It feels a heap better where it is!"

Slim came to him and regarded him intently as he rolled himself a cigarette. He made considerable of a ceremony of lighting it, and when he had achieved the result Tod promptly said:

"Now give it to me, Slim! A smoke will put me on my pins."

Slim Willett surrendered the weed and grinned as Tod inhaled in deep satisfaction.

"I guess you ain't about to shuffle out after all, Tod!"

"Shuffle off?" Tod smiled. "Not me, Slim! Derned if I didn't have all the luck las' night, though—judgin' from what the doc said."

"Did you hear what he said?" Slim demanded in surprise.

"Quite a bit o' it."

"Why, yuh big stiff!" Slim growled.

"I been sittin' up all night thinkin' you was croakin'. Why didn't you tell us?"

"I couldn't. Words wouldn't come," Tod explained.

"Bunk! Yuh kep' me here just out o' hellishness, thassall!" Slim grumbled. "You allus was thataway. Plumb ornery, that's you!"

"How come you're in town, Slim?" Tod grinned. Then his face set a little at the force of his thoughts, and he continued in different tone: "There ain't nothin' wrong out at the place?"

"Ain't there? Well, I'll be damned!" Slim growled. "Has there been anythin' out there that ain't been wrong ever since that ringtail busted up the scenery with his ugly mug?"

"No—but I mean anythin' new?"

Slim shrugged his shoulders disconsolately. "Heaven knows the old man's worse'n ever, Tod!" he bemoaned. "He jumps every time this Goud hollers, an' the place is ridin' to the dogs in a patent leather bucket!"

"What now?" Tod urged.

"Well—the old man tells Nan she shouldn't o' kissed you good-by an' met you again at the Slip! He says that makes a fool outa Bram Goud, an' that's a bad thing fer discipline. Kin you beat that, Tod? Discipline! My Lawd—imagine any o' the lads bein' handled much by that stuffed shirt!"

"What did Nan say, Slim?" eagerly.

"How'n'ell should I know? Think they talk these things over with me? All I knows is that the old man calls me in, an' says he wants me to ride into town an' tell you a few things right from his heart!"

"John said that?" Tod asked inanely.

"John did!" Slim avowed much as though the statement was an accusation of the rancher rather than what it seemed. "He tells me I'm yore friend—an' I was till you kep' me up all night!"

"An' bein' my friend—you'd do what?"

"Well, now, git me straight on all this junk, Tod," Slim parried. "It ain't from me, an' I ain't in favor o' it a damned bit! I'm only tellin' you what he asked me to tell you."

"You ain't tellin' me a dern thing, Slim!" Tod interrupted. "You're sittin' there sputterin' like a boardin' house marm! Go to it!"

"Have it yore way, you fathead!" Slim growled. "He says to tell you that a gent kin work too long in one place, an' kinda git to thinkin' he's a fixture there. He says you might 'a' done that at the Loop K, an' he wants you straightened out plenty. He says to tell you to be on yore way, Tod—that you are makin' a heap o' trouble fer him an' fer Nan too."

"He said that?" Tod said slowly.

"Them was the words the ol' idjit used, Tod!" Slim growled. "I told him right to his face he was makin' thirteen kinds of a burro flea outen hisself—but it didn't do no good."

"He wants me to be on my way, huh?" Tod mused.

"I wouldn't leave it hurt me much," Slim attempted to placate. "The ol' gent ain't hisself, an' we all knows it."

"Did he say anythin' else? Not that that ain't enough, but—" Tod stroked his chin.

"Yeah, he said plenty, the ol' fool! He says that you got an idea somethin' is eatin' on him 'cause he backed Bram up an' let you out. He says to tell you that you been there too long anyhow, an' he don't wanna see you round the place any more, an' thinks you oughta hike it outa the town here too. He says he hopes you ain't the kind that 'll hang round just to bother a foolish young gal."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Tod growled, forgetful for the moment of his head. "Ain't that the worst ever, Slim?"

"Course'n 'tis! I tol' him that to his teeth, an' I knows by the way he said it he didn't mean it! It's just more o' that Bram Goud's stuff! I kin read that easy enough, Tod. The ol' man sends this word 'cause Bram tell him to, thassall! Bram must 'a' give the ol' gent an earful 'bout Nan kissin' you good-by an' then meetin' you later on.

"Arter that he puts the fear curse on Rogers, an' ribs up this here nutty message that you gotta git outa town fer his sake an' the gal's."

"I reckon that's it, Slim," Tod agreed,

again amazed at the length to which Bram could drive his old friend.

"Shore it is! Bram wants everythin', includin' the gal, an' damned if it don't begin to look like he's goin' to git 'em too! Not that Nan wants the fish—but you know what she'd do fer the ol' gent, Tod!"

"Did he say what he was goin' to do in case I sends back word to go to hell?" Tod smiled. "He ain't my boss no more."

"I told him that's just what you'd do, Tod. I says you'd laugh at him."

"What did he say to that?"

"Well, he kinda wet his lips a few times an' peeked over his shoulders like he was afraid Bram might be round an' catch him eatin' his own chow; then he says to tell you that you got a lot o' damn fool idees, an' you better drop 'em an' make a fresh start som'eres afore you git yoreself in a heap o' trouble.

"He says," Slim went on, "that he knows you'd like fer to help him any way you kin, but there ain't any way, an' he don't need any help. Then he starts in sayin' Nan is just a foolish young gal what don't know 'er own mind, an' he don't want you round to keep them silly notions goin'."

"I'm willin' to leave Nan decide that, Slim," Tod avowed.

"I reckon so! I just about told 'im that, too. An' when I did he says the one big reason he shore enough needs to have you beat it is on account o' yore run-in with Bram!"

"Bram agin!" Tod rasped. "Why should I beat it from town 'cause o' that skunk?"

"Rogers tells me that you an' Bram is shore to cross up agin afore long if you hangs around town. He says Bram 'll go fer iron an' that 'll mean a killin'."

"I reckon it will if he ever goes fer iron with me!" Tod said and the fervor with which he spoke removed any taint of boastfulness from the words. "That'd be the best thing could happen to Rogers if the fool only knowed it, Slim!"

"Tell him that!" Slim suggested. "I tried to! He goes paler than this here ghost they're talkin' about, an' grabs me by the arms so hard I like to choked! Then he don't do nothin' but state that the death o' Bram Goud will be the abs'lute ruin o' himself an' Nan both!"

That time Tod sat up in his blankets, so amazed was he at what the rancher had said. For a moment his head spun a little from the effort, but, having got that far he fought on and gained his feet, Slim taking him by the arm to steady him somewhat.

"Tod," Slim went along earnestly, "somethin' hellish has got that ol' gent under its thumb! He can't break away from it, an' he's afraid somebody that's workin' in the dark like you er me will hang him while we're tryin' to help him! He's afraid to move an' he's afraid to let anybody else move!"

"Well—I'm goin' to move!" Tod rasped. "I'm damned if I'm goin' to see Nan ruined along with him! Nothin' could be worse'n what's comin' to 'em if Bram Goud keeps at it a mite longer!"

"Good!" Slim agreed heartily. "While you was poundin' yore ear las' night, Tod," he went along casually, "I done a mite o' thinkin' fer myself. First off, I wonders, who tried to salivate you—an' why? There's a lot o' thinkin' to be done on that point!"

"You reckon it goes back to Bram?"

"I reckon it does," Slim announced.

"Just fer the lickin' I give him?"

"No. I think Bram sees he made a big mistake when he kicked you off'n the ranch an' left you free to do as you damn please! I think he sees that mistake about now, Tod! Out there he could watch you; in here he can't."

"Why should he think I'll do anythin'? On 'count o' Nan?"

"Partly—but more 'cause he guesses that you know he's nailed the ol' man down an' got 'im under his thumb. He knows you ain't a fool, an' he sees you guessed that out. With you free you'll start huntin' 'round fer that secret, see? An' he must think you got a fair chanst o' findin' it, or he wouldn't be so fast about tryin' to have you salivated!"

"There's sense in that," Tod admitted slowly. "It ties in with other things right good, Slim!"

"Course'n it does. You ain't got an en-

emy in this here town, Tod! Who the devil'd pull a deal like this on you, 'ceptin' fer his orders?"

"I dunno. An' I dunno who would even under his orders! I wish I did!"

"Well, then you find out the gent that don't want you to see this here ghost, Tod," Slim whispered significantly. "You made a crack downstairs, they tell me, that you was goin' out an' take a peek at this here spook! Whoever tried to salivate you is some gent that wants you to keep away from ghosts!"

Instantly Tod saw the perfection of that logic. Though he said nothing of it to Slim his mind, cleared now surprisingly well, reverted to Nan's words about the secret at the Hollow. Knowing that, there could be little doubting Slim's clever reasoning.

But who, and where was the man?

CHAPTER VII.

SPOOK HOLLOW.

"SLIM," Tod said after having thought matters over for a considerable moment, "I'm plumb laid up fer quite a spell! This here gun shot has made a bad cripple outa me, an' I won't be able to leave this here room fer at least a week!"

"Go on, you fathead!" Slim smirked incredulously. "There you stand puffin' a cigarette, an' talkin' as clear as I am—"

"But folks have gotta think I'm as bad as I just said, Slim!" Tod stated vehemently. "I gotta lay up here all day long, an' we gotta fix that doctor to help us out. We'll git Lem to say the same, an' you hang here with me like you was mournin' deep an' sorrowful, see?"

"An' then what?" Slim demanded suspiciously.

"Then when night comes an' I can work it, I take your hoss an' beat it fer Spook Hollow! If folks thinks I'm laid up bad they won't be lookin' fer me out there, see? We'll just turn their own trick against 'em!"

"I go out there with you, huh?"

"No. You stay here in town."

"Damned if I do!"

"Now, lissen here, Slim, you do as I say on this thing! We gotta play mighty careful, an' everybody knows you're still out at the Loop K. Once let 'em think a Loop K rider is foolin' around Bram's game, an' Bram 'll hit the ol' man quick!"

Slim grudgingly admitted that such might be the case, and together they perfected the plan which Tod wanted to work. Slim went below, and managed to smuggle some food upstairs. As Tod ate with lusty appetite, Slim said that he had spoken to Lem, and that the hotel owner would fix things with the doctor who was shortly expected to return.

"Yore head is thick as a steer's with all them bandages on it, Tod," Slim grinned. "I reckon the doc wanted to stop up the bleedin', an' he can take a heap o' that stuff off when he comes."

So it proved. The wound, though an ugly one to look upon, was really superficial, and lent itself to adhesive bandages that left the rest of Tod's head clear. Though they extracted from the doctor a promise that he would play their plan with them, they did not go into too great detail with the man. There was no sense, Tod thought, in taking any unnecessary person into their strict confidence.

That day dragged interminably for the two who had imprisoned themselves in an attempt to use the attack of their enemies as a stroke against those who had perpetrated it. If it was true that the attack and the affair in Spook Hollow emanated from the same source, then Tod felt that he had fallen upon the right track at last.

During the late afternoon, when the shadows had begun to slant about the sides of the mountains and the peaks were being bathed in a purple that seemed to emboss their jagged outlines against the heavens, Slim got more food, and spread the word below that Tod was in dangerous condition and must lie quiet for many days to come.

Then he saddled his pony, promised that he would return to be with his friend just as soon as it was possible, and set off in the direction of the Loop K. Though he watched closely he could not detect a single sign of suspicion that his story was questioned.

About three miles from town he cut back across the prairie, doubled toward the west, and thus worked his way back toward town arriving just about as darkness fell. In a little coulee which he and Tod agreed upon he pulled up and settled himself comfortably to wait.

Back in the hotel Tod, impatiently awaiting the coming of night, learned from Lem that their story of his confinement was accepted at its face value by the townsmen, and that an escape unseen ought to be comparatively easy by making use of the hallway to a rear window, and thence across behind other houses to the open spaces.

Tod looked to his weapon and cartridge belt, pulled his sombrero low over his taped forehead that he might not be recognized by a chance passer-by, then crept to the hall, peered through the deserted hallway, and darted quickly to a rear window which Lem himself had deliberately opened. A glance outside told him that it was safe to make the leap to the ground some ten feet below.

He landed in the soft dirt lightly, though the shock set up a slight headache in the region of his wound. Then, like a slinking shadow he sped toward the rear corner of the building next door. That point gained, he paused to make certain of his next step. At his back twanged the strains of a mechanical piano; men's voices raised in raucous merriment served to cover any slight noise he might make.

Across the littered backyard of a store he went, and toward the shadowy buildings which loomed ahead facing on the side street. Ten minutes after he had left the hotel he was on the outskirts of the town under cover of the black darkness that preceded the rising of the moon. Feeling that he was safe at last, he straightened from his crouched position and sped toward the plains.

Far behind him a dog barked suspiciously; the voice of the town faded as he ran, and he gained, shortly, the coulee where Slim was impatiently waiting with his horse.

"Good old Slim!" Tod greeted as he clasped his hand. "Lawd knows what you're goin' to do the rest o' the night, but—"

"Lawd an' me both knows!" Slim answered promptly. "I'm goin' to stretch out here fer a reason'ble spell, then I'm goin' back into town an' say I returned to be with you! Arter that I'm goin' up to that room o' yours, an' have a sleep while you an' the ghosts are doin' a banshee dance in this here Spook Hollow!"

Tod laughed softly and agreed to the plan. He felt ineffably happy to be free, with a trail ahead to follow and a chance to fight for Rogers and Nan. Thought of the girl served to inspire him to dramatic heights. He was quite willing to face the weird ghost that had so terrified George Lenz. He hoped devoutly that his trip to the Hollow would not be in vain.

With a final whispered good-by he turned the horse toward the trail to Liberty planning to ride that until he was ready to cut up the range toward the Hollow. Lem had repeated instructions as to directions, and Tod knew the country with the familiarity of years in the locality.

The night was clear and warm, and he looked forward to a full moon and ample light within an hour or two. He planned to ride close to the Hollow, then to dismount, secure his pony, and explore the place at will. If the ghost that had been seen there was willing to show himself at all, Tod thought he would like to view the creature in his own way.

His headache fled before the caress of the soft wind as he put the pony into a keen gallop. He hoped to reach the Hollow before ten o'clock, and knew that at least the last mile must be made afoot. Finally he came to the steep upward grade, and pressed the willing little animal onward until he dared go no farther for fear of sounding a warning.

The moon rose over the range as he dismounted and tethered the animal. Great, lurking shadows reflected from the crags above, and the pines about him penciled their way over the ground at his feet. Huge bowlders were imbedded in the way he must travel, and he found it impossible to make rapid time. However, he soon gained the opening to Spook Hollow, and wended a cautious way inward toward the ravine where the waterfall hummed its ceaseless

song and the strange voices maintained their plaintive hymnal.

There it was before him, its walls rearing upward to heights that seemed tremendous; the air, fanned by the gentle mountain breeze, compressed itself as it sped through that narrow cleft in the range, and as it gained the exit of the ravine it seemed to whisper of strange and unseen presences.

"No wonder they named this here Spook Hollow," Tod mused as he worked silently forward.

Through Lem he had learned the exact spot at which George Lenz had had his harrowing experience, and it was toward that spot that Tod worked his way.

Near at hand the waterfall boomed its sibilant chorus. The towering walls above him, swept by the rush of air through the cañon, seemed to be whispering of his presence in the solitude. Somewhere, far off, a night bird squawked an eerie note, and far down on the prairie a coyote howled its complaining yelp.

Once a stone rolled free from the wall at Tod's left, and it might have been a landslide so completely did its downward course fracture the silence of the place. Tod gripped his gun tensely, feeling that some foot might have dislodged that stone. But the sounds died away into the tumultuous voices which blended into silence.

No evidences came of a presence other than his own, and when he had gained the place which Lenz had named, he settled into as comfortable a position as possible and took up a watchful vigil.

There was some eerie quality about the place, Tod soon saw. The very silence itself was awesome. He felt its oppression now, felt it until he became angered with himself for such ridiculous notions and inwardly upbraided his cowardice. Nevertheless, he gained a new understanding of what Lenz had meant when he said that things looked different out in Spook Hollow than they did back in town!

Suddenly there came a new sound. It floated out over the Hollow much as though it might be the voice of the very silence itself rousing from the slumber of ages, taking entity in the solitude of space. Tod's mouth dried as he listened, and his hand, as it gripped the butt of his gun, was suddenly damp.

Now the sound grew and took more definite form. Tod rose to his feet as he caught the new note. It was a laugh! A soft, yet resonant laugh! A wholesome, rollicking, sepulchral laugh that mocked the silence, and seemed to come from nowhere!

But Tod fought off the feeling of panic that gripped him. The sound of hoofs could be heard now, far down the ravine coming from the direction of Liberty. Suddenly they stopped short, and a horse whinnied in terror.

There came a terrified shout, one such as a man gives who is confronted by that which robs him of his sense of control utterly. Then came the mad clatter of hoofs again, but they did not drown out the laugh. Tod cursed softly that he was unable to see what was happening, for his sense of hearing told him that this chance rider was less courageous than George Lenz. His horse was racing madly back over the Liberty trail again!

Then, as though it had come to life before his very eyes, Tod saw the ghost of Spook Hollow! Some hundred feet above him on the opposite side of the ravine it appeared. It was mounted, and there seemed no natural way in which a horse could climb to such heights. Tod saw it well, and afterward cursed himself for a fool for the manner in which he stood motionless gazing upon the thing.

The face was that of a man. Every feature was perfect except that they were shrouded in a pallor that verged upon green.

And Tod recalled laughing inwardly at Lenz's remark the first time he heard it; as he watched, spellbound, that face suddenly become luminous—and the lips parted—and the laugh came from them. And even as he looked, the face darkened again, by degrees, as though life might be fading from it; and the laugh died away into a gurgle, and without the sound of a hoofbeat, the horse and face alike had disappeared!

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Treasure Acres

By GARRET SMITH

Author of "Black Butte Bacon," "I Did It," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CAPTAIN J. MORTIMER PENNINGTON was gravely considering a financial problem.

With stately tread, to which a slight limp seemed merely to add a measure of dignity, he entered the dingy little lobby of the Hickory Center Hotel and approached the fly-specked cigar case at the end of the desk.

"Good morning, captain," greeted the seedy middle-aged clerk, slouching over to the case and drawing out a box of dangerous looking weeds marked "10c. straight." "Kind of hot for April, ain't it? Nice day, though."

"Good morning, Silas," replied Captain Pennington, abstractedly.

He eyed his favorite brand with wistful glance, but for once hesitated.

From the tail pocket of his shiny Prince Albert coat he drew a frayed silk handkerchief. Removing his broad-brimmed rusty black felt, he gracefully mopped his bald spot and gave a final flourish at his impressive white mustache and goatee.

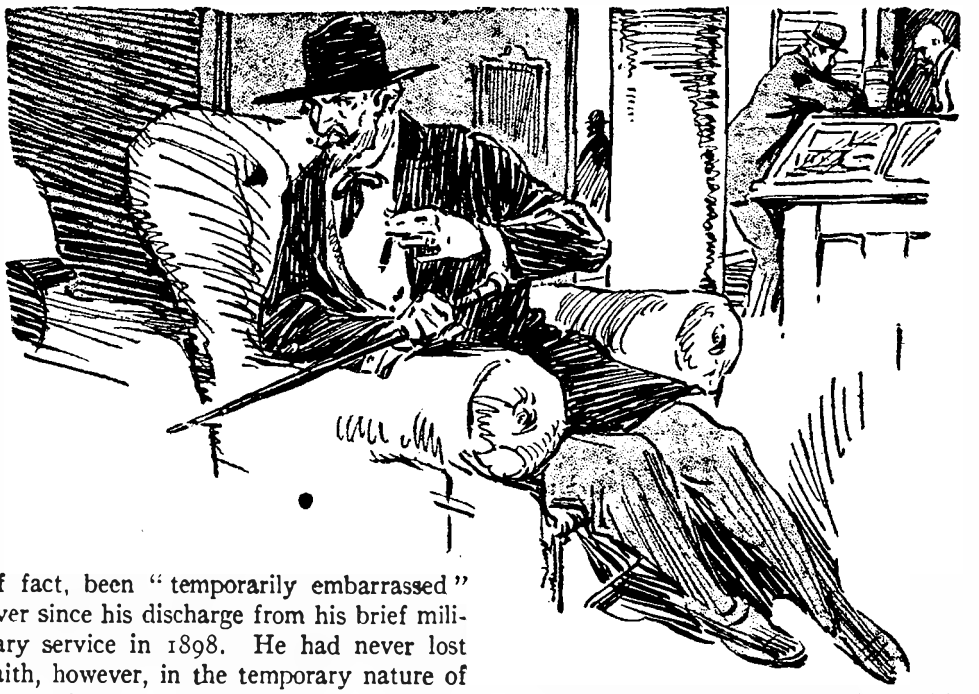
Then the soft white fingers of his right hand returned to the lone dollar bill in his trousers pocket.

A moment longer he hesitated. Over his aristocratic features swept a look of distaste followed by one of decision.

"Do you know, Silas, the late Vice-President Marshall uttered a profound truth when he said that what this country needs most is a good five cent cigar! We had that blessing once, Silas, up to about the end of the Spanish War. I see over there a box of El Moros, a brand I smoked regularly in the army. I suppose they have deteriorated since then, but I have a notion to try one for sentiment's sake."

He selected a black atrocity with great care while the clerk watched him with that blasé wisdom of his tribe, developed even when marooned in a rural back-water like Hickory Center. He had seen the captain "temporarily embarrassed" before. He was not deceived by his euphemisms.

Captain Pennington was more successful in deluding himself. He had, as a matter



of fact, been "temporarily embarrassed" ever since his discharge from his brief military service in 1898. He had never lost faith, however, in the temporary nature of that embarrassment. He lived in a glowing illusion of the past glory of the Penningtons, and of a great day of sudden riches about to dawn.

Following the groove of daily habit, he strolled across to his favorite overstuffed chair by the window behind one of the writing desks.

Settled comfortably, he went on with his problem.

How could a gentleman of leisure live gracefully on ninety-five cents through the bleak period of ten days intervening between now and his next pension payment?

Glancing out of the window, he caught sight of his oldest son, Theodore Roosevelt Pennington, strolling idly down the street. The sight added a touch of bitterness to his predicament.

"If Theodore hadn't lost his job again!" he mused.

Losing jobs was a specialty with the easy-going Theodore. He had been indulgently allowed to neglect his education, and he shared his father's distaste for such work as he was fitted for. In these respects he resembled the rest of the captain's brood of six.

But his ire at Ted was fleeting. After all the boy was a Pennington, and the Penningtons weren't always going to be in need of jobs—just temporarily embarrassed, that was all. And Ted, too, had done his bit in the war, the Great War. Life owed him something.

Nevertheless, ten days are ten days and ninety-five cents are ninety-five cents.

A few minutes his mind toyed ineffectually with the problem. Then it gradually relaxed under the combined influence of tobacco and the recent late breakfast of his wife, Eunice, who was an excellent cook. Fortunately, the Penningtons still had limited credit at the local store between pension payments.

Musing on that last and more grateful thought, he let his stately head fall against the high chair back. Journeys of the dubious cigar to his lips became less frequent. At length it fell unheeded from his limp fingers.

Captain J. Mortimer Pennington was fast asleep.

But even in his sleep the captain kept his dignity. An onlooking stranger might easily have taken him for an old-time Southern colonel strayed far afield. In-

deed, the captain went to no little pains to foster that illusion.

The effect was purely exotic. Captain Pennington could not even boast a remote ancestor from below the Mason and Dixon line. For himself he had been born in this little western New York village, and lived all his sixty years there, except during his brief army career.

The two strange men who entered the hotel lobby at this moment, however, did not even see the slumbering captain, a simple fact that had a far-reaching effect on the future of the sleeper.

They had evidently met there by appointment, and at once glanced around for a quiet spot in which to talk, safely out of the hearing of the acute, curious-eared hotel clerk.

The writing desk in the corner seemed best located. It was one of the common type of double affairs with an upright panel between, just high enough to conceal the sleeper. Approaching on the opposite side of the desk from him, and being preoccupied in drawing up chairs, they sat down without noticing the captain.

One man at the desk made notes and figures on a sheet of letter paper. The other, beside him, read his notes and discussed them in low tones.

Slowly the mumble of voices penetrated to the consciousness of Captain Pennington. He roused a little, half-opened his eyes, and seeing no one, dozed off again.

But the mumble of talk continued. The captain was annoyed. It was getting harder all the while for a gentleman to enjoy a mid-forenoon nap in peace. What with a noisy houseful at home, and strangers flocking in and out of the hotel, a man might almost as well be a toiling office slave and done with it.

He was pretty nearly awake now, and had about made up his mind to shake himself out of his nap long enough to relocate at the opposite end of the lobby, when the full meaning of the words of one of the conferees suddenly struck home.

"The center of the track and the key to the whole development is the farm of this old bird, Captain J. Mortimer Pennington. We can make a fortune out of that one farm alone, because if we keep our mouths shut we can get it for a song."

II.

At this mention of a fortune in connection with his ancestral farm, which had kept him land poor for so many years, the cobwebs were swept instantly from Captain Pennington's brain.

He snapped upright and stared in the direction of the voices. Only the tops of two heads, slightly above the desk panel, were in sight.

A moment he hesitated. This was eavesdropping—no kind of business for an officer and a gentleman and a Pennington.

But it hadn't been intentional, he told himself. Besides, it was too late now. The mischief had been done. Why cause intense embarrassment to all concerned by getting up and announcing himself?

Better lie low and pretend to be asleep if they saw him.

Besides, what was it all about? The captain ached to know.

So the upshot was that he dropped back in the chair, closed his eyes again, and eagerly drank in the rest of the conversation.

"Here's a rough map of the layout," the first speaker continued. "This is the Pennington farm, two hundred acres, one hundred on each side of the railroad. Right here in the center of the west one hundred we'll build the apartment hotel; just below it the railroad station. Then on the east hundred we'll put up the country club and lay out the golf course.

"Then we'll build a few villas on the rest of the property, just enough to start 'em coming. Meantime we'll have options on the adjoining farms, and take 'em up as we go along. I tell you, man, there's a whale of a fortune in it. Well-to-do Buffalo people will eat it alive as soon as they know Hollis DeLong is backing it, and is putting up his own country home out there. DeLong is the cream of society, you know. So, if you're interested, we'll run over there now."

"But why do you say we can get this Pennington farm for a song?" asked the other man.

"It's going to be sold for back taxes next spring, and it won't bring any more than the amount of the taxes. We need just about a year to complete financing and other arrangements, and get our other deal off our hands. So all we have to do is to keep the thing quiet until we pick up this Pennington property.

"In the first place, the land is all run out for general farm purposes, been bled to death by tenant farmers. Last year or two old Pennington hasn't been able to find a tenant. It's badly located, too, way off on a poor side road and miles from the present railroad station.

"Then this man Pennington is one of these run-out country aristocrats. He's never done a lick of real work since the Spanish War. The family used to amount to a lot, had a good deal of influence around here when this man's father was alive. The captain has spoiled all his kids, too; none of 'em any good.

"They've just let the farm go to pot, and haven't paid up the taxes in God knows how long.

"On account of the family's influence, the taxes have been allowed to run year after year until now. They owe around three thousand dollars in back taxes. And this year a new tax collector was elected who doesn't like the Penningtons. I've sounded him out cautiously.

"He's going to serve notice on the captain that one year from date he'll sell him out if the taxes aren't paid. They won't be. Old Pennington couldn't raise three thousand dollars if he wanted to, and he won't want to. He's tried several times to sell the farm. Wanted to mortgage it and couldn't. It's just a white elephant he'll be glad to get rid of. So all we'll have to do is bid it in for three thousand dollars, and it 'll shortly be worth half a million."

"But suppose the captain gets wise and raises the tax money?"

"Then we'll simply have to deal with him. We could afford to take him in on the scheme for a big slice if we had to, but we won't have to. He's dead from the ears up. He couldn't raise that amount in any possible way."

"Huh!" Captain J. Mortimer Pennington so far forgot himself as to explode in an angry snort behind the screen of the desk, thereby nearly betraying himself.

But, fortunately, the conspirators were too engrossed in their plot to notice it. At that moment one of them glanced back at the hotel clock over the desk.

"Just time for us to run out there and give it the once over before the noon train to town, if you're interested," he suggested.

"I think I'll do that. It looks good to me," the other agreed.

They got up and departed without looking back, leaving behind them in the corner chair an enraged elderly aristocrat who appeared as if he were about to shatter for all time his stately dignity by exploding into a thousand fragments.

For some moments he was too overcome with mixed emotions to move or speak. When finally he was able to move, he could not trust himself to speak anywhere within possible earshot of a fellow-villager. And his emotions demanded speech, speech of volume and depth without let or hindrance.

The seedy hotel clerk was not a little startled at the vision of suppressed rage that swept past his desk and out the door a moment later.

Down the street the captain stormed at twice his ordinary pace, still stately, to be sure, but with a dynamic difference. His usual limp was almost eradicated. The gold-headed cane, that ordinarily tapped a measured beat on the uneven sidewalk flags, was held before him like a menacing club.

Several curious eyes followed him.

"Must be Cap'n Mort's got the spring fever an' b'iled over," remarked George Weston, the local storekeeper, to Mrs. Martin Bremer, the customer of the moment.

"More likely heard of a piece of work lying around an' he's runnin' to get away from it," sniffed that lady. "How those Penningtons manage to live an' do nothin's more'n I can see! I'm sorry for Eunice, though, or would be if she had more spunk."

"Wal, the cap'n ain't so bad," Weston demurred. "He's a good-natured cuss an' I do sure like to hear him talk."

A little group waited on the post office steps for the bus that brought the mail up from the railroad three miles away. Wait-

ing for the mail was one of the captain's daily diversions, but he passed it by to-day.

He was too engrossed even to reply to the friendly salutes of members of the group.

Near the corner of the single cross street he almost ran into his enemy, Rufus Cole, the new tax collector. His glare was so fierce that Cole shrank involuntarily as he dodged to escape a collision.

"Dratted little skunk!" the captain grunted after the man had passed on. "He'll sell me out, will he? I'm dead from the ears up!"

He had turned down the single side street and was passing the village church and cemetery now. He felt fairly safe from living ears. Leaning against the low stone fence he broke out freely and with true military vigor, in language quite out of harmony with the sacred edifice and the peace of the sleepers in the sodded graves.

It was a very creditable performance for a mere Spanish War veteran. Many an A. E. F. man mired in Flanders mud would have paused in envy at such a well-rounded-out production.

Suddenly he stopped in the midst of his tirade, struck by a chilly thought. Was it possible that this was a ghastly joke? Had Rufe Cole set up a couple of traveling men to spoof him a little?

Well, he'd find out.

With face set in grim lines, he set rapidly off down the street, his progress followed by the curious eyes of gossiping housewives from behind curtains of the half dozen houses between there and the open fields.

Following the winding country road past scattering farmhouses for a scant two miles, he came within a half hour to a tumble-down, rambling, deserted building near the railroad, the seat of the ancestral acres of the Penningtons.

Sure enough! In front of the house stood a shining roadster of expensive make. The passengers were not in sight at the present, but Captain Pennington was morally certain they were the same whom he had heard plotting.

He carefully noted down the number of the car then slipped behind the far corner of the house and waited.

Fifteen minutes later he heard voices. The two men he had seen in the hotel appeared around the other corner of the house and approached the automobile.

"I'm satisfied to come in on it," he heard one of them say as they climbed in. "You've got a gold mine. Little does your old captain realize that he's letting two hundred acres of treasure slip out of his lazy fingers."

III.

As he watched the strangers disappear down the road, Captain Pennington's wrath and dismay suddenly evaporated under a return of his constitutional optimism.

Was he going to let a half million dollars' worth of treasure acres slip out of his fingers, all for the lack of three thousand measly dollars, when he had a year to collect it in?

Lazy fingers, huh! Well, he'd show them whether his brain was lazy or not!

He started back toward the village, in high spirits now. The old glory of the Penningtons was going to be restored at last and in greater burst of brilliance than ever.

Often J. Mortimer had winced inwardly at overhearing slighting comparisons between himself and his energetic father. He'd show 'em, by Godfrey! Had his father ever been worth a half million dollars? Not by any manner of means!

Again Captain Pennington was considering a financial problem as he marched sturdily through the April mud. He still had his task before him of keeping his personal cash expenditures for the next ten days down to ninety-five cents. But it had faded from his mind for the moment. The question of raising three thousand dollars was far more befitting the dignity of a Pennington.

And he'd put it over, by Godfrey!

But how?

Project after project blazed up in his seething brain only to pale again as quickly. The trouble was that practically everything he considered required one or two things, often both—hard work and capital!

The captain had his heart set on avoiding the former. As for the latter—well, if he

had capital, he wouldn't be bothering his head about how to get it, would he?

He was still nowhere near a satisfactory solution when he reached the house in Hickory Center where the family had lived ever since the father of J. Mortimer had retired from the farm when the latter was a boy.

On just one point he was settled. The whole family must go to work. He'd borne the burden of their support long enough, he told himself, and he really believed it. It was their turn to buckle down and all work together for a common end. Under his wise guidance they'd win.

A brilliant plan was beginning to form in his mind.

They were all there waiting rather sulkily for the belated dinner that their mother had insisted should not be eaten until the head of the house arrived.

But the exalted mien of the husband and sire hushed for a moment the chorus of protest that had been ready for him when his step was heard on the gravel walk. The captain's exalted moods usually meant trouble for them all.

"Ah, the family circle seems to be complete," he remarked unctuously, striking an attitude in the doorway and surveying them deliberately as one about to make an important announcement and wishing to enjoy to the full the dramatic suspense.

"Complete exhausted," Ted supplemented languidly; "I feel as empty as a circle, all right. Let's eat now, before dad goes into how he walloped Frank White at checkers over at the blacksmith shop."

"Theodore!" rebuked Mrs. Pennington, plaintively. She never could get over the idea that her offspring should give the same reverence to their father that she had always accorded him.

"You are facetious, Theodore," the captain remarked leniently. He could afford to be magnanimous. "Perhaps I might have something more important to disclose than a victory across the checker-board."

Mrs. Pennington paused on the way to the kitchen.

"Captain Pennington!" she exclaimed, hopefully. "You aren't going to tell us that your pension has been raised at last?"

Such a boon had been for many years one of the stock chimeras of the Pennington household.

"Pension?" the captain threw back his head and laughed.

Then he drew himself up solemnly and added a degree or two of mock dignity to his regular stock.

"Pension! My dear woman, know that a pension no longer means anything in my life!"

"What!" exclaimed Martha Washington Pennington, the oldest daughter, showing interest for the first time. "You haven't lost your pension? Good night, us!"

"Tut, tut, sister! Calm your fears." He gave the dark bobbed head of his favorite an indulgent pat. "Far from it! In fact, you shall have the entire pension as your allowance, double that, if necessary. Good idea! I must make a note of that to include such a provision in the corporation papers."

"Captain Pennington, what on earth are you talking about?" demanded Eunice, his wife, with unusual insistence. "What corporation? Are you fooling with some crazy mining stock or something again? Remember, you promised me you wouldn't go into anything like that after you lost a month's pension on that fake oil well."

"Right, my dear. It's nothing of that sort."

He paused for an impressive moment.

"I am speaking of the Pennington Development Company, capital stock five hundred thousand dollars."

IV.

CAPTAIN PENNINGTON had long since dulled his family's palate for sensational announcements. This was merely one of a series of false alarms. The fact that it was a climax of the series had been pretty thoroughly discounted.

Eunice shook her head sadly and went to the kitchen. Ted and Martha merely looked at him with adult disdain. Ulysses Grant and Dolly Madison, the sixteen-year-old twins, glanced at each other and snickered.

"I suppose it's another patent right," sighed George Washington.

"Or else the country rights for another dog-gone subscription book," suggested Fitzhugh Lee. "But five hundred thousand dollars! Why not make it an even million, dad?"

Instantly the captain snapped into a cold rage. He rose half out of his seat at the head of the table, bent on spurning the family board and eating a solitary meal at the hotel.

Then he remembered the meager ninety-five cents in his pocket and subsided. Besides, Eunice entered at that moment with his favorite stew.

But he withered his offspring with a sweeping glare all around the board.

"You're an ungrateful lot, an impudent, disrespectful generation of vipers!" he pronounced with deadly calm. "Here I've cared for you all these years, kept a roof over your heads and provided you with food and clothes. While I've labored with plans for building up the family fortune, you have disported yourselves in idleness.

"But I'm through. At last I've achieved the goal by my own unaided efforts and from you I get only derision."

"But, hold on, dad," Ted broke in on the tirade. "What's it all about? If you've really got something this time, tell us about it. Where does the half million come from? That's a lot of money!"

"That remains, my children, for you to decide," he conceded, slightly mollified. "You can do the work that will bring in that money, if you will, under my guidance."

He noticed the bored expression that rippled around the table at the mention of the word "work." Again his rage mounted. He banged a fist on the table.

"Yes, work! You can decide right now. Either you are for me or against me. This afternoon I am drawing up a new will disposing of an estate of five hundred thousand dollars. Those of you who will pledge yourselves right now to buckle down and work like Trojans for one year to help me put this over, will share in this estate. Those who do not so pledge themselves will be cut off with a shilling. And you can pack your personal belongings and get out!"

Again his emphatic fist made the dishes dance. His goatee bristled belligerently like the back of a porcupine.

"Why, Captain Pennington!" Eunice protested feebly.

For once the captain had made an impression on the heart of his family. Never before had he assumed such a harsh, dictatorial attitude. It began to dawn on them one by one that there must be something substantial behind such a revolution in character.

"Why, dad, don't get excited. Of course we're all with you!" Theodore Roosevelt assured him. "Aren't we?" he demanded, turning on his brothers and sisters.

"Of course. Sure. Certainly."

It was unanimous and there was something akin to respectful curiosity in their tones.

"That's better," the captain granted and he had no little struggle with himself to keep from dropping back into his customary stately good nature toward his family. But he realized that the time had come when he must hold the reins with firm hand and he steeled himself against the lax impulse.

His next step he had considered carefully. This must be made very impressive. The exact truth of the situation must be concealed even from his family. And absolute secrecy must be assured for what he chose to tell.

"First, let me make it clear to you that not one word of what I am about to impart to you must be breathed to a single soul. If it gets out the whole proposition will fall through. This family will lose a cool half million dollars.

"Theodore, do you pledge your honor as a soldier and a gentleman to keep absolutely inviolate what I am about to tell?"

Theodore concealed a fleeting grin.

"I do," he stammered, swallowing hard.

"George, do you so solemnly swear?"

"I do."

"Fitzhugh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ulysses?"

"Yes, sir."

"Martha?"

"Yes, daddy."

"Dolly?"

"Uh-huh."

"How about mother?" Dolly ventured to ask when Mrs. Pennington was conspicuously omitted from the ordeal.

"Your mother and I are one," solemnly rebuked the captain. "My wish and purpose are hers.

"Now," he went on, "perhaps you will realize that your father has not been the mere idler and dreamer that I'm afraid many of our neighbors have thought me all these years.

"When I came out of the army with this unfortunate lameness that prevented my performing any physical task and with it a nervous condition that rendered office routine impossible, I set about at once planning my family's future. To begin with I provided for their immediate creature comforts by seeing to it that the government accorded me a proper pension.

"That done, I attacked the future in a large way. Big things cannot be done in a minute. Thirty years ago I saw clearly that Buffalo within a generation would become a metropolitan center. Which meant that it would develop fashionable suburbs. I studied all the region within commuting distance, earnestly sounding out day after day, year after year, every one I met and spending long hours pondering on the result. The conclusion I came to was that the trend was in our direction, that this region was the logical site for Buffalo's fashionable and exclusive suburb. I determined to make the Pennington acres the basis of that development.

"Well, to be brief, I have at last won the victory. Hollis DeLong, the Buffalo financier and social leader, has come to see it as I do. Not only is he going to build his own country place out here; he is heading a company that will buy my farm and the adjoining lands and build a select community. Land you can hardly give away now will suddenly be worth over a thousand dollars an acre.

"The deal is all settled. I saw two representatives of the group of promoters at the hotel this morning. We went out to the farm and inspected the site thoroughly. They conservatively estimate that my land will be worth a half million when the actual building starts."

Here the captain gave an enlarged and gilded outline of the building plans he had overheard that morning.

"And I have it in my power to control the destinies of that fair new city, for without my acres the project must fail before it starts. It has even occurred to me that I should give it a name. What more fitting and euphonious name for such a community than Pennington Acres?"

"But where do we come in? How much money have they paid you down?" asked Ted pointedly.

Captain Pennington blinked in spite of himself.

"Well, ah—there's the rub," he admitted at last. "I haven't actually received any money as yet. We've got to do our part. Hence, the pledge of industry I have exacted. Hence, the need of secrecy.

"I—ah—regret to say that the confounded scoundrels plan to trim us if they can, but I propose to thwart it. You see, we owe three thousand dollars back tax money and that skunk, Rufus Cole, is going to sell us out in a year if we don't pay up. So they propose simply to wait till the end of the year and bid in the farm for the amount of the taxes. They'll get five hundred thousand dollars' worth of property for three thousand dollars."

"But they can't do that," Ted objected. "All you'll have to do is spring the story and there'd be a lot of big bids against them. You'd get a good price for the place."

"No, my son. They'd simply deny the story and lie low. No. Our only chance of holding the whip hand is to get the three thousand dollars and pay up the taxes. Then we'll have our own little company already formed and we'll threaten to go through with it ourselves if they won't. That 'll bring 'em to time."

A sudden chill fell on the group. It was as though some one had thrust a pin in a bright iridescent bubble.

"So!" Ted broke the silence first. "That's all we've got to do, is it? Just raise three thousand dollars over and above living expenses in the next year! Dad, you know darn well this family hasn't had a gross income all told of three thousand dol-

lars any one year since I can remember. We might just as well plan to buy up the United States Treasury."

"What did I tell you a few minutes ago, my son? I have plans for that. Just leave that to me. Did you ever know a Pennington to set out to do anything and fail? I will now go and consult my lawyer." He arose and strode confidently out, leaving a still bewildered family group behind him.

V.

AFTER the captain's departure the family sat for some moments, each communing with his or her own thoughts.

"Wouldn't it be funny if dad had really put it over at last?" Ted exclaimed, first to break silence. "It looks like the real thing this time. Well, it 'll sure seem good to be able to run into town whenever I want to and keep up my end with the fellows."

"Perhaps I can horn into the Samoset Rod and Gun Club after all," Fitzhugh mused.

"Now we can all go to Europe," George Washington ventured. "Ted won't have anything on us."

"I'll get out of this burg," Ulysses declared. "Now I can go to New York and study art."

"Oh, gee," murmured Dolly Madison, "won't I show that snippy Sally Kane how to dress!"

"Dress!" sneered Ulysses. "All girls think about!"

"Now we can have one of those slick Lenhard cars—a gorgeous sedan. M-m!" gloated Martha Washington.

"Yes, we will not!" vetoed Ted. "Who wants a colored car?"

"And a Lenhard!" jeered Fitzhugh. "Old ice wagon! We'll have a Maxton."

"Not worth a darn!" George Washington demurred hotly. "Have you seen the latest Hollis model? There's a real car."

They were off for a heated argument.

"Children, children!" wailed their mother. "Are you quarreling about our money already? And planning never to be at home any more? Dear, dear! I shall be happy enough just to see your dear father successful at last.

"It will seem sort of good to be able to have some new lace curtains," she admitted, after a moment's pause.

"Lace! Oh, mother! Get up to date. Silk draperies!" Martha corrected.

"I'm old-fashioned, I know," Eunice admitted, "but I'm going to have the things in my home that I like."

"All right! All right! Anyhow, I won't be here to suffer." Martha sniffed and flounced out.

One by one the others followed, each firing a parting shot in the word battle. The Pennington treasure acres were already yielding a crop of apples of discord.

"That lazy Ted Pennington is strutting more than ever to-day," remarked Mrs. Charles Hefflin as the captain's oldest passed her house a few minutes later. "Getting more and more like his father."

"You fellows be over to Towanda to the ball game Saturday?" asked Ted Morris, the grocery clerk, of the three other Pennington brothers, who were finishing the car argument on the post office steps.

"Can't do it. Busy," Fitzhugh refused with a confirmatory look from his brothers.

"That's right," George agreed after Tod had passed on. "They're a cheesy bunch. We fellows have got to be more particular about who we run with from now on."

Martha, going down the street in the other direction, met her chum, Laura Dale, daughter of the blacksmith.

"Hello, Marth," greeted Laura, gayly. "Doesn't a day like this make you begin to think about picnics over at Spring Beach?"

"Oh, hello, Laura," Martha returned with a coolness that startled her friend. "It is nice, isn't it? No, I doubt very much whether I do much picnicking there this summer. It's getting to be rather commonplace, don't you think? You never see any nice Buffalo girls there."

"Well, ain't you snooty?"

But Martha merely lifted a pair of aristocratic eyebrows and started on.

"What's the matter, Martha?"

"Nothing at all."

She left her chum hurt and puzzled.

At about the same moment her younger sister, Dolly, was passing along the cross-

street, toward a favorite spot under the big oak on Crowell Hill, where she often sat and indulged in maidenly dreams. The present occasion seemed to call for one of those sessions.

"Hi, Doll!" hailed Jim Turner from between the plow handles in his father's garden.

Dolly failed to hear him, though only the week before she had celebrated the first warm spring day by keeping an hour's stolen tryst with Jim under the old oak.

Captain Pennington could not complain that his children were not taking his claim to fortune seriously this time.

And meanwhile, the good captain had strutted down the street purposefully until he reached the hotel. There he paused for a moment with sudden irresolution.

Then he stalked inside and over to the cigar case.

"Another El Moro, captain?" asked Silas, the clerk, reaching for the box.

The captain waved it back grandly.

"Thanks, no, Silas. My curiosity is satisfied. I'll take a Persens."

And he grandly threw fifteen cents on the case without a thought of the eighty cents left in his pocket.

Next door he entered the office of Torrence Winters, Hickory Center's sole lawyer.

"Good morning, Mr. Winters. I have a couple of documents I'd like to have drawn," he began as he seated himself. "First, I would like to make a new will if you will kindly note the provisions. My present will which you have in your safe, you may modify as follows, after leaving the provision giving my wife the use of one-third of the property during her lifetime. A sum of fifty thousand dollars to be bequeathed to the village of Hickory Center to build a combined public hall and library as a memorial to the Pennington family."

The lawyer gasped and stared at his client.

"You have that noted?" asked the captain a little testily.

"Oh, yes, I—I was a little surprised."

The captain ignored the interruption.

"Fifty thousand dollars to each of my children, the residue to be divided equally among them. You have that?"

"Yes—yes—ah—I wasn't aware—ah—"

"That I had such an estate to leave," the captain finished for him. "One's circumstances change from time to time. I can't go into that now. You understand of course that both of these matters are confidential."

"Certainly! Certainly!"

"Now I want you to draw up papers of incorporation for the Pennington Development Company, the notes on which I have here."

He handed a sheet of paper covered with penciled memoranda to the lawyer.

"I see," said Winters after a few moments' study in which his amazement and curiosity grew to the bursting point.

"Ah—fifty thousand dollars' capital—hum! You realize the fees for this will be rather heavy, State tax and all?"

The captain was dashed at that. He hadn't thought of it. But he preserved his outward aplomb.

"Quite so," he agreed. "We'll take that up later. Draw up the papers and I'll look them over, of course, before we commit ourselves finally. I'll not be at liberty to explain more fully just now. Good day, sir."

The captain departed. It is to be presumed the lawyer observed proper professional ethics regarding the confidences of his client. Yet, by the time the evening mail came in, it was common gossip that the fortunes of the Penningtons had taken a sudden upward turn.

VI.

At the first meeting of the tentative organization of the half million dollar Pennington Development Company, the crying need was ready cash.

After the pockets of the stockholders and directors were turned inside out and the contents checked on the dining room table, the total liquid assets of the concern were found to be three dollars and ten cents.

The captain's own funds had by now dwindled to fifty cents. He reluctantly added them to the pile.

The corporation as yet had no legal existence. The forms had been drawn up and would be used for working purposes. No

need of paying the heavy fees unless the formal corporation should be needed as a club to compel the Buffalo people to deal with them.

The stock lay in the hands of the captain, with certain allotments to each member of the family to be paid for in installments, the captain as president still to retain a majority holding. The farm, with its potential appraisal of five hundred thousand dollars, constituted the value behind the stock.

But the realization of this value depended on raising that three thousand dollars of tax money. Doing it depended on the earnings of the stockholders.

At the moment, not a stockholder had a job and the total expense money available for job hunting was the three dollars and ten cents on the dining room table.

"We must get hold of a fund for running expenses, somehow," the captain announced. "You've got to find employment, all of you and right away. It looks as though you would have to go to Buffalo for that. One or another of you has lost every available job in Hickory Center. I've canvassed the place thoroughly in the last two days and there isn't an opening of any kind that I would consider for a child of mine. Your reputation for instability is against you here. Besides, we can conserve our dignity better by working at a distance. No one need know our business.

"But it costs money to go back and forth to Buffalo job hunting. We will have none until my pension comes, a week from now, but most of it will go right out again for store bills, as usual."

An hour's debate found no solution until Eunice came to the rescue.

"You know that old oak chest in the attic, Captain Pennington? Well, these antique collectors are buying things like that nowadays. We've sold about everything to them now that we could get along without. But I don't need that."

"You know I always objected to selling our effects," the captain protested. "It's very undignified for people of our caste."

"Oh, dad, you're behind the times," Martha Washington expostulated. "Don't you know it's quite the thing now to deal in old furniture. Society women are doing it all over."

This was a new idea to the captain. He shifted his viewpoint with some difficulty, but at last yielded as there was no other hope in sight.

But once converted, he proved versatile. The chest was cleaned up and attractively located on the front porch. Two of the family's remaining really good chairs were placed beside it. The family surveyed the result.

"Martha, my dear," the captain announced to his oldest daughter, "you are about to be a young gentlewoman who has taken up antiques as a fad. Why, my dear girl, you may perhaps solve our whole problem for us. There is a lot of money in this business."

On the Pennington gatepost this neatly lettered sign appeared the next day:

EXHIBIT of ANTIQUE FURNITURE WITHIN. MISS MARTHA WASHINGTON PENNINGTON

The local paper also carried this announcement that week, written by Captain Pennington himself and inserted as a favor to him by the editor, who had in the past received from the captain many valuable political ideas.

YOUNG SOCIETY LEADER ADOPTS A CAREER

Miss Martha Washington Pennington, elder daughter of Captain J. Mortimer Pennington, U. S. A., retired, one of our leading citizens, is an example of those young women of social position who have adopted professional and artistic careers.

Miss Pennington is making a study of early American house furnishings. Beginning tomorrow, she will hold a continuous exhibition of antiques at the family's town home on Main Street, this village.

Miss Pennington announces that any one possessing rare old furniture of merit may have the full privilege of entering them in her exhibit.

"Which is quite in keeping with the dignity of the Pennington family," the captain commented, after reading the item over a round dozen times at the breakfast table.

So hopeful was the president of the Pennington Development Company of this

branch of its activities that he assigned the twins as Martha's assistants—Dolly to assist in receiving patrons and Ulysses, who had an art flair, to do the work of renovating the old pieces.

Martha borrowed a book on American antiques and plunged into the job with real enthusiasm.

But a week passed and neither the chest nor any of the few dubious pieces contributed by neighbors, sold.

Then the pension money came in. The captain, in desperation, held up the store bill and devoted a part of that fund to job hunting in Buffalo with his three older sons.

When the Penningtons began commuting without giving satisfactory explanations to the gossips, it was assumed that they were attending to the affairs of their mysterious new fortune. They said nothing to alter this impression.

It persisted after Ted had found a job as a salesman and his brothers were located as clerks, thanks to the captain working his Buffalo acquaintances hard.

The evening after the last of the boys was thus landed, they took stock of the situation. Each son was to contribute ten dollars a week toward the tax fund and support himself entirely on the balance of his wages.

"But," Ted objected, "that's only thirty dollars a week, a little over fifteen hundred dollars a year—about half what we need. And Martha's antique stuff looks like a flivver to me. I think it's up to you, dad. You've got the superintending done for the present, now that we're all placed. It's up to you to get some kind of work yourself if we're going to put this over."

The captain flushed angrily, but he couldn't deny the logic of this statement. When he spoke it was rather plaintively.

"You forget, my son, that your father is a cripple and a nervous wreck."

"You don't need to do anything that takes leg work, dad. As far as your nerves are concerned, you've been doing a lot of brain work on this thing, years of it, you told us, and it hasn't hurt you."

The captain was fairly trapped. He said nothing more, but adjourned the conference with prompt informality.

Next morning, however, Captain Pennington resumed his regular trips to town without comment to his family. And for three days he came and went with little to say.

But on the evening of the fourth day, Captain J. Mortimer Pennington returned riding again on the crest of the wave.

"I've got it!" he boomed. "I've landed a business connection that may clean the whole thing up any day now!"

VII.

THE family gathered around excitedly.

"I am representing the Bison Realty Company in the sale of several big tracts on the south side of Buffalo," he announced proudly. "A sale of any one of them would net me commission enough to more than meet this tax money at once."

The captain painted in glowing terms how he had landed the job through an old acquaintance in the government building—a brother army veteran. He was enthusiastic over his "associates" as he grandly called the heads of the concern. It was highly flattering to him to receive such important assignments.

"I impressed them with my knowledge of realty affairs, obtained by my prolonged study of the situation out here."

As a matter of fact, the wily captain had gone to the head of the company with a letter from his veteran friend, which the latter had been unable to refuse, but had made noncommittal. The realty man had indeed been impressed—but with the captain's complete lack of any knowledge of the real estate game.

But he didn't want to offend his friend's friend. He had, therefore, promised him the usual commission on anything he sold for them on a straight commission basis, assigning him some tough propositions to which he could do no harm.

On this the captain hammered away enthusiastically for two weeks, but without results. He was always about to land a big deal and seemed really to believe he would.

Then Ted lost his job. His employers gave as their reason, his persistent failure

to show up on time. In reality, he had proved himself utterly unadapted to that kind of work as well as pretty thoroughly lacking in experience.

As usual, after losing a job, the young man was discouraged. The captain was convinced he hadn't tried to make good and wasn't putting forth any real effort to get a new situation. The upshot was that they had a violent quarrel.

"All right, young man!" the captain roared at last. "You can get right out of this. I'll make a new will to-morrow and cut you off without a cent."

Ted walked out in a fine rage, promising that was the last they'd see of him. And the next day the captain, true to his word, but with a sinking heart, made the new will.

But after his father had gone to town, Ted, considerably mollified, slipped in to see his mother.

"Why don't you come around this evening and talk it over with your father?" she urged. "He won't be too harsh with you."

"Never. I'm through. He can keep his money."

"But what are you going to do."

"Don't know."

Eunice Pennington did a little sober thinking.

"Listen, Teddy dear. Why don't you go down to the farm and stay in the old house for a little. I won't say anything to your father at present. I'll keep you supplied with food. You can cut up some wood and do a little gardening. Maybe one of us will hear of a job meanwhile. If I can save out a little money I'll send it by Ulysses."

Ted shrugged. Rustication wasn't his idea of a wonderful time, but perhaps it was better than being a tramp. Ted had led too soft a life to take kindly to either. So he went.

The following Sunday was a low day with the captain. He had about made up his mind that he was not fitted for the real estate profession. Not a nibble had rewarded his efforts. He had not as yet contributed a cent to the tax fund.

Martha was still working enthusiastically at the antique shop, but so far her expenses had eaten up just about what the boys had made.

As for the boys, the captain had been sorely disappointed. Secretly he was worrying over what had become of Ted, as he had heard nothing from him. Within the last two days, both the other boys had lost their jobs and had nothing else in sight, though they showed a more decent disposition than had Ted.

The captain felt the need of a solitary walk. Not unnaturally his steps took him toward the farm. As he neared the house he stopped in surprise. Smoke was rising from the battered chimney.

"Tramps, by Godfrey!"

Brandishing his cane menacingly, he advanced into the yard and around the corner of the house. The ring of a hoe on gravel soil smote his ears. He followed the sound.

A little farther on he came upon his oldest son, Ted, in shirt sleeves, planting a row of peas in a newly spaded garden.

"Well, sir! Do I have the pleasure of seeing you at work at last?"

Ted whirled, startled, and flushed at sight of his father. But he caught instantly the glint of humor in the eyes that were trying to be stern, and he laughed gleefully.

"Caught is right, dad!"

Then and there Captain J. Mortimer Pennington had a new and final inspiration.

"By Godfrey, we've got it! We've got it!" he exclaimed. "Why didn't we think of it before?"

"Got what, dad?" asked the puzzled Ted.

"Why, boy, we'll make the old farm pay its own taxes! Truck gardening for the Buffalo market! There's a mint of money in it. The other boys have quit their city jobs. I'll send 'em out here to-morrow."

"Suits me O K, dad."

"And we'll simply say we're all taking a vacation," the captain went on thoughtfully. "Let it be understood that our affairs in town have shaped up so that we can leave and that our doctor has ordered

us to take open air treatment for our nerves."

"Fine. Save the old family dignity."

"Remember, my boy, we have to live up to the dignity of a half million dollar fortune. And by the way," he added, as he started to go, "that last will, Ted. I'll just destroy it. I trust no further need of such discipline will arise."

Ted Pennington's younger brothers were not so enthusiastic over gardening. However, the menace of another alteration of wills bottled up their objections. Monday morning they were established at the farm with Ted.

"My dear," the captain said to his wife that day, "now that the boys are settled on the farm, why wouldn't it be a good idea for us to move to our summer home too? All the élite are doing it. We can leave the girls here to run their shop. Martha tells me she wants to go on with it. And she really made a few dollars last week."

Eunice agreed as usual, and a week later the family were established at the farm, "in their country home at Pennington Acres," as a carefully worded news item announced.

Captain Pennington himself found this place of residence rather trying as a matter of fact. It meant a two mile walk into the village and back twice a day for his morning cigar, mail, and vesper gossip.

But he gradually got used to it. There were days when for a mile at a time he forgot to limp. His not undignified paunch also underwent considerable reduction.

The boys continued to buckle down to business and gradually extended the acreage under cultivation. At the end of a month the first products were ready for the Buffalo market, and brought good cash prices.

Added to this, Martha's antique shop began to pay expenses and show signs of forging ahead. It was again the quiet Eunice who made a valuable suggestion that helped turn the tide—that they serve tea. She presided in the kitchen making tiny biscuit, cakes, tea and coffee, and the girls served it.

Thus things went on smoothly and exhilaratingly for a little time. Captain Pennington and his family had come to take the meeting of the tax money on time as a foregone conclusion.

Then came the mutiny.

VIII.

THERE had come upon them a hot dry spell, trying to fruits and vegetables as well as to the nerves of their cultivators. They were hampered by lack of proper tools, and they had no money with which to buy them—that is, no money to spare for that purpose.

Captain Pennington, like all those who watch farming from afar, thought he knew all about it. Had he not discoursed on the subject many an evening to an admiring group of actual tillers of the soil, not realizing that their admiration was for his flow of language rather than for the opinions set forth?

Now the captain was becoming daily more critical of his sons' methods of work. He was constantly giving hampering directions. Frequently the sons failed to agree with his judgment.

Under the attack of the drought one crop after another failed. Pennington products ceased to find their regular way to the Buffalo markets. The savings account at the Hickory Center Bank stopped growing. The year was a quarter gone and the necessary fund was by no means a quarter raised.

Little hope could be based on the fashionable Pennington Antique Shop and Tea Room, though Martha's enthusiasm continued unabated.

There came a day when there was a ball game and picnic at Wayman's Beach. All the countryside was attending. The temptation was too strong for the Pennington boys. They felt they had earned a day's vacation and decided to go.

"You will do nothing of the sort," their father thundered when the subject was broached. "Would you leave when a day's delay may mean the loss of a thousand dollars in ruined crops? Constant agitation of the soil is what saves the day in a dry spell. No, sir-ee, you fellows are going to stick right on the job."

But Ted, the spokesman for the trio, was obdurate.

"No, dad. We can do better work after a day off. We're all in. You don't know anything about it. You aren't doing any of the work. Just try it and see!"

"All right!" the captain snorted in a cold rage. "If you go, you may stay. I'll not fool with you any longer. You'll find I'll manage without you. I'll make a new will this afternoon."

But the boys went.

They did not return that night nor the next day. On the day following came a letter from Ted saying they had jobs at the beach and were enjoying themselves very well, thank you.

A week the boys stuck.

Then one afternoon they strolled in again. They had grown bored with the jobs at the beach, and unceremoniously chucked them. Besides, the thought of home and the stirring of guilty consciences lured them.

Opposite the tilled acreage, just before they reached the house, they stopped to inspect the vegetables, anxious as to how things had fared in their absence.

"By gosh! Things look pretty good," Ted exclaimed. "Who's been at it?"

"There's a man at work over there," George pointed out.

The man in question was a veritable scarecrow, in a heterogeneous equipment of torn overalls and jumper. His back was toward them, but when he heard their voices he moved swiftly away without looking back. And there was something familiarly stately about his gait.

The scarecrow disappeared behind some currant bushes. In a moment, from behind those same currant bushes, there appeared the stately figure of Captain J. Mortimer Pennington in frock coat and broad brimmed felt hat, and bearing his gold-headed cane.

"Were you gentlemen looking for me?" he demanded coldly.

"Dad, we're licked," Ted confessed. "Never mind the darned will; we've come back to where the grub's fit to eat, and there's a man's work to do."

Again they caught a twinkle in the would-be cold eyes. But he merely said:

"We won't discuss the will. Get into your work clothes and go at it. We've lost several hundred dollars through this performance."

When they returned from the house ready for business, the scarecrow was on the job again. They got a chance to make a detour of the currant bushes, and there in a neat pile lay the frock coat, hat and cane.

This time when they faced their father there was a positive twinkle in his eyes.

"I wouldn't have gone to such pains to change if I had known members of the family were approaching," he admitted. "It is unnecessary for the public to know the lengths to which the Penningtons are compelled to go at present.

"I have allowed the impression to get abroad that I am doing some exercise for my health, however. And I find that such is actually the case. I shall continue to work with you. I have never felt so well in my life. You may have noticed that my lameness has practically vanished."

IX.

It was at the church sewing circle meeting, held in the parsonage nearly a year after the eventful day when Captain J. Mortimer Pennington began his morning with a financial problem involving ninety-five cents, and ended it with a vision of a half million dollar future.

The Penningtons were up for discussion.

"Well, I don't believe it!" Mrs. Raymond Hollis was insisting. "It's absurd to think they'd be sold out for three thousand dollars back taxes with all the money they're supposed to have—a country and town home, two hundred acres of good truck garden land, that antique furniture business of Martha's."

"Can't help it," snapped Mrs. Worden. "The tax sale was advertised in the paper. They'd have been sold out long ago if we'd had a tax collector that lived up to the law instead of toadying to aristocrats."

"But they're certainly nice people and leaders in the town," Mrs. Tusey maintained. "Why, the story was that the captain's will left fifty thousand dollars to the

village to build a memorial hall and library, and that the captain was head of a half million dollar corporation. This must be just a mistake, or some dispute over the amount, or something. I won't believe it till I see the sheriff throwing 'em out."

"Neither will I," was the general chorus, which indicates pretty clearly the climb the Penningtons had made in public esteem during the year.

But quite another story was unfolding at a conference in the Pennington dining room, where the moribund Pennington Development Company was in session.

"I've tried every possible turn, and it's no good," groaned the captain. "We've got only two thousand dollars, and they won't accept that and extend the time."

"You still think the bank won't lend a thousand?" queried Eunice.

"After all the times they've refused to lend us a cent I wouldn't ask them."

"We'd have made it if it hadn't been for that dry spell," Ted insisted.

"Or you birds hadn't run off for a week," Ulysses jabbed at his brothers.

"I've been hoping the tea-room and shop would do it," Martha wailed, "but it is only lately that it has begun to pay well."

"There's no use in recriminations," sighed the captain. "We simply had a series of misfortunes. It's too late now. The Buffalo gang is ready to grab our fortune, and we'll simply have to live on the pension and what Martha can make on her business. We got that, anyhow, and we never did care for the farm."

"Oh, but we do now, dad," Ted demurred. "It's been the making of us."

"Right, my son, but it's gone. The thing that hurts me most is that that gang of crooks will make a half million that belongs to us."

Captain Pennington went to the sale the next day, faintly nursing the last minute hope that the news of the coming boom would start competitive bidding that would yield him a profit. He saw the futility of starting any such talk himself. He could not in honor do it.

But there was no competition. There was only one bid, that put in by Truman Cole, the local banker, evidently acting as agent for the Buffalo crowd.

Captain Pennington turned dejectedly toward home. Some one hurried up from behind and touched his elbow. It was Cole.

"Look here, captain, you didn't commission me to buy in your place for you, but it amounts to the same thing. I don't see why you didn't come to me beforehand and save costs. You see, circumstances are quite different than when you asked for loans before. Now you and your boys are working the farm successfully, and you have other business assets besides.

"I don't want your farm. I'd be glad to let you put a mortgage on the place to cover the taxes and take the place back."

Captain Pennington stared at him stupidly for a moment, too dazed to speak.

"But—I thought you were bidding for that crowd of promotors in Buffalo, the DeLong gang who were going to build a suburb there," he stammered at last.

"That crowd? Oh, no. They gave up that scheme a year ago nearly. Experts found that the drainage was bad, and they're going to a spot on the lake shore instead."

THE END

The Print of a French Heel

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "The Hole in the Wall," "West of Broadway," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE VOICE ON THE PHONE.

THE silence which smothered Miltville was shattered by a sharp barking report, followed in quick succession by three more. In the bedrooms of the houses along Cedar Street several heads lifted on pillows to listen, then dropped back heavily while their owners muttered "automobile backfire" and returned to slumber.

But in one of the houses a man was groaning on the floor of his bedroom with two bullet holes in his body, while the slam of the front door marked the exit of his assailant. There was a dim light burning in the bedchamber—Amon Peterson always slept with a light on; he had reason to be afraid in the dark—and the wounded man lay in the middle of the floor, writhing in pain, while his white nightshirt slowly crimsoned with the blood which flowed from two chest wounds.

Peterson seemed to be about sixty years old with grizzled instead of gray hair, and a short pepper and salt beard. His eyebrows were very bushy, his nose long and predatory, and his sharp pointed chin nearly touched the tip of his nose because his false teeth were out, in fact both sets were visible in a tumbler of water on the bedside table. He did not cry out because he was alone in the house; instead, he grunted and groaned, but despite evident agony, slid himself along the floor until he reached the side of the bed.

On the little table stood the telephone, and this he wished to reach. To drag himself with a shattered chest to the bed was a dreadful task. His clawlike hands grasped the wooden side of the bed, then the mattress, and then the head of the bed, while the effort forced gasps of mortal agony from his throat.

Finally, he achieved the bed, and fell, apparently, lifeless upon it, while the sheets slowly colored dark red. It seemed as though he could not give the alarm. He was motionless for a moment or two; then one long arm reached out and fumbled for the base of the telephone, and finally secured it. Even to lift the instrument was a task; the man was breathing so heavily that it seemed like the death rattle in his throat. But he got the mouthpiece to his mouth, and moved the hook up and down until a sleepy and careless telephone girl drawled "Hello."

"Amon Peterson talking."

"Louder, please."

"A-mon Pe-ter-son. I've been murdered."

He heard a titter, and ground his gums together in rage.

"Quit yer kiddin'. How could you be murdered and tell me about it?"

"Shot, dying," he gasped. "Get police. Arrest Bill Phillips."

"Who—what—d'yer mean it?"

"Mur-dered. Bill Phillips did it," repeated the old man, his voice dying away so as to be inaudible at the end. Then the 'phone dropped from his hands, his head fell back; when he died a vengeful smile distorted his hideous face.

And that was the end of Amon Peterson, who was generally considered the meanest man in Miltville, most likely the meanest man in Massachusetts, and one of the richest. He died alone because he would not pay a servant; his wife had perished contentedly twenty years before; his daughter had run away to go on the stage four years before, and had not communicated with him since, and his son had been driven from his home a year or two earlier, and had never again been seen in Miltville.

The telephone girl, now wide awake, called the chief of police, Arthur Easton, and repeated what she had heard. It was then eleven five or ten P.M., the middle of the night in Miltville.

"You mean to tell me he was murdered, and called you up and told you Bill Phillips shot him."

"Yes, sir," whimpered the girl who was alone in the telephone exchange, and already imagined that the murderer was coming after her.

"Sure it wasn't some of those drug store funny fellers?"

"No, sir, I think I recognized his voice; it was awful weak and then died away."

"But Bill Phillips! He wouldn't shoot anybody."

"That's the name he said."

"Look here, Lulu. Realize you'll hang Bill?"

The phone girl sniffled; the chief could almost see the eyes fill with tears.

"He—he said Bill Phillips," she repeated.

"Hum. First I'll go to Peterson's and see if he was having a nightmare. Get hold of Luther Ames, and send him down to arrest Bill on suspicion. Tell him I told you."

The chief was lying in bed as he talked, his wife, a fat, round-eyed, gray-haired woman, was listening avidly, and demanded a complete rehearsal of what had been told on the phone while her husband was dressing.

"The old skinflint," she declared, when he had finished. "Somebody had ought to have killed him long ago, but I can't believe it of Bill Phillips."

"Imagine the guts of the old man getting to the phone after he was shot," chuckled the chief who liked to have his wife think him hard-boiled. "Bet Bill Phillips never thought of that. He had ought to cut the wire 'fore he fired the fatal bullet."

Just the same Arthur Easton's hands were trembling as he tied his shoes; if Peterson had been murdered, it was a big case, and in his twenty years of incumbency of his office nobody had ever been murdered in Miltville.

In ten minutes he had left the house, plodded out to the chilly garage, and coaxed

his wheezy auto into activity. Then he rumbled and rattled his way across the sleeping town, a town which was beginning to wake up. He saw lights flashing in bedroom windows—something incomprehensible to him, because he did not know that Lulu Blair in the telephone exchange was relieving her nerves by calling up subscribers with whom she was friendly and giving them the exciting news. As Miltville was a village of party lines, and whenever any of the numbers rang all the women on the line hastened to listen in, the result was that on each line five or six persons besides Lulu's friend got a terrific thrill.

Chief Easton turned up Cedar Street, a long, wide, unpaved avenue with two rows of fine cedars upon it, and reached the home of Amon Peterson in a very few minutes. It was a bleak house, about as decorative as a dry goods case, and resembling it in architecture. The steps sagged, there were boards missing from the porch flooring, no paint had been applied for at least ten years; its air was untidy and dreary.

The chief stopped at the front door, glanced up, and saw a light against the curtain of the old man's bedroom on the second floor, laid his hand on the door and hesitated. It had not occurred to him before, but it was nearly midnight; there was not a soul in the house except the old man who was supposed to be dead or dying. If he was dying, all right, but if he had died—a shiver convulsed the policeman; he feared a corpse—particularly to be alone with a dead man at the witching hour when the ghosts of murdered men were restless.

Arthur Easton received five hundred dollars a year to be chief of Miltville. It was nice on Sunday when he put on his blue uniform with gold bands on the sleeves and gold leaves on the cap and stood in Central Square directing the automobiles which shot continually through the town but rarely stopped and he did not mind conducting a tramp to the lockup. But murder—he wished for the first time that somebody else was chief of Miltville, whose duty it was to enter the house of death and touch the bleeding corpse.

And as he hesitated another machine grumbled its way to the door and a young man leaped to the ground and came to his side. With a sigh of relief he recognized him as Herbert Green, the editor of the weekly paper. This was different. In the presence of the press, the police acquired both dignity and authority.

"Hello, chief," said Herbert. "On the job, I see."

"I'm always on the job. How did you hear about this?"

"Lulu called me on the phone and told me about the dying message. Believe me, this is some piece of news."

"It may be a joke of some kind," replied the chief. "I wouldn't be surprised if old Amon was sound asleep and never called her at all."

"How about finding out?" suggested the editor. "Let's go in."

"That was what I was about to do when you butted in. Come on."

"Want me to go in alone first?" asked Herbert, rather maliciously.

"No—o. Now that you're here, you might as well come along."

"Want me to go first?"

"Certainly not."

He tried the front door which opened at the touch.

"He always locked it," said Easton.

They stepped into the musty front hall, dark as Hades, and about as fearsome. Easton knew where the hall light was and pressed the button, and the illumination gave them courage because no killer was lurking there.

The chief went up the stairs first, making his step intentionally heavy so that Amon, if he were alive might hear him and shout, but no sound came from the room of the owner of the house. The door was ajar, and an oblong of light lay upon the hall floor outside. The pair drew close together; then Easton resolutely pushed the door open.

On his back on the bed, the telephone, with the receiver off the hook, lying beside him, was Amon Peterson. There was a pool of blood in the center of the floor, and a streak of blood on the carpet marking his snakelike progress to the bed. The sheets were red in spots, and the whole front of his nightshirt was dyed crimson.

As the chief made no move, the newspaper man approached the still figure and bent over it. Gingerly he lifted the nightshirt and shuddered at the loathsome wounds. He touched the forehead, found it cold.

"Dead, all right," he said. "Must have bled to death."

"Don't touch nothing in this room till the medical examiner sees it," said Easton. "Sure he's dead?"

"No question about it."

"Well, call Dr. Morgan on the phone; we got to have a doctor to certify it."

Even the telephone was bloodstained, and Green felt a strong distaste at touching it, but the eye of the chief was on him and he obeyed.

"Better get right out of here," said the chief, who was white and weak. So much blood turned his stomach; he feared that he would faint in the presence of a reporter and be disgraced forever. So he turned around and went down the stairs—stumbled down them, to be exact—and dropped into a chair in the front hall.

In a moment Green followed him. The reporter also looked shaken, but carried himself better than the chief.

"How about looking for clews and things?" he demanded.

"Ain't no need. We know who done it."

"Bill Phillips?" said the editor.

"Sure. Amon told Lulu."

"Got to have clews just the same," said Green. "Nothing but a girl's word. She might not have heard right, might have been some name like Bill Phillips. I don't believe he did it."

"She was sure of it."

"To-night, maybe. To-morrow she's apt to say something else. She was hysterical when she called me."

"I got to go right down and arrest Bill," said the chief. "You stay here and wait for the doctor."

"Not on your life. I don't want to be alone with him."

"Wait outside in the street."

Green laughed grimly. "You know you have sent Ames after Bill. Lulu told me. You stick right here on the job, chief. You got to investigate that room. Got to find the weapon, and finger-prints, and lots of things. Bill won't run away. You got to prove a motive anyway. Know a reason why he should murder the old man?"

"No, of course not."

"You got to find one to send him to the chair."

"I don't want to send anybody to the chair. It's terrible."

Green patted him on the back and laughed indulgently. "You're a good old scout, Arthur, but you got to do your duty. If Bill killed Peterson, he's got to go to the chair. If somebody else did, we've got to find out who."

"You can't get around a man's dying words."

"Frankly, I wouldn't believe the old devil's dying oath. I hated him myself, and so did everybody in town."

"Man's character don't make any difference. Thou shalt not kill."

"Oh, sure, but if somebody in this town had to be killed, I'm glad it was old Amon Peterson."

"Guess this is Dr. Morgan," grunted the chief as a smart step sounded upon the decrepit porch and a sharp rap came upon the door. Green opened to admit the leading physician of Miltville, a small man wearing the Vandyke beard with which the New England small town physician is apt to be equipped, a little black bag, and a manner of ill-suppressed excitement.

"Somebody killed Peterson?" he demanded. "Doesn't seem possible. Let us go right upstairs."

The reporter and the policeman followed the doctor up to the second floor and stood just inside the door of the death chamber while Morgan shed his overcoat and hat and strode across to the bed where the dreadful spectacle confronted him.

"Quite dead," he said, "but *rigor mortis* has not yet set in."

"How could it? He was talking over the telephone less than an hour ago."

"Met death as the result of two bullet wounds; one entered above the heart, the other passed through the lungs. No powder marks—the shots could not have been self-inflicted."

"Never heard of a man firing two bul-

lets into himself," mumbled the chief. "Besides, we know who done it."

"Bill Phillips, so Green told me on the phone. Horrible affair."

The doctor pulled a sheet which had been thrown over the foot of the bed up and over the body. Then he looked around the room.

"Ha," he exclaimed. "The old man was not shot in bed. He fell in the middle of the room and dragged himself into the bed. Death was not instantaneous."

"Not if he was able to pull himself across the room and up on the bed and talk over the telephone," declared Green.

"He was in his night clothes, had gone to bed, as is evidenced by the fact that the bed covering was hastily thrown back. He must have heard an intruder in the room, got up, attempted to struggle with him, and was murdered. Any sign of the weapon, chief?" asked the physician.

Easton had not looked; now he moved about the room, peering carefully into corners, opening drawers, looking behind the curtains; finally he pronounced: "No weapon."

"*Post mortem* examination will extract one or both of the bullets and tell us their caliber. See any finger-prints?"

"There ain't light enough."

"Well, leave everything until the county medical examiner gets here in the morning. Suppose we go out and lock the door."

"You certify he's dead all right?"

"Dead as Alcibiades."

"Don't know him."

"You wouldn't," laughed the editor. "But take my word for it, that fellow has been dead a long time."

The three men left the chamber, locking the door on the outside, whereupon the chief dropped the key in his coat pocket.

"Now I got to go and see if Ames arrested Bill Phillips," sighed Chief Easton. "You phone the medical examiner, doc?"

"Yes, I'll do that."

"I'll go with you to see you arrest Phillips," said Green. "Then I'll sit up all night writing the story. We go to press tomorrow morning."

Three autos wheezed away from the home of the late Amon Peterson, passing several people hanging over the gates on Cedar Street, and several others hastily dressed and loitering upon the Main Street. As Chief Easton passed the one-story wooden police station and lockup he saw a light in the office which made him bring his car to a sudden stop, almost causing a collision with the car of Herb Green, who had been following close behind him.

The door of the station opened, and Officer Ames poked his head out.

"Hello, chief," he observed.

"Get him?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"He wasn't to hum."

"He wasn't?" demanded Easton. "Where was he?"

"Went out about nine o'clock and ain't come back. His mother heard 'bout the murder, and she almost tore me limb from limb. Wouldn't let me look in his room nor nuthing."

"That darn Lulu just about ruined this case," growled Easton. "Bet she telephoned everybody in town. Was his car in the garage?" He accented the first syllable of the word.

"Nope. It was gone too."

"Well, don't see what we can do," mused Easton.

"Call up Springfield, Worcester, and Boston police, and tell them to look out for the murderer," suggested Green. "If Bill has fled, it seems to prove that Amon was speaking the truth for once in his life."

"That ain't no way to speak of the dead," protested Ames.

"Shucks, what's the difference," demanded the chief. "Nobody liked Amon, but we got to apprehend the murderer just the same. Put in those phone calls, Luther. No sleep for us to-night."

CHAPTER II.

MR. ANDREWS COMES TO TOWN.

FROM the standpoint of newspapers, a murder is not hot news unless it is a mysterious murder. The case of Amon Peterson was ruined for the papers in the big cities because the killer was identi-

fied immediately. An ideal murder is one in which death occurs under strange circumstances, and there is no clew to the murderer. Suspicion points its skinny finger in a dozen directions; this person and that person is taken into custody and proves innocence, the hunt continues for weeks and even months, and every now and then an angle develops worthy of an extra for the afternoon papers.

Had this been such a murder, the star reporters of the Boston, Worcester, and Springfield newspapers would have landed in Miltville on the first train in the morning; instead, not a single newspaper man put in an appearance, and the only stranger was a rather stout, middle-aged man with a red face and a big, rather bulbous nose which was made further conspicuous by a network of blue veins. He wore number ten shoes, and he laid his feet down with an air of anxiety as if he were not sure they would obey orders.

He asked his way to the police station, which happened to be less than a block from the pretty little stone depot, and moved ponderously and slowly toward it, the while he grumbled under his breath at the smallness and lack of interesting features of downtown Miltville.

When he finally entered the station house he was confronted by no less a person than Chief Easton, who sat at his desk wearing his uniform cap, but minus his big blue coat with the gold sleeve bands, which hung over the back of his chair.

"Morning, chief," he said. "My name is Andrews—Henry Andrews. I'm a member of the State detective force, sent down here by the chief to look into this murder you had last night."

Easton rose and shook hands, while he sized up the State officer resentfully.

"Beats all, the way the State wastes money," he observed. "This case is all solved, everything clear—we know all about it; no need for State detectives."

Mr. Andrews lowered himself into a chair with a sigh of satisfaction.

"I ain't looking for work," he declared. "If you got it all sewed up, I'm tickled to death. Trot out the murderer and let me have a look at him."

"Well, we ain't got him yet. You see, he skipped town. That was in the morning papers."

Andrews grinned a heavy, good-natured, yet contemptuous grin.

"No case is solved till you got a conviction," he observed. "From what I read in the Worcester paper, the old man got to the phone and told a phone girl that a feller named Bill Phillips shot him. You go after Phillips, and he's gone. That right?"

"Yes, about right."

"Well, till you catch Phillips and make sure he ain't got an alibi, and prove that he was in or near the house or could be in or near the house, and get the phone girl on the stand and have her swear that she heard the dying man accuse this feller and swear she recognized his voice, you haven't got the case settled by a long shot."

"You mean to say the old man doesn't know who shot him?"

"I suppose he does, or he wouldn't have named the feller with his dying breath, but all these things got to be proved. First thing, where is this Lulu Blair that got the dying message?"

"Home in bed. She worked all night."

"Get her up. Got to talk to her. She can sleep afterward. Where does she live?"

"'Bout half a mile out of town. I'll take you out there in my car?"

The pair climbed into the auto, Mr. Andrews causing it to sag dangerously on one side, and they sped rapidly down the main street until the little shops gave place to dwelling houses and the paved street became the glossy black State road. At a small white story-and-a-half house, well back from the street, the chief stopped the car, and they descended, walked up to the front door, and rang the old-fashioned bell. After a moment's wait the door opened, and they were confronted by a slovenly-looking woman with jet black eyes and a mop of grayish black hair in great need of combing and brushing.

"Morning, Mrs. Blair," said the chief. "We got to talk to Lulu."

"Come in, Mr. Easton," she said. "The poor girl ain't been to bed yet, what with visitors and everything."

"Visitors?" asked Andrews, lifting his heavy eyebrows and giving her a penetrating glance from cold gray eyes. "What visitors? Who's been to see her?"

"Several folks. Mrs. Phillips with her now."

"Hear that, chief?" asked Andrews. "We didn't come none too soon."

Mrs. Blair went to the foot of the stairs and in a shrill voice cried:

"Lulu!"

"What is it?" was the reply, equally shrill.

"Come on down. Chief Easton wants to see you."

They had to wait a few moments; then Lulu Blair descended the stairs, followed by an elderly woman whose face was chalk white, whose black eyes were like coals, whose hands were thin and worn and wrinkled, and whose cheeks were creased and tear-stained.

Lulu Blair was a dark, thin, nervous-looking girl with black bobbed hair, not pretty, rather wistful; her brown eyes looked frightened, and tear drops, which she tried to wipe away with the back of her hand, were still coursing down her cheeks.

"What you want, Mr. Easton?"

"Now, Lulu," he said gently, "we got to have a little talk. You come into the parlor with me and this gentleman."

"Who's he?" she demanded, regarding the big man suspiciously.

"This is Mr. Andrews; he's a detective."

"Oh, well, all right."

"Can I come, too?" asked the older woman anxiously.

"No, Mrs. Phillips," replied Easton gently. "We'll talk to you later. Please don't go away."

Mrs. Blair opened the door of the parlor, which exuded a musty smell. It was a small room, dark because the curtains were down. It contained an ancient square piano with yellow keys, half a dozen horsehair stuffed chairs, and an uncomfortable-looking sofa upholstered in the same material, two or three hideous crayon enlargements of former members of the Blair family, and a glass case covering a stuffed bird.

Lulu seated herself upon one of the chairs and looked at the officers defiantly.

"You told me last night that Amon said Bill Phillips shot him," said the chief. "You are prepared to swear to that, ain't you?"

"Well—er—I don't know," was the surprising reply.

"Of course you are. You heard him."

"I couldn't understand him very well. It sounded like Bill Phillips, and I happened to know him, so I supposed it must be, but it might have been somebody else."

"Ha," exclaimed Andrews. "She's reneging already. Now listen to me, miss. You understood him perfectly, didn't you?"

"No-o," she replied hesitatingly. "I guess he had his teeth out; I couldn't make out what he said very well."

"You heard him say that he had been shot?" asked the chief.

"It sounded like that."

"Then you heard him say Bill Phillips shot him."

"I kind of thought he said Bill Phillips, and I asked him again, but I didn't get it last time: his voice kind of faded away."

"Are you prepared to swear that he did not say Bill Phillips?" asked the chief.

"That's no good as evidence," interrupted the detective. "Listen, young woman, it's a serious offense to lie to an officer. That old lady out there is this boy's mother, isn't she?"

"Yes, sir."

"And she's been over here this morning trying to make you think you didn't hear her son's name?"

"No, sir—yes, sir—I don't know, sir."

"I asked you last night if you understood you'd hang Bill if you stuck to your story, and you said it was him," reminded the chief.

"I didn't know what I was saying," she retorted, almost weeping.

"And this morning all you can tell me is that it sounded like Bill Phillips. Did you promise Mrs. Phillips you would deny what you told me last evening?"

"I couldn't hear Mr. Peterson very good, and he mumbled so, and all I can say is that it sounded like Bill Phillips, and that's all you can get out of me," she defied.

"But you called up several people after you talked to me, and told them that Bill

Phillips murdered Peterson. You know you did."

"Gee, I was all alone in the exchange at midnight, and I just heard about a murder, and I had to talk to somebody, and I don't know what I said, but if I told them it was Bill Phillips I hadn't ought to have done it, because I'm not sure at all, and I ain't going to swear to it," she declared.

Andrews looked at Chief Easton with a grin of contempt.

"Mystery solved, nothing to do," he quoted him. "Come on, chief. There goes your case. Let's talk to the old lady."

Lulu rose with alacrity and hastened from the room; and Easton, crestfallen, went to the door and invited Mrs. Phillips to enter.

The old lady almost tottered as she entered, and Easton sprang to her aid and assisted her to a seat on the sofa.

"This is Mr. Andrews, of the State police," he said. "Now, Arabella, don't you be frightened. Everything will be all right."

Mrs. Phillips threw him a glance which was not one of fright, but anger.

"You always were a fool, Arthur, but trying to connect my boy with a brutal murder is the most foolish thing you ever did."

"Where is your son, Mrs. Phillips?" asked the State officer sharply.

The old lady winced slightly, but answered steadily enough: "I really don't know."

"When did he leave home last night?"

She considered, drew herself up, looked over the big man from his huge shoes to his fat, homely face, and replied:

"I don't know."

"Did he come home at all last night?"

"I don't know."

"Had he had any trouble with Amon Peterson?"

The old woman looked him straight in the eyes. "No," she replied.

"Now look here, Arabella," pleaded the chief. "It won't do any good not to tell the facts to Mr. Andrews. It may be the best thing for Bill."

"I have nothing to tell. I don't know why a mother should be expected to furnish information to policemen to be used against her son."

"Ha," exclaimed Andrews: "You admit it might be used against him."

"You are trying to prove that he had something to do with the murder, aren't you?"

"Well, Peterson himself accused him over the phone to Lulu."

"Nothing of the kind," replied Mrs. Phillips. "The feather-headed child was so excited she didn't know what name he said. She told me so herself."

"With a little assistance from you," growled Andrews. "All right, Mrs. Phillips, I don't know your son, and have nothing against him. If he didn't kill Peterson all he has to do is to come forward and tell where he was. We know exactly the hour when Peterson was killed because he telephoned within five minutes. If your boy is innocent why isn't he in town?"

"Undoubtedly he has excellent reasons."

"That's what I think," said Andrews, grimly. "You're excused for the present, Mrs. Phillips. I've got an old mother myself, and she would stick up for me just the way you are doing for your boy. You did a good job on that telephone girl. We'll never convict him on her testimony."

Suddenly, Mrs. Phillips's composure gave way. Tears started from her eyes, her frail body began to shake and quiver; she bent over, hid her face in her hands, and sobbed loudly. Chief Easton patted her gently on the shoulder, then responded to the nod of the detective, and the pair tiptoed out of the room.

They reëntered their car and drove away. Andrews drew a dirty clay pipe from his pocket, filled it leisurely from a tobacco pouch, bent over and lit it, then straightened up.

"If it wasn't that so many crooks have nice old mothers like that," he observed, "the detective business wouldn't be so bad."

"I can't understand Lulu," said Easton, shaking his head sadly. "Last night she was sure."

Andrews said nothing for a moment or two; then he took his pipe out of his mouth, and half turned to face the police chief.

"Course it's too much to expect that you local cops would know what to do, but you busted up this case by your own negligence."

Easton bristled. "I did not. How do you make that out?"

"Bet you went back to bed after sending in a general alarm. Didn't you?"

"Well, yes. There was nothing to do."

Andrews chuckled. "You should have woke up a notary, taken him down to the telephone exchange, and got an affidavit from that girl right away. You can't depend on a woman. She began to think that she was responsible for sending this young fellow to the chair; maybe she used to go to school with him, danced with him, got kissed by him. So next thing she began to think that Peterson couldn't mean him, maybe she didn't hear right.

"She doesn't sleep when she gets home, and in comes the poor old mother, right on the job, and breaks down and gets on her knees and they both cry together, and there goes your absolute proof of the criminal. Peterson is dead; he can't testify. She refuses to repeat his exact words, declares she couldn't hear him very plainly; it sounded like Phillips, but it might have been anything else. So we're put into the position of having to convict him as though there was no positive evidence."

"Guess I was kinder stupid about that," admitted the chief.

"I ain't blaming you. You fellers are all right for stopping automobiles and putting tramps in the calaboose, but you ain't detectives. That's why the State has to employ us fellers."

"Is that so? Well, you haven't solved this case yet, and I bet I find as much evidence as you do."

"Oh, I ain't aiming to make you mad; we got to work together. Now suppose I take a look at the scene of the murder, and you get busy and find out everything about Bill Phillips. I want a very accurate description and a photograph of him, and I want to know what he's done all his life, who he works for, what money troubles he's had, every possible reason why he might go after Peterson with a gun. We've got to have a motive. You know the town, you know him, you can get the facts much better than I can. Has the medical examiner got here?"

"He motored over from the county seat early. He's at the house now."

"Good. Drive me over, and then you go out and dig up the facts on Bill. Get me a line on Peterson, too; let's discover who else might have had it in for him."

"He wasn't exactly popular."

"Rich?"

"He's supposed to be; nobody knows, but he must be."

"Well, I want facts. Are you with me, chief?"

"You bet," replied Easton, completely mollified.

In four or five minutes they rolled into the yard of the Peterson place, and observed the big car of the medical examiner standing before the door. Andrews shook hands with the chief, and Easton started off on his mission.

CHAPTER III.

THE LAST OF A GREAT LINE.

THE task allotted to Arthur Easton was not a very difficult one because William Phillips had been born in Miltville and lived there during all the twenty-five years of his life except for the period when he attended Yarmouth College. An ancestor of his had founded Miltville away back in 1675; at one time the family had owned three-quarters of the town and built the first cotton mill shortly after Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin. A great, great grandfather had imported weavers from England and made the beginning of an industry which now supported half the population.

His grandfather had been colonel of a regiment which marched away to save the Union in 1862 and had never come back, and his father had inherited the fortune of the Phillips family at its peak and made ducks and drakes of it.

Young Bill had been sent through college by his widowed mother at the expense of her little capital; when he returned, after four glorious years during which he had wanted

for nothing, she told him with a smile that they had no money, and if he didn't get a job and support her she supposed they would both starve. Arabella Phillips, Arabella Sears that was, had been the prettiest girl in Miltville when Arthur Easton was a young spark; the chief of police had worshiped her from afar because she was one of the aristocrats of the town, and the obvious match for Thomas Gray Phillips, the richest man.

To-day she looked much older than her fifty-five years because the life that her husband had led her was not calculated to keep a woman young and beautiful. Inheriting three-quarters of a million dollars at the age of twenty-nine he had run through it so successfully that when he died, he left barely fifteen thousand dollars upon which she had supported herself and her son and sent him through college.

Of course they had moved from the old Phillips mansion; it had been taken for debt. They lived now in a neat little cottage not far from the home of Lulu Blair, the night telephone operator; a six-room house in which Mrs. Phillips did all her own work except for the washing which Bill had insisted upon sending out.

In common with everybody in Miltville, Chief Easton knew that Amon Peterson had gone up as Thomas Gray Phillips had gone down? Piece by piece, the Phillips lands had passed into his hands at a fraction of their value, and the Phillips securities in the cotton mills had been pledged with Amon for loans which had never been redeemed. Old Peterson had been the town money lender for thirty years or more; he took risks that the bank refused, accepted second and third mortgages at ten and twelve per cent interest, in addition to usurious bonuses, and Phillips was by no means the only resident who fell into his clutches.

The original Peterson was one of the weavers imported from England by the Phillips who founded the cotton mills, and for a century they had lived in corporation houses, mean, squalid, and ignorant. Amon, himself, had gone to work in the mills as a boy of ten, never had an education save what he got during the scant period between supper time and bedtime. In those days children went to work with their elders at six in the morning and quit at six at night, a twelve-hour day for which the youngsters earned two or three dollars per week, and their parents made eight to twelve.

But Peterson had got out of the mills before he was eighteen years old; he worked in the livery stable, the grocery store, was office boy for a lawyer from whom he learned pettifoggery, held a small job in the bank where he learned figuring, and when he was twenty-two years old set up in business as a money lender.

In those distant days there was no State jurisdiction over money lending; the loan shark would advance five dollars and charge a dollar a week. Usually the interest mounted more rapidly than the payments. There was a case which, at the time, awakened great indignation in Miltville when an ignorant weaver had borrowed ten dollars from Peterson. At the end of six months he had paid off one hundred dollars on the loan, and still owed one hundred and ninety dollars, whereupon the loan shark had seized his furniture and pulled the bed out from under the man's wife who had just had a baby.

The woman died, and the crazed weaver got a shotgun and tried to kill Peterson. One of those stern old Massachusetts judges had given the man six months in jail during which time his four children were cared for by neighbors and the baby, as was to be expected, died. There was some talk of riding Peterson out of town on a rail, but they were a law-abiding community and they did nothing. Those were the early days of Amon Peterson, so long ago that they had been forgotten.

In time he rose from the rôle of loan shark to be a mortgage broker, and contented himself with twelve, fifteen, or eighteen per cent instead of five thousand per cent. He bought a nice house, married a wife, begot children, and became a power in the community. He joined the church, paid his pew and sustenance fees without very much grumbling, bought a frock coat and high hat, and carried his head proudly.

A new generation had grown up which did not know the early Amon; his children

went to the public schools, were accepted everywhere, and although they were usually poorly dressed and undernourished, they were rather nice youngsters, having inherited their mother's good qualities rather than their father's bad ones. As soon as they reached the age of reason they began to hate the old man. Amon, Jr., abused him publicly; Ruth was less indiscreet, but she waited only for the day when she could run away.

There is an alleged funny story about a father who was so mean that he would offer his children ten cents each to go without their dinner and then charge them ten cents for their breakfast. Amon, Jr., told some school fellows that his father had done that very thing.

When their mother died there was no longer a reason for the young folks to continue to live with him, and both took French leave, as has been already stated.

Yet it was this old curmudgeon who offered to Bill Phillips a job when he came back from college. The job was bill collector, and the duties were to call on poor families and bully them into paying installments upon various pieces of furniture and luxuries that agents had induced them to purchase.

One of the most lucrative investments made by Amon Peterson in recent years had been this sort of thing. He was in touch with installment houses in Boston whose agents had traveled the countryside. The glib-tongued agents were able to cozen poor housewives into purchasing pianos, washing-machines, vacuum cleaners, carpet sweepers, and other contraptions by the small initial payment process.

These dealers charged outrageous prices for such things, and made their profits upon the honest majority who managed to meet the payments. Those who defaulted got a series of form letters from alleged lawyers, and if they failed to pay after these threatening epistles the agent paid a visit with the purpose of "pulling the purchase." This meant walking off with the article, no matter how much had been paid upon it. When the purchaser drove him away, as he often did, the dealer crossed the transaction off his books and forgot it.

And that was where Amon Peterson came in. He bought the bad bills charged against persons living within reaching distance of Miltville for ten cents on the dollar, added interest from the time they became overdue, and went after them. Because he was one they knew and feared, who lived near enough to pay them frequent visits, most of the victims were terrified into paying whatever their balance might be with interest that they did not owe.

Bill Phillips was a big blond youth who never wore a hat, had a forty inch chest, and a voice like a bull. His eye was blue, and clear, and unafraid; he had played tackle on one of the best football teams that Yarmouth had ever turned out, and he was full of enthusiasm for earning a living for himself and his mother. When Amon offered him fifteen dollars a week to start and ten per cent commission on what he collected, he went to work with a will. It happened that his heart was as big as his frame, however, and the employment sickened him.

He found pianos that wouldn't play, phonographs that had never been intended to operate, washing machines which turned clothes out more soiled than when they entered it, merchandise, in short, that had never been worth a fifth of the selling price, and upon which the true value had usually been paid twice over. He entered homes where there wasn't enough for children to eat, and whose bread was being taken from their mouths to meet the installments that Amon had scared them into paying again.

However, he did not break loose until the day when he chummed up on the road with the agent of one of the Boston houses who was trying to sell a neighborhood that had been already oversold with that sort of truck. As a good joke the agent told him about Amon Petersen, and how he bought the bad bills owned by his house for ten cents on the dollar.

Bill had been working only two weeks; his collections were small, and had been augmented by payments from his own pocket in cases too pitiful for him to insist. This news made him fighting mad, and he returned to town and burst into Petersen's office, where he proceeded to give the old man a piece of his mind.

Peterson listened patiently for awhile, tried to deny the charges, and declared that he was only acting as agent for the installment houses.

"You lie, you miserable old skinflint," shouted Phillips, shaking his fist under the long-pointed nose.

"You get out of my office," squealed Amon. "You overfed young hog, I'll make you rue insulting me, that can buy and sell you and your whole worthless family. You're no good and your father before you was no good."

"Don't you talk about my father."

"And your mother has no sense, or she would have put you in the mills instead of sending you to college. She's a fool."

Bam! A big fist had collided with the big nose, and Amon Peterson bit the dust, as they say about the Indians in Western novels.

Bill Phillips went home and told his mother that he had lost his job, while Amon went to Chief Easton and swore out a warrant for assault and battery against his former employee. The chief had served the warrant and shaken hands with Bill for a very popular blow, but the judge called him a young ruffian and fined him ten dollars.

Since then there had always been bad blood between Bill Phillips and the usurer.

Then Mary Litchfield had come home from college. Mary was one of those exotic creatures who are occasionally born in drab New England to prove that there is life in the old stock after all. She was the daughter of the president of the Miltville National Bank, the richest man in town next to Amon Peterson, a queenly girl with a wealth of jet black hair as fine as silk, as glossy as satin.

Her features were small and perfect, a fine wide brow, eyebrows that arched like those of a princess of the time of Louis XIV, a nose which was a copy of that of a Greek goddess, a sweet little mouth that smiled when it was closed, and dazzled when it smiled; a firm, neat chin, a neck like that of Annie Laurie. Her head was beautifully shaped, and she was lithe and graceful and slim. It was no wonder that all the young men in town went off their heads about her, including Bill Phillips.

A small town is a young folks' democracy until high school is over; then a chosen few go off to college, while the others buckle down and become tradesmen and clerks, salesgirls and housemaids. In four years the lucky ones come back transformed, as different from those they left behind as wine from water.

They do not forget their old friends; they chat with them and bow to them; but there is a change, just the same; an aristocracy has been formed; the old freedom of high school days has vanished, the stay-at-homes know they will not be asked to the parties of the college folk; if they are asked once they go and feel uncomfortable or stay away; in either case they know they do not belong.

There were only half a dozen boys in town who had been to college, as Bill Phillips had been; none who had made a reputation as an athlete except him; these were now Mary Litchfield's cavaliers.

Of them all, he was the most ineligible, as her father did not hesitate to tell her; he had no job and no prospects, and she mustn't waste her time with him. Womanlike she proceeded to spend as much time with Bill as he could manage, and that was a lot.

The chief remembered that he had stopped Mary for speeding two or three times when Bill was in the car. Of course, he had not complained; he complained only of strangers who exceeded the limit; townsfolk could go as fast as they pleased with nothing but a reprimand.

Then Bill had landed a job that should have caused him to be ostracized by the elect—mechanic at the town garage; he would have been, too, only Mary always had something the matter with her car, and spent hours at the garage, and as she was the leader of society it was obvious that the others could not cut Mary's friend.

So it had gone for a couple of years, despite the protests of John Litchfield and his wife, and only three nights before the murder the chief had come upon the pair of them leaning upon the Litchfield gate in the moonlight. If they had not been kissing, why had they sprung apart and looked so guilty as he passed?

All this information about Bill the chief had in hand; he did not need to make inquiries about the young man at all. Aside from the row of three years ago with Amon Peterson, which had resulted in a court trial and a fine for Bill, he knew no reason why the young man should have murdered the old skinflint, and there seemed to be excellent reasons why he should not.

Yet he had killed Amon, because the old man had told Lulu that fact over the phone with his dying breath, and if the chief could catch him he would undoubtedly go to the chair despite the last attitude of the fair Lulu. The State detective would find evidence enough. Arthur Easton was kind-hearted; he liked the boy, but he was a slave to duty. If Bill came in sight, he would arrest him immediately, and with no hesitation about it. He nodded his head grimly as he had this thought.

During the past few years Amon Peterson, living alone, had doffed the outward splendor of the high hat and frock coat, had given up his office, and transacted his business from his house. He wore an old suit of clothes year after year, seemed to have no other, never went to church, withdrew from his old-time business acquaintances, and kept entirely to himself. He refused to buy an automobile, walked when possible, and begged rides for longer distances. His food supplies were meager, according to the butcher and grocer; he didn't seem to eat enough to keep a bird alive.

Strangely enough, he seemed to have lost his animosity to Bill Phillips, exchanged greetings with him, occasionally stopped to talk with him at the garage, and Bill no longer spoke of him with such bitterness, which made it the more astounding that he should have killed the old man.

CHAPTER IV.

A BEAUTIFUL ALIBI.

WHILE Chief Easton was ruminating at his desk and making notes of what he would report to Detective Andrews about Bill, the door of the station house flew open, and there darted in a brunette fury by the name of Mary Litchfield. Her eyes were shining with excitement and anger, her olive cheeks flushed, and her lower lip was quivering. The old man thought she made as beautiful a picture as Marevna, the dancer, whom he had seen in a ballet at the Boston Opera House one night. But all he said was:

"'Lo, Mary."

"Is this true?" the girl demanded; she was nearly out of breath.

"How do I know till you tell me what you mean?"

"That Bill Phillips is accused of killing that horrible old man?"

"Well, it kind of looks that way, Mary," he admitted.

"It isn't so."

"No, I s'pose you wouldn't think so."

"I can prove it isn't so."

"If you can, that settles it," he declared. "But can you?"

"Certainly," she said triumphantly. "What time was the murder?"

"'Bout five minutes after eleven near as Lulu remembers when the call came in."

"At five minutes after eleven Bill was with me. We were on the sidewalk just below my house, under that clump of trees."

"S'pose so," smiled the chief. "If I said five minutes past eight you could have proved the same thing."

"Certainly. We were together all the evening."

"Hum. Anybody see you?"

"Lots of people."

"Who?"

"Well—I really didn't notice. But several people passed."

"Couldn't see you though, because you was under the darkest spot in the whole group of trees."

"Perhaps," she said brazenly.

"Too bad you ain't got some other witnesses," he said dryly. "What time did he leave you?"

"Why—er, I'm not sure."

"How do you know it was five minutes after eleven?"

"Well, we heard the town clock, and I said to Bill is that ten or eleven and he said it was eleven; he counted."

"You didn't count?"

"No—yes, of course I did."

"I doubt if you young folks would be apt to pay any attention to the town clock. Lucky you did."

"Isn't it," she smiled.

"Sounds like a good alibi, Mary. Does you credit. Seen Bill since?"

"No."

"Did he tell you he was leaving town?"

"No—o."

"Well, he's gone. Didn't go home last night."

"It seems to me he did say something about taking the milk train through to Springfield."

"He didn't, though. Found that out."

"Anyway, that doesn't matter. You can't prove he killed Peterson because he was with me at five minutes after eleven."

The old man regarded her kindly.

"Guess you love Bill, don't you, Mary?"

"I just do," she declared.

"Supposing it turned out he did kill Peterson, would you still love him?"

"But he didn't. I can prove it. You know Bill wouldn't kill anybody."

"I never thought so," he admitted. "But longer I live, Mary, less I know about folks. There's something inside of everybody that nobody ever learns, not even husbands and wives."

"I know everything about Bill. He's wonderful."

"Well, guess you've saved him, less it turns out you were mistaken about the time. Did he ever say anything to you against Amon?"

"No. He always said he admired and respected Mr. Peterson."

The old man leaned his head against the back of his chair and cackled, and the girl noticed that when he laughed in this manner his upper set of false teeth quivered like a leaf in the wind.

"I won't make a note of that answer," he said. "Don't want to cast doubts on your statement. Nobody in this town admired and respected Amon. Hated him myself."

"Well, maybe he didn't say just that."

"You just bet he didn't. Run along now, dear, before you incriminate yourself and prejudice your case."

Mary flushed, then laughed in embarrassment. "They can't do anything to him after what I've told you, can they, Mr. Easton?"

"Don't calculate they can, Mary, 'less they unearth some direct evidence."

The girl leaned forward impulsively and kissed him upon the forehead, thus shaking the overwhelming sense of duty of Chief Easton. If he had seen Bill Phillips passing down the street in that instant, he would have looked the other way. In a few moments he heard the rumble of Mary's big car as it darted away.

Andrews, after having been ferried to the Peterson house by the chief's auto, climbed upon the porch, found the front door ajar, and entered. He grunted as he climbed the stairs. The detective was suffering from overweight and every step was painful, but it had to be done; and eventually he reached the top and moved with the ponderosity of an elephant to the room where the body of Amon Peterson lay on the bed. He found the medical examiner standing in the center of the room looking thoughtfully about.

"Hello, Andrews," he said casually. They were old acquaintances and often met in scenes like the present. The examiner was a tall, thin, clean-shaven, rather distinguished-looking man; he might have been a college professor, or the conductor of a symphony orchestra, instead of which he was a very able physician and surgeon, and one of the best medical examiners in the State of Massachusetts.

"How are you, Dr. Bryce?" replied the detective doffing his soft black hat. "Found anything?"

"I have made a few observations. This old man had amazing vitality. He should have died almost instantly; instead, he was able to live for five or ten minutes, move himself along the floor, and climb upon the bed and do some telephoning; fastened a noose around the neck of a man named Phillips I understand."

"Yep," said the detective. "But the noose come undone. We got to fasten it again. This telephone girl has cold feet, denies that she said Bill Phillips, won't swear to anything. So we got to prove he did it. See anything that 'll help?"

"To tell the truth I haven't looked. I've only been here a little while, and I've been examining the body."

"Cinch it wasn't suicide."

"Hardly. Four shots were fired, two took effect."

"Find the weapons?" asked Andrews.

"No, but there are two bullets in the body, there is one imbedded in the woodwork of that closet door, and one went through the window pane. Surprised you didn't discover that last night."

"I wasn't here, and the hick chief of police wouldn't know a bullet if one hit him. Four shots, hey. This guy wanted to be sure."

"As well as I can reconstruct the scene, the old man had gone to bed; I suppose they retire about nine o'clock in this town. He heard a noise, got up to investigate, and was standing in the middle of the room when the assassin came in through the open door and fired. Judging by the direction taken by the bullets in the body they were discharged by a taller man than the victim from a distance of at least six feet."

"Phillips is a big fellow, so they say."

"So was the murderer. No signs of a struggle?"

"None, unless they put the room to rights last night."

"Even this chief has more sense than that. How about robbery?"

"I haven't looked."

"Well, I'll take a look. Dirty old room, wasn't it?"

"Yes, the dust is very thick."

"I'll say it is."

"You don't have to bother to probe for those bullets," said Andrews. "I can tell from this little hole in the window pane that it was a bullet from a thirty-two."

"I'll get them out just the same, part of the job. See anything else?"

The detective grunted negatively, and Bryce smiled. He remembered the first time he had encountered Andrews, some five or six years previously upon a particularly baffling murder case in Lawrence. He had felt a pang of pity for the hulking, clumsy, thick-witted officer, because it was a mystery that did not seem possible of solution.

Andrews was a man with little education, a recruit from the Boston police department, a flatfoot, apparently without especial gifts of observation and no reasoning powers. His methods seemed utterly futile; he asked stupid questions, overlooked things which had seemed to Bryce important, just blundered about—and suddenly swooped upon the murderer, a person whom nobody had suspected, but who went to the chair because Andrews had woven a net from which his lawyers could not extricate him.

"Got any theories?" Bryce asked the officer. To Andrews anything was a good excuse to sit down; therefore, he squatted immediately in a big chair, folded his fat hands over his paunch, and pursed his thick lips.

"Only been in town an hour," he said. "Haven't got any dope on Peterson yet, don't know much about the lay of the land, met a chief of police that don't know what it's all about. Looked like a cinch to pin it on this feller Phillips, but the chief was so dumb he didn't get an affidavit from the telephone girl while she still knew her own mind, and so the dying message is ruled out.

"However, Phillips has disappeared; so it looks like him. I don't know what he's like or anything about him; haven't any motive in sight yet. On the other hand, don't have to wait for a verdict of murder, got a suspect, easiest thing is to run him down, give him the works, and pin it on him."

"Doesn't it seem too certain? Haven't you found that the obvious explanation of a thing is more often wrong than right?"

"Can't say I have. Say there's a murder. Whoever did the killing had a strong reason. Find out all the people who had motives, investigate them all, eliminate those who can prove they were somewhere else, and it usually simmers down to one or two; and the one with the biggest motive is guilty. That's the way with most cases."

"But doesn't it often happen that it is impossible to find a motive, or you round up a number of people with good reason for killing, but fail to discover the motive which is strongest of all and which caused a per-

son outside your net to have committed the crime?"

"Oh, sure, we don't capture them all. But more real murderers are set free by juries than ever escape the police, and don't you forget that."

"I agree with you. It has been my experience. Usually they leave some clew."

"Sometimes. I don't take so much stock in clews, though. Tell you, doc, when a feller commits a murder, unless he does it on the spur of the minute and loses his head, he lays his plans careful. The biggest boob in the world knows about finger-prints; so the only finger-prints you find around the scene of the murder nowadays are made by innocent people. The crooks wear gloves.

"They don't lose buttons off their clothes, or pieces of their coats or dresses, or handkerchiefs with perfume that belongs only to them, or pages from memo books, or unusual kinds of hairpins, and if they use their own weapons they have sense enough not to leave them behind them to help the police. No, sir, I don't expect to find any clews—what's that?"

The heavy lids had lifted and the sharp gray eyes were fixed upon something beneath the bed. It looked to the physician as though Andrews dived from a sitting position and measured his full length on the floor, his right arm going under the bed and coming out with something white clutched in his fingers.

CHAPTER V.

THE PRINT OF A FRENCH HEEL.

STILL lying on his stomach Andrews twisted his neck to look up at the medical examiner, and grinned a sheepish grin.

"A clew," he chuckled.

Bryce laughed heartily. "After your remarks that is very remarkable. What is it?"

"A handkerchief, with the initial 'P' on it."

"Phillips."

The officer lifted himself painfully to a sitting position and opened out the linen.

"Woman's handkerchief."

He smelled of it. "Perfume," he exclaimed. "Can't have been here long. Smell it, doc? What is it?"

The doctor put it to his nose, and got a faint whiff of fragrance of a queer exotic sort.

"I don't know," he admitted. "No common perfume."

"There was a dame in the room last night," said Andrews in a tone of surprise. "Damn it, doc, this may be a case after all."

"It is unlikely that this hulking Phillips carried that dainty affair."

"P could stand for Peterson as well as Phillips. But the old miser wouldn't have a woman's handkerchief, and he certainly wouldn't have perfume on it."

"Evidently a woman's handkerchief, and a woman who used expensive and rare scent."

"Do you suppose the old curmudgeon had a lady friend?"

"Unlikely, but if he did the neighbors would know. They know everything scandalous in these villages."

Andrews got upon his feet and commenced to prowl about. He wandered out into the uncarpeted hallway, and the medical examiner continued his attentions to the corpse.

"Hey, doc, come here," called the detective. Bryce laid down his instrument, and went into the hall. On his hands and knees the officer was peering at something in the dust on the floor.

"There was a dame," he declared. "See the imprint of a French heel. These boobs who were here last night stamped the others out, but here is one that's unmistakable. It's had a patch on the right side of it, too; see the nail marks."

"No question about it," agreed the physician. "That's a woman's heel."

"Well, I got a camera in my bag at the station. I'll go down and get it, and photograph this. We got her handkerchief and the exact size of her right heel; they always patch the outside of their heels, so this was on her right foot. We got a couple of clews. What do you know about that?"

"After your remarks, it is surprising."

"Listen," grinned Andrews. "I'm funny; I can see more and think better when I am loafing on my back chewing the rag than any other way; so I just chatted anything that came into my mind. I didn't really mean what I said."

"No, you were just preparing an alibi in case you found nothing. I understand."

"I don't believe this dame fired the shot, though, because a thirty-two isn't a woman's weapon, but she was around when it happened."

Andrews returned to the death chamber and continued his investigations, but made no further discoveries there. Then he went downstairs and looked about the rooms on the lower floor without result, after which he inspected the porch and the driveway in front.

He found marks of three or four automobiles on the ground, all small cars except the car of the medical examiner, and these he assumed to have been made by the machines of the chief and the newspaper editor who he knew had visited the house the night before. He had barely finished inspecting the driveway when the car of Chief Easton drew up, and the chief alighted.

"Heard anything about Bill Phillips?" he demanded.

"It looks as though he didn't do it," replied the local police head. "An alibi has just been established for him."

"The hell it has. Is he back?"

"No, but somebody is willing to swear where he was at eleven five."

"That so. Where was he?"

"Under a clump of trees near the Litchfield place, half a mile from here."

"Who was with him?"

"One of the most estimable persons in town, the daughter of our bank president, Miss Mary Litchfield. She says he was with her."

"A dame. Who saw them together?"

"Nobody. But she declares that she was with him all the evening."

"I don't doubt it," retorted Andrews. "I believe it. She was with him when he was shooting old Peterson."

"You're crazy," retorted the chief, angrily.

"Crazy as a fox. We just established that there was a woman with the murderer. We've got the print of her heel, and her handkerchief with perfume on it."

The chief looked shocked; then he laughed incredulously. "See here, I've known Bill Phillips all his life and it's hard for me to believe that he committed a crime; but to assert that Mary Litchfield aided and abetted it is crazy. I know the girl. I simply don't believe it."

"You small-town guys don't even believe in evolution, but that makes no difference. Lead me to this Mary Litchfield. I've got something to show her."

"All right," said Easton. "She will soon convince you; wait till you see her."

"First telephone for a cop to patrol these grounds. I'm not through with this house, and I don't want any rubes around here mussing up the place."

Easton entered the house while Andrews moved about the yard. The grounds of the Peterson place were not extensive; there was an old-fashioned barn at the rear, but the driveway to its entrance was grass-grown because the old man had given up horses and never purchased an automobile, and therefore the stable had not been used for years.

His sharp eye, however, struck an object lying upon the disused driveway, and he was on it like a vulture; it turned out to be a bundle of yellow straw fastened together by tiny threads, evidently a portion of a straw wrapper such as goes about champagne bottles. How long it had lain there he did not know, but the straw seemed fresh; it had not been exposed to storms. He thrust it in the pocket of his coat. Presently Easton returned, and they entered the automobile.

"This dead man, how about his family?" demanded Andrews.

"Son and daughter. He's about twenty-six; she's twenty-two or thereabouts."

"Have they been notified? Where are they?"

"Nobody knows unless the old man did, and he can't tell."

"Understand he was rich. They are the heirs."

"Sure. It will be a change for those kids; they were starved, and abused, and

finally ran away. Never been heard from since."

"Must have been a nice old codger. However, if he left a lot of money, they won't be long in turning up; we won't have to chase them. Seen anybody who knows what Phillips was doing last night?"

"Nobody but Mary. How do you know it was her handkerchief?"

"Don't. We know Phillips killed him. She says she was with him. All right, there was a woman with him when he shot Peterson, and if she is telling the truth it must have been her."

"It wasn't."

"Is she stuck on the boy?"

"Yes, she's in love with him."

"Then she cooked up the alibi. We'll soon bust it. She can take her choice of admitting she wasn't with him, or being arrested as accessory to the crime."

"I won't permit you to arrest Mary." The old man was trembling with agitation.

"Don't worry. She'll weaken. Is this the place; some villa!"

They had turned into the driveway of the Litchfield home. It was one of those comfortable wide-spreading residences so common in New England villages. Architecturally it had a lot the matter with it, but it looked comfortable and homelike, and it nestled among trees in a friendly way, while ivy ran part way up its brick walls and a wide front porch spoiled the perfection of its Colonial lines.

It was nearly noon. Mrs. Litchfield was sitting comfortably on her porch, working upon a piece of embroidery while the tinkle of a piano through a half open window proved that the daughter of the house was making music. Mrs. Litchfield looked curiously at the car, waved a greeting to the chief when she recognized him, regarded the stranger expectantly.

"Mrs. Litchfield," said Easton nervously, "this is Mr. Andrews who is helping me on the Peterson case." The officer grinned at the manner of the introduction. "We'd like a word or two with Mary, if you please."

"Mary?" asked Mrs. Litchfield with surprise in her manner. "What in the world do you want to see her for?"

"Nothing particular; thought she might have noticed something last night."

"Well, she didn't, and you ain't going to draw her into it. I never heard of such a thing."

But Mary had heard the car and the sound of voices, and stopped playing the piano. Now she came out upon the porch, and smiled in friendly fashion at her elderly admirer.

"Want to introduce Mr. Andrews, Mary," said Easton in embarrassment. "He's a detective."

"Really?" asked the girl, lifting her eyebrows in mock admiration. "Think of a detective in Miltville. And did you wish to see me, Mr. Andrews."

"You dropped your handkerchief," he said brusquely. "Here it is."

Mary took it from his outstretched hand, glanced at it, sniffed, made a grimace, and handed it back.

"Thank you very much. I suppose you knew it was mine because it had the initial 'P' on it, and mine are M. L."

"Ain't it your handkerchief? I was told it was your perfume."

"Horrors! I never used such perfume in my life. It's nasty."

"Know what kind of perfume it is?"

"They don't sell it at our drug store. I never smelled anything exactly like it before."

Easton grinned triumphantly at his coadjutor, and Andrews looked slightly nonplused. As usual, Mary was making the impression she always did upon the opposite sex. Assured as he had been that she was the woman who had been in Peterson's room, her personality made it seem impossible. Nevertheless, he must bluff it through.

"You were with Bill Phillips all last evening, long after eleven o'clock," he accused. Mary grew red, but nodded her head affirmatively.

"Bill Phillips was in Peterson's house at eleven five with a woman. You must have been the woman."

"How could he have been there when he was with me?"

"Couldn't unless you were with him."

"I was, but not there. We were right outside here in the street."

"Hum. Mind bringing out some of your shoes so I can look at them."

Mrs. Litchfield had listened to this conversation in astonishment and consternation, and now her face grew as pink as a peony, her lips drew into a straight line, and her eyes flashed sparks.

"The idea. Wait until Mr. Litchfield hears of this," she exclaimed. "How dare you ask my daughter to show you her shoes? And as for my Mary being with that useless Phillips boy until after eleven o'clock, there was nothing of the kind."

"I was, too, mother," asserted Mary.

"You were not. You went upstairs to bed at nine thirty, and you didn't come down again. Your father and I were in the sitting room, and you couldn't come down without our seeing you. What do you mean by telling such stories?"

Andrews kept a sober face, but he was laughing inwardly, while Mary's face grew redder than ever and she looked as though she were about to cry.

"If you must know," she said, "I went up to my room, and went out on the roof of the porch and let myself down; I've done it before."

"Well," exclaimed Mrs. Litchfield, "upon my word!"

"You see, Mr. Andrews," continued Mary rapidly. "My family object to my seeing Bill; so I have been in the habit of sneaking. I hate to do such a thing, but you know how it is."

"Sure, young love. I understand," grinned the detective. "Which is your room?"

She went down upon the lawn and pointed it out, a room on the corner of the house on the second floor. From the window sill to the porch roof was only a couple of feet, but from the edge of the porch to the ground, Andrews estimated, nearly ten feet.

"Quite a jump for a girl," he said.

"Pooh. Nothing for me."

"Wait till your father hears of this," threatened Mrs. Litchfield from the front steps.

"Ground was soft last night," commented Andrews. "When you landed your feet went into the ground. Let's have a look."

He got down on all fours looking a good deal like a great bear and inspected the earth. Presently, he arose with a sarcastic smile.

"Heard of girls being light as a feather, but you take the cake," he said. "There isn't a mark of a slipper on the ground."

"I can't help that" she said with assumed indifference.

He turned on her with sudden fierceness in his manner.

"You are lying," he exclaimed. "Trying to save a man who killed a poor old fellow in cold blood. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

She returned his fierce glance. "Bill Phillips was with me in the street outside this house at eleven five last night, Mr. Detective. It's up to you to prove he wasn't."

"If I prove you were with him I'm going to put you under arrest," he declared.

Mary flinched and paled, but thrust out her chin and set her teeth. Mrs. Litchfield gave a wail of alarm, and ran to Mary to wrap her arms around her.

"Don't you dare to arrest my Mary. She wasn't with that man at all," she exclaimed.

"What shoes were you wearing last night?" asked the detective.

"These," replied Mary, freeing herself from her mother's embrace. She thrust out a pretty patent-leather-clad foot.

"Mind taking the right one off?"

She pulled it off and handed it to him, standing on one foot the while. Andrews turned it over and inspected the heel. It was a new shoe, and had not been repaired. Besides, the French heel was a trifle wider than that outlined in the dust of the Peterson house.

"Who cobbles your shoes?"

"I'll have you understand that my daughter doesn't have her shoes cobbled," declared Mrs. Litchfield. "When they run down at the heel she sends them over to the charity society."

"Great to be rich," he mumbled. "All right, Miss Litchfield. It isn't your handkerchief, and it isn't your shoe that I'm looking for. You stick to your story?"

"Certainly."

"Your friend has been running around with another woman, then."

"He has not. He was with me."

"All right. I'm not through with you, yet."

"I'm not afraid of you. I have done nothing."

"Interfering with the progress of justice and swearing falsely is a crime."

"Come on, Andrews, you're distressing the child," said the chief.

"Ought to be distressed; ought to be spanked," growled the detective when they were again in the auto. "Darn little liar. If she sticks to that yarn she'll make it hard to convict."

"What makes you think she isn't telling the truth."

"Chief, her mother called the turn on her. The kid went to bed and didn't know anything about this until next morning. She never dropped off that porch without her heel sinking an inch deep in the soft ground under it; besides, she wouldn't dare drop ten feet. She heard her boy friend was in danger and cooked up this tale."

"Perhaps. I don't know."

"They ought to be picking up this Phillips any time now. As a matter of fact, we have your statement that the telephone girl told you the old man said Phillips killed him, you'll swear to that."

"I've got to."

"It will help. Now the next thing I want to do is to get some one who knows all about Peterson's affairs. I need a good reason for the killing. Also what kind of will did he leave, how much money had he."

"You better talk to John Litchfield, the bank president. He would know."

"That girl's father?"

"Yes," smiled the chief.

"Holy Moses! Better see him right away before the old lady gets at him. She was whopping mad. I hope she spanks the brat."

"Don't call Mary that. I think she shows a wonderful spirit."

"Raising the deuce with our case, chief."

"Even so."

"Some peach, too. With a girl like that, why did he turn murderer?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe wanted to get married and didn't have any money. He thought Peterson kept a lot of coin in his house and went there to rob him. That's not a bad theory."

"Bill was not a thief."

"You know him, and I don't. I'm hoping to meet him soon."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

SWEET SYMPATHY

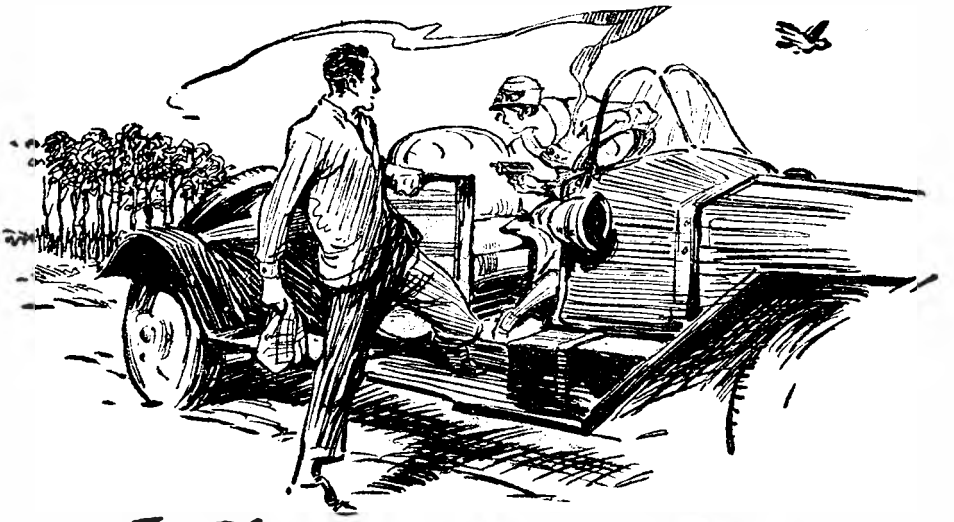
WHEN I fell down the cellar steps
And hurt myself to-day,
The fam'ly all showed sympathy—
Each in a different way.

Cook ran to pick me up, and when
She knew I wasn't dead,
She promised right away to bake
Some nice hot gingerbread.

Of course, it hurt an awful lot
When mother bathed my eye,
And father gave me twenty cents,
Because I didn't cry.

But Tiny Tim, the puppy, seemed
The best to understand.
He couldn't *say*, "I'm sorry!"—so
He simply licked my hand!

Mazie V. Caruthers.



A Day for Chances

By RICHARD BARRY

BEFORE signing the check the levers and buttons on the front board had seemed fascinating. Now they leered —and jeered. She got a flash from the lamps, a musical chime from the horn, and a glow from the cigarette lighter, but no juice.

The car lay dead by the side of the road. And a special paint job, too, just out of the factory, with a thin streamer line of lavender along its creamy coat.

"Damn!" said Bethlyn, reaching into her bag for a cigarette.

She used the patent lighter, which helped some, for the old Duveen had lacked modern improvements. Then she drew a deep puff, settled into the blue leather, and looked along the way.

Far up, maybe half a mile, lay a red sign. Was it a garage? Would she have to walk that far?

From behind—she had not yet looked that way—came a cheerful voice, saying: "Need help, sister?"

She glanced around. A man was at the running board. A cap pulled over his eyes rendered his face indistinct, though it was high noon. Perhaps that was why he drew his cap down, she thought, to shield his eyes from the sun. It was hot.

"Look's if I did," she laughed. "I can't start. It's a new Scrappy—my first trip—and I can't make it behave. I wonder if you—"

"Sure!" His foot was on the running board. He flipped open the door. "Sit over!"

She moved along the seat. He looked at the board in front, turned the key in the ignition lock, pulled the gear shift, and pressed the starter.

The Scrappy bit the road. The man threw the gear into high. The car purred and throbbed. In three minutes they were doing forty miles an hour.

"Oh!" Bethlyn gasped. "What did you do that I failed to do?"

No response. The man bent tensely over the wheel as the roadster slithered along. Now she noted him more carefully. He had no coat, only a blouse and trousers, and very worn shoes. Perhaps a garage

helper, she thought, for he seemed at one with the car.

Then she noted his hands on the wheel. They were clean.

Perhaps he had not heard her.

"Thanks," she murmured. "How did you do it?"

"Can't start in gear," he muttered; "begin in neutral. And you have to turn your key—for a spark."

The ghost of a smile lit one corner of a thin mouth.

"Of course," she gasped, in the accelerated wind. "How silly! You see, I am used to a chauffeur, though I did run the Duveen myself."

She watched the speedometer. The needle was at 47. It passed 50—reached 58.

"Thanks!" she protested. "Thanks very much. I—I can drive myself—now."

He said nothing, but fed the Scrappy more gas. Shortly the speedometer was registering seventy miles an hour.

Bethlyn exclaimed: "Really, you must stop. I'm just a little bit nervous."

He took a quick look along the road. They were in a narrow valley with woods on both sides, and not a habitation in sight; no creature anywhere to be seen. He cut off the power, applied the brakes, and came to a quick stop.

"All right, sis," he said. "You can hop out now."

He reached over and opened the door on her side.

"Hop out?" she asked. "What for?"

From a front pocket in his trousers he quickly produced a blunt-nosed, oblong-barreled automatic revolver, and held it covering her breast.

"Beat it!" he growled.

She did not stir, but looked at him steadily. She noticed that his hand was shaking, and that his neck was turning from white to red as by a transformation. She wondered—was he more scared, more upset, than she?

"Are you running away from some one?" she queried gently.

"I'll be running away from you in a jiffy! Come! Hop out!"

"But it's too far to walk. I—"

"Can that stuff! I'm no softy. What d'ye think?"

"I think you're trying to steal my car."

"Ye're a bright little cutie! Give ye credit. Go."

She marshaled a smile, shook her head bravely, and looked at him steadily.

He pressed the revolver a few inches nearer, and insisted: "Rustle now. I don't want t' hurt ye!"

A throb far up the road, at the top of the hill, floated along the summer breeze. Both looked. A motor car was starting down the long glide toward them.

"Not a move or a sound less'n ye want t' be bumped!" He lowered the revolver a trifle, though a bullet from it would still have settled for her. With his free hand he set the car in motion. The other car passed them at a good clip, the occupants not glancing their way. Not once did he take his eyes or the point of the weapon from her.

"Can you dispose of a car without showing your bill of sale?" she asked.

"Sure!"

"How?"

"Say! Look here!" He gaped at her.

She persisted. "But it would be hard to sell a Scrappy, wouldn't it? Unless you could prove you owned it. There are so few of them, and the motor is made abroad."

Perhaps this was the very thought which had been bothering him for some time. He relaxed his vigilance and dropped the point of the revolver a few inches.

She placed her hand calmly on the nozzle and depressed it toward the seat, well away from her person.

Was there something hypnotic in her manner, or did he choose not to risk an explosion by struggling with her? At any rate, he permitted her hand on the revolver without withdrawing it. She noted the red on his neck recede to white and then blend into a healthy pink.

"Tell me," she asked very gently, "did you ever hold up anybody before?"

"Well!" he breathed hard and spluttered. "You're a game kid, all right!" and relaxed his hold on the gun.

"Did you?" she insisted, taking the re-

volver gently and placing it in her beaded bag beside the cigarettes.

He watched her as if entranced, seemingly satisfied that she had no intention of turning it on him. Then he breathed deeply and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Did you," she repeated for the second time, "ever hold up any one before?"

"Suppose not!" He looked at her a bit defiantly. "What difference does that make?"

She laughed merrily. "Why, that is all the difference in the world!" she cried. "Don't you see?"

"I see you got the drop on me and 're bluffing me out of a sure thing, and I'd take my hat off t' ye—if I had one—'n maybe y're right about turning a Scrappy!"

His speech seemed disjointed, and his action also, now that his tension was relaxed. She felt for a moment as if he were grateful to her for preventing a stupidity.

Then he opened the door on his side, placed a foot on the running board, with: "Guess I'll say, 'By-bye—on yer way!'"

She placed a restraining hand on his sleeve. "Please," she said, "I am not sure that I know how to start it."

His body was half out of the car.

"Come," she pleaded. "I want you to drive me home."

Sudden suspicion shot from the tense eyes under his cap. "No—you don't!" he exclaimed. "Can't get me that way!"

"I wouldn't harm you," she replied sweetly. "Why should I? Didn't you save me a nasty walk? Come!"

The gloved hand lay on his arm like a caress. Gently it lured him back into the seat where, in a moment, he sank relaxed. A tremor passed over his body, as if the emotional strain he had been through had prostrated him.

"Tell me," she went on softly, "how you came to—to—tell me, please. I felt sure this was your first—" She hesitated, not wishing to use the word 'crime.' "Attempt," she added.

He pulled off his cap, and then she saw his eyes. There was a tear in the corner of each, but they were wide-set. The brow was lovely, she thought, but the mouth weak.

He looked down, shamefaced, at his ragged toe. "I was a helper in the garage —a mile f'om where I picked you up—worked there a year—miserly pay, and th' boss wouldn't let me keep the tips—shook me down f'r 'm each night. I kicked. Saturday he fired me. I made up my mind to wait on th' road an' grab th' first car with a woman drivin' alone. An' that's that!"

She looked at her wrist watch, and suddenly exclaimed: "Twelve minutes of one! I must be at Deepwold at one! Come! Drive me there. It's just over the next hill, and the second turn to the right."

This woke him from his slump, and seemed to frighten him. With a slouchy glance at her he started again from the car, mumbling, "Guess I won't take no chances, miss. But thank ye, just th' same, f'r ye're right about th's Scrappy—can't give 'em away, an' th' guy that's got one 's a marked man!"

She felt that the situation now required a really heroic remedy. So she reached into her bag and handed him his revolver.

"Trust me," she smiled; "what is your name?"

Wonderingly he pocketed the weapon. "Billy, miss," he said. "Billy Myers."

"Thanks, Billy. Mine is Mrs. Vanderkin. Get me to Deepwold in ten minutes and I'll give you twenty-five dollars."

A crooked little smile lit up the corner of his mouth as he resumed his seat and stepped on the gas. "It's my day for chances," he remarked, half to himself.

The Scrappy drew up under the *porte cochère* of the old estate at three minutes before one. Bethlyn jumped out, calling to Billy to wait. The butler bowed her into the living room, where a deeply tanned man in riding breeches awaited her.

After a kiss Bethlyn said gayly, "Well, Philip, I win the twenty-five dollars. You bet me I couldn't go to town and come back with a new chauffeur, but I did, and there he is!"

She drew him to the window and pointed to Billy, sitting in the Scrappy, as she added, "Go out and give him the money, please. I promised it to him. And tell him he is hired."

THE END

The Endless Chain

By WILLIAM SLAVENS McNUTT

Author of "The Deliverer," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

THE Daggetts—Caleb Daggett, his wife, Martha, and their daughter, Emily Daggett—are becalmed on a poverty-stricken farm in an ocean of travel. Emily wants to leave, but her father is reluctant; so in order to travel she begins to rehearse a vaudeville act with Woody Hawkins, the village bad man. Woody tries to put his arms around her just as Walter Frazier happens along. Walter is an auto tourist traveling with his parents, who have stopped off in Redburg, Daggetts' village. In the row between the young men Woody tries to stab Walter, but merely manages to cut Emily in the arm. When Caleb Daggett hears of the vaudeville act rehearsal he realizes how much his daughter wants to leave Redburg; and he exchanges his farm with Dan Miller, owner of the local auto camp for the camp Miller formerly ran in Claravue, California. A few days later, Walter is working in the garage when Dan Miller comes to him and says he has just heard a story of what happened to Emily before the Daggetts left Redburg; Miller says that he heard she tried to commit suicide because Woody Hawkins got her into trouble. At that, Walter drops his wrench, and straightens up. "Surprised you, didn't I?" Miller exclaims triumphantly.

CHAPTER IX (*Continued*).

RUMORS.

WALTER picked up a tire iron and balanced it experimentally in his hand. "You did," he said grimly. "An' now you tell me where you heard that bunch o' damn lies, or I'll pry your head open with this tire iron an' find out what kind o' soap suds you use for brains. An' that ain't one o' my little jokes, either. I mean just what I said."

"Say, hold on!" Miller exclaimed in alarm. "I'm only tellin' you what I heard."

"Where'd you hear it?" Walter demanded.

"Down at Redburg, at the pool room."

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for July 17.

"Who told you?"

"Woody Hawkins. He didn't tell me about the suicide part. I guessed at that after he told me he got Emily in trouble an' that was why the Daggetts pulled out."

Briefly Walter told Miller the truth of the affair.

"Nice boy, this Hawkins, ain't he?" he remarked in conclusion.

"Well, I'll be darned!" Miller exclaimed. "Somethin' ought to be done to him."

"Yeh!" Walter said, wiping his hands on a bit of waste. "I'm goin' in now an' do it."

He walked out of the shop, climbed into a car, and drove away toward Redburg. An hour later he drove up in front of the garage once more, walked in jauntily, whistling, and began work on the differential again.

Miller fussed about for a few minutes, waiting for news. None was volunteered.

"Well," he said finally, exasperated. "What happened?"

"He'll live," Walter said cheerfully. "I made him get down on his knees on the main street an' own up in a loud voice that he was a damn liar. Then I polished him off the best I knew without runnin' a chance of getting myself a job workin' for the State. There ought to be an all the year 'round open season on animals like you, but there ain't."

"The idea!" Miller said indignantly. "Him tellin' lies like that!"

"An' butter-witted boobs believin' him," Walter added. "That's an idea, too!"

"Um," said Miller, eying his employee thoughtfully. He suspected that last remark of being a dirty dig, but wisely decided not to inquire further.

Walter went on with his work, whistling, apparently casual, but actually seething with emotion. The fight with Hawkins had roused the lover's protective instinct within him, and he burned to do other deeds for his lady, and do them immediately.

He had figured on working through the winter and going on West to meet Emily in the spring. Now he began to wonder if perhaps he might not as well work until December, say, and then take to the road and spend Christmas with his sweetheart.

He could go to work again out in Claravue after the holidays, and save his money there as well as where he was. That seemed such an excellent idea that he began to wonder why he stayed on near Redburg at all. Why not go on at once and get work in Claravue, where he could see Emily occasionally and watch over her.

He convinced himself without effort that she needed a protector. She was just a dear, sweet, ingenuous, inexperienced farm girl, suddenly at large in a strange world, with only her mother and father to look out for her. And Walter was quite certain that Mr. and Mrs. Daggett were far short of being capable of caring properly for her.

He was sure, for example, that they would be no guard against the works of a smooth crook like that fellow Shackleford, the real estate man they had met just before leaving. His cheeks burned as he recalled Shackleford.

He would be out there in Claravue. He would, of course, meet Emily again. No doubt he would give her a rush, take her riding, to dances probably. He was on his back under a machine tightening a bolt as these thoughts came to him, and as he recalled Shackleford he yanked on the wrench handle so viciously that the jaws slipped from the bolthead, and he barked his hand painfully as it banged against the differential housing.

As he was binding up the wound a loud horn honked for service. Walter went out and saw a young man in khaki breeches, leather puttees, and a blue flannel shirt, seated in a powerful roadster drawn up by the gas tank.

"Ten o' gas, and take a peep at my oil," the young man said briefly.

As he unscrewed the cap on the gas tank Walter noticed that the roadster wore an Arizona license.

"Headin' home?" he asked, as he turned the crank on the gas pump.

The young man in the roadster nodded. "Yuma," he said.

"Good boat," Walter said, indicating the roadster with a slight movement of his head.

"They stand up," the driver agreed.

"Yeh," said Walter. "They step, too. What do you average in a day on good goin'?"

"Four hundred."

"Atta boy!" said Walter approvingly. "Want company?"

"What?" said the driver.

Walter grinned. "I wash my teeth an' change my socks an' everything," he assured him. "I'll buy the gas an' take my turn at the wheel."

"How far you want to go?" the driver asked.

"Yuma," said Walter.

The driver looked him over critically and smiled.

"My name's Roach," he said. "Oil man. How soon you be ready?"

"Frazier's mine," said Walter. "Garage mechanic. Ten minutes. Wait here for me."

He hurried away and found Miller.

"Know where you can get a good man to help around a garage?" he asked.

"Who wants him?" Miller asked.

"You do," said Walter. "Pay me my money an' save your breath. Nix on the sermon. I know the words. I'll never amount to nothin' runnin' around like this. You wouldn't 'a' hired me if you'd known I was goin' to jump out. You'll never take a chance on a guy off the road again. Blah-blah-blah-blah! Come on, pay me what money is comin' to me."

With his wages in his pockets, he sprinted up the hill and entered the house. Mr. Frazier looked at him over the top of a farm journal.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothin'," said Walter, and went to his room.

Rapidly he did up a blanket pack—three extra suits of underwear, three flannel shirts, a half dozen pairs of socks, tooth brush and paste, a comb and brush, a safety razor outfit, and a clean pair of khaki trousers. He swung this on his back, returned to the living room, and kissed his mother.

"'By, ma," he mumbled as he made for the door.

"Hey, you!" Mr. Frazier called, alarmed. "Where you goin'?"

"California," Walter called back over his shoulder as he crossed the yard on the run. "I'll write."

CHAPTER X.

WAKING UP.

BY the time the Daggetts reached Arizona they were dizzy with new impressions, sketchy, jumbled memory prints of new people and new country. The Missouri farm and the life they had lived there was so soon become to them a dim recollection of a far-away dream. They were transient creatures in a world of movement, an ever changing world of sky and earth, adown which ahead of them ran a road, on and on and ever on. On that road they traveled, day after day, from dawn to dark, and somewhere beside that road each night they camped from dark to dawn.

Prairie and towns and mountains and towns and deserts and towns, but always the road with its current of cars, purring, clattering, rolling, jolting, big cars and little cars, old cars and new cars, touring cars and roadsters, sedans and limousines. They were laden with everything from a dented wash boiler, and rusty bed springs, and a coop of chickens lashed to the rear, to English-made pigskin baggage, golf sticks, and tennis rackets.

Americans on the move—good and bad, glad and sad, rich and poor, wise and foolish; some happy, and some miserable; some loving it, and some hating it; some wondering why they had left home, and some wondering why they had not done so long since; some learning from the country they passed through and the people they met, and some traveling in an aura of ignorance, seeing nothing, hearing nothing.

But all traveling, moving, ever moving along that road that went on and on, and was only one of many from coast to coast and boundary to boundary, over which kindred cars and people were moving, moving, ever moving in ever increasing numbers, inevitably adding something to the national character with which history will some day deal.

The Daggetts two weeks on the road were removed by more than distance from the Daggetts who drove away from the Missouri farm. The oil wells in Oklahoma and Texas had intrigued Caleb. Wealth gushing from the ground! He could understand and thrill to that. He talked, enamored, with owners, superintendents, drillers, and sensed to the full the chancy romance of it all.

From the time they reached the first field of derricks he talked of oil, babbled of it. The sight and sense of the oil fields woke hope to life in him. Things *did* happen, after all—good things! He saw and heard the evidence that fortune had come to common, plodding farmers like himself.

The realization of this acted on his imagination in precisely the same way splicing a broken connection acts on the lighting system of a car. The juice of hope got through to his mind, and dreams long dark glowed again. He began to think about making something more than a bare living, of profits, opportunities, investments; began to think of Claravue and the camp there not merely as a destination and a place where he might eke out an existence for himself and family, but as a theater of operations with the stage set for a man with a brain and two good hands.

The change in Caleb, though, was slight to that which had taken place in Emily. Life had touched her with a magic wand in an auto camp in El Paso. The manner of it was this: A big new sedan rolled into the camp and parked next in line to the Daggett flivver and tent.

The car was an aristocrat of the tourist trail. It carried a great leather trunk strapped to a platform in the rear. Riveted to the running board on the left side was a large, cunningly contrived cupboard containing everything needful for the preparation of a meal, including a small gasoline pressure stove, and the cover of which let down to make a table.

There was fine linen in that cupboard, and silver cutlery, and grand-looking thermos bottles. The seats inside the car were arranged so that they fitted together to make a bed, and in the trunk in the rear, among other things, were oodles of fine linen sheets, and thick, soft blankets that fairly yelled money.

With the car were a man and a woman who might have been models for an advertisement of some famous sport clothes establishment. The woman—she was probably in her early forties, but she looked thirty, and acted twenty-five—beheld Emily and raved. She raved about her complexion, her eyes, her hair. She called her husband to come and see, posed Emily as though she were a manikin, and raved and raved.

Poor Emily was embarrassed, and Mr. and Mrs. Daggett were incipiently indignant, when the woman suddenly, irresistibly apologized.

"I'm a talkative, tactless old buttinski," she said contritely. "It would serve me right if you would tell me to go about my business, but I do so hope you won't. I hate being served right, and I don't mean to be rude. The child is so lovely she shocked me into being frank."

And then she introduced herself.

"O-o-oh!" said Emily. It was a long-drawn exclamation of wonder. "Are you the Nita Wenwood who—who—"

"Writes," Nita Wenwood finished for her, smiling. "That's me."

"Well, I declare!" Mrs. Daggett said solemnly. "I've read stories you wrote—lots of 'em. And Emily—why, Emily thinks the stories you write are just about—But there now! I s'pose you've been told nice things by people so often that you—"

"I love it," Nita Wenwood declared frankly. "It thrills me clear through to know that you've read things I've written, and know who I am. I'm a vain, vain woman, and I never tire of being flattered by recognition. And now say you'll forgive me for chattering about this dear child's loveliness."

"Why, of course," Mrs. Daggett agreed, looking at Emily a little puzzled. "We've always thought she was real good-looking, but—well, it kind o' makes me feel funny to have a woman like you admire her."

Nita Wenwood looked at her curiously. "Haven't you known she was beautiful?" she asked.

"I—I guess not," Mrs. Daggett said hesitantly. She felt queerly guilty, as though she had been convicted of some gross maternal sin of omission.

Nita Wenwood looked at Emily, smiling. "You've known it, though, haven't you?" she asked.

Emily shook her head. She could not quite trust herself to speak. She had not known that she was lovely, for she was cast in too generous a mold to be appreciated in a back country community where the standard of beauty was a weak, pallid prettiness of small features. She had only hoped that she might be lovely some day; dreamed vaguely, desperately of some miracle of experience or treatment that would endow her with the beauty she craved.

And the miracle, when it occurred—for it had occurred—was no working of physical change, but only the spoken word of one who knew. Nita Wenwood had said that she was lovely, and suddenly Emily knew that it was true.

She knew that she was not just a forlorn, gawky farm girl with a mouth that was too wide, and a nose that was too large, and eyes that were set too far apart. She knew that she was lovely, generously, compellingly beautiful, and this knowledge loosed in her a sublime sense of power that glowed through her flesh and gave it glory.

"Lord!" Nita Wenwood said solemnly, watching.

Emily blushed scarlet and ducked into the tent.

Caleb scratched his head, perplexed, watching Nita Wenwood warily as though he expected her to perform some feat of magic.

"She is kind o' good-lookin', ain't she?" he said wonderingly. "Funny! I never took much note of it."

That night after dark came and the evening meal was eaten, Nita Wenwood and her husband sat late by the Daggett camp fire. The Daggetts listened enthralled while the famous woman talked of her travels, her acquaintances, amusing and dramatic experiences the world round.

Visitors from other cars joined the group, sitting or lying about on the ground in the circle of the firelight. Among them was a bridal couple, a skimpy, washed-out-looking young man, scant of chin and narrow of shoulder, and a scared slip of a girl with big eyes and dank, bobbed hair. They were fresh from a New York department store—he from the shipping room, and she from behind a counter of kitchen utensils, honeymooning in a cut-down flivver. They had started with the intention of driving as far west as Cleveland and then hurrying back to their jobs, but the road had got them. They were headed for California and a new start there, scared, thrilled, atingle with the spirit of an undertaking that was as much an adventure to them as any trip across the jungles of Africa could be to a pair even slightly more sophisticated.

There was a banker and his family from Minneapolis, an oil man with a string of tools in Wyoming, another in Oklahoma, and yet another in southern California, and whose traveling office was his car. A racetrack habitué, an ex-jockey who rode an old motorcycle and carried his camping equipment in a side car, a miniature frying pan and coffee pot, a pup tent, a roll of blankets; he was heading for Tia Juana, planning to work in the cotton fields of Imperial Valley until the opening of the race meet on Thanksgiving Day and be ready for business with a betting stake. There were retired farmers and small business men, workers migrating, tourists.

They talked there in the meeting place of the firelight, each contributing something of interest from his or her sphere of experiences, equals for the evening in the democracy of the road.

In the morning, early, just as the Daggetts were finishing a hearty breakfast, Nita Wenwood bustled over and kidnaped Emily.

"I'm going to borrow this child for two hours," she announced gayly. "For that time she's mine, and I'm going to show her what she really looks like."

She took Emily in the sedan with her and drove into El Paso. There was a session in the barber shop of the Del Norte with Emily in the chair and Nita Wenwood standing critical watch while the barber

worked; then a whirlwind visit to several stores and a swift drive back to the auto camp.

When Emily stepped out of the sedan in front of the Daggett tent, she was charged full of all the emotions, both painful and pleasurable, that a young actress, playing her first important part, experiences on an opening night as she makes her first entrance.

Her honey-colored hair was bobbed after the fashion that peculiarly suited her face; she was clothed in a white sport blouse, green sweater jacket, dove-gray knickerbockers and stockings, and trim tan gold shoes. Nita Wenwood followed her from the car and, placing an arm around her shoulder, stood beside her.

"There!" she said triumphantly to Caleb and Mrs. Daggett.

For a moment the father and mother stared at the lovely, strange figure who was their daughter, dumb with astonishment. Then Caleb's face crinkled into a pleased grin.

"Well, by golly!" he exclaimed. "Ma! Look at her. Say, how in time are you an' me ever goin' to live up to anything like that?"

Mrs. Daggett did not smile. Her worn face was tragic with a full comprehension of it all.

"Honey!" she said yearningly, holding out her arms to her girl. "Aw, honey!"

Emily burst into tears and fled to the haven of her mother's embrace.

"Well, thunderation!" Caleb exclaimed. "What you all cryin' about?"

"You'll never know," Nita Wenwood said tearfully, sniffling. "That's one of the darned unfair advantages of being a man."

She reëntered the sedan and called to her husband. "Come on, Henry. You don't know what it's all about either. Get in there and drive. I am afraid we have delayed too long."

"Oh, Mis' Wenwood, we can't let you do this," Mrs. Daggett protested over Emily's shoulder. "Why — why, these things must 'a' cost—"

"It was fun," Nita Wenwood assured her earnestly. "Such fun! I wanted to do it. I wanted her to know what she—she—Oh, bother! Good-by, everybody. Henry, step on it!"

CHAPTER XI.

GUN-PLAY.

A RUSHING thunder on the highway in the chill half light of pre-dawn; a loud honking, impatiently swift servant of speed throughout the long hours of daylight, swerving past humbler cars on the road, a smooth streak on the paved ways; an earth-skimming comet flaunting a tail of dust when the dirt was underfoot; a fiery-eyed, roaring monster of mystery flashing by in the night—that was the big roadster bearing Roach, the oil man, and young Walter Frazier into the West.

They were both lean, tough young men with a liking for flight, and a love of the hypnotic, dull dizziness of fatigue that hours upon hours of uninterrupted swift motion brings.

They were up and away always with the first suggestion of light in the eastern sky, off across the empty world in an initial burst of full speed, sixty, seventy, seventy-five miles an hour, the top down, the rush of early, keen thin air stinging them to exhilaration, bellowed songs, full-throated shouts of greeting to a drowsy farmer in a barnyard.

An hour, two, three hours of this, and then a halt in a town and a gluttonously relished breakfast of ham and eggs, hot cakes, and coffee in some small restaurant just opening up for the day. Oil and gas and water then, and a discussion with the man at the filling station about the roads ahead, a brief study of the map to check with his directions, then off on the long daylight grind.

Each took his turn at the wheel, Roach for two hours and Walter for two. The man driving drove. He concentrated on making the best speed that safety permitted. The one resting consulted the map from time to time, read the road signs on the fly, lit cigarettes for the driver, did whatever sight-seeing interest dictated, and got in an occasional short half nap.

No useless talk now, just ride and drive and drive and ride. Hour after hour of air beating on them, country fading behind, looking ahead, curves, hills, down grades, flat straightaways, cars to be passed, towns to be idled through; and then drive and ride and ride and drive again.

They made a short stop for lunch, oil, gas and water between twelve and two, and another short stop for dinner, oil, gas and water between six and eight. Then sundown and dusk, the headlights flaring along the road ahead, and flight through darkness. Ride and drive and drive and ride till their eyes were red with strain and their bodies ached and a pleasant dizzy stupefaction akin to a degree of alcoholic daze possessed them. And some time between ten and midnight the one driving would pull up at a wide place beside the road and regretfully suggest camping.

They made a simple short business of bedding down for the night—a few seconds of stretching cramped muscles, a session with the canteen and toothbrush, a search with the flash light for a flat spot not too covered with bumps or stones; then the blankets spread, shoes kicked off, socks and trousers discarded.

A quick dive into the blankets, a little of grunting and squirming, and immediately thereafter regular breathing brought sleep, deep, steady, dreamless sleep. In the morning, in that electric shivery period just before the appearance of the first light, there would be a resentful peek at a relentless watch, and a groan, then a surly call: "Hey! Come out of it!"

Then up out of the blankets, swearing, shaking, they would rise, make a quick shift into clothes and a shivery engagement with toothbrush, towel, soap and canteen. A quick rolling and lashing of packs, and away on the road again, the staccato thunder of the big car's cut-out would make a startling smash of sound in a quiet world with only the occasional crow of a rooster for a rival. And they loved it, these two, the strain of it, the speed of it, the sense of conquest of stubborn distance. They lived hard and rode hard, and loved the thrill of it!

In Texas they ran into a hard rain and a consequent stretch of gumbo mud, deep, slithery, clutching stuff, through which they fought their way in low or second speed, the driver fighting the wheel all the while to keep the big car front end forward until travel established ruts.

Then it was a case of drop into these ruts and buck through. In one day of this going they made only eleven miles, another day but twenty-six, and on the third and last day of the gumbo thirty-two. Then they were free of the slick, stiff, stubborn mud, and on their swift way once more.

They reached Phœnix, Arizona, in the late afternoon, and there, on the page of an auto camp register, Walter found his first trace of the Daggetts. The name was there in the cramped fist of Caleb under a two-day-old date.

He returned to the car, his heart racing, his whole being charged with a fierce impatience.

"Two hundred miles on to Yuma," Roach said, glancing at the low sun. "How about it? Stick here and get a good night's rest or take a long breath and slog it through to-night?"

"Aw, let's go on," Walter urged eagerly. "What's the sense of layin' over here?"

Roach smiled wisely. "Get some news?"

Walter blushed. "Yeh. They was here a couple o' days ago," he mumbled.

"All right, kid," Roach said sympathetically. "Get in and we'll step."

The attendant at a filling station on the edge of town where they stopped for oil and gas warned them of the road ahead.

"Been some holdups along the road 'tween here an' Yuma," he said. "Anybody tries to stop you, you better keep movin' along."

Walter's heart developed a painful irregularity of movement.

"Been any recently?" he asked huskily. "The last few days?"

"I heard they was some held up day 'fore yestiddy," the man informed him.

Walter gulped. "Any—anybody hurt?" he asked with difficulty.

"Naw!" the man exclaimed disgustedly. "Damn tourists! No fight in 'em. Only way they'd get hurt would be histin' their arms so fast they'd bust somethin'. Full

grown man ought to be ashamed of himself for robbin' 'em. But, say, boy, I've seen the time out along that road when—"

"Save it, grampa," Walter interrupted. "I know the story—the good old days; them was the times, huh? Men was men. Blow that into the flat tires, fella! How much I owe you?"

Driving away from the filling station, Walter grumbled to Roach: "They make me sick, these old bozos always talking about how tough it used to be. Met 'em all over the country, Florida, Montana, Wyoming, Oregon. Blah! They still think the James boys were great bandits!"

Roach laughed. "Want to make a battle out of it if we get stopped?" he asked.

"Why not?" said Walter.

Roach took an automatic from the pocket of the car door.

"Better pack that then," he advised, handing the weapon to Walter. "I've got another on me, and a half dozen spare clips filled."

"Sure," said Walter, pocketing the gun. "We might have some fun."

The fun began near midnight on a desolate stretch of desert. Walter was driving. The road was two well-worn tracks in desert sand and gravel, on either side a heavy growth of chaparral. Coming around a slight curve the headlights picked up the figure of a man with a pack on his back plodding along the middle of the road. He turned and held up his hand. He might be what he appeared, just a poor bundle stiff on his innocent, weary way, hoping for a lift. And, then, again—

"On the lam, kid!" Roach said tensely. "It may be a plant. Step on it."

Walter nodded, sounded a warning note of the horn, and stepped hard on the accelerator. The man in the road ahead, seeing that the car was not going to stop or slow down, tossed aside his pack and jumped to the side of the road. As he made this move Walter saw the glint of a gun barrel in his right hand.

"Crack him," he yelled to Roach. "He's got a gun!"

He crouched low over the wheel as he spoke, his shoulders hunched in an instinctive effort at protection. He saw the flash of a shot from the chaparral just off the right front wheel. A spit of flinty glass splinters spattered on his neck and ear as the bullet flicked through the windshield and whizzed over his bent head. Roach, crouching low, fired twice over the edge of the car as they tore by the spot from which the first shot came.

"Get him?" Walter called.

"Dunno," said Roach. "Couldn't tell."

There was a racket of shots from behind, the plug and ping of bullets striking and glancing from steel, the angry, snapping whine of them through the air, and then a startling, nearer report as a slug bit into the left rear tire.

As the tire blew the car slewed to the left. Walter stepped hard on the brake, and switched off the lights as he did so. The roadster jolted to a stop in the chaparral.

"'At's usin' the old bean!" Roach said softly in approval as he slid from the dark car. "Come on, kid. The brush for us."

The desert sops up objects as a sponge sucks up water. In the daytime one may see a car or a mounted man in the distance, apparently there is no cover within miles sufficient to hide the object discerned; suddenly it disappears, the chaparral and a depression in the seemingly table-flat floor have done the trick.

Stand and watch for it to reappear. Five, ten minutes, half an hour, perhaps an hour later, it pops into view again miles from where it was last seen. Yet one unacquainted with such country would swear there was not enough cover within seeing range for a goat to travel a hundred yards without being spotted.

Thirty quick paces to the left, and Walter and Roach were swallowed up completely. Crouching together at the foot of a huge cholla plant they were merely two vague shadows, shadows that were creosote and greasewood and varied forms of cacti, shadows among which one with even a dull imagination could, by use of it, discover all the animals in the zoo, to say nothing of human figures in all sorts of startling postures. And, too, for all they could see, they might have been fifty miles from their car or a road.

For half an hour they waited, whispering cautiously, listening. Then, some distance away on their right, they heard the sounds of a car being started, the racing of the motor, the steady drone of it, diminishing, dying.

"S'ppose that's them leaving?" Walter whispered.

"Maybe," Roach whispered back. "If they're wise they'll figure us to think that and go back to our car and turn on the lights. If there's any of 'em left around here in the brush that would be a bad idea. We'd better sit tight."

They sat tight, listening intently, hearing nothing but the thin, high whine of the desert night wind in the chaparral. Walter grew impatient.

"I got a hunch," he whispered, and rapidly outlined it.

"Risky," Roach warned him. "If you want to try it, though—"

"They wouldn't dare sneak too close to the dark car for fear we might be in it—or under it," Walter argued. "I'm goin' to take a chance."

Cautiously he crawled back toward the car, located it, and, working flattened out, drew himself up over the running board until he could reach the light switch. Over the nub of this switch he cautiously slipped and tightened a loop in the end of a twist of string that he carried. This done, he eased himself flat on the ground again, and inched away on his stomach, paying out the twine as he did so, until he reached the shelter of a creosote bush some fifteen feet distant.

He lay still at the base of the bush for a few minutes, and then carefully drew the string taut. Startlingly the headlights flashed on. A moment of pregnant silence followed, and then the flash and bang of a gun from a spot some thirty feet in the rear of the car, then another shot and another. Walter rose to his feet, spotted the flashes, and fired at them.

From a little to his right Roach added to the party with a spatter of shots. There was a yell of pain, and a receding scurry of feet. Walter crept back to Roach.

"All right, kid?" Roach asked in an anxious whisper.

"Sure," said Walter, chuckling. "The stunt worked, hey?"

"I think we winged one," Roach said.

"I heard him yelp," Walter agreed. "Think they've ducked?"

"Maybe," said Roach. "We'd better sit the night out, though. Let's move back a little. If they're around yet they may have spotted our gun flashes."

They moved to a new hiding spot, and shivered the night through. Dawn and an accommodating party of tourists in a big car arrived simultaneously.

The bandits were gone. Investigation of their tracks showed that two of them had crept close to the car and waited, opening fire when Walter switched on the lights. The footprints of their line of retreat to the road were plain, and a slight blood trail of small, dark spots proved that one of them, at least, had been winged.

A bullet had ripped the radiator of Roach's roadster, and it was necessary to take a tow from the tourist car to the nearest garage.

"Quite a party," Roach said cheerfully as he sat at the wheel while the tourist car towed them away from the scene of their adventure. "Maybe not so good as the good old days, but still and all—"

"I bet we give 'em somethin' to think about in their old age!" Walter boasted, grinning. Then his face grew grave.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, worriedly. "I hope they got through all right."

Roach did not ask who he meant by "they." He laid a sympathetic hand on Walter's knee.

"You can't laugh that off, can you, kid?" he said gently. "When there's a girl the grin dries up in the best of us!"

CHAPTER XII.

BEING HELD UP.

THE Daggetts had *not* got through all right. They were stopped on a bright morning close to the spot where Walter and Roach had their adventure, stopped by two neatly dressed, humorous young men who looked more like soda clerks than highwaymen. There was nothing soda

clerkish, though, about the automatic they exhibited. They frisked Caleb expertly, and cleaned him down to his last cent.

"Just leave me a few dollars," Caleb begged desperately. "I'm most out o' gas, an' I dunno what I'll do if—"

"You'll be *all* out o' gas in just a minute, pappy fella," one of the young men enlightened him, grinning. "We're going to drain your tank for you. If you had gas you could travel, and if you traveled you might talk, and if you talked some lop-eared sheriff might listen. That 'd be terrible, 'cause he might come out here while we was around, an' we'd have to shoot him. We hate to shoot sheriffs, 'cause they're such nice old pappy guys an' they all have big families."

They stood then, one on each running board, and forced Caleb to drive aside from the main road over a faint wheel track trail through the chaparral into a wide wash a mile distant. Here they drained the gas tank and departed, bidding the Daggetts a mockingly polite good-by.

The Daggetts held a panicky council, and decided that Emily and her mother would wait with the car while Caleb followed the wheel tracks back to the main road and begged help from a passing tourist.

"Somebody 'd ought to lend us a few gallons o' gas," he said hopefully as he prepared to start. "We can get into Yuma then, an'—an'—"

And then what? That was the corrosive question that ate holes in Caleb's imagination, and which he could not abate with any satisfactory answer. He shook his head, and wiped a dew of perspiration from his forehead.

"I—I dunno what we'll do then," he finished weakly.

"Oh, pa, buck up," Emily urged. "People don't starve to death in this country. Lots of the folks we've met along the road stop and work for awhile whenever they run out of money. We're in a tough fix, of course, but there's nothing to be scared about."

Caleb looked at his daughter and found relief in her steady, confident gaze. For several days he had been vaguely aware of a change in her relationship to him, conscious of a new strength in her, a daily increasing assumption of command. And now it was her voice that saved him from complete panic, the confident, faintly scornful look in her eyes that shamed him to at least a simulation of cheer and courage.

"Oh, sure! We'll be all right," he agreed with a fair imitation of sincerity. "I ain't what you'd call scared about it. Well, I'll go on back to the road an' see if I can get some gas from somebody."

"Careful you don't get lost, Caleb," Mrs. Daggett urged anxiously.

"Oh, I'll foller the wheel tracks back to the road," he assured her.

"They're awful faint in some o' them rocky places," she reminded him. "Be careful."

The silent threat of the desert thrilled them all unpleasantly. True it was only about a mile back to the road, and there were wheel tracks to follow, and the sun and mountains to go by. But the threat was there, definite, justified.

A few wrong steps where the wheel marks were faint, a subsequent wrong guess on the way back, a moment of panic, a fast walk, breaking into a run, an unanswered shout, and a lost, crazed man rushing to early exhaustion and death; the story of more than one sun-bleached skeleton on the desert within a few hundred yards of the safety of a main traveled trail is as simple as that.

"I'll watch close," Caleb promised, and started on his way.

He had gone but a few steps when Emily called out sharply: "Pa! Wait a minute. What's that?"

She was standing in the flivver, watching a swiftly approaching brown ground cloud. Caleb saw it, and ran back to the car. He had no more than reached it when the thing was upon them, and the light of day was dimmed to a dirty, foggy dusk through which it was impossible to see for a dozen feet.

It was a sandstorm, and it lasted for three hours of shrieking wind and a world abraded with sand, flying like spume gale-whipped from wave crests. The Daggetts sat huddled together in the car, shielding their faces with blankets, breathing with

difficulty, half suffocated. Then the wind died and the air cleared gradually, and they discovered that the wheel marks leading to the road were completely obliterated by a new sand surface.

It was Emily who devised a way of searching for the road without losing contact with the car. They broke off old creosote limbs, and with these scratched a trail in the desert surface as they proceeded slowly, all three together, in the direction they figured the road to be. It took them the better part of an hour to reach the highway. Another hour passed before a tourist passed who was willing to part with three gallons of gas to help a strapped fellow traveler on his way.

All in all it was late afternoon before the Daggetts got their auto back to the main road and headed west once more. They camped before dark alongside the road at the edge of a little desert settlement. Caleb reported the holdup to a garage keeper there.

"Cleaned you, huh?" this individual remarked casually without show of excitement or sympathy.

"Took every cent," Caleb confessed.

"Tough," the garage man admitted. He went about his work, ignoring Caleb.

"Hadn't I ought to tell the authorities?" Caleb asked timidly.

"Might be a good idea," the garage man admitted.

"Who'll I tell?" Caleb persisted.

"Sheriff at Yuma, I reckon."

"Have you got a telephone?" Caleb asked.

"Yep," said the garage man. "Toll to Yuma is sixty cents."

"Oh," said Caleb abashed. "Oh, I see."

He started out of the shop. The garage man followed him to the door.

"Sorry, partner," he said apologetically. "Your story may be all straight, but if I helped out all the folks that stop in here with a good excuse for not having a cent of money I'd go broke in a season. If you're on the level and want work you won't have any trouble gettin' plenty around Yuma. You'll be all right."

"Oh, sure," Caleb agreed. "I'll be all right."

He repeated this assurance to himself as he walked back through the desert dusk to his camp by the roadside, and in spite of the efforts of panic to shake him, voiced the phrase to Emily and Mrs. Daggett with a commendable measure of firmness. But he lay long awake in his tent that night wondering what the day to come held in store for him, and fighting off the ghosts of fear with arguments and will power.

CHAPTER XIII.

THEY MEET MR. SHACKLEFORD.

BURT SHACKLEFORD, the real estate man, had trouble aplenty along the road *en route* to Claravue. In Texas he burned out a main bearing. Trying to make time on a bad stretch of desert road in New Mexico, he hit a chuck hole, and snapped a rear spring. Nearing Yuma, Arizona, an eastbound truck slewed in the sand as it was passing him and smashed his left front wheel.

Thus it came about that he was in Yuma, domiciled in a cottage in an auto camp, waiting for his car to be repaired, when the Daggetts arrived there.

The Daggett flivver had just rolled into the camp yard on the hill top when Caleb saw Shackleford standing in the door of his cabin.

"Hey!" he called frantically. "Hey, Mr. Shackleford. Hey, you!"

He killed the engine, scrambled from the car, and ran awkwardly across the yard toward him. Emily jumped out and followed. Mrs. Daggett descended as hurriedly as she was able, and joined the procession.

For a moment Shackleford did not recall Caleb. Then he remembered and greeted him. Caleb seized his hand and pumped it enthusiastically.

"Say now I'm—I'm awful glad to see you here," he panted. "I'm—I want to ask you somethin'."

"Fire ahead," Shackleford said patronizingly, grinning with amusement at the effusive earnestness of Caleb's manner. Then he saw Emily, behind her father, and stepped past him to shake hands with her.

"Well, say!" he exclaimed in admiration. "What's happened to you, young lady? Had your hair bobbed, haven't you? Say! You know I like it. Looks fine."

Caleb grasped him by the arm. "Say, now look here, Mr. Shackleford," he said excitedly. "I—I wonder what I'm goin' to do."

"What's the matter?" Shackleford asked.

"We've—we been held up," Caleb said desperately. He told the details of the robbery. "I dunno what we're goin' to do, Mr. Shackleford," he concluded. "I—gosh!"

He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, and looked about him, at the cabins, the camp yard, the far encircling hills with the frantic gaze of a trapped animal.

Shackleford's first instinctive sensation was one of withdrawal. He sensed a touch. Then he looked at Emily, and admiration warmed him. The thought processes that followed were so rapid that he was not aware that he thought at all. Forced to an explanation he would have testified honestly that his subsequent action was due to a sudden, generous impulse.

The action was, nevertheless, the result of the following thoughts: Emily was pretty, astonishingly pretty, far more charming than he remembered from their one brief previous meeting. She was going to Claravue. She was desirable; at the least a nice kid to play around with. A small loan would give him the inside track with her and her family as well. He would, in all probability, be repaid. It was a good investment.

He smiled benevolently, and patted Caleb on the shoulder.

"Now! Now!" he said soothingly. "Don't be panicky. Nothing to be afraid of. How much did they get you for?"

"Over two hundred dollars," Caleb said huskily. "All I had! I tell you, Mr. Shackleford, I don't know what I—"

"Forget it," Shackleford said largely. "Cigarette money, Mr.—Mr.—I forget your name."

"Daggett," said Caleb. "It may not seem a lot to you, Mr. Shackleford, but—"

"Chicken feed!" said Shackleford. "Now calm down and listen to me, Mr. Daggett. You're going to Claravue. So am I. We're going to be neighbors. It's an easy two-day drive from here. I'll loan you whatever you need to get through on. Fifty dollars, if that's enough, or—"

Burt Shackleford got his money's worth right then and there in the sincere protestations of gratitude that the Daggetts poured upon him. It is not given to many to buy as much flattering warmth of honest appreciation for so little.

"My bus 'll be patched up and ready to roll by morning," Shackleford said when the Daggetts had recovered from a near hysteria of mingled gratitude and relief. "You folks hang out here to-night and to-morrow we'll start together."

"Well, sir, I—I just don't know how to say what I feel," Caleb declared, his eyes still moist. "I got title to that camp out there, an' I s'pose, if I have to, I can raise some cash on that to start with an'—"

"Why sure you can," Shackleford assured him heartily. "You're all right."

"We wouldn't have been all right if you weren't so good," Emily reminded him fervently. "We'll just never forget it, Mr. Shackleford."

Shackleford's vanity glowed pleasingly to the breath of this gratitude.

"We're going to be neighbors," he said jovially. "Any good neighbor would do as much, I guess. You folks register now and get settled, and we'll have a talk about Claravue. I've been hearing good news of that place all along the road. There's a real boom on there."

CHAPTER XIV.

AT YUMA.

IT was just sundown when Roach and Walter Frazier drove into Yuma.

"Here we are, kid," said Roach as he nosed the roadster into a parking space on the main street. "I live up on the hill. Going up there as soon as I see a couple of people. Come with me and stay the night?"

"No, thanks," Walter declined, climbing from the car, and beginning to unlash his blanket pack. "Where's the auto camp?"

" Big one up on the hill just beyond the high school," said Roach. " Look to find your girl here?"

" I dunno," Walter mumbled, embarrassed. He shouldered his pack. " She might be. Prob'ly gone through. Well—so long."

" How you fixed for dough, kid?" Roach asked.

" All right," Walter lied. " I got plenty."

" Just as soon give you back what you paid for gas an' oil," Roach offered. " I'd have had to buy it if you hadn't been along."

" I'm all fixed," Walter insisted. " Good luck."

" Same to you," said Roach.

The lights were on in the stores and restaurants. A colorful throng moved and loitered on the broad sidewalks; wide-hatted Mexicans; big, broadfaced Indians, their heads decorated with bright handkerchiefs; gay, full black negroes, imported hands in the adjacent cotton fields; tourists; local business men; ranchers; cowhands; miners; prospectors. Roach sat in his car and regretfully watched Walter join this throng, move with them, his pack on his back, and disappear around the corner. Then he sighed and got out.

" Nice kid," he said to himself. " Good, game boy."

The lights were on in the auto camp on the hill when Walter arrived at the office by the entrance. He asked for the register, and his heart did a funny syncopated beat in his breast when he saw " Caleb Daggett, wife, and daughter," written thereon.

There were a dozen or more tents pitched on the graveled camping space. Camp fires were burning. Groups sat about on the ground or on stools at folding tables eating dinner. A portable radio set in front of one pretentious tent was tuned in on a jazz orchestra in Los Angeles. A number of couples were dancing to the music in the late dusk. The yard was softly alive with sound, low talk, light laughter.

There were four rows of cabins, ten in each. Lights shone from them all. They were completely screened on the sides and rear, and fitted with hinged wood wings that could be hooked up. The day had been hot and the night was yet warm; so the cabin occupants had all taken advantage of this opportunity offered for air. The whole was a dizzying confusion of bright lights and deep shadows, clear seen figures in the deep dusk of the outer yard, fragments of figures and faces sharply revealed by headlight beam or tent-pole lantern or camp fire, the rest dim in shadow.

In this cubistic maze of various lights and degrees of darkness Walter hunted for and found the Daggett auto, identifying it by the Missouri license plate and distinctive features of the camp equipment.

All about it was dark. He called: " Emily. Oh, Emily."

His voice was timid, uncertain. The sound of it embarrassed him. A man looked out of a near-by tent inquiringly.

" I—I was just lookin' for these folks here," Walter explained apologetically.

" They was here a little while back," the man said. " Guess you'll find 'em around the camp some place."

Walter wandered aimlessly away, feeling acutely forlorn, out of place, uncertain of his welcome or the wisdom of his having come. The dream wine of romance that had warmed him into a rosy, hazy glow of vague ecstatic anticipation following his fight with Hawkins, and committed him to the trip and kept him in a high state of mental intoxication throughout the hard length of it, had died out in him suddenly, leaving him soggy cold and afraid to face reality. As he had come, blithely, unquestioning any phase of the adventure, so now, arrived, he recognized suddenly the questionable elements in every particular of it.

In this mood, finding the Daggett tent deserted seemed to him a dire omen. He had, in his pockets, two one-dollar bills and some silver. That was their total cash content. This had not previously worried him. He was wise in the ways of the road, the habitués of which know that a job is always to be had, either where the money gives out or within reaching distance thereof, and that a week's work yields a traveling stake.

But now alone and miserable in the dark camp, he felt poor; there is a vast deal of

difference, and often no relation, between being out of money and feeling poor. Walter had often been out of money. Never before had he felt poor. Feeling poor made him wonder how the Daggetts would receive him when he did find them. It not only made him wonder, but worry as well.

Feeling poor made him doubtful of even a welcome from Emily. Being doubtful made him sullenly sensitive. He began to brood about the Daggetts being absent when he arrived, to be aggrieved, to feel that there was, in some way, an affront connected with it.

And then, seated in a lighted cabin and clearly visible through an open screened side, he saw Caleb Daggett. He was unconscious of the immediately subsequent physical movements by which he found himself before the door, knocking frantically thereon. A voice said: "Come in."

Only Caleb and his wife were inside. They looked with mingled astonishment and alarm at the boy who opened the door and stood on the threshold staring at them.

"Why, Walter!" Caleb exclaimed. "Where'd you come from?"

"Redburg," Walter said thickly. "Where's Emily?"

"Why, she went down town to have dinner in a restaurant with Mr. Shackleford," Caleb replied. "Where's your folks?"

"Shackleford!" Walter exclaimed, his voice rising. "Shackleford, hey? I knew it! I told you to look out for that guy! I told you he was a dirty crook!"

"Oh, now, Walter, you were wrong about him," Caleb protested warmly. He told then of the holdup, and the aid Shackleford had given.

"An' you fell for that!" Walter said bitterly. "Why, he just laid here for you, waitin' for you to come along so's he could work himself in with you somehow! I wouldn't put it past him that he framed that holdup so's he'd have a chance to loan you a little money an' make a little tin hero out of himself! I knew the minute I seen him back there in Redburg he was goin' to pull some stunt to get in with you folks."

"Oh, Walter, no!" Mrs. Daggett insisted. "Mr. Shackleford's real nice."

"Got you fooled, too, has he?" Walter jeered. "You think he's nice, huh? I notice he's off alone with Emily just the same!"

"Well, now, look here, what's wrong with him an' Emily goin' to a restaurant to eat together?" Caleb demanded, a touch of anger in his voice.

"Huh!" said Walter. "S'pose he asked you an' Mrs. Daggett to go with 'em, huh?"

"As a matter of fact, he did," Caleb said tartly. "Me an' ma was tired so we said we'd just have a bite here an' then rest here in his cabin till he an' Emily—"

"*His* cabin!" Walter exclaimed. "This is *his* cabin, huh? That's fine, ain't it? Just like one big family, huh? Maybe I'm buttin' in, bein' here? Prob'ly Mr. Shackleford wouldn't like me hangin' around *his* cabin, me not bein' one o' the family, an'—"

"Walter!" Mrs. Daggett said reprovingly. "You mustn't talk like that. You're excited."

"Oh!" said Walter. "You think I'm just excited, huh? Listen, Mrs. Daggett, I—lemme tell you somethin'. I come all the way from—this fella Shackleford—now—you know you people ain't ever been away from home before an'—an'—"

The words piled up and stuck in him short of his tongue. He wanted so desperately to plead his case well, explain that he was a wise and rightful protector come a long, hard journey, and providentially arrived to save them from the wiles of a road wolf, make them see that they were helpless innocents in terrible danger; and that he, wise in the ways of the wicked world, should be trusted and obeyed. But his throat shut tight on all the naïve, young-love, dreadfully honest nonsense that seethed in him, and he stammered and was silent.

"An' what?" Caleb prompted coldly.

It was no use. The words would not come. Walter took emotionalized youth's customary refuge behind a sullen front.

"Nothin'," he mumbled.

There was an unpleasant silence. Walter still stood in the doorway, aching to make himself understood, and appearing only stubbornly, childishly disagreeable."

"Come in an' set down, Walter," Mrs. Daggett said nervously. "They'll be back soon."

"Think your friend Shackleford wouldn't mind if I set an' waited in his cabin?" Walter asked nastily.

He had not meant to say anything of the sort. The words came from his lips involuntarily, and they both surprised and humiliated him. He had a panicky feeling that he was in the grip of a hypnotic influence, irresistibly forced thereby to the utterance of foolish, irrevocable words. He forced a smile and sat down, determined to dissemble, appear at ease, casual.

It was no use. The smile dissolved into a surly frown. Light words refused him their aid. An emotional mixture of jealousy, fear, love, and loneliness, the whole well seasoned with the flavor of youth, permeated and poisoned his being.

He could neither do the right thing nor avoid doing the wrong thing. He answered the Daggetts' questions in surly monosyllables, elaborating not at all in explanation of his presence, and when not directly questioned sat silent, gloomy, glowering.

At length, from near by in the yard, the three in the cabin heard Emily laugh. It was a clear, long, merry laugh, and it stung Walter with all the sudden hot pain of a lance thrust unexpectedly into a ripe boil. His reason took no account of the fact that she did not know that he was within two thousand miles of her. She had been absent when he arrived; she was with Shackleford; she was laughing. There he sat in torment, waiting, and she announced her arrival with a laugh!

"There they come," said Mrs. Daggett.

"Yeh!" Walter said bitterly. "I hear 'em. She seems to be havin' a good time all right!"

Then the door was thrown open, and Emily and Shackleford entered.

Emily stopped at sight of Walter, and gave a cry of astonishment.

"Why—why, Walter!" she said haltingly.

"Huh! Didn't expect to see me, did you?" Walter said challengingly.

"Where on earth did you come from?" she asked wonderingly.

"Oh, I just happened along and dropped in," Walter explained with elaborate carelessness. "Don't let me put you out, anyway."

Emily nervously introduced Shackleford.

"I've met him," Walter said darkly.

"Met me?" Shackleford questioned.

"Yes, met you," Walter said truculently.

"In Redburg," Emily explained to Shackleford, distressed, "the morning we left."

"Oh," Shackleford said, smiling. "A friend from home, eh?"

"Yeh," Walter snapped at him. "An' no yap, either."

Shackleford eyed him appraisingly for a moment, catalogued him as a jealous rival, and smiling, took advantage of his ill-humor.

"Have a good trip?" he asked pleasantly.

"No," Walter snarled.

"Too bad," Shackleford said, unruffled, and turning from him engaged Caleb and Mrs. Daggett in conversation.

Emily sat down, trembling a little, her face troubled.

"When did you get in, Walter?" she asked timidly.

"While ago," he replied briefly. He studied her with an insultingly critical eye. "Got your hair bobbed, didn't you?"

Emily nodded. "Do you like it?"

"No," said Walter shortly.

Emily flushed. "Lots of people do," she said defensively.

"Yeh?" said Walter. "Well, if you want to make a hit with a lot o' people you're all right, then."

He rose and moved toward the door.

"Guess I'll be movin' along," he said. "Guess this party'll get along without me all right. 'Night."

He opened the door.

"Will I see you later, Walter?" Emily asked miserably.

"Oh, I guess you won't have any time to bother with me," Walter said with heavy sarcasm. "You'll prob'bly be pretty busy with all the lot o' people that are so crazy about you now."

He stepped out into the night and slammed the door behind him.

Emily, sick with shame, mumbled an excuse and followed him.

"Walter!" she called, hurrying after him. "Walter, wait!"

He stopped. "Well, what do you want?" he said roughly.

"Walter, what's the matter?" she asked tearfully. "What do you want to act like this for?"

"You don't like the way I act, huh?" Walter said tauntingly. "All right. It's my way. If you don't like it, you know what you can do!"

"Walter!" She spoke the name with a sharp snap of reproof. "You can't talk to me like that."

"Can't, huh?" he said. "Who's goin' to stop me?"

"I am," she said, suddenly furious. "You can go now, and I don't care if I never see you again!"

When he left the cabin he had been definitely on his way. If she had not followed him he probably never would have seen her again. But she had followed him, and now she was terminating matters, and this changed the chemistry of the situation. He caught up with her and began to plead his case violently.

"What do you think I'm made out of? Wood or somethin'? I come tearin' clear across the country all by myself just lookin' for you, an' when I get here you're off bummin' around with this guy Shackleford."

She clutched him, clung to him.

"Aw, Walter! You came just to see me? Only for that?"

"What did you think I came for? The ride?"

"I didn't know, Walter. You didn't tell me anything, an' you acted so mad—"

"I was mad," he confessed. "Findin' that guy Shackleford givin' you a rush an'—"

"No, Walter," she protested. "Nothing like that. Honest! He was just bein' nice to us like he would to anybody that's in trouble. We got robbed, Walter, an'—"

"I know. Your pa told me."

"Mr. Shackleford ain't been fresh with me or anything, Walter. He just loaned pa some money so we could get on to California. He don't care anything about me nor me about him. Honest."

"Tell me true you don't like him?" Walter demanded.

"Like him!" Emily exclaimed. "Why, of course I like him, Walter. He's been ever so nice! He loaned pa the money to—"

"Oh! You *do* like him, huh? I thought so!"

"But, Walter! Listen—"

"*You* listen! Did you mean what you said when we—you know— Back in Redburg when you promised you—you would?"

"I did, Walter. 'Course I did! I wouldn't promise a thing like that unless I—"

"Do you still mean it?"

"Yes." There was just a suggestion of hesitation prior to the affirmative.

"All right. Then you go in there an' tell your pa to give the money back to Shackleford an'—"

"Walter! I can't do that!"

"Can't, hey? I didn't think you would. I'll tell you this, though. You can take your pick right here and now. Me or Shackleford. You can ditch him like I asked you, or it's good-by for me."

He stopped, waited for his answer. Where they stood it was too dark for him to distinguish her features; so he could not see the expression of her face, which might have warned him of the mood she was in.

"I hate you!" she flung at him suddenly after a little silence. "I hate you for the way you've done. I never hated anybody before like I— Oh, I hate you! Go away! Don't you ever speak to me again! I hate you!"

Then she was gone, a swift-moving figure of shadow, a silhouette for a second framed in the open door against the cabin lights. She slammed the door behind her, and the bang of it fell on Walter's ears with the stunning effect of a hard physical blow. For a few minutes he stood motionless where she had left him. Then he walked to the door of the cabin and knocked. Shackleford appeared.

"Come out a minute," Walter said in a dull voice. "I want to talk to you." He was breathing heavily, and his face had the congested look of a man long drunk.

"Right with you," Shackleford said,

smiling. Over his shoulder he spoke a word of excuse to the Daggetts, stepped out into the dark, and closed the door.

"Let's take a little walk," Walter mumbled.

"Sure," Shackleford agreed easily, and moved beside him.

In a dark place a hundred yards or so from the cabin Walter stopped.

"I'm goin' to knock your block off," he announced.

"So?" said Shackleford. "I supposed that was about the idea. Just a minute now. Did I understand you to say that you were *not* a yap?"

"Huh?" said Walter.

Shackleford laughed. He took his right hand from his coat pocket, and struck a quick, sharp blow like a man driving a small nail with a light hammer. Walter grunted and slumped to the ground.

"Young men who are not yaps hit first and talk afterward," Shackleford softly informed the unconscious lump at his feet. Thereupon he replaced the blackjack in his pocket and returned to the cabin.

"It was nothing," he assured the Daggetts when they questioned him anxiously. "The boy has some silly delusion. Let's forget it."

He began to talk entertainingly, amusingly, and the Daggetts were laughing when Walter staggered by the cabin five minutes later.

A little later Walter passed Roach, his late companion of the trip, as the latter was getting out of his car in front of his house. There was an arc light overhead, and Roach recognized him.

"Hey!" he called, alarmed. "What's the matter, kid? You're bleeding!"

He laid his hand on the boy's arm.

Walter shook it off. "Aw, you go to hell!" he swore at him.

Roach stood quietly and watched him fade into the night.

"Too bad!" he muttered. "But when there's a girl—"

Two miles along the dark desert road that led east toward Phœnix, Walter Frazier crawled off alongside a creosote bush, spread his blankets, rolled up in them, and gradually went to sleep. Three weeks later to the day he crawled stiffly from a truck in front of Miller's Garage, lean, hungry, travel-worn, and humbly begged his job back.

"I'll stick," he promised Miller. "I'm cured."

Shortly after he entered the living room of the farmhouse.

"Well!" his father greeted him. "You are a fine-lookin' scarecrow! Had a pretty tough time of it by the looks of you."

Walter nodded wearily. "Pretty tough," he admitted. His lower lip began to tremble. He started toward his room.

"Just a minute, young man," Mr. Frazier said importantly. "I've got a few words to say to you."

Mrs. Frazier spoke.

"You shut your mouth, John Frazier!" she said furiously.

She put her arms around Walter and walked to his room with him.

A half hour later she appeared again—alone.

"What do you mean by speaking to me like that?" Mr. Frazier demanded weakly.

"I meant what I said," Mrs. Frazier said grimly. "You're the head o' this house, John Frazier, an' I look up to you like a wife should; but there's times to have sense, an' this is one of 'em. You let Walter alone about this trip!"

CHAPTER XV.

MOUNTAIN MADNESS.

WHEN Emily Daggett left Walter in the camp yard she went back into the cabin with a set smile on her face. She kept that smile in place when Shackleford went outside at Walter's invitation, and was still wearing it when he returned. She took it to bed with her, and it remained her expression when she arose in the morning.

Emily was smiling mad, and any one conversant with the degrees of anger knows what that means. She was so mad that she would not admit to herself that Walter Frazier was responsible for the ache in her heart. More, she would not admit to herself that there was an ache in her heart.

She seemed gay as she helped pack for the resumption of the trip. She sang and giggled, she teased her father and mother, and flirted with Shackleford.

"Emily's takin' it well, ain't she?" Caleb remarked to his wife.

Mrs. Daggett looked at him curiously.

"I *do* declare!" she exclaimed scornfully. "I don't see how a man can be the son of a mother, the husband of a wife and the father of a daughter, and still not know anything about a woman!"

"Why, Marthy!" Caleb said, perplexed. "What do you mean?"

"How can you tell?" Mrs. Daggett retorted tartly. "I'm a woman. Hand me them dishes an' then strap up the bedroll."

By sunup they were ready to roll. Shackleford had offered to keep pace with them for the day, and invited Emily to ride with him in his roadster.

In the clear, thin light of the early desert day they drove through the town, just stirring to life, on out past the adobe ruins of the old Territorial Prison, and stopped just short of the bridge over the Colorado to be looked over by the State immigration inspectors. On across the bridge then after this formality and—California.

Emily, riding ahead in the roadster with Shackleford, drew a deep breath as the car rolled off the bridge onto California soil, and looked about eagerly.

"I think I'm disappointed," she confessed, laughing. "I don't know what I thought would happen when I crossed the river into California. I'm sure I thought something about it would be absolutely different from anything I ever saw before. Ahead it looks just about like it does behind in Arizona."

"It's a big State," Shackleford explained. "Plenty of wonderful things in it to see, but you can't expect to get a bird's-eye view of all of them from here."

"I guess that's what I expected," Emily admitted. "I had a sort of an idea that the minute we crossed the line I'd see—oh, the redwoods, and Golden Gate, and the Pacific Ocean, and lots of orange groves and—and probably Hollywood, too—all spread out in front of me."

In the flivver behind Caleb Daggett smiled at his wife as their tires rolled onto California soil, and laid his right hand on hers.

"Well, Marthy!" he said.

She smiled back. "We're here, ain't we, Caleb? My! It don't seem real. It's been—oh, I don't know how long—since I even dreamed that anything could ever happen to us. I mean anything except—well—"

"I know," Caleb said soberly. "'Cept work an' trouble an' death. An' now, by golly, here we are in California an'—an'—I dunno. I feel all new an' clean somehow, Marthy, like I'd been all cluttered up for a long time an' had got swept out an' dusted.

"An' I feel young, Marthy. You can laugh all you've a mind to, but I do! I feel like I could start in an' do somethin'. I know I'm just as old an' a few weeks more so than I was back in Redburg, but I don't feel so. I bet I'll *do* somethin' out here."

"Of course you will, Caleb," Mrs. Daggett assured him fondly.

Emily looked back from the roadster ahead and waved to them.

"She's sure havin' a great time, ain't she?" Caleb chuckled.

Mrs. Daggett frowned. "I'd feel better about her if she'd cry," she said worriedly.

Some twenty miles from the river they struck the sand hills, a true bit of the heart of the Sahara. For seven miles they crawled in low gear along a one-way plank road with platform turnouts every few hundred yards, up and down and round about, over and between great hills of pure yellow sand, their surface fretted by the wind into minute myriad ripples like the surface of gale-worn snowdrifts, then down a long, steep grade to the flat floor of the desert once more, and the beginning of the straightaway fifty-mile paved stretch to the Imperial Valley.

Here Shackleford and Emily stopped and waited for Caleb, who was having his troubles negotiating the narrow, twisting plank ribbon of road, that in places offered only a few inches of leeway between safety and the nerve-racking alternative of a sheer drop into a deep sand cañon. He was trem-

bling violently when he reached the flat and stopped.

"I never see anything like that before!" he admitted in an awed voice. "Why, say! Drivin' over there's just like walkin' a tight rope' way up in the air!"

"It is scary in spots the first time over," Shackleford agreed. "You get used to it, though."

"I ain't goin' to get used to it!" Caleb declared emphatically. "It ain't safe. I seen the bodies o' several cars that had gone off. Just laying there in the sand they was—abandoned!"

Shackleford nodded. "Quite a lot of 'em have gone off. Panic mostly. If you ever get scared driving any kind of a narrow, dangerous grade—stop! Stop, and stay stopped till you get over being scared."

"I wasn't scared, pa," Emily boasted. "I bet I could drive it all right."

"Yes, you could!" Caleb jeered.

"I could so!" Emily insisted. "If we get on a place like that again, I'll show you!"

"We ain't goin' to get on any place like that again," Caleb promised emphatically. "Not if I know it, we ain't."

They got on one that afternoon without knowing it. Shackleford parted with them in El Centro in the Imperial Valley, stopping off there to see to some business before continuing on to Claravue.

The Daggetts proceeded alone once more, across the lush, flat, irrigated lands of the Imperial Valley, out onto the desert once more, and up into the San Diego Mountains. The grade up tried Caleb's driving nerve, but it was a comfortable two-car road all the way, and he managed. But a garage man in Jacumba, far up in the mountains, advised their taking the secondary route through Julian and Escondido. Caleb negotiated the summit on this route successfully, although the road was narrow and there were slopes that fell away alarmingly.

"I guess I'm getting the hang of this mountain driving," he boasted somewhat shakily as he neared the top.

Just short of the summit Emily cried out and pointed off to the left.

"The ocean!" she said. "Oh, look!"

It was. Just a patch of shimmery silver far distant, showing through a narrow valley between two wooded peaks.

Caleb stopped the car and stared.

"Yes, sir! That's it!" he said in an awed voice. "That's the old Pacific Ocean, ma, just as sure as you're born!"

"My!" said Mrs. Daggett. "From here it looks just like a great big mirror reflecting the sun, don't it?"

They looked their fill and drove on. A few hundred yards farther they came slowly around an abrupt turn in the road, and Caleb gasped and shut off the ignition with trembling fingers.

They were at the summit, and suddenly, spread out on their right, below them, they beheld scores upon scores of miles of mountains, valleys, and cañons falling away to the floor of the distant desert, and far, far in the distance the silver gleam of the Salton Sea.

"Gosh almighty!" Caleb said huskily. "Just look at that, would you! It makes you feel kind o' solemn an' scary, don't it?"

"It makes me feel mad!" Emily said tensely. "It's so big it makes me feel how little I am. It—it makes me want to do something. Something—oh, big and strong and worth while. Oh, darn it! I wish I was a man!"

Their way led down from there by a winding grade that Caleb felt proud to be able to drive successfully. They crossed a high valley then and hit the San Pasqual Grade and trouble.

Caleb was on the grade before he realized it. A turn around the sharp shoulder of a hill, a terrifying glimpse of a sheer drop into a ravine hundreds of feet deep, a nerve shattering look ahead at the steep narrow ribbon of road winding down the mountainside: down and down, disappearing, reappearing, winding level after winding level of it in view, and for all the visible length of it that menace of depth on the right.

He braked the car to a crawl, negotiated one sharp turn, stopped, and set the brake with great care. Then with a gasp he let loose of the wheel and lifted his foot from the clutch. He was trembling violently, and

a sudden sweat broke out on his face. He covered his eyes and groaned.

"I—I can't do it," he said desperately. "I'll drive off sure if I go on."

"Can't you back up to where it's wider, Caleb?" Mrs. Daggett suggested anxiously. "It ain't far. Maybe we could turn there and get off this. We might find some other way that ain't so—steep and—and narrow."

"I don't dare touch anything," Caleb groaned. "If I move this car I'll run it over the side. I know I will! I just don't dast touch anything, Marthy."

"I'll drive," Emily offered calmly.

"You couldn't!" Caleb insisted fearfully. "I wouldn't let you try, Emily."

Emily opened the door and stepped out onto the foot or so of road between the car and the edge of the cliff. Caleb screamed and grabbed her by the shoulder with frantic hands, his eyes shut tight against the threat of depth.

"Dad, be still!" Emily commanded sternly. "Get in back there with ma and let me drive."

A quality of cool confidence in her voice calmed Caleb somewhat. Keeping his eyes averted from the chasm, he crawled over the back of the front seat, and huddled beside Mrs. Daggett.

"I'm terrible ashamed o' myself," he said miserably. "I dunno what took me. I just got helpless!"

"Nothin' to be ashamed of, pa," Emily said comfortingly as she climbed into the front seat and took the wheel. "I guess being scared of high places like this is something you can't help. It's like some people get sick if they eat certain kinds of food. They're just that way and they can't help it."

She started the engine and let off the hand brake. Caleb put his forearm over his eyes and groaned.

Emily laughed exultantly as she eased the car down the steep, narrow grade and around a sharp, left-hand turn, where for a moment, they seemed to be hanging precariously to the mountainside with only depth in front, behind, and on their right.

"It's all right, pa," she called assuringly. "I'm not scared a bit. Just sit still and don't worry."

In meeting the challenge of the steep, narrow grade she experienced a fierce, sweet easement of the suppressed, unacknowledged anguish that had tortured her since her parting from Walter Frazier. The thrill of driving matched and balanced the denied love ache in her heart and gave her a soaring sense of power.

She drove joyously, carefully, but without tension, down and down, and around and about, with the road edge never more than a foot from the wheels except where passing places were cut in the side of the mountain. And still the way showed ahead, winding level after winding level, down and down.

A third or more of the way along the grade she nursed the car carefully around a sharp left-hand turn where the mountain wall rose sheer at her left and fell away abruptly on the right, and stepped hard on the brake at the sight of a touring car standing in the road just ahead of her. Just at the rear of the machine stood a young man and girl, close pressed against the cliff wall, their arms about each other.

"Emily stopped the car, set the hand brake, and shut off her engine.

"You broke down?" she called.

The young man stared at her, his mouth open, his whole face a mask of horror. His lips worked, but no sound came from them. With ludicrous caution he signed to his companion to sit down in the road with her back to the cliff wall. Then, dropping to his hands and knees he crawled up the grade, brushing the mountain wall with his body all the way.

Reaching the Daggett flivver, he caught hold with both hands, first on the spokes of the front wheel, then on the fender, and then on the windshield support, and thus inched himself partially upright. His voice when he spoke was a hoarse, hard, forced whisper.

"My Lord! Help me, will you? Help me off here! Get me off here, will you? My Lord! What am I going to do?"

"What's the matter?" Emily asked sharply.

"I—I can't stand it," the young man moaned. "My Lord! How am I going to get off of here?"

The woman he had left sitting in the road cried out and braced herself back against the cliff wall, her heels digging desperately into the dirt as though she were resisting a physical pull toward the edge of the road.

"George! Come get me!" she wailed. "I'm slipping, George! I'm going to fall! I—oh!" Her voice rose to a wild scream. "George, George!"

"Oh, my Lord!" the young man muttered. And then in a weak call that was scarcely more than a whisper: "Hold on, deary! I'm—I'm coming."

He dropped to his hands and knees, crawled rapidly back to her, and took her in his arms. They clung to each other, pressed tight against the cliff wall.

"Poor feller!" Caleb said, pityingly. "I know just how he feels!"

Emily began to laugh. "They look so funny," she said. "They couldn't fall unless they walked across the road and jumped off."

"Emily," her mother said reprovingly. "You hadn't ought to laugh!"

The young man disengaged himself from the girl's embrace, turned carefully about on his hands and knees, and started to crawl up the grade again. The girl clutched him by the ankles, and, holding to them, crawled after him. The sight was too much for even Caleb and Martha. Mirth grew in them in spite of their efforts at restraint, and by the time the frightened pair reached the front of the auto and drew themselves carefully erect, squeezing in between the car and the cliff wall, the Daggetts, father and mother, had joined Emily in an uncontrollable hysteria of laughter.

The young man managed a shamefaced approximation of a grin.

"I suppose it must look funny," he admitted grudgingly.

"Oh, I think you're mean to laugh!" the girl sobbed.

Caleb and Mrs. Daggett apologized contritely. Emily offered no excuse, and the scared girl eyed her resentfully.

The incident seemed to restore a measure of control to the man. He introduced himself and wife, and explained their predicament. They were from Kansas City, newly married and on their honeymoon trip. He had driven onto the grade unexpectedly, as had Caleb, gone panicky, feared to attempt backing up, and tried to hold himself in hand and go through with it.

"I didn't dare go an inch further than here," he declared. "I don't know how I ever got the car stopped. I forgot all I ever knew about driving. I know if I'd gone another foot I'd have driven off the edge, sure. It's—it's just terrible to feel that way."

"I know just how it is," Caleb said sympathetically. "I was the same way. I had to crawl back here an' let my daughter drive. It don't seem to bother her none."

"There's a turnout just a little below where I stopped," the young man said to Emily. "If you could drive my car down to that you could get by."

"I can't drive a gear-shift car," Emily said.

"I'm surprised," the bride said cattily. "I thought *you* could do *anything*."

"Honey!" her husband exclaimed reprovingly.

"At least, I can drive my own car," Emily said coldly.

"I feel a little better now," the young man said. "Maybe I could get my car down to the turnout so you people can get by."

"You'll do no such thing!" his bride declared wildly. "They can stay right here till somebody comes along to help us. I'll not have you risking your life just so they can get by. They think it's so funny; let them sit here and wait!"

"She's right," Emily agreed shortly. "You'd better not try driving while you're scared. We'll wait till some one comes along who can handle your car."

"Oh, is that so?" the bride snapped petulantly. "I'll have you know he's not scared. Not a bit of it. He may be a little bit dizzy, but he's not scared; and if he wants to drive his car he'll drive it without asking any permission from you, young lady!"

"We're both a little excited," the young man said apologetically. "Hush now, honey. Don't say any more. I'll get the car down to the turnout all right."

"Better not try it," Emily repeated.

"You shut up!" the bride said furiously.

Braced by anger and shame the two who had crawled up the grade from their car walked back to it. They walked gingerly, to be sure, hugging the cliff, but they walked. The girl insisted on entering the car with her husband, but he forbade this and crawled in alone, leaving her standing in the road behind the machine.

Cautiously he turned on the ignition and stepped on the starter. Yet more cautiously he threw out his clutch and shifted into low gear. Handling the emergency brake as though it were a deadly snake that he was gripping behind the jaws, he let it free. Then he eased up carefully on the foot brake, and very slowly let his clutch catch.

The car moved, and as it did so he screamed, lifted his feet from brake and clutch, squirmed from behind the wheel, and leaped out. He bounced off the running board and lay flat in the road against the cliffside, as the unguided car rolled slowly to the edge, and slowly, awkwardly tipped off and over and, suddenly gaining momentum, went bounding thunderously down the steep rock slope, and reached the distant bottom with an echo-rousing final crash.

The bride crawled to her husband, and clutched him desperately in her arms. He buried his head on her breast like a scared child in its mother's embrace. Emily drove slowly down, and stopped beside them.

"Go on," the bride ordered in a dull, hostile voice. "There's nothing more to laugh at."

"I'm sorry," Emily said compassionately. "You and your husband squeeze in with us, and I'll drive you on down till we come to a town."

The man tightened his grip on his wife, and moaned frantically. "Oh, no, no!" he cried. "No! I won't get in there. Go on, please. Go away! Let us alone. We'll get down somehow."

Emily hesitated, troubled. "Shall I send some one back to get you?" she asked.

"You go on about your business!" the bride said sullenly. "Go on now!"

Reluctantly Emily drove on, leaving the bride seated in the road, her arms tight about her fear-broken husband, a bitter shame in her eyes.

Twice they looked back from points where the upper levels of the grade were visible, and saw the bride and groom making their way down. They were walking slowly, the girl in front, her husband hanging to her hand, walking sidewise, his back brushing the cliff face.

The Daggetts camped that night in an auto park in a green, warm, sweet-scented valley well down toward the coast, a cozy, lazy valley of orange and lemon groves and small truck ranches. Claravue and their journey's end lay ahead an easy day's drive over cement-paved highways. Behind was conquered distance. As they sat in front of their tent in the warm night they relaxed to the serene sense of a task accomplished.

"Golly, ma!" Caleb exclaimed solemnly. "Just think o' them folks that came the same route we did 'way back in the old days when they traveled in wagons an' there was only just a trail to foller, an' hundreds o' miles where there was no towns, an' Indians to worry about all along the way! Can you imagine how they must 'a' felt when they finally got here?"

"I *know* how they felt," Mrs. Daggett declared. "Just the same as we do, only maybe more so. Kind o' tuckered out, but safe an' warm. Like when you been out in a storm an' come in to a nice cozy room where there's a fire an' set down an' rest."

"Well, we had our troubles along the way, but I'm mighty glad we come," Caleb said. "We got Emily to thank for bein' here, ma. If 'twasn't for her we'd o' stuck on there on the old farm till we died likely. You happy you're here, Emily?"

"Indeedy, I am!" Emily replied emphatically. "We're all going to be lots happier out here. I just know it."

She arose and moved about restlessly.

"I'm going to walk around a little before I go to bed," she said. "Don't wait up for me."

"I'll come along with you, Emily," Caleb offered, rising.

"No," Emily said a little sharply. "I'm —I'm—I just want to walk around alone a little while, pa."

"What ails her?" Caleb asked his wife when Emily was out of earshot. "That Frazier feller?"

"Of course," Mrs. Daggett replied. "Poor honey. We got to be very tender with her, Caleb. She's awful bad hurt."

"Dog-gone him!" Caleb said savagely. "I'd like to wring his fool neck for him. Makin' our girl miserable right now when she'd ought to be just happy an' nothin' else. Whatever you s'pose got into him? I never see nobody act so crazy stubborn an' uppity! Good thing she found him out soon's she did, *I* say. He's just a surly, trouble-makin' young pup."

"Hush, Caleb," Mrs. Daggett reproved him gently. "Walter's just a nice, honest young boy, terribly in love. The nicer and honester they are the worse they're liable to act. Poor Walter! I feel almost sorrier for him than I do for Emily. I wonder where he went to an' what he's doin'."

"I dunno an' I don't care so long as he keeps away from us," Caleb declared.

"I wouldn't say that, Caleb," Mrs. Daggett said worriedly. "We're liable to see the day we'll wish hard for him to show up again."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CAMP AT LAST!

IT was after three o'clock in the afternoon when the Daggetts drove into the town of Claravue.

Their first impression of it encouraged them. Building was going on everywhere, new streets being graded and paved, hustle and bustle and an atmosphere of aliveness, everything new, new houses, new streets, new street lights, new business buildings, and new people.

Claravue was really booming. No one knew just why. There was no real reason. Other towns in the State, scores of them, offering every advantage Claravue could boast, were standing still or suffering the nearly as great civic humiliation of merely normal growth.

Somehow Claravue had caught on. The word was out all over the country that the town was in the boom. Letters east carried the news. It was being passed along on the tourist trails wherever cars with the bundle badge of the tribe traveled.

It was a motor tourist town. A good ninety per cent of the people inhabiting it when the Daggetts arrived had come by car with camp gear lashed to the running board.

It was a pretty town in a pleasant valley close up against a rugged range of dappled brown and heather-colored mountains. On three sides were miles of fertile valley land, cut up into small fruit groves, chicken ranches, and vineyards.

"It sure looks good, don't it?" Caleb said as they drove slowly along the brand new main street of the town.

He stopped in the business district and called to a man on the sidewalk, asking the location of Miller's camp.

"I don't know, friend," the man said, smiling. "I'm new here."

A number of other passers-by gave the same response.

"One thing sure," Caleb chuckled. "A feller don't feel out o' place being' a stranger here. Seems that's what everybody in town is."

They tried a filling station then. The attendant scratched his head.

"Miller's camp?" he said. "Don't seem to place that. A fella by the name of Hemingway's got a camp out in the edge o' town. That's the only one I know about. 'Course I only been here a couple o' months.

"We'll go out to this Hemingway's place an' ask," Caleb said. A premonition of trouble ahead chilled him.

"Prob'ly this feller that's been takin' care o' Miller's camp ain't been advertisin' it like he'd ought," he said to Emily and his wife in explanation of their inability to discover any one who knew its whereabouts. "Miller said, you know, that the feller wasn't takin' care of it right."

That speech was a whistle in the dark, and it did little to hearten the women or ease Caleb.

They found the Hemingway Camp without trouble. It was in a eucalyptus grove on the main highway, and long-lettered arrows every few hundred yards pointed the way to it.

"Miller's Camp?" the proprietor there said. "Oh, that ain't running' any more."

"Ain't runnin'!" Caleb exclaimed. "Why—why, Miller told me he had a man out here runnin' it for him."

"Oh, yes," said Hemingway. "He left a feller by the name o' Andy Colter in charge down there, but, o' course, there wasn't any sense o' his stayin' on there after the new road was cut through; so he come up here an' went to work for me."

"The—the new road?" Caleb said thickly.

"Why they took a big bend out of the old highway, you know," Hemingway explained. "And, of course, that left Miller's old camp clear off the road; so there wasn't any sense tryin' to keep it going any longer. Did you want to see Colter?"

"I—I dunno," Caleb stammered. "I dunno what I— I tell you, mister, I bought that camp o' Miller's."

"You bought it!" Hemingway exclaimed. He started to laugh, but the stricken look on Caleb's face stopped him. "Say, friend, I'm afraid you've been stung," he said, sympathetically. "Did you pay much for it?"

"Around two thousand," Caleb said.

"Two thousand!" Hemingway whistled and shook his head. "Something ought to be done to that fellow Miller," he said angrily. "Say, that's too bad! Wait a minute till I get my car, and I'll drive down there with you and show you what it is."

"Maybe he's just trying to scare us," Emily suggested shakily as Hemingway walked into the yard to get his car. "Maybe he's afraid we'll take his trade away from him."

"Mebbe," Caleb said dully, hunched spiritlessly over the wheel. "I dunno."

None of them spoke as Caleb guided the flivver in the wake of Hemingway's roadster, back through the town and out along the highway on the other side. They turned to the left, then, on a little-traveled, narrow dirt road, and followed this for a half mile down into and across a sand and gravel wash, and on the far side reached a paved way that had been part of the big curve in the main road before the short cut eliminated it.

A few hundred yards to the left on this road between the wash and the base of a low range of bare brown hills, and Hemingway stopped his roadster. Caleb stopped behind him. Hemingway stepped out of his car and pointed.

"There she is," he said.

On the left along the edge of the wash were a few cottonwoods and oaks. Among them were a number of small, dilapidated cabins. The windows in all of them had been broken or stolen. Just off the road stood a locked and rusty gas tank, back of that the shell of a small shack store from which windows and doors had been filched. Above the store a faded sign announced:

MILLER'S AUTO CAMP
Cabins, $1.00
Camping Space, 25c.

"I'm sorry for you folks," Hemingway said sincerely. "Mighty sorry! But there's no use trying to make a good matter out of a bad one. This camp simply isn't worth anything. The ground along the wash there is no good to raise anything.

"The cabins ain't fit to rent, an' they're too far from town to be worth fixin' up for people staying here that might take them by the month. And, of course, since they straightened out this big curve there's practically no travel by here at all. It's tough on you folks, I guess."

"Yes," Caleb said dully. "It's tough."

"Glad to help you any way I can," Hemingway offered.

"That's real neighborly," Caleb said gently. "But I—no. I guess there isn't anything you could do."

"Glad to have you come up and stop at my camp, as my guests," Hemingway went on.

Caleb shook his head. "No," he said. "We'll stop here."

Hemingway repeated his regrets and said good-by. When he had gone Caleb started his auto once more and drove it slowly into the desolate, abandoned camp. He stopped it between two rows of plundered weather-worn cabins, and shut off the ignition.

"Well," he said, looking about him. "Here we are."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

In Love and War

By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

RIGHT away I can see Bill Digley ain't as snappy as usual. I give him the good word, mop off the marble an' mix him his milk chocolate sundae. He's lookin' at me in a sort of mysterious way, an' every once in awhile he turns around to see if anybody's watchin'. At last the couple at the end of the counter take their check and go, and Bill catches my eye.

Right away he runs his tongue in his right cheek, an' touches his left eye with his right forefinger, the grand distress sign of the Order of Jonahs. That makes the fifth time in ten months that Bill's called on me for help under the sacred obligations of that secret society he organized himself and made me pay a dollar to get initiated into. The regular price was to be twenty-five dollars, but Bill let me in for a dollar because I was to be a charter member.

It sounded good when Bill was first tellin' me about it. That's the worst of Bill, he can make anything sound good. I guess it's his training as a salesman.

Ever since we left high school he's been studyin' salesmanship, and I guess he's doin' pretty good with sellin' stuff for an automobile accessory house. Me, I'm buildin' up a blamed good business runnin' the soda fountain and sandwich stand in the Palace Drug Store, and I don't need to know anything about salesmanship. Give 'em good stuff to eat and drink and they'll come back.

"I appeal to you as a fellow Jonah, under the sacred obligations of your oath," whispers Bill solemnlike.

I guess it's all right. Bill says when he gets the society really organized, a member can find a brother any place in the Union, and the grand hailing sign of distress 'll have brothers flockin' around to bring aid an' sympathy.

I guess maybe he's right, but right now, the members are so few that I seem to get all the signs of distress, an' all the calls for help. Somehow or other I've always managed to fight my own battles an' I ain't never called for help from no brother member, but maybe I ain't a good Jonah. I

notice Bill Digley's always callin' for help under the sacred obligations of the order.

I leans over the counter.

Bill pulls a pencil from his pocket, takes out a piece of paper an' starts talkin'. Bill's like that. He says he has to have a piece of paper in front of him when he tries to sell a man somethin'.

"Look here, Dick, I've told you about Margy Bridger?"

I nod quick. He ain't been tellin' me about anything else for the last three weeks, and I want to head him off before he gets started again.

"I've lost her," he says, doleful-like.

"Why don't you put an ad in the paper?" I asks.

He scowls.

"Now don't try to be funny. Remember, I'm appealin' to you under the obligations of my lodge, that is, of our lodge. I've lost her—that is, unless you rally to my assistance and do what I want you to."

In dealing with Bill Digley, the only thing to do is to find out quick what he wants, then you can head him off quicker. If you let him talk, he'll have you all tied up to do it before you know what it is.

"What is it you want, Bill?"

He starts talkin' about the wonderful feelin' of fraternity when he can call on a brother Jonah an' feel as though he's talkin' to a real brother, and know that there's nothin' he can ask that the brother won't do, even at the risk of his life. That's what Jonahism means to him.

I get fidgety. This must be worse than any of the other things he's got me into trouble over with that grand hailing distress signal.

"Bill, I'm busy. I gotta get a bunch of sandwiches ready. Tell me what it is."

"Margy Bridger has fallen for this outdoor stuff, this big men in the open places sort of idea."

I nods. "They all do, sooner or later. It's a funny streak they've got, the same thing that makes 'em fall for caveman stuff."

Bill snorts.

"Since when did you get to be such an expert? This is different. This is a man, a cow-puncher."

"Oh!" I says. "I begin to see."

I did, too. Bill had told me a lot about Margy, and there was a something about her I understood. Sometimes, just from sitting there and listening to him, I thought I understood her better than he did. She wanted 'em to be game, to stand the gaff.

Somehow or other, I got the idea Margy wouldn't like the idea of her hero goin' around callin' for help with the grand hailing distress sign of the Jonahs.

"It's Buck Dawson," Bill goes on. "He shows up with a coat of sunburn and a lot of stories about how he punched cattle out in California, somewheres. Margy 'll sit and listen to him by the yard, and I don't get a look-in. He's beatin' my time."

At this point I might have registered sympathy, but past experience has taught me that it's dangerous to register sympathy with Bill, particularly when he's been giving the grand distress signal. It's what he'd call his cue to "close the sale."

I don't say a word, just keep on polishin' a soda glass and listenin'. That's the worst of salesmen, you don't dare to treat 'em like they're human.

"Now here's where you come in, Dick. I want you to pose as a cow-puncher and go call on Margy. I'll take you around. You're a friend of mine, see? I met you out in Arizona a year or two ago, and you let it slip out sort of natural that we were both of us punching cattle out there for a spell. She'll want to know why I didn't tell her before, and I'll act sort of modestlike as though braggin' wasn't my long suit. Then you mention about some prize I won for roughridin', or whatever it is you call that stuff, an' I'll be jake. That other bird won't stand the chance of an uncaged canary with a tomcat."

All of this time Bill's been makin' a line of dots on the paper, and when he gets to this point, he slides the paper over and hands me the pencil.

"What's this for?" I ask.

"Oh," says Bill, sort of flushin', "I forgot. I was givin' you a dotted line to sign on. Just sort of mechanical-like with me. Every time I'm makin' a sale I get that way. I have to have somethin' to help me close an' get the order."

I thought so, too, but I didn't say much.

" Remember, Dick, it's a part of your sworn obligation as a member of the Independent and Established Order of Jonahs to come to the aid of a brother in distress whenever the grand hailing signal of distress is given. You remember when you took the solemn oath, don't you?"

" How do I put this cow-puncher stuff across, an' what does a cow-puncher act like?"

Bill leans forward, looking mysteriouslike.

" I've got it all doped out. I've been to a costumer's and got a whole cowboy outfit except the spurs. You'll have to get them yourself at a harness shop. Get a big pair, one that 'll show up nice by lamplight. To-night I'll bring the costume around and we'll pull off the show."

I blink a couple of times, trying to get my head clear, and Bill reaches forward and grabs my hand, giving me the welcome sign of the order.

" Brother Dick Ellis, you have proven yourself a true brother, a loyal Jonah, and a credit to the exalted teachings of our order. I will see you at seven sharp."

With that he was gone.

I stared at him, and didn't see a man sittin' at the end of the counter for a minute. He wanted a Prohibition Delight with two bananas. What I give him the Lord only knows. That's how dazed I was.

I'm always like that after Bill makes one of his sales. He's sort of chain lightnin', and it sounds so easy when he says things fast. Afterward, it looks different.

I got through the day somehow, and that night Bill brought the things around. I'd got the spurs, and they cost blamed close to five dollars for a pair that really showed up. It seems that Bill's schemes are always costin' me something. It's funny Bill didn't get the spurs, but he's like that, an' anyhow, he's a brother Jonah, an' our ritual says you should close your eyes to the faults of a brother.

I had a lot of questions I wanted to ask, but I never got the chance. Bill started in to talk, an' he never quit until he'd talked those clothes clean on me, an' pulled me in the little bug he's got, the one he calls his " Termin 8."

Maybe I didn't look so bad in those hairy pants after all. That orange handkerchief around my neck, and the big hat sort of set my face off. Anyway, that's what Bill said.

He gave me a lot of instructions, most of which boiled down into the simple fact that I was to say " yes " every time he looked my way and paused in the conversation.

Margy was staying with her aunt. Her folks lived out of the State somewhere and she was going to college.

I felt sort of sheepish as we walked up to the front door, but Bill kept walkin' along beside me talkin' the ritual of Jonahism to me, an' keeping one hand friendly-like on my shoulder, gently pushin' me with it. I never had a chance to turn back.

The aunt is a hatchet-faced jane with the longest nose I ever see tacked onto a human face. I don't think she ever smiled in her life. If she did, the nose hid it, so it didn't do any good.

Bill introduces me.

It's plain to be seen aunty doesn't fall very strong for Bill, and I can tell that she don't fall at all for his cow-puncher friend. Everything's nice and informal, and I go on into the parlor, with Bill's hand pattin' me on the back, and pushing me along, my spurs jinglin' an' rattlin' on the hardwood floor.

There's a female voice from somewhere's upstairs.

" Auntee, a-u-n-t-e-eeeeee, somebody's let Bobo in. I can hear his chain jangling on the floor."

Aunty elevates her nose forty-five degrees, and lets her voice rattle up the stairs.

" It's not Bobo. It's company for you. Come down."

I never heard a woman talk so fast. Her words came out so quick her tongue seemed to be rattlin' against her teeth, and it wasn't until five seconds after the echo died away that her words registered as bein' language instead of just tongue vibration.

The more I thought of that dig, the less I liked it: " It's not Bobo. It's company for you."

I looked over at Bill.

He was making the grand rallying sign of

the Independent and Established Order of Jonahs.

I looked away, and then I seen Bill jump to his feet, and I turns toward the door.

Margy was a peach, I'll say that for her. She was everything Bill had said and then some. Black hair that glistened in the light an' was bobbed so it sort of made a frame for her face, a little nose that turned up at the end just enough to give her a teasin' sort of expression an' show off the rosebud of her mouth.

Bill takes her hand and bends low, but Margy don't see him; she's lookin' over the top of his varnished hair to where I'm standin'. There's somethin' funny about her expression.

"Why, who's your friend?"

Bill swells back his chest.

"Margy, may I present Broncho Dick Ellis? Dick used to ride with me in Arizona, an' I never had a finer or a truer bunkmate."

She extends her hand an' gives me a quick once over from them gray eyes of hers. Sort of cool an' steady, and yet with a sparkle in 'em.

"Why, Bill Digley! You never told me you were in Arizona."

Bill waves his hand modestly.

"I really mention it very infrequently," he begins in that stilted sort of sing-song effect that shows he's written that little speech down and then memorized it. "There was a little trouble over a shootin' scrape, and when the smoke had blown away, Four Finger Pete, the terror of the border, lay dead, and I was headed for across the line. I could have got out all right on a plea of self-defense, but I was tired of punchin' cows anyway."

She looks at him, an' you could have knocked her eyes off with a stick, they stuck out so far.

"R—e—e-e-e-e-ally and tru-u-uly?"

Bill nods, standin' there with his shoulders squared and his hand stuck in his vest like the pictures of Napoleon crossin' the Rhine, the light shinin' down on his baked enamel hair finish, lookin' for all the world like a movin' picture sheik in the last fifty feet of film.

"Certainly," he says.

We sits down, and Bill begins to talk. Almost at once I realized I'd made a mistake by not findin' out more of the particulars. Bill takes a couple of hours runnin' over his career in the Wild West, appealin' to me for confirmation every few minutes.

I'd nod an' say "yes," but personally, I thought he was spreadin' it on too thick. Margy Bridger kept her eyes shiftin' from one to the other of us, but she didn't say much. She didn't have a chance.

"Now tell me something of yourself, Mr. Ellis," she says finally.

Shucks, I didn't know what to say. Somehow, I hated to look in those eyes an' lie. I sort of looked down at my feet, an' saw that I'd been rubbin' my heels around and the spurs had scraped all the finish off the chair leg.

Bill rushes to the rescue, handin' me out a sop.

"He won't ever talk about himself, Margy. He's the greatest broncho buster east of San Francisco. When Dick can't bust 'em they ain't worth bustin'. Why, I remember one time at one of these here cowboy circuses, these ridin' exhibitions, you know, the kind you read about where all the cowboys get together an' bust bronchos—"

Margy interrupts. "Yes, I know; a rodeo is what you mean."

Bill nods. "Yeah, at one of these here rodeos, Dick wanted to show 'em what was what in broncho bustin' an' he had the saddle put on a horse upside down. You know, the saddle hangin' down on the horse's stomach, an' Dick climbs in that saddle, with his head hangin' down to the ground, an' rides that there bronc upside down."

Margy didn't say anything to that. She got a fit of coughin'. She'd been coughin' a lot that night. I wondered if maybe she didn't have a bad cold or somethin', but when she got finished with her coughin' spell she looked at me out of them wide eyes of hers.

"W-w-w-onderful!"

After that Bill talked some more about himself. It seemed like an age before we finally got up to go, an' Margy handed me that big, high-peaked hat.

I jingled out of the door, sort of feelin'

her eyes on us, an' then when I come to the porch stairs, blessed if I didn't get those blamed spurs tangled up, an' down I went.

The door closed softly behind us, an' I prayed Margy hadn't see that last. Bill picked me up, an' kept pattin' my back all the way into the car.

"Great stuff, Dick, old boy. We've got her sold, sold a thousand per cent. What did you think of that line I gave her about you comin' right on into the city with your regular cowboy clothes on in order to spend a few days, not realizin' that they wore different clothes off the range; you know, makin' sort of a joke about your ignorance?"

I didn't say much. What could I say?

Bill was the one who always did the talkin', and he had got so wound up tellin' about his exploits while he was punchin' cows in Arizona that he hadn't commenced to run down.

"Now," prattles Bill, "when this here Dawson shows up and starts tellin' about how he punched cows in California he won't have anything on me. In fact, I bet I thought of some stunts to-night that Buck Dawson couldn't have thought of in a hundred years."

"Yeah," I cuts in, "but did yuh notice how that jane knew the name o' this here cattle an' horse bustin' circus That may mean somethin'."

Bill laughs, tickled pink with himself.

"Aw, shucks, Dick, you worry too much. Look at me. I'm not worryin'. I take 'em as they come. That's the way to get along in this world."

I shrugs my shoulders, we get to the house, Bill gives me the grand farewell grip of the Independent and Established Order of Jonahs, and drives away.

Dog-gone it, take it any way you mind to look at it, Bill's a lucky dog. That girl, Margy, is some little queen an' no mistake —well, I guess I'm out of the picture. I rolls in and goes to sleep.

II.

It's three days later that Bill slides up to the counter with a funny look on his face.

"Dick, I don't know what's up, but Margy wants me to bring you around to her house to-night. She says she figures you'll have some store clothes by this time, and that she likes to listen to you talk."

I can feel my jaw saggin'.

"Listen to *me* talk! Shucks, I never said a word. I never had a chance, an' you know it, an' what's more, so does she."

Anyhow, there wasn't any backin' out, and, to tell the truth, I didn't feel so reluctant. I sticks on my sheikin' suit, an' out we go in the old Termin 8.

This time it's a regular party, an' Bill draws auntie. How it happened nobody knows. Bill always claimed aunty never did care much for him, always gave him the cold shoulder, so to speak; but this time she warms right up to him, an' after the first few passes of the weather reports an' such like, she sidles up to him, tilts her nose up in the air an' starts rattlin'.

I don't know when I've enjoyed anything better. Take it as a rule, Bill does so much talkin' that anybody else doesn't get a chance to say a word. To-night it's all the other way. Bill is sittin' there fidgetin' in his chair, sidlin' 'round waitin' for a chance to spill whatever it is he wants to say, and aunty just keeps the old rapid fire goin'.

After the first few minutes I forgot about Bill. I find that Margy has everything on the ball, an' after a few minutes we're talkin' an' laughin' away like we'd known each other for years.

An' then there's a ring at the door, an' aunty goes and lets in a tall, ganglin' sort of a guy that looks as though he's about ready to cave in in the middle, he's so thin; but you can see that he's wiry an' tough for all that.

Margy jumps to her feet with a squeal.

"Oh, Buck, I'm so glad you should come. You know Mr. Digley, of course, and I want you to meet a regular old-time cow-puncher, Mr. Dick Ellis."

I've been raised polite, an' I stick out my paw, which the other takes after a long minute.

"How'r'ye, pard?" I hands that line out fast, havin' read somewhere that that's the way real, sure enough cow-punchers talk among themselves.

"Chawmed," comes back this regular puncher with the parlor manners, an' I feel sort of let down.

"Now," says Margy, "I just want you two men to get together and talk of the range. Tell of some of your experiences out on the desert, and in the sage brush. You know, you two should really get along famously."

I can feel the red commencin' to come up behind the ears. I can see where I'm goin' to last quick; but Bill saves the day.

"Dick," he spouts, breakin' in on the rapid fire echo producer while she's in the middle of a sentence or a paragraph, or somethin'. "Dick, you remember you promised to meet up with that horse trader to-night at nine sharp. You can take the car. Of course, I don't want to hurry you, but you remember I promised him you'd ride anything he had, and I want to see you make good. If you don't meet him he'll think we're quitters.

Margy looked sort of mad for a minute, but I sure clutches at that straw.

"Gosh! I nearly forgot about that, and I wouldn't have missed it for the world! I'll have to be gettin' started."

I do that little thing, an' I do it speedy. What's more, I don't breathe a deep breath until I'm in the Termin 8, chuggin' along up town.

I can't put my hand on just what it is that's makin' me sore, but I'm gettin' sore, an' no mistake about that. I decide to go to Bill's room an' wait up for him. It ain't very long before he shows up.

I take a deep breath, gettin' ready to tell him a lot of things about himself an' Jonahism, an' all the rest of it, but I don't get the chance. That's Bill all over. If a fellow stops to take a deep breath before startin' the argument, Bill's got him cheated.

Bill can talk an' breathe with the same motion. He don't need to stop talkin', or else he stops breathin' when he's talkin. I never have figured it out.

"Listen, Dick. You've got to see it through now. This cheap sport of a Buck Dawson started pokin' fun at you right after you left. 'What, him a puncher?' he says, sort of scornful like. 'Him a broncho buster! Why, he couldn't ride a street car for ten blocks without having to get off. He couldn't ride a fifteen-year-old horse twenty feet,' and there was a lot more to it, Dick. Of course, I wouldn't let him talk about a brother Jonah in good standing that way, so I climbed right into the conversation and told about some of the stunts I'd seen you pull."

Bill stops there, and I can feel my heart sinkin'. When it gets so bad Bill has to hesitate it's awful, and I don't mean maybe.

"Go on," I says, and my voice sounded far away like.

Bill sort of squirms.

"Well—that is—er—you see, it was like this. Of course, I had to keep my pose as an ex-puncher, too, and one thing led to another, and—er—finally I offered to bet you could ride anything Buck Dawson could ride."

My heart skips a beat.

"And then?" I prompts.

Bill waves his hand.

"Oh, there wasn't much to it after that," he remarks, casual like, "except Margy said there was a bucker down at the polo fields, and she knew the man that had charge of the stables, and we all meet for breakfast Sunday morning and go down for a riding party. You'll get on him and show what you can do. You know, Dick, I don't think there's much to this riding business after all. A bucking horse can't be so hard to stick, and then if you do get thrown off, well—all of the best cowboys get thrown off once in a while, and—"

This last bunch of conversation is coming out like a rapid fire gun. Bill's trying to talk so fast that he'll have me dazed by the time he quits, but this is too much.

"Wait!" I roars, and for once I got away with it, and Bill listens.

"Do you mean to tell me I'm to ride a bucking horse in front of Margy and this human fence rail?"

"Sunday morning, Dick, old dear. Don't act so cut up about it. It's nothing much."

"All right!" I bangs my fist into my palm with so much force it surprises even me. "I'm finished. I've done all that could be expected of me, and a blamed sight more, and I'm through."

Bill looks reproachful.

"Why, I thought I could depend on a brother Jonah!" He makes the grand hailing distress sign of the Independent and Established Order of Jonahs, but I don't soften a bit.

"I'm resignin' from the lodge, effective right now, an' I'm only sorry I can't make it effective a week ago!" I yells, and slams out of the door.

The nice part of bein' a salesman is that nobody knows where to catch you when you don't want to be seen, and the worst part of havin' a soda stand and restaurant counter is that any Jonahs in good standin' know where to find you any time they want to hunt you up.

III.

WHEN Bill sidles up to the counter next morning he makes the grand hailing sign, but I give him the glassy eye. He extends his hand and whispers the pass word. "Why, Dick, don't you know the secret response to the grand hailing sign?"

I'm still icy. "I don't know nothin' about that lodge. I believe I used to be a member, but I resigned."

Bill pulls the paper out of his pocket and leans over the counter, makin' a little dotted line—a sure sign that he was gettin' ready to use some high pressure salesmanship.

"Now listen, Dick, it's like this. I made a bet on you, a small bet,—but a bet, just the same. Also I've got my reputation and my stand-in with Margy at stake. She ain't so cordial as she used to be, and I can't afford to fall down on this thing.

"Now here's the way I've figured things out. I'll go hunt up this stableman at the Polo Club, and I'll slip him a twenty to switch horses and give you a horse that ain't got a buck in him.

"You go down in your cowboy clothes and climb aboard. Before you swing up into the saddle I'll double all bets that you ride him two minutes—see? It 'll be a cinch, and we'll have a wad of Buck Dawson's money to pay expenses."

It's a funny thing about Bill. He can make blamed near anything sound convincing.

"Yeah, but that's a dirty trick to play on Buck Dawson. Let's be open an' aboveboard, an' throw up the sponge right now. I don't want to stoop to none o' this bribery business in order to make a hit with a jane."

Bill looks worldly wise and patronizing at the same time.

"Bosh—all bosh! Don't you know that all's fair in love and war. Why, shucks, anything goes in love! If you want a girl, win her, by fair means if possible—but, anyway, win her."

I don't say anything for a minute. I'm thinkin' the thing over, and when Bill gets yuh thinkin, he's got yuh on the dotted line. All he wants is for a fellow to hesitate, and after that it's all off.

Somehow or other I hate to appear to be a quitter in front of a girl like Margy. I know she'll think I'm a yellow dog if I just don't show up, and if there's any way on earth I can cinch the thing— Of course, if I do it I'll just leave a clear field for Bill, an' somehow that don't fill me with any great enthusiasm; but if I don't go through it I'll never see her again, and I've got to admit that she's some little pippin.

"Why, there's nothin' to it," Bill goes on, shovin' the paper over a little bit closer. "Come on, be a sport. A thousand years from to-day you won't know the difference. Come on!"

I'm weakenin' fast, an' Bill knows it.

"Go on down and see the stable keeper," I tells him as I turn to wait on a cash customer.

IV.

THAT night Bill drops in and says it's all fixed up. I don't know why I didn't wonder right then if he'd have told me the same thing if it hadn't all been fixed up. Bill is a funny sort of a guy. His idea of sellin' is to get the order. An' his idea of love is that everything's fair in love and war.

Sunday rolls around so quick it don't seem like no time at all, and here's Bill with the cowboy costume. We're all to have breakfast together, and then we're goin' to pull the heavy stuff.

By this time I'm keen for the thing. If I can get by with it, I'm goin' to have an easy out, and I'll get a chance to see Margy again—often, maybe. As Bill's best friend I'd be a welcome visitor at the house. Maybe I'd be best man at the weddin'. And somehow or other that thought don't fill me with no great degree of enthusiasm.

Breakfast is one great meal. I'd made up my mind that I'd put it on real thick, triple plate XXX. I'd been readin' a bunch of these Western stories, and I'd learned a lot of stuff from them about cowpunchers.

When we all piled out of the Termin 8 and walked into the restaurant, I made it a point to walk last, and I walked some bowlegged. I'd read about punchers walkin' bowlegged, an' I sure made a sensation when I walked in there with them goats' hair pants an' my spurs.

Buck Dawson was dressed just like he was goin' to a party or somewhere. I did not know how much he'd bet with Bill, but I bet it was a considerable chunk of coin, because he seemed mighty blue when he got a chance to size up my outfit an' see that bowlegged walk o' mine.

"Looks sort of new," he says, rubberin' over my cowboy clothes, when I'd got sat down.

"Yeah, I always keep *my* clothes clean an' neat," I comes back like a flash; an' I could see Margy smile an' Bill grin.

Buck Dawson's clothes weren't pressed as well as they might have been, and he didn't say nothin' more.

We orders ham and eggs all around.

I've made up my mind I'm goin' to be a real puncher. When the waiter brings my platter with two pieces of ham on each side of some fried eggs I just take my knife and cut those eggs in two, then I take an egg on the knife, tilt my head back an' drop it down my throat, an' if I choked a little bit I'll never tell. Then I grabs a piece o' ham an' does likewise.

All in all, I'm through my breakfast in just four knifefuls, an' all finished with an empty platter in front of me just about the time Buck Dawson is gettin' his eggs lifted over onto his plate.

"Gosh! That's a slim breakfast for a real puncher," I says, an' Margy's eyes stuck way out, then she got another of those coughin' fits of hers.

I guess that little stunt took some more of Buck Dawson's courage. He commenced to think I was the real stuff as a puncher, after all, an' the further he went the more sorry he'd got about that bet.

Right away I started in arrangin' the details.

I wanted to ride that horse first, after that Buck Dawson could ride him if he could. Buck and Bill could draw straws for the next turn if they wanted to, but I wanted to climb aboard that horse right off the reel.

I could see Margy look at me sort of curious, those gray eyes of hers sizin' me up an' down real serious.

"You know, Mr. Ellis, some of these horses are quite dangerous. I really didn't expect you boys would carry things this far. Don't you think we'd better call it off and all go home now and be good friends?"

I shake my head.

"By gosh, I want 'em hard to ride! I only hope this here horse ain't one of them false alarms that won't buck when he feels he's got a master rider on his back. Some of 'em are that way; they've got a streak of yellow in 'em when they know there's a master hand on the reins. I want a real tough horse. I hope they've got one o' these here outlaws."

Buck Dawson suddenly loses his appetite for breakfast. I guess I've got him wishin' he hadn't been so wild about his bets.

Margy keeps lookin' at me with those eyes of hers, and they make funny feelin's go up and down my spine. There's somethin' about that girl, sort of a personality or somethin'. She sure is different from the most of 'em. If things was different—oh, well.

It don't seem no time at all until we're at the polo grounds.

Somehow, I don't like the looks of that bird in charge of the stables. I can see that he don't exactly copper to my cowboy rig. About that time I'm gettin' my mus-

cles a little sore from walkin' bowlegged, an' he really didn't get the full effect. He should have seen me when I walked into that restaurant.

He's got a horse all saddled up, and when we come up he sticks a blindfold on him.

"Now, of course," says Bill, speakin' in general and to no one in particular, "you understand that many a good puncher's been thrown when he had an off day or a strange saddle or somethin' like that. What I'm callin' your attention to is the fact that my friend Dick Ellis here is tacklin' the proposition, an' he wouldn't do that if he wasn't an old time rider."

"Of course," agrees Dawson, "good riders *have* been thrown."

I'm sort of wonderin' about Bill makin' a crack like that. Why should it be necessary to start makin' alibis in advance with everything all framed?

I slip alongside. "Sure everything's all fixed?"

He laughs sort o' funny like. "Now, don't go worryin' about that—just get aboard. Of course everything's all fixed."

The stable hand motions for me to get up in the saddle, and I can see Margy watchin' me with the funniest expression on her face. Her hand's at her throat an' her eyes are as big as saucers.

I've seen 'em do it in the picture shows enough so I savvy how she's done, an' I sticks a leg in the stirrup an' climbs up. Of course I didn't do it the way they do in the pictures. That saddle was higher than I thought, an' I had the feelin' that I was haulin' myself up there hand over hand, but I figured nobody'd notice it.

The last I hears from Bill is when he whispers short and keen: "Don't blame me. Remember everything's fair in love and war."

While I'm wonderin' what makes that saddle so far from the ground, and tryin' to figure what that remark means, the guy that's standin' at the horse's head says: "You all ready?"

I grab hold of the reins and nod. He jerks the blindfold off the horse's eyes and gives him a slap across the head.

Then's when the balloon starts goin' up, and it goes up and up—and up—and sideways—and up.

V.

THEY say men that 're about to die see all their past life in a panorama. That may or may not be, but I sure did some thinkin' as that blamed horse started ascendin'.

It didn't make no difference to Bill if I got bucked off or not. Even the best of 'em had their off days. He had manipulated things so that the contest was between Buck Dawson an' me. *He* wasn't intendin' to ride any horse, an' it was easier for him to have me bucked off than to have the stableman switch horses an' give me a gentle one.

I could feel the horse archin' his back like a cat that sees a dog, an' then he comes down all four feet together an' stiff-legged, and I can feel my backbone bein' driven through the top of my head, and then when I'm about half lurched over to one side he starts up again.

This time he sort of bangs me back into the center of the saddle when he comes down, but the next spring I can feel my head jerked to one side, one foot slips out of the stirrup, an' I have a sensation of fallin'.

I must have gone out for a minute or two, because when I get my eyes open I'm lyin' on the ground with my head in Margy's lap, and her moppin' my forehead with a wet handkerchief, an' there's tears in her eyes.

"I'd never have forgiven myself if anything had happened to hurt him," she was sayin'. I knew he wasn't a rider. When I'm home I live in Texas, and my father owns a big cattle ranch there. I knew there wasn't a one of you that knew anything about riding, or punching cows. I could tell it from your conversation.

"I egged you on to put on this riding exhibition just to see you all back out, but Dick, here, was dead game. He's got something you two fellows never will have, something a cow-puncher needs every day—gameness. Oh, if anything's happened, and he's hurt—"

I open my eyes and look square into hers

instead of sort of peekin' out the way I'd been doin'.

I grin. "If I can stay this way longer, I'll be hurt all day," I tells her.

She blushes a little bit, but puts her soft hand on my forehead.

"Are you all right, Dick?"

Dick? Gosh, she uses my front name natural, an' there ain't no music I ever heard that's half as sweet.

I can see Bill makin' the grand distress signal of the Independent and Established Order of Jonahs, an' lookin' real pleadin' with his eyes; but I just grin.

"I ain't a member any more," I tell him, "an' besides all's fair in love and war."

"What's that?" asks Margy, puzzled like.

"Nothin'. I was just sayin' I felt better. I think in about fifteen or twenty minutes I can be moved, Margy."

She smiles a tender little smile, an' keeps strokin' my forehead. Gosh, I'm glad I resigned from that lodge of Bill's!

THE END

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SOBER SECONDS

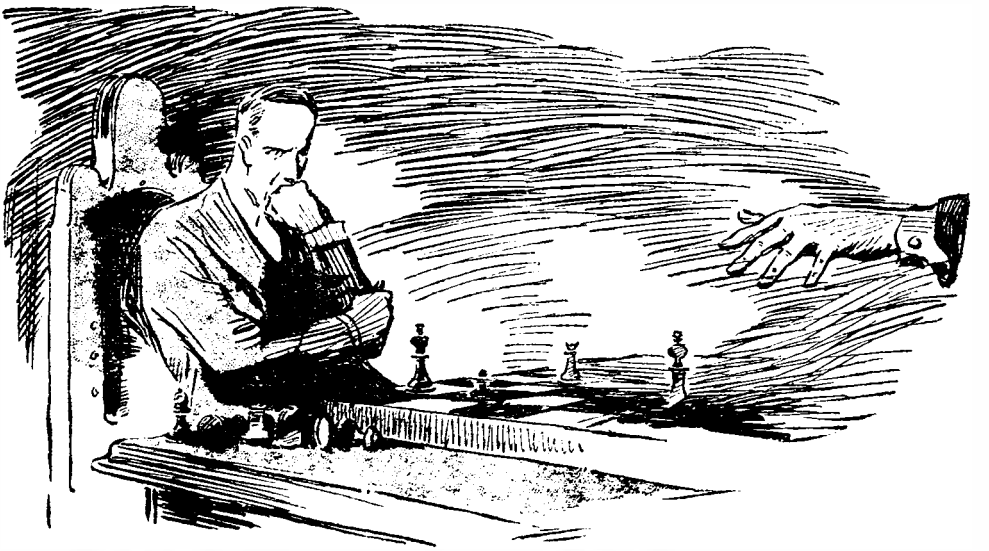
LOVE, that sumless bards have sung.
Love's a leaden chain
Never to be loosed and flung
Far afield once it has clung.
There is keen, corroding pain
Lurking in each link of it! . . .
Nay, but Love's a golden chain,
Now I come to think of it!

Gold, that is ten millions' god,
Gold's a sordid thing.
For its power they plan and plod,
Each a blind and soulless clod,
Fascinated by its ring,
Frenzied by the chink of it! . . .
Nay, but Gold's a noble thing,
Now I come to think of it!

Life, or many-yeared or brief,
Life's a stormy sea;
Every day a cruel reef
Washed by whelming waves of grief.
What but shipwreck can there be
At the farther brink of it? . . .
Nay, but Life's a sunny sea,
Now I come to think of it!

Age, that long-maturing brew,
'Tis a bitter draft!
Hemlock-bitter and of hue
Blackest broth one ever knew.
Thus, while Youth's bright wine I quaffed.
Was I prone to think of it! . . .
Nay, Age is a sweet, sweet draft,
Now I come to drink of it!

Edward W. Barnard.



The Great Commander

BY THE AUTHOR OF "THE SEAL OF SATAN."

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHERE IS THE COMMANDER?

A THRONG of scrub women in the entrance of the Nelson Building in New York about 6.30 A.M. attracted the attention of a passing policeman who wandered in to learn the reason for a convention.

No trace of the night superintendent or watchman could be found, the door of the superintendent's office was locked, and, after hearing their tale, he told them to go home while he telephoned to the station.

At eight the day superintendent arrived, opened his office and discovered the note left by Hopkins directing him where he could find the missing persons.

One or two of the men who had been gagged and bound were unconscious as a result of their predicament, but no one was too far gone to be revived. Then began a babel of explanations interrupted by the arrival of two Central Office men who had to hear the stories all over again.

It seemed to the detectives to have been a brazen plan to rob the building, although what there could be in an office building to attract a band of daring thieves they could not understand.

The detectives who had been captured around the corner added their disturbing experience to the muddle. The disappearance of the guards of the Nelson estate stationed in cars on that street had long since been discovered, and other guards had replaced them; now it seemed that they had been captured to safeguard the operations of the thieves in the Nelson Building.

The sleuth who had been taken in Gregg Williams's office added his story which identified two of the band, Williams and Congressman MacGregor. Queer business for a Congressman and a rising young lawyer.

Curiously enough, it did not occur to

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for July 3.

anybody at that time that the proceedings in the Nelson Building might have something to do with an assault upon the residence of King J. Nelson. How could it?

It was known that no windows opened from the back of the building into the grounds save a row of little windows in the store-rooms much too small to permit any person to pass through, and no alarm had yet come in regarding the disappearance of the Commander and his daughter.

This also was readily explained. Nelson often occupied one of the chambers of his cottage. His valet thought nothing of his nonappearance in his own chamber in the big house. The house was full of guards who had observed nothing during the night, and the walls were watched by a cordon of private detectives.

It was decided by the Central Office men, after a conference with the superintendent, to wait until nine o'clock, when the tenants would begin to arrive, as the simplest way to discover what offices had been entered and what goods had been stolen.

They called headquarters to send out men to place Williams and MacGregor under arrest if located at their residences, and they held all the persons found bound and gagged for further inquiry.

It happened that the Commander had made an appointment with Isadore Rottenburg for nine o'clock at his home to inspect the publicity matter prepared by that genius to follow up the great speech, and Rottenburg arrived and was admitted without question.

"The Commander has not come down as yet," explained the butler, as he placed a chair for the press agent in the big room used by Nelson as an office.

"Please tell him I'm here. I have an appointment and it makes him mad for anybody not to be on time."

The butler visited his master's suite and was informed by the valet that he had not been in, most probably had gone to bed in the cottage. Then he crossed the garden, entered the cottage and mounted the stairs. He knocked at the door of the room usually occupied by Nelson, got no answer and knocked louder.

When this rap did not bring a reply, he took courage and tried the door which he found unlocked, then he opened it and saw that the bed had not been used. Being a trifle alarmed by this time, he knocked at the door of Miss Nelson's room with equally neglible results. Cautiously, he peered into the room and saw that her bed had not been occupied. Frightened now, he ran through the cottage calling: "Mr. Nelson. Miss Nelson."

A moment later he was racing across the garden at a speed which shocked the lazy menials who happened to see him, and he burst into the office in which Rottenburg was reading a morning paper completely out of breath and so terrified that he could not speak for a moment.

"What's eating you, old hoss?" demanded the press agent. "Spit it out."

"I'm afraid something terrible has happened. I can't find the master nor the young mistress."

"They are probably over in Home, Sweet Home."

"What, sir?"

"On the banks of the Wabash, where candle lights are gleaming. The cottage in the garden, you bonehead."

"No, sir. I looked there."

"Then they went out for an early morning walk."

"No, sir, the doormen say they have not gone out."

"Then if they haven't gone out, they are in the house. Look for them."

"No, sir. They are not."

"Look again." Rottenburg suddenly grew alarmed. "Keep your mouth shut, do you understand? Not a word to any other servants. You go on a still hunt and come right back."

He paced the room anxiously until the man returned.

"Well?" he said sharply.

"My God, Mr. Rottenburg! They have vanished into thin air. What shall I do?"

"You are absolutely positive that they are not in the house and haven't gone out?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is there any other exit save the front one?"

"A servant's entrance, but they did not use it. A watchman was on duty."

"Any other way of getting out?"

"No, sir. Well, there's the door in the wall on East —th Street."

"Let's go look at it."

He followed the trembling butler across the garden. It was a mild morning in late March, there had been a thaw, and on the ground beside the path the sharp eye of the publicity man observed a number of bootmarks just at the foot of the steps leading to the porch of the cottage.

He raised his eyebrows and whistled softly: "Dirty work at the crossroads!" he muttered.

"What, sir?"

"Nothing. Lead on."

They continued to the door in the wall. Rottenburg turned the knob, and it opened. He stepped into the street. Immediately a man jumped out of an automobile at the curb, ran toward him and drew a pistol.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "How did you get through that gate?"

"[illegible] was open, you poor boob. How long you been on duty?"

"Since four o'clock this morning."

"Who did you relieve?"

"There was nobody here. The guards had been removed for some reason or other."

"I see," said Rottenburg. "All right. Go to your car and don't fall asleep. Come, James. Let's go back to the house."

"That door was never open before. It's always locked," the butler told him. "I don't understand it."

"Not a peep out of you about this," warned Rottenburg. "It's lucky I came around this morning, or things would be in a terrible muddle."

"But what can have become of them?"

"Nothing. Not a darn thing. Can't the Commander and his girl leave their own house without advertising it if they want to? Officially they are still in the cottage. Tell anybody who calls that Nelson is ill, can't see them to-day. Same with Miss Nelson. I'll stick on the job here."

The butler disapproved of Mr. Rottenburg with a cockney's distaste for persons of Oriental origin, but he was in what he would have described as a "state of mind," and he was aware that the Hebrew was high in the confidence of the Commander. Besides, he did not know where to turn for aid in this emergency, as Nelson had no relatives with whom he was on intimate terms, and he had never given any instructions as to procedure in the impossible contingency that both himself and his daughter might vanish into smoke. Therefore, the servant dumped his burden of responsibility upon the shoulders of Mr. Rottenburg with a sigh of relief, and was ready to carry out his orders.

As soon as he was alone the press agent seated himself in Nelson's chair and put his feet upon the blotter upon the top of Nelson's big, flat-topped mahogany desk. He lighted a cigar and drew on it with satisfaction while he ruminated about as follows:

"Nelson expected me here this morning. He's too darn methodical to forget the engagement, and he wouldn't have gone without leaving some word. If he went away with his daughter, he would not have slipped out through the garden gate; he would have gone by the front door and left some instructions.

"There were five or six men standing in the mud just off the path near the cottage last night, and the detectives on guard in the back street were not found when the relief came on in the small hours of the morning. It looks to me very much as if a gang swooped down on the old boy and his daughter and carried them off, no doubt about it.

"Now the question is who would have the nerve to pinch the future king of this grand old nation and the princess royal and why did they do it? And under the circumstances what should be the attitude of Isadore Rottenburg?

"I've got a good job with Nelson and I'm getting rich fast, but if he should be king, he might cut off my head because I know too much. And he was aiming too high anyway, riding for a fall, sure to come a cropper, somebody would bump him off, some old line fanatical patriot. You can't have a king in a country like this.

"Maybe he was grabbed by a gang of crooks who want to hold up the country for a ransom of about fifty million dollars. In that case we shall hear from them soon, and

we can pay the ransom out of Nelson's private fortune. He can stand it. And perhaps he was dragged out and murdered by some old-fashioned guys who believe in the Constitution, in which case the body or bodies will turn up. And again, he may be held a prisoner because they are too high-minded to commit murder. If that's so we may be able to round them up, find out where the prisoners are confined and release them.

" It's too much responsibility for me because if I make any bad break and Nelson comes back he'll flay me alive. This looks to me like a job for Jerry White, and the quicker I get him up here the better."

He immediately put in a call for the head of the White Bureau, who was occupying his New York office while his august employer was in the city, and found the great detective entering at the moment.

" Hell's broke loose, Jerry," he informed him. " Get up to Nelson's as fast as you can fly. I'll explain when I see you. All right."

He hung up. Then he continued his reflections. Suppose Nelson had been permanently removed from the scene of his activities. What would happen. His lieutenants in business would have to carry on for Nelson's heirs. These were cousins and second cousins who were not important in business or politics and took no interest in big affairs.

Had Miss Nelson been left behind she might have operated for her father, held the fort for him, even functioned as dictator for a brief period, very brief, of course, for the politicians would quickly grasp the power which had been centered in King J. Nelson. It would be dangerous to have it known that he was missing, even for a single day, therefore the search for him must be conducted with the greatest secrecy.

In less than a quarter of an hour, he was joined by Jeremiah White, a short, squat man with a red face and a small sandy mustache, whose sharp, grayish-green eyes and grimly set mouth alone indicated unusual intelligence and great determination.

" Hello, Izzy," he greeted the press agent. " What's the trouble with you this morning, and why sit in the seat of the mighty? Take your feet off that desk or His Nibs will jail you for *lese majesty*."

" Sit down, you correspondence school detective. You are responsible for the protection of the royal palace, aren't you?"

" You bet your life."

" Well, I'm going to tell you something to make you wish you weren't. Last night a gang broke in here and carried off Nelson and his daughter under the nose of your damn detectives."

The color rushed from the red face of the chief detective, leaving it a greenish-white. He grasped at the edge of the desk, sank back in his chair; Rottenburg noted that the man was near to fainting.

" Buck up, Jerry," he declared. " We've got to find the boss and the girl and find them quick. No time for passing out. How do you suppose it was done?"

Certain information which had come to him through police headquarters and which had seemed hard to explain now made the plot as clear as daylight to the detective.

" They entered the garden from the Nelson Building somehow," he said. " I know the names of four of the band already, and it won't take long to round them up."

" Crooks?"

" Not ordinary crooks. One is a Congressman, one a general, and there are a couple of well-known lawyers."

" You're not such a bad detective at that. How the deuce did you find out when I only just told you what happened."

" Because the Nelson Building was captured last night, the employees tied up, the men I had on guard on East —th Street taken and hidden in the basement. Headquarters thinks it was a plot to rob the tenants of the office building, but I see now it was simply to use the building as a base against this estate."

" Great work. Who were concerned in it?"

" Congressman John MacGregor."

" Holy Moses! Our next ambassador to Japan!"

" General Bartol, retired."

" Considered the best strategist in the A. E. F."

" Gregg Williams and Frank Hopkins, lawyers."

" Don't know them."

"There are warrants out for all of them."

"Won't do a bit of good. We are up against it like the deuce if those fellows pulled off this trick. Jerry, it's a conspiracy to remove the Commander and put an end to the existing state of things. These are 'Give me liberty or give me death' boys, like the old-timers that kicked out King George. If Bartol engineered it, you can bet your life they have Nelson tucked away in a safe place already, probably got him out of the country."

"What are you going to do?"

"Where do you get that 'you'? I don't hold the bag for Nelson. For the time being we cover up his disappearance. He's supposed to be sick and his daughter is taking care of him."

"But we must give the alarm, watch all trains and steamers, stop all yachts, make every airplane give an acount of itself, warn all foreign governments, send out the entire police of the country and get the Navy Department to turn over its destroyers and planes to be used in the search. We must leave no stone unturned."

"Don't you suppose they expect that? How long do you imagine he will be dictator if he isn't on the job? It's up to us to cover up, search quietly without letting a rumor get out. Meantime, I'm going to send for six or eight men who run his big industries for him and hold a conference, and then I'll jump down to Washington and tip off the President."

"You're tying my hands," complained the detective.

"Can't be helped. I'm sure this is the way that Nelson would wish it. Now you get busy on the strict Q. T. In about an hour I'm going to get about three billion dollars' worth of capitalists in here and give them the scare of their lives."

"I haven't questioned my own operatives yet. We had a man concealed at a conference between Bartols and MacGregor and his gang. They captured him and hid him in Bartol's wine cellar, just let him out this morning and I was going to talk to him when you called me. I had an operator on MacGregor's trail. He followed his man to the Nelson Building yesterday and they nabbed him there."

"A fine lot of detectives!" scoffed Rottenburg. "What the old boy will do to you if he ever comes back! He forgives everything but failure."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THREE BILLIONS' WORTH OF CAPITALISTS.

AT two thirty that afternoon a memorable conference occurred in the big office of King J. Nelson.

Eight great executives of the Nelson combination had been summoned to meet the chief at his residence, and had dropped everything, cancelled their important appointments and hastened to obey the summons.

They were greeted cordially by Isadore Rottenburg upon their arrival. Even in 1934, the big men of business affected to despise publicity and to look down upon its most celebrated exponent, and it was obvious that they resented his officiousness.

The group consisted of Morton Q. Blunt, who operated the railroad trust, Herman Black, Mines, Frank H. Worth, oil, Jonas Quigg, motors, Bertram Malone, shipping, John Beaugard, cotton, Lucius Thomas, the nation's granaries, and Herbert Lossing, the secret banking consolidation; men ranging in age from fifty to seventy, hard men and sharp, highly intelligent, relentless, forceful, aggressive, resourceful.

Nobody except Nelson could possibly have driven such a band of wild horses, but these men knew their master. By this time it was no secret to them that he controlled the entire group which represented American industry. One or two absentees, textiles, meat packing, etc. had their headquarters elsewhere and could not be reached in time.

"Where's Mr. Nelson?" demanded Blunt of Rottenburg. "What's the meaning of this conference?"

Rottenburg walked boldly to the chief's desk and sat down amid utter disapproval.

The press agent was only a millionaire, the poorest man in the group, but his assurance was equal to his task.

"I called this conference," he said. "There's the devil to pay. It's up to us fellows to decide what to do. A gang of

patriots have kidnaped Nelson and his daughter, broke in last night and by this time have probably got them out of the country. Maybe they'll murder him, maybe just keep him prisoner. What do you think of that?"

There was a hubbub. Everybody was exclaiming, demanding details, expressing horror, indignation, asking what had been done.

"Nothing's been done except to cover up, set White quietly on the trail, forbid publicity. Have you gentlemen ever been given instructions what to do in this kind of emergency?"

There was a moment's silence. Nelson had never taken any of his subordinates into his confidence, had made no arrangements for any individual to take charge of his property; in fact, had concealed from all the full extent of his control of everything. His dictatorship had made it possible for him to exact implicit obedience from the most powerful of his lieutenants even when they were disaffected as Herman Black, the mining man, had been since his public humiliation.

"It seemed to me," continued Rottenburg, taking advantage of his opportunity, "that we should form an executive council to manage things during his absence, which can't be for very long. How about it?"

The suggestion was well received. Each of them was well equipped to conduct his own department for weeks, even months without orders, and a general council could handle unexpected developments affecting them all.

"It seems to me," said Herman Black, "that these gentlemen present might well adopt the suggestion. However, a press agent has no place in this council. Mr. Rottenburg, you will take your orders from us, but you can have no voice in our deliberations."

"Is that so?" said Rottenburg satirically. "Well, let me tell you fellows that the publicity department is the most important of all at the present time. How I handle the press makes or breaks you. We are all a lot of hired men together, don't forget it, and the only one with any real authority is absent; this is an unofficial council, we have no real right to decide anything, and I propose to have a voice in everything that is decided."

"I think Mr. Rottenburg is right," announced Morton Blunt. "He has managed this situation admirably, he has great ability and can be tremendously useful in the emergency. And I am sure I speak for all of us when I say that no executive here would think of turning this unfortunate affair to his own advantage. Am I right, gentlemen?"

"Certainly."

"Oh, sure."

"The idea!"

"We are all loyal to Nelson."

The replies came in chorus, but several of the big men did not sound enthusiastic, and they eyed one another uncertainly.

"Now, first question. Shall we admit the disappearance of Nelson or try to keep it dark?"

"Keep it dark," they said, unanimously.

"The government must know, of course," said Blunt. "I'll go to Washington, and see the President at once."

"I was planning on going myself," said Rottenburg.

"You had better take up your headquarters in this house and see that no rumor gets out," advised Blunt.

"How about Nelson's private secretary in Washington?"

"I'll take care of him," said Blunt.

The conference broke up and the group of great men returned to their offices in the mood of schoolboys whose teacher has given them an unexpected holiday.

There was no love for their leader among them. He had ruled them with a rod of iron, they obeyed from necessity rather rather than from inclination, and among them there was not one who was not wondering how he could turn the situation to his own profit. Rottenburg, who could not have succeeded if he had not understood human nature, watched them depart with a satirical smile.

"They'll be at one another's throats in a week if the boss doesn't come back. I guess I'll turn my holdings into government and municipal bonds."

And this is the explanation of the failure

of Gruning, at his wireless instrument, to hear an alarm in the air on the disappearance of the most powerful man in the world. There was no pursuit, no broadcasting of the crime, no aircraft in chase. The Flying Fish was flying and no man was pursuing her.

The truth of the matter was that King J. Nelson was alone against the world, his friends were playing into his enemies' hands.

CHAPTER XXV.

SYDNEY TAKES A DIP.

SYDNEY had supposed that she would not sleep the night she landed upon Candida, but she was worn out with excitement, her remorse was no longer so poignant, her sweetheart was within call, her father was safe in his bed; she fell asleep soon after retiring and when she woke the sun had been up for hours.

She ran to her window, threw open the shutters and looked out to utter a cry of delight at the fantastic beauty which confronted her.

The sky was a marvelous blue, the sunlight a bright yellow, and it fell upon tall palms like feathered dusters of light green. She looked down upon a garden blooming with tropic flowers of bright and dark red and pink and yellow.

She recognized hibiscus and poincianas.

The garden sloped gradually down to the cove, where she saw a snow-white beach upon which rippled a sea of emerald, with streaks of turquoise and amber.

Beyond was a reef upon which the waves were breaking, tossing up manes of milky spray. To the left there was a grove of coconut trees. She could see the clusters of huge green nuts under the palm branches. To the right, some distance off, was a palmetto cottage, thatched with dried palm leaves. Out in the little bay was a single boat in which a black man was serenely fishing. The open sea beyond was a deep rich blue and as far as she could see there wasn't a vessel of any sort. Over toward the right she could see an irregular line which marked another island. It must have been five or six miles away or more.

Although it was not yet spring when she left New York forty or forty-five hours before, here it was soft balmy summer, the air as caressing and sweet as a maiden's kiss and bearing the odor of jasmine and other lovely plants and flowers.

She realized that she was happy for the first time in months, happy though her father was a prisoner on a tropic island, detained by determined men who might kill him to prevent his escape. In such a haven nothing of the sort could happen. In such an atmosphere her father would soon be content, ready to lay aside his grotesque plans of empire and settle down to the soft, easy, delightful life of the tropics.

She threw on a wrap and ran into the corridor. Two men sat there who bowed to her. John was not there. She knocked on her father's door, was told to enter, and darted inside.

The Commander was seated, fully dressed, by the open window, just finishing a breakfast of fruit and eggs. He greeted her with the fond smile which he kept for her alone. He seemed in good spirits and disposed to make the best of things. Sydney threw herself upon him and covered his face with kisses.

"Father!" she exclaimed. "Isn't it exquisite? Isn't it glorious here?"

"Under different circumstances I might agree with you," he admitted. "But when I think of the abominable outrage which these criminals have perpetrated upon you and me, I am afraid I can not devote much time to admiring nature. At least they have given me a good breakfast."

"That's something. I'm dying to get out and explore the island."

"A good idea. I suppose I shall be closely watched, but you will be free. Please explore it thoroughly and see if you can light on some means of escape."

Sydney veiled her eyes, kissed him on the cheek, sighed, and left him, ashamed of her disloyalty. She could not help feeling proud of his indomitable spirit; only death could conquer such a man as King J. Nelson.

She passed through the upper hall, brilliant in sunlight, a wide, white, cool, airy passage with chamber doors on either side

built like house blinds, so that a current of air from the windows of the rooms might find free passage, descended the broad staircase, and heard the clink of glass and crockery at the rear, which conducted her to the dining room where the general and his son, Downing, and MacGregor were sitting at breakfast. The men pushed back their chairs and rose. The general was spokesman.

"Miss Nelson, this is the first opportunity we have had to thank you for your splendid behavior in this sad affair. Without your aid I am afraid our efforts would have come to naught. On behalf of my friends, I wish to thank you for your patriotism and to assure you that your father is in no personal danger from any here."

"Thank you, general," she replied. "I am in a very dreadful position. I have been disloyal to my father because I believe that I am acting for his own best interest; but I am heartbroken that I should be in the situation of having joined in a conspiracy against him. Only the assurance of John MacGregor that he would be absolutely safe among you persuaded me, and I was alarmed by your threats on the yacht."

"They were for effect only," he assured her. "He shall have every consideration —the best treatment possible. He is not to consider himself a prisoner on this island. We shall not intrude upon him any more than is necessary. Of course, it is our business to see that he does not leave the island, but nature will guard him better than we. There is no way of escape."

"May I have some breakfast?" she asked with a smile. "You have relieved my mind, general. You sounded very bloodthirsty on the ship."

"I have seen too much bloodshed to be bloodthirsty. It is to save deluging our country in blood that we have performed this deed. But I wish you to believe that we do not consider your father responsible for his actions in the past few months. We think that he is suffering from a curable malady. Rest and time will bring him to our point of view."

"How long do you think we shall have to remain on the island?" she inquired.

"Perhaps a month or two, perhaps longer, depending upon events in the United States. We believe that a month or six weeks will restore normal conditions there so that when he goes home he will find no opportunity to resume the dictatorship. In the meantime make the best of it. Why don't you young people go bathing? I understand the beach in the cove is safe; the reef keeps out the big fish."

"I have no bathing suit," she demurred.

"In the closet of your room, Miss Nelson, you will find three or four ladies' bathing suits," said Downing. "Help yourself."

Sydney was not loath to follow the suggestion. Already the temperature was as high as a July day in New York, and there was considerable humidity in the air.

"I'll try to find one which fits me," she said. "Just give me a cup of coffee and some grapefruit. Coming, John?"

"You bet," answered the Congressman.

"Mind if I join you?" asked George Bartol rather shyly.

She looked on the handsome boy with favor.

"Why not? The more the merrier."

In half an hour the bathing party left the house, Sydney in a red one-piece bathing suit which might have been designed for her, so perfectly did it fit and so exquisitely did it temper her gold red hair and display her perfect form. She wore no shoes and stockings, and her limbs and shoulders gleamed like snow in the sunlight. John was a fine figure in a bathing suit, and Bartol was a young Adonis.

Laughing gayly, the three ran across the lawn toward the water, while King Nelson looked down upon them from his window and marveled at the spirit in which his daughter was accepting her captivity.

Sydney exclaimed with delight when her bare feet touched the beach, which was a crescent about a quarter of a mile long, of sand so fine that it reminded her of talcum powder. The water near the shore was a pale green and so transparent that it might have been colored glass. It was warm, too, more than seventy-five degrees.

They dashed in without preliminary shrieks and shivers and soon were swimming swiftly a hundred and fifty feet from

shore, splashing one another, chattering, laughing, reveling in the clear salt fluid which stimulated both their minds and bodies.

The colored man whom Sydney had seen when she first looked out of her window, fishing out in the bay, was rowing slowly in, and they made for the boat. John lifted himself over the stern, George dragged himself over the side, almost upsetting the craft despite the protests of the darky, then they pulled Sydney in, giggling.

The bottom of the boat contained a dozen strange fish. Instead of the gray and silver of northern seafood, these were as brilliant as the ocean in which they had lived, blue and gold, yellow and red, purple and brown—some of them fantastic in shape.

There were two or three angel fish among them, so called because they were shaped somewhat like an angel, with outspread wings. Some were incredibly ugly, some beautiful.

"Surely you don't eat these lovely things?" she asked the boatman.

"Yes, meledy," replied the negro, whose accent was weirdly cockney rather than like that of a Southern darky. "I catched these for your dinner, so I did."

"I'll never eat them. It's a crime!" the girl exclaimed.

At that moment a long-tailed creature, which still breathed, suddenly snapped at her bare white toes, which she pulled away just in time.

"Oh!" she shrieked. "I'll eat that one. He's bad."

The men laughed heartily.

"Who's for a dive?" demanded John. Without waiting for an answer, he dived over the side, and they saw him striking out toward the bottom as clearly as though they were looking through a pane of glass instead of into the ocean.

He touched bottom, turned, and began to swim for the surface. The bottom did not look three or four feet away; actually it was twelve feet or more.

Sydney plunged next, and George followed. Then the three turned and swam slowly shoreward. Afterward they lay on the sand for half an hour until Sydney remembered that with her complexion she might sunburn badly.

"See you boys soon," she told them, and ran to the house. In five minutes she was lolling in the fresh water of her bathtub in a mood of complete content. After a rub down she dressed leisurely, filled with a sense of well being such as she had not known for a long time. Surely if she could persuade her father to join the bathing parties he would come to understand the joy of life and lay aside his ambition.

She found Nelson seated at a writing desk, covering sheets of paper with notes. He greeted her coldly.

"I suppose it is too much to expect that you would take this captivity as I do," he said. "I saw you fraternizing with your jailers."

"It was only John and the Bartol kid. He's a joy," she said. "Oh, father, it's marvelous, the ocean down here. Won't you come for a swim this afternoon?"

"How far do you think it is to the island I see from my window?" he asked, irrelevantly, it seemed.

"Five or six miles. Why?"

"I suppose that negro into whose boat you climbed is a house servant?"

"Yes. You ought to see the beautiful fish he caught—all green and gold and red and blue."

"If we could get him to take a message to the mainland, I would pay any price. Will you talk to him, Sydney?"

It was time for a show-down, so the girl considered.

"Father," she said. "I am not going to join in any plot to escape. These men are doing you a tremendous service. I am sure you will come to realize that what you were doing at home wasn't worth the effort and will settle down to enjoy life here."

"So," he said coldly, "my daughter has gone over to the enemy."

"Oh, no!"

"I have been considering the events leading up to our capture. It's a dreadful thing to say, but I am wondering if you had any advance information in regard to it. You are in love with this man MacGregor. Since time immemorial daughters have betrayed their parents for lovers.

Shakespeare made a play on this theme, 'King Lear.' I had intended you for the most brilliant destiny imaginable. You preferred a miserable politician. Are you in this conspiracy?"

"Father, I have always protested against your conduct at home. I have warned you that something dreadful was sure to happen," she retorted, her head high, eyes flashing. "I did not take sides in this affair; I was neutral."

"'Those who are not with me are against me,'" he quoted. "Leave me. I do not think I want to see you again."

Her defiant attitude melted. She burst into tears and attempted to throw her arms around his neck.

"I thought I had a daughter, but I am alone in the world. So much the worse for the world," he said bitterly.

Then he took her wrists and removed her arms from about his neck. He led her to the door, opened it, thrust her outside, and shut it with a slam.

The girl sank into a sobbing heap on the threshold. He must have heard her, but he did not reopen the door. Finally she picked herself up, went into her own room, threw herself on the bed, and wept for half an hour. The happiness which she had felt had given place to misery; her father had disowned her, and she loved him so.

Nelson went back to his desk and continued to write. He was setting down all details of his experience for future reference, and such was his power of concentration that he had banished his daughter from his mind as he had banished her from the room.

Several days passed uneventfully on the island. The dictator refused to join the conspirators in the dining room, and ate his meals in solitary state. In the afternoons he strolled about the island, followed at a considerable distance by a guard. He resisted all Sydney's efforts to establish herself upon the old footing, but he was courteous to her, listened to her pleas in silence, was careful to give her no more confidences.

The wife of the caretaker cooked the meals for the party, the black man did odd jobs about the place, operated a dynamo which supplied light and power, mowed the lawn and tended the neglected garden.

Sydney turned for consolation to John, who was willing, and the lovers strolled about the exquisite island during the afternoon, went bathing together, sat on the porch in the moonlight.

The moon of the Bahamas is a gorgeous thing when it is full. It illuminates the land and water with such brilliancy that it is possible to read by its silver light. It speaks of peace and content, it preaches love and happiness; beneath it it is not possible to be wretched—it charms away sorrow.

Sydney and John had supposed that they loved each other fully and completely; in the moonlight they seemed to melt together to be remolded into one effulgent being. They talked in low voices of life and religion, they speculated upon eternity, on God and the angels; they looked into each other's eyes, and they remembered nothing of the past, dwelt not upon the future. They kissed, they embraced, and they knew the meaning of the word bliss.

The other members of the band watched them from afar, the younger with friendly envy. It was hard for them to see the lovers and to be left in the bewitchment of the moonlight with no girls to enjoy it with them. George Bartol was hopelessly in love with Sydney; so was Hopkins. They treasured the kindly comradely smiles she gave them, and they were happily miserable in the knowledge that she was not for them.

Even Nelson found the need of company during these enchanted nights. He surprised the general one evening by coming out upon the porch and smoking a cigar with him. The two men conversed, arguing the age-old subject as to the merits of democracy and absolutism.

CHAPTER XXVI.

GENTLEMANLY JAILERS.

THE dictator was too great a man not to understand the motives which actuated the stanch old soldier and his companions and which had resulted to his disadvantage. He appreciated that they

had all abandoned their homes and their affairs, risked their lives, dared disgrace and dire punishment from the same stern sense of duty which drew Cincinnatus from his plow, Washington from his plantation, and Grant from his grocery store.

If another than himself had overturned the cherished institutions of America, he might have been one of the band, so he bore them no personal malice. His anger burned only against the man whom he believed had induced his own daughter to turn her back on her father.

While he was determined to circumvent them, and his disposition to make them pay for their audacity was as strong as ever, he could not hold himself aloof in that pleasant land. He had to express himself, and he talked for his own satisfaction, with no anticipation of converting the general to his views.

He could never have achieved his commercial success without extraordinary powers of persuasion. He had a way of making sophistry convincing, and upon the subject of the weaknesses of democracy he was armed with powerful arguments. The general was no match for him in discussion; Nelson drove him from pillar to post. The failure of democracies matched against despotisms from the earliest times to the present had to be admitted, but the old soldier always stuck to his guns.

"No matter how bad, how corrupt, how incompetent, how ungrateful a republic may be, it is better for the people to govern themselves stupidly than to submit to a despot as wise as Solomon."

And secretly Nelson agreed with him, only he happened to be the despot, and he loved supreme power.

Nobody knew better than himself how selfish and heartless his ambition was. He was fully aware that his plans would cause multitudes to die of the sword and of famine, but he wanted immortality, and he felt that his name would go ringing down the ages along with other great if execrated conquerors. He considered the prize worth the price.

So he would have slain his guardians without a qualm if it had been possible. As it was not, he indulged himself in an argument with the old man who was, by common consent, their leader. And always he was waiting his opportunity and chafing lest delay would cause his kingdom to slip away from him.

A week passed, and two weeks. Nelson wandered about the island at will, studying it, examining it, cursing it, for there seemed no opportunity of escape.

Downing kept a thirty-foot power boat which he used to convey supplies from Nassau, a hundred miles away. He had made one trip already and brought back newspapers, provisions, and groceries. He had cut a little channel from the cove into a pond, and upon the bank of the pond constructed a metal boathouse in which the power vessel was kept.

The door of the boathouse was bolted and padlocked, and there was a steel gate which cut off the exit from the pond. Nelson had determined to get possession of the power boat as soon as he discovered it in its nest, but as yet had been unable to contrive a way to do it. Once in Nassau he would announce his identity, and he knew that all the resources of the colony would be placed at his disposal.

The newspapers were dated three days after the capture of the Commander, and they explained to the captors why there had been no pursuit. Paragraphs on the front page announced that Mr. Nelson was confined to his house in New York with a slight cold; that he was being attended by his daughter and his physician, Admiral Gray.

There was no alarm, apparently no public unrest; things were proceeding as usual throughout the country. The stock market was steady, the ship of state was sailing on a true course.

They kept the papers away from the prisoner, and they consulted together about the unexpected course of events.

"If they can keep up this fiction of illness," said MacGregor, "they have defeated our purpose. Should Nelson return to-morrow he would simply resume control."

"But how can they keep it up, my boy?" asked the general. "A few days, possibly a week, but after that the people become

uneasy. They ask how sick Nelson is, whether he is dying or already dead.

"It will be necessary to produce him. At the end of a month things will have to be decided, important political and business decisions, and somebody else must make them. A month's illness is a very serious one, two months' confinement to the house means that it is likely to be fatal. We never expected that a week's absence would do the trick. Perhaps we shall have to hold him a year. All right, we'll hold him as long as it is necessary."

"Is it possible they are not searching for him?" asked Downing with a frown.

"Of course, they are using every means in their power, but secretly," said Bartol. "They can't keep the secret forever, and Professor Strong will give it away very soon. You can bank on him."

"If he doesn't we shall," declared the owner of Candida. "I'm going to send for the materials and construct a huge broadcasting station. Then we'll burst in on their entertainment programs with the facts, something like this:

"'King J. Nelson is not ill at his house. He was taken prisoner as a traitor to his country, and will never be allowed to return. He planned a war with Japan for the purpose of making himself king, and a committee of patriotic American citizens removed him because he was a madman!' How's that?"

The general reflected for a moment. "Send for the outfit. We can erect it on the other side of the island, and keep Nelson under cover until it is completed. I don't know whether it will be the thing to do or not, but we shall be prepared. He controls the press, but he can't stop anybody who has a powerful broadcasting station from intruding on his own Radio Trust wave lengths."

"On the other hand," admonished John, "the men who erect the station return to America. We broadcast this statement. At once a search is made for such a powerful station, and these workmen say:

"'Why, we have just built a station which could send this message in Candida Island, in the Bahamas.' I don't suppose you want to murder the workmen after they have completed their work, as Oriental despots were wont to do."

There was general laughter.

"I am afraid you have scuttled that plan," smiled General Bartol. "It would reveal our hiding place without a doubt. We must depend upon our friends in New York to expose the illness yarn. I have confidence in their ability to do it. How often do mails arrive at Nassau? Daily?"

"I found that there was a quarantine on against Florida ports," Downing informed him, "and at present their only mail is weekly. It comes down on the weekly steamer from New York."

"That's exasperating. Then we shall have to wait another week for any further information," grumbled the old man.

One day a beautiful white schooner yacht was sighted off the island, causing Nelson, who was prowling about half a mile from the house, to grow hopeful, and he hastened toward the cove in the hope of communicating with her before his guardians prevented such a thing, but the yacht never entered the little harbor.

Downing, in his launch, ran out to her, and informed her skipper, who was pointing toward the entrance, that the island was private property and no visitors were desired. She immediately swung about and faded into the distance, much to Nelson's chagrin.

For what happened a few nights later the conspirators had only themselves to blame, but they consisted of a general, a retired ship owner, a lawyer, a clergyman, a Congressman, an aviator, and a young banker, George Bartol; not a policeman among them.

Being gentlemen, they disliked spying upon the slightest motion of the prisoner. Being confident that he could not escape from the island, they grew to keep lax watch, and the corruption of the black servant was effected under their noses.

Nelson paid him five hundred dollars in greenbacks to steal a revolver from the gun room, and the Negro accepted the bribe, secured the weapon and a supply of ammunition, and passed them on to the Commander. They had searched him the first night when he was unconscious. It

never occurred to them to repeat the operation, and Nelson had been armed for several days awaiting what he considered an opportunity.

It came when he discovered a skiff which had broken loose from a yacht and drifted to the beach on the far side of the island. The Commander had pulled the boat up on the shore, and by perseverence and main strength had concealed it in the bushes.

It contained a pair of oars, but no mast or sail. He was mad enough to be willing to set out in that flimsy craft, but not sufficiently insane to take his daughter with him.

Nelson was quite aware that he might drift far out to sea, be swamped by great waves or perish of hunger and thirst; that the probabilities were against his being picked up by any vessel. But he understood that the longer he was kept a prisoner the greater the difficulty to recover his grip on affairs at home, and he was in a frenzy of nervousness and impatience.

If he could not reign he did not want to live. If he were picked up and landed at some British or American port he could assume charge by wire or radio, and he was prepared to take his chances. Sydney was safe enough; his captors were men of honor. He knew that she was a willing prisoner.

It would be necessary for him to get out of the house early in the evening, soon after dark. While they were searching for him on the island he would make directly for his boat, push off, and row with all his strength.

By dawn, even if he averaged only two or three miles an hour, he would be twenty-five or thirty miles from land, and he did not believe that the launch would sight him, since they had no means of knowing in what direction he would proceed: in fact, they might assume he was hiding on the island, as they did not know of the existence of the boat.

Being unaware of the latitude and longitude of the island, ignorant of the ocean steamship tracks, he did not know himself what direction to take, but he would keep a straight course by the north star at night and by the sunlight in daylight.

It was as crazy a scheme as ever suggested itself to man, but Nelson was insane in a way, otherwise he would not have dreamed of being a king.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A BULLET FINDS ITS MARK.

THE Commander owned one of the finest yachts in the world; he could navigate to the admiration of his sailing master, but he had never rowed a boat in his life; he had no conception of the labor, of the blisters, the aching back, the heat of the sun in the tropics upon a man in an open skiff. So he made his plan.

On the evening of the fourteenth day since landing on the island, Nelson retired to his room at nine o'clock. During the day he had contrived to fill the water cask which he found in the boat at a spring near its hiding place.

He had no food, he had not dared to take the Negro into his confidence lest he be betrayed, but he knew that men had lived for weeks without anything to eat, and he was a superman.

For some days they had ceased to station men in the upper hallway outside his room. One man always stood watch during the night, but while all were up and awake they dispensed with sentinels.

Sydney and John had walked down to the beach early in the evening, spent an hour in the bright moonlight, talked as lovers talked, kissed, perhaps, and then Sydney had decided to retire.

John accompanied her back to the house, and as it was not yet ten o'clock strolled off by himself in the fragrant night. His thoughts were pleasant. He walked farther than he intended, and he turned about when he saw a figure skulking along under the trees. Drawing his revolver he started in pursuit, and when the man, for a moment, stepped into the moonlight, he recognized the Commander.

"Where are you going, Mr. Nelson?" he demanded.

Nelson, who was about thirty feet away, and had not been aware of his presence, uttered an oath, faced him boldly, and to

John's astonishment pointed a revolver at him.

"Damn you, MacGregor, stand where you are!" he commanded.

John disregarded the order, and continued to approach him.

"I don't know where you got that gun, Mr. Nelson," he said, "but you must give it up. What's the use? You can't get away from this island."

"Stop, I tell you!" The menace in his voice caused John to pause, but he immediately covered the Commander with his own weapon.

Like duelists the two men stood, each with a pistol pointed at the other.

"I don't want to shoot you, Commander," said the Congressman. "It's my duty if you don't surrender. Please use your head. What's the use? You can't get away."

"That's all you know about it," snarled Nelson. "Drop that gun."

"No."

"Then shoot me down. You might as well as imprison me. Shoot, I tell you."

"How can I shoot?" he protested. "You are Sydney's father."

He stepped two paces nearer.

"Stop!" exclaimed Nelson. "Another step and I fire."

John was not more than five feet from him. He dropped his pistol on the ground, hoping to throw Nelson off his guard, then dived headlong at the man with the gun. Nelson had not taken his eyes from him; recognized his intent, and at the moment that John launched himself the weapon in the Commander's hand barked sharply. John fell prone on his face, but did not rise.

"You brought in on yourself, you fool!" muttered Nelson. Then he took to his heels.

MacGregor lifted himself on his arms, groaned, flopped on his face, and lost consciousness.

In the stillness of the island night the report of the pistol burst like a cannon's roar. It started echoes; birds awakened and twittered in alarm. It reached the ears of the men who were smoking on the porch, and those of Sydney undressing in her chamber. Its character was unmistakable.

"Run up and see if Nelson is there," commanded the general. "That was a pistol. Either a rescue party has landed on the island, or he has secured a gun and taken to the woods. Who's missing among us?"

"MacGregor," exclaimed three or four.

"He's gone," shouted the man who had run up stairs, from Nelson's bedroom window.

"What has happened?" shouted Sydney from her room.

"Quick!" shouted the general. "Spread out and approach the place where that weapon was fired. It came from that direction. Be careful. If he has gone crazy he may fire from ambush and pot two or three of us. Try to take him without injuring him. If you have to shoot, aim at his legs."

Sydney was among them. She threw her arms around the neck of the general. "You promised!" she exclaimed. "He's my father. Whatever he has done you must not hurt him. Don't you dare shoot at his legs."

But the men were already moving forward, obeying orders. The girl, half dressed, ran wildly after them. And it was Sydney who came upon the body of MacGregor.

"John!" she screamed. "Oh, my God! He's shot John! John, dear John, don't die. Speak to me, John."

She was on her knees beside him, lifting him, kissing his neck and his hair and his face. John opened his eyes and smiled faintly. "I'm not dead, Sydney," he whispered. "The bullet passed through my shoulder, I think."

The party gathered from all directions regardless of shots from ambush.

"Carry him back to the house," commanded the general. "The pursuit can wait. "He can't get off the island."

"Yes," protested John. "Never mind me. When I told him that, he said, 'That's all you know about it!' I think he must have a boat."

"Carry him to the house," insisted Bartol. "I'll take care of the wound. The rest of you can spread over the island. Listen for rowlocks. If he has a boat you

can hear the noise for a mile in a place like this. We'll run him down in the launch. Don't worry, Sydney; I am sure John is not badly hurt."

Tenderly they lifted MacGregor, who suppressed his groans lest they distress the girl. They laid him in his bed while the general busied himself with Downing's first aid kit, and Sydney hovered about with hot water and bandages.

Downing, with one man, had hastened to the boathouse and got out the launch. If Nelson were still on the island they could capture him in daylight. If he had found a boat and had put to sea it was essential to locate him immediately.

It was the work of ten minutes to open the gate, start the engine, and run out into the harbor. The launch was fast, and could circumnavigate the island in twenty minutes. The moon was full, and objects could be seen at considerable distance

As it happened, they saw Nelson before they heard the rowlocks. He was about half a mile off shore and bending to his oars like a Trojan. When he heard the launch he stopped rowing, drew his pistol, and waited for it. A bullet whistled past Downing's head at the wheel.

"Go back!" yelled the Commander. "Go back if you don't want to be shot. I'm a desperate man."

He had the pursuers at a great disadvantage because he had no objections to killing them, while they did not wish to harm him.

Downing and Foster, who was with him, drew their heads below the gunwale. The launch was steel, and proof against pistol bullets.

"Good heavens! What shall we do?" demanded the clergyman.

A couple of bullets whanged against the side of the launch.

"I know," whispered Downing. "I'm going to ram the boat at the bow. When it sinks we'll pull him out of the water."

Keeping his head as low as possible he grasped the wheel and headed the launch at full speed for the boat. Nelson stood up brandishing his weapon. With a crash the sharp steel bow struck the wooden skiff about two feet from its bow, cutting it off as though with a great knife.

It sank immediately. Downing circled round, shut off the engine, and slid close to the Commander, who was swimming. Foster stood up with the boat hook. Nelson pointed his pistol full at his face and pulled the trigger, but the weapon was wet and did not discharge. The minister deftly caught the boat hook in his coat collar, and both men dragged the fugitive into the launch, where he sat dripping and cursing.

Thus ended the mad enterprise of the greatest man in the world. Fearing lest he attempt to capture the launch, Foster kept him covered with his revolver until they were again in the boat pond. There they found the other members of the company awaiting them, and they escorted the Commander back to his bed.

"I am sorry I had to shoot MacGregor. I hope I did not kill him," Nelson was gracious enough to say as they left him at his door.

"It's a slight wound. The bullet entered on the left side just under the collarbone, and passed completely through and out. He'll be all right in a week. That was a crazy undertaking, Mr. Nelson."

"You don't suppose I would permit myself to be held by a lot of amateur kidnapers without making an effort to get away," he growled.

"We shall try to be more professional in the future," replied the general gravely. Sydney burst through the throng and faced her father.

"Father," she said reproachfully, "you shot John. You knew I loved him and you tried to kill him. Oh, how could you? Oh, father!"

He attempted to embrace her, and she drew away with a gesture of repulsion. The man's face worked with emotion.

"I'm sorry, Sydney," he muttered. "I suppose I must have been mad. I thought I saw a chance to escape, and he blocked my path. I'm sorry."

"If he dies I'll never forgive you."

"He won't die," said the great man piteously. "They tell me it's nothing. I don't want him to die. Listen, Sydney, if I get out of this I'll withdraw my objections; I'll let you marry him. Give up my plans for you."

"I'll marry him anyway," she retorted. "I'll try to forgive you, father."

She turned away, eager to get back to her lover. Nelson smiled sadly and said to the general:

"Parents don't stand much chance against a lover. Thanks for your consideration, gentlemen. If conditions were reversed I suppose I should have done as you have done. Good night."

However, there was a guard that night in the hall and another beneath his window. He might try to escape once more.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

JERRY WHITE ON THE JOB.

JOHN suffered considerably from his wound that night, but by morning was resting easily while Sydney sat by his bed, haggard-eyed, trembling of lip, ready to dissolve into tears when he looked up at her adoringly.

Since her surrender in the Nelson garden she had changed from a confident, self-reliant, headstrong and buoyant girl to a tender, dependent woman.

She had suffered greatly. It had torn her heart to turn against her father and aid in his capture; she had hated the hypocrisy which had persuaded her to pretend, for a time, that she was also a reluctant captive; she had accepted it as her due, but winced none the less, when the stern parent had accused her of sympathizing with his enemies and refused her ministrations. This last stroke, the shooting of her lover by her father, had been overpowering; even his repentance, his impulsive consent to her eventual marriage had not consoled her much. She was sure he would withdraw it for reasons of state if he ever got back his supremacy.

In the morning she implored the general to send to Nassau for a physician, in fact, demanded it, careless of what result it might have upon their plans. It was John who vetoed that.

"It's not a serious wound. I received immediate attention, and the general knows what to do in such a case. I will not have a doctor brought here."

"Then put him in the launch, general, and let me take him to Nassau."

"No, dear," said John. "They know that I am mixed up in the disappearance of your father. My presence there would make it evident that he was hidden not far from Nassau. Please don't worry, I feel much better this morning."

"Not a sign of inflammation, no bullet to extract, nothing to worry about, Miss Nelson," the general assured her. "He will be on his feet in two weeks."

The girl still protested, but less vehemently, and presently consented to be led to her room, for she was half dead from shock and loss of sleep. And the normal routine at Candida resumed.

Three days later Downing and the Rev. Mr. Foster started for Nassau in the launch for fresh supplies and newspapers. They departed shortly after noon, would spend the night on the boat in Nassau Harbor, and return next morning, which left five men in charge of the prisoner, including John, who was flat on his back.

The other four arranged an eight-hour shift, even the general standing watch. Nelson had sulked for several days, refused to leave his room, occupied his time by writing in his journal, planning, plotting, building schemes, one after another to be discarded as abortive.

From midnight to eight in the morning, George Bartol and Frank Hopkins were on guard, George in the garden below the Commander's window, Hopkins in the upper hall outside Nelson's door. Sydney was sitting beside John, who was not sleeping, although his wound was healing rapidly. They conversed in whispers.

George was sitting in a deck chair on the lawn looking toward the harbor about one in the morning. He was wide awake, watchful, but he did not have eyes in the back of his head. There was no moon that night and the stars, though bright, did not shed much light upon the island.

Around the side of the house, from the rear, came stealing a file of men, four, six, eight, twelve, sixteen. One of them stumbled and uttered a smothered exclamation, but George overheard, turned like a flash and attempted to draw his gun.

"Hands up, young fellow!" came in a whisper, and he looked into the nose of an automatic held by a determined man he had never seen before.

With a sinking heart, George obeyed the injunction.

"Rush the house!" commanded his captor. "No shooting. You might hit the Commander."

A tramp of feet upon the wooden porch notified Hopkins that something was wrong below, but by the time he reached the head of the stairs with drawn revolver a dozen men were halfway up.

"Drop that gun!" shouted the leader. "We've fifty men, and you haven't got a chance."

Hopkins hesitated. Although he had been a soldier he hated to fire into the group on the stairs, and he saw more men piling through the front door. At the moment General Bartol, in his pyjamas, came out of his room and took in the situation at a glance.

"Surrender, Hopkins," he said quietly. "They've got us."

Hopkins drew back, and was immediately disarmed by the rush. A man, evidently the leader, pushed his way through the crowd.

"Where's Nelson?" he demanded. "If you've harmed a hair on his head I'll murder every man of you."

"Hello, Jerry," said Nelson calmly, appearing at his chamber door. "Where have you been all this time?"

"Hurrah!" shouted Jerry White. "Boys, we've found him. Three cheers for the Commander!"

A ringing shout went up, which made the rafters quiver. John attempted to rise from his bed, but Sydney held him down by main force.

"What is it?"

"Father is rescued, that's all," she said excitedly. "Oh, John, what will he do to you?"

"There are four men here," Nelson was explaining, "and a fifth, MacGregor, in that room over there. He is wounded and will make no trouble. How soon may we leave?"

"Within an hour, chief," replied Jerry. "We have your yacht, the Juno. Can land you in New York in sixty hours."

"Collect your prisoners and take them on board with us. Handle MacGregor carefully. Better carry him on his mattress."

In his moment of triumph, the Commander was as self-possessed and cool as he had been furious when dragged out of the sea after the destruction of his skiff.

"May we have time to dress?" asked the general, whose chagrin was evident, but who knew how to behave in defeat.

"Certainly. Jerry, Mr. Downing, who owns this place and that minister, Foster, are at Nassau. They will be back in the morning. Suppose you cruise toward Nassau and pick them up as they come out. I want to take back the whole collection. Excuse me while I dress."

In an hour the Commander and his prisoners, escorted by the detectives headed by Jerry White and followed by six men carrying John on his mattress, with Sydney bringing up the rear, began a march to the far side of the island.

The yacht had taken advantage of very calm weather to lay about half a mile offshore and sent her expedition in boats which had been drawn up on the beach.

She now ran in closer and picked up her boats, one by one, until all were on board. Nelson walked into his cabin, looked around, proceeded to undress and threw himself upon his bunk.

"I need sleep," he said. "Tell me all about it in the morning. Lock those fellows in separate cabins. Take good care of MacGregor. As I shot him myself, I don't want him to die. And Sydney takes up her usual quarters. Congratulations, White. Though I do not understand how you permitted me to be captured in the first place."

White lost something of his air of elation. He went back to the main saloon and instructed the steward to lock up the prisoners. Sydney insisted upon remaining with MacGregor and had him carried into her suite, where there was a wide bed, then nestled down beside him and took both his hands in her own.

The general shook hands with the other

three conspirators, and the supporters of a lost cause went disconsolately to their staterooms. About nine next morning the Juno was off Nassau and sighted the Candida launch which had rounded Hog Island and headed eastward. The yacht intercepted her and, through a megaphone, Jerry White shouted:

"The jig is up, Downing. We've got the Commander and all your gang. Come on board or we'll blow you out of the water."

"So that's that," commented Downing. "Throw the newspapers overboard." Foster dumped the heavy bundle, which sank immediately. Then they ran the launch under the ladder put over the side by the captain of the yacht. As soon as the pair were on board they hoisted in the launch and White said to the skipper:

"New York, as fast as you can get there!"

Without ceremony Downing and Foster were locked up in separate staterooms. Nelson had breakfasted leisurely in his cabin, and when he had finished sent for his Secret Service chief.

"Sit down, Jerry. Have a cigar. How are things at home?"

"All right, I guess."

"Send a wireless to the President right away that I am returning."

"Well, I don't know, chief. You are supposed to be in New York, sick at your house. Nobody knows you were captured. Do you want to blow the gaff?"

"No," he said thoughtfully. "That was a wise move. Now tell how you discovered me."

"It was like this," said Jerry as he crossed his legs and puffed contentedly on the cigar. "Rottenburg found out you had been spirited away. Instead of giving an alarm he sent for your big bosses and they held a conference. They decided to pretend you were on the job and carry on for you.

"Meanwhile they put me to work to find out where you had been taken and to get you back. Of course we knew right away that MacGregor and Williams were mixed up in it. They operated from Williams's office in the Nelson Building.

"They had a conference at Gregg's apartment the night before, and one of my men was hiding in a closet. They caught him and hid him in the wine cellar of General Bartol's house. That incriminated him and his son. Then I tried to find out what prominent men with whom these fellows were chummy had disappeared, and I found out that this minister had gone and Downing had started south the day of the kidnaping.

"This took some days, you know. It did us no good to know who was in the plot because they had all gone off with you. Find you and I'd get them.

"It was up to me to find out where they had taken you and I investigated them all. Downing, it seemed, had a summer home somewhere in the Bahamas, and that looked like a good bet, all we had to go on. Of course I wasn't sure that he was in the plot at all, but none of the others seemed to give me an opening.

"I took your yacht, forged an order from you to the captain, took on board sixteen of my nerviest operatives and we sailed down to Nassau. Took me a couple of days to find out he didn't own a place there. Then I got the government people to look him up, but Saturday was a holiday and the next day was Sunday, so I lost two days that way. And, would you believe it, it took them three days to find out what island Downing owned? It seems that some lazy clerk had never entered the transfer from the last island owner, and they gave me the wrong latitude and I landed on four other islands before I found out that this was the one."

"But how would you have accounted for your raid if you found that Downing was alone and I was not his prisoner?"

"We'd have pretended to be bootleggers. It didn't worry me, and there's no law down here, anyway.

"I had a map of the island and I knew if we entered the harbor they'd spot us and hide you, perhaps. So we waited until midnight and then lay off the far side of the place while I landed my men and crept up to the rear of the house. We found one guard below and surprised him, and you know the rest."

"Jerry," exclaimed Nelson, "you are a great detective and a fine executive and you

handled this job very marvelously. I won't forget it."

"What are you going to do with the bad men, hang 'em?"

"They ought to be hanged, every one of them, particularly MacGregor," said Nelson savagely. "If they had held me much longer I don't know what would have happened. It was a stroke of genius to conceal my capture. I'll give you an order to take them to jail in New York and transfer them to the Federal prison in Atlanta. A year or so will do them good."

"Very lenient. Does your nature credit," approved the detective. "Kind of tough to jail the old general, though."

"He is the leader. He ought to be shot."

"Oh, sure."

"Take care that my presence on board is not given away. And arrange for closed cars to take my daughter and myself home. The day after my arrival I'll appear in public, and then return to Washington.

The Juno passed Sandy Hook at sunset, and proceeded upriver to an anchorage off Seventy-Fifth Street. A launch conveyed the Commander and his daughter ashore after she had taken a lingering farewell of John.

White returned an hour later, after seeing his master into his home and placing a heavy guard about the residence. First he sent MacGregor to a hospital and then mustered his other prisoners and conveyed them, under guard, in two automobiles to the Ludlow Street Jail, where he handed the sheriff an order for their commitment overnight signed by King J. Nelson, National Commander.

The sheriff frowned and asked:

"What's the charge against these men?"

"No charge. It's an order from the Commander."

"Sorry, Jerry. It don't go."

"What do you mean?"

"Not legal."

"Are you crazy?" demanded the indignant detective.

"Not at all. You have no official standing. You can't bring men to be locked up without charge, and the Commander's signature doesn't go any more."

"What in hell do you mean?"

"Where have you been? By act of Congress passed and signed by the President yesterday the office of National Commander has been abolished because the national emergency has passed."

White turned pale, and sank into a chair. "For the love of the Lord, boy! How they'll sweat for this. Wait till the Commander hears of it."

"What are you going to do with these men?"

"Well, I'll let them go to their homes. Nelson can pick them up again in the morning."

CHAPTER XXIX.

"WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY—"

FOR a moment or two after the machine carrying Nelson and his daughter toward their residence had left the landing there was silence. Nelson was brooding. His mind was busy picking up the threads dropped when he was dragged away three weeks before. Sydney was afflicted with a new timidity in the presence of her father, yet she had to speak to find out.

"Father, what do you intend to do with those men?" she essayed finally.

"What? Oh, the kidnapers? Punish them. Naturally."

"But John?"

"Punish him also."

"You've punished him enough. You shot him. He is helpless."

"Confinement will be good for him for a time."

"But you said you would withdraw your objections, that we could be married—"

"I'll have to rescind that. Spoken without reflection, in a moment of distress. There are reasons—"

"Can you no longer keep your word to your daughter?" she asked bitterly.

"There are other things besides you and me to be considered. The nation. The man is a lawbreaker."

"There is no law except you. You are the law."

"Well, I can't settle anything now. Here we are at home."

Brushing aside the well-meant congratu-

lations of the butler, he headed for his room, followed by Sydney, whose eyes were veiled with resentment. To her this was not home. The house on the island had been the happiest home she had ever known.

"Shall I wake Mr. Rottenburg, sir?" asked the butler.

"Yes. Tell him to get a taxi and come here at once."

"I don't have to do that, sir. He is here."

"In this house? Why?"

"I don't know, sir. He just moved in. He has been living here since you—ahem—since you went away."

"I'll be damned! Fetch him right away. Talk about gall. Did you hear that, Sydney? This fellow, Rottenburg, coolly takes up residence in my house. Hanged if I don't send him a bill!"

Sydney said nothing, but glided away to her own room, where her maid fell on her neck. Nelson paced his chamber impatiently for two or three minutes, then saw the door open and the publicity man appeared in the entrance.

"Well, welcome to our city," breezed Isador. "This is a surprise!"

There was an air of impudence about him which annoyed the Commander, and he had had the audacity to enter the presence without dressing. He wore a brilliant colored silk dressing gown, and his hair was rumpled.

"Why are you living in my house?"

"I moved in to watch. You know we had a plot to keep your disappearance dark. You were supposed to be sick. I was stationed here to handle persistent visitors."

"I see. That was well conceived. But I'm back and on the job. You leave in the morning."

"Tickled to death," retorted Rottenburg. "I'm glad it's not my house. Too damp. I'm delighted that those fellows didn't murder you. How did you get away?"

"I'll ask the questions, please. Is everything all right?"

"Depends on what you call all right."

"Look here, Rottenburg," said Nelson, sternly. "I don't like your manner. What in hell do you mean?"

"I'll try to change my manner. It may be hard, but persistence will win."

"You are talking to the Commander, sir."

"The ex-Commander."

Rottenburg enjoyed the astonishment and consternation of his employer. Nelson's eyes bulged, his lips moved, his hands opened and shut.

"Perhaps you will explain," he said, rather mildly.

"'In view of the continued illness of our illustrious King J. Nelson, and the reëstablishment of stability and prosperity in the nation at large, we have decided to accept his resignation, so often tendered, from the post of National Commander, with gratitude for great services and in the firm hope that never again will it be necessary to call in a private citizen to administer the government.' Quotation from message to Congress of President Cushing."

"He wouldn't dare."

"Upon receipt of which Congress, by a great majority, passed an act abolishing the office, which was signed yesterday by the President. That's what you get for leaving the country in the lurch for three weeks."

A cold sweat broke out upon the forehead of the Commander. He recognized the symptoms of a faint and fell heavily into a chair.

Rottenburg dropped his disagreeable, mocking manner and approached him.

"Honest, boss, I did all I could for you, but three weeks was too long to keep up the bluff. They got on to it."

"I'll soon bring those dogs to heel. I'll show them who runs this country."

"You can't do a thing, Mr. Nelson. You've been frozen out," the press agent told him.

"I can't do a thing!" repeated Nelson, scornfully. "In forty-eight hours I'll have them screaming for help."

"You don't know the half of it yet, boss," said Rottenburg, taking possession of a chair and drawing it close. "When you went away you controlled all the industries of this country."

"I did and I do."

"You did and you don't."

"Do you mean—"

"You were cracking the whip over a lot of tigers, but you turned your back. You had the nation's business tied up in a bundle, but it was tied with thread and they broke the thread."

"Omit figures of speech, please, and tell me what happened."

"Mind if I smoke? Thanks. I called in all your big boys the day you disappeared. They agreed to cover up, carry on and play the game. I thought they would be on the level, but they were a lot of crooks.

"It was all right for a week. Then Professor Strong, who was in with the kidnapers, went to Herman Black and told him what had happened. He said you had been taken out of the country and would be kept out for a year. If you tried to escape you would be killed.

"That was enough for Black, who was still sore on you for threatening to shoot him for obeying your own orders about the coal strike. He tipped off some of the others and they started bearing the stocks you held on margin. They got at your books, found out just where you stood. Your bankers and brokers didn't know what to do. Lossing was in the gang, wouldn't support the market, and they sold you out to protect themselves.

"There was a panic on the market last week and when it was all over Black came up in control of the mines, Blunt had the railroads and various combinations had most of your other enterprises."

"I suppose you profited with the other traitors," said Nelson bitterly.

"No, sir. I stuck to you. I didn't make a dollar, but I did buy up a couple of newspapers that were going cheap when the combination busted."

"Thanks for so much."

"Having stolen your property, the next thing that worried the boys was that you might come back and, as Commander, confiscate it all and line them up against the wall to be shot."

"A fate they richly deserved."

"Oh, sure. So they brought pressure to bear on the President, gave orders to all your Congressmen, and they just neatly oozed you out of the job of Commander so you couldn't occupy it again. You see, it was a swell job, but you had to work at it all the time."

"I see. I am no longer Commander. My great combination has been dissolved, and they have stolen about half my fortune."

"You still got enough to have a good time on and, honestly, you're lucky. You were going to get a bullet in you from some patriotic bug as sure as fate. Now you are the noblest citizen the republic ever had.

"You saved them all, fixed up everything nice, and resigned just as you always said you would do. You become the first citizen. Washington was the father of his country, you can be the mother if you like, but the king business is 'blah,' gone into the ash can. Nobody ever knew about it but you and me, and neither of us will tell."

Nelson smiled feebly. "I am really much obliged to you, Rottenburg. I think, at that, you were probably my most loyal supporter and you enjoyed my fullest confidence. I wish you good night. Come to see me in the morning."

The fallen giant dismissed the valet who intruded. He undressed himself, crept between the sheets and contemplated the wreck of his ambition. He might achieve it again, but it meant a long bitter fight with his former associates to win back the control they had stolen from him.

He could then throw the country into a situation like that which had brought him to the Commandership, build slowly, perhaps in ten years reach the point from which he had been toppled by the general and his band.

Was it worth it? He did not think it was. He was tired, he was shocked at the ingratitude of men he had made, Black, Blunt, Cushing, Lossing, the whole crowd. Presently he fell into a deep sleep.

When Nelson woke up in the morning, his first thought was that the revelations of Rottenburg had been part of his sleep, a bad dream. But a glance at the financial pages of the newspapers told his experienced eye that it was true enough. He turned to the editorial page of the *Planet* and read in the leading article his obituary as a monarch.

It was couched in the most complimentary terms, it praised his rare judgment, his firmness, his public-spiritedness and his nobility.

Few men in the proud position of King J. Nelson would not have tried to take advantage of it, to perpetuate it. From such a post men have stepped into kingship in the past. But Nelson is a great and patriotic American, a lover of our institutions, probably the finest citizen of our republic, for he voluntarily laid down his scepter, stepped out of his mighty seat into the ranks of private citizens, just as he has always said he intended to do, leaving as his monument a restored and reinvigorated nation, again a free republic.

He asked nothing from the people he has saved, but he has their love and gratitude. And history will not forget him.

He will be a model to generations to come.

He smiled grimly as he read the editorial in a paper which he no longer controlled, perhaps written by an editor with his tongue in his cheek, but an editorial which would be believed by the people who read it.

And suppose that were the estimate of the nation, suppose he did go down in history as a noble, self-sacrificing, patriotic American, a lover of Democracy, one who had turned away like Cæsar and Washington from the proffer of a crown.

It would depend upon his attitude from this minute on. This man had never before lost a battle, but he had the makings of a good loser. On impulse he seated himself at his desk and penned the following note to the President of the United States:

DEAR PRESIDENT CUSHING:

I am deeply grateful for the splendid tribute paid me in accepting my resignation from the Commandership, a post which was only justified by an intolerable situation, now happily passed away. I have recovered from my illness, but I could not again bear the weight of such great responsibility as was mine during the past eight or nine months. My admonition to you and to Congress and to my countrymen is to so revise and amend the Constitution that such crises as that through which we recently passed can be firmly met by the legally elected officers of the nation. Despotism is intolerable to a free people. Let us never again have a dictator.

He signed it with a flourish, called for Rottenburg and handed it to him, watching his countenance as he read it. The press agent laughed in admiration.

"Can you imagine the astonishment of the gang when they get this? Boss, it's the only way out. If you raised the deuce they would laugh at you and expose you. You are playing their game, and they have got to play yours."

"I mean every word of it," asserted Nelson. "I'm going to use the remainder of my fortune, which is considerable, to see that we never have a dictator again. I'm going to fight corruption in politics, get rid of Cushing, who is not honest, and back a man for President who will be independent like those who have held the office before."

"I'm with you," said the press agent eagerly. "I'm a rich man myself, and I don't want any crooks in office. Let's clean up the country, expose graft, bust the trusts and go down in history as a couple of reformers."

Nelson laughed heartily. He was genuinely amused, and he was astonished at his state of mind. To hold his power he would have gone down fighting tooth and nail, have permitted his enemies to tear him to pieces before he would have surrendered. Now that it had disappeared during his absence he found himself experiencing a deep sentiment of relief.

He had been like a man trying to swim and hold on to a big bag of gold. Although he would have drowned before he let go, when a wave happened to tear it from him, he struck out for the surface and rejoiced to find he could remain there.

Jerry White intruded now upon the conference, and in him also the ex-Commander observed a certain change of manner which caused his keen eyes to twinkle satirically.

"Chief, what do you want to do with those kidnapers?" he demanded. "You've been double-crossed while you were gone and they abolished your job. Of course, you know that. So they wouldn't accept the prisoners at the jail. You can charge them with kidnaping and prosecute them in the criminal courts; otherwise they go scot free.

"Suppose you round them up and bring them here at twelve, Jerry. I want to have a talk with them."

Six of the seven conspirators assembled in the antechamber of the office of King Nelson at noon were filled with curiosity rather than apprehension. When the New York officials had refused to honor an order from the Commander to lock them up overnight, they had understood that the great man had fallen. Professor Strong, whom they roused from his bed, supplied the details, and they had retired jubilant because victory had been hidden in the jaws of defeat.

Of course, they were liable to long imprisonment for kidnaping Nelson and his daughter if he wished to proceed against them in the criminal courts, but they were reasonably certain he would not take such steps. Nevertheless, they were eager to hear what he had to say.

John MacGregor had not been taken to the jail, but conveyed at once to a hospital and put to bed with instructions from the doctor to stay there for another week, but the general had sent word to him of the marvelous change in their prospects.

Their former prisoner was sitting at his big desk as they entered, bowed to them and invited them to take chairs. Then he pressed a buzzer for his stenographer and asked her to summon his daughter. He maintained silence until Sydney entered, looking apprehensive. As yet she knew nothing of the change in her father's estate.

"You know these gentlemen, Sydney," he said with a smile. "It's a sort of reunion. I am informed that Mr. MacGregor is doing nicely at the hospital."

Sydney seated herself without replying and looked about, exchanging friendly smiles with her companions of the island.

"Undoubtedly you have learned of the situation in America," said Nelson quietly. "It was my intention as Commander to punish you severely for your crime. Instead you seem to have accomplished your purpose in much less time than you anticipated. You did me too much honor in supposing that it would be several months before my grip on this country could be shaken off. It was done in less than three weeks. My dear and trusted associates not only abolished my political office, but they raided my enterprises and succeeded in stealing more than half my fortune."

"That I did not expect," said the general. "I am sorry to hear of it."

"I have plenty left," said Nelson. "In destroying my power, gentlemen, I have come to believe that you did me a great service. I have called you here to express my thanks for your action, to tell you that I shall take no steps against you. In enslaving the nation it seems that I made myself the greatest slave of all, and you have set me free. I am heartily glad of it. I ask your congratulations."

There was a buzz of comment. Then General Bartol stood up, assumed the position of "attention" and saluted in military fashion.

"I salute a great man, Mr. Nelson," he said. "You are a greater man than I believed. We had no intention of doing you a service, I assure you, but since it has turned out so, I am very glad, and I speak for all my friends."

Sydney had listened to her father's statement in bewilderment, which changed to rapture. Now she rushed him, fell upon him, devoured him with kisses.

"Father!" she exclaimed. "How did it all happen? Isn't it wonderful? Oh, I never loved you so much."

"Now, Sydney," he said, "I can take you on that world cruise you have always wished for."

The girl hesitated, blushed. "Well—er—can we take John?"

"Would you rather take John and leave me behind?"

"No," she said. "We'll go on our honeymoon and take you as chaperon."

"If he has no objections to sailing with a man who put a bullet in him."

"He won't."

"That's all I have to say, gentlemen. Do you play chess, general?"

"Love it."

"Let's play a game some night soon. I wager you can't checkmate my king in chess."

"I'll wager I can," said General Bartol.

And that is the inside story of the rise and fall of the American dictator.

THE END

The Dominant Male

By E. I. LaBEAUME

THE Parleys had just decided to take a cottage at the shore, and the talk at the supper table was all of going away, and of doing things, once gone. It was very pleasant and jolly until Mr. Parley spoiled it by asking:

"What are you going to do with the cat?"

"Oh, father!" Jane and Austin exclaimed in unison. "Mayn't we take her?"

"Spotty won't be any trouble." Walter, Jr., hastened to the defense of the cherished pet. "I'll put her in a basket and take care of her all the way."

Mrs. Parley looked pleadingly at her husband, but said nothing. It was this glance that he answered, rather than his children's question. "Certainly not: we look enough like emigrants when we travel, without including a menagerie in the party."

"What are emigrants?" asked Jane.

Again it was his wife to whom he addressed his reply: "Emigrants are people who carry paper parcels in trains."

A few evenings later Mr. Parley brought the subject up again, demanding: "What have you done about the cat?"

"I've telephoned a lot of people," Mrs. Parley answered hurriedly. "I tried to get the Browns to take her, but everybody seems to be going away, or else they have a cat. Really, Walter, the children are so fond of Spotty—we're all so fond of her—I was wondering if we couldn't take her to Oceanton."

Mr. Parley looked at his wife pityingly. "I will not travel with a cat," he announced in a voice that was ostentatiously restrained. "It's a little hard to understand how you can make such a suggestion, considering the time we always have with the things you forget to pack, and grab up just as we are leaving the apartment. Now I want it understood that if you don't get rid of that cat before next Thursday we won't go. If you must have the cat, you can all stay home and take care of her. I shouldn't advise you to delay this a minute longer than necessary, either," he added with a meaning look.

As he kissed his wife good-by on Monday morning, Mrs. Parley annuled the tender significance of the caress with a cold reference to the troublesome subject.

"I'll telephone the cruelty-to-animals people to come and get her to-day." She whispered it in order to hide the tragedy from Walter, Jr., who was hovering near for an affectionate demonstration, with a nickel as his final objective. "I suppose it's the only thing to do," she added aloud.

"I don't care what you do with her," Mr. Parley answered harshly. "Drown her, asphyxiate her, run her through the meat-chopper; do anything you blame please with her, but get good and rid of her. She's yours; this is your affair and you've got to handle it. It should have been attended to long ago, as soon as we decided to go away, but get this: when I come home to-night, that cat's to be gone — do you understand?"

Mrs. Parley nodded; Mr. Parley opened the hall door and rang violently for the elevator; Walter, Jr., who had been so enrapt by this exhibition of authority that he had forgotten his affectionate leave-taking, and even the nickel he hoped to gain by it, was now eying his mother with a challenging expression.

She returned his look without seeing him at first. Then, as she heard the elevator stop at the landing, and heard its door slam shut upon her husband, the sense of security till dinner time affected a magic transformation; her eyes lost their vacancy and focused on Walter's feet.

"Take off those new shoes and put on your play-shoes at once," she commanded.

"I blame won't," Walter retorted. He spent the morning locked in his room puzzling over the inconsistency of woman as shown in her contradictory behavior under man's virile assertiveness.

II.

HARDLY had Mr. Parley let himself in that evening when his wife hastened to explain that she had telephoned the cruelty society and that they would send for Spotty the next day. He muttered something about what could be expected when things were left till the last minute. This went unchallenged, and he apparently put the subject out of his mind—to Mrs. Parley's great relief.

She was having a struggle with her conscience. She was one of those women who tell their husbands almost everything and are forever wishing they hadn't.

That day she had learned something, which, in a way, she supposed she ought to speak about to Walter. But this time she triumphed over her conscience; she did not linger over the thought that if she failed to tell she would probably avoid a scolding, but she decided that to do so would only irritate her husband to no good purpose.

Just as she was beginning to feel relieved in consequence of this decision, he dismayed her by driving straight at her secret. He had an uncanny faculty for doing this; it was simply no use trying to hide anything from Walter.

"Do they charge for taking cats?" he asked, innocently.

Mrs. Parley took a deep breath and then began to speak quickly.

"I'm not sure, Walter; Mrs. Kenner says they do, but—" He checked her in midflight: "Didn't you ask when you telephoned to-day?"

"No, I didn't," she admitted, losing her former fluency.

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I suppose I didn't think of it, and then besides, it really didn't make any difference; we'd have to have them come anyway. They were perfectly lovely about it. They said—"

"How much does Mrs. Kenner say they charge?" he interrupted again.

"She says two dollars, but—"

"Where did she get her information?"

"That's what they charged to take her cat two years ago, but she says it's an outrage. I really think a dollar is enough. I expect it will be about a dollar. I may have to give the man a quarter for himself—" She paused with a sharp intuition that to continue would make matters worse.

Mr. Parley rose and moved into a position whence he could include all of Mrs. Parley in a cold stare. He precluded his comment with a long-drawn "Ah!" on a rising inflection, and then, facetiously: "So you think a dollar is enough? Then of course, they can't charge you any more.

At how much do you value that cat, may I ask?"

"How do you mean, value her?" she inquired nervously. "We all love kitty very much but—"

"There is no hidden meaning in my question," he assured her. "I meant exactly what I said: what value do you place upon the animal? At what would you appraise her?"

"You mean how much is she worth? To sell her?"

"Exactly." He said it as one who is quite overcome at the depth of another's comprehension.

"Well, Walter," she began again, more puzzled than before, "when I've told you I've been trying to give her away, and can't—"

"Exactly," he repeated in the middle of her sentence. "That would indicate that as an article of trade or commerce she is worth practically nothing, wouldn't it?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," she sighed. "Kitty's not in trade or commerce."

"Would it be unfair to infer from your experience that one could probably purchase a large quantity of similar fauna for say, twenty-five cents?"

"I don't know. I suppose you could. Mrs. Sweet is trying to get rid of her cat, too. It was too funny when I called her up about ours. We simply got to screaming over the telephone."

Relentlessly, Mr. Parley swept aside this attempt at diversion and proceeded to point the conclusion developed by his coldly logical questioning: "Does it seem at all, or—shall we say disproportionate?—to spend two dollars in order to dispose of a possession of such negligible value?"

"Of course, it doesn't seem right," she agreed. "You'd think some one would be awfully glad to get her; I believe there are lots of people who would, too, if we could only find them. But I told you it oughtn't to be two dollars. I think a dollar is plenty."

This was too much for Mr. Parley. He gave voice to a sound that might have indicated either uncontrollable fury or intense bodily anguish, plunging his fingers into the graying locks around his temples, and subjecting his head to severe pressure between his hands.

Calmed at last by this exercise, he started for bed, delivering an ultimatum: "You will not spend two dollars or one dollar of my money to get rid of that cat; but if she is here when I get home to-morrow night—"

He left the room without finishing, leaving it to his wife's imagination to picture what would happen.

III.

On the following evening, Mr. Parley thought there was a false lightness in the volubility with which his wife greeted him. The children's whisperings, with furtive side-glances in his direction, strengthened an instantly formed suspicion.

"Still here?" he asked his wife accusingly.

She swallowed out loud, with noticeable effort, and nodded.

"Already?" he questioned dourly.

Again she nodded.

"How many?"

"Five." Her lips framed the words, but little sound came from them.

"Where?" he pursued methodically.

"They're in a box in the kitchen."

"I'm not inquiring as to their present location. Where did this take place?"

"In your room, but—"

"On my bed?"

Startled out of all thought of quibbling by such divination, Mrs. Parley explained hastily: "You never could tell, Walter, really. You can go right in and see. If you hadn't guessed, you'd never have known a thing about it. They're the dearest things; the children are simply wild over them."

"What are you going to do about them?" he cut in.

That question again—in that voice! Mrs. Parley jerked as though some one had unexpectedly made a loud noise behind her back.

Her intention had been to plead for at least one of the kittens, but she changed her mind; she did not even second the children's entreaties. When these had been sternly silenced she answered his question:

"I suppose we'll have to call the cruelty-to-animals people, now that there are so many."

Mr. Parley sprang from his chair and confronted her. He seemed to be trying to keep from falling upon her and rending her. If so, he was successful, and when he spoke it was with a measured and ominous calm:

"Are you thinking of paying out twelve dollars of my money to have those cats removed?"

"Twelve dollars?" she repeated.

"Yes—twelve dollars. Six times two are twelve. Do you think money is absolutely nothing to me?"

"But, Walter," she faltered, "surely they wouldn't charge the full rate for kittens; and besides, I told you I thought two dollars was too much."

Mr. Parley fell into one of those fits of groaning that sometimes seemed to be his only adequate means of communion with his wife. When the paroxysm was over, Mrs. Parley began again:

"I'm sure we'll never be able to give away a whole family of cats. People might like the kittens; but they're too young; why, they won't even have their eyes open when we go away."

"No; they will not!" Mr. Parley corroborated decisively.

Mrs. Parley shuddered at these words. When the children had gone to bed her fears were confirmed.

"Is there any chloroform in the house?" he asked, quite as he would have said castor oil or quinine.

Learning that there was not, he went to the drug store to get some.

IV.

We must pass lightly over what followed. To his wife's horrified protest he replied that apparently he had to do everything in that house. It was not enough, he said, for him to do his share by slaving all day to provide for them; he must undertake the management of the household as well.

Mrs. Parley locked herself in her bedroom and buried her head in the pillows; Mr. Parley went to the kitchen with a bold tread, breathing deeply to dispel a slight nausea. He carried out the druggist's instructions shakily and returned to the front room.

Half an hour later he returned to the scene. He looked cautiously into the kitchen, and listened attentively. He saw the box as he had left it, covered with the ironing board, which was held down by two electric flat irons and a heavy iron pot; not a sound came from it. He approached it slowly, pausing now and then to listen. When he was very near he shuffled his feet noisily.

Finally he gave the box a gentle kick—still not a sound. Reassured, he removed the weights, and then, standing as far as possible from the box, he took the ironing board by one end and raised it gingerly.

That which was disclosed bore witness to a serene and painless dissolution; this gave him a feeling of virtue mixed with profound relief, but the sinking sensation still persisted as he gazed upon his victims.

"Of course. What did you suppose?" he told his wife a few minutes later when she asked a tremulous question. Then he added condescendingly: "I presume you will be able to dispose of them now they are dead?"

Yet when he returned from the office the next evening, he asked the usual question. It seemed that dead cats were not as easily put out of the way as one might think. We shall not dwell on what Mr. Parley said and did when he learned that his roof still sheltered the offending felines. When the storm had spent itself Mrs. Farley tearfully explained that the janitor had refused to take them down with the garbage, saying that to do so would be in violation of a city ordinance, and that the Board of Health must be notified to send for them; that she had tried, without success at first, to reach this body by telephone—she kept getting the morgue and the school board—and when the right connection was finally made she was told that it was too late and to call again the next day.

"I never heard of such a thing," said Mr. Parley contemptuously. "I don't believe there is any such ordinance."

"I can't help it," she sobbed; "that's what the janitor said. I told him you'd be furious. Surely you couldn't expect me to take them down and throw them in the street."

"I should never expect you to do anything."

There was forbearance in his voice if not in his words, and this presaged the martyr's rôle he was about to assume. He moved about that evening with an air of resignation. Before leaving the next morning he asked for wrapping paper, modulating his voice ministerially.

He made a neat parcel of Spotty and her young, and placed it under his arm. His acknowledgment of his wife's fervent declaration that she would never, never have another pet was like a benediction.

In the old days Mr. Parley was one of those men who are ashamed to be seen carrying bundles. Early in their married life Mrs. Parley learned the futility of asking him to stop at the market on the way home. But Mr. Volstead has removed the stigma from this menial service—has lent distinction to it, in fact—and Mr. Parley started off jauntily with his modish-sized package. He had no definite notion of what he would do with it, but he didn't worry. On the way to the subway he stopped at a cigar store where he did not usually deal. Departing, he left his bundle on the counter, and was smiling to himself half a block down the street, when the clerk clutched him by the sleeve and pressed his cats back upon him.

Mr. Parley thanked him genially—he could enjoy a joke on himself as well as anybody, especially if no one else knew it—and went down to the subway platform.

He was fortunate in getting a seat. When his station was reached he pretended not to realize it until the last minute. Just as the guard was about to close the doors he jumped up and rushed for the exit. A woman who had been sitting beside him sprang in pursuit, and he was followed by a chorus of well-meaning passengers: "Hey, mister! You forgot something!"

The guard obligingly held the train while the lady restored his package with a benign smile, and he departed, graciously bowing his thanks.

These had been merely haphazard attempts, and he was not troubled by their failure. When he found himself walking along Forty-Second Street toward his office he decided that the time for more subtle strategy had arrived, and that he must execute a plan that would definitely relieve him of his burden.

He was delayed by the traffic at the crossing of Fifth Avenue, and seeing passengers getting onto a bus gave him an idea. As he placed himself before a store window and laid his package on the ledge beside him, a stranger stopped to ask him for a match. Mr. Parley politely lighted it for him, and as he put the match back in his pocket a bus went by without stopping, and he made a run for it.

The stranger noticed the parcel lying on the ledge, and, believing that courtesy should be repaid, picked it up and overtook the bus at some risk to his person. He was aggrieved at the surly manner in which his considerate action was received.

"That's what you get for trying to be nice to people in this world," he complained to himself as he went on toward Forty-Third Street. "The old grouch! I wonder what he had there, anyway. It felt peculiar."

By this time Mr. Parley was exasperated. It was too much if a man couldn't go away and leave something he didn't want without having a lot of busybodies standing around to return it to him! The bus stopped to give way to the crosstown flow at Forty-Third Street, and he got off. Glancing around aimlessly, he noticed a large can standing by the curb, placed there to receive old papers.

He strode up to it and deposited Spotty and her offspring therein with a defiant gesture, as though daring the public at large to fish them out and try to give them back. There was an unexpectedly loud thud on the bottom of the can—a great rustling of papers. Several people turned to look at him, and he decided not to remain and take chances on the acceptance of his challenge.

He started briskly across the street without observing that the signal was now open

for northbound traffic. He was brought up sharply by a policeman, who caught him by the arm—such is the city's solicitude for its inhabitants and guests. Stepping back into the front rank of those waiting to cross, he looked at his watch impatiently and found that he would be late in arriving at the office—all on account of those damnable cats.

Gloomily meditating this, he failed to see that the man to whom he had given a light, and who had made an ass of himself by his misdirected zeal, was talking excitedly to the policeman, and that both were looking at him. He turned haughtily when the officer's hand gripped his shoulder, and he was about to demand an explanation in his most overbearing manner; but just then he caught sight of the man of the match, and his indignation gave way to a feeling of guilt.

Under slight propulsion he found himself once more before the rubbish can in the center of an interested crowd. The meddling stranger rescued the package for the second time and handed it to the officer, who demanded:

"Is this yours?"

"It was mine," Mr. Parley conceded.

"What's in it?"

His truthful answer brought a titter from the bystanders, which added nothing to his self-possession; he began to feel very warm and uncomfortable. Suppose some one should recognize him in this ridiculous situation!

The policeman did not join in the merriment.

"Let's see if it is cats," he commanded, shoving the package at Mr. Parley.

"You can feel them," he ventured; but that was what the policeman had been doing, and he was unconvinced.

"Open it up," he insisted.

Mr. Parley complied, awkwardly supporting the package on one knee, which he elevated by placing his foot on the rubbish can. He had difficulty with the knot, and he didn't wish to cut it—the string was just long enough, and he intended to remake the parcel as soon as might be—but the officer grew impatient, produced a pocketknife, and severed the cord.

A hush fell upon the curious spectators. Those who were not close enough for a good view began to push: and the policeman's order to stand back came too late to save Mr. Parley, who lost his balance as some one fell against him, and sprawled among a litter of—surely there had only been five kittens, yet as he got up and hastily began to collect them there seemed to be at least a dozen.

"M-e-o-w, m-e-o-w!" wailed a street urchin. Others took up the chorus, while the older members of the crowd broke into idiotic shouts of laughter.

By the time he had picked up the last kitten and with trembling fingers had made a bulging, misshapen bundle, another policeman arrived. Mr. Parley was turned over to him by the traffic officer with this explication:

"He's been throwing dead cats in the rubbish can. This gentleman here—" He turned to point out the officious stranger, and Mr. Parley sent a hateful glance in that direction, but the stranger was gone. "Well, here's his card, anyway," the officer went on. "The sergeant can get hold of him if he wants to, but it ain't necessary. Anyhow, he saw this man acting suspicious; he tried to leave that package down the street, and then he chucked it in there. He ain't got any right to put dead cats in the rubbish can."

Jeers went up as a way was forced for Mr. Parley between the tight-packed onlookers. Cat-calls followed him as he slunk along toward the police station, continually pausing to pick up kittens, which seemed to fall out of one side of their wrapping as fast as he could poke them in at the other.

The sergeant listened to the story with little show of interest. His attitude was preferable to that of the policeman, however, who was inclined to be jocose.

When Mr. Parley gave his version, earnestly asserting that he had transgressed unwittingly, he seemed not unsympathetic; he even accepted a cigar. But for all that, the culprit found himself charged with defiling the public highways, and was summoned to appear in court that afternoon to answer for his offense.

"Can't I plead guilty now and pay a fine?" he petitioned.

Assured that this was impossible, he asked anxiously: "They can't put you in jail for that, can they?"

"Is this the first offense?" inquired the sergeant. Mr. Parley assured him that it was. "Ever been arested before?"

"Certainly not," he protested.

"You'll get off with a fine, then," the sergeant told him.

But this was not completely satisfying, and Mr. Parley asked: "Does the statute provide a jail penalty."

"Sure it does," said the sergeant. "He can send you up for sixty days if he wants to, but he won't. Unless," he added, as an afterthought, "it just happens he's got a lot of these cases and he wants to make an example out of you; but you don't need to worry."

In a way this was comforting and in another it wasn't. The possibility of going to jail however remote could not be faced with composure.

V.

ARRIVING at the office very late, Mr. Parley spent the rest of the morning in a state of nervousness that caused some whispered comment among his subordinates, and that would certainly have caused his superiors to order an audit of his accounts had the day's business called him into their presence.

He was restlessly undecided whether to call in his lawyer. He spoke of Fred Hatfield as *his lawyer* because he had once paid Fred fifteen dollars for drawing up his will. Except for this, he had never before required the services of a legal adviser; but he had often heard of the dangers besetting laymen caught in the legal web, who attempt to free themselves without the aid of expert counsel.

He believed these dangers existed; it seemed foolhardy to brave them alone, but —here was the inhibiting factor—Mrs. Hatfield and Mrs. Parley were friends. It was probable, it was almost certain, that Mrs. Hatfield was one of those to whom his wife had appealed in her efforts to find a home for Spotty, and the prospect of spending sixty days in jail was hardly more disturbing than the prospect of Mrs. Parley's discovering the sequel to his taking the disposition of the cats into his own hands.

True, he could get another lawyer, but he didn't know any; and he shrank from intrusting a matter of such delicacy to one of whose trustworthiness he could not be sure.

Five times during the morning he looked for Hatfield's number in the telephone book and wrote it on little slips of paper—which he invariably mislaid a few minutes afterward. Ten times, at least, he picked up the receiver to give the number to the operator, but each time he thought better of it and decided to delay a little longer.

Two o'clock found him in the court room unprotected save by his resolve to tell a straightforward story without attempting to palliate his offense, and to rely on the magistrate's clemency to recognize the mitigating circumstances, his irreproachable record and his ignorance of the ordinance he had violated.

Most culprits, so he reasoned, would would plead, and equivocate, and make excuses. He hoped that the frankness of his avowal would, by contrast, create a favorable impression.

At first he cast a withering glance around for his accuser, but, on the whole, he was relieved to find only the policeman to appear against him. When he was summoned before the bar, after what seemed an interminable wait he was given no opportunity to tell the story so carefully thought out down to the inflection of every word.

With an apathy that would have been insulting if it had not been so reassuring the magistrate listened to the policeman's tale, asked Mr. Parley if the facts were as recited, and closed the matter by sentencing him to a fine of ten dollars, and costs.

It was an ironic coincidence that the costs amounted to exactly two dollars. But for the moment, Mr. Parley was too light-hearted at his escape to indulge in bitter reflections. Almost joyfully, he paid the twelve dollars—just what the cruelty-to-animals people would have charged, unless, of course, they accepted Mrs. Parley's view that this was exorbitant.

When he went home that night, Mr. Parley ignored his wife's inquiring glance. He could see that she was in the throes of exigent curiosity, and he immediately determined on his course: He would discipline her by refusing to say a word about the subject.

He often did this when she importuned him about some trival matter before he was ready to speak of it; but she never profited by experience, never learned to suppress her eagerness.

Several times during dinner he smiled to himself complacently as he divined the question that was trembling on her lips. He feigned a preoccupation that discouraged conversation—failing to heed remarks addressed to him or answering them in reluctant monosyllables.

This, he knew, was the way to lead her on. But it was not until he retired behind his newspaper in the sitting room that Mrs. Parley ventured to intrude.

"Walter."

He did not answer, and she repeated his name in a louder voice.

"Huh?"

"Did you have any trouble with the cats?"

"Huh?" he repeated crossly. "How do you mean, trouble? Of course I didn't have any trouble."

A smile, which her husband could not see, accompanied her next remark. She looked almost roguish.

"I was just wondering how you got rid of them," she said gently.

It sounded like an attempt to disguise her interest, lest he suspect it and tease her by prolonging her suspense. It was Mr. Parley's turn to smile; such transparency. It was almost too easy—would she never learn the finesse of this domestic warfare?

"I thought it would be too bad if you did have any trouble," she went on in the same mild voice, with the same hint of restrained merriment around her mouth and eyes, "because I found out that the cruelty people would have taken them for nothing."

Mr. Parley felt himself flushing, and he was thankful for his shielding newspaper. This speech angered him; but it gave him the pretext he wanted. An annihilating speech framed itself in his mind as his wife proceeded.

"Mrs. Kenner came over this morning to tell me about it. She says she doesn't know how she got so mixed up. It was the veterinary who charged her two dollars. She says she knew there was something about two dollars and a cat, and she thought it was entirely too much at the time, because he only pulled a fish hook out of her foot and it hardly took him a minute; but she did have the cruelty people come for the cat later and they didn't charge her a cent."

As she finished this explanation, Mrs. Parley committed an unpardonable offense: She giggled.

"I should think you'd be ashamed to make such a confession," Mr. Parley began his rebuke in a voice vibrating with scorn. "I should think you'd be ashamed to mention those cats in my presence after the silly, trifling, incompetent way you bungled the whole affair. And now you sit there and titter because you found out you've been a bigger fool than you thought you were."

"I tried to tell you about it," she said softly.

"What do you mean? When?" he snapped.

"I telephoned the office as soon as Mrs. Kenner told me, but they said you weren't in yet; you were very late. That's why I thought you must have had some trouble. And then Mrs. Kenner's brother, who's visiting them, came to take her to lunch; and he told about having you—I mean about having a man arrested for putting dead cats in a can. The man was impolite to him, and he was quite angry. He was going to appear in court against him; but when I explained that it was—when I explained, he was very nice, and said he wouldn't. And we thought it was such a good joke. So you see I really did help a little bit, didn't I, Walter?"

"Keep still and let me read my paper," commanded Mr. Parley.

"I believe Jane is crying," said Mrs. Parley, running from the room with her hand pressed tightly over her mouth.

THE END

The Radio Planet

By RALPH MILNE FARLEY

Author of "The Radio Man," "The Radio Beasts," etc.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LUNO AND BEYOND.

WITH no weapons except for steel knife and wooden rapier, the unkempt and bearded earth-man set out resolutely along the twenty-mile road which led to Lake Luno. All the rest of the afternoon he tramped along, avoiding the towns, and taking cover whenever a kerkool approached.

Night fell—the velvet, fragrant, tropic-scented night of Poros; yet, still he kept on, for he knew the road.

As he trudged along he tried to picture to himself the state of affairs in Cupia. Back in Vairkingi, when at last he had succeeded in getting the Princess Lilla on the air, she had mentioned the whistling bees, just before Prince Yuri had cut her off.

These bees were called "whistling" because of the heterodyne squeal with which they appeared to converse; but Myles then discovered, by means of the greater range and selectivity of his own artificial radio speech-organs, that this whistle was due to the bees sending simultaneously on two interfering wave lengths, for signal purposes. When simply talking they used a wave length beyond the range of Cupian speech!

Cabot had been able to adjust his portable set to this wave length, and talked with the bees. As a result of this conversation an alliance had been formed between Cupia and the Hymernians—as the bee-people called themselves—which had driven Yuri and his ants from the continent. Thereafter the bees had lived at peace with the Cupians, a special ration of green cows being bred for their benefit.

What, wondered Cabot as he trudged along, had the returned Yuri done to dis-

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turb this state of affairs? If Portheris, the king of the bees, still lived, Cabot could not imagine him siding with Yuri.

But, whatever had happened, it was clear that the bees were at the bottom of it. Time would tell very speedily.

Traveling on foot at night on the planet Poros is necessarily slow and tedious, for the blackness of the Porovian night is dense beyond anything conceivable on earth. On earth even the light of a few stars would enable a man to distinguish between a concrete road and the adjoining fields and woods and bushes, but on Poros no stars are visible. Accordingly Myles had to feel his way with his feet, and fell off the road many times before he reached his destination. Due to the mountainous character of the country, most of these falls were extremely painful, and some were positively dangerous.

Yet on he kept, and before long the lights of Luno village loomed ahead. Even here it would not do to reveal himself in his present state of appearance, so he skirted the town and made his way down the steep path which led to the lake shore.

If his island dwelling had been disturbed he half expected to find that his boats were gone from this landing place; but upon groping about in the dark he came across several of them, tied up just where they ought to be. This cheered him immensely.

But when he stared across toward the island and saw no sign of any light there, his spirits fell again. It was not the custom at Luno Castle to go through the night totally unillumined.

He would soon find out what the trouble was. So stepping into one of the boats he cast off, and paddled vigorously toward the middle of the lake. Keeping his bearings was difficult in the jet-black darkness, but he was guided somewhat by the faint illumination sent skyward by the little village.

Finally he bumped against the rocky and precipitous sides of the island, but misjudging his location he had to paddle nearly clear around the island before he came to the landing beach. This gained, he pulled his craft ashore, and groped his way up the narrow path to the summit, thence across the lawns, which sloped gently down toward the center of the island, where lay a little pond with Luno Castle standing beside it.

Myles ran into several shrubs, got completely mixed up as to his directions, and finally fell into the pond. This gave him a new starting point, from which to orient himself. Walking around its edge, with one foot in the water, he would diverge outward from time to time, until at last his groping hand touched a wall of masonry. It was his castle! He was home! But what did that home hold? His heart beat tumultuously with anticipation.

Feeling his way along the wall, he came to the steps, and crawled up them to the great arched doorway. The door was closed, but it turned out not to be locked. Myles flung it open softly, and entered, closing it behind him. Then closing his eyes, he turned an electric switch, flooding the hall with the light of many vapor-lamps.

Gradually opening his eyelids, he glanced around him. Everywhere was the musty odor of unoccupancy. He had expected either his family or a sacked and ruined castle; he had found neither.

It would not do for the surrounding populace to discover his return until he was ready; so he hastily found a flash light, and then switched off the vapor-lamps again.

Flash light in hand, he made a tour of the castle. Everything was in perfect order. Lilla was a good housekeeper, and had evidently been given plenty of time by Yuri to prepare for her departure. This spoke volumes for her safety and that of the baby king.

Myles even found his own rooms undisturbed. This surprised him greatly. He had not expected this much consideration from Yuri. But then he reflected that Yuri must have been pretty sure that he would not return from the earth, and had wanted to do nothing to antagonize Lilla any more than absolutely necessary. This time Yuri had been playing the game of love-and-empire with a little more finesse than usual.

Myles, in his own dressing room, switched on the light; this was safe, as its windows opened only onto the courtyard. Then he bathed, shaved, trimmed his hair, and donned a blue-bordered toga, in place of his

leather Vairking tunic. On his head he placed a radio headset of the sort which he had devised shortly after his first advent on Poros, to enable him to talk with the earless and voiceless Cupians and Formians.

Artificial antennae projected from his forehead. His earphones and ears were concealed by locks of hair, his tiny microphone—between his collar-bones—by a fold of his toga. Artificial wings strapped to his back protruded through slits in his garment. Around his waist, beneath his gown, was the belt which carried his batteries, tubes, and the sending and receiving apparatus itself.

Thus equipped, he surveyed himself complacently in the glass. Barring the absence of a sixth finger on each hand and a sixth toe on each foot, he looked a Cupian of the Cupians.

Then he proceeded to the radio room. The long distance radio set was in perfect condition, but there was nothing on the air. One of the three-dialed Porovian clocks showed the time to be 1025; that is, a half hour after midnight, earth time. There was nothing further he could do before morning; so he laid down for a few hours of much-needed rest.

When he awoke it was broad daylight. 310 o'clock. The pink flush of sunrise was just fading from the eastern sky. Less than three parths—six hours—of sleep! And then he realized that he must have slept the clock around, and more. A day's growth of beard confirmed this. It was now the beginning of his *third* day in Cupia. He had been dead to Poros for fifteen parths.

So he shaved, bathed, and breakfasted on some dried twig knobs—which was all he could find in the house. The courtyard garden was full of weeds. The lawns which surrounded the castle and the pond were uncut. Everything bespoke an abandonment many sangths ago.

After a complete tour of the premises Myles hastened to the radio room, and tuned in the palace at Kuana. The result was the voice of the usurper Yuri, testily calling the ant-station in New Formia, far across the boiling seas. From time to time there would be silence, during which the prince was evidently waiting for a reply; but none came. Otto the Bold had done his work of destruction too well.

Myles chuckled. Yuri's frantic voice, coming in over the air, was a radio program much to Cabot's liking. Even KDKA at its best could not surpass it. The only thing he would rather hear would be his own sweet Lilla.

His recollection of Otto the Bold led him to wonder how the battle for Vairkingi had progressed. Roies and Vairkings on one side, against Roies and ants on the other. It was a toss up.

It seemed years since he had left the land of the furry ones—Otto, Grod, Att, Jud, Theoph, Crota, Arkilu. They all resembled mere shadows of a dream. The only real feature that stood out in his memory was the radio set which he had fabricated in Vairkingi.

Then his thoughts flew to Yat, the city of the Whoomangs, with its strange assortment of creatures, including Boomalayla, the winged dragon, and Queekle Mukki, the serpent. Cabot shed a tear for Doggo and little golden furred Quivven, and then came down to the present with a jerk.

He was back in Cupia, clean, clothed, shaved, equipped, fed, and rested. It was now up to him to rescue the Princess Lilla from her traitor cousin. First he must find firearms. But of these the castle actually had been looted; for not a trace of a rifle, an automatic, or even a single cartridge could he find, though he searched high and low. So reluctantly he strapped on merely his Vairking sword and knife, and ran down the path to the beach.

In the boat once more, he paddled rapidly toward the shore. At the landing place, sitting on one of the boats, was a Cupian, but as this man seemed to be unarmed, Cabot approached him without fear. As he came within antenna-shot the man sung out:

"Welcome back to Cupia, Myles Cabot, defender of the faith!"

Myles shaded his eyes from the silver glare of the sky:

"Nan-nan!" he exclaimed; for the Cupian before him was none other than the young cleric of the lost religion who had

helped rebuild his radio head set in the Caves of Kar during the Second War of Liberation.

As the boat grated on the beach the earth-man leaped out, and the two friends were soon warmly patting each other's cheek.

These greetings over, Cabot asked: "What good fortune brings you here?"

He found it easy to slip back again into the language of this continent.

"The Holy Leader detailed two of us," replied Nan-nan, "to watch Luno Castle, for you know he must be kept informed of everything, as he waits within his caves for the promised day. Night before last my colleague saw lights for a few paraparths, but nothing further developed for a day and a night, so this morning I decided to reconnoiter."

"Is Owva still Holy Leader?" asked Myles politely.

"Yes," replied the cleric. "The grand old man still lives."

"The Builder be praised! But," changing the subject, "how are my family?"

"Both well," answered Nan-nan, "though for the past six or nine days the princess has not been permitted to communicate with any one."

Myles smiled. "Why?" he asked innocently.

"I know not," admitted the young cleric.

Myles laughed.

"I thought that the Holy Leader knew everything," said he. "Well, as it happens, *I* can tell *you*. It is because I communicated with her a few days ago and informed her that I was about to return. Has no news of this got out from the palace?"

"No," replied Nan-nan, "but it explains why Yuri has kept a large squadron of whistling bees patrolling the eastern coast all day long every day. How did you get by them?"

"Came over at night," the earth-man answered. "But what about the bees?"

"I'll tell you," said Nan-nan. "Shortly after you left on your visit to your own planet Minos, Prince Yuri flew back alone from his exile with the Formians beyond the boiling seas. This was the first that we of Cupia had known that any of them survived.

"Yuri kept his return a secret for some time, but got in touch with some old supporters of his. First he contrived to cut off the allowance of anks which are doled out to the bees for food. Then he stirred up trouble among the bees because of this.

"The bees imprisoned Portheris, their king, and, under promise of an increased allowance of food, seized the arsenal at Kuana, the air base at Wautoosa, and Luno Castle. As you know, the air navy had been practically disbanded, because there was nothing for it to fight. The rifles of the marching clubs had fallen into disuse because other newer games had superseded archery. Most of the rifles were stored at various central places, which the bees succeeded in seizing.

"Some of the hill towns still had arms, but they surrendered these under threat of Yuri to kill the Princess Lilla and the little king.

"All the arms are now stored in the arsenal at the capital under guard of Yuri's most trusted henchmen. A new treaty was made with the bees, giving them an increase in food. But even so they are restive and are held in check merely by fear of the anti-aircraft guns at Kuana.

"The general belief of the populace is that you are dead. Yuri is ruling strictly, and has dissolved the Popular Assembly. The pinquis everywhere are his personal appointees. These facts and the burden of supplying anks to the Hymernians irk the people; but they are impotent. 'Can a mathlab struggle in the jaws of a woofus?'

"Lilla he has treated well. If he had not done so the populace would rise against him, bees or no bees. And he has promised the succession to little Kew, if Lilla will marry him. But your dot-dash message many sangths ago stopped that, for it showed that you still lived and had returned to Poros, although not to this continent.

"That is all. Now tell me of your adventures."

But before complying with this request

the earth-man asked: "What has become of the loyal Prince Toron and my chief of staff, Hah Babbuh, and Poblath the Philosopher, and all my other friends and supporters?"

"Every one of them, so far as I know, is safe," replied the young cleric. "Most of them are hiding in the hill towns. Yuri has not risked the wrath of the populace by molesting them, and in fact has given notice that so long as they behave they will be let alone."

Then Cabot related all that had occurred to him from the time he transmitted himself earthward from Poros down to the present date.

When he concluded he remarked:

"That will be an antennaful for the Holy Leader. But now to get to work. On whom can I best depend in this vicinity?"

"On Emsul, the veterinary," replied Nan-nan. "He lives in this village now. Return to the island, and I will bring him to you."

Myles did so, and in a short time the three were in conference in the castle. It seemed to Myles that the first thing to do was to recover his airplane, rifle, and ammunition from the waters of the pit, but Emsul demurred.

Said he: "Huge dark-green water-insects inhabit that pool. They are very like the red parasites which cling to the sides of the anks, and which we roast for food, but they are much larger and the bite of their claws means death."

The parasites to which the veterinary alluded had always tasted to Cabot exactly like earth-born lobsters. The description of these new beasts was further suggestive of lobsters. He asked Emsul for a more detailed description, and found that this tallied still further with the earthly prototype.

This reminded Myles of an interesting experiment which he had seen tried in a zoological laboratory, and which he now hoped to put to a practical use.

So he asked: "Have these creatures a gravitational sense organ?"

"Yes," replied the Cupian veterinary, "although it is unlike ours. We Cupians, and I suppose you Minorians, have inside the skull on each side of the head a group of three tubes like the spirit levels of a carpenter.

"The corresponding organ of the scissor-clawed beasts is different, although serving the same end. On each side of the thorax of these creatures there is a spherical cavity, with a small opening to the outside. This opening is just large enough to admit a grain of sand at a time.

"The membrane, which lines the cavity, exudes a liquid cement which unites into a little ball the grains of sand which enter. The cavity is lined with nerve ends; and, as the ball always rolls to the bottom side of the cavity, the beast is able to tell which direction is up, and which is down."

Cabot clapped his hands in glee. This was exactly as in the case of earth-born lobsters.

"They won't know which is up and which is down, when I get through with them," he exclaimed cryptically.

It was quickly arranged that Nan-nan should go at once to the village near the lobster pool, and engage a gang of Cupian men to cut a swath through the thick woods which hem in the pool. When this was completed, he was to send a messenger to Luno Castle to summon Cabot, who, meanwhile, would be engaged in preparing certain mysterious electrical apparatus. For the present, the fact of the earth-man's return was to be kept a strict secret.

The plan worked out to perfection. Only one day was consumed in chopping the path through the woods. On the second day after his meeting with Nan-nan and Emsul, Myles proceeded to the lobster pool by kerkool, with his electric equipment and several boats.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LOBSTEROID CIRCUIT.

MYLES could not help comparing his present ease of passage down the swath cut by the Cupians with his difficult grubbing through the shrubs a few feet an hour, or even with forcing his way behind the wedge-faced insect.

Upon his arrival at the brink of the abyss, his first act was to test the black sand with an electric coil. As he had expected, it was magnetite, the only iron which will respond in ore form to a magnet. It was the same ore as he had used in his crucibles while making his radio set in Vairkingi.

This preliminary disposed of, cables were quickly stretched back and forth across the pit, and from these cables large electro-magnets were hung close to the surface of the water. Wires were run from the lighting system of the near-by town to a master controller at the top of the cliff.

When all was in readiness, the earth-man threw the current into all the circuits. The result was immediate. To the surface of the water, there floated, bottom side up, a score or more of lobsterlike creatures, each the size of a freight car. Poor beasts!

The pellets of sand and cement, in the cavities of their gravity-sense organs, were composed of magnetite; and this being attracted upwardly by the suspended electro-magnets, gave the poor creatures the impression that up was down, and down was up. Consequently, reversing their position and floating to the surface, they imagined —with what little imagination their primitive brains were capable of—that they were resting peacefully at the bottom of the lake.

Next there were turned on, in place of the suspended magnets, a number of magnets lying against the steep side of the pit near the surface of the water; and instantly all the lobsteroids rolled over, with their bellies toward that side of the pit. The experiment was a complete success.

Grappling hooks and blocks and tackle were then brought, and dragging was begun for the airplane, the ant-rifle, and the bandoleer of cartridges which Myles had lost on the night of his landing in Cupia.

The radio man himself, stationed at his switchboard, manipulated the instruments. Presumably all three of the sought articles were near the bank where Cabot had landed, so fishing was begun at that point, while energized magnets, across the pond, drew the huge crustaceans away. Even so, several of them swam back and snapped at the grapple hooks.

This gave Myles an opportunity to practice his controls. Whenever one of the monsters of the deep would approach any of the dredging apparatus, the radio man would close the switch which controlled some near-by magnet, whereat the bewildered beast would be thrown completely off his balance, and would require several paraparths before he could orient himself to the new lines of force. By the time that this had been accomplished, Cabot would have switched on some other magnet, thus again upsetting the beast's equilibrium.

It was truly a weird and novel tune which this electrical genius of two worlds played upon his keyboard, while huge blood-green shapes moved at his command.

Finally Myles got so expert at this strange game, that it became safe for his workmen to descend into the pit without fear of the denizens of the deep. At last the ropes were securely fastened to the ant-plane, and it was drawn up the bank to safety. The firearm and ammunition followed shortly thereafter.

The forces of the true king—Baby Kew —were now armed with one small airship, one rifle, and one bandoleer of cartridges.

"You must attack at once!" asserted Nan-nan.

The earth-man looked at his Cupian friend in surprise.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because," explained the young cleric, "if you don't, some one in this village is going to get word to Prince Yuri of your return. Although no announcement has yet been made of your identity, this feat of yours of overcoming the scissor-beasts is as good as a verbal introduction. Runners will soon be notifying the usurper."

"Why runners?" asked Myles. "Why not radio?"

"Because," replied Nan-nan, "I took the precaution to throw an adjusting-tool into the local motor-generator set early this morning. One of the solenoids is hopelessly jammed, and it will take several days and nights of steady work to restore it."

"Great are the ramifications of the lost religion," murmured Cabot approvingly.

But the young cleric pouted, in spite of the tone of approval.

Said he: "There were no ramifications to this accomplishment. I did it all myself."

"Have it your own way," returned Myles conciliatorily, "but to get back to what we were discussing, how am I to attack the usurper with no troops, and only one plane, and one rifle?"

"But you *must* attack!" objected Nan-nan. "As for planes, every plane in the kingdom, save only yours, is under lock and key at Wautoosa, the old naval air base, which now is the headquarters of the whistling bees. Every firearm, save two, your rifle and Prince Yuri's automatic, is under heavy guard at the Kuana arsenal. Only the pretender himself and the arsenal guards—who are trusted henchmen of his—are permitted to be armed."

"And I suppose," interjected the earth-man, with a shrug, "that you expect me, alone and single-handed, to seize the Kuana arsenal, and distribute arms to my people."

"Not exactly," replied the priest. "You see—"

At which point the conversation was interrupted by a body of troops, four abreast, which came marching toward them down the aisle which had been cut through the trees.

Cabot stepped back aghast. Trapped! The soldiers swung along in the perfect cadence which had been taught them by generations spent in the marching clubs—or "hundreds"—of Cupia. True, they were unarmed, but what could one armed human do against such numbers. Cabot glanced down the path, and saw hundred after hundred turn into it at the farther end.

There was only one possibility of escape, his plane. But the plane was still dripping from its submergence in the pond. Would its trophil-engine start while wet? Had enough water leaked into the alcohol tanks to damage the fuel? He would see.

Shouting to Nan-nan and Emsul to follow, he started toward his craft; but the young cleric blocked his way. Treachery? No.

For the young priest cried: "Fear not, defender of the faith. These be friends! They are the armies which you are to lead against Yuri. They are the marching clubs of the loyal hill towns, which have been called together here, ostensibly for an athletic tournament."

Cabot stopped his mad scramble of retreat, and smiled. With such men he would reconquer Cupia, Yuri or no Yuri, bees or no bees!

The foremost hundred debouched and formed in company-front. Then from the ranks there stepped a Cupian, who snatched off his blond wig, revealing ruddy locks beneath. Onto his own right breast he pinned a red circle, the insignia of Field Marshal. It was Hah Babbuh, Chief of Staff of the Armies of Cupia, who had been Cabot's right-hand man in the two wars of liberation.

Facing the troops he gave a crisp command. Up shot every left hand. Then, wheeling about, he held his own hand aloft and shouted: "Yahoo, Myles Cabot! We are ready to follow where you lead!"

"Yahoo!" echoed the troops in unison.

Then, giving his men order and at ease, Hah strode up to the earth-man. Warmly, the two friends patted each other on the cheek. It was many sangths since they had seen each other, and much had happened in the meantime.

A council of war was immediately held between Myles, Hah, Nan-nan, and Emsul, at the plane.

"Won't this gathering come to the attention of Yuri?" Myles asked. "And won't he at once suspect its cause, in view of its nearness to Luno Castle, and in view of my recent radio announcements from Vairkingi?"

"I doubt it," replied Babbuh, "for we have wrecked every radio set in the vicinity."

But this did not reassure the earth-man as much as it might.

"It would seem to me," he asserted, "that this very fact would put Prince Yuri on his guard."

"Possibly so," admitted Nan-nan ruefully, "but it will take four days for investigators to cover the thousand stads from Kuana to here by kerkool, two days by bee."

"And in the meantime," countered Myles, "it will take our plane two days to reach Kuana, and our kerkools four."

"Then," suggested Emsul, "had we not better march openly and at once?"

This suggestion was accepted, with the reservation, however, that the return of Cabot and the existence of their plane were to be kept as secret as possible.

Accordingly, the main body of the troops were put on the march toward Kuana, under Emsul, with instructions to requisition every available kerkool, wreck every radio set, and place every settlement under martial law. The kerkools, as fast as seized, were to be manned by the best sharpshooters, and sent ahead.

The local village and the lobster pond were placed under heavy guard, and the earth-man, with his plane and rifle, remained under cover.

That night, just at sunset, he started forth. The airship had been stripped to its lightest, and in it were crowded Myles Cabot, Hah Babbuh, Nan-nan, and half a dozen sharpshooters. Long before morning, they came up with the lights of the foremost kerkools, and so were forced to stay their advance, whereupon they landed, and encamped for the rest of the night and the following day.

All day long, kerkools passed them on the road, stopping to report as they passed. Apparently a surprising number of these swift two-wheeled Porovian autos had been captured.

The following night the plane again took wing, and continued until it caught up once more with the advance guard of the "taxi-cab army." These men reported that, at the last radio station seized, they had learned that Prince Yuri had put censorship on the air, thus showing conclusively that the usurper had learned at least something of what was going on. Then the kerkools swept ahead, and Cabot encamped as before. He was now halfway to Kuana, his loved ones, and Prince Yuri.

Toward the end of the day which followed, the advancing kerkools met a bombing squadron of whistling bees, and were forced to halt and take cover as best they could. Most of the men escaped, but many of the machines had to be left on the road, where they were demolished by the bombs of the enemy.

During all this confusion, a kerkool from the capital, bearing crossed sticks as a flag of truce, drew up at the vanguard, with the following message: "King Yuri cannot but regard the steady procession of kerkools toward Kuana as a menace directed against him. If it is not so intended, then let a delegation in one kerkool proceed under crossed sticks, to convince him of your sincerity. From now on, if more than one kerkool advances, it will be taken as a hostile act, and Prince Kew, the heir to the throne, will be sacrificed as a hostage."

Upon receiving this message, Emsul at once directed his followers to stay where they were until Myles Cabot should catch up with them. Then, with a picked body of men, in one kerkool, under crossed sticks, he took up the road toward Kuana, preceded by the delegation which had brought the message from Yuri.

Not a word would he give them as to the purpose of the advance.

"The message is from Prince Yuri," said he, "and therefore to Prince Yuri shall be the reply. But it does seem a bit thoughtless of the Hymernians to drop bombs on our men, before even attempting to ascertain whether or not our advance was intended to be peaceful."

To this, they in turn made no answer.

About midnight, Myles Cabot, in his airplane, reached the point where the kerkools had halted. He found the Cupians confused and more or less leaderless. He, as they, was horrified at the threat which the usurper, Yuri, held over the head of the little king.

But while he and Nan-nan and Hah Babbuh were conferring on the situation, word was brought in, by a party who had just demolished a near-by radio set, that they had picked the following unaddressed and unsigned message out of the air:

> Fear not. Baby Kew has been kidnaped from the palace, and is safe.

Somehow this news carried conviction, and appeared more and more authentic, the longer they considered it. Certainly, it could not have emanated from Yuri, for he could have no possible object in deceiving them into thinking that the little king was

safe, and thus encouraging them to proceed with whatever they might have afoot.

But they could not imagine who was their informant. It might be any one of a number of the leaders in Cabot's two wars of liberation, Poblath the Philosopher, mango of the Kuana jail; Ja Babbuh, Oya Buh, and Buh Tedn, professors at the Royal University; Count Kamel of Ktuth, the ex-radical; or even the loyal Prince Toron, Yuri's younger brother, whom Cabot had left in charge as regent, upon embarking on his ill-fated visit to the earth.

All these loyal Cupians had been driven into hiding when the renegade Yuri had returned across the boiling seas, and had usurped the throne with the aid of the Hymernians. Where they now were, no one knew. This message might be from any one of them—or it might not.

Anyhow, it served to hearten Cabot and his two companions.

Said Myles: "Undoubtedly there were some of Yuri's Cupian henchmen on the backs of the bees which bombed our kerkools. These have probably reported by wireless that our advance has stopped. I do not believe that Yuri yet knows that we have a plane; accordingly, he will not expect immediate trouble, so long as our vanguard remains here, four hundred stads from Kuana.

"Do you, Hah Babbuh, remain here in charge of our troops. I seriously doubt if the usurper will attack you, for he does not dare entrust enough Cupians with rifles for that purpose. Nan-nan and I and our sharpshooters will proceed as rapidly as possible in the plane, until daybreak, when we will encamp as usual.

"To-morrow afternoon, send scouts ahead to destroy the wireless, and start your whole kerkool army on the move at sunset. Bend every effort to join me as soon as possible at the capital, where I expect to arrive some time to-morrow night. Beyond that, I have no definite plans. May the Great Builder speed our cause."

Then he said good night, and took to the air once more. As he soared aloft with his noisy trophil-motor, earth-men would have heard it for stads in every direction, but these Cupians were earless and hence possessed of no sense of hearing as we know it. The noisy plane could make no impression upon their antenna-sense, for its engines, being of the trophil variety—or Diesel, as we call a somewhat similar device on earth—had no electrical ignition.

All through the rest of the night the plane sped southward, deviating from its course only when whistling sounds warned them of the presence of bees. With the first faint tinge of pink in the east, they landed and hid their airship at the edge of the wood, two hundred and sixty stads from Kuana.

A small town lay near by. To it went several of the crew in search of food and information, while the rest took turns guarding the plane and sleeping.

During Cabot's turn at watch, he noted a figure slinking across a neighboring field. There was something strangely familiar about this figure, so Myles hid himself in a tartan bush and awaited its approach.

It walked with a peculiar limp, very much like that which had characterized Buh Tedn, ever since he recovered from the shell wound which he had received in the Second War of Liberation. But the face and hair of the approaching Cupian bore no resemblance to that of Professor Tedn. Nevertheless, Cabot took a chance.

Stepping suddenly from his place of concealment, he shouted: "Buh Tedn!"

Thereat, the Cupian emitted a shriek of terror from his antennæ, and started running away across the fields.

"Stop!" called the earth-man. "I am Myles Cabot."

The fleeing man halted abruptly and peered at Myles inquisitively; then he smiled, snatched off his wig, and straightened out his expression. It was none other than Buh Tedn!

"So you are the cause of all the rumpus," he ejaculated, returning and patting his friend warmly on the cheek.

"What rumpus?" inquired Myles with interest.

"Wireless won't work," replied the other, "and no messages on the air anyhow. Nothing but bees; the air is full of *them* anyhow—also full of vague rumors of all sorts. As Poblath would say: 'Where there's wind, there's a storm.'"

"Speaking of Poblath," said Myles, "where *is* the philosopher?"

"Kuana, the last I heard," replied Buh Tedn. "Ja Babbuh and Oya Buh somewhere in the west. Prince Toron has disappeared completely. Hah Babbuh and Emsul are supposed to be in the northern part of the Okarze Mountains. Kamel Bar-Sarkar has gone over to Yuri. I am here. That about completes the list of our former leaders."

"Hah Babbuh is in charge of my unarmed forces one hundred and sixty stads north of here," answered Cabot. "Emsul is on his way to Yuri under crossed sticks. I am here in a plane, with one rifle, Nan-nan the cleric, and six unarmed sharpshooters."

"What is the idea?" asked Tedn.

"The idea is to fly to Kuana to-night," replied the earth-man, "and raise as much rough-house as possible for Prince Yuri. Will you come with us? There is one vacant place in the plane."

The Cupian looked at him admiringly, and said: "You are still the same old Myles Cabot! You propose to capture Kuana practically without arms and single-handed. And the joke is that you will probably succeed. How *do* you do it?"

"It's a gift!" remarked Myles to himself; then aloud: "But 'trees have antenna,' as Poblath would say. Let us proceed to the plane and wait for evening."

At the plane, Cabot awakened one of the Cupians to take his place on guard. Then, in low tones, he and Buh Tedn each related to the other all that had occurred since the matter-transmitting apparatus had shot the radio man earthward.

Along toward night the absentees returned from the village, bringing provisions, but scarcely any news except that the place was seething with suppressed excitement, and that they had succeeded in getting into the radio station and "pying" the apparatus.

"Let us start then at once," counseled Buh Tedn. "No one can now get word to Yuri, and perhaps they will mistake us for a Hymernian, anyhow."

But impatient as he was, Myles would hear none of this.

"They could easily run to some near-by town and send the message from there," said he. "Furthermore, a plane looks very little like a whistling bee."

So the little band feasted, and waited until the last streaks of red had died in the west, before they shot up into the air and southward. The plane was driven to its utmost, but it was later than 100 o'clock before the lights of Kuana loomed ahead.

Turning to the right, Cabot skirted the city and landed near the arsenal.

Nan-nan promptly left them.

"I have church affairs to attend to," he explained.

"Great are the ramifications of the lost religion," replied the earth-man, laughing, "and I hope that you pick up some useful information."

After the young cleric had gone Buh Tedn asked:

"Surely you don't plan for us to attack the arsenal? It is heavily guarded by the only men whom Yuri permits to carry firearms in this entire kingdom."

CHAPTER XXV.

ALL KINDS OF TROUBLE.

"WE must reconnoiter first," replied Cabot, "for as yet I have no definite plans."

Accordingly they made their way to a grove of trees near the arsenal. Where they stood they were completely enveloped by foliage and tropical darkness, but the arsenal was in a flood of light which emanated from large electric vapor lamps on poles a short distance outside the surrounding wall. Along the top of the high wall walked sentinels armed with rifles.

Cabot quickly formed his plans.

Turning his rifle and bandoleer over to the best shot in the party, he instructed the sharpshooter as follows:

"When I raise my hand so, then shoot the sentinel to whom I am talking. Follow that by a shot at the nearest light. Then, under cover of the darkness, slink across the plain and join me at the wall."

Without any further explanation he walked boldly out into the light.

As he approached the arsenal there rang out the cry of "Halt!"

He halted.

"Who is there?"

"Not so loud!" he cautioned. "You see I am unarmed. Let me approach near the wall so that I may explain my mission, which is for your antennæ alone."

The sentinel signified his assent, and Cabot drew nearer.

"Halt!" said the Cupian on the wall, but this time in a low tone.

Cabot halted again, this time almost directly under the light.

"Stand where you are," said the soldier, "while I let down a ladder. Make any attempt to flee, and I shall fire."

Myles remained where he was, with every indication of extreme terror, as the Cupian let down a rope ladder from the top of the wall, and descended.

"Hold up your hands!"

Up shot Cabot's right hand. It was the signal agreed on with the concealed sharpshooter. *Ping!* The sentinel dropped to the ground without a sound. *Ping!* The light went out. Hastily the earth-man exchanged his white toga for the black toga of his fallen enemy, and picked up the latter's rifle and cartridge-belt. It felt good to have a real rifle-shaped rifle in his hands once more in place of the buttless firearm of the ants.

Just then a voice hailed him from the top of the wall. "What's the trouble?"

Out of the dim twilight below Myles called back:

"I shot a sutler, and just as I was about to search his body the light went out. Have you your flash light with you?"

"Yes."

"Then come on down and help me search."

The second sentinel, eager for a taste of sutler's food after weeks of garrison rations, started to scramble down the rope ladder; but as he neared the ground Cabot stepped to his side and put a single bullet through his brain.

Out of the semidarkness around him there arose seven forms. They were Buh Tedn and the six Cupian marksmen from the hills. Buh Tedn started to change clothes with the fallen guard, but Cabot stopped him, saying:

"No; your limp would give you away. Let one of the others assume the personality of this sentry."

One of the others made the exchange.

Then said their leader: "Two of the posts of the guard are now cleared. Do you, marksman, ascend the ladder and walk this beat, impersonating Yuri's guardsman."

The man did so, while those below cowered close to the wall. Soon Cabot heard a shot to the extreme right of the beat. Then a voice from above called softly:

"One less guard, oh, Cabot. Three sections of the wall are now cleared. I have the body up here."

Myles and one more sharpshooter mounted the parapet; soon all three were walking post with all the precision of old wartime practice, while the other five members of the party clung to the rope ladder under the shadow of the wall. Cabot himself walked the leftermost post, and took pains never to meet the adjoining sentry. Thus nearly half a parth of time passed.

Finally an officer with a squad approached along the top of the wall to the left. Cabot promptly crowded to the extreme right-hand end of his beat, and cautioned his own adjoining sentinel to remain close at hand.

As the squad drew near he sung out, "Halt!"

The squad halted.

"Who is there?" demanded the earth-man.

"Relief."

"Advance one and be recognized."

The officer stepped forward.

"Advance relief."

The officer brought the relief forward, halted it again, and called out, "Number four!"

Thereat one of the squad stepped from the ranks at port-arms. Cabot himself came to port in unison.

At this point the routine ended. Tilting his gun slightly from his position, Myles suddenly fired two shots, and the officer and the new Number Four sank down upon the parapet.

Instantly the whole squad was in confusion, but before they could raise their rifles to reply Myles and his companions riddled them with bullets.

One of them, more quick-thinking than the rest, dropped prone without being hit, and then cautiously drew a bead on Myles Cabot, who, seeing his enemies all down, had just paused to breathe. Neither he nor his companion saw this hostile move, and Myles's other man was walking his post, far to the right, in a military manner, so as to attract no attention from the guardsmen farther on.

Everything was all set for the tragedy which would forever put an end to the hope of the redemption of Cupia from the renegade Yuri and his bee allies.

But just as the soldier was about to pull the trigger, a brawny arm slipped across his throat and yanked him backward, so that his gun went off in the air. It was Buh Tedn, who had crawled to the top of the wall in the rear of the squad. A shot from Cabot's companion promptly put an end to this last enemy.

Then the seven conspirators searched the bodies and equipped themselves, Cabot pinning on the insignia of the officer. There were eight bodies, but some had undoubtedly fallen from the wall in the struggle. No time could be spared to hunt for these, and eight was more than enough for present purposes.

Myles formed his men in two ranks, counted them off, faced them to the right, and proceeded along the parapet, picking up his one already posted man as he went.

Number Six was relieved in true military form. He was too glad of getting off duty to notice the unfamiliarity of the officer who relieved him. Similarly with Numbers Seven, Eight, Nine, and so on.

As he came to Number Eleven, Cabot began to worry for fear that his supply of new sentinels might run out. Why hadn't he made some arrangement to have his own men rejoin him after being posted? But then he reflected that that would never do, for it certainly would have been noticed by the others. He was in a fix.

Number Twelve was relieved, all seven of his own men were gone, and Myles Cabot found himself at the head of a squad composed entirely of the enemy. What could he do at Number Thirteen?

But just as he was frantically turning this question over in his mind, he came to a long ramp leading inward from the wall, down to a small building between the wall and the main arsenal. Was this the guard-quarters? He stepped back as though to inspect the squad; and they, without command, marched past him, turned, and proceeded past Number One down the ramp.

Inside the buildings he gave the commands: "Relief—halt! Left—face! Port—arms! Open—chambers! Close—Chambers! Dismissed! Hands up!"

The last was not in the Manual. The tired men, on their way to the gun rack, stopped in surprise. Up shot their hands, some first dropping their rifles, but some retaining them.

"It's Cabot the Minorian!" shouted one of them.

The situation was ticklish in the extreme. The Cupians were scattered throughout the room, so that it was impossible for Myles to cover them all simultaneously with his rifle. They were desperate characters, thugs of the worst type, typical henchmen of Prince Yuri. If they started any trouble, Myles could expect to get one, or at most two, of the seven before the rest would get him. Furthermore, they knew it.

"Back up, all of you, into that corner! Quickly!" he directed.

But they did not budge. Gradually smiles began to break over their ugly visages. They realized that they had him at bay, rather than he them. And what a prize he would be for presentation to King Yuri! Why, the king might even blow them to a beefsteak party.

The earth-man confronted them, unafraid. He still had the drop on them, and he intended to press his advantage to the limit.

"You fat one over by the rack, back into that corner," he ordered, "or I'll shoot you first."

The Cupian addressed obeyed with alacrity.

"You with the scar! Lay down your gun! Now you back into the corner!"

The second soldier did so. Things were progressing nicely. One by one he could subdue the Cupians confronting him. But, just as he was exulting in his triumph, his gun was seized from behind. Turning, he saw Number One leering at him.

One blow from his fist in that leering face and the newcomer crashed to the floor. But before Myles could wheel to confront those in the guardroom, they had rushed him and borne him to the ground.

"Capture him alive!" shouted some one, and that was the last that he heard, for something snapped in his portable radio set, and from then on he was deaf to antennæ-emanations. All that he could hear was an occasional rifle shot.

In spite of the overwhelming numbers upon him, he fought with feet and fists until at last, to his surprise, the weight seemed to lessen. Finally he struggled to his feet and confronted his tormentors. Could it be that, single-handed, he had vanquished eight brawny Cupians?

But no, for the figures he confronted were Buh Tedn and his own men. The eight enemies lay dead on the floor.

The mutual congratulations were silently given. A quick inspection showed that the head set and the apparatus belt were hopelessly damaged, so the radio man found a stylus and paper and wrote: "My artificial antennæ and the accompanying apparatus were ruined during the fight. Luckily there is another set in the airplane. One of you go quickly and fetch it."

One of the party accordingly withdrew. The others, rifle in hand, proceeded to search the building, but not a soul did they find, although the couches had evidently been recently occupied.

It seemed likely that, during the struggle in the guardroom, the rest of the guard, being unable to reach the arms rack, had stealthily left the building.

So Myles and his party hurried to the door which led from the building into the arsenal yard. As they emerged they were met with a volley from the arsenal, and three of their number went down. The rest beat a hasty retreat and barred the door.

Then they made their way to the windows which faced the main arsenal, but two more of them were picked off before they realized how perfectly they were silhouetted by the lighted rooms within. One of these two was Buh Tedn. Myles Cabot and one Cupian sharpshooter were all that were left of the party.

As rapidly as possible the two survivors extinguished all the lights in the guardhouse, and then mounted to the roof, which turned out to be flat and surrounded by a low parapet which protected them from showing themselves against the illumination of the surrounding vapor lamps.

Crawling along the roof to the edge nearest the arsenal, they peered cautiously over. The whistle of a bullet caused Myles to duck his head, and he pulled his companion to cover as well. With his artificial antennæ gone, he could not explain orally, and it was too dark to write. But the other followed him to the opposite edge, where they succeeded in potting the sentinels at Posts Two and Three, which were the only occupied posts within sight.

There appearing to be nothing further to be accomplished up there, they crawled down into the building and took up their station at windows of the upper story, from which they fired at every sign of movement in the direction of the arsenal, taking care to drop to the floor and then change windows after each shot.

Finally their ammunition gave out, and Cabot went down into the guardroom for more. But a long and careful search revealed only a few rounds. Quite evidently Prince Yuri did not trust even these, his most loyal henchmen, with very many cartridges.

Myles returned to the upper story and groped through the rooms to find his friend. But it was his foot, rather than his outstretched hand, which finally found him. The Cupian sharpshooter lay dead.

Myles Cabot alone, with only about a dozen cartridges, was the sole remaining defense of the captured building. No life seemed to be stirring on the arsenal side, so he crossed the building and looked out at the wall.

Dark figures were stealthily creeping along where Post No. 12 should have been.

The earth-man let them have it rapid fire, and they quickly disappeared.

He now heard firing in that direction, and then the lights there went out, so that the wall no longer showed against the sky. From time to time he fired where he judged the wall was, so as to keep back the invaders, and thus soon entirely exhausted his ammunition.

"Thank heaven," he said to himself, "the downstairs door is barred!"

But as he said this he realized that he had omitted to bar the door which opened toward the wall; and even as he realized this there came a rush of many feet down the ramp which led from the wall to this door.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DEBACLE.

MYLES drew his knife, crouched in a corner of the dark room, and prepared to sell his life dearly. He was ready for searchers who might come groping through the room, but he was wholly unprepared for the sudden switching on of the electric lights. As he sprang to his feet and rubbed his eyes, he saw before him Nan-nan and the sharpshooter whom he had sent back to the plane to get his second radio set. Behind them in the doorway were a score or more of Cupians.

Snatching the new set, he fastened it in place, while the others waited. Then said he, articulate once more:

"You have come in the nick of time. How did it happen?"

The young priest replied: "Through spies of our religion I located Oya Buh; he rounded up a number of his followers, and we hastened hither. The wall we found unguarded, with a rope ladder hanging down, and at its foot six dead soldiers in black togas. We took their arms and mounted the wall, only to be driven back by shots."

"My shots," interjected Myles.

"Not all," replied Nan-nan, "for some came from the arsenal; we could tell by the flashes. Several of our party were hit—although not by you, so your conscience may feel clear—before we put a stop to this by shooting out all the outside lights. Then we rushed the guardhouse, and here we are. But where are *your* men?"

"Dead—all dead," replied the earth-man sadly. "Even Buh Tedn."

Oya Buh then stepped forward and greeted his former chief.

"Yahoo, Cabot!" cried he. "May the dead rest beyond the waves, but we, the living, have work to do. Look—the sky turns pink and silver in the east! Morning has come. What do you propose?"

"Morning means that the whistling bees will soon be upon us," answered Myles. "We must capture the arsenal before they arrive."

The party then took inventory of their supplies. There were thirty-eight rifles, forty Cupians, and Myles Cabot. One man was promptly sent to the roof with crossed sticks. When these were recognized thirty-eight men under arms were marched up onto the roof as well. It was considered advisable for Cabot himself to keep under cover. Then Oya Buh unbarred the door and stepped out. An officer from the arsenal advanced to meet him. The two gravely patted each other's cheek.

The officer, whose rank was that of pootah, inquired:

"What is the idea of defying your king, professor?"

"The idea," replied Oya, "is that we have come to restore Kew XIII to the throne and the Cupians to their proper dominion over the bees. The guardhouse, as you see, is manned by sharpshooters, fully armed. A vast force, unarmed but determined, awaits outside the walls. If you surrender, we shall spare your lives. If not, we shall rush your gates while our sharpshooters pick off any one who opposes, and shall kill all whom we find within. What say you?"

The pootah shrugged his shoulders.

"What is there to say?" he replied. "We surrender, provided we are given safe conduct."

"Safe conduct without arms?"

"Agreed."

So the guard, about a hundred in number, in their black togas, filed out of the arsenal,

through the guardhouse, onto the wall, along it, and down the rope ladder. The ladder was then hauled up again. The pootah looked around him.

"Where is your vast army?" he asked.

"On the other side of the wall," replied Oya Buh, with a smile. "Now run along away from here."

But the officer and his followers started circling the wall to investigate. Before he gained the main gate, however, it had been opened and, for all he could tell, the "vast army" had passed inside. A guard stationed there advised him to get out of rifle range as speedily as possible, and twelve sentinels, who by now had manned the wall, bore out this menace; so, grumbling somewhat, the pootah led his men off toward the city.

Thus did Myles Cabot and forty-seven practically unarmed followers capture the Kuana arsenal with over one hundred defenders.

Straggling Cupians now began to drift in from the city. These were put to work carting arms and ammunition out of the arsenal and stacking it up in widely separated piles wherever cover could be found. Every Cupian who reported was issued a rifle and a full bandoleer of cartridges.

"We may perhaps thus arm some enemies," said Myles, "but we must take a chance. The majority will be friends."

It was well that they removed all the ammunition which they could. It would have been better if they could have removed more. They all worked feverishly for half the morning, even taking the guards off the wall for this purpose, but they had scarcely made a dent in the supplies stored in the arsenal when a fleet of bees appeared on the southern horizon.

In spite of the approaching menace, Myles and his men continued to work. The Hymernians flew low straight at the arsenal, until a volley from Cabot's men brought down two of them and caused the rest to soar into the sky. Whereupon they started dropping bombs on the arsenal, and on the men carting materials therefrom.

Naturally, this put an abrupt end to Cabot's operations. His men scattered as rapidly as possible; and individually, keeping to cover as well as they could, made for the city with small quantities of arms. Cupians from Kuana helped themselves to the rest, and by nightfall the captured supplies were pretty well distributed. Also the arsenal was a smoking ruin.

All through the afternoon the bees, flying low, harassed whoever they saw moving on the streets, especially such as were carrying rifles; but these retaliated by firing at all bees that came within range, in spite of which very few bees were killed. Night brought a cessation of this sort of warfare.

Emsul arrived and of course at once gave up the idea of his projected peace mission to Yuri. He and Cabot and Nan-nan and Oya Buh spent the night, under heavy guard at separated points throughout the city, securing much-needed sleep. Under cover of the darkness, many of their followers foraged in the ruins of the arsenal and secured a surprising quantity of undamaged material, being joined in this toward morning by the army in kerkools from the north.

Before daybreak a resolute band of several thousand loyal Cupians had gathered in the streets and houses surrounding the palace, and promptly at sunrise they launched an attack. They had expected to find the palace guard unarmed; but evidently a large quantity of the rifles and ammunition, which had been distributed throughout the city, had found its way to the palace, for the assault was at once repulsed by heavy fire from the palace guards.

As they reformed for a second attack, they were deluged with explosives from above. The bee-people had evidently not returned to their base at Wautoosa, but had spent the night near by, so as to be on hand to protect the palace. And at hand they certainly were.

Whenever they sighted even a small group of Cupians, or wherever they had reason to suspect that some building was hostilely occupied, there they would drop one of their devastating bombs. Cabot's forces were completely at the mercy of the Hymernians. There was but one thing to do—flee.

In vain, the earth-man and his able lieutenants tried to rally their troops. What

was the use in assembling, when assembly was the signal for a bomb from above? What was the use of attacking the invincible bees?

Myles Cabot stood irresolute in one of the public squares. He was as near to despairing as he had ever been in his many vicissitudes on the planet Poros, since his first arrival there, over five earth-years ago. Oh, if only he had airplanes with which to subdue the Hymernians as in the days of old! Almost was he tempted to return to the vicinity of the arsenal, ascertain whether his one plane was intact, and if so fly alone in a last desperate attempt to give battle to his winged enemies.

The more he thought of the plan, the more it appealed to him. There seemed to be no other way out. His bravely engineered revolution had crumbled. If he stayed where he was, he would undoubtedly be tracked down, and put to some ignominious end by Yuri, the usurper. How much better, then, to die bravely fighting for his Lilla and his adopted country.

And his baby? He wondered where the little darling had disappeared to. At least the infant king was out of Yuri's clutches.

So, his mind made up, Myles set out on a run for the wood overlooking the arsenal. After a few paraparths he reached it. There stood his plane. Rapidly he went over all the struts, and stays, and engine parts. Everything appeared to be in first class order. The fuel tanks contained plenty of alcohol. How this machine had escaped capture or destruction was a marvel, but probably the bees had been too busy bombing groups of Cupians, to take the time to explore the apparently deserted grove.

Myles sprang aboard and was just about to start the trophil engine, when a familiar sound, smiting upon his earthborn ears, caused him to delay for a moment. From the southward came the purr of many motors.

Was the wish the father to the thought? His longing for an air fleet, with which to vanquish the bees, had been so intense; had it affected his mind and caused him to hear things which did not exist? Impossible, for the purr of the motors was unmistakable.

He strained his eyes toward the southern horizon, so that they might see what his ears heard; but there was nothing there. The radiant silver sky was untouched save by an occasional small cloud.

The bees still kept up their bombing of the city. He could see them flying low over the housetops, and up and down the principal thoroughfares, ferreting out any groups of Cupians who dared to gather in Cabot's cause, dropping bombs on any houses which presumed to fly the blue pennant of the Kew dynasty in place of the yellow of Yuri.

The bees did not heed the approaching planes from the south. Of course not! For the whistling bees of Poros had no ears. They heard with their antennæ, and heard only radio waves at that, in fact, only short-length radio waves.

The noise of a large fleet of airships swept on out of the south. Nearer and nearer it came, until it was right over the city, and still not a single plane appeared in sight. Meanwhile the bees continued their depredations, and the earth-man sat in his own plane and watched and waited.

As he watched, he saw one of the bees, who happened to be flying higher than the rest, suddenly vanish in a puff of smoke. And then another and another.

The Hymernians, too, saw this and rose to investigate, whereat there came the shut-off whir of descending planes.

Fascinated, Myles stared into the sky, whence came these sounds, and saw occasionally, against gathering clouds, a glint of silver light.

Several more of the ascending bees exploded. And now Myles was able to glimpse from time to time, silhouetted on a background of cloud, the ghostly form of an airship. The bees, too, saw, and flew to the attack. What was this shadow fleet? Had the spirits of the brave Cupian aviators of the past returned to free their beloved country from Hymernian domination?

The two fleets, bees and ghostly planes, had now completely joined battle, and were drifting slowly to the southeast. Myles came out of his trance, started his engine, and rose into the air, intent on joining the fray.

On his way, he circled over the city, and gave it a glance in passing. Then he gave it a second glance, for the Cupians, relieved of the menace of the bees, were forming for a second attack on the palace.

Instantly his plans changed. What business had he running off to watch, however interesting, a sky battle when right here before him lay a chance to do what he had braved so many misfortunes to accomplish, namely, free his Lilla from the unspeakable Yuri! Veering sharply, he landed on one of the upper terraces of the palace.

He still wore his bandoleer of cartridges, and still carried his purloined rifle. Filling the magazine, he boldly descended into the building. No one guarded the approaches from the air, for they depended on their aerial allies to do that for them. The upper rooms were deserted, doubtless because the womenfolk were cowering in the basements and because the palace guards and Yuri's other henchmen were resisting the attack by Cabot's Cupians at the ground levels.

Cabot himself explored the palace unimpeded and unchallenged. Here he was at last at his journey's end, but where was Lilla? Lilla the blue-eyed princess, Lilla of the golden curls, his Lilla!

The rooms which he and she had occupied showed every sign of continued and present occupancy, even to the crib of the baby king, emblazoned with the arms of the House of Kew. Cabot looked reverently around the living rooms of his wife and child, and then swept on into the lower levels of the palace.

Occasionally he would come upon groups of defenders; but they, naturally assuming that he was one of them—especially as he still wore the black toga of the arsenal guard—gave him but little heed. Whenever the group was not too numerous he would shoot them. He hated to do this, but he knew he had to in order to save his loved ones.

Thus he traversed practically the whole of the upper reaches of the palace without encountering his arch enemy Yuri, or any of the womenfolk. Yuri was no coward. However much of a scoundrel he might be, no one would ever accuse him of that. Therefore he was not in hiding. He was apparently not in command of the defense. Therefore he must be either away from the palace, or concocting some devilment within.

Figuring thus, Cabot continued to descend to levels below the ground floor. While treading these subterranean passages, searching, ever searching for either Lilla or Yuri, he came upon one of the palace guards. The fellow was unarmed, so Cabot did not shoot.

Instead he ordered, "Up with your hands."

The guard promptly obeyed.

"Now," said his captor, "the price of your life is to lead me to your king."

"Indeed, I will with pleasure," replied the soldier with a sneer, "for King Yuri will make short work of one who turns traitor to his black garb."

The earth-man smiled.

"I am no traitor," he announced, "and this black toga is mere borrowed fur. Do you not know Cabot the Minorian?"

The other blanched.

"My Builder!" he exclaimed. "We did not believe the story that you had returned from the planet Minos. But I am at your orders, for I am one of the old guard who served under King Kew the Twelfth, the father of Princess Lilla, may he rest beyond the waves."

"Lead on, and no treachery," Myles curtly replied. "I trust no one who has ever worn the livery of Prince Yuri."

So the guard led him through many a winding passage, down into the very bowels of the subterranean labyrinths of the palace. What could Prince Yuri be doing way down here unless he was hiding, which seemed unlikely? Cabot became very suspicious, and, rifle in hand and finger on trigger, watched his guide with eagle eye.

Finally they came upon a form in an elaborate yellow toga, huddled in a corner.

"King Yuri," said the soldier laconically.

At the sound of the voice the usurper looked around; and now it became evident that he was crouching there not for fear, but rather because he was engaged in repairing something with a set of typical Porovian queer looking tools.

Apparently not at all surprised, he hailed

his deadliest enemy and rival as though the latter were a long lost friend: "Yahoo! Cabot the Minorian. I rather expected you would turn up sooner or later. Just a minute until I fix this wire, and then I will be at your service. You see, one of my mines wouldn't explode; no one else seemed able to get at the cause of the trouble, and so I had to come down here in person."

And so saying he turned back to his work. Myles stepped forward to see what Prince Yuri was doing. For a brief moment the earth-man's scientific curiosity got the better of his caution. But that moment, brief as it was, proved long enough for the watchful soldier, who had led him hither, to snatch Myles's rifle from his hand, and cover him with its muzzle.

"Up with your hands!" commanded the soldier peremptorily.

Cabot obeyed. Not to do so would have been suicide.

Yuri, still unperturbed, remarked, "Well done, Tobo; you shall be promoted for this."

"Shall I shoot him, sire?" asked Tobo.

"N-no," ruminated the usurper, waving his antennæ thoughtfully, "not just now. Wait until I finish with this wire. In the meantime you might let the Minorian lean against the wall, so that he will be more comfortable."

So Myles leaned against the wall and waited, his hands still held high, while the prince puttered around in the corner. Finally, after a seemingly interminable period, Yuri arose, slung his tools together, brushed one hand against the other, and looked at his victim with a cruel smile.

"Shall I kill him now?" asked Tobo eagerly.

"No. I am reserving that pleasure for myself," replied the prince; then to Cabot: "At last, you are in my power—"

But Yuri continued hurriedly, "I intend to shoot you myself. I intend to shoot you down, unarmed."

Turning to Tobo, the prince asked, "How is our battle going?"

"Very well, sire," replied the soldier. "We are repulsing all assaults, in spite of the departure of the bees to the southward."

A momentary cloud of doubt spread over the sinister, handsome visage of Prince Yuri. Then he smiled and said, "Doubtless the bees know what they are about, and will soon return to the fray. So let us proceed with the execution. Follow me!"

Myles followed. Almost was he tempted to spring upon his enemy and attempt to throttle him before the inevitable bullet from Tobo could do its work. It would be well worth the sacrifice of his own life to rid Cupia of this incubus. But what if Yuri should survive? No, it would never do to risk this. So he meekly followed.

The prince led the way up several levels, until they came to a small circular chamber hung with curtains. At one side was a dais. An electric vapor-lamp on the ceiling furnished the light.

Prince Yuri took the rifle from the guard, stood Myles in the center of the room, and sat down himself on the dais.

Then he directed Tobo, "Go and summon the Princess Lilla hither, for I wish her to see me kill this lover of hers, this beast from another world."

Myles winced at the mention of his beloved, and thereat his tormentors smiled.

The soldier departed on his errand. Yuri toyed with the weapon, and watched his victim, with a sneer on his handsome lips. Myles returned his stare without flinching.

"You can put down your hands now, if you wish, you fur-faced mathlab," remarked the prince.

Cabot did so, and instinctively felt of his face. The insult was unwarranted, for he had shaved only that morning.

"Don't go too far!" he admonished his captor. "Remember Poblath's proverb: 'You cannot kill a Minorian.'"

"I've a mind to kill you right now," replied the prince, "just to prove to you that your friend is wrong."

"Go ahead and try it," challenged Myles, half hoping that Yuri would take him at his word, and thus spare Lilla the pain of attending the execution.

A grim look settled on the usurper's face as he slowly raised the rifle and pointed it at the earth-man's right side.

"Other side," admonished Myles. "Remember that my heart is on the other side than is the case with you Cupians."

"My, but you are a cool one!" admired Yuri, shifting his aim as directed. "Now, are you prepared to die?"

"Yes," replied Myles.

It all seemed like a dream. It couldn't be possible that he was really going to die on the far-away planet Venus. Perhaps all his adventures in the skies had been a mere dream and he was now about to be awakened.

"Thus do I bring peace to Poros!" sententiously declaimed the Cupian.

His finger closed upon the trigger.

The rifle spat fire.

CHAPTER XXVII.

PEACE ON POROS.

MYLES felt a sharp warm pain in his left shoulder. But he still stood erect. He was not dead. Could it be that Yuri had missed? Shaking himself together and blinking his eyes, Myles stared at the prince.

The prince stared back with an open-mouthed expression of surprise. His eyes were fishlike. His body was no longer erect. The rifle lay in his lap, and he seemed to be feebly trying to raise it and point it at Cabot.

Then, with a gurgle, some blood welled from the prince's mouth and trickled down his chin.

With one supreme effort his antennæ radiated the words:

"Curse you!"

Then the rifle dropped clattering from his nerveless hands, and his body slouched forward, prone on the floor at the foot of the dais. From the right side of his back there protruded the jeweled hilt of a dagger.

Behind the couch, between parted curtains, stood a wild-eyed Cupian woman, her face hideous with pent-up hate and triumph.

For a moment Myles stood rooted to the spot; then, tearing his feet free, he rushed to his fallen enemy and plucked out the dagger. From the wound there gushed bright cerise-colored blood, foamy with white bubbles. Myles turned the body over, and listened at the right side of the chest. Not a sound. Then, with a sigh, the chest collapsed, a little more blood welled out of the mouth, and all was still once more.

Prince Yuri, the most highly developed specimen of Cupian manhood—but a renegade, traitor, rejected wooer of the Princess Lilla, pretender to the throne of Cupia—Prince Yuri was dead!

And such an ignominious death for one of his high spirit to die! Stabbed in the back by a woman.

Cabot rose and faced her, the jeweled dagger still in his hand.

"Who are you?" he asked. "And why did you do it?"

"I am Okapa," she replied in a strained voice—"Okapa from the mountain village of Pronth. Do you remember how in the Second War of Liberation you found Luno Castle deserted and a slain infant lying on a royal bier?"

"Can I ever forget it?" he answered, his mind going back into the past. "Naturally I thought it was my baby son, whom I had never seen. Therefore I fought all the harder against the usurper Yuri until I drove him and his ant allies southward, rejoined Lilla in Kuana, and learned that little Kew was safe, and that the dead child was but an orphan baby whom Lilla had substituted for our own baby for fear of just such an outcome."

"It was no orphan!" shrieked Okapa. "It was mine—mine! The dead child was mine! Yuri stabbed my child, and now I have stabbed him with the selfsame dagger. Yuri killed my baby, and I have slain him, and now I must die myself for killing a king."

So saying, her anger spent, she flung herself upon the couch and wept silently, as is the habit of Cupians.

Just then the Princess Lilla in a black gown swept into the room and glanced inquiringly around.

"They told me the king wished to see me here," said she. "Where is the king?"

She stopped abruptly as she saw the body on the floor. Then her eyes rose until they rested on Myles Cabot. With a glad cry she rushed toward his outstretched arms.

But a peremptory shout of "Hands up!" from the doorway caused her to halt. She was between Myles and the door. He still held the jeweled dagger in his hand. Stepping quickly to one side, he cast it straight at Tobo, who stood by the entrance, a rifle in his hands; and before the Cupian soldier could raise his weapon to fire, the missile had penetrated his heart. Down he went with a crash.

While this had been going on, Okapa, the madwoman, had crept stealthily toward Yuri's body with a view to securing the rifle which he had dropped. Seizing it, she leaped to her feet with a shriek.

"You too!" she cried, pointing at Lilla with one skinny finger. "For you it was who took my babe from the orphanage and exposed him to danger. You are joint murderer with Yuri. Him have I slain, and now it is your turn."

But Myles stepped between her and the princess and wrenched the gun from her poor mad hands, whereat she flung herself upon him, clawing and biting like a demon. It was only the work of a few minutes, however, to get both her wrists behind her back.

Lilla, sensing the need, ripped some strips from the hanging draperies; together they tied the woman and seated her to one side. Then once more the long separated earthman and his Cupian beloved started to embrace, while Okapa glared at them with baleful eyes.

This was too much for Myles.

"Just one paraparth!" said he, and, stepping over to Okapa, he spun her around until she faced the wall.

Then he clasped his princess to him in a long embrace.

But at last a pang intruded in his bliss. "Lilla dearest," he asked, "where is our little son?"

She shook herself together.

"I know not," she replied. "They would not let me know, for fear that the usurper—may he rest beyond the waves—might force the secret from me. But our country is more important than our child. While we tarry here the battle rages. Quick, to the upper levels, and let us take control."

"We cannot do so without a message from their king," asserted her husband. "Let us therefore bring them one."

Stooping down, he picked up the dead body of Prince Yuri and flung it across his shoulder.

"Lead on!" said he.

As they emerged up a flight of stairs into the main hall of the palace they saw a frantic throng of palace guards piling tables, chairs, and other furniture into a barricade across one of the doorways. Evidently the troops of Emsul and Hah Babbuh had penetrated the palace and had driven the defenders back to this point.

The golden-curled Lilla, standing straight and slim in her black gown, stopped all this work of fortification with an imperious gesture.

"Desist!" she cried. "I, your princess, command it. The war is over. Yuri, the usurper, is dead."

"Prove it," snarled back the guards like a pack at bay, recoiling from her regal presence.

"Here is your proof!" shouted Myles Cabot, stepping forward and casting Yuri's body down before them. "Your king is dead."

"'Tis true," replied one. "The king is dead."

"Yuri is dead," echoed another. "Long live King Kew!"

"Long live King Kew!" shouted all the palace thugs, just as the besiegers stormed over the barricade with leveled rifles.

But at the shouts within, and at the sight of their princess and their intrepid earth-man leader, they grounded their arms and, holding their left hands aloft, gave the Porovian greeting:

"Yahoo, Myles Cabot! Our regent has returned from Minos to rule over us!"

Then one guardsman had an idea.

"Come," said he, let us mount to the upper terraces, haul down the yellow pennant of King Yuri, and restore the blue banner of the Kew dynasty."

From one of the balconies above came a boyish voice: "It has already been done, Myles Cabot."

Every one looked up, and there stood Yuri's younger brother, the loyal Prince

Toron, wearing the insignia of admiral of the Cupian Air Navy.

"I hope you don't mind, Myles," said he as he descended. "I made myself admiral on my own hook. You see, while all the bees were here at Kuana bombing your men, I captured the air base at Wautoosa with a crowd of ex-aviators whom I had assembled for that purpose.

"We had been hiding in the woods for several sangths, with spies at Wautoosa to inform us when there was an opening. When the time came we walked right in, killed a few old bees who were on guard, reconditioned the planes which have lain in storage ever since my brother seized the throne, painted them with silver paint, flew up here to Kuana, and put the bees out of business.

"The silver paint was my own idea, and I must say it seemed to work. The bees couldn't see us at all against the silver sky. The plaza and the fields beyond are strewn with dead and dying Hymernians, and my men are tracking down the survivors."

And he would have chattered on in his boyish excitement had not one of the soldiers brutally interrupted with:

"Thy brother lies dead, oh, Toron."

The young prince followed the pointing finger of the guard until his eyes rested on the crumpled body in its bloodstained yellow toga. Then he flung his arm across his face to blot out the sight. For a few moments he stood thus, while all respectfully kept silent. At last he uncovered his eyes and addressed the earth-man.

"May he rest beyond the waves!" said he. "I crave the corpse so that I can give my brother a decent funeral."

"He shall be buried with full royal honors," replied Myles Cabot; "for he was a brave and regal Cupian who would have served his country well if his inordinate ambition had not blinded his judgment."

"My cousin shall have royal burial," echoed the Princess Lilla. "It would be due you, Toron, for your share in the victory, if for no other reason."

"I appreciate this courtesy more than words can expresss," replied Toron.

The news of the capitulation had rapidly spread, and the huge hall was filling with Cupians from without. Among them came Emsul, Nan-nan, Hah Babbuh, Oya Buh, and even Poblath the Philosopher. Warm were the greetings between the friends.

"But where is our king?" asked Myles, as soon as he could free himself from all the congratulation.

"Now it can be told," replied Poblath. "He is safe in the care of my wife Bthuh, in our villa at Lai."

"The darling! I shall go to him at once," announced Lilla.

"And I too," added Myles.

"But no," interposed Hah Babbuh, "for the populace are already gathering in the stadium and are demanding a speech from the great liberator."

"So be it," said Myles with a shrug of resignation. "Affairs of state cannot await even the presence of the king, it seems."

"But shall these black-togaed guards be permitted to retain their arms?" asked Emsul.

"Why not?" replied the earth-man. "Their only crime is that they fought loyally for their leader. Besides, this is a free country. One of our grievances against the usurper was that he deprived us of our rifles."

Then, to the palace soldiery: "Care tenderly for the body of Prince Yuri, and lay it out in state pending our return. Oh, and I almost forgot—there is a crazy woman bound in one of the cellar rooms. Turn her over to the mango of Kuana for incarceration in the mangool, and under peril of your lives do not permit her to escape."

"All hail our regent! And our most beautiful and beloved princess!" shouted the guards, as Myles and Lilla left the palace.

A kerkool awaited them at the gate. Getting into this, they proceeded at a slow rate through the city and across the plaza toward the stadium through lanes of cheering Cupians. Prince Toron, Emsul, Hah Babbuh, Oya Buh, and others of their retinue followed them.

The plaza and the fields beyond were strewn with bodies—mostly in fragments—of the once great race of the Hymernians. One of these bees, as they passed it, gave

signs of still possessing some life. A faint whistling noise assailed the antennæ of the passing procession.

Cabot gave one look in the direction of the sound, then signaled the kerkools to stop, dismounted, and approached the dying creature.

Adjusting his controls to the wave length of bee speech, he said:

"Portheris, once my friend, whom I made king of the bees, it grieves me to see you lying thus, struck down in a war against my people."

Raising himself feebly, the dying Portheris replied:

"I bear you no malice, Myles Cabot, and I pray that you will bear me none. Although I opposed the war, yet when it came to a fight of race against race I was loyal to my own, as any honorable individual would have been under like circumstances.

"Perhaps it is just as well; for do you not remember that when you were driving the ant-men off the face of Cupia, you said: 'There is no room on any given planet for more than one race of intelligent beings'? Now the last Formian is gone, and the last of my own people is gone. May Cupia be at peace. It is the sincere wish of your old friend."

The huge bee fell back, quivered a moment, and lay still. Thus died Portheris, the last of the Hymernians.

"May you rest beyond the waves, dear friend," murmured the earth-man as he returned sadly to his car.

They found the stadium packed with cheering throngs in gala attire. Everywhere fluttered flags of the Kew dynasty.

After Lilla had been comfortably seated and Marshal Hah and the others had arrived, Myles stepped to the transmitter and was about to broadcast some appropriate remarks to the assembled multitude, when an airplane arrived overhead and settled softly into the arena. All eyes turned in that direction.

From the plane there stepped Poblath the Philosopher, followed by Bthuh, his dark and beautiful wife. Both were smiling, and Bthuh held in her arms a baby Cupian.

Then Cabot spoke into the microphone: "Behold your king!"

It was the shortest speech he had ever made—and the best.

Thus came Kew XIII into his own.

There is not much more to tell.

Prince Toron retained his self-given title of Admiral of the Air Navy. Hah Babbuh was restored to his professorship at the Royal University. Oya Buh was promoted to full professorship. Poblath the Philosopher again became mangool of Kuana, and his wife was made governess to the infant king. Emsul, the veterinary, was given the title of court physician.

Owva, the Holy Leader, died shortly after this, and Nan-nan was selected by the Great White Lodge as the fit person to reëstablish the lost religion publicly throughout Cupia.

Myles and Lilla, leaving their friends to reconstruct the capital, departed for a vacation at Luno Castle.

Thus ends the story of the adventures of Myles Cabot, the radio man, on his return to the silver planet Venus, as received by the Harvard scientists and myself over the long distance wireless set at my farm on Chappaquiddick Island, Massachusetts.

THE END

The Stigma

By GORDON STILES

TO the residents of Burnside, Vermont, the town seemed just about perfect, as towns go. To outsiders, the place appeared too smug, too hard-shelled—inordinately proud because of its old families of pure American stock and its part in America's various military arguments, from the Revolution down to the World War. In Burnside, one was distinctly " in it " or just as distinctly " out of it."

Thus it was that when Andrew Lord came to Burnside to see his widowed mother on her deathbed and remained after that to work the Lord farm, a situation arose which disturbed the minds of more than a few of the young man's neighbors.

Andrew was what is known in Burnside as " close-mouthed " and he offered no explanation of why he gave up a supposedly excellent position with the Peerless Foundry Company of Chicago and came to wrestle with the more or less barren acres of the Lord place.

People shook their heads at that part of it. It was no secret that during the last years of her life Mrs. Lord had lived almost entirely on the money sent to her by Andrew. And now that she was gone, there seemed to be no reason why the son should tarry in Burnside. On the contrary, many of the townspeople—in fact, most of them—discerned at least one mighty powerful reason why Andrew Lord should return whence he came.

All of the talk about the matter centered around Andrew's war record or, more properly, his lack of one. Andrew never mentioned the war, not even to the extent of offering an alibi. And Mrs. Lord had made no secret of the fact that she was glad her boy was not in the fighting.

She loathed and abominated war and appeared not to notice the tightening of the lips on the part of mothers whose sons were with the colors when she mentioned Andrew. To several persons she had showed her son's letters and these carried no reference to the doings " over there."

On the other hand, the war record of Burnside's youth was striking, at least on

paper. One or another of the training camps had claimed most of the men of military age. That only two Burnside boys had actually reached France could not dim the glory of what the town had offered.

One of the two, Lester Graham, had been killed within a few weeks after he landed at Brest; the other, Ben Simpson, had done his bit as sergeant in a mechanical transport unit at the base. But because he had "got over" and came home wearing overseas regalia, there was about him a glamour that clung.

It was no more than natural that Ben should feel a certain superiority to the boys who had done nothing more thrilling than foot-slog on monotonous route marches and deliver vicious bayonet attacks against lines of straw-stuffed dummies. Ben never dwelt much on his service at the base.

He needed no urging to tell about the perils of the crossing through submarine-infested waters and at times he managed to convey the impression that he had been nearer the front than the safe and fairly comfortable post which his company occupied throughout its sojourn in Europe. He was a bit careful where he let his remarks fall.

And in the year nineteen hundred and twenty-four—at the time Andrew returned after eight years in Chicago, Ben was back at his job in the Burnside National Bank, the most tangible living hero Burnside possessed, and practically engaged to Ruth Demarest, heiress to something like a half million dollars which had been assembled by a canny and thrifty dad. In short, Ben was "sitting pretty."

He did not make any particular effort to conceal his contempt for Andrew Lord when the latter came into the bank to cash a check, a day or two after his arrival in Burnside. Nor did he show the bad taste of rubbing it in.

Andrew's mother was fatally ill at the time, it must be remembered. But about Ben's greeting there was a coolness that would not be likely to obtain when two young men who have been schoolmates and playmates meet after years of separation, even though they had not been chums.

However, Andrew appeared not to notice the other's lack of enthusiasm and cordiality. He was his own quiet self—perhaps a little more grave than usual, which was to be expected.

II.

It was not until Andrew had announced that he was going to work the farm and had begun to settle down to the routine of life in Burnside that ill-feeling began to crop out.

At first this took the form of whisperings which did not reach the ears of the subject. Later Andrew noticed that frequently, when he came suddenly upon a group of men at the Burnside Golf Club in which his father had purchased a family life membership, there would be a sudden hush.

And, being possessed of a mind far from dull, he was not long in recognizing what the trouble was. He gave no sign, however.

Of all Andrew's denouncers, Ben Simpson was the most outspoken.

"He's certainly got gall!" Ben said to a group of admirers, one afternoon. "Here we've tried to show him that he isn't wanted by treating him as if he didn't exist and he's so thick-skinned that it rolls right off. And the nerve of him to settle down here gets my goat! I tell you, there isn't any room in Burnside for a slacker!"

Nods of approval greeted this assertion, but nobody offered any plan for ridding the town of the offending individual. Jack Houston went so far as to suggest: "We can't be sure. He may have a perfectly good alibi."

Ben snorted in derision.

"What a chance! Believe me, if he had any alibi—perfectly good, as you say, or otherwise—he'd trot it out! That's the damned insolence of it; he completely ignores the fact that there has been a war! Never asked me a thing about it and, of course, he knows that I was over."

Thus Ben Simpson's bitterness was placed on record.

Perhaps his attitude would have been understood better if some of the others had seen what Ben had seen the afternoon before—Andrew strolling along Maple Street with Ruth Demarest, with Ruth talking and

looking as interested as if Andrew Lord had been a regular fellow instead of a man who would wear to his grave the stigma of "slacker."

Beyond that, there was the recollection of how keen Ruth used to be about Andrew, at school.

Ben had called to see Ruth in the evening, and he said: "Saw you with Andy Lord this afternoon."

It may have been the "Aha! I caught you!" element in Ben's tone; it may have been something else that caused irritation to creep into Ruth's voice as she replied: "Nothing strange about that, is there? I think Andy's improved since he went away, don't you?"

Ben boiled within. He countered, sarcastically: "He's certainly been free to improve himself from May, 1917 to November, 1918."

"And they call women cats!" returned Ruth.

"Cat or no cat," stormed Ben, "Andy Lord is a damned slacker! He ought to be ashamed to show his face in Burnside with the record he's got!"

"Perhaps he tried to enlist and was turned down. That happened to a lot of chaps I know."

"Blah!" sneered Ben. "You don't think for a minute that he wouldn't be shouting it from the housetops if that happened, do you?"

"Oh, I don't know. Andy isn't much of a hand to shout from the housetops, as you put it."

Her tone infuriated Ben. Did she mean —did she—

His train of thought was interrupted by Ruth's cold: "Seems to me that you're a little out of order yourself. Did you come up here to pick a quarrel with me because I was walking with Andy Lord to-day? If you did, you'd better do a little walking yourself. Andy Lord is and always has been a mighty fine chap and a good friend. To you as well as to me. And I should say it's *your* turn to be ashamed."

"If that's the way you feel about it—by George—I *will* do a little walking! I'll—"

"Good night," said Ruth, coldly. And before Ben realized what was happening, she was gone.

He had not looked for this and stood uncertainly, leaning against the porch railing, incapable of believing himself so curtly dismissed. But when one minute passed—two minutes—he cursed under his breath and took his departure. His outburst at the club was in the nature of an aftermath.

III.

If he could have glimpsed what was going on in the mind of Andrew Lord, Ben would have been even more upset. If he could have known that it was the sight of Ruth Demarest that had caused Andrew to decide on remaining in Burnside if the thing seemed at all feasible—

The fondness which he had held for Ruth when she was a little girl in school had turned swiftly into love for the adorable young woman of twenty-two whose beauty and charm had stirred the hearts of others than Ben Simpson. Ben had encountered plenty of opposition before he felt certain that he was holding the inside track.

Andrew therefore settled down to work. He made heroic onslaughts on the weeds which had been allowed to overrun the place, mended fences, set out hundreds of berry bushes, prepared the soil of a dozen acres for intensive market gardening.

He called on Ruth Demarest as frequently as he decently could, but did not force the pace. Somehow, he did not believe that Ben Simpson was as strong as the latter seemed to feel he was. Andrew could not bring himself to think that Ruth really was in love with Ben. If he thought that, he told himself, he would not set himself deliberately to win the girl.

As for Ben, he had promptly made his peace with Ruth and, so far as others could see, the two were on the best of terms. Generally, Burnside expected Ben and Ruth to marry.

While the town knew that Andrew was paying marked attention to Ruth, he was not regarded as a serious contender. It was unthought of that a chap who had ducked war service would stand any chance of winning out.

Ben, under a constant struggle to control his rage over the tactics of Andrew, fostered the general feeling in every manner and instance that offered. As chief of the local American Legion post, he was bound to be something of a figure in Burnside and he seized every available opportunity to deliver his opinion regarding men who had not served.

And it must be said that his efforts bore fruit. With the war six years in the past, it is likely that no open hostility would have been shown toward Andrew had it not been for the continuous agitation on the part of Ben Simpson. He permitted no one to forget that Andrew Lord was a slacker.

Thus the stigma was applied and kept vivid by the effort of Ben alone.

How much of all this Ruth Demarest knew was not entirely clear. Probably considerable. She was pretty well occupied with her own feelings—with the process of self-analysis that was so hard to bring to a satisfactory termination.

She repeatedly asked herself if she was in love with Andrew and just as often decided that she would love him if his war record had been right. She tried to picture herself married to a man at whom others would point with the scornful remark: " He fought the war at his desk in Chicago."

Ruth was a sensitive soul and she knew that the thing would hurt—hurt terrifically and despite any determination she might have not to permit it to do so. She tried to decide if her love for Andrew was such that it would withstand the sufferings she knew would fall to her lot if she were to marry him.

When she was with Andrew, she was happier than at any other time; it seemed to her then that if he asked her to marry him, she must say yes. When she was alone, doubts crept in and all of these doubts pivoted on the war. One thing she knew—she could not consider Ben Simpson in the light of a possible husband.

IV.

In keeping his own counsel, Andrew was running true to form. Those who had known him early in life should have realized that it would be utterly foreign to his nature to offer an explanation or an excuse of any kind.

So there was the unpleasant fact that while the other boys of Burnside were in the army, serving for a pittance, Andrew Lord was sitting tight, sending home money regularly and entirely avoiding all mention of the war in his letters to his mother. And against this nothing had been offered in extenuation.

To a lot of people it seemed that Andrew would be in better taste if he at least showed that the stigma hurt.

How it all would end was uncertain—until one day the problem solved itself. A visit which Andy paid to the bank during the noon hour was primarily responsible.

Making his way leisurely along the deserted street, he was congratulating himself on the fact that he was beginning to get returns from the farm. In his pocket was the first decent-sized check which he had received. His thoughts were pleasant as he ascended the stone steps and entered the rotunda. Then his heart gave a queer flop at what he saw.

From the teller's window, Ben Simpson faced him—a white-faced Ben with sagging jaw and terror-stricken eyes. And in the foreground, in tense attitude stood a wiry individual whose right hand leveled an ugly automatic at the cowering figure behind the grille.

At the sound of Andrew's footsteps, this figure swung quickly about.

A whirlwind rush—the clatter of feet on the polished granite floor—the roar of a pistol shot—a tangle of arms and legs and bodies—as Andrew closed with the robber. Then the latter crumpled under a blow from the butt of the pistol which Andrew had wrenched loose and Andrew himself slumped in a heap, a spreading splotch of blood darkening the left side of his chest!

A crowd collected from nowhere instantly —stood in uncertain attitudes while the shaking and unnerved Ben tried to give a coherent account of the affair.

Dr. Davis pushed through the jam, followed an instant later by the constable. After a hasty examination by the physician, both of the injured men were removed to

the Memorial Hospital and Burnside waited in awe for the verdict.

As the day wore on, Ben Simpson regained his nerve. With each retelling of his story, his part in the affair grew more valorous. In the end, it seemed that he was just about to make a desperate effort to seize the gun under the counter when Andrew intervened.

He did not explain why he had not secured the weapon after Andrew engaged the attention of the lone bandit.

V.

RUTH DEMAREST heard the tidings from her father. Her first question, in an unsteady voice was: "How bad is he hurt?"

"Oh, Andrew? The doctor says it's an even chance. Can't tell for a day or two. He was hit over the heart, but he's in good shape to come through if there are no complications, I understand."

"And Ben wasn't hurt?"

"Ben!" exclaimed Mr. Demarest. "No. Only scared half to death. Jim Foster, who got in there almost the first, told me that Ben's teeth were still chattering and that he thought the fellow was going to faint after the show was all over."

Ruth slipped away to her room. There she paced the floor nervously for half an hour, clenching her hands, her face drawn with suffering.

Through it all ran a thread of joy—an exultant feeling. Whatever came, Andy had shown that he was no coward! What did his war record matter? She—oh!—if he would only get well. Quickly! She wanted to see him—more than anything in the world!

Her room was too small. The house was stifling. Ruth ran downstairs, out into the side yard. Out of doors, she wandered about—distraught.

It seemed, somehow, as if she ought to be doing something for Andy—as if it was all wrong for her to be where she was while he fought death in the hospital. Finally, in the late afternoon, she determined to telephone and inquire about his condition. She *must* know!

She was spared the trouble, however. At the instant she turned to go into the house, the runabout of Dr. Davis rolled down the street. Ruth sped to the sidewalk and hailed him.

"He's going to get well," the doctor assured her and added: "And when he does, I imagine that a few folks in this town will change their tune."

"What do you mean?" Ruth asked, eagerly.

"It's quite a story, but the substance of it is this: when I examined Andy at the hospital, I came across another wound—a bullet wound, too. Through the hip it was. So I asked him about it. It took a lot of urging to pry the story out of him.

"It seems that when the United States entered the war, Andrew was one of the first to offer himself. He was turned down because of a minor defect in eyesight. So what did he do but hop over the border and join up in a Canadian unit. He served through and got hit during the last month of the fighting. Lay in a hospital almost a year.

"And all that time, his mother was receiving the carefully prepared letters which Andy had prevailed on his boss to send. Some of them were written from the field and some from the hospital, after the first batch were exhausted. The firm paid his salary all the while, so there always was money to inclose.

"You see, Andy knew how his mother felt about war. Also, he knew that, with her weak heart, the shock of his enlistment would probably kill her. So he did what he thought best; he wasn't the man to stay out. I do think he ought to have mentioned it when he came home. But he's always been that way—close-mouthed. Hello! What's wrong?" The doctor looked into the swimming eyes of the girl before him.

"Dr. Davis, do you think—do you think—I could see him—soon?" Ruth's lips trembled as she waited for the answer.

The doctor took another look at her face; said: "Yes. I think so, perhaps, to-morrow. I fancy it would do him a lot of good to see you."

THE END

Hey-You

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

HE was mighty busy as he investigated the bewildering number of scents along the waterfront. Several times he paused a moment as if dumfounded, then hurried on to make up for lost time.

He was not coming from home, nor was he headed for home. He was homeless, a bum, picking up his food where he could find it, sleeping in convenient places, escaping with his life by narrow margins a dozen times a day—a yellow, half-grown dog.

But the yellow was all on his coat. There was none of it within.

But of late serious trouble had invaded the ranks of his kind. Daily his number grew smaller. On several occasions men had pursued him furiously, and twice a net-like device on the end of a pole had been hurled at him along with curses at his fleetness of foot.

The previous night had been all that could be desired. Quite by chance he made the acquaintance of one of the swells in the residential part of the city.

This swell was a well-groomed dog. He boasted a beautiful collar, with brass studs and a silver plate on which was written his name, " Sport." The tramp dog had neither a collar nor a name.

After exchanging greetings, during which each had stood stiff legged and sniffed noses with no little embarrassment, they decided to see the sights together. Sport was hampered to some degree by a short section of rope trailing from his collar. The rope had evidently been chewed in two, and as there was some of the fiber remaining between Sport's teeth, it was evident that he had done the chewing.

Sport had never been in the rough part of town before, so the yellow dog acted as escort. First they upset the tramp's favorite garbage can and found therein food that Sport never dreamed existed.

It was while doing this the man with the net appeared. He attacked the tramp furiously, but ignored Sport, who in addition to the silver plate also boasted a brass numbered tag on his collar.

The dog ducked under a building, emerged from the opposite side, and joined the amazed Sport. The remainder of the day was spent on the waterfront.

It was old stuff to the tramp, but mighty interesting to Sport. Later they played in a muddy pond, retrieving sticks that a chance small boy tossed in.

Shortly before sunset Sport invited the tramp home for the night. It was quite a long distance to travel, and several streets filled with traffic had to be crossed.

The tramp noticed Sport had some difficulty in making his way through traffic, but for the tramp it was less than nothing. A dart here, a leap there, a rush, and he was on the opposite sidewalk.

Sport ran up the front steps of a fine looking place and peered in the window. Immediately a voice cried, "Here he is. He's come back!"

The door opened and a young boy yelled excitedly, "Sport! Hey, Sport!"

So that was his name? It was the first time the tramp knew that a dog had a name. Well, there were a number of things he must acquire now.

First, he must find somebody that wanted him, then he'd get himself a collar—one with brass studs, a numbered brass plate, and a silver plate with a name. Yes, he must get himself a name by all means, otherwise how could he know when to come, or how would people call him?

Rather suddenly he realized that he did have a name. These people who owned Sport said, "Sport, do this; Sport, do that!" The man who had followed the boy from the house had said, "Sport, you bad fellow, you chewed your rope in half. From now on you'll have a chain." And the beautiful lady had said, "Sport, get down; you're all dirt!"

As the tramp reflected he recalled that people addressed him as "Hey-you!" The butcher said, "Hey! You! Get out of here!" Others said, "Hey-you, beat it!" or "Hey-you, leave that cat alone!"

Yes, Hey-you was a good name, one to be proud of. Where one or two people seemed to know the name Sport, everybody knew Hey-you. He realized he was a popular dog.

The people had opened the door that Sport might enter. As an invited guest, Hey-you prepared to follow.

He caught a glimpse of deep, soft rugs, far superior to grain sacks of the docks, a faint odor of broiling fowl, and a disdainful cat. Hey-you smiled inwardly at the thought of what he would do to that cat when the opportunity afforded.

Sport seemed perfectly at home, and Hey-you was following closely at his heels when a man's foot blocked the way.

"Hey-you," he shouted, "get out." Evidently there had been some slip-up, and Sport's friends were not recognized. The door closed. Hey-you was alone.

And such a night as he put in! Rare bits from refined garbage cans, aristocratic cats and some not so aristocratic. It would seem that he was the only loose dog in the district. He saw, scented, and heard many others, but they were tied up.

Some of them lived in small houses, painted exactly like the structures in which their masters resided. Hey-you resolved he would own a house some day.

Dawn found him again on the waterfront, glad, and sorry to be back. He was tired, but there would be no rest to-day. The man with the net was after him again.

Besides, he had a purpose in life now. Ambition's urge would never be stilled until he owned a collar, studded with brass; a master, and a house in which he could lie and watch without being seen.

The roar of the city grew swiftly this morning. Steamers in the bay whistled, trucks rumbled over docks and pavements, freight cars rattled and banged as they were shunted about.

Hey-you's course was purposeless, yet Fate was guiding him along the channels of life mapped out for him. He chased a cat under a building, explored the place for several moments, and emerged covered with dust and cobwebs. The cat vanished, as cats have a habit of doing.

A new alley attracted his interest and he hurried along, turned a half block, and found himself in a forest of moving legs. Shoes pressed in on all sides, and though he frequently turned an appealing gaze to the faces so high above, none looked down

except briefly, none did more than say. "Hey-you, get out of the way."

Hey-you was carried along with the human tide. Caught in an eddy, he eddied for several minutes, then like some bit of driftwood tossed aside by the stream, Hey-you was washed under a bench.

Around about were statues frowning down upon the hurry and foam of a business day. The grass was very green, free of weeds, and a great structure of stone and marble looked down upon all.

Hey-you rested briefly, then trotted across the lawns, and following the scent of a cat, disappeared into what was evidently the garage of the building. Suddenly he stopped as an interesting scent caught his alert nostrils.

Presently he stopped before a light truck, the rear of which had been converted into a cage. The cage was empty, but it had evidently contained numerous dogs. It was an intriguing thing, and Hey-you wondered where all the dogs had gone to.

If something big was on, he wanted to be in on it. Perhaps Sport was here also. He backed off and cocked his head first on one side, then on the other.

The silence was broken by the laughter of a man. He was dressed in greasy overalls. In one hand he held the valve of a motor, in the other a small wrench.

"Hey, boys," he shouted, "can you beat it? If this isn't flying in the face of Providence I don't know what is!"

Several others appeared.

"A dog without a license, sniffing around the dog catcher's wagon. That's one for the buck. Hey-you, you better beat it while you've got the chance. He's back in the garage eating his lunch!"

Beneath the building that served as a city hall were several departments and many men. A patrol wagon driver joined the group.

"I've seen that yellow dog before," he announced. "He's a longshoreman or something of that kind, hangs 'round the waterfront."

"I'm going to tell Dawson there's a dog waiting to be caught!" said another.

"Just a minute. I'll bet a dollar Dawson doesn't catch him. Are you on?"

"Yep," the other answered, and each gave the mechanic a dollar, which he put into his jumper pocket.

Dawson appeared a moment later and the crowd laughed.

"That dog's daring you to do your stuff," said the patrol wagon driver. "I've just bet a buck you don't catch him."

Dawson frowned. He recognized Hey-you as he approached.

"Come on, old boy," he said invitingly; "nice dog. Nice boy!"

Hey-you started, then warning whispered, and he suddenly changed his mind. Dawson walked slowly toward the cage, then from the top quickly jerked one of the nets. With a rush he was upon Hey-you.

The net cracked the dog across the back, flattened him to the pavement, but he squirmed free and the crowd cheered. Hey-you turned the corner with such swiftness that all four feet skidded from beneath him.

Behind thundered the footsteps of the dog-catcher. Hey-you darted among numerous legs, was stepped on twice, but here he had the advantage, for he could work through the crowd with considerably more speed than his pursuer. Also, he sensed these people were with him, rather than with the man.

He turned to the right half way down the block and found himself in an entrance. The man was too close for comfort now; the dog leaped, and a second later was caught in a revolving door.

He skidded around the marble floor upon his back, then was spilled into a vast corridor. The dog catcher, however, was not so fortunate; he could not bring his net through the door, and without it he did not have much chance with an alert dog. Nevertheless he did not quit; dropping the net he jerked on a pair of heavy gloves and raced down the corridor.

Hey-you disappeared at the first turn. He found himself blocked, returned, and darted down a stairway before the man could head him off.

A similar corridor was below. Excited and badly worried over his strange surroundings he slipped through the first open

door. The room was well lighted, and a counter ran the width, except for a small gate at one end.

Several people were standing at the counter talking. Hey-you slipped behind the counter, sniffed and hurried behind the legs of the man he sensed would give him the best break, for now he could run a short distance at best.

The man looked down. "Well, now, I'll be hanged. Plenty of people come to me for dog licenses, but this is the first time a dog made a personal application."

Dawson approached the license clerk. There was battle in his eye.

"See a dog come in here?" he panted.

"What kind of a dog?" the clerk inquired mildly.

"Plain yellow dog. He's a smart one. I've been trying to catch him for weeks. Had the nerve to come up and sniff around the wagon while I was eating lunch."

"You don't say," the clerk answered; "he must be quite a dog."

Dawson turned and walked away.

"He's around here somewhere!" he grumbled.

The clerk peered down. He was not sure, but it seemed as if the yellow dog was winking at him knowingly. The clerk fished into his pocket and dropped a dollar into the license proceeds for the day. Then he wrote out a license and selected a tag.

"Guess I'll take you home. The kids will like it, and the old dog-house has been empty a year now. That's too long."

He grinned. "You're good, taking a chance on the license clerk for your tag. Say, there ought to be a story in that!"

There was. This is it.

THE END

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NATIVE

WHEN I first came into th' West,
I didn't have a thing;
Job's turkey was a millionaire
Compared to me, by jing!
An', though you might say truthfully
That I was stripped down bare,
In spite of bein' busted flat
I didn't even care.

Now I am ownin' a good bronc,
A single-footin' dun,
An outfit that can't be surpassed,
A lulu of a gun,
An', when th' Tumble R's paid off,
I'm here to have you know
That I go racin' into town
With pockets full of dough.

Though other chaps are ownin' herds
An' far-flung ranches, too,
They didn't get a sooner start
Than this fool buckaroo,
Who didn't have a stitch of clothes,
When he came here to mourn,
Because th' wild an' woolly West
Is right where I was born.

Edgar Daniel Kramer.