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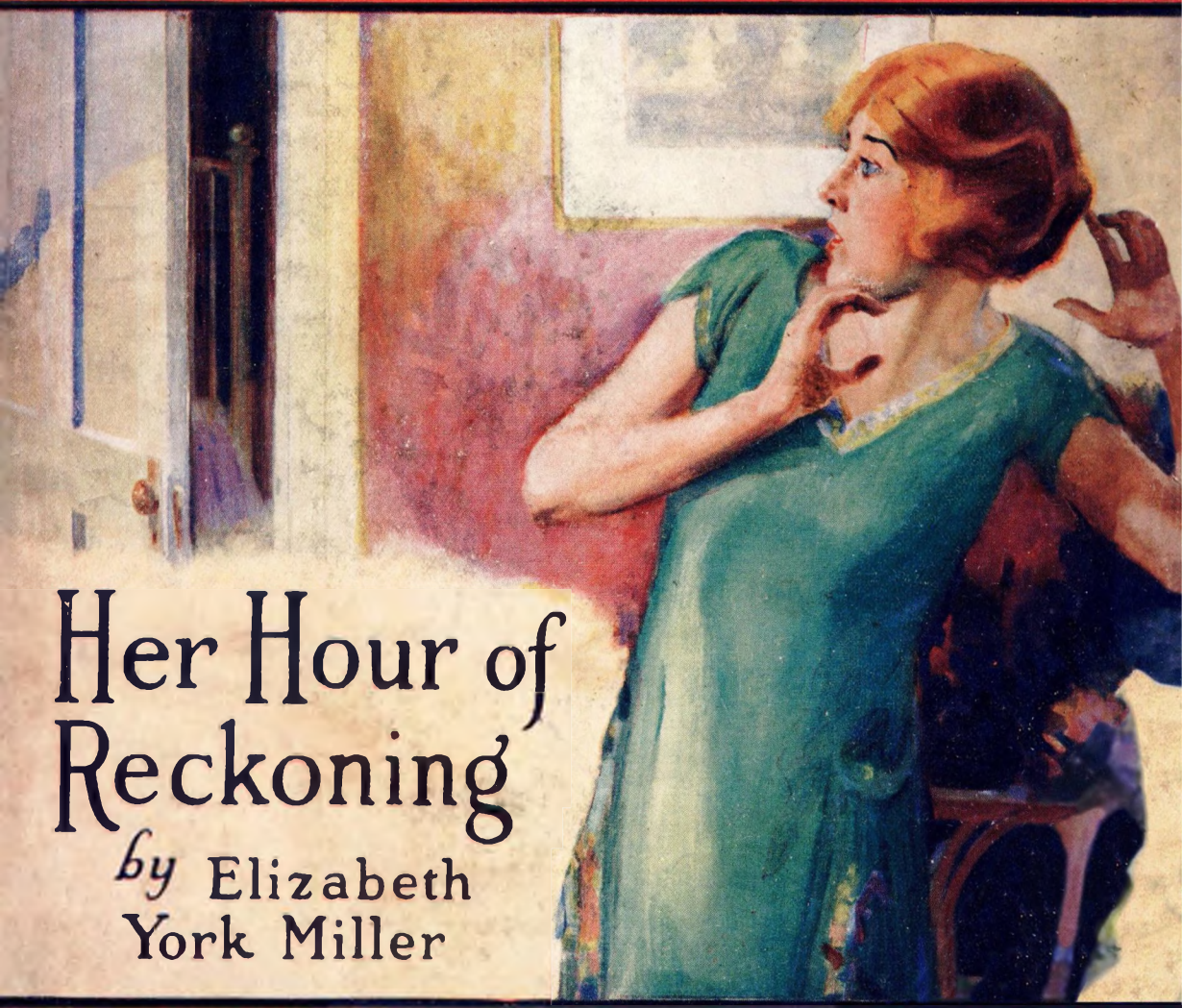

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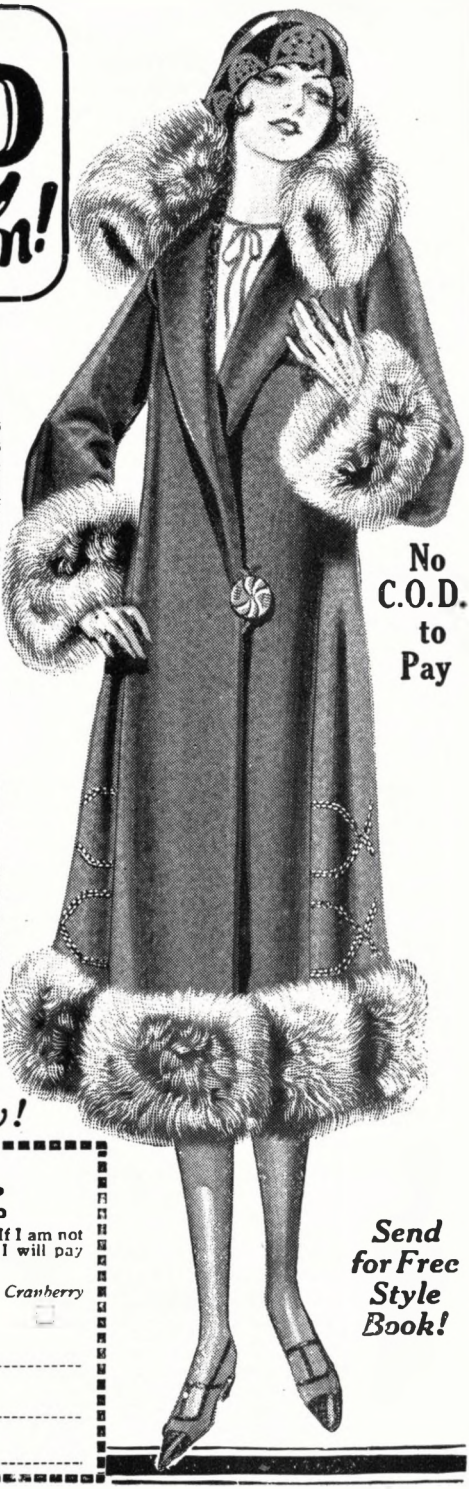

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VOL. CLXXIII CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER 28, 1925 NUMBER 4

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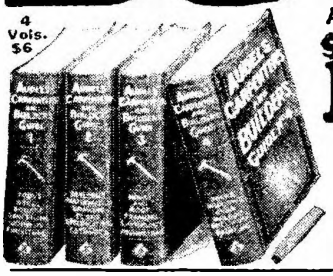

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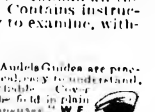

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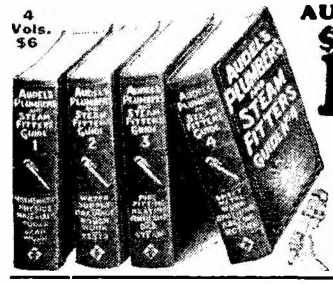

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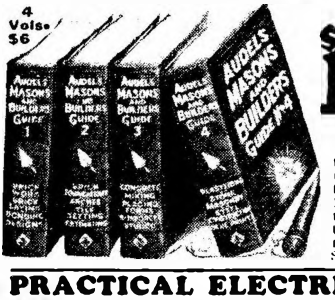

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Issued Weekly

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXIII SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 1925 NUMBER 4

Her Hour of Reckoning

By ELIZABETH YORK MILLER

Author of "Bondage," "Mrs. Marbury's Alibi," etc.

INTRODUCTORY

SOME time since we asked Mrs. Miller to write something about her career that we might pass it on to you readers in her own words. But she was so modest about it that we have decided to take the facts and set them briefly before you in ours.

Elizabeth York Miller was born in Washington, D. C., and was only eleven when she captured a prize of five dollars for a short article which appeared on the children's page of the New York *World*, a paper with which she was later identified for three years, doing everything, as she herself puts it, except set type.

As was the case with Mary Roberts Rinehart, Mrs. Miller's first fiction story appeared in this magazine. Its title was "His Automobile or Theirs" and she continued to write steadily for us until she decided to remove to England, where she registered an extraordinary success as writer of serial stories for the late Lord Northcliffe's

London newspapers—the *Daily Mail* and *Mirror*. Story after story flowed from her pen, for Mrs. Miller writes always in long hand and then sends the completed script to London, where it is typed by an agency presided over by no less a person than the granddaughter of Charles Dickens. These serials are followed breathlessly day by day by thousands of delighted readers throughout the British Isles and, except for a brief visit to her native land two years ago, Mrs. Miller has resided in England for almost fifteen years. She lives on a hill in a very old Kentish farmhouse in the garden county of England. Here she enjoys all the comforts of home, except electric light, but the absence of this is offset by the possession of a wonderful garden, which is the joy of her heart. Two hours' run by rail from London, where she had a flat for many years, she knows this famous fiction background as well as any of England's native daughters and has herself many times been in the hotel where *Mrs. Kingslake* has her startling adventure in the first installment of "Her Hour of Reckoning." THE EDITOR.

PRELUDE

There was the Door to which I found no Key;
There was the Veil through which I could not see.

THE caravan moved slowly on in the face of the sinking sun, toward that phantom sea whence blows the salt clean breath of Sahara. At the head of the procession rode a tall, elderly man on a gayly decked donkey. He cut rather a figure of fun and enjoyed it, his long legs dangling and his Panama hat, a little too small for him, set jauntily at an angle.

Behind him his wife and another woman, both rather timid, sat their camels joylessly, but making a pretense at ease. One had bunched herself into the attitude of a jockey getting close to the winning post, while the other—a stout, red-faced matron—indicated her complete at-homeness in the altitude to which she was raised by lighting a cigarette—and then dropping it with a shriek when her beast lowered his serpentine neck to crop a tuft of herbage.

After these came a young girl on a small white trotting camel. Her steed was properly saddled and bridled, but she rode without using the stirrups, and with all the indifference of an Arab.

She was a glorious girl, strong, slender and athletic, and she had taken off her hat, winding a bright green scarf turbanwise around her head, and under her breath she hummed a little tune.

Behind her straggled the pack camels with the tents and camp equipment, the cook riding sidewise with a crate of live chickens to keep him company, and the camel men trudging along on foot.

Now and again the eyes of the green-turbaned girl took furtive note of an another member of the party—a man who looked to be in his late thirties and who sat his Arab horse as superbly as the girl sat her camel. Earlier in the day they had raced their steeds in mad little skirmishes over the desert, much to the admiration of the staider members of the party, but now they were a little tired.

The man on the horse was a spectacular individual. He wore a white turban with a rough riding kit of linen jacket and light corduroy breeches. His sunburned features were aquiline, almost ugly; he had a brown beard, soft and silky, and his ears were curiously pointed, giving an impression of faunlike irresponsibility.

Whenever the girl's glance strayed in his direction he would look at her so hard that she had a sense of pulling herself away from his gaze with violence. He was always looking at her, and she kept wondering what it was he wanted to say that he could not or would not put into words.

The girl was very happy. It seemed to her that she had not a care in all the world. At the gate of the desert the whole of life was miraculously changed, and she wanted to ride on and on toward that ghost of a vanished sea on the western horizon. Behind her were stark, purple-shadowed mountains, but Sahara was before her, and passionately she longed to penetrate to its very heart.

The man pointed with his riding crop to-

ward a great sand dune which rose like a cliff a half mile to their right.

"That will be a good place to make camp," he said. "If a wind springs up, we'll be sheltered."

Then he gave her that look again, the look that she had to struggle against until it seemed like a mortal combat.

"I've brought a rug to carpet the floor of your tent," he said softly. "It's a rather special rug. I hope the other ladies won't be jealous."

The girl laughed gently. They wouldn't be jealous, but the one who rode bunched up like a jockey might wonder why any one but herself had been signaled out for such favor; and the stout, red-faced one—who was an authoress—possessed keen intuitions, and had already warned her young secretary-companion that they knew nothing at all about this charming Aylmar Brinton.

He had first made their acquaintance in the little hotel at El Kantara, and was unexplained beyond the fact that he proclaimed himself a poet by virtue of a slender book of sentimental verse, and a painter on the strength of some colorful sketches.

Yes, he was charming. The authoress admitted that with a shrewd gleam in her humorous eyes. But—

The girl was so happy that she could have died of the joy of it.

It was not love. She didn't think she was in love with the poet-painter. The thing seemed like a spell of enchantment rising out of the desert. It was a mirage and a song in the wind; it was the echo of things long dead which whispered perpetually in this strange land of mystery. Life was here all about her—a life felt and sometimes even glimpsed; things that one would not believe who hadn't felt and seen for one's self. Those things pressed rapture upon her.

She turned to her companion, and this time she let him hold her eyes. She made no struggle.

"I wish I understood the desert," she said. "Some day perhaps I shall."

He laughed oddly. "When that day comes, sweet child, you will be dead."

"You don't know what I mean. I mean—I wish I could tell you. I can't express it."

Again he laughed. "Exactly. You don't know, yourself. Nor does anybody—although now and again I suspect the Arabs of guarding secrets we'd all like to share. But I'm glad you like my desert."

"*Yours?*" she demanded.

"Ours, then," he replied. "Yours and mine."

He left her abruptly and galloped ahead to confer with the tall man on the donkey about making camp under the lee of the sand dune.

The authoress said to the jockey: "How on earth are we going to get off these animals? I know I shall pitch head over heels when mine starts to kneel down."

"That would be one way to get off," replied her friend. "Hang on to the rope at the back for dear life, and shut your eyes."

"It will be a dreadful moment," said the stout, red-faced one.

CHAPTER I.

THE MIRAGE OF HAPPINESS.

EVE KINGSLAKE stood at the drawing-room window with the telegram in her hand, staring intently into the garden. It was a frozen December day, with ice on the little ornamental pond, no breath of wind, and a curious ferocity in the sun's red disk. Something sullen about that sun and something ominous in the still bleakness of the dead garden, where bare black limbs of trees creaked suddenly and the glassy film over the pond bubbled with air holes.

Ada, the parlormaid, had brought in the telegram about five minutes ago, and after reading it Mrs. Kingslake had gone to the window as if instinctively seeking escape. She stood there quietly enough, giving no sign of the inward turmoil which seemed tearing her very soul to rags and pieces, a tall, magnificently built woman with a rope of red brown hair twisted around her head like a crown, and little flecks of yellow in eyes the color of jade.

Seen in profile, her features were pure Greek, a trifle heavy, the nose starting flush with straight thick brows, the lips full and pink and pouting—the lips of a woman who has been well loved and a little spoiled; lips that would always drink greedily of the wine of life, draining the goblet as many times as it was offered.

Yet full face, and when she smiled all that heaviness vanished, that sometimes sullenness like the breathless ferocity of to-day's sullen sun gave way to an altogether remarkable charm. The jade eyes held a mystery of their own, a vital secret which made men and women ask themselves what it was Eve Kingslake possessed of knowledge which she kept so completely and so provokingly to herself. When she smiled the pink lips could be too expressive for comfort.

There was, in fact, too much individuality about this woman to suit her rather ordinary walk in life. Imagine erecting a temple to Venus in a popular suburb!

Eve's husband, Neil Kingslake, a prosperous city man, was adoring but unimaginative, and she returned his adoration and seemed perfectly happy in the commonplace round of a well-sheltered life. Bridge parties, golf, exchange of luncheon and dinner invitations, the excitement of the children's homecoming from school, anniversaries marked by presents and theater trips, running up to town for a little shopping, totaling household accounts and deciding about the summer holidays—that was Eve's life, and she would not have changed it for anything else on earth. That, indeed, was the secret held so steadfastly by the strange flecked eyes, for Eve Kingslake had known peril. Its shadow was over her even now.

She reread the telegram, which to the casual eye seemed harmless enough. All it said was:

> Can you come to town to-day? Wish consult you about important investment. Stay night if possible. AUNT KITTY.

Presumably the sender of this message was a Mrs. Lawrence, Eve's widowed aunt, who lived in London and never made a financial move without consulting her niece, much to Neil's amusement. It was mere superstition on Aunt Kitty's part. She seemed to think that Eve's advice brought her luck.

But what should be taken into account was the fact that Aunt Kitty never sent telegrams. She was very careful about small sums, holding that time is of less value than money; and, on the score that time has its worth, she did not even patronize the telephone service.

However, Neil was away in the north on business at this precise moment, so the telegram did not demand any special explanation. It might just as well have been signed by the person who actually sent it: a personage in fact who certainly was not Aunt Kitty.

All down the years this thing had been coming toward Eve, stealthily but surely, and as she stared so intently out of the window it was not the bleak garden that she saw, the garden which in a few months would burst into joyous, colorful life once more, but a very different scene indeed.

Memory painted vivid pictures for her; memory was calling her as the muezzin in the minaret of a mosque calls the faithful to prayer; memory tasted hot on her lips, not as the wine of life she loved, but gritty hot as though her lips were smeared with desert sand; and scents were brought to her nostrils, vagrant, African scents, of the bazaars and of things steaming over charcoal fires, a waft of ambergris, and of camels dusty in the blazing sunshine.

Her arms, held rigidly, trembled a little. All down the years this thing had been creeping toward her, out of the desert. There had never been any escape from it, although she had tried again and again to cheat herself into thinking there was.

She ought never to have married Neil: it had been wrong to buy happiness at such a price. She should have waited. If only she had known before it happened what the desert can do to the soul of a woman. That had been the sheer cruelty of it—because she hadn't known. The cheating, lying mockery of the thing! Nothing real there, only ghosts of dead cities and a phantom love song in the wind.

Here was reality—here, if you please, in Bishop's Troll—in one's own safe home, with Neil and the children. There was reality in bridge parties and having important clients to dinner. There was reality in pots and pans and household accounts.

Yet the desert, that vanished mockery, had borne its fruit. It was real enough that a little girl, known to her own quite small world as Sara Brinton, would be seventeen years old in a few days and the convent school in Paris could not keep her much longer. Something must be decided for that little girl's future. What manner of child had been born of that desert madness?

Eve passed her hand across her forehead. It felt damp and cold to her touch, yet she was tingling with a warm sense of vitality. To live it all again— That strange, fantastic half man, half faun, who had taken her youth and crushed it, and who was now most impossibly Aylmar Brinton, fourth Viscount Grayling, millionaire ship owner and an important member of his majesty's government.

In the desert days he had been little more than an adventurer of good birth who had married a middle-aged music-hall star in his youth and been sent wandering by his outraged family until time and circumstances called him back to his heritage. It was indeed nearly impossible to visualize him as the Lord Grayling of to-day. His unsuitable wife was dead now; rumor had it that she had drunk herself out of this world.

Eve had seen his photographs in the picture papers, of course, and read some of his fiery speeches which generally turned the house into a bear garden; but it had been a long time since she had seen the man himself.

On the edge of Sahara, Aylmar Brinton and the desert had taken brief hold upon her life and shaped it unmercifully according to their mysterious will. The following year Eve spent in Paris, still supposed by Aunt Kitty to be in the employ of the traveling authoress, and Aylmar Brinton gave his own name to Sara.

He had paid for the child's care and schooling all these years, but it had been understood that some day her mother must be taken into consultation as regarded her future.

And now obviously the "some day" had arrived.

CHAPTER II.

THE CLANDESTINE FOG.

THAT year, mostly alone in Paris before the unfortunate little Sara came into a world which had no place for her, had shaken Eve to the depths of her soul. She had fled in sheer panic from the living symbol of her secret, and with a torn and bleeding heart. Brinton had begged her to wait, but she had not the courage. Very likely, when the madness had passed, she discovered that she did not love him enough—if indeed she had ever loved him at all—and certainly she did not love him now.

She had only seen him once since Sara's birth—an odd, uncomfortable meeting in a hotel lounge shortly after her marriage to Neil—and it was arranged that Grayling should communicate with her by telegram over the signature of Aunt Kitty, should circumstances make it necessary. It was then that Eve first began to feel that shadow, that thing of peril, creeping toward her. Always there was the longing to see her abandoned baby; and a fierce resentment that Grayling had grimly announced his own determination to keep in personal touch with the little Sara.

What would he do about the child now? Eve felt that she almost hated him for his liberty to do pretty much as he pleased.

The stillness of that frozen day!

Down here in Bishop's Troll there was no hint of the black gloom which had descended upon London. Eve had a small bag packed, and, giving but the briefest explanation to her servants, caught a train which should have got her to town about four o'clock, but was an hour late.

The sullen red sun disappeared, wiped out by fog, and at Charing Cross there was chaos, an unearthly sort of bedlam in which surging masses of people struggled for trains

that might or might not go, while porters shouted and whistles shrieked demoniac defiance.

Eve fought her way to a telephone booth, where she had to queue up for ten minutes, and then finally got through to a number on the Victoria exchange. A man's voice answered her. It sounded as if he might be a secretary, and when he asked her name she suddenly stopped short at "Mrs. Kings—" That would do; Grayling would know who she was. "Mrs. King," she repeated, eliminating the final "s."

There was the click of a domestic telephone switch, and presently another voice, a querulous one, was demanding if she were Eve, where she was, and where the owner of the voice could see her.

They fixed it up between them that she should go to the Corintheum, a big hotel in Piccadilly, and engage a sitting-room so that they could talk privately.

"I'll call in about an hour," said Grayling. "Name of Brinton, you understand."

"Yes. Ask for Mrs. King," Eve replied.

She rang off abruptly and fled from the booth as if from a crime.

Suddenly her heart was going *thump, thump*—and all sorts of fears assailed her. Suppose the fog had prevented Neil from getting away from London last night? Any amount of things can be supposed by a guilty conscience. Even the dense fog afforded her no sense of protection. Neil of the kind heart and undistinguished face seemed to be peering at her from under the hat of every form that passed.

In the cab it was no better. They crept toward Piccadilly by inches, and here and there flares were lighted, silhouetting more Neils than there could possibly be in this world. She seemed to see her husband everywhere.

Out of the cab, she found herself suddenly transferred to dazzling, crowded brightness. The hotel lounge was very full; somewhere a band raced at full canter; there was a faint odor of tea and buttered toast mingling with tobacco and with acrid drifts of fog as the doors let in atmosphere at every revolution.

The reception clerk looked Mrs. King over with doubtful detachment. He had no single rooms. For one night only? The hotel was pretty full; they were turning people away. Well, yes, he had a suite, and it was priced at six guineas.

Eve said she would take the suite, and when the clerk cast his semidetached glance slightly in the direction of her very small bag she said she would prefer to pay now, as she might wish to leave quite early in the morning.

She hesitated for an instant over the signing of the register, then set herself down as a Mrs. King of an address in Bedford which was that of a housekeeper of one of Neil's clients, and she wrote in a painfully slanting hand, so obviously assumed that the reception clerk suddenly took a penetrating interest in her. He knew that she was not a Mrs. King, that her home was not in Bedford, and that there was something a little unlawful about her.

But he was not in a position to prove his opinion. He knew, but it was not positive knowledge.

CHAPTER III.

AFTERMATH.

EVE disappeared in the direction of a lift accompanied by a page boy carrying her small bag, and felt quite lost when finally and with some ceremony she was ushered into the six-guinea suite.

There was a vast wardrobe and two chests of drawers in the double bedroom, and she had nothing to put in them but her night things. The huge bathrooms glittered and gleamed with pseudo-onyx and silvered fittings, and the sitting room with its cunningly arranged lights, its multitude of chairs, divans, and inlaid tables, betokened the salon of a successful adventuress whose education in taste had stopped short contentedly at cushioned ease. The whole place was most uncomfortably hot. Eve went into the bedroom, took off her hat and coat, and powdered her nose, but did not unpack her bag. Perhaps after her talk with Grayling she'd go back home.

This palatial hotel suite made her feel a little faint. It was so unlike home, so unsheltered, so blatantly suggestive of—of what? Of the stage, possibly, or the motion picture screen. It wasn't real, but its unreality wasn't the same as the desert's.

The desert! That tent with its gay lining and the glorious Eastern rug spread on the flat sand; the love songs of the camel drivers, and the roaring camp fire which for a little while had blanched the golden moonlight to whiteness.

Strange that she should see the desert in this place. But she was seeing it and feeling it, too. Vividly she recalled a certain mirage, a pink and white and yellow city hung on cliffs above an indigo lake fringed by giant palms.

There had been little, curiously rigged ships on that like of mirage—but motionless.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling went the telephone. Eve brought herself back to the superheated hotel suite, and the mirage vanished.

"Yes? Oh, yes! Please show Mr. Brinton up."

Downstairs the reception clerk beckoned the porter with a raised eyebrow. "What name did he give?"

"Brinton, sir," the porter replied.

The reception clerk looked wise. After all, the lady had a suite, and it was not for him to question the alias of a Lord Grayling. Besides, strictly speaking, it was not an alias.

He thought of that woman. There was something a little remarkable about her—something which entitled her to unusual regard. He wondered what her age might be, and why, if she were as interesting and important as she seemed, that he had not heard or seen her before. A friend of Lord Grayling's—perhaps a society woman—but it was a little dangerous of them to intrigue at the Corintheum.

Upstairs, Eve was opening the door, and as she did so there was an impression of years rolling back. Physically the impression was thunderous.

It was remarkable that Grayling had changed very little; the newspaper photographs had represented him inadequately or else his personality eluded the camera. There was some gray in the brown beard and hair and the fierce sunburn had disappeared, but that was all to mark the passing of the years which had half tamed him.

The eyes which had held Eve so closely were still compelling—that straight, hard gaze bore down upon and threatened her now.

She drew back from it, smiling faintly, but it was a nervous smile.

"So—once again!" he exclaimed, tossing his soft hat in the direction of one of the inlaid tables. It slithered off and fell to the floor, but neither of them took any notice.

They stood regarding each other, and the woman was conscious of fear. This man could make her forget Neil, if he liked; he had once made her forget that she lived in an ordinary world. There was that secret bond between them—the little Sara!

"You are as young as you ever were—and twice as beautiful," he said grudgingly. "I suppose it's because you're happy. Happy people are always beautiful."

A little color came into her cheeks, and she threw a self-conscious glance toward the mirror.

"I am—I ought to be happy. But of course you know—please tell me about Sara. Oh, if you knew what I go through, how tortured I am, really, you'd pity me. You wouldn't look as though you hated me."

Suddenly she gave him her hands to hold. That wide gulf of years must be bridged for this little hour; she must try not to think of Neil or anything connected with him, but of Grayling and that unfortunate child of theirs. The firm hand clasp of his hands stirred emotion in her, so that something seemed to rise up in her throat with a strangling sensation.

"Don't look at me like that," she begged breathlessly. "I can't bear it."

"I don't think I'm looking at you," he said slowly. "Not at the wife of a smug little city man who lives in a stucco

suburban villa, anyway. No, I'm looking *for* you, my dear. We left each other out there, you know.

"I think we're still out there, the real you and the real me. We're wandering toward the sea and the sunset. Do you remember how we used to feel that if we walked only a few miles we'd come to the sea?"

"Yes, I remember," Eve replied in a husky whisper. "And sometimes we heard drums beating and the music of a flute—but it was only the wind."

"Only the wind!" Grayling repeated. "I wonder!"

Gently she drew her hands from his and the little spell was broken.

"When I got your telegram, of course I knew it must be—that it's nearly time for something to be done about Sara," Eve said. "That's why you telegraphed, I suppose."

"Something has been done," Grayling replied brusquely. "She got herself expelled from the convent. They're sending her over to me to-morrow and that's what I wanted to see you about; why I asked you to stay the night, if possible."

Eve gave a little cry of dismay. "Expelled! What for, Aylmar?"

"As far as I can gather, she tried to elope with the brother of a school friend—one of those society ruffians who live on women and blackmail. I have an idea he's found out who I am, and of course he hopes to make money out of it."

"And if he finds out who I am—"

Grayling nodded. "It's only fair to warn you that if you do what I want you to do, he may. I believe the fellow is in London now. His name is Raymond Lacosta. You see, they know me at the convent as Brinton, and as far as Sara knows, I am her legal father. As a matter of fact, I mean to adopt her, and it's going to be a rather sad business telling her—well, something of the truth.

"She writes to me at chambers I took on at the Temple for that purpose. She thinks I live there a lonely old widower, and that's where I shall take her first. One of the lay sisters is bringing her over, and the train gets into Victoria at six o'clock. I wondered if you could go to the station with me? My dear, of course she's been told that her mother's dead—you'd be there simply as an old friend of mine. It would be so easy to arrange that, wouldn't it? The child needs a woman to look after her a little—just at first."

Tears filled Eve's eyes and she dabbed at them with her handkerchief.

He was pleading with her to take an interest in her own child! As though the thought of that child hadn't been with her day and night for the last seventeen years—years of longing and agony and grim relentless remorse. Those other children of hers—Neil Kingslake's children—so safe and sheltered, while this daughter of storm had been left virtually to look after herself.

"I must," Eve whispered. "At whatever cost—whatever risk."

But even as she said that, the staid matron of Bishop's Troll, the Mrs. Kingslake to whom her husband's love and honor were beyond the price of rubies, was counting both the possible cost and the risk.

Years ago she had made it so clear to Grayling that Sara could have no place in her life, and he had taken the whole blame upon himself, where indeed it was; yet she had longed with such longing as only she herself knew, to find some way whereby it could be managed.

"I had to tell you about the Lacosta creature." Grayling said anxiously. "I don't want you to be hurt, Eve. You are the only woman in the world I've ever loved, and I wouldn't hurt you for anything. There would be a risk for you, yet—"

The compelling eyes regarded her wistfully, now.

"Look here—" he went on, taking a little leather case from his pocket. "This is Sara. She's rather lovely isn't she? But a great handful. I wish I knew what to do for her. I wish I knew some good woman I could trust and get to help me.

"There's Lady Dilthorne—I might ask her. She's been trying to marry me for heaven knows how many years. But I thought I'd ask you first."

A little flame of jealousy swept over Eve; jealousy of Sara being looked after by a Lady Dilthorne.

Her lips trembled as she stared at the photograph.

It was curious that she could trace little resemblance either to Grayling or herself in the small, piquant features. It was a gypsy's face, the face of a nomad girl, old for her years, inscrutably wise, sensitive and daring.

Grayling put the case back into his pocket.

"Well, that's how it stands," he said with a sigh. "They warned me that it might be better to have a couple of policemen to bring her across instead of one small nun. They think she isn't to be trusted. That fellow may decide to meet the boat at Dover, if he knows she's coming.

"She's clever, Eve—and she imagines she's in love with the scoundrel. But she did promise to have a talk with me before trying any more monkey tricks—she sent me a telegram giving me her word of honor that she would. The Mother Superior seems skeptical that she'll keep it, but in spite of all my sins, Eve, I like to think that the only child I have in the world won't go back on her word of honor."

Eve scarcely heard any of this. Her mind was a place of blank spaces, but some of them were filling up. Neil would be in Aberdeen for at least three days; Christmas was coming on and there was the good excuse of shopping to keep her in town if any question arose out of her staying.

Harry and Carol wouldn't be coming home from school for another week, and Eve, herself, could leave the Corintheum and ask Aunt Kitty to put her up for a night or two. Perhaps the risk wouldn't be as great as she feared, and the cost nothing at all, while one furious ache would be lulled a little.

And as those blank spaces in her mind filled up she knew how it was going to be, how it must be. A gathering determination took possession of her. At all risks, at whatever cost, she must do what Grayling wanted her to do, and what she, herself, desired with a misery that was like that of a starved and thirsty creature crying for bread and water.

She lifted her head and smiled, the smile of the glorious young girl who had ridden with such mad joy and fearlessness into the desert so many years ago, and the words were on her lips to tell him that she would go with him to the station to meet Sara to-morrow, when a tap at the door froze them both to questioning silence.

Then Grayling said: "It's only a maid or valet, but you'd better see."

Eve stood up trembling from head to foot. In her consciousness it could only be Neil, yet she forced herself to the door and opened it.

Outside in the wide, red-carpeted passage stood a youngish man with a fair mustache waxed at the points, a sleeky handsome man dressed with that accentuated smartness which suggests the Boulevards rather than Saville Row.

He stared at Eve with a hint of insolence in his prominent blue eyes—took her in at his leisure—and finally said: "I beg your pardon, but perhaps I have made a mistake. I was told that I'd find Lord Grayling here."

Eve returned his stare coldly. The emergency gave her courage and she knew that Grayling could not be seen from the passage.

"Yes, you have made a mistake," she replied, and closed the door in his face.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HOUR APPROACHES.

"WHO could that be? He asked for you—said he was told that he would find Lord Grayling here," Eve said breathlessly. "What does it mean, Aylmar?"

Grayling lifted a cautionary hand.

"Wait a moment," he said quietly. "Don't say anything for a moment."

He went softly to the door and listened, but could hear nothing outside. Eve was shuddering as though struck by an icy wind. She clasped and unclasped her hands in an agony of suspense while Grayling still stood at the door listening intently. She marveled at the quietness of the man, the perfect immobility of his features, so strongly aquiline, like something sharp and tense cut out of bronze.

An age seemed to pass, then he came back to the fireplace where she was standing and took her tortured hands in his firm grasp.

"Don't be frightened, my child," he said kindly. "Nothing can harm you. Nobody knows who you are—and it doesn't matter about me."

"But—how could the hotel people let anybody come up like that, unannounced? It's outrageous," she replied in a sobbing breath.

"Depend upon it, they didn't. It's somebody who saw me come in and managed to find out where I am. What was the fellow like? A detective?"

Eve gulped and shook her head.

"I don't know—I shouldn't think so. He stared at me, up and down, in the most insolent fashion before he spoke. It was as though he meant me to know that he'd remember me. He had a fair mustache and you might call him handsome."

"Ha!" Grayling exclaimed. Then his brows knitted together and for a moment he was sunk in deep thought. "I believe I know," he said finally.

"You think it might be—"

"Yes, I'm pretty sure that the fellow is Sara's admirer. I've never seen him, but I've had a good description of him from a detective of my own, and I believe he's in London, as I told you. Were there a lot of people about when you came into the hotel?"

"Oh, masses—the place was packed."

"You wouldn't remember seeing him before?"

"No, I was too nervous to notice anybody in particular. The clerk made me feel nervous. I—I felt that he was taking too great an interest in me, although he scarcely looked at me. It was curious that he could make me feel like that without saying anything out of the ordinary. The pen nearly flew from my hand when I was signing the register."

"My dear, you may be quite certain that the hotel people have nothing whatever to do with this intrusion. You should ring down to the office at once and make a complaint. They ought to know about it."

"Oh, I couldn't!" Eve cried.

"Well, then, I will."

"No—no! Let me think for a moment."

She pressed her hands to her head and the lovely flecked eyes were wild with fear. Could it be that Neil had suspected her secret?

Years ago she had once been indiscreet enough to mention the fact that she had known Lord Grayling when he was Aylmar Brinton, a fantastic young man who seemed half Arab and had initiated the little party she was with into the mysteries of the desert. Neil had been interested, but it had never before occurred to her that he might also have been suspicious.

But ever since she had rather regretted saying anything to Neil, because whenever Grayling's name came up, or he had done anything startling in a political sense, Neil always drew her attention to it, and spoke of Grayling as "Your Bedouin friend," or, "I see your sheik is shaking us up again." That silly little pun always pleased Neil.

Suppose that Neil had his suspicions? It was difficult to tell about him. He was so quiet, so reserved even with the wife he adored.

Often Eve had been obliged to exercise superhuman control to prevent herself from taking him by the shoulders and demanding to know what he was thinking about, when he sat quietly pulling at his pipe and looking at her as though she were almost a stranger to him, and a puzzling sort of stranger at that!

Once she had given way and asked him, and he had replied almost as she feared and expected: "I am thinking about you, my dear—wondering if I shall ever really know you." Then he had added quickly: "That's your charm. You are not merely one woman—you are twenty women. I don't think it can be quite right, because it gives me the feeling that I've got a harem."

But suppose that Neil were much cleverer than he seemed to be? He must be clever or he wouldn't have got on so well in life. Could it be possible that whenever he went away on business he had her "watched"?

Had he found out in some way that a

telegram signed "Aunt Kitty" would be a signal to her to make a rendezvous with a man who had played a vital part in her past?

"I think you are being most unwise." Grayling said, when her moment of self-searching had gone on long enough. "Not to report that man, whoever he was, is equal to acknowledging that either you or I have something to conceal in the mere fact of my calling upon you. There is no reason on earth why I shouldn't call upon you."

"No, but I—you see—"

"My dear Eve, don't be hysterical. Everybody knows me, and in this instance plainly I am the target, not you. But there's no change to be got out of me. I'll stand up to any blackmailer on earth and give him all he's asking for—which will be my blessing and a term in prison."

A heavy tiredness took possession of Eve. It was all so unconvincing to her that she, herself, wasn't the target. The precious things of life seemed to be slipping through her fingers, and she knew that she had never really been entitled to them. They had never belonged to her, those jewels of happiness. She had wanted everything her own way; she had sinned, but tried to get out of paying the price, and until now she had got out of it.

With the tap at the door and that insolent stranger staring at her and speaking of Grayling, there was undoubtedly the hour of reckoning. She knew it in every fiber of her being.

It was all in keeping with the thing that had been creeping toward her down the years. Some day it had to come, and the some day was now. One lied to and cheated one's self; one lied to other people and cheated them—most especially those one loved dearly, to save them pain and also to gain happiness for one's self. But there must come an hour of reckoning.

"Eve, my dear, dear child—pull yourself together." Grayling protested anxiously.

She looked so white and weary that he thought she was about to faint.

"Very well, I'll try."

"Then telephone to the office, as I asked you to," he urged.

"No, I'll go down and speak to them. I'd rather do that than telephone. The man may be loitering about and I could point him out if he is. I don't want them sending somebody up here."

"Just as you like," Grayling replied. "Perhaps it would be better to do that."

CHAPTER V.

ILLUSION.

HER rooms were on the second floor and Eve decided to walk down, since there was a staircase directly opposite. At one end of the long passage a floor waiter carrying a tray of cocktails was visible for a brief moment, and toward the other end a woman dressed for dinner came out of her room and walked towards the lift.

Even the sight of these two quite harmless people increased Eve's self-conciousness. She hated the very idea of facing that murky, crowded foyer again and of speaking to the overwise young man at the desk.

The stairs were wide and drafty and she went down slowly, finding herself at another entrance, when she got to the bottom, than the one she had entered from Piccadilly. She felt stupid and bewildered, but finally a page-boy directed her to the office and she threaded her way through the little groups of persons standing about gathering themselves for early dinner.

The man who had knocked at the door and asked for Lord Grayling might easily have been there somewhere, but Eve did not see him. There were too many people and they were still coming, driven in by the fog, a dense, anxious crowd clamoring at the desk for rooms which had long since ceased to be available.

The particular clerk of Eve's acquaintance was wholly detached, now. He answered questions monotonously without looking at anybody.

"Have you booked a room—No, sir; very sorry, sir, but we've nothing left."

After all, he wasn't the person to complain to, Eve decided. It would be the head porter, of course. In his little cubby-hole the head porter was very busy with the telephone, but finally she got his attention.

She stammered out her grievance. Some one, a man, a stranger to herself, had come unannounced to the door of her sitting room a little while ago, saying that he had been told he would find Lord Grayling there.

The porter shook his head.

"No, madam, there has been no inquiry here, except that a gentleman called some time ago and I was answered on the telephone—"

"Yes, I know. But this was some one else, a few moments ago, and he came up without being announced. Is that usual?"

"No, madam, it isn't. Perhaps you'd better speak to the hotel detective."

It seemed to Eve that she was getting involved deeper and deeper, and that out of her fervent desire to be wholly inconspicuous had come a great publicity.

Presently she was sitting very ill at ease on the edge of a chair in an office room talking to a solemn-faced man behind a flat desk, while another man lolled in the background with a manner of indifference which did not in the least conceal his real interest in her and her little affair.

She had to describe the unannounced visitor; to say why she had been so disturbed by his apology..

She grew crimson and blurted out: "But of course it wasn't a mistake. Lord Grayling isn't staying in the hotel. He happened to be calling upon me. He gave his family name—Brinton."

That stimulated the solemn-faced man to a measure of activity.

"Ah, I see," he said. "Well, we'll look into it at once and let you know, Mrs. King. Thank you for reporting it. It may have been the porter's fault. We'll make inquiries and let you know."

Eve was ushered to the lift and her frame of mind would be difficult to describe. For one thing she was very angry with Grayling. It seemed almost wicked of him to have forced her into this situation. Suppose they got hold of that man and there was some sort of prosecution? Just exactly what it might be, Eve did not know, but her imagination seized upon every possibility.

The matter of Sara complicated it, too. If the man who had knocked at her door were the Raymond Lacosta who was bent upon getting Sara or money or both—it would be very dangerous to go to Victoria to-morrow with Grayling.

Yet Eve's whole heart and soul were set upon going. She was in a frenzy of torment at the thought of the child's peril. Poor little Sara—abandoned by her own mother—Sara, with the lovely face of a nomad girl, the widely-spaced soft eyes, the hint of daring and strong will in the firm mouth and chin, the appreciation of life indicated in the delicate curves of nostrils and high-bridged cheeks.

It had come to Eve, dimly at first and then with overpowering conviction, that Sara was herself as she ought to have been, and Grayling as he was; a strange, wild composite of earth, air, fire and water all blended and held together by a soul which hovered indecisively between ascent to highest heaven or descent to unhappy hell.

She knew her first-born only as a soft little bundle held briefly and fearfully against her heart—yet there was more to that. All these years that Sara had been growing up, something in Eve had grown, too, and kept pace with her.

The drum beats and the sweet, wailing notes of the flute—Grayling had wondered if the illusion of them came only from the wind.

CHAPTER VI.

THE COUNSEL OF COWARDICE.

WHEN she reached the door of her sitting room Eve was obliged to knock, for she had not taken the key downstairs with her, but as she half expected, there was no reply. Very likely Grayling thought it wiser not to answer; still, it might have occurred to him that she hadn't her key.

She tapped again, softly and quickly, thrumming on the panel with her fingers, then stood indecisive as there still was no result. But at that moment a chambermaid coming out of a bedroom further down the corridor, saved the situation by opening the door for her with a pass-key.

Eve thanked her hurriedly and slipped inside with furtive awkwardness.

There was no one in the sitting room and just for a moment she thought that Grayling must have become tired of waiting for her and decided to go. Perhaps he had left a note, or would ring her up later. But no, he couldn't have gone. There was his hat on the floor where it had slid off the table. Had he become worried by her long absence and gone downstairs to look for her?"

She opened the door which led to the little private hall and noticed that the door of the bedroom stood slightly ajar. The lights in the bedroom were full on and she knew that she had not left them so. Had the chambermaid been in, or could it be that Grayling had gone in there? Everything was very quiet.

She called out softly, "Aylmar, where are you?" and stood listening with a cold sense of fear in her heart.

Did she hear anything or was it only imagination that she seemed to hear a drum beating monotonously and a far-off flute-like note? There was certainly scarcely any sound of street traffic. The fog had reduced that to a minimum.

Again she called and listened, then went to the door and looked into the bedroom.

Grayling lay across the bed with the eiderdown quilt drawn over his shoulders. The counterpane had been dragged off and lay on the floor. At first Eve thought he was asleep and was greatly annoyed at his taking the liberty of having a nap on her bed.

She went over and shook him, pulling the eiderdown away.

"Aylmar, please wake up. You shouldn't have done this—" Under her hands his shoulders felt curiously and unpleasantly rigid, and a strange, pungent odor hovered in the air.

She shook him more violently now and spoke harshly under her breath, managing finally to turn him over on his back. Then with a sharp cry she drew away, her lips parted in a grimace of fear, her eyes dilated with horror. The man was dead.

Trembling, she turned away and started to reach for the telephone, but as her hand was actually on the instrument she hesitated and then drew it back again. Something had rolled off the bed on to the floor, a small glittering object which fell at her feet as though consciously asking for her inspection.

She stooped down and picked it up, and then she saw what it was, a little roughly-hammered circle of silver wire which did not quite meet, as if a tiny fraction of it had been cut out and the ends slightly spatulated. It was the ring off the hatpin the handsome jeweler, Ducassin of El Kantara, had made for her years ago, the traditional pin of Algeria with its thick short shaft, flat ornamental disk and the ring to slip through to keep it in.

Eve glanced toward the dressing table where she had left her hat. The pin was not there. Again she approached the rigid figure on the bed and forced herself to make a close inspection.

Except for the fact that he did not breathe and that his face was icy, Grayling looked as though he were peacefully asleep, but there was a splash of blood on his throat and just under the left ear was a darkened clot from which a purplish discoloration like a bruise radiated. The pungent odor was most noticeable now, and Eve found herself growing faint and giddy.

She stood up and drew a hand across her eyes. He had been stabbed with something sharp—*sharp and poisoned*—and she had the clew as to what that something was—her Algerian hatpin.

But where was the pin itself?

That was a ghastly business, hunting for it. She had to move that rigid body again, but some of the horror wore off in her frantic anxiety to find the pin. As far as she could ascertain it was not in the bed, and gradually she turned her attention to other parts of the room.

The significance of what the finding of the hatpin might mean was as yet under-

stood by her only subconsciously, but she did know that if possible she must find it.

In the midst of her continued search the telephone in the sitting room rang. She let it ring twice before she gathered sufficient courage to answer it, then she drew the bolt across the bedroom door which led to the corridor, and flew into the sitting room, dropping exhausted into a chair by the telephone stand.

It was only the office ringing up to ask if she had been troubled again, and to say they were very sorry, but could not trace the anonymous caller who had inquired for Lord Grayling.

She hung up the receiver, laid her head on the stand and burst into sobs.

What on earth was she to do?

This meant the complete wreckage of her life—but, more terribly, the wreckage of Neil's life. Splendid Neil, who loved her so dearly and whom she had deceived in the cruellest way a woman can deceive the man who loves her.

He might forgive her, but it would break his heart. Quiet, gentle-natured men like Neil could be driven mad by such a blow as she was about to deal him.

And then she stood up, clenching her hands until the nails bit into the flesh of her palms.

There was just one chance, one desperate chance of escape, and she must take it. It might be a coward's way out, but she would have to try it for Neil's sake.

CHAPTER VII.

MERCIFUL CHANCE.

THE moment that she came to her decision, a reckless sort of courage flowed into Eve's veins. Nothing mattered, really; nothing could be worse than what had already happened. Her brain, a riot of confusion, understood that, at least.

She abandoned her search for the hatpin, which apparently was not to be found, and forced herself back to that room of tragic mystery. One small, foolish thing seemed to make what she was about to do quite a moral proceeding.

She had paid her six guineas in advance for twenty-four hours' enjoyment of this luxurious suite. She owed the hotel nothing, and if the bedroom door remained bolted until to-morrow, no one could question her right to have it so.

She could do nothing for Aylmar. He was dead—how he had died she did know, whether by his own hand or whether it was murder.

She could scarcely imagine that he had killed himself, that if he meant to do such a thing he would drag her into it; she believed that his feeling for her was more kindly than that. He wouldn't want to hurt her—he had said so when he warned her about the man with whom Sara had tried to elope.

She went into the bedroom and begged forgiveness of that still, rigid form. She kissed the cold forehead and then tucked the eiderdown about him again. It was a forlorn and vain thing to do, but the coldness of him in that uncomfortably hot room seemed pitiable.

It was all like so long ago, when she had said: "I can't bear it, Aylmar. I must leave you—I must get away and forget that this had happened." Only now she didn't add what she had said on the occasion of the other parting: "I don't love you." She spared the dead ears what she had inflicted with scarcely a thought upon the living.

The pungent odor of the drug or whatever it was seemed less noticeable now, but there were still faint drifts of it, and after a little difficulty Eve got a window open. Promptly the fog came rolling in, more dense and acrid than ever, but perhaps it was better so.

She put on her hat and coat, gathered up her gloves, handbag and the small dressing—bag. Then she switched off the lights and made her way from the sitting room.

It seemed impossible that she could escape, that any mortal being could escape from what she had left behind, but there was the one chance and she believed that Aylmar would wish her to take it.

She felt almost calm as she stepped out into the corridor again—would she ever forget that wide, still, white-walled and red-carpeted passage! Always there

seemed to be life behind the white walls and sometimes a hurrying figure sped across the crimson pathway, but it was really very still—still and wonderfully clean.

No one on the stairs. Did no one but herself ever use the stairs?

She came again to that side entrance and even the door porter was missing here. He was out looking for a taxi for a couple who had hopes of getting to the theater of their choice.

Nobody stopped Eve or took the slightest notice of her. She slipped out with a sob in her breath, and was immediately lost in the fog.

For a long time she walked without thinking or caring where she was going, her only impulse being to get as far away as possible from the dreadful thing she had left behind. Every now and again a great shudder shook her violently.

Perhaps it would be in to-morrow's papers, and she could almost see the headlines accusing her, asking her to come forward and explain. If only she had found her hatpin—Trivial things were beginning to bother her now; her head ached and the bag dragged at her arm; she was feeling lonely and miserable and even hungry.

Where to go, what to do? The thought of facing another hotel was unbearable.

Then suddenly the obvious, the only thing to do dawned upon her. She must go to Aunt Kitty's, of course, and say that she had been held up in the train by the fog and had been unable to send a telegram announcing her coming to town. Aunt Kitty wouldn't think of questioning her.

The trouble now was how to get to Aunt Kitty's. The whole thing was nightmarish; the cold biting fog, the sense of being lost, the flight from that crime which somehow she seemed to have committed, the sheer cruelty of life. It beat upon her with merciless intensity and presently she found herself sobbing hysterically.

It was like being all alone in a waste of waters, drowning with no hope of rescue. She groped on, the will to fight growing more and more feeble.

Then out of the murky darkness a white light was flashed upon her and behind the light loomed the form of a police constable.

Eve screamed and drew back. Should she drop her bag and run? She stood in a panic of indecision, closing her eyes as the white light played upon her face.

"What's the trouble, madam?" a friendly voice inquired. "Can I help you?"

Oh, forlorn hope—was it true that the policeman did not mean to take her into custody? She stumbled heavily and fell forward against him.

"I'm lost—I'm frightened," she wailed, as he set her on her feet as if she were a child.

"That's all right, now," he soothed her. "Nothing to get excited about. Where do you want to go?"

She gasped out Aunt Kitty's address in Kensington and then learned that she was on a street running down to the Embankment. The constable got the impression that she had just come from Charing Cross and was trying to find the Underground Station. He offered to pilot her there, but when they gained the Embankment the fog was lifting a little and there was a taxi stand with one cab left.

"I think I'll take that," Eve said. "I might get lost again in Kensington."

The constable helped her in and she thanked him a little incoherently.

The taxi started off cautiously into the the murky gloom and Eve lay back with closed eyes, more dead than alive, struggling to pull her senses together.

On, on—forever on into a black void. Kensington was a long ways off and they traveled slowly. There were moments when she dreaded the journey's end, and other moments when a wild impatience to get there seized her.

But all journeys end at last, even the long perilous journey of life, itself, and Eve stood finally in the warm vestibule of Honeywell Gardens, fumbling in her handbag for change to pay off the driver. She could scarcely see what was in her purse and counting out silver was almost beyond her, but in the end it was done and, gathering the last remnant of her strength, she climbed the two flights of stairs to her aunt's flat.

Contrary to what she feared and half expected, it was plain that Aunt Kitty had not yet gone to bed. There was a light shining behind the ground glass panel and scarcely had Eve pressed the bell when flying footsteps came to answer it. The door was flung open and there stood old Ella, the maid, quaking out a rapturous welcome.

"Oh, ma'am, here you are! We didn't know what to think. But here you are, at last."

Eve stared at her blankly. Were they both of them mad?

She came in and at that moment stout Aunt Kitty waddled out from the drawing room.

"My precious child, where have you been?" Aunt Kitty demanded. "Neil is half wild about you. He's gone out again to telephone."

"Neil?" Eve echoed. "*Neil*—here?"

The whole place went black for a moment, then she put out her hand and let Aunt Kitty lead her into the drawing-room.

"My precious pet, what is the matter? I suppose you got held up by the fog—" (Aunt Kitty raised her voice to a scream at this point for Ella was deaf). "Bring my smelling-salts, Ella—the *smelling-salts*."

"Tell me about Neil," Eve said faintly. "I don't think I understand."

"Didn't you get his telegram? But you must have. He telegraphed you that he hadn't been able to get away and asked me to put him up. Then later he telephoned and that parlormaid of yours said you'd left to come up here. She seemed rather muddled, he thought—because first she said you had had a telegram, and then she said a telegram came shortly after you left."

Ella appeared with the smelling-salts and Eva was invited to take a whiff of them. She did so and it knocked some consciousness into her.

"Where did you say Neil has gone now?" she asked.

"I told you," Aunt Kitty replied. "He's gone out to telephone again. He thought he'd better ring up the police."

"Oh, my God!" Eve moaned under her breath.

"But dear, how could we know you hadn't met with an accident? Anyway, it's all right now. Poor darling, you do look so tired. What happened?"

Eve took a couple of sniffs at the smelling-salts to revive her senses again.

"I got lost," she said. "You've no idea what it was like and—and I was afraid to take a taxi, so I thought I'd make for the Underground. I walked around and around for ages, and then a policeman put me right, but by that time the fog wasn't so bad and I decided to take a taxi after all. I might have got lost again."

"You poor darling, and I suppose you haven't had a thing to eat—Ella!"

It was all so simple and kindly, like a warm hard laid upon a cold and fainting heart. Dear Aunt Kitty, fat and long-faded blonde, her pink cheeks quivering with emotion bred of love, bustled about ordering things for Eve's comfort, a hot-water bottle to be put into the spare bed, a hot bath to be drawn, a hot little supper to be prepared.

And now her child must undress and have the hot bath; the supper she should have in bed. Neil would be back soon, and what a relief for him to find her here.

Neil!—how Eve dreaded the moment when she would have to face him. It would be too much to bear.

Then she remembered to-morrow. Strange that she hadn't thought of to-morrow since her flight from the Corintheum, until just now.

That first-born child of hers, who was not Neil's child, would be arriving at Victoria Station with nobody to meet her; not knowing who her father really was, and certainly not knowing that he was dead.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SPUR OF SUSPENSE.

DROWSILY, Eve was conscious of a whispered conversation going on somewhere near her.

She lay in the warm bed wishing to sleep, praying for forgetfulness.

Neil was in the room; Neil and Aunt Kitty, and Aunt Kitty was telling him all about it.

This was the safe, familiar sort of room that one understood—a few bits and pieces of old furniture, a fire in the grate, a shaded light on the bed-stand, sheets that smelled of lavender, some framed prints on the walls.

The whispered talk drew Eve's full attention finally, although she still seemed to be asleep.

"She was so tired, poor darling. I thought the best thing to do was to put her to bed. Eve isn't used to looking after herself, and it must have been dreadful for her—getting lost like that. How thankful we should be that nothing *did* happen to her!" That was Aunt Kitty.

Neil murmured that he was indeed most thankful, and added: "I'll sleep on the couch in the dressing-room to-night so as not to disturb her."

Eve continued to simulate sleep. Even when her husband turned out the light and bent over just touching her hair with his lips, she did not stir. Her grief was too great for the solace of his love. She was shamed and hurt in every atom of her being.

That she had done this thing to Neil! But it was no new thing, was it? The wrong had been done years ago: a sin is just as much a sin even if it isn't found out, and how little sin there would be in this world if along with it went the certainty of discovery.

To-morrow! She had to face to-morrow, and all the long, lonely years after to-morrow; not just one day, but the whole of life. With a deep sigh she turned and buried her face in the pillow, and she shook with sobs.

But after awhile she slept and then came dreams—she was riding across the desert with Aylmar Brinton toward that sea of mirage, and it was an endless journey. They were both worn out, but something made them go on; she was crying with fatigue, crying and begging for peace, when suddenly peace was with her, enfolding her like a warm garment. She woke up to find Neil sitting on the bed holding her close in his arms.

"My darling!" he said gently. "My poor, tired girl. There—it's all right, now, isn't it?"

She clung to him, laid her face against his breast and cried out to him never to let her go, always to keep her close and safe, always—no matter what happened—to remember that she loved him and had never loved any one else in all her life

"So that's the little nightmare, is it?" he said. "I know, my darling, and you'd have some job if you ever tried to lose me."

"I'm not sure. I thought I had lost you," she sobbed. "I thought I'd never see you again."

In the morning the fog was gone and a trickle of pallid sunshine filtered in when Ella drew the blinds. Then came Neil already dressed and breakfasted to say good-by. He was taking the morning train north and warned Eve that he might be away a week.

"You're all right this morning, old girl, aren't you?" he asked cheerfully. "But you'd better take it easy for to-day. Don't go out in any more fogs."

Eve let him kiss her and tried bravely to meet his cheerful mood, but after he had gone she lay back with a sense of relief.

It was still very early and she began to order her thoughts with some sort of sequence. Perhaps it was a sign that God had compassion for her in the fact she had come here last night, and that Neil had no idea that she had intended to be anywhere else.

When Ella brought a newspaper in with her breakfast tray she forced herself quite calmly to an inspection of what it might contain, and it contained nothing of vital interest to herself.

Well, that was not so very strange. Even by now they might not have discovered Grayling's body, unless the chambermaid had gone in through the sitting room to turn down the bed for the night. It was a little curious that obviously she hadn't done so.

While Eve was dressing, Aunt Kitty bustled in to make inquiries as to her health and plans for the day.

"We might do a little shopping," Aunt Kitty suggested, "and lunch at Parker's,

The shops are so gay. What shall I give Carol? I've knitted her a jumper, but I should like to give her something else—something not too useful."

Eve replied mechanically. Yes, they'd have a look at the shops and lunch wherever Aunt Kitty liked, and probably find no end of a choice of presents for Carol.

But all the time she was thinking furiously about that other daughter now starting on her journey to London, expecting to be met at Victoria by her father. There would be no one to protect her against almost certain harm unless Eve went, herself; and Eve knew that she must go. Already the hour of six was reaching out to her with its fatal demand.

She wondered if Grayling had ever mentioned his "friend," Mrs. Kingslake, to Sara; but more importantly she wondered if Sara would be surrendered to her care or would accept it, and what she should do with the child in that case.

By six o'clock the news of Grayling's death would be over all London, on every newspaper placard, on everyone's tongue. There would be a hue and cry after the Mrs. King who had vanished so mysteriously from the Corintheum—and with Sara involved in the matter it would be easy enough to link up the connection between that vanished Mrs. King and a Mrs. Neil Kingslake of Bishop's Troll.

It seemed to Eve that the only thing she could do would be to say to the girl: "I am your mother—but nobody knows it and you must keep my secret." Yet how could she hope to win the child's love or confidence at this late date?

One had to be two persons at once, the domestic Eve Kingslake of Bishop's Troll, full of Christmas plans and small talk for the benefit of garrulous Aunt Kitty; and that other Eve with the tragic problem which the desert had set for her so long ago.

That tragic Eve was amazed that Mrs. Neil Kingslake could so serenely discuss such unimportant things as Christmas when the world was made up of nameless peril for all mankind. To Mrs. Neil Kingslake it seemed most important, first that they should secure a table in Parker's crowded restaurant, and then choose what to eat; it was even important to argue amiably over which should have the privilege of paying the bill.

But after luncheon, Aunt Kitty was tired and wanted to go home, so the tragic Eve was no longer under a necessity to divide herself with the Eve of Bishop's Troll.

"I shall take a little nap," said Aunt Kitty, "and expect you back to tea. Neil says you must stay with me for a few days, and it will be so nice having you."

Eve hurriedly made an excuse. She might go to her club later on, and it was just possible if she did so that somebody would ask her to make a fourth at bridge. For a moment it looked as though Aunt Kitty meant to invite herself to meet her niece at the club, but she was pining for her nap, and so they parted without coming to any definite decision about it.

The tragic Eve crossed High Street to the big newsdealer's and stationery shop, and bought the latest edition of an evening paper, standing in the arcaded entrance to search it.

Nothing!

That was amazing. Again and again she went through the paper, page by page, column by column, coming finally to the "stop-press" at the back, but there was not so much as a hint of any hotel tragedy nor any mention of Grayling.

The sense of mystery was more terrifying, even, than what she had expected to see. It made her doubt her own reason.

"I wonder if I could possibly have dreamed it!" she muttered to herself.

Again, as last night, she had that feeling of being lost, struggling alone in a waste of waters—infinitely alone. The roar of High Street, the surging crowds of holiday shoppers, were non-existent. She felt that she must go back to the Corintheum if only to test the theory that possibly she had never had that dreadful experience.

Dazed, she walked slowly to a bus stop, jostled left and right without noticing it, and got into a No. 9. That would take her to the Corintheum. As she opened her bag to pay the fare, however, she realized what a mad and dangerous folly she had been on the point of committing.

There, beside her purse, lay the little silver ring which had slipped out of her missing hatpin. The sight of it brought back to her vividly how desperately she had searched for the pin—and not found it. No—the experience had been real enough, and the delay in the publicity probably had a logical explanation.

Suddenly it occurred to her that for her own satisfaction, or to relieve the tension of her nerves, she would call at Grayling's house. That was a mad idea, too, and might involve her as deeply as going to the Corinthium, but the suspense of the whole thing had brought her to the breaking point. The suspense wasn't to be borne any longer.

She remembered the address, which was in Eaton Square, and at Hyde Park Corner she got off the bus and walked.

It was a mid-Victorian house, one of a long, uninteresting row, with nothing at all exciting about the exterior; certainly nothing to show that a great tragedy had happened to the owner of it.

Eve walked past, then resolutely and without giving herself time for further deliberation, turned back, went up the steps and rang the doorbell.

Her summons was answered by a middle-aged butler, a friendly, dignified person with the perfect manners of the old school. Eve inquired haltingly if Lord Grayling were at home, would he ask if his lordship could see Mrs. King. The hypocrisy of her request brought a flush of shame to her cheeks. Poor Aylmar!

"I'm sorry, madam, but his lordship is not at home," the butler replied.

"Oh, well—I wonder—I rather wanted to see him," Eve said awkwardly.

So they didn't know even now!

"Mr. Howland is here. Would you care to see him? Perhaps Mr. Howland could tell you when his lordship will be returning."

Eve hadn't the faintest idea who Mr. Howland was, but the suggestion seemed a straw to clutch at, and she was drowning.

"Thank you. I would like to see him," she said.

She was ushered into a dim, old-fashioned drawing-room where nothing had happened for a half century except cleaning and dusting. A bright fire blazed in the deep grate, and she wondered why any one had troubled to light it.

CHAPTER IX.

THE UNESCAPABLE TRUTH.

A YOUNG man came into the room, and when he spoke to her Eve at once recognized his voice for the one which had first answered her over the telephone yesterday. He was a quiet-looking young man, rather stockily built and with an expression of both physical and mental strength in his blunt features; his gray eyes gave an idea that he could see a great deal, but would tell very little, and tell that little only for some good and sufficient reason.

From his manner there was nothing to indicate that he had anything unusual on his mind. It seemed to Eve, meeting him for the first time, that when he came into the room he brought courage to her; that he was like a rock, and that even an earthquake would leave his own courage unmoved.

"Mrs. King? My name is Howland—Jim Howland. I am a relation of Lord Grayling's, but I am also a sort of secretary to him. You asked to see Lord Grayling, but he isn't here just now. Would you like to leave a message for him?"

The gray eyes inspected her gravely and she began to tremble and felt herself turning pale. What did he know? He knew something, she felt sure—but what?

He hastened to push forward a chair for her.

"Please sit down. Can I get anything for you—a glass of water? You don't look very well."

Eve shook her head. "No—I shall be all right presently. I—I've had a little shock, that's all. I felt I had to come here and—and assure myself about Lord Grayling. When do you expect him back?"

The young man stood looking at her as if carefully calculating his reply; then said: "Well, really it's difficult to say. He might come home any moment."

Eve bit her lip. "I hope you won't think I'm being too pressing; but I have a reason. Lord Grayling is an old friend of mine, and we have a very important—er—matter to arrange. I wonder if you knew that he was to meet some one coming from Paris this evening?"

The young man again considered before replying.

"Yes, I knew," he said finally.

"Do you know who—"

"Yes; his daughter."

Eve averted her gaze quickly.

"It was about that I wanted to see him," she said, bringing the words out with desperate difficulty. "I was to go with him. He asked me to, as a friend."

"Yes, I know," the young man said.

"When did Lord Grayling go out?" she asked, feeling as if the question was choking her.

This time the reply came without hesitation and sent a painful quiver through every nerve in her body.

"He went out late yesterday afternoon to keep an appointment with you at the Corintheum Hotel, Mrs. King. I really am glad you called, because I wanted to get into touch with you without any fuss or bother."

She stared up at him, straining at the arms of her chair, her beautiful face a mask of tragic fear. This was a trap, and like a fool she had walked straight into it. Now she thought she knew why there had been no public hue and cry after her as yet. They were waiting for her to walk into this trap, knowing doubtless that her anxiety for Sara Brinton would bring her either here or to Victoria Station at six o'clock. She was convinced that this self-contained Mr. Howland was perfectly well aware of her own relationship to Sara. Probably Grayling had told him.

"When my cousin left you last evening—or did he leave then?—but no matter, when he left you, was it arranged that you were to meet him at Victoria this afternoon?" he asked.

Eve shook her head. "No—not exactly arranged— Oh, Mr. Howland, I can't stand any more. I won't answer any more questions! I'll just sit here until you decide what's to be done. I am really very ill."

He gave her a quick look then murmuring, "Excuse me just a moment, please," turned and hurried from the room, and presently the butler came in with a glass of sherry and a carafe of water on a tray.

"Mr. Howland thought you might like something, madam," he said. "Mr. Howland won't be very long."

Eve drank the sherry, her teeth clicking against the glass. The butler went out again, treading with unnecessary softness, it seemed, and there was no sound in the room but the ticking of a solemn-faced grandfather clock. This finally drew Eve's attention in a dull sort of way. Nearly five now. The boat train was well started on its journey from Dover.

More than a moment dragged on. It was nearly ten minutes before Mr. Howland appeared again.

"I have just rung up the Corintheum," he said. "Apparently you didn't stop the night there, although you had engaged some rooms. So my cousin must have left early in the evening. Before you did, I suppose?"

White-lipped, Eve replied in a whisper: "No; I left—before he did. I left him there—because I was afraid. He—he was not very well.

"Somebody came to the door, a man, and it upset us both—at least it upset me—and Lord Grayling thought I ought to complain to the office because this man asked for Lord Grayling, and he had come straight to my rooms without being announced. So I went down to the office, and it took a rather long time, and when I got back Lord Grayling was lying on the bed in my bedroom.

"I was frightened, I tell you. I went out and left him there—I didn't know what else to do. Oh, I know it sounds callous—but it wasn't merely because I knew he wasn't well.

"I knew that he—that a terrible scandal would come out of it. I thought only of my husband and how it would break his heart and ruin both our lives, and I fled."

Jim Howland looked at her with a flicker of distaste in his eyes. "You left a very

ill man, without even troubling to get assistance for him?"

"I left—a dead man," Eve whispered.

"Oh, no—that's impossible! Dead men don't get up and walk away."

She jumped from her chair, thoroughly startled, but with a gleam of hope lighting the blank darkness of her heart.

"You mean—they haven't found his body? They haven't found a man whom I believed—had reason to believe—had been murdered? Are you sure?"

"Positive. Why should you think he had been murdered?"

Eve began to pace restlessly to and fro, clasping and unclasping her hands in that derelict and forlorn fashion which indicated the completely disorganized state of her mind.

"I don't know! Mr. Howland, it's no use my trying to tell you anything, because I can't collect my thoughts. Perhaps I was hypnotized—self-hypnotized—into thinking I saw what I did.

"There's something behind it all which Aylmar understood better than I did—things which are almost impossible to connect with a place like the Corintheum Hotel or London, or with anything but the desert.

"I knew Aylmar long ago—so many years ago—when we were both out there and both young. I felt those strange things then, and believed in them—but I forgot them.

"Afterward my life was so different. I am a very ordinary woman, Mr. Howland, but Aylmar Brinton has always been an extraordinary man. Yesterday, talking to him, recalling the old days, I seemed again to hear what he heard—drum beats and a strange, flutelike piping—and to see what he saw, the mirage of a great sea curling onto the sands against the horizon.

"Even when I had his telegram asking me to come up to London, I heard and saw those things. Yet never, never were they real. They were not real things—they were just ghosts and echoes.

"Very likely it wasn't real that I saw him lying dead, but it seemed so to me. He was cold and rigid; there was a horrid little puncture in his throat, the odor of an overpowering aromatic drug in the room. And I couldn't find my hatpin!"

During this long and passionately declaimed speech Jim Howland regarded Eve with an interest which had some kinship with the interest of the reception clerk at the Corintheum. How much he believed or did not believe found no reflection in his expression. If it seemed too fantastic for any credence, he gave no sign.

What he said was: "My cousin has his eccentricities and is fully aware of them. I am in his confidence, completely, I believe, and know what he would wish me to do. As I said before, he's quite likely to turn up here at any moment, but if he doesn't he is certain to be at the station. His fondness for his daughter— Well, whatever happens, he'll be there to meet her. He loses his head sometimes, but not for very long."

Again Eve had the sense of leaning upon and drawing from great strength and courage. This Jim Howland was years younger than Aylmar, yet in his very youth there was sane-headedness. Aylmar as a young man had been fantastic.

One couldn't imagine Jim Howland decorating himself in an Arab costume and courting mysteries which no Englishman can hope to woo without peril to his peace of mind. Howland reminded one of Oxford, a complacent, brainy strip of Oxford, self-sufficient, all-knowing, both wise and innocent beyond its years.

The trite saying, "It takes all sorts to make a world," fleeted through her mind. And then instantly she classed Jim Howland with Neil. Those two would understand each other up to the hilt. But no one in this whole wide world would ever understand Aylmar Brinton.

Howland sat down beside her and with quiet tact and patience got her to repeat her story in detail. Once or twice he nodded his head as though agreeing to himself that what she said could be true, and Eve wondered if the same thing or something like it had ever happened to Grayling before.

"And now," he said, glancing at the clock, "we had better go to the station. Miss Brinton knows me, and that I have

some authority from her father. If by any chance my cousin doesn't turn up we must bring her back here and then decide what to do."

"You will inform the police, I suppose," Eve said wearily.

"That depends," he replied.

But what it depended upon he did not say and she was too nervous to press the point. During the short drive to the station her distracted mind leaped ahead to the meeting with her daughter, and she wondered how she would be able to control herself sufficiently to appear natural.

They were standing by the barrier waiting for the train which had been signaled when suddenly Eve clutched Howland's arm and spoke quickly under her breath. "Look—there's that man! He's seen me—he's recognized me."

Howland turned sharply, but the man Eve had drawn his attention to had turned also and was now walking rapidly away.

"Lord Grayling must have been right about him," she said. "Lacosta, I believe he said his name is. It was that man who knocked at my door yesterday. I am sure he knows or has reason to think that Lord Grayling can't be here to-day. He came for the purpose of meeting Sara! And Lord Grayling *isn't* here!"

Howland pressed her hand reassuringly.

"Be careful. Don't say anything more, now. We can only do one thing at a time, and here comes the train. I'll look out for Miss Brinton and you watch to see if the fellow comes back."

The train steamed slowly in, disgorging first a large tourist party headed by a wild-eyed young man from whom two old ladies were passionately and simultaneously demanding. "Where is my little bag!"

The ranks closed up and became a dense surging mob with porters staggering under immense burdens of continental luggage and the barriers were besieged like the walls of a dam through which only a thin trickle could pass.

Eve forgot to look out for the man whose unexpected appearance had so startled her and strained her eyes for the first glimpse of Sara. There would be a black-robed convent sister with her, of course, and presently Eve saw a couple of sisters in the crowd, but there was no young girl with them.

"Where is she? She hasn't come!" Eve exclaimed to Howland.

He, too, was beginning to feel anxious

"There's a second train," he said. She'll probably be on that."

There were only a few passengers left now. Suddenly he started forward. "There she is—there's Miss Brinton. She's alone. By jove, that's queer."

He pushed his way through the barrier, heedless of the sharp protest of the ticket collector, and darted to the side of a young girl who was coming slowly along with the blank look of a sleep-walker, and staggering a little. When he took her arm she smiled slightly, but apparently did not recognize him, although she made no protest at his joining her.

Eve's heart was in her throat. Suppose there had been no one here to meet her but that sinister man!

The girl was small and had Grayling's neat, well set figure. At this moment the gypsy beauty of her face was marred by the vacant-eyed expression of one who is not in full possession of her faculties.

"This is Mrs. King. She has come to help me look after you," Howland was saying. "Your father has been prevented from meeting you."

Tears streamed unheeded down Eve's cheeks. She made no attempt to stop them, but took the girl's hands in hers and bent down kissing her tenderly.

"Sara—Sara, dear! What has happened? Why are you alone?" she demanded.

The girl looked bewildered and a flicker of dawning consciousness replaced the blank expression in her eyes. For a second her features came vividly to life, and she was intensely, amazingly beautiful.

"I am not alone," she said. There was a stubborn note of resistance in her voice, but again she made no protest when Howland said: "Come along. We'll get her home and send for a doctor. Could you manage to stay the night, Mrs. King?"

Eve nodded silently. Nothing at all

seemed to matter any more—none of the ordinary things of her life. She was projected into another existence; nevertheless, she mustn't forget to send a telegram to Aunt Kitty.

In the cab the girl spoke again. She said, "I promised my father something—what did I promise him?"

"You promised that you'd have a little talk with him before you did anything that he mightn't approve of," Eve replied quietly.

"Oh, yes! It was about Raymond."

Then nothing more was said until they reached Eaton Square.

Howland threw an inquiring glance at the butler when he opened the door to them, and was answered by a shake of the head and, "No, sir—not yet," by which Eve understood that no news had been received of Grayling. This did not surprise her at all, for in her own mind she was quite certain he was dead.

A sort of fatalism was on her now. It almost seemed as though she never had any life except the one linked mysteriously with Aylmar's.

She loved Neil, but it was like a love only half-remembered; she loved her other children, but they had never been abandoned and they had never needed her as this gypsy-faced daughter of the desert needed her. Nothing had ever menaced them.

They were such "safe" children. She even thought a little contemptuously of their safeness. It was impossible to imagine plain, snub-nosed Carol getting hurt, except physically, as when the brake on her bicycle didn't work and she was pitched head foremost into a hedge, and another time when a member of the opposing team temporarily lamed her with a hockey stick.

That sort of thing would always happen to Carol, but not the more deadly sort of thing. She might break her neck some day, but her heart would never come to grief.

A doctor was sent for and had a short session with Sara and a longer one with Eve and Jim Howland. A maid went out to the chemist's and returned with a very simple remedy, sal volatile. The doctor said that it was quite obvious to him that the girl had taken too much of a drug which was calculated to prevent seasickness, and nothing else was the matter with her. She would be all right in an hour or so.

Sara had not been put to bed and after the doctor left they sat, all three, in the old-fashioned drawing-room around the fire. The girl was a little listless, but her wits had returned to her, although so far she had not been stirred to curiosity concerning Eve's identity or her father's absence.

Sister Catherine started with her from Paris, she said, and had expected to spend a week at a convent in London and then travel back with a young English sister who was going over to teach in the French convent. Sister Catherine was one of the oldest of the lay sisters, and would be described as a mathematics mistress.

Sara had felt ill on the boat—it was a very rough crossing—and some one in the ladies' cabin had given her a couple of tablets for seasickness. She couldn't remember how she got off the boat or on to the train, but when she did get on to the train she had lost Sister Catherine.

Vaguely she remembered, however, a discussion about somebody's passport—apparently not her own—and of herself assuring a very pleasant young man that her father was to meet her in London. She thought it possible that this young man had helped her on to the train and given her ticket to the conductor. She believed that she had asked him who he was, and he told her that he was "the Foreign Office."

Bit by bit it became clearer to her. The dispute was over Sister Catherine's passport. They had taken Sister Catherine into the smoke-room for a final session just as the boat was about to land, and then this pleasant young man had come along and asked Sara to give him her father's name and address, saying he would send a telegram.

She had slept on the train and only wakened when a porter clamored about her luggage. There were still two trunks waiting at the customs.

Howland asked her for her keys and took them out to send a servant for the trunks

and for the first time since the girl's arrival Eve Kingslake was alone with her daughter.

Also, for the first time, Sara Brinton became conscious of the undercurrent of mystery which was dragging at them all. She started up suddenly and stared about the room as though trying to find something familiar in it, then turned to Eve.

"This isn't my father's house," she said resentfully. "My father's house is quite a small place, a little flat in the Temple. Why has Jim Howland brought me here, and who are you, really? And why didn't my father meet me?"

She rapped the questions out with passionate, half-suppressed wrath as one who had been caught in some sort of a snare and only just discovered it.

Eve made a gesture of helplessness.

"Mr. Howland told you who I am—an old friend of Lord Grayling's," she replied.

The girl's eyes narrowed. "Who is Lord Grayling?" she asked coldly.

"Oh, dear, what have I said! Still you were to be told. Lord Grayling is your father."

"My father's name is Aylmar Brinton," Sara said, impatiently stamping her foot.

"Yes, that is true—Aylmar Brinton, Viscount Grayling," Eve replied. "And this is his house. I expect you will take Mr. Howland's word for it if you can't take mine."

"I'm sorry," Sara said. "Still, I must know things, mustn't I? Did my father tell you about me—about the trouble I've been in?"

"He told me a little," Eve admitted.

Sara took off her small cloche hat and threw it at a couch, then ran her hands through her hair. The gesture vividly recalled Grayling, but the red brown hair which stood out in a thick frizzy mop was the color of Eve's own hair, and so were the curiously flecked, jade-colored eyes the eyes of Eve Kingslake.

In the photograph of Sara those things were not to be observed, but now Eve realized that seeing them together no one could possibly be deceived as to their relationship.

The girl herself was not deceived.

"My father had no right to discuss my affairs with anybody," she said breathlessly, "unless—unless it was my mother, and I've been told that my mother died when I was a baby. But she didn't die, did she? You're my mother, aren't you?"

Eve turned deathly pale.

"Yes—I am your mother," she replied.

She had suffered a great deal in the past twenty-four hours, but this was the climax of all the suffering in the world.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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A RADIO TRAGEDY

HE heard her sing across the night
From Station QMZ,
Her trilling filled him with delight
And tonic ecstasy;

And so he wrote: "You've won my heart
With your alluring lay.
We were not meant to live apart
So kindly name the day."

She did, and set a meeting place,
The news made him rejoice
Until he looked upon her face—
It didn't match her voice!

John McColl.

The Infallible Eye

By ARTHUR PRESTON HANKINS

Author of "Something from Samarang," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

FOREWORD

LANIER KARNAK, forty years of age and comfortably well-to-do, lives in the hills that stand between San Anselmo and the sea, across the bay to the north of San Francisco. Studious, pretty much of a hermit, a bachelor, he spends the greater part of his time on his wooded acres, puttering around with tools, feeding squirrels and birds, building trails with pick and shovel, and attending to his garden. But when he decides to break his hermitry and go to the city across the bay, nothing gives him more pleasure than to watch the crowds in the various gathering places of mankind. An insatiable desire to know the life secrets of some of the interesting people he looks upon often leads him to follow them to see what they will do. Then it is that he calls himself the Shadow. These strange trips lead him into many queer adventures, the second of which is set forth in the narrative that follows.

CHAPTER I.

KARNAK CROSSES THE STREET.

KARNAK left the Pelicans' Club at half past seven in the evening. His dinner had been remarkably good—the companions with whom he had chatted had seemed exceptionally clever and entertaining. He felt fine as he started forth for a walk about the great gray city, swinging his cane and drawing slowly on an aromatic cigar.

For three solid weeks he had kept to his home in the hills across the bay. There with his books and his cigars, his tools and his games of chess, billiards, and poker with

occasional friends who dropped in on him—there with his music and his paintings and his pets—he had been content for the twenty-one days just past.

Then suddenly there had come over him a longing for contact with his fellow man. And promptly he had ordered his Chinese chauffeur, Fook Gee, to get out the big closed car and drive him to San Francisco.

Dinner in his favorite club had followed, and now, having begged off with difficulty from the many friends who wanted more of him after so long an absence, he sallied forth on one of his nocturnal prowlings in search of the curious in life.

As he strolled along in his neat-fitting evening clothes, with his topcoat over his arm and his slender stick in his gloved hand, he presented a figure that many paused to gaze at. Strong, healthy, prosperous looking, good-natured, *genuine*, he commanded the respect of all who glanced his way. All of which was in no way displeasing to Lanier Karnak.

He reached Mason Street at last and ambled along with the crowds, his eyes coasting here and there for some clew that gave promise of an interesting and profitable evening. But though he gazed mildly into hundreds of faces, he saw none that made him wish to follow its owner. Not until he reached O'Farrel Street.

Here on the corner, however, he came up to a man who was looking this way and that with some expectancy. And he varied his glances into the faces of passers-by with frequent consultations of his thin-cased watch. Like Karnak, he wore a dress suit and carried a cane.

Now, there was nothing particularly strange in a man's standing at the corner of O'Farrel and Mason Streets, looking at the dial of his watch occasionally and scrutinizing the faces of the passing throng. Quite apparently he was expecting somebody—had an appointment with some one at that hour and place.

Countless thousands of men, perhaps, had done the same thing on that same corner since the days when San Francisco was a brawling mining camp. And there was nothing characteristically striking or unusual about this man in evening clothes. But Karnak, on the lookout for a subject, paused a short way off and watched him.

Immediately the pale-gray eyes of the stranger settled on him, and in the eyes came a questioning expression. The man looked at him with such studious expectancy that Karnak became embarrassed.

It struck him that the other was waiting for some one with whose face he was not quite familiar. Else he would not have picked on Karnak as possibly the person he was due to meet simply because Karnak had paused on that corner.

The man took three steps toward the discomfited watcher, halted, and glanced at his watch again.

Karnak took out his own watch and looked at it to hide his perplexity. It was three minutes after nine.

Karnak looked up to witness a gleam of resolve in the other's eyes. The man smiled faintly and started toward him again. Whereupon Karnak, in order to disabuse the other's mind of the thought that *he* was the person he was looking for, turned about and started up the street.

The man did not follow him. He completed the block, crossed Mason Street, and started back in the direction whence he came. And when he reached O'Farrel again, but at an opposite corner from the one on which the well-dressed man had stood, he encountered another individual in evening clothes who was engaged in the same pursuit.

In other words, he too was looking patiently into the faces of the passing crowd and occasionally glancing at his watch.

Now Karnak knew the plot. These two men, whose faces were not very well known to each other—or not at all—had made an appointment to meet on the corner of O'Farrel and Mason Streets at nine o'clock. But they had neglected to designate which corner of Mason and O'Farrel was to witness their meeting—and, like all intersecting streets, O'Farrel and Mason had four corners. Hence one man was waiting and watching on one corner, while the other half of the combination was holding down the corner opposite.

Karnak essayed to relieve the rather stupid situation.

"Pardon me," he said, stepping up to this second restive waiter. "You have an appointment at the corner of O'Farrel and Mason at nine o'clock with some one, haven't you?"

The man's face brightened. "Sure have," he returned. "With eight some ones. Are you one of the eight? Your face seems sort of familiar, but eight years is a long time, you know. Which one are you?" And he took from his pocket a small notebook and thumbed the pages.

He found what he was looking for before Karnak could explain that he was not included in the eight people whom the other was to meet. The man looked up from his notebook, a comradely smile on his face, and Karnak found himself growing interested in the promising situation of one man meeting eight others whose faces he was not sure of. So he did not interrupt as the stranger began to speak.

"Let's see," he said, reading from the little book. "Joseph Langhorne, Maximilian Bozeman, John Starrett, Fred Muir, Walter Loomis, Abijah Warbranch, George Sullivan, Ralph Hoard. One of those names is yours. Now, which one are you?"

Karnak smiled and started to correct him, but he held up a hand for silence. "Don't tell me," he cautioned. "Let me see if I can remember. Come over here in the light."

Karnak followed him to a spot before the show window of a store, still holding his peace. His business was to study humanity, and here was a likely subject. The man scrutinized his face carefully, then was obliged to shake his head.

"I can't name you," he confessed. "But, as I remarked a moment ago, eight years is a long time. Eight years works marked changes in a fellow's mug. And you don't know me either. I'm Felix VanZant. Now which of the eight are you?"

It was time for Karnak to set him right.

"I'm not any one of them," he said. "My name is Lanier Karnak, and I haven't any appointment with you here at nine o'clock. I merely noticed you watching the faces of the crowd and consulting your watch, and stopped to tell you that another man is doing precisely the same thing on the opposite corner.

"You see, when you made your appointment you neglected to state, no doubt, the exact corner of Mason and O'Farrel on which you were to meet. I'm sorry to have disappointed you, Mr. VanZant. Please accept my card." And Karnak opened his case and tendered one.

The man took it with a crestfallen countenance. Then he smiled good-humoredly. "I'm mighty sorry you're not one of the eight," he said. "Or, rather, one of the nine—which includes myself. I like your face, if you'll pardon me, and can only wish that you were one of us. However—thank you. I'll hurry across the street and see who is waiting there."

Laughing lightly, he stepped into the roadway, dodged a potential murderer in the shape of a taxi driver, and crossed diagonally.

Karnak's glance followed him. Should he drop the trail and hunt for some one else? No, the situation still looked promising.

What nine men, not sure of one another's looks, were to meet on some corner of Mason and O'Farrel? And why? Two of them he had seen. The other seven remained a challenging mystery.

Karnak crossed the street.

CHAPTER II.

THE ROMPING EARLS.

WHEN Karnak reached the other corner of Mason and O'Farrel he found five men—two of whom were those he had previously seen—laughing and slapping one another on the back. He stepped into the shadow of a building and watched them.

Apparently three more of the nine had joined the first two. Now came two others, one at a time, reaching forth their hands in greeting and laughing boyishly. They looked one another over carefully, made good-naturedly caustic remarks about one

another's appearance, and seemed to be enjoying the situation hugely. For five minutes the seven remained on the corner, but were not joined by the missing two. Then Karnak heard one of them say:

"Well, it's nearly fifteen minutes after nine. The appointment was for nine sharp. There are seven of us here—seven true ones. The other two may be dead or in heathen China, for all we know. Let's give 'em up and go to Trent's before it is too late for them to seat us all together. We'll find taxicabs in front of the Hotel Stewart. It's less than two blocks; let's walk it."

Locking arms, four abreast in front and three abreast in the rear, they started along Mason Street, turning at Geary and strolling down toward Powell.

And when they had all piled into two yellow taxicabs in front of the Hotel Stewart, the Shadow slunk into a third and told the driver to follow.

Through Chinatown the trail led him—through Chinatown and onto the old Barbary Coast. Before Trent's, an old landmark resort which was still struggling for existence on near-beer and near-Scotch, the seven alighted. When they had passed through the garish doors Karnak paid his fare and followed them.

Inside, with the jazz orchestra blaring in his ears, Karnak discovered that the head waiter had been claimed by the seven celebrants. With head bowed deferentially, he was listening to explicit instructions given him by one who seemed to have taken command.

Karnak stopped a passing waiter of lesser caliber and hypnotized him with a five-dollar bill as he twiddled it in his fingers.

"See those seven gentlemen talking with your boss?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"They will be seated together, I think. Do you know where that will be?"

"Seven of them? Let's see, sir. On the mezzanine floor, I think. Yes, sir—there's a vacancy there for a large party."

Karnak drew the bill tantalizingly between his fingers. It made a dulcet sound. "Can you seat me near them, where I can hear?"

"Yes, sir—I think I can manage it. The table is in an alcove—a sort of large booth. I can seat you close to it, I think, sir."

"This is yours when you've done so," Karnak bribed.

"Thank you, sir. In just a moment. Will you stand at the bottom of the stairway to the mezzanine, sir, until I've finished with a party I'm serving now?"

"I'll stand," Karnak informed him, "without being tied."

The waiter forced his avid glance from the crinkly bill and whisked himself away. The head waiter was leading the seven up the stairway mentioned. Karnak followed and, taking up a position at its base, casually studied the gathering throng in Trent's.

When the corrupted waiter finally led Karnak to the mezzanine floor, the seven were already gathered around a table in the alcove. It didn't offer much privacy, but the young men seemed content.

Karnak was seated at a table near the edge of the mezzanine railing, directly in front of the alcove. He could look over and down at the crowd, while not ten feet from him stood the table of the seven diners, with not even a curtain to shield them.

He could hear the medley of their voices plainly, and when any one of the group raised his tones to address the entire gathering every word that he spoke was distinguishable.

Karnak thought that such speeches from one to all were likely to convey more information than the casual conversation of the party.

As usual in cases like this, Karnak suffered from a feeling of guilt over his astonishing effrontery in spying on these men; but he promptly stepped on the serpent's head. He was out to study humanity, to find out what life was about, and his conscience must not be allowed to interfere.

A man was now addressing the gathering in the alcove. Karnak listened.

"Well, gentlemen, we're all here but two," began the speaker. "And to be quite frank with you, when I walked to O'Farrel and Mason this evening I didn't expect to find a single man waiting there for me.

"Eight years of a man's life is a long period—a goodly fraction of his threescore years and ten. We are all eight years older than we were on the 15th of April, 1917. We are all, no doubt, eight years more serious. So, as I have said, I am surprised that the pact was kept by as many as seven of us, and—"

Just here the head waiter bustled past Karnak and stood in the arched entrance to the alcove.

"Pardon me, sir," he said, apparently addressing the speaker, "but the manager received a cablegram early this evening, and he's wondering if it is for you gentlemen. It is addressed "—he consulted the yellow envelope—"to 'The Romping Earls, in care of Trent's Café, San Francisco.'"

"That's us!" roared several voices. "We're the Romping Earls. Shoot the news to us."

The waiter handed the cablegram to the man whose address had been interrupted: There was a short space of silence except for the sound of tearing paper, and then the speaker's voice was heard again. He read:

"Paris, France, April 15, 1925.

"To the Romping Earls,
"Care of Trent's Café,
"San Francisco, Calif., U. S. A.:

"Brothers—I greet you from Paris. My spirit will be with you on the night of the 15th of April, 1025, as you sit about the table in Trent's and recall that other 15th of April when the nine of us romped the streets of San Francisco, so young, so foolish, so gay. I cannot join you, for I am a slave to the lamp of duty and to the ring of ambition here in Paris, but my heart and my thoughts are yours. "Maximilian Bozeman."

"Good!" shouted his listeners. "One more heard from. That's eight of us. Now where's the ninth?"

The speaker claimed attention again.

"I started in to make a wonderful speech," he said, "but this interruption has made me forget what I was going to say. However, that doesn't matter. We're going about this in an unmilitary manner anyway. The first thing in order should be a roll call I forgot that. I'll call the names:

"Joseph Langhorne!"

"Here with bells on!"

"Walter Loomis!"

"Heah!"

"John Sterrett!"

"Here!"

"Maximilian Bozeman!"

"That's the guy in Paris. Just heard from him. Fellow that cabled," came explanations from several throats.

"Fair enough!" replied the master of ceremonies. "Fred Muir!"

There was no answer.

"Guess he's the missing ninth," remarked the speaker. "Abijah Warbranch! I'll answer to that myself. Here, by golly! Felix VanZant!"

"Here!" piped the voice of the man Karnak had spoken with on the corner of Mason and O'Farrel.

"Ralph Hoard!"

"Here, sir!"

"George Sullivan!"

"Right here!"

"That's nine. Fred Muir and Maximilian Bozeman are absent. Bozeman has explained his failure to keep the pact, but it must be remembered that, eight years ago, we nine earls solemnly swore that nothing but death should keep us apart tonight."

"We were all lit," somebody reminded him.

"Pardon me, we were half lit. We were as the Lord meant us to be—happy. We were *right*. And when a man is right—when a *right* man is right—the best that's in him comes to the surface. So of the nine of us, seven have proved themselves to be nature's noblemen. And from now on, if we decide to get together in the future, we will be known as the Seven Romping Earls instead of the nine. Bozeman and Muir are herewith forever excommunicated, expelled, sprung, fired, and stepped upon. But, gentlemen, isn't it really remarkabe that even seven of us should be here?

"We had never met, as a whole, before that memorable night of the 15th of April, 1915. Two or three pairs of us were already friends, if I remember correctly. But we were not knighted as earls until we formed the combination. We were out for a good time—to make a night of it. San Francisco was having a big carnival—I don't remember what it was all about. But

i know that the United States hadn't as yet entered the World War, so it couldn't have been a militaristic demonstration.

"Yes, I see that you, over there, remember what it was, and want to tell me. But never mind. It's immaterial what we were celebrating. The point is that we were celebrating something, and celebrating it right!"

Here his six listeners clapped their hands.

"Anyway," continued the man who had named himself Abijah Warbranch, "we realized that in numbers there was strength. In some mysterious way, as we were romping down the streets, throwing confetti and blowing horns and generally making fools of ourselves, we got together. We formed a wedge and went through the crowds like a football team.

"The city was ours. We made regular asses of ourselves, but we harmed nobody. Then when the drinks started coming a little faster, in celebration of some coup that we had just pulled off in the street somebody suggested that we all go to Trent's and have something to eat.

"Trent's was as lively, or more so, than the streets outside; and, to make a long story short, we had one helluva time. We had a big, fine dinner and quarts and quarts of champagne. And we became so friendly that, in a romantic and somewhat maudlin mood, we swore to meet again every 15th of April, at the corner of Mason and O'Farrel—where the fun started—and to go from there to Trent's for our annual blowout.

"All nine of us kept the pact twice. But in the same month of our second annual party the United States had entered the World War, and we realized that most of us would go to France and that we might never meet again.

"So, not knowing how long the war would last, we made a pact that, eight years from that night, we would resume the proceedings and meet once more at the old corner on our way to Trent's. And here we are—seven of us.

"So far as I personally am concerned, I have met only one of you during that lapse of time. But, as some of you were already acquainted with one another, my case is not representative of the general situation. I knew Felix VanZant before that night. In fact, we were together when we joined the rest of you and did our part to make the Romping Earls notorious. And we have kept in touch with each other since.

"And now, beginning on my left, I am going to ask each man to rise to his feet and tell what changes have come to him. But before we begin let's recall our battle cry which we used that night when we were bulling our way through the crowds. Who remembers it? I think it was composed for the occasion by the man who calls himself John Sterrett. Mr. Sterrett, kindly rise and refresh our memories."

Near the foot of the table a tall man, whom Karnak was just able to see from his position, rose to his feet.

"Here it is," he announced:

"We're the Romping Earls, the Romping Earls!
Nine of us—count 'em—nine!
We romp all night when the lights are bright.
And our principal prey is girls—romping girls!
Nine of us—count 'em—nine!"

A buzz of laughter and conversation followed, which was interrupted by the master of ceremonies.

"Now, all together!" he encouraged. "The Romping Earls—here we go—"

And solemnly they repeated the nonsensical verse in unison.

Karnak smiled. He could picture that carnival night, could picture these men, ten years younger—twenty-one might have been their average age then—making the night hideous as they tramped the streets in a body and skylarked with the pretty girls. Karnak was a college man himself. He remembered.

CHAPTER III.

THE EIGHTH EARL.

"IT'S a wonder we didn't all get pinched," remarked one of the Romping Earls, as the verse was finished.

Then came the head waiter to find out if they were ready for dinner to be served,

and a pause ensued. Afterward, one at a time, while the dinner was in progress, they rose from their chairs and told of where life had called them in the eight years past.

These recitals were intensely, humanly interesting. All of them had prospered, it seemed, and many had wandered to the far corners of the earth. Most of them had participated in the World War. But not one confessed to being a bootlegger, at which the chairman marveled greatly.

Then it came the turn of the man with whom Karnak had talked on the street corner, Felix VanZant. He rose from his chair and talked in an easy, charming manner. But the master of ceremonies, at the head of the table, was in full view. And Karnak noticed that his eyes were blazing, and that, as they remained steadily on VanZant's face in an insolent, cruel look, he leaned forward tensely.

Karnak remembered that this man, Abijah Warbranch, claimed to have been in touch with Felix VanZant during the eight-year period just passed.

Felix VanZant had just resumed his seat at the banquet table amid the applause of his six brother earls, when a wizened little man came up the stairway to the mezzanine and stepped to the alcove entrance. He carried a camera and tripod.

"Here he is now!" cried Abijah Warbranch, from the head of the table. "You're late, Eli."

"I know it—I couldn't help it," pleaded the little man, who at once began setting up his camera.

Warbranch addressed his fellow diners.

"Gentlemen," he told them, "I have taken the liberty of engaging a photographer for the occasion. This is Mr. Eli Smedley, an old acquaintance of mine—a professional photographer and newspaper reporter. We're going to have a flashlight picture of ourselves gathered about the table, and the picture and a little write-up will appear in the papers to-morrow. But, Eli, the table's all messed up now. You should have been here before we began to eat."

"I know it—I couldn't help it," reiterated the man with the camera.

"Well, I guess it will be all right after this course has been cleared away," said Warbranch. "We'll have things straightened up for that picture. Go ahead and get the thing focused, Eli—or whatever you do with it—while we finish the course. And let's see. We're to hear from Mr. Loomis next. Mr. Loomis, kindly take the floor."

While the man who sat next to VanZant was speaking the little photographer monkeyed with his camera, moving it here and there, and peering through it at the gathering, with a black cloth over his head.

Then came two waiters who cleared the fish course from the table and, at a command from Warbranch, readjusted the silver and other appointments in readiness for the photograph to be taken. Then Warbranch sent one of them for the manager, who appeared, and, after listening carefully to something that Warbranch said, nodded his head in acquiescence.

"Get ready, fellows," Warbranch told the others. "He's going to get the attention of the crowd below and ask 'em to be patient a few minutes while the lights are turned off, so that we can get our flashlight."

The little photographer stepped forward and arranged the earls to his satisfaction. The manager had stepped to the edge of the mezzanine floor. In his hand was a megaphone.

He succeeded in getting silence down below, and then he explained what was about to take place. The diners received the announcement good-naturedly, and preparations went ahead on the mezzanine.

Then the lights went out and the café was in total darkness. There was a brief delay, followed by the warning from the little photographer for the seven earls to prepare themselves for the flash.

"I'll count three," stipulated the photographer, "then set her off. Look happy, please. Here we go: One—Two—*Three!*"

A blinding white light filled the alcove, then all was blackness once more. But while that instantaneous flare was lighting the scene, Karnak saw a man, who seemingly had come from nowhere, standing close to Felix VanZant, but just outside the alcove. His sudden appearance there in the

darkness was mystifying, and but for the flash his presence would have escaped Karnak entirely.

"All right," from the photographer. "I think she's a bear. You can turn on your lights now."

Then the café was as brilliant as day once more.

Immediately the seven began talking and laughing. But Karnak's glance was for the newcomer who had appeared so mysteriously in the dark.

He was still there, but he had taken several steps and now stood directly before the alcove.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I am Fred Muir, one of the Nine Romping Earls. I was detained unavoidably, so I didn't go to O'Farrel and Mason at all, but hurried straight here instead. I regret that I am too late to be included in the photograph. I had just learned from a waiter down below where I could find you, and was on my way up to the mezzanine floor when the manager announced that the lights were to be turned out. I called, but my voice was drowned by the talk and laughter of the crowd. I hurried on up, but arrived too late. The flash came just as I reached this spot."

Abijah Warbranch arose from his chair.

"Fred Muir," he said, "we greet you. The fact that you are late, though a grave deviation from rectitude, will be forgiven if the earls assembled will consent to—"

A hoarse scream interrupted him. It came from the other end of the table—from the lips of Walter Loomis. He was on his feet, staring at the diner next to him—Felix VanZant.

VanZant sat with his head lopped over on his right shoulder, his body inclined to the right at an unbelievable angle. His eyes were fixed, and the pupils dilated.

"Look at him!" cried Loomis. "What's the matter with him?"

And as the Romping Earls gazed at the slumped figure and sprang to their feet, Felix VanZant slipped from his chair and would have fallen to the floor had not Loomis grabbed him.

Two men bent over VanZant—straightened him. Mumbled words were the only sounds. Then a man looked up and gazed in consternation at the others.

"He's dead," he said. "There's not a sign of a heart beat. My God, men—what happened to him?"

Karnak was on his feet, staring into the alcove, from which the acrid smoke of the explosion was drifting slowly. His brain was working clearly.

An outsider, he was not so deeply concerned as the Romping Earls. His keen eyes darted this way and that. They noted that the newcomer, who had named himself Fred Muir, was gazing in a manner as bewildered as the others at the gruesome sight. He knew that this man had stood at VanZant's left side when the flashlight photograph was taken. Was it murder?

"Here's a man that needs investigating!" he cried, leaping forward and grasping Muir by the arm. "This may not be a natural death. I saw what the rest of you could not see, since you were looking at the camera. I saw this man standing at the dead man's left side when the flashlight was burned! Hold him! And send for the police. And here—what's this?"

He rushed into the alcove and plucked from the floor a tiny bottle, empty, and without a cork. He lifted the phial to his nose.

"Peach blossoms! That means hydrocyanic acid. This is murder, men!"

But even Karnak, the coolest of any of them, didn't realize that the wizened little photographer and his camera had vanished utterly.

CHAPTER IV.

NICHOLAS MASON.

THE excitement in the alcove where the dead man sagged in his chair was communicated to the diners below. In almost no time at all the news that a murder had been committed on the mezzanine floor had spread to all parts of Trent's Café.

Several women screamed. Men crowded on the stairs. Somebody, Karnak never knew who, sent for the police. They arrived in a remarkably short space of time,

bulging through the curious throng and herding men back downstairs.

"Well, now, what's all this?" blustered one of them. "Murder, eh? Who knows anything about it?" He fixed an accusing eye on Karnak, who chanced to be the handiest man. "What do *you* know about it? Speak out!"

Another policeman was examining the body. In a wrinkle of the dead man's waistcoat he found the tiny cork, and held it up. A third officer was shooing men and women back to their tables.

Being addressed, Karnak told what he had seen and passed over the tiny phial. One or two of the earls chimed in now and then to help him out, so that, altogether, it was a pretty confused story that the officer heard. But he wheeled on the man who had announced himself as Fred Muir and demanded speech from him.

"It looks pretty bad for you, brother," he told him. "What 'a' ye got to say for yourself?"

Muir's face was white and drawn and his lips twitched, but he cleared his throat and replied:

"I know no more about it than anybody else here. I had already explained why I was standing here before it was discovered that VanZant was dead."

Warbranch stepped forward.

"Let me explain about Muir," he offered. "I imagine it is pretty much as he said. He came late and was on his way up here when he heard the manager telling people that the lights were about to be turned off in preparation for a flashlight. He says he shouted and tried to let us know that he was coming and wanted to be in the photograph, but was unable to make himself heard above the laughter and conversation of the crowd. He had reached the foot of the stairs when the lights went out. He hurried on up in the darkness, and apparently reached the alcove just before the flare came. That is, if this man here saw him when the flashlight was touched off."

"Standin' right there, was he?" the policeman asked of Karnak. "Right there by the side of the dead man, eh?"

"Yes," answered Karnak. "But he was outside of the alcove."

"Under the arch, though—eh?"

"No—not quite."

"Only a step from the dead man?"

"Yes, quite close."

"Where were you sitting?"

Karnak turned and pointed to his chair and table.

"You wasn't in the party, then?"

"No."

"Ain't acquainted with any o' these men? Didn't know the dead man?"

"No to both questions," Karnak answered, with a lack of memory which he regretted later.

"What else did you see when the flashlight was fired?"

"I saw all these gentlemen looking at the camera. No one else except this newcomer, who had reached the alcove in the dark. Of course the flash was instantaneous. It was black again in the winking of an eye. I hadn't time to see much."

"Listen here," sternly commanded the officer. "Are you *positive* you saw all seven of these men seated when the light flashed? Think hard, now! Are you *positive?*"

"Wel-l-l," Karnak hesitated. "No, I can't say for sure. But I thought I saw every chair filled. It was too quick—too blinding—for me to be sure of anything. And the photographer and his camera shut off a part of the view."

"No, I guess you couldn't see much," the officer agreed. "But you saw this bird standin' right here, did you? And he wasn't standin' there before the lights went out?"

Karnak nodded. He was growing weary of answering the same questions again and again.

"What's your name? Where d'ye live?"

The answers were written in a notebook. Next, the policeman secured the names and addresses of the seven remaining earls. Then came the abrupt question:

"Where's the guy that shot the picture?"

It seemed that, in the excitement following the discovery of the crime, the wizened little photographer had been entirely forgotten. The seven earls and Karnak looked about for him fruitlessly.

"He's gone," said some one, which plainly could be seen by all.

"What's his name? Who hired him? Where'd he come from?"

Nobody replied at once. Then the earl named Walter Loomis, who had been seated on the dead man's right, made answer by addressing Warbranch.

"You hired him, didn't you, Mr. Warbranch?"

"Yes," the master of ceremonies responded. "I can't imagine what has become of him. I've known him for some time. His name is Eli Smedley. I think he must have hurried off directly after the flashlight was taken, in order to develop the plate and get the picture in the various editors' offices in time for the morning papers."

"Where's he live?"

"His place of business is— Let's see: I think I have his card in my pocket."

Abijah Warbranch fished in his pocket and brought out a card. He handed it to the spokesman of the police, who read aloud:

DO YOU NEED A CAMERAMAN?
Call Western 119

Publicity Campaigns, Out-of-Town Trips, Sporting and Society News, Press Photos

ELI SMEDLEY PHOTO SERVICE
615 Tekram Street

"I think I know that bird," observed the cop. "Little dried-up wienie, ain't he?"

"Yes," answered Warbranch.

The policeman swung about on Karnak again.

"Did this man look dead to you when the flash came on?" he quizzed.

"No," said Karnak. "There wasn't time for details."

An exclamation from the policeman who was investigating the alcove turned all eyes toward him.

"Same smell in the wine glass beside the dead man's plate," he said.

"All right. Get a bottle from the waiter and pour the wine into it. That's evidence enough for murder. Analysis will prove it."

The gong of the police ambulance sounded outside in the street.

"All right, fellows—let's be gettin' outa this. Take the body out first. You men stick here—understand? You're all under suspicion. Ye'll all have to go to the station and be searched. Then it's up to the sergeant whether you'll be held pending investigation or not. Right up here, boys!" he raised his voice to the ambulance men coming in.

So that was the breaking up of the party of the seven earls. All of them, including Lanier Karnak, were herded into a police patrol and rolled to the station. There they were quizzed and searched by the sergeant on duty and several plainclothes detectives. But no incriminating evidence of any description was found on any of them.

They were all able to give a good account of themselves. There were telephoning and establishing of identities and reputations, and in the end all of them, excepting Fred Muir, were released on their own recognizance.

For to the last individual they proved themselves to be men of consequence in and about San Francisco. But Muir was held on suspicion despite proofs of his responsibility.

Karnak was on the point of leaving when a heavy set man in a neat gray suit of clothes accosted him.

"Aren't you Mr. Karnak?" he was asked.

Karnak admitted his identity.

"I'm Nicholas Mason," said the other, and his look implied that Karnak ought to be familiar with the name.

"I'm sorry," Karnak told him, "but I can't recall either your name or your face."

"Criminologist—private detective," explained the man.

Karnak smiled. "I know no more than I did before," he said.

The big fellow looked a trifle crestfallen. "Well, no matter. I guess your interests in life haven't been along my lines. You telephoned to the Pelicans' Club a short while ago, to Mr. Golden, didn't you?"

"Yes, I wanted him to vouch for me. He's a particular friend of mine."

"Uh-huh. And Ned Golden is a particular friend of mine, too. He called me up afterward—I was at home—and asked me to come down here and help square you. But it seems I wasn't needed, after all. I'd like to know something about this

business, Mr. Karnak. The case looks unique, judging from the little I've overheard. How would you like to go to some quiet place with me and tell me what you know about it?"

"I don't in the least mind," Karnak assured him.

"Come on, then. We'll get a sandwich and a bottle of real five per cent beer. Where? Ask Dad—he knows! My car's outside."

In a short time they were seated opposite each other in a remote little place on Eddy Street, with chicken sandwiches and the forbidden amber fluid close to their hands.

"Now," said Nicholas Mason, "shoot!"

Karnak repeated the story of what he had observed, and not once was he interrupted. When he had finished the detective leaned back, puffing at a cigarette, deep in thought.

"It's funny—mighty funny," he said at last. "It's the most interesting case I ever heard of, I believe. Now what do you make of that photographer beating it away so fast?"

"It only puzzles me," Karnak replied.

For several moments more Nicholas Mason sat dreaming. Then he suddenly roused himself, drained his glass, and leaped to his feet.

"Come on," he said. "Let's beat it down to that photographer's place and see if he's developed that plate yet. Hope we can get there before the cops do, but I doubt if we will. Are you game? Let's see if we can find out who murdered Felix VanZant ourselves."

"All right," Karnak agreed.

He was well pleased at the sudden turn of affairs, for had he not accosted Felix VanZant at the corner of Mason and O'Farrel Streets in the hope that the encounter might lead to a night's adventure?

But as he rose to his feet a girl, wrapped in furs, entered the restaurant, and, after glancing hurriedly about, walked straight up to him.

"You're the gentleman who—who saw it, aren't you?" she asked through colorless lips. "I mean the—the murder in Trent's Café."

"Why, yes," Karnak, greatly amazed made answer.

"I was there," she stated. "Down on the main floor with some friends. Fred Muir was my escort. We all came in when he did—just as the manager was announcing that the lights were to be put out. Fred left us on the run for the mezzanine, and—"

Here Nicholas Mason interrupted her. "You were there, you say? You're interested in this fellow Muir?"

"I'm engaged to marry him," she answered simply.

"Heavens and earth! How did you know Mr. Karnak and I were here in this restaurant?"

"I followed you from the police station in a taxicab."

"M'm-m! Where are the rest of your friends?"

"There were only two more—a man and a girl. The excitement made the girl ill, and the man had to take her home. So I—I followed Fred, in the police patrol, to the station. There I saw you and Mr. Karnak—is it?—just as you were leaving. I was too timid, I guess, to speak to either of you. So I got a taxicab that was standing at the curb and followed. I've been hesitating outside there, trying to get up courage to come in. Then I did, and—"

"Yes, yes, I understand all about it now. You'd better come with us. We're going to work on this case, Mr. Karnak and I. Maybe you can help us. But we've no time to talk now. Gotta see that photograph as soon as possible. Will you come with us? In my car?"

"Yes, I'll do anything to help Fred. I know he's innocent even if he did have reason to hate Felix VanZant."

"Hated 'im, eh? That helps a lot. Well, maybe he's innocent and maybe he isn't. That's what we want to find out. Personally, I think there's a good chance that he *is* innocent. What's your name, please?"

"Loris Fowler."

"M'm-m—glad we got hold of you before the police did. Come on. Let's find out whether the developed plate shows VanZant dead or alive. We ought to be able to tell. That'll prove whether he was

poisoned before the picture was taken or afterward. By *afterward* I mean between the flash and the moment the café lights were turned on again and the murder was discovered. And it may show something more important still."

CHAPTER V.

ELI SMEDLEY.

NO. 615 Tekram Street proved to be an upstairs number, and a stairway led to it in an old two-story building a good many years behind the times. And the rooms occupied by Mr. Eli Smedley were in the rear.

The three had climbed the long flight of dusty steps to find themselves in a dark, smelly hall. It was not lighted, and Mason flashed his electric torch to locate the signs painted on the various doors. A dim radiance, however, emanated from the transom over the last of them. And the torch pointed out the fact that they had found the business quarters of Eli Smedley.

Mason turned the knob, but the door was locked. Then he knocked. From inside there came a sound, but the door was not opened at once. Not until after the detective had knocked a third time.

Then the key grated in the lock, the door was swung open to a narrow crack, and the weird face of the crooked little photographer peered out at them.

"Well," Smedley asked, "what do you want this time o'night?"

"Are you Mr. Smedley?" Mason asked him.

"Yes, I am."

"I'm Nicholas Mason, of the Wilkes Detective Bureau. I'd like to come in and have a look at the photograph you took a short while ago in Trent's Café."

"I haven't got it," said Smedley. "It's already gone to the news editors of the morning papers."

"But you have the plate, or film, haven't you?"

"Yes, o' course. But the police have already seen it. Why are you horning in?"

"Come, come, Mr. Smedley," soothed Mason. "We're not going to harm you. Let's have a look at that plate. We won't take up much of your time."

"Come on in, then," offered the photographer grudgingly. "But remember it's late. I don't want to be kept up all night. Confounded reporters have been houndin' me to death!"

Loris Fowler preceded the two men into Smedley's place of business.

It proved to be one of the most cluttered set of rooms that any of the trio had ever seen. It looked more like a junk shop than a photographic studio. It was unspeakably dirty, too. A peculiar, offensive odor hung in the atmosphere of the place.

They followed the little man into a second room. He led them to a bench on which were countless photographic plates, cameras of several descriptions, dirty trays, tools, and odds and ends of brass and iron, printing frames, and other paraphernalia of the photographer's craft.

Smedley picked up a plate and handed it to Mason without a word.

The detective held it to the electric light which struggled with a coat of grime on the glass bulb. The girl and Karnak looked over his shoulder.

"M'm-m—good exposure, all right," Mason muttered. "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven—all there. Now which is the man who was murdered, Mr. Karnak?"

"Right there, at the foot of the table"—and Karnak pointed.

"M'm-m! Looks just as alive as I am this minute. He'd be lopped over in his chair, if he were dead when this plate was exposed. Or, if he were dying, his figure would be blurred, perhaps, and his eyeballs popping from the spasm brought on by the poisoning. But he's alive and well and smiling.

"That means that he took a drink of the poisoned wine after the picture was taken. He would hardly take a drink in the dark, would he? Certainly not. But the poison was slipped into his glass while the lights were out.

"Here—let me reconstruct it for you: There the seven of them sat, all primed for the picture. Then the lights went out. Immediately the murderer left his seat at the table, stepped softly through the dark to

VanZant's side, and poured the contents of the phial into his wine.

"He dropped the empty bottle on the thick carpet and hurried softly back to his seat. So that he was there in his place when the flashlight torch was lit.

"Then the picture was taken. The lights of the café were turned on again. Everybody was talking and laughing, perhaps, and VanZant took a drink of the poisoned wine.

"It knocked him cold, like the winking of an eye. He lost consciousness immediately, no doubt, and shook with a brief spasm. This went unnoticed by the man next to him. (And that's a point we must keep in mind, too.) Then he flopped over, and this man next to him saw his condition and shouted to the others. What name did the man give who sat next to him. Mr. Karnak?"

"Walter Loomis," Karnak replied.

"It would have been an easy matter for Loomis to pour the deadly contents of that phial into his wine, wouldn't it? Here—look! Is this Loomis, right here on his right?"

"Yes."

"Yet Loomis wasn't suspected at all, it seems—that is, no more than the rest of the men at the table. The cops were all for fixing the crime on this here Fred Muir. Now, Muir doesn't show in the picture at all, does he?"

"No," said Karnak. "He was standing right there, just outside the alcove. He was out of the picture entirely. See, only the least bit of the wall outside the arch of the alcove shows. Six inches, maybe."

"Yet Muir could have taken a step or two, dumped the poison in VanZant's wine, and stepped back out of the picture, couldn't he?"

"Yes, that's possible."

"But he didn't!" protested Loris Fowler.

"My dear young lady, I didn't say he did!" snapped Mason. "I'm saying what he *could* have done. Now, Karnak, you were the one who led the police to suspect Muir. Didn't it occur to you that one of the men at the table might have committed this murder?"

"No, it didn't," Karnak told him. "Muir's sudden and mysterious appearance made me suspect him alone. I never thought of the others."

"I would have suspected Walter Loomis, after hearing Muir's explanation of his seemingly miraculous appearance there," stated Mason. "And Muir's explanation is borne out by Miss Fowler, here. But at the same time, we must remember that any one of the six other diners, if he was lucky, might have left his seat, poured the hydrocyanic acid into VanZant's wineglass, and got back into his seat again before the flash. That is, if there was time enough.

"This plate is mighty disappointing to me. Frankly, I expected to see the likeness of the murderer, standing close to VanZant or on his way back to his seat. He was lucky—that's all. If Muir has done it, wouldn't he have beat it away from there in the dark, before the flashlight powders were lighted?"

"And you think, then, that Fred is innocent?" asked the girl.

"I'm almost sure of it. I will be certain of it, Miss Fowler, when you have taken me to the friends who were with you tonight and I have heard them corroborate your account of Muir's reason for arriving late."

"It was all the fault of Clarice Warden," said Loris Fowler. "She took too long to dress. She and the man she is engaged to marry, Giles Wilkie, and Fred Muir and I were to dine at Trent's this evening. Fred and I went to her house, where we found Giles Wilkie already waiting for her. When we reached Trent's, Fred was going to leave our party for a time and visit with these men, then make his excuses and join us again. But Clarice was late—"

"Yes, they usually are," interposed Mason. "I understand all that. And I wouldn't worry, if I were you. We're going to clear Mr. Muir. Don't ask me how, but we're going to."

He turned to the silent photographer. "Why did *you* beat it so soon after you took the picture?" he snapped.

"I was in a hurry to get it developed, printed, and in the hands of the editors, so that it would appear in to-morrow morning's papers," replied Smedley easily.

"That's the way I make my living. I didn't beat it. I just picked up my stuff and walked away."

"And you saw nothing peculiar about VanZant?"

"No, I didn't notice him or anybody else. I got nothin' to do with those birds, so I didn't stick around. I only know Warbranch, who hired me to go there."

"I see. I see. And you didn't know that a murder had been committed until the police came here to see the photograph?"

"No."

"I'd like to buy one of the prints."

"Two dollars," said Smedley promptly. "I'll mail it to you, mounted, to-morrow morning."

Mason produced the money and gave his address.

"Did the police see prints, or only this plate?"

"Just the plate. The prints were on their way to the newspaper offices when the cops got here. I sold 'em right and left to the reporters who flocked in."

"You're a fast worker, Mr. Smedley."

"That's the way I make my livin'," repeated the photographer.

"Couldn't you print another one for me now?"

"I could, but I won't. I'm tired."

"All right. Mail me one first thing in the morning, special delivery. Thanks for your time. Good night."

And Mason wheeled and led the others out.

"Well, what do you think of Eli Smedley?" asked Karnak as the three emerged into the street below.

"I think he's a damned liar," Mason replied inelegantly. "But I'll have to prove it."

CHAPTER VI.

THE EMPTY CHAIR.

As Loris Fowler, Nicholas Mason, and Karnak crossed the sidewalk to the detective's car, a hand fell upon Karnak's arm. He wheeled about in some surprise, to find himself looking into the steady, penetrating eyes of a large, heavy set man who wore a wide-brimmed Stetson.

"You're Mr. Lanier Karnak?" asked the man.

"Yes; what can I do for you?"

The man's left hand threw back the lapel of his coat, and a metal shield on his vest twinkled in the street lights.

"You're wanted at police headquarters again," he announced. "I'm a plain-clothes man, and I've been hunting for you for over an hour."

"Well, what's the matter now?" puzzled The Shadow. "Has it been decided that *I* committed the murder?"

"Not exactly that, I guess," the detective told him. "But since you were released something has come to light that makes it necessary to question you further. I have orders to bring you in."

Mason stepped forward then. "Hello, Tetterton," he said. "What's the row?"

"Why, hello there, Nick," the plain-clothes officer responded. "What are you doing here with Mr. Karnak?"

"We're interesting ourselves in the murder of Felix VanZant at Trent's Café," Mason replied. "This isn't a pinch, is it, Tet?"

"Well, I hardly know. I was ordered to bring Mr. Karnak in for further questioning. I called up both of his clubs, but found that he wasn't at either of them. I was scouting about, and it was by the merest chance that I lamped him crossing the sidewalk here. I was on my way up to the studio of the photographer who took the flashlight picture at Trent's. The chief of detectives had also ordered me to get a print from the plate.

"The photographer's place is just upstairs here. Some of the boys came here directly after those birds were herded in from Trent's, but the photographer said that he had already disposed of all his prints to the reporters of the various papers. He showed them the plate, but that didn't satisfy the chief. He told me, on my hunt for Mr. Karnak, to drop in and make this fellow Smedley run off another print for us. And here, right at Smedley's door, I stumble upon Mr. Karnak. I guess you've just seen Smedley."

Nicholas Mason had stepped close to the two. He gave Karnak a warning nudge in the ribs, but did not reply to Tetterton.

"That's a strange coincidence, Tet," he remarked. "Mr. Karnak and I, as I said before, are investigating this case on our own. Just for curiosity's sake, you know. Unless this young lady with us, Miss Loris Fowler, wishes to employ me to find the murderer and remove suspicion from the man you are holding, Fred Muir. She is engaged to marry Mr. Muir."

"That so? Humph! Well, I guess you'll have to struggle along without Mr. Karnak's help for a time, Nick. I've got orders to bring him in, and I'll do my darndest."

"We'll go along—Miss Fowler and I," announced Nicholas Mason. "My car will carry the four. Come on—I'll shoot you around there."

"I never walk when I can ride," laughed the plainclothes man. "Put the lady beside you in the front; Mr. Karnak and I will sit behind and look haughty."

They entered the car, and Mason turned about and drove to police headquarters.

"Guess there won't be any objection to Miss Fowler and me going in, too, will there, Tet?" suggested Mason, as the car slowed down at the curb.

"Well I can't keep you from coming inside, anyway," replied Tetterton. "But whether you'll be permitted to overhear the questioning of Mr. Karnak or not, I can't say."

"We'll try to horn in, anyway. Come on, Miss Fowler. Keep a stiff upper lip, Karnak, old boy. Don't let 'em put anything over on you."

They filed into the building, Detective Tetterton and Karnak in the lead.

Mason at once left Miss Fowler and went into the office of the chief of detectives. He came forth almost immediately, intercepting the plainclothes man and Karnak on their way toward the rear of the building.

"I'm a good little fixer," he told them. "The chief says he has no objection to my being present at this hearing. I'll act as Karnak's legal adviser. I think we won't trouble to take Miss Fowler in. You fellows go ahead. I'll tell her to wait."

"I doubt if she'll get out without being questioned," said the plainclothes man grimly, "when I've told the chief who she is."

"You needn't do that on our account, you know, Tetterton," Mason threw back at him.

"Humph!" was the other's only answer.

It was the chief of detectives himself, who, in a small room at the rear of the building, poured a stream of rapid-fire questions at Lanier Karnak. It was not exactly a third degree process, but it was none the less discomfiting to the victim.

"Mr. Karnak," he began, "didn't you tell the police officer who questioned you in Trent's Café, something like a couple of hours ago, that you were not acquainted with any of the men who call themselves the Romping Earls?"

"Yes."

"Was that the truth?"

"Certainly. I am not in the habit of saying anything but the truth."

"You are not acquainted with any of them? Think hard, now!"

"You have my answer."

"All right. How about the murdered man, Felix VanZant? Weren't you acquainted with him? Think carefully before you reply."

Karnak realized that he had been led into a trap. Knowing that it would be a difficult matter for him to explain how he had accosted Felix VanZant on the corner of Mason and O'Farrel, and trailed him and the other earls to Trent's Café, he had purposely refrained from mentioning the brief meeting.

"I had met VanZant earlier in the evening," he admitted. "But that is the first time I ever saw him in my life. Therefore I am telling the truth when I say that I am not acquainted with him."

"Um-m—now we're getting a little closer to the truth, anyway. Is this your card, Mr. Karnak?"

The chief of detectives suddenly whisked before Karnak's eyes a small white rectangular slip of pasteboard, on which was Karnak's name in Old English letters.

"Yes, it is," the victim admitted. "I suppose that it was found on the body of the dead man after I was brought here the first time."

"Exactly, Mr. Karnak. It was discovered on the body after it had been taken to the receiving hospital. Somehow or other the investigation at Trent's failed to reveal it. Now, did you give Mr. VanZant your card?"

"Yes, sir."

"When?"

"Shortly after nine o'clock to-night."

"Where?"

"At the corner of O'Farrel and Mason Streets."

"Where you met him for the first time in your life?"

"Yes."

"Tell me the occasion for presenting VanZant with your card on a street corner, Mr. Karnak."

This was the demand that Karnak had been dreading. But he drew a deep sigh and made the best of the situation, telling in detail what had occurred.

The chief of detectives laughed uproariously as he concluded. "Mr. Karnak, do you expect me to believe that cock-and-bull story?"

"Why not, chief?" quickly interposed Nicholas Mason. "What's so hard to believe about that?"

"You keep out of this, Nick!" sternly ordered the chief. "You'll either keep out or get out. Take your choice."

"Now, now, now, chief! Don't get hot under the collar about nothing! Don't forget that you and I are friends, and that we've helped each other a lot. If you could afford to turn me down as you threatened, I wouldn't be in here now. Give Mr. Karnak a chance. I demand it."

It was at once apparent that, in Nicholas Mason, Karnak had a friend at court. Evidently he was considered a personage of some consequence by the chief of detectives.

"Well," the chief snapped at him, "what's the grand idea, anyway, of a man of Mr. Karnak's wealth and position chasing about the streets at night, following people whom he doesn't know? It's a stupid as well as a dangerous practice, to say the least. I can't imagine a man of Mr. Karnak's standing making such an idiot of himself."

"Just the same, chief, you'll have to admit that his story is plausible. You'll *have* to admit it. Confound it, Karnak is a man of wealth and reputation—a member of two of the most exclusive clubs in San Francisco—a citizen above reproach! Can't you imagine that such a man, who is obliged to guard his reputation and his pocketbook all the time, has to blow off steam some way now and then?

"You must give him credit for being original in picking something unique as a safety valve. There's no possible chance of Karnak's being the murderer, or connected with the man who did commit the murder. And I don't want him held to-night on such a flimsy item as the fact that his card was found in the dead man's pocket."

"Oh, you don't?" sarcastically.

"No, I don't, chief. I want him to help me unravel this mystery. We're going to do it before the sun shines on this old burg again. We're going to show you that Fred Muir had no more to do with the killing of VanZant than you had. We're going to produce the murderer and convince you that he is guilty. I'm going to do this, with the help of Mr. Karnak. So you mustn't hold him."

"Well, well, well!" drawled the chief. "You talk as if you knew the murderer's name, Nick."

"I do," came the astonishing reply. "I only ask a little time in which to prove it. A little time—and Mr. Karnak."

But why didn't Karnak tell about giving his card to VanZant before I drilled it out of him?" the chief demanded.

Mason laid a hand on his shoulder. "Pete," he said, "if you had followed the Romping Earls to Trent's as Mr. Karnak did, would you tell about it, in view of what happened, unless you had to? Think hard, now!"

The chief of detectives grinned.

"Maybe you're right, Nick," he said. "Anyway, you've helped me a lot in the past, and I can depend on you. Will you agree to deliver Mr. Karnak into our hands when we want him, if I release him now? In other words, will you be responsible for his reappearance here on demand?"

"Surest thing you know."

"Then take him and get out. But I'll bet you a hundred dollars we've got the murderer in a cell this very moment!"

"Oh, no, you haven't, chief. Fred Muir is innocent."

"I didn't mention Fred Muir's name, did I? I said I'd bet you a hundred dollars we have the murderer in a cell this moment. Want some of it?"

Nicholas Mason was staring at him. "Who is it?" he asked. "Not—" He bit his lower lip to stop the disclosure that was on his tongue.

"Not who?" bantered the chief.

"Never mind. What's the name of the alleged murderer?"

"You'll know when the proper time comes. Want to bet that hundred?"

"Not until I know the name of the suspect you're holding," Mason declined.

"All right. His name is Walter Loomis, and he sat next to the man who was poisoned in Trent's Café. He was one of the Romping Earls."

"I'll take the bet," clicked Mason. "Tetterton here can hold the stakes. Dig, old-timer!" And Mason pulled from his pocket a roll of bills, passing five twenties to the man who had brought Karnak in.

The chief of detectives handed his subordinate a like amount, grinned at his friend, and waved him out of the room.

"Take your assistant and get busy," he said. "The night isn't so young as it was."

"Just a moment, chief," put in Tetterton. "There's a lady outside that Nick Mason told me is engaged to marry this fellow Muir. Do you want to question her?"

The chief leaped to his feet. "Not Miss Loris Fowler? You don't mean she's outside! I've had several men hunting her for an hour."

"You're on the job, after all, aren't you, chief?" laughed Mason apparently a bit chagrined.

The chief ignored this thrust. "Is Miss Fowler out there?" he demanded again of Tetterton.

"She sure is."

"Then I want her in here immediately."

They all went out together the chief in the lead, hurrying.

But the seat which Loris Fowler had occupied was empty.

CHAPTER VII.

THE INFALLIBLE EYE.

A BRIEF search on the part of the chief of detectives and Tetterton failed to reveal Loris Fowler in police headquarters. She was not in Nicholas Mason's car before the entrance. Tetterton made the rounds of the block without finding her.

"I guess she got scared and beat it," suggested Mason. "Can't blame her. She would naturally shrink from being questioned, and I guess she was afraid that was about to happen. I noticed she looked pale around the gills when I walked up the steps with her."

"Find her again, Tetterton, after you've got that photograph from Smedley," was all the chief said as he stalked indoors.

Nicholas Mason and Karnak stepped into the car and the detective started it.

"Now where?" asked Karnak as they left the block.

"Guess we'd better glide 'round to the Palace Hotel and pick up Miss Fowler again," laughed Mason. "When she and I were entering the police station together I told her, if I should slip her the wink, to beat it there and wait for us. I thought maybe the chief would want to question her after I made the break to Tetterton who she was, so I was prepared for the worst."

Karnak laughed. He was interesting and ingenious, this bluff, good-natured detective, and he liked him. Karnak was having the time of his life, despite the thought that these interesting events revolved about a tragedy.

"Find Miss Fowler after he's got the photograph from Smedley, eh!" Mason was chuckling. "That's good! I've got Miss Fowler, and Smedley has left his place of business."

"How do you know he has left his studio?" asked Karnak.

"He came down right behind us," Mason replied. "I saw him leave the entrance just as Tetterton pinched you. Remember

when I stepped up and gave you the office to let me do the talking? I killed two birds with one stone that shot. I not only nudged you and kept you silent, but I placed my body between Tetterton and Smedley. Oh, I make breaks sometimes—and sometimes I'm able to mend 'em. What's that kid yelling? Listen!—"

"Mawning papers! Mawning papers!" came from the sidewalk close at hand. "All about de murder at Trent's Café. Mawning papers!"

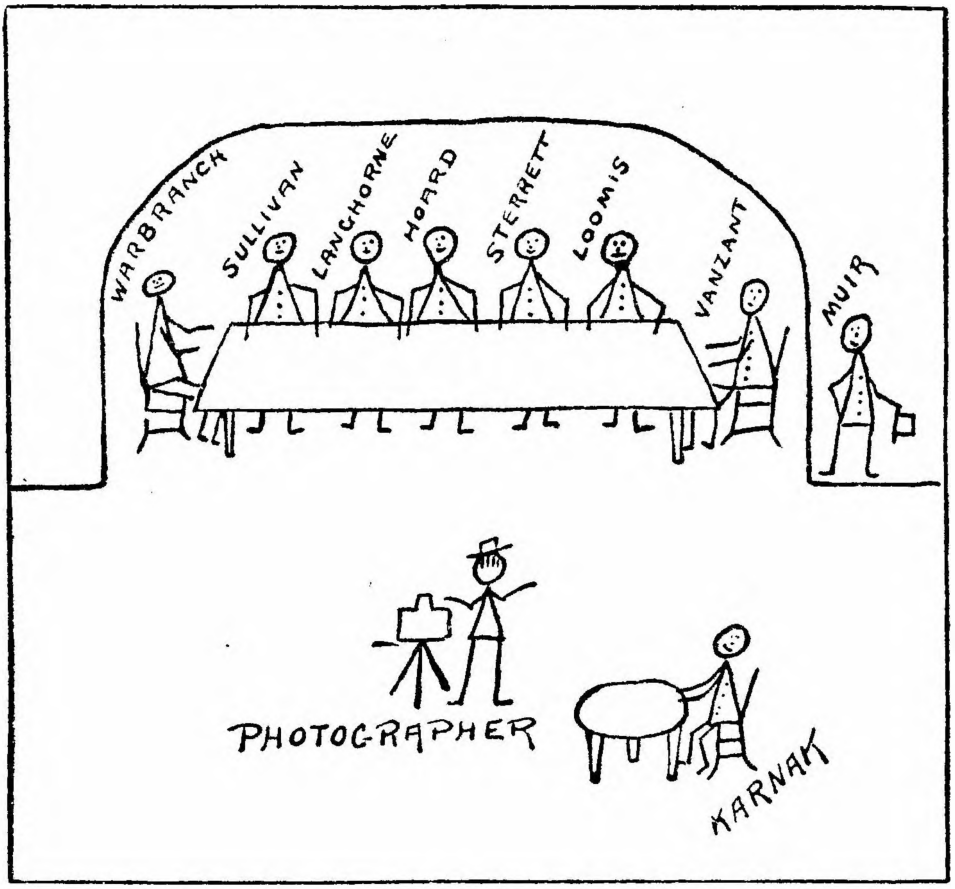
"That's us," said Mason, shooting in to the curb. "Here, kid! Give us a *Chronicle* and an *Examiner*. Two copies of each."

And they were away again for the Palace Hotel and Loris Fowler.

Both men left the car when they reached the Palace and went in to find the girl waiting in the lobby. Nicholas Mason led the way to a soft divan, where the three seated themselves to read the papers.

Presently, while the girl and Karnak were deep in the somewhat muddled account of the tragedy, the detective left them and sought a writing desk. Karnak saw him bending over it with a pencil, alternately committing something to a piece of hotel paper and consulting the news sheet in his left hand. Then he arose abruptly and hurried back to the others.

"Here—give this the once-over," he asked of Karnak, and presented the hasty drawing which is here reproduced, except that Karnak later added the names:



"There you all are," he explained, "in the same positions as are indicated in the reproduced photograph. The figure that represents Muir, of course, I added myself, as he isn't in the picture. And I added your figure and the photographer's, too. Have I got Muir placed about right?"

"That's exactly where he was standing when I first saw him," Karnak said.

"All right—that's fine. Now, Karnak, old boy, take your pencil and write the name of each of the others over his head."

"I don't know that I can place all of them accurately," Karnak told him. "But I am positive about certain ones. The man on the left, at the head of the table, is Abijah Warbranch, of course."

"Then label him so," commanded Mason.

"The figure at the foot represents the man who was murdered—Felix VanZant" – and Karnak wrote the name above the figure's head.

"Now, Loomis—Walter Loomis—sat on his right." And Karnak wrote "Loomis" above the figure under discussion. "Next to Loomis sat Sterrett, if I'm not mistaken." He named the second figure from the foot. "That leaves three to be named." He looked at the newspaper account of the affair to refresh his memory. "That leaves Langhorne, Sullivan, and Hoard," he added. "And I'm not just sure how they were arranged at the table."

"Well that's all right. Name them hit or miss."

Karnak, beginning at the left, penciled "Sullivan," "Langhorne," and "Hoard."

"All right. Now we have a sketch of ten men all named. The one named VanZant was killed by one of the remaining nine. We'll exclude you entirely. So we'll amend that statement to eight men."

"You're not excluding the photographer," Karnak reminded him.

"I am not excluding the photographer," said Mason. "He has a direct connection with the party, since one of them engaged him to go there and take the picture. You were not connected with the party in any way. You are eliminated."

"All right. Proceed."

"It is most logical to assume that either Muir or Loomis, one on either side of VanZant and closest to him of the eight, is the man who dropped the poison in the wine when the lights were out. However, what strikes me as logical isn't always absolutely true. We know, however, that Muir was acquainted with VanZant. That is, he was closer to him than perhaps any of the others.

"That throws suspicion on Muir. Loomis, on the other side of him, was not connected with VanZant in any way beyond the slight acquaintance he had with him by reason of being one of the Romping Earls. That is, so far as we know at present.

"But Loomis, it seems, has been rearrested by the police. I am of the opinion that, when they got their wits together, they decided that they had made a mistake in letting him go, since he sat directly on the dead man's right. They'll pump him hard and discover whether or not he had any connection with VanZant other than infrequent association with him at the banquets of the Romping Earls.

"But I suspect all of them. I suspect Sterrett, Hoard, Langhorne, Sullivan, and Warbranch as much as I do the others. And I may say that I suspect them more.

"Because, Karnak—look here: Would Loomis, sitting on VanZant's right, take such a risk? If he had any reason to kill VanZant, wouldn't he realize that, when the man was discovered to be poisoned, he would likely be the first one suspected?

"And it's the same way in the case of Muir, as I have pointed out before. If Muir came there purposely to poison VanZant, and if the lights had been conveniently turned off just when he was ready for the act, wouldn't he have done his work and hurried away in the darkness, instead of standing there till the place was light again and announcing himself?"

"That all rings pretty good," Karnak encouraged him.

"Fine! I'm glad you see it that way. Therefore, Karnak, I suspect any one of the remaining six more than I do Muir and Loomis.

"Now, just for the sake of convenience, let's eliminate Muir and Loomis altogether. If our future deductions prove unsatisfactory, we can retrace our steps and pick them up again.

"So now we have six suspects—Sterrett, Hoard, Langhorne, Sullivan, Warbranch, and Smedley the photographer. The immediate question is, then, which of the six seems to most likely to have been the slayer of Felix VanZant? Which do you say, Karnak?"

The Shadow thought a little. "Well," he replied finally, "Warbranch claimed to have been in touch with VanZant during the eight years since the earls banqueted together last."

"Ah! So he did. But how could Warbranch contrive to leave his place at the head of the table, after the darkness came, go to the foot of the table, empty the contents of the phial into VanZant's wine glass, and return to his seat again before the flashlight torch was lit? Was it at all possible for him to have done so? The answer depends entirely on the length of time between the dousing of the café lights by the manager and the firing of the flashlight torch. Now, Karnak, how long was that?"

"It was a very short space of time indeed," was Karnak's opinion. "There was no need for any delay at all. I can say positively that there was not time for Warbranch to make his way through the blackness to VanZant's side and poison his wine, then get back and seat himself, present a smiling countenance to the camera when the flashlight was fired."

"Impossible, eh? Couldn't be done? Altogether out of reason?"

"That's my personal opinion."

Mason studied the reproduction of the photograph in one of the newspapers.

"Warbranch certainly looks happy, unperturbed, and natural in this picture," he said. "He's a cool one if he managed, in some way, to do what we have just described and then present such a smiling countenance to the lens. Should we eliminate Warbranch on those grounds?"

"I should," Karnak told him.

"Then out goes Warbranch. That leaves five suspects.

"Now it's possible for Sterrett, sitting on the right of Loomis, to have reached across in front of Loomis and deposited the deadly liquid in VanZant's glass. In his case, we must discover a motive. And as it seems that he had no close connection with the dead man, a motive will be hard to find. However, we'll hold Sterrett for the present.

"Now, if it was impossible for Warbranch to leave his seat, commit the crime, and return in time for the flashlight, it would be almost equally impossible for Sullivan to have accomplished it. Langhorne and Hoard might have done it a little easier than Sullivan. We have eliminated Warbranch, remember, because it would be more difficult for him to pull the trick than for any one of the others. But as to Langhorne and Hoard, we are again confronted with the fact that, so far as we know, they were not connected with VanZant except as a fellow member of the Romping Earls.

"And now we come to Eli Smedley, the photographer, who, remember, admitted being an acquaintance of Warbranch. Could the photographer have poured the poison in VanZant's glass?"

"Yes," answered Karnak thoughtfully, "it would seem that he might have stepped forward as soon as the lights were out and turned the trick, then tripped softly back to his camera. But the fact remains that I heard his voice, his movements, beside the camera all the time the lights were off."

"Can you say that positively?"

"Well, anyway, I was conscious of his presence there."

"Yes, yes; I understand what you mean."

"And I doubt," added Karnak, "if even he had time enough in which to do it."

"All right. Then suppose we eliminate all of them. Who then?"

"I'm sure I can't answer that," Karnak laughed.

"Take a look at this picture in the paper," went on Mason; and, as he passed it to Karnak he offered, in his other hand, a magnifying glass. "Give it a careful scrutiny, from side to side and from top to bottom," he suggested.

After a long study of the picture Karnak looked up. "I don't get your drift," he confessed.

"Don't see anything new?"

"Not a thing."

"Look directly behind VanZant's chair," Mason commanded. "Between the right side of the arch and VanZant's chair, on the floor. Do you see anything there in the shadow?"

Karnak looked lengthily. "By George!" he cried suddenly. "I seem to see—see something!"

Loris Fowler glanced over his shoulder. "So do I," she announced. "I see a small bulk that seems to be just a little darker than the background."

"What does it look like?"

Another long pause. Then came in a startled exclamation from Loris, "My goodness! It looks something like a foot"

"Gosh, it does!" Karnak breathed.

Nicholas Mason grinned with huge satisfaction. "If it isn't a foot," he stated, "both of mine are cut off at the ankles."

"But whose foot?" demanded Karnak.

"The murderer's foot," said Nicholas Mason. "I didn't notice it when I looked at the plate. I wouldn't have noticed it in this picture if I hadn't used the magnifier. But I'm of the opinion that it'll show rather plainly when we see the print to-morrow morning. The murderer, my dear newfound friends, was standing directly behind VanZant, shielded from the eyes of the photographer and Karnak and the camera lens by the wall at the end of the arch, when the flashlight picture was taken. And the diners, all looking at the camera—naturally—did not see him either. But he didn't have time to withdraw that foot, it seems, after putting it forward to balance himself as he leaned over to deposit the poison in the wineglass. It was still thrust out when the flashlight flared. And the infallible eye of the camera caught it."

"Why—why that clears every one of the Romping Earls and the camerman, too!" cried Loris jubilantly.

"In the eyes of the police it will, I think," drawled Mason. "Now tell me, Miss Fowler, why your *fiancé*, Fred Muir, had reason to hate the dead man. And then we'll take another automobile ride in the early morning hours, while the city sleeps."

CHAPTER VIII.

KARNAK LOSES HIS TEMPER.

"IN the first place," Nicholas Mason continued, "did you know Felix VanZant, Miss Fowler?"

"No, I never met him," Loris replied. "But Fred Muir left something in his care when he went to China last year. I am afraid that I can't explain it at all, for I know nothing about business matters. Anyway, Fred left something for VanZant to do for him, and—and I guess he didn't do it right. Something about some stocks. VanZant was to sell them for Fred, I think. And Fred says he sold them at a very low figure, and split the difference with the man who bought them. That's really all I could get out of it—that Fred thought Mr. VanZant had cheated him out of a lot of money."

"I see. And how long has Muir been back from China?"

"Why, he returned only day before yesterday on the steamer Southern."

"Oh-ho! I'm beginning to see a little light. Now, Abijah Warbranch claimed to have known VanZant. That is, he said at the banquet, according to Karnak, that he had kept in touch with VanZant during the eight years that the Romping Earls had been separated. Do you know Warbranch, Miss Fowler?"

"No, I have never met him, but I have heard Fred mention his name."

"Were he and Muir connected in any close way?"

"Well, hardly that. But they have met many times during the past eight years."

Mason turned to Karnak. "Didn't you tell me," he said, "that, at the banquet, Abijah Warbranch claimed to have been in touch with only one of the earls during that period—VanZant himself?"

"He made that statement," replied Karnak.

"Which was an untruth, apparently. He knew Muir quite well, according to Miss Fowler. That would make two of the earls whom he had been in touch with since the last banquet, eight years ago. Why did he lie? I can't answer that, but I can tell you why he *dared* to lie. He thought Muir was still in China, and had no idea that he was to present himself in Trent's last night. Now why did he want to lie?"

Both Loris Fowler and Karnak shook their heads.

"Do you suppose that he knew Muir, whom he thought still in China, and VanZant were on the outs?"

Neither of his auditors could answer. But Karnak ventured:

"Being in touch with VanZant, he doubtless knew that VanZant was in touch with Muir."

"Not necessarily," said Nicholas Mason. "Suppose that VanZant and Warbranch were engaged in some secret enterprise—maybe something out of the bounds of the law. In that case they might not mention to their fellow earl, Fred Muir, that they were in touch with each other. Is that fair enough?"

"It's acceptable," was Karnak's reply.

"All right, then. Now it seems to me that it's up to us to discover this connection—which we will hypothetically call a secret connection—between Warbranch and VanZant."

"But why pick on Warbranch?" asked Karnak. "We had already eliminated him before the discovery of that mysterious foot caused us to eliminate all of the earls and the photographer as well."

"He lied," Mason reminded him. "He said that he had been in touch, in the eight years past, with only one of the Romping Earls—VanZant. VanZant himself probably knew that he was not telling the truth, but did not rise to correct him. A secret between them—see? Then up flopped Muir, just returned from China, to give Warbranch the lie. Besides, Warbranch was the only one at the banquet who claimed to have been in touch with VanZant. So we'll put Warbranch back into our puzzle again."

"But look here," cried Karnak, finding it difficult to follow him, "I heard you tell the chief of detectives that you know the murderer's name. And when you discovered that mysterious foot peeping into view behind VanZant's chair, you claimed that it was the foot of the murderer. If you knew the murderer's name before, and if you are now sure that it is his foot which is showing in the picture, why don't you find him? According to your statements, he is not one of the Romping Earls nor is he Smedley, the photographer. Then who is he?—and why bother further with any of the Romping Earls?"

Nicholas Mason smiled indulgently. "I didn't state, my dear Karnak, that the murderer was not one of the Romping Earls. It was Miss Fowler, if I mistake not, who said that. He must be one of the Romping Earls. How could anybody else have got into that alcove undiscovered? There were no waiters about when the picture was taken, were there?"

"No."

"It would be utterly impossible for an outsider to get to the position behind VanZant's chair, pour the poison into his wine, and get away again before the lights came on. He would be unfamiliar with the surroundings entirely. He couldn't accomplish it, unless he had eyes that could see in the dark. No, one of the Romping Earls or the cameraman killed VanZant, and it's up to us—"

Karnak sprang to his feet in his exasperation. This man was off his balance.

"You're absolutely illogical, stupid, crazy!" he accused, while Mason stood spread-legged and smiled at him in a superior way. "You state that the cameraman or one of the Romping Earls killed VanZant—that that is the reproduction of his foot sticking out there behind VanZant's chair. We know positively that the poison was placed in VanZant's glass before the flashlight. The flashlight shows every one of the Romping Earls in his chair at the banquet. And the photographer, of course, was beside his camera. You're wasting my time. I'm going to get a taxi and take Miss Fowler home, and then I'm going to my club and go to bed."

"Dear, dear, dear! What an impulsive man you are, Mr. Karnak! And just when I thought I was convincing you that I am an expert reasoner. Well, I like you, Karnak. You're a good fellow, a gentleman, and a scholar. I'll have to convince you, I guess, because I don't want to lose your friendship or your respect. I did want to look up a motive for the crime, in order to made my case complete, but since you have become so impetuous, I'll let that slide. So if you and Miss Fowler will come with me to police headquarters, I'll show you the murderer in a short space of time."

"To police headquarters!" gasped Loris. "You don't mean Fred, after all?"

"Will you come—both of you?"

"Yes, we'll give you one more chance," said Karnak. "Lead the way."

"All right. But before I go, take another long look at that reproduction in the paper—both of you—and tell me which of the men pictured is the murderer. He's there, right in front of you. And the evidence that he is the murderer is there, plain as the nose on your face. Look! Think!"

Loris Fowler and Karnak spent fully five minutes studying the reproduction, but at last Karnak handed the paper back with a sigh.

"You'll say, 'How simple!' when I show you," growled Mason. "And just for that I'm not going to show you until the end. You have eyes, but can't use 'em. That's not my fault. Come on—we'll go for another ride."

The police station again—and Nicholas Mason asked Loris Fowler and Lanier Karnak to remain in the car. Then he ran up the broad stone steps and was inside for some little time.

Out in the car, Loris and Karnak held an indignation meeting, and resolved that, whereas Nicholas Mason acted like a lunatic, he was a lunatic.

Then the lunatic came down the steps with two plain clothes detectives at his heels.

"Guess we can all squeeze into the old bus," he remarked lightly. "Miss Fowler, I think you'll find it more comfortable in front with me."

The plain clothes men clambered in. Mason took the wheel.

Then, to Karnak's surprise, he drove to 615 Tekram Street, where he ordered all hands out.

Karnak was more surprised than ever when Mason led the way up the dark stairs that ascended to the odoriferous photographic studio of Eli Smedley. For, though he had not seen Smedley leave the building to go home, Mason had assured him that the photographer had left while they were talking with Detective Tetterton before his door.

But as they reached the dark hall above a thin smear of light was showing through the transom over Smedley's door.

Mason walked to the door and knocked. It was not until then that Karnak missed one of the plain clothes men.

Mason knocked again and again, without receiving a response. Finally, as nobody came, he began throwing his shoulder against the door, but not hard enough, Karnak noticed, to strain the lock or the hinges. He kept this up at intervals, making quite a bit of noise.

Ten minutes passed. Nobody had said a word. Then suddenly there came the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and presently an electric torch pointed the way along the dusty floor of the hall for two men who had ascended from the street.

Another electric torch, in the hands of the plain clothes man who was with them, cast a shaft of brilliancy in the direction of the approaching pair.

Loris Fowler gasped. They were the missing detective and Eli Smedley

"Caught 'im monkeyin' down the fire-escape, Nick," announced the captor. "He raised an awful holler when I nabbed him. Now what'll we do with 'im?"

"Unlock the door, Smedley," commanded Mason. "We want to go in your dump and have a talk with you."

Smedley grumbled to himself, but he was plainly frightened. He fitted a key in the lock with trembling fingers and opened the door.

They all filed in, passed through the main room, and into the one where Karnak and Mason had talked with the photographer the first time.

Mason found a chair and set it forward for Miss Fowler. Then he stepped before Smedley and leveled a finger at his nose.

"Now, Mr. Smedley," he said, "you're up against it, and you might as well come clean. You're a bootlegger, aren't you?"

"I am not!" denied Smedley indignantly.

"Tut, tut, man! Don't you think I know the smell of a whisky still? I smelled it when I was here before. Your still was going then. That's why I expected to find you here at this time in the morning, instead of at home in bed. Illicit distillers usually work at night, when other folks are asleep and can't smell the fumes. I knew you sneaked down the stairs after

Karnak and I left before, to make sure that we were going away for good.

"When I told you I was a dick, you got excited. Then, seeing us still at the curb before this building, and in company with a police detective, you walked away up the street, throwing the bluff that you were going home. Your still's right in that room, Smedley"—and Mason pointed to a door that was closed. "I knew you were in here, and I thought you would refuse to open the door. So I pretended that I was on the point of breaking my way in, in order to scare you down the fire-escape. Detective Willock was waiting for you in the alley, and nailed you. Just as I planned. Now let's see your still, Smedley."

"You're not enforcement officers!" growled the little photographer. "You got no search warrant. I refuse to open that door or any other door."

"All right, Smedley," Mason gave in. "You're talking like a sea lawyer now. You're within your rights. We won't force our way into that room. Between you and me, Smedley, we're not interested in your activities as an illicit distiller of hooch. We want to know who poisoned Felix Van-Zant in Trent's Café last night."

The man's face, already pale, grew ghastly white. "I don't know a thing about it," he protested, licking his lips with a swift tongue in his perturbation.

"Let's see the original plate you used to make that exposure, Smedley," Nicholas Mason persisted relentlessly.

"I showed it to you once, didn't I?"

"I said *the original plate*, Smedley! You'll either show it to us now, or we'll take you to the station and give you the third degree. Do you realize what that means, Smedley?"

The wizened little fellow licked his lips furiously again.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about!" he howled. "I tell you I showed you the plate! That's the only plate there is. It's the original. How could there be any other?"

"Listen, Smedley," said Mason sternly. "I happen to know something about photography myself. I was a newspaper reporter at one time in my career. I know what can be done to a photographic plate by an expert. Now will you come across? I've got you, Smedley."

Smedley sank weakly to a chair and threw his arms on his workbench, burying his face against them.

"Come! Talk!" Mason ordered.

But just then there was a knock at the outer door, and two more plain clothes police officers came in, preceded by Abijah Warbranch, the master of ceremonies at the banquet of the Romping Earls.

"Good evening, Mr. Warbranch—or, rather, good morning," Mason greeted him. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Nicholas Mason, of the Wilkes Detective Agency. Sorry to have to get you out of your warm bed in the St. Ignatius Hotel at this ungodly hour of the morning, but our business is pressing. I want to know how long you have known Mr. Smedley, here, and what you can tell us about his general behavior."

Warbranch looked stupefied, glancing from one to the other of the occupants of the room.

"Why, I've known Eli for some time," he stated. "We're pretty good friends. I think he's honest and straight. You're not trying to connect him with that terrible affair at Trent's last night, are you?"

"Yes, in a way," replied Mason. "But before I ask you any more questions about him, will you kindly give this young lady here a good look and tell me whether or not you have ever seen her before? Her name is Mary Dover."

CHAPTER IX.

MISPLACED LEGS.

LORIS FOWLER gasped, it was so sudden and unexpected. She turned startled brown eyes on Mason, utterly at a loss to know what he had in mind.

Warbranch, equally nonplused, looked at the embarrassed girl closely.

"I am positive," he said, "I have never met her before."

"Never met Mary Dover? She has charge of the hat-and-coat stand in Trent's Café."

Warbranch elevated his eyebrows politely, as much as to say: "Well, what of that?"

"Last night, while the Romping Earls were dining in the alcove on the mezzanine floor at Trent's," Mason went on, "Miss Dover had occasion to leave the checking stand and go to the mezzanine. This was just before the flashlight picture was taken. She went up the stairs, walked past the alcove where you gentlemen were at dinner, and entered a room at the other end of the mezzanine floor. Shortly after this, as she was on her way back to her stand, the manager had the café lights extinguished. She was caught in total darkness halfway between the door from which she had just came and the alcove.

"She stopped, of course wondering what had happened to the lights, for the manager of the café had made his announcement while she was in the room which she had had occasion to visit. Then, while she was standing there, waiting for the lights to come on again, the flashlight torch was fired, and the picture taken.

"And what, Mr. Warbranch, do you suppose that Mary Dover saw? She had a slanting view of the interior of the alcove. From where she stood, she could see the man who was poisoned, Felix VanZant, and only two more of the diners. But what is more important still, she tells me that she saw another man standing directly behind VanZant's chair, hidden from everybody except herself by the wall which forms the arch before the alcove. He was standing in that little corner, directly behind VanZant's chair, leaning forward just a trifle. Isn't that remarkable, Mr. Warbranch?"

"It's remarkably stupid of you to be telling me all this," Warbranch snapped. "I suppose you suspect my friend Eli Smedley of this murder. That's why you've lured me here, to help incriminate him. But I myself, sitting in my chair at the head of the table, plainly saw Eli standing beside his camera when the flash came. How could he be anywhere else? Wasn't it he who made the exposure? Wasn't it he who fired the flashlight torch? This Mr. Karnak here—I think I have the right name—knows that as well as I do."

"Mr. Warbranch," Mason continued, "Eli Smedley did fire the torch, and he did stand beside his camera at the time of which you speak. But if the man hiding in the corner behind VanZant, unseen by the Romping Earls because they were looking at the camera, unseen by Karnak because the wall of the arch concealed him—if this man was not Smedley, I ask, who in the devil was he?"

"How should I know?"

"He was one of the Romping Earls—one who left his seat as soon as the lights were out, darted to a position behind VanZant's chair, poured the poison in the wineglass, and stood erect just in time to prevent his figure from being exposed to the photographic plate when the light flashed. But, in leaning forward to pour the acid in the wineglass beside VanZant's plate, he was obliged to thrust out a foot to balance himself. Before the flash light flared he was able to jerk his body back out of sight, but not that foot. It shows in the reproduction of that picture in the morning papers, Mr. Warbranch. Have you seen the papers yet?"

"No."

Mason handed him a copy, together with his magnifying glass. "Take it to the light and look closely," he said. "You'll see the dim outlines of a man's foot protruding beyond the wall that forms the archway on the right. See it?"

"Yes, I believe I do," returned Warbranch after a lengthy scrutiny. He looked straight at Mason again. "But what have Eli Smedley and I to do with that?" he asked. "Here's the picture"—he tapped the newspaper with his knuckles—"and in it every one of the Romping Earls appear. If there was a man standing behind VanZant's chair, he undoubtedly is the poisoner. But he can't be one of the Romping Earls, because all of them are in their respective places. This picture proves that."

Warbranch, however, glanced nervously at Loris Fowler—just one fleeting, expectant glance. Loris lowered her eyes.

An ominous silence fell. The breathing of every one in the room could be heard. Through the cracks of the door which

Smedley had refused to open issued the pungent smell of distillation.

Then suddenly there came from Eli Smedley a hoarse scream. "I can't stand it!" he cried. "I'm gonta tell! They've got us! He understands photography, that fellow does. I've got to tell or I'll go crazy! I—"

"Shut up, you fool!" shouted Warbranch. "He knows nothing. He's bluffing you! Shut up, I tell you!"

Mason had risen and stepped to the side of the wailing photographer. He laid a hand gently on his shoulder.

"Show me the original plate, Eli," he said soothingly, "and save yourself the trouble of an explanation. I know all about it, anyway, you know."

Smedley was weeping nervously. "I—I destroyed it," he faltered.

"I thought maybe you had done that. Then tell me. It 'll go easier with you if you do, Smedley."

"Don't say a word!" yelled Warbranch. "Close your trap! Let him do his worst. He doesn't know anything."

Smedley looked up at him. "I'm gonta tell," he said. "I know which side my bread's buttered on. It ain't me—it's you! I'm gonta save myself."

The words were barely out of his mouth when Warbranch crashed a fist to the jaw of the nearest police officer and made a dash for the door. He wrenched at the knob, but, unbeknown to him, the door had been locked by the last plainclothes man to enter. He reeled back into the arms of two of them.

Handcuffs flashed on his wrists. He stood there, tragedy in his face, held by two indifferent and bored-looking officers.

Mason was speaking softly.

"You don't need to tell me, Eli," he declared. "I'll tell you what was done, and you may corroborate what I have to say. Later, when you feel better, you can write a complete confession and sign it before witnesses. It 'll go much easier with you if you do."

Mason smiled at the others.

"There," he said, pointing a finger at Abijah Warbranch, "stands the murderer of Felix VanZant. I knew hours ago that he was the murderer, but I wanted to get absolute proof before I made any statement. I knew it after I'd studied the plate that Smedley showed me here in his studio. I wanted one of the prints, however, so that I could see things more clearly. But we don't actually need even the plate. Abijah Warbranch is plainly labeled as the murderer in that reproduction in the papers. I know, because I was once, when working in a newspaper office, quite familiar with the tricks of expert photographers.

"If you will look at the reproduction in the papers, you will note that the figure of Warbranch is blacker than the others. Just a trifle. It is also a little clearer, a little more distinct. But not one man in a thousand would notice it.

"That gave me my first clew, and I looked for additional evidence. I discovered it at once. Karnak, Miss Fowler—all of you who are not engaged—please examine the reproductions in these papers. Look closely at the figure of Warbranch. Do you notice anything else besides the extra clearness of his picture?"

Those who had responded to his request shook their heads, after a long examination. Mason sighed.

"It's so evident," he said. "Look at VanZant's picture. He is seated at the foot of the table, directly opposite Warbranch. The table is a long, narrow one. Its ends are perhaps four feet wide. Naturally, the men at the ends of the table should be seated in the middle. Let's say that their bodies occupy a foot and a half of space in the middle of the ends. That leaves a foot and a quarter of table space on each side of them.

"Now, if one of you gentlemen should sit in the middle of the end of a table four feet wide, would you find it convenient to spread your feet apart so that they would be on the outside of the table legs?

"Notice VanZant. His legs do not show. They are inside of the table legs, of course. But notice the picture of Warbranch. His right leg shows outside of the table leg. An undignified position for a man to keep his legs in at a banquet, to say the least. Don't you see that it would be almost impossible for him to sit in the middle of

the end of the table and have his right leg showing outside the table leg? Don't you see that, Karnak?"

"Yes, it's clear," admitted Karnak. "But still I don't understand—"

"How it condemns Warbranch as the murderer, eh? But it does. If Smedley hadn't destroyed the original plate I could show you in an instant. But here's the plot in a nutshell:

"Warbranch left his seat at the head of the table the instant the manager turned off the lights. Catfooting over the soft carpet of the alcove, he slipped behind his fellow earls to a place back of VanZant's chair. He leaned over and poured the deadly contents of his phial into VanZant's wineglass. He had hoped that there would be sufficient time for him to return and resume his seat before the torch was fired. But something went wrong. Smedley worked too fast for him, or—"

"I didn't have anything to do with it!" shouted Smedley. "Not then, anyway. I didn't know anything about it, then, Mr. Mason."

"All right, Smedley. I believe that. Anyway, Smedley began counting one, two, three before Warbranch could dart back to his own end of the table. But he was prepared for just such an emergency. He stepped back quickly into the corner, thinking that there he would not show in the photograph, and believing that the other earls would have their eyes glued to the camera and not notice him. *But he failed to retrieve that balancing foot in time.* The flash came and his foot was photographed, though very dimly.

"Immediately after the flash, and before the café lights were turned on again, he hastened back to his chair and was there in his seat when the place was again illuminated.

"The flash was so quick that Karnak, even, sitting directly before the subjects of the photograph, was unable to tell whether all of the chairs were occupied when the torch was lighted. Warbranch thought that he was virtually safe, for he had purposely seated VanZant at the foot of the table, had purposely taken the other end himself, so that he would be the last man to be suspected of the crime because of his distance from his victim.

"Then in some way he got in touch with Smedley, after the crime had been discovered. He needed Smedley's aid now to save him from the gallows. His life was in Smedley's hands. He may have telephoned from the police station, under the pretext of getting somebody to vouch for him, or he may—"

"That's what he did," sniffed Smedley. "And I got word just in time. I lied to you fellows when you were here. And to the police, too. I hadn't finished with the work yet. The prints weren't on their way to the newspapers. I came back, finished up, and sent them in later—just in time to get 'em in."

"I thought as much," Mason told him. "But I didn't say anything about it. I wanted you to go ahead and hang yourself —and Warbranch."

"And Warbranch was hidin' in that room there when you were here," Smedley added.

"I suspected that, too," smiled Mason.

"But what was done, folks, was this," he continued. "Over the phone Warbranch told Smedley all that had happened, and begged him, for the sake of the connection between them—which I think is the bootlegging game—to save his life. Smedley agreed to it. So when Warbranch hurried over here, after being released by the police, they got to work.

"Here in his studio Smedley placed Warbranch in an ordinary dining chair—this one right here, maybe. He aimed his camera at his profile. He inserted the plate of the exposure made at Trent's, which showed the empty chair. Then, with his black cloth over his head, he looked through the camera, moving the camera here and there, backward and forward, until Warbranch's figure appeared just where it ought to be if he had been in the original exposure, correctly focused and of the proper size. The empty chair was covered by Warbranch and the chair in which he was seated.

"Then he slipped the original plate out and inserted an unexposed plate. He took a flash light of Warbranch. He hastily de-

veloped this plate, made a print, dried it, and with a pair of scissors cut out the figure, following the outlines carefully. This cut-out figure he pasted on the print of the original photograph of the banquet, which showed Warbranch's chair empty. He pasted it in just where Warbranch should have been, at the head of the table. But he was confronted with a dilemma, or else he was obliged to work too fast, so that he didn't notice details. For in pasting in the figure of Warbranch in its proper place he was obliged to paste the man's leg on the outside of the table leg.

"If the tablecloth had been longer, and hung clear to the floor, he could have cut off Warbranch's leg entirely, and those who saw the print would think his leg was hidden in the gloom under the table. But café tablecloths are notoriously short.

"However, that was the way it was done. Then Smedley, with an enlarging camera, took a photograph of the patched-up photograph, and lo and behold, the empty chair was occupied when the prints went to the newspaper offices! It was all carefully planned by Warbranch before the crime, to be done if he failed to get back to his chair before the flash light. It was designed to be a perfect alibi—but it failed. Now, Warbranch, why did you kill VanZant?"

Warbranch, white of face, glared at Mason. His lips moved spasmodically, but he did not speak.

"He'd double-crossed us in the bootleg game," muttered Smedley. "Not only once, but several times. Warbranch and I made the booze; VanZant peddled it. Oh, he was smooth and polite and gentlemanly acting, but he was all for VanZant. He claimed he had to make up to certain police officials, but we found he was lying and was putting the money in his pocket. There is a girl, too, of course. They hated each other like poison for the past few months. Hooch and a woman—that's what killed VanZant."

Mason rose.

"All right, Smedley—thank you," he said. "You'll have to come with us to headquarters now, of course. There you can write a confession of your small part in the plot, and sign it before witnesses. I hope they make it light for you—you're only a tool.

"Let's be going, boys. The chief of dicks owes me a hundred bones that I want to collect before I go to bed. Karnak, you're as sleepy as a puppy. The Pelicans' for you, my son. And I'm sure Miss Fowler wants to see Fred Muir released so that he can take her home. He's been in China for a year, and was snatched away from her the second day after he came back."

"Miss Fowler?" Smedley stared. "I thought you said her name was Mary Dover."

"I'd forgotten that," said Nicholas Mason with a grin.

THE END

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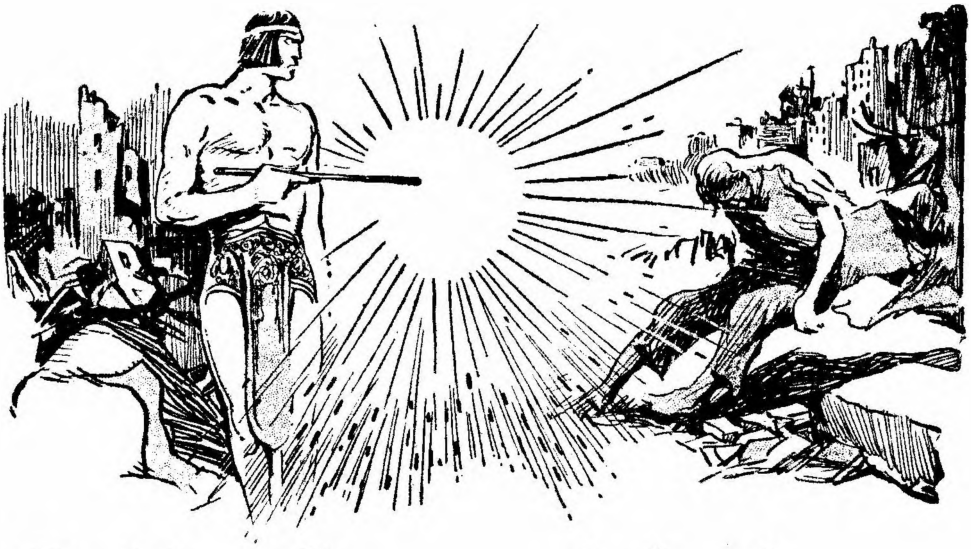
THE DISCIPLINED YOUNGSTERS

THEY used to ask me for the car
  At morning, noon, and night.
They yearned to drive it near and far,
  With sundry friends bedight.
But I was adamant with them,
  And would not let them take it.
I did not haw, I did not hem;
  My will, they could not break it!
They do not ask me for it now—
  With truthfulness I type it:
To obviate a family row,
  They simply go and swipe it.

Strickland Gillilan.



The Sun-Makers

By WILLIAM F. McMORROW

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

FRANK HARDIMAN, who tells the story, is becoming a little bored with his friend, James Rossey, an astronomer who tells him about the planet of Venus and its probable occupation by living creatures. The next morning a queer, top-shaped machine appears in the sky and lands not far from Hardiman's home, attracting crowds of sightseers who have read of a new type of airship said to have been manufactured in Belgium and flown across the Atlantic. The first evidence of something decidedly weird about the machine is found when a small animal is thrown out, a creature unlike any earth-born animal. Then a reporter, trying to climb up the side of the toplike structure, is electrocuted. A strange force explodes revolvers in policemen's pockets, gasoline in automobile tanks and ammunition in distant arsenals. Many persons are killed; those in the neighborhood where the strange machine landed attempt to flee with their families. Rossey, the astronomer, locates Hardiman and advises immediate flight from the section. Hardiman locates his wife, but finds her terrified over some new development.

CHAPTER III (*Continued*).

THE FIRST BLOW.

"JOHNNY is gone!" she screamed. "He isn't here anywhere."

"Easy now," I soothed her. "He can't be far away. Let's inquire."

I heard my name called and looked around to see Mrs. Marlin standing near the hedge that divided our property from hers. Her voice sounded remarkably clear and steady for such a time.

"Looking for your boy ain't you?"

"Yes. Have you seen him?"

"What with all this pesky nonsense about Bolsheviks and folks running around a body is lucky to see anything," she answered with some warmth. "I ain't going to flatter them by budging an inch. Why, you'd think the end of the world had come. It's these chuckle-headed womenfolk with their nerves on edge from late hours and bobbed hair that starts these things. I been telling Peter what to expect. It's a visitation for our sins. I'm ready for the call. There's some that ain't so ready—"

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for November 21.

"But how about our Johnny? Did you see him?" I broke in.

"Well, I ain't seen the boy myself, but the Whites was running around like a bunch of scared chickens some time back, and I heard them say they would take your Johnny with them and escape. Escape from what? There ain't no escape from your sins nor your conscience—"

I had no time to listen to her. I heard Rossey shouting to me from the roadway and raced inside the house to get the stuff he had suggested.

"You see Johnny's safe," I told my wife. "Get some food ready."

When I came down with an armful of blankets she had a basket on her arm. We hurried out to the driveway. On any other occasion I would have enjoyed joking with Rossey on the situation I found him in. He was sitting on the front seat of a grocery wagon and holding the reins. It was a plain delivery wagon with a canvas shed and with its old bay horse was a familiar sight at the back doors of Thermopylae. I think it was the only one of its kind in town, most of the tradesmen having automobiles.

"Where'd you get it?" I asked, soberly, dumping my load in the rear.

"Found it standing on a side street," he answered, looking over the horse appraisingly. "Not much of a judge of horseflesh, but he seems tame enough."

"How about a taxi?" I suggested, helping my wife into the rear end of the wagon. It had a smell of coffee and spices that one usually associates with vehicles of the kind. "Not that I mind, but for men in our position a grocery wagon makes a poor impression on the neighbors as a means of getting about. Besides a taxi is faster."

"Hardiman," Rossey said coldly, "Has it ever occurred to you that for general usefulness and density your head would make an admirable paper weight? Have you seen a gas driven vehicle lately that could be used?"

I climbed to the seat beside him.

"No. Come to think of it they were all on fire."

"Yes!" he snapped. "And every other inflammable thing within a radius of a good many miles is blazing right now. I knew those devils were getting in their work when the gas tank of my car exploded. We think we understand radio activity, don't we? Suppose they are able to throw a spark ten miles. You remember the explosion in Germany I spoke of. You can recall the explosions in the coal mines in Canada and Pennsylvania, too. That is a good bit farther than ten miles."

He touched the old horse with the whip and we moved slowly through the thickening smoke. A bungalow with a shingle roof was burning brightly at the corner of the street and lit up the way.

"Who are 'they,' Rossey," I asked, resentfully. "I'm not altogether a fool."

Lashed sharply with the whip, the horse broke into a clumsy gallop, turning the corner and into the broad, smoothly paved Boston Road toward the New York City line. We passed several groups hurrying along and stopped to take Chalmers and his family aboard. They loaded the wagon to its capacity.

When we started again it was at a slower pace. Rossey handed me the reins and lit a broken cigar.

"Bolsheviks," he muttered. "Hopeless!"

He sat silently then while we creaked up the hill and down again and across the bridge at Eastchester creek.

"Hardiman," he spoke up suddenly out of the darkness, "do you remember a recent conversation we had in my observatory?"

"Oh, that astronomy stuff," I answered shortly, nettled by his manner. "What's that got to do with a revolution?"

"Nothing—only this isn't a 'revolution' as you call it. It's something a great deal more serious than anything that ever has happened to this little old earth of ours."

"Why—what do you mean—worse than a revolution?"

"I mean," he said, impressively, laying a hand on my knee, "I mean that those creatures that landed back in that meadow are the ones men have been expecting but hoping never to see, that they have come to us from the planet Venus, that what they have done so far isn't a marker to what is going to happen by and by."

"Oh, come, Rossey, not as bad as that."

"I don't mean to be melodramatic about it," he continued, paying no attention to my aimless remark, "but it looks very much as if man—lord of all he surveys—lord of creation as we call him—is pretty close to the end of his reign."

CHAPTER IV.

I HEAR SOME STARTLING THINGS.

THE wagon jolted over the ruts for some time. Behind me a child whimpered and voices murmured underneath the wagon top. Here and there, over the nearby country, the flames of burning buildings flickered in the darkness like the camp fires of a huge, invading army. Rossey seemed to be turning something over and over in his mind.

I watched him uneasily. In spite of his mania for sitting up all night, watching the stars with that big spyglass of his, he had always appealed to me as a sane enough person. A good many solid business men with A-1 ratings had hobbies just as harmless. But I wondered if the suddenness of the events of the last few hours had not affected his mind a little.

I decided to avoid any reference to astronomy.

"How did you happen to hit Thermopylae this evening?" I asked. "Were you coming over to my place?"

He remained hunched up in his seat staring gloomily ahead.

"No—not exactly that. I had read of the so-called Belgian heliocopter, as our learned public styled it, and I realized what it was. My dates were a little wrong, though. I figured the Venusians, if they ever came would wait for the moon. They have come sooner than I thought they would."

"The Venusians!" I exclaimed. "I thought you were joshing me a while back, Rossey. Do you really believe that?"

He laughed harshly.

"If you hard-headed business men had raised your eyes from your own petty affairs, you might have seen this thing coming. The idea that creatures on some other planet might be as superior mentally to men as—say, men are to apes—that idea strikes you as ridiculous. The notion that these creatures would, some day sooner or later, decide to visit this planet for purposes of their own, that notion, a logical sequence, has never occurred to you; but it was just as certain to happen as it was certain that the white man's curiosity and greed would reach out for the discovery, possession and exploitation of America in the fifteenth century. That was an idea, too, that the sober merchants of the time regarded as absurd.

"For the past generation everything has pointed toward a possible invasion of this planet from a neighboring one. For the past few years everything has pointed toward Venus as the source of the invasion. I tried to explain a few things to you not long ago—things that many thinking men have noticed."

He whipped the grocer's nag into a trot again.

"Well, here they are now, Hardiman, right on top of us without any warning. Who and what they are I can't say. One thing is certain."

He tapped my knee with the butt end of the whip.

"Beings that can cross twenty-six millions of miles of space are vastly ahead of us in brain-power!"

"But what will they do here?" I asked. "Do they want to destroy us altogether? What would that benefit them?"

"That remains to be seen. They had some object in coming. It might be an exploring trip. Then again, they might have a deeper object. Obviously, if we get in their way they will destroy us."

"What! Murder us in cold blood!" I gasped.

"What do you mean by murder?" he countered, quickly. "Do you call it murder to kill a million or so of rabbits or seals or whales? It is hard, naturally, for us to conceive of a reasoning creature other than ourselves because we are the only species that shows intellectual development, to any extent, on this earth. When we think of a reasoning animal we picture a man. We have been so long the rulers of

this planet that the idea of a superior creature subjugating us as we subjugated the lower forms of animal life—the idea is abhorrent to us. But it is not inconceivable.

"After all, Hardiman, we are only big fish in a mighty small pool here. If we get in the way of these creatures from Venus, and they have the power, they will do away with us with the same ruthless ferocity that men have displayed for so many million years against any rebellious subjects in the animal kingdom!"

All this did not sound cheerful to me. I thought of my growing business that I had worked so hard to build and of myself and family.

"Maybe you're laying it on too thick," I suggested, trying to be optimistic. "They can't wipe us out altogether, you know. We're not so slow, I guess, ourselves. Our scientists are pretty smart, too. Oh, I guess they'll know how to handle the situation."

"We must hope so," he breathed.

But he did not seem very confident.

When I looked around me at the frightened procession along the road and the reddish tinge on the horizon all around I did not feel so confident either.

In a few minutes we reached the outskirts of the Bronx and pulled up under an "L" structure to let a column of soldiers and a line of gun carriages of a peculiar pattern ride by. They were going in the direction from which we had come. There seemed to be a regiment of infantry with them. The men looked worn out and the horses were wet with sweat.

An officer rode up to our wagon and switched a pocket flash light over us.

"You people from Thermopylae?" he inquired.

I nodded.

"How are things up there? We're like blind men here."

Rossey explained the appearance of the Whirling Machine and its effect; he mentioned the Venusians, but the other man seemed more interested in the machine.

"That's a new type," he said. "I wonder if it's really armor-plated. The revolutionists seem to have a lot of tricks up their sleeves. They blew up our motor transport back there."

"What's happened in the city?" I inquired.

"As far as I know except for the gas stations and garages they didn't do much damage. Automobile transportation seems to have collapsed. Some one set fire to the motor busses. Funny thing is that, although we know that some one is raising this particular hell all over, no one has been caught in the act. Telephones have broken down somehow. Quite a lot of fires, I hear, in the lower part of the city. We left the armory at the first riot call, but I don't suppose our colonel knows any more than we do what it's all about—we're the 48th Anti-aircraft—trouble seems to be around Thermopylae last we heard. Washington has been going crazy for—but I've got to catch up."

He started off at a brisk trot after the troops, waving his hand to us in informal salute and Rossey whipped up the old horse.

I noticed that no trains were running overhead and that the street lamps were not lit. The only light came from bonfires in the streets and candles and old-fashioned lamps in windows.

I pointed this out to Rossey.

"Paralyzing us! Striking right at the heart of things!" he muttered. "We have been able to stop gas motors at a distance—no mystery about that. Kemenoff, the Russian electrical wizard claimed to be able to do it. It might be unintentional—something about the machine they came in possibly neutralizing certain forms of energy."

Chalmers interrupted to ask that he and his family be set down at a friend's house in the neighborhood.

Rossey tried to persuade him to remain with us.

"There's safety in numbers," he insisted. "Things are going to fall apart for awhile, not only in New York, but throughout the rest of the world. Take my advice and avoid the cities for awhile until we find out what to expect. Better come along with us over to my place in Hastings."

But Chalmers was already lifting his children out of the wagon.

"Nonsense, Rossey!" he exclaimed impatiently, when pressed further to remain

with us. "I can't have the children sleeping outdoors and the city is the safest place for every one. Besides the government will take care of the people who are making all this trouble. That's what I pay taxes for. Let them worry about it!"

He started off, leading the oldest boy and carrying the youngest in his arms. At a corner, lit by torches held in front of a speech-maker on a broken-down truck, Chalmers looked back and waved his free hand. That was the last I saw of him. He was killed two days later in the collapse of the Municipal Building where, his wife told me later, he had gone to find out why the city departments were not taking proper steps to preserve order. He had always been a good citizen of the fussing sort.

Rossey struck a cross-street going west and we followed it for some time. Once we passed a large fire burning in the center of a crossing and a crowd gathered around a speaker. I looked back to see a squad of police scattering the crowd with clubs and fists. At the next corner an automobile fire engine, a blackened and scorched hook and ladder, blocked up most of the street so that we had to detour. Several times we passed squads of soldiers and police and there was intermittent shooting going on on either side of us.

"We'd better hurry if we're going to make the Albany Post Road," Rossey said, "for those policemen and soldiers will be holding up traffic. They will put the city under martial law—if there is any system left at all. I hope the National Guard will at least keep order."

The smoke blackened ruins of autos dotted the way here and there. In the shadows of the houses other shadows moved furtively along. Sounds of shouting and crashing glass came from the Southern Boulevard when we passed its intersection. Some kind of a riot was in progress.

Later the old horse shied violently at something in the road and I was afraid he had broken one of the flimsy shafts. I saw that the shapeless thing in the road was a dead man.

"Starting already," Rossey said, grimly. "With the end perhaps in sight they waste no time getting at each other's throats."

"What do you intend to do?" I asked.

"Hastings first," he said. "Got to get my data and the use of my telescope. Then Washington. The steam trains ought to be running for a few days yet. I've got to be there in person. There aren't six men in the United States to-night that know what is going on. I happen to be one of them. Two or three others may be there and if the Federal government will listen to us—"

He gestured with the ragged whip.

"I have a sort of an idea what these Venusian invaders are up to. If I'm right, there's not a moment to lose. I'd give a lot for two minutes' conversation with three or four men I know."

"With whom?"

"One is the leading geologist of this country; you don't know him and never heard of him; he's not a popular-lecture type, but a man who knows. Another is a friend of mine who worked quietly but efficiently for the gas defense organization during the war, and invented that powerful lethal gas we never used. Another is Weintraub, the German chemist, and another is Pierre Trabre."

"The French astronomer! Quite a combination, Rossey," I commented with feeble enthusiasm. "Sort of mixed, though. Geologists, chemists and astronomers. I should think we'd need generals right now and guns."

"Generals!" he snorted. "These are the generals we need. Our only hope lies in the men of science."

We passed a deserted news-stand, and I jumped down and secured a copy of the *Evening Star*. By the light of matches we examined it as we continued on our way.

It was an early edition, probably on the news-stands before transportation stopped, and of course made no mention of the events of the last few hours. The first page was devoted to a million-dollar bequest from one of our rich men to a university; some racy scandal revealed in a popular divorce suit; and various items that had been of stupendous interest twelve hours before.

I was about to toss it into the street, when Rossey pointed to an item below the

latest sport news. It was headed "Missing Balloon Found?" and read:

By *Evening Star* Radio.
Rio de Janeiro, June 6.

Messages are being received here from the interior reporting a strange balloon which has appeared close to the Peruvian border, near the Tarjuaca River, early this morning and is thought to be the captive balloon that broke loose from its moorings during the recent Brazilian army maneuvers. If so, it raises the interesting question as to the length of time such craft can remain aloft, as it was conjectured that the one in question had long since come to rest in the jungle. In other respects, it does not answer the description of the lost aircraft. Natives describe the one seen over Tarjuaca as silver-tinted and shaped like a top. Further details are lacking, as telegraphic communication, always poor in the interior, has for some reason been completely cut off.

Rossey tapped the paragraph with his finger and looked at me through narrowed lids. Then he blew out the match he had been holding, leaving us in darkness again, and chirruped to the tired horse. We both realized what that dispatch meant. There were two of the machines on earth.

It was a dark, moonless night, now that we had gone beyond the city limits, and I could hardly see three yards ahead. Presently we struck the Albany Post Road and turned north along the river front.

"Of course," I said at last, "there's no way of telling what is going on in Europe right now. They may be there also."

"Perhaps," he said wearily.

The grocer's horse, which had been gradually slowing up, stumbled twice while Rossey was talking. The latter peered into the shadows by the roadside and pulled up.

"You people better camp here for the night," he said. "You can sleep in the wagon. I may be wrong in my idea, but if I were you I'd avoid getting under any sort of roof to-night."

"How about you?" I asked.

"I'm going ahead. There will be no sleep for me until I am on my way to Washington. There used to be a couple of bicycles up at the house. I'll use one to get me to the river and find some way to get across to Jersey and look for a train, if there are any running the way I am going."

Neither my wife nor I got much sleep after he left. She did not mention our Johnny again, and I knew she was worrying about his safety and trying to pretend she thought it was all right and that he was safe. I figured he was with the Whites and in good hands.

I discovered that a business man of thirty-seven, weighing close to two hundred pounds, is unfitted physically to sleep in light delivery wagons, so I wrapped a blanket around me and tried to snatch some sleep propped up against a billboard by the roadside.

My mind was busy figuring out what was happening all over the world and what was going to happen that had scared Rossey so much. The stars came out after awhile. There seemed to be just as many of them as usual. I wished then that I knew more about them and wondered what Rossey had meant about the catastrophe that was coming our way, and wished I had asked him more questions. I tried to figure out what the creatures from Venus would look like. Rossey said birds, I remembered.

At any rate, they would have as much sympathy for us as we would have for a bunch of strange goblins.

I fell asleep and dreamed of fighting slimy creatures in airships. I was engaged in a thrilling battle with a Venusian above the clouds and had managed to upset the bath-tub he was driving by ramming it with a grocery wagon. We fell together through clouds of burning bathroom catalogues and directories of plumbing supply houses, and I awoke to find it was broad daylight and my wife was shaking me.

"I declare, Frank, I think you'd sleep the day through. How you can sleep so soundly with all these things happening I can't see."

She probably had not slept at all, so I maintained a charitable silence while we made a meal of a couple of sandwiches and a stale bottle of milk. I found the horse was hopelessly lame, so we packed up the few belongings we had and started for Hastings.

The road remained quiet. No motor cars appeared. But it was different at the

Hastings railroad station. The commuter was a hardy animal in those days. Nothing unless it were the crack of doom would keep him from getting his morning train. There were no trains running, but the commuters thronged the platforms, arguing in groups. I would have liked to stop and listen, for there were several novel theories going the rounds of that excited crowd. But we had no time to gossip.

Mrs. Rossey met us at the door of her home. She was looking worried and thin.

"Come right in," she said, kissing my wife. "We're all camping out these days. Rossey left for Washington to help out. He wants us all ready to move in a day or two. Isn't it terrible, Mr. Hardiman?"

She led my wife inside to a much-needed sleep. I strolled to the gate.

"Hello, there, Hardiman."

White was standing in the road with his wife. He walked toward me along the drive, firing questions.

"This Rossey's place? How'd you get here? Say, did you hear about the gas works in Mount Vernon blowing up?"

I put in a question myself.

"Where's Johnny? I thought he was with you."

They both looked blank. White shook his head.

"No. He left us as we were ready to leave. He was going down to meet you and Mrs. Hardiman at the airplane in Hank's meadow. He started that way, anyhow."

I know now what it means when I hear of people being struck speechless. For about a minute I just stared at him, figuring about little Johnny in the hands of those monsters back in Thermopylae. Then I came to life. I can think quickly when I have to.

"Listen!" I whispered, grabbing his arm. "Tell the folks—tell my wife that you brought the boy here, and that I took him down to the village for a couple of days. Tell her I did not want to wake her up to tell her about it."

I ran down the path to the barn. I recollected Rossey saying he had a bicycle hidden around somewhere. In another second I was wheeling it down the path at a run and had climbed into the seat.

"Hey!" White shouted as I rode by him. "Where you off to?"

He stepped out of the way just in time. I hadn't ridden a bicycle in a good many years and was never graceful at it.

"Back to Thermopylae."

He shouted something else, but I was through the gate and too busy trying to keep the machine on the highroad to listen. I could not even take my mind off my work long enough to look back.

I might have saved myself a lot if I had.

CHAPTER V.

A WORLD IN DANGER.

Of course we all know more about what was going on during the couple of days that elapsed between the landing of the Whirling Machines and the first big crash—we know more about this now than we did then.

Plenty of lectures have been given and volumes written on the subject from Castleton's "Venus, the Destroyer," to the voluminous reports from the Planetary Institute, in Washington, which reports have been the means of spreading knowledge among the laymen concerning the important item of just who and what our neighbors are in the heavens. But this interest is recent. At the time of the Venusian invasion most of us knew about as much concerning the thing that had hit this old Mother Earth, as a colony of ants scurrying around, would know concerning the causes of their nest being wrecked.

We know now that only two Whirling Machines hit the earth.

One was our Thermopylae visitor, and the other was the one mentioned in that vague dispatch in the *Evening Star*—a suggestive name, by the way. The latter machine remained only a day or two on Brazilian soil and appears to have done no damage except to villages of neighboring Indians.

Several of the latter were carried off by the Venusians. The object of that expedition is not clear yet; so many changes have taken place since that time in South Amer-

ica that it is doubtful if the matter will be cleared up for some time. At any rate, that Whirling Machine left rather suddenly.

But as every one knows, the Whirling Machine that landed on our Westchester soil did not arrive to collect specimens of humanity only. They did that, too, but they had another object besides satisfying their curiosity concerning this bright star in their heaven, which was our hapless earth.

It was Rossey who first opened the eyes of the scientific world to what was really happening. Others knew, but he was on the job first and broke the news to the assembled Smithsonian Institution and the rest of them, the day he got to Washington, informing them very emphatically that unless they worked fast this world that had rolled along for so many ages peaceably was doomed to sudden extinction in a decidedly unpleasant manner.

They did not take the whole idea in the beginning.

Rossey told me about it after everything was over, one day when we were watching a gang of negro workmen salvaging building material from the débris that marked the site of the busiest section of lower Broadway.

"This," he said, waving his hand toward the half submerged heaps of rubbish and twisted columns—"this is nothing to what it might have been. It was only by the narrowest margin we got by. It was close."

It appears to have been difficult work convincing the wise men of that assemblage that day. Most of the savants had come hurriedly several hundred miles. A good many were too far away when the transportation and communications began to fail, to get in touch with Washington after President Penrose issued his startling proclamation.

They suspected, too, I imagine, that some crank had inoculated the President of the United States and the Chief of Staff and the Cabinet and the scientists with his own foolishness. One venerable doctor of something or other—I have forgotten his name—pooh-poohed the whole thing.

"Venusians!" he snorted contemptuously. "Come all the way from that planet—twenty millions of miles or so—to raise Cain here! Ridiculous idea! What next, I wonder?"

He bolted the meeting then and there and refused to have anything more to do with it. Later on he proved conclusively several times in public lectures on street corners—those were queer days following the coming of the Venusians, with every one more or less mad—that the visitors were not from Venus at all, and that the Whirling Machine had come out of the center of the earth where another race of creatures, something like salamanders, existed. He disappeared after the crash.

But the others listened to Rossey with respect. He had all the data at his finger tips and drove every argument home with facts and proofs that no one could very well ignore.

I can imagine nervous, energetic Rossey pounding his fists on the table and making the sweeping gestures he used to emphasize his theories with at Hastings.

"There I was before the best men in their line in the land," he told me, "white-headed fellows, with all the letters of the alphabet after their dignified names, and keen-eyed youngsters who had already made their marks in the scientific world. I had to show them.

"Eventually they got my drift. You remember, Hardiman, all the arguments I advanced to you one day to prove that Venus had a freezing temperature on one side part of their year, and a red-hot climate on the other side. Naturally I did not have to explain all that to those men. But when it came to my theory I had my hands full."

Gradually, he said, the assembled scientists grasped the truth, and the questions came thick and fast. What data had he to check up the facts he gave? How many million horse-power did he think the Venusians had provided for? Might they have come from Mars and not from Venus at all? How could any creatures execute such a gigantic engineering feat as his engineering called forth? There were more questions about the thickness of the earth's crust, the nearness of the moon on a certain date, and other questions which, until Ros-

sey explained to me, seemed to have little bearing on the subject.

Pierson, the elderly physicist, suggested plaintively that no creatures could be so heartless as to wipe out a world teeming with living creatures, for purely selfish reasons.

"What! Do you mean to say that in order to carry out their fiendish plans these hobgoblins would destroy us?"

"Exactly," Rossey had replied. "And with about as much compunction as you would feel in slaughtering millions of disease germs to save one human life. It's in your point of view. We mean absolutely nothing to these beings from our neighboring planet. It is a war to the death, with no quarter on either side. They are here, and will either accomplish what they came for or we will destroy them. There can be no half measures about it."

It *was* war. That afternoon President Penrose issued a second proclamation, calling on every able-bodied man and woman to aid their fellow humans in ridding the earth of the Venusians. There was no way of getting word to Europe under several weeks. Later, Europe sent her help. But that was after the first shock of the 17th of June. And that was almost too late in this one-sided war.

I am going too fast, though. All that was later.

Pushing that bicycle along the Albany Post Road that morning, I knew nothing of what was going on. I had only a dim idea from what Rossey had let drop that we were in for a bad time. What the Whirling Machine had brought to earth I did not know.

I was too busy trying to keep in the middle of the road to have much time to worry about anything else. I was not thinking of the Venusians at all just then. I had turned into Two Hundred and Tenth Street and was deeply engrossed in making a sharp turn around a deserted automobile and avoiding an iron pillar of the subway elevated structure that seemed to be trying to get in my way, when I found myself lying on the ground, entangled in the broken spokes of the bicycle. I took a quick look around to see what I had slipped on, and then scrambled to my feet. Several men, their faces white and their eyes staring upward, rushed to the protection of the elevated pillars and clung to them. I looked up.

Overhead the wall of the nearest building seemed to bend out all of a piece and hesitate for a fraction of a second like a breaking comber. It fairly quivered in its whole nine-story length of brick and stone. I clung to the iron pillar, itself swaying drunkenly, and shut my eyes.

There came a series of minor crashes far off like distant thunder. A scattering volley of bricks rattled against the iron overhead. The next instant came a roar like an ocean breaking loose, and I stopped thinking for awhile.

CHAPTER VI.

I MEET THE VENUSIANS.

IT was on the 17th of June that our planet received that terrific preliminary, warning jolt that showed the Venusians were getting in their work. At the same instant ever city and town within a radius of twenty miles of their landing place was laid in ruins.

The shock was felt all over the world, and in some cases slight damage was done as far away as London and Paris. In the former place St. Paul's, long known to be insecure, was a total loss. The Eiffel Tower in Paris crashed to the ground. Chicago was partly destroyed; Philadelphia, Boston, Pittsburgh, and other cities felt the shock and lost some of their skyscrapers, but otherwise escaped the fate of New York.

But the latter city was annihilated. The Woolworth Building crashed down first, according to one survivor, followed immediately by near-by tall buildings of the financial district. The bridges across the East River slid into the water almost noiselessly by comparison. Most of the great edifices of the metropolis collapsed like piles of dishes when a tablecloth is jerked from beneath them.

It was a nightmare of destruction. One second the sun was reflected from the

countless roofs and orderly squares of a thousand places that were the culmination of mankind's hundreds of years of painful building. The next minute or two an aerial observer would have had difficulty seeing through the clouds of dust that hovered over the ruins.

It came suddenly, unexpectedly. The greatest city of the Western Hemisphere received a smashing knockout blow from an invisible hand and went down for the count, carrying with it most of its vast population.

On that 17th of June the civilized world stopped like a delicate watch struck by a hammer.

Any boy in the sixth grade knows that. I only mention that date particularly because I figure I must have lain unconscious in the ruins for a whole day following the catastrophe. In spite of the fact that I kept a fairly accurate record of the days in my mind—even among the Venusians—I seem to have lost a day in my reckoning.

I seemed to come to life abruptly without experiencing any semiconscious state.

One moment I was cowering beneath the wave of brick and steel that was curving over me; the next moment I was lying alone on some splintered wood, in a dead silence, with a steel girder across my right foot and the dazzling glare of the sun in my eyes. Stabs of pain shot through my aching head. I never realized before how thirsty a man can be.

For a few moments I lay trying to collect my throbbing senses and watching the fireworks that seemed to revolve around that burning noontime sun overhead. Then I sat up, twisting around on my elbow, very dizzy and sick, and feeling as though I had just finished a round with a world's champion who had forgotten to take the horseshoes out of his gloves.

I got uncertainly to my feet. As far as I could see in any direction, I was surrounded by a rolling desert of broken brick and plaster with little hills where parts of stone foundations still held together beneath the piled-up débris. Here and there a crumpled steel skeleton twisted up above the ruins.

It reminded me of pictures of wartime France, only those pictures usually showed villages, whereas this desolation was, only two days before, one of the world's greatest cities, with crowds and apartment houses and theaters and stores full of life and rush and bustle.

Now it looked like nothing so much as a junk dealer's back yard.

Near me was a woman's hat, sadly battered, a crumpled bath tub—it made me homesick to see it—the top of a yellow-and-black taxicab half buried under a cigar store sign; a steam radiator and a piano speared on the end of a broken iron column. The place had the unearthly hush of a graveyard at midnight.

I was almost afraid to move around and make a noise. Very faintly, every few seconds, I could hear a dull rumble from the south. When you consider that the rumble was caused by the shifting of the ruins down around Wall Street, ten miles or so away, it will give an idea of the weird silence.

I staggered across the litter to what appeared to be a man's spring overcoat thrown in a heap, and sat down on it. Then I jumped up. There was a dead man inside the coat.

A foot sticking up from behind a pile of broken lath showed me where another was lying. Here and there I could make out others, some of them women.

I began to get an idea of the magnitude of the disaster.

But the main thing for me just then, I thought, was to get away. I felt that I could not get away from that city of death quickly enough and out into the green country where perhaps there were still men and women.

I started over the jumbled-up heaps carefully, jumping awkwardly every time my foot started a landslide of brick. Once I heard a faint cry as if some poor devil were pinned underneath, but I was too weak and sick myself to stop and investigate. I wanted to find water.

By and by I came to what had been a garage. It had been strongly built, and the roof still held here and there, though it sagged warningly. There was plenty of water there. It was at the bottom of a steep

street, quite a pool showing where the water had collected when the mains burst. I fell into it as gladly as a traveler in the desert does when he finds an oasis. The coolness of that artificial pond refreshed me wonderfully.

I kept on toward what I thought would be the west. Five minutes later I was fishing with a long stick in the ruins of a delicatessen store, at the risk of being buried alive beneath the threatening walls. That enterprise netted me half a loaf of bread, two cans of kippered herring, and a smoked tongue. More was in sight, but the view I got of the lately deceased proprietor took most of my ambition away.

I must have looked like a fine specimen of a hobo as I sat in an open space, devouring that stuff. I felt it. Human nature has its funny twists. Even there, the only man in what appeared to be a lifeless, ruined world, in spite of my famished condition, I felt a little foolish to be squatting on the ground chewing on the end of a loaf of bread. It was undignified. It takes time to get back to cave days and not a policeman in sight when you are accustomed to the five fifteen train and Sunday golf. I had a lot to learn.

Well, during the next few months I learned it.

When I had finished what I could of the victuals I dropped the rest into my pocket. I might have several days' travel before I discovered anybody alive in this waste. I sat for awhile trying to figure things out. Without a doubt, there had been a terrible world calamity.

New York was done for. The survivors must have fled to the open country, where it was safer. That explained the silence and loneliness. They probably took the injured with them. But what caused the earthquake—for that is what it seemed to be—in the first place?

I bounded to my feet as a cold nose touched the back of my neck and something breathed softly on me. In my sudden fright I must have stepped back ten feet at least before I caught myself and croaked out a relieved laugh. Then I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand.

It was only a sad-looking dog. I had been so wrapped up in my speculations that he had crept up to me unnoticed. He waved a draggled tail in a tentative sort of way and eyed me closely, waiting for me to wigwag a friendly signal back. I cut off a piece of smoked tongue with my penknife and held it out to him.

"Here, Tut!"

Tut is always a safe name for a dog, or was at that time; the fad dated from the digging up of some Egyptian king of that name. I needn't have been afraid of hurting this hound's feelings, however, by miscalling him, for when he saw the meat he snapped it up with all haste. In his hurry he seemed to think my fingers were included in the offer, but I took them out of his mouth again. No use pampering a dog.

After that we became great friends. He was company for me. It would have taken a better man than me to tell just what kind or how many kinds of a dog Tut was, but I valued his society just then. He made the desert of brick and stone less lonely. Together we scrambled along over the heaps of débris and around tottering walls, keeping the sun over my left shoulder in the hope of striking the Hudson River to the west.

It was hard going and we got twisted around sometimes, but by dark we reached clearer ground where the ruins were farther apart. By that time I had shed my coat, was covered with plaster and brick dust, and was ready to call it a day. I was puzzled at not finding the river; but considering that, in my ignorance, I was going east, that fact is not strange.

Still no signs of life. It began to look as if Tut and I were alone in a very dismal world. The thought of the possible fate of my wife and little Johnny was a dark cloud over my tired brain.

I stopped to rest in a broken chair against a section of the wall.

"Cheer up, Tut, old boy," I said, scratching his one good ear. "The folks are all right, I guess, somewhere. Let's make camp."

Tut wagged his tail and sniffed around as I dragged a few boards against the wall for a shelter in case it rained. What I

made did not look like a human habitation, and even Tut eyed it suspiciously before he crawled in with me. By the time he had circled around a few times the way all careful dogs do and walked over me and under me to investigate the place, we were ready to sleep.

Eventually he settled down for the night and I listened to the rumbling sounds far off. Once or twice before I drifted off to sleep the dog raised himself slowly beside me and stood rigidly alert. His hair bristled under my hand, and I could feel my own hair tickling the neckband of my shirt in sympathy. Whatever he saw or heard seemed to make him uneasy and he would growl a little in his throat before he would settle down.

I could hear nothing, but had a sort of nervous, jumpy feeling that there were things crawling around. Every one who has slept outdoors in the woods has had that feeling at first. It wears off.

Through the cracks between the boards I could see the stars blinking away as calmly as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened to our little world. I thought of what Rossey had told me one night.

We were on his back porch. It was before he made his money and built that observatory. He had a pair of German field glasses he picked up in a secondhand place. Even then he was a "nut" on astronomy. He had been telling me something about a "nova," which he said was a new star, that had lately appeared. He had shoved the glasses in my hand.

"See if you can see it," he suggested.

But of course I could not. I never could see anything in those days.

"That pinpoint of light," he went on, "is a blazing world bigger than this. Something went wrong, and it has crashed into another planet. Strange, isn't it, to think that what we are looking at happened two thousand odd years ago. By to-morrow that light will begin to fade. In a few weeks it will die out, according to human eyes. As far as we can see, that crash of two worlds happened only a few days ago, but those stars are so far off that astronomers figure the light takes two thousand years to reach us.

"That cataclysm we think we are watching must have occurred about the time of Christ. Who knows but it had a connection some way with that terrible event? The Bible says the veil of the Temple was rent. Perhaps there was a crashing of planets, too, and we are only beginning to see the results. Eh, Hardiman?"

And so on while I yawned.

It didn't seem so outlandish now, with the views of the greatest city in the world around me. I felt a little scared by the immensity of it.

I tried to pick out Venus against the Western sky, and wondered what was waiting for us. These Venusians were certainly making a wreck of things. Was there a Supreme Being watching over the universe? Were these Venusians His chosen people, instead of ourselves? Were we only second-raters, after all—thinking apes, as some of the highbrows tell us, big fish in a little pond until a bigger fish appeared?

Gradually I fell asleep.

I was having a lot of trouble making up the new inventory for the firm of Hardiman & Berlin. As fast as I got the bath tubs in order the piles of sanitary wash basins would tumble down, and when I turned to sort them out again the portable showers would fall down and I had to pack them back in their boxes. That idiot next door kept shouting all the time and beating time on a boiler. It's a wonder the landlord allowed it. He disturbed me so much I dropped my pencil and had to fish around under the piles of galvanized iron pipe in the back of the shop to recover it.

There was the dog, too. I wondered who let him in. We never had a dog around the place before. He sat on my desk in front of me with his ragged tail in the ink and barked in my face. Berlin's dog, probably. He ought to have kept him at home.

I got up to tell him so, struck my head against the board over my lean-to, and woke up. Daylight streamed through the openings.

Tut was barking furiously outside, giving quick glances over his shoulder to attract my attention.

I crawled out on my hands and knees. I was stiff in every muscle.

"Oh, there you are! I thought there was some one inside. Better hustle along with us if you want to get away. We're about the last."

I looked up into the unshaven face of a middle-aged man partly dressed in the remnants of a white Palm Beach suit. When I say "remnants," I mean there was more man showing than suit. He looked as if he had been to a bargain sale—one of the kind held the first Monday in May—and been snowed under. His eyes were haunted, he was out of breath and looked over his shoulder as if he expected to see a ghost in broad daylight. Behind him two women and a child leaned exhausted against a broken board fence and watched us dully.

I grabbed his hand enthusiastically.

"The last of what?" I inquired. I was still sleepy.

"Bucyrus." It was a town close by Thermopylae. "We're on our way to join the rest of the lucky ones that got away early—if there are any left."

"What happened to Bucyrus, then?"

He jerked his hand impatiently away.

"Are you coming? There's no time to fool away. Come or stay. If you stay, you'll soon know what happened to Bucyrus."

This seemed to arouse his mind to the need for haste. We limped rapidly away to the women. Hastily they clambered over the piles of débris.

"Insects," I muttered to Tut, as I fed him scraps of meat. "That's what Rossey said. Who's afraid of a bunch of insects?" And I really thought so at the time. Ten years at a desk hadn't sapped the muscular strength gained in my years as a working plumber. I felt equal to handling myself in an emergency.

We started out across the heaps of building material in what I guessed to be the general direction of Thermopylae. It was fairly hard work climbing up and down brick piles and under iron girders and beams. We made less than two miles an hour. Tut, in the fashion of a dog, must have traveled about fifteen in circles working in and out in an intricate path. Once we passed two other dogs worrying something half buried under the débris, and Tut kept closer to me for awhile with his tail tucked between his legs.

Off on the horizon I thought I saw a glistening something suspended in the air, but I could not be sure. It was a hazy, hot day and my vision was poor. The thing in the sky reminded me of the Whirling Machine.

We had reached another open space where the houses had been detached when suddenly the dog began to bark furiously. I heard a scrambling sound close at hand and two men appeared around the corner of a caved-in frame house.

They were stumbling along at a half run, heads drooping and rolling wearily and their breath sobbing through set teeth. They looked neither to the right nor to the left, but kept straight on by us. I have seen Marathon runners at the end of a race in better condition. They were running like frightened rabbits.

I stepped out to head them off.

"Hey, what's up?"

The nearest gave a scared jump and stumbled over an obstruction in the road, then picked himself up hastily and rushed after his companion.

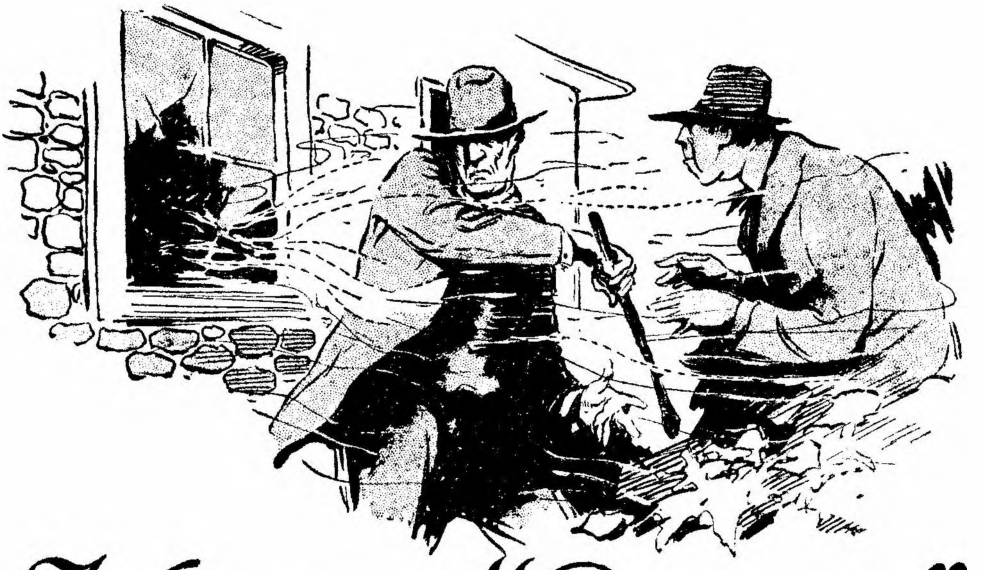
"Well, Tut, I wonder what the—"

But the dog was acting strangely. He paid no attention to the man who had just passed. Instead, he directed his quivering nose toward the north, whining and growling gently to himself. Then he slunk between my legs and refused to budge. It was a plain case of funk. I was puzzled.

It must have been contagious, for during the next few seconds, for the life of me, I was mortally afraid to look around, though I could hear distinctly heavy breathing and the stumbling of some heavy body coming toward me over the uneven ground. It was a panicky fear similar to the one that attacks the best of men at times, making them refuse to face the source of their fear, or makes women pull the covers over their heads in bed at night when they hear a noise.

Then I whirled around and had my first view of a Venusian.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK



Verdict: "Suicide"

By GEORGE ALLAN ENGLAND

INTRODUCTORY

WE should be glad to have our readers' opinions on the outcome of the following story, which presents a peculiar problem in ethics. In other words, do you think the criminal investigator was right or wrong in the decision he made with regard to his discoveries in the Coffrin affair? THE EDITOR.

"THIS is quite an interesting novelty!" T. Ashley leaned back in the big wicker rocking-chair and hoisted his feet to the porch rail of Restawhile Inn, overlooking the sparkling waters of Lake Massagunsett. He began reading the newspaper item over again. "There seem to be novelties everywhere, if a man only keeps his eyes open. I can't even take a fortnight's vacation without running into one. Let's see, now!"

The item was printed in the local sheet, the *South Harbor Breeze*, and it said:

JEFFERSON COFFRIN SUICIDES BY AUTO GAS.

Coroner's Verdict Reveals Strange Case.

Coroner Bailey's verdict in the case of Jefferson Coffrin, the well known merchant of this place, and whose death we noted in our last week's issue, reveals a singularly well planned suicide, carried out with great determination.

The facts, as brought out by the coroner's inquest, are as follows: On the night of August 17, Mr. Coffrin attended lodge meeting, and there had some confidential conversation with Lawyer Simeon Grimes about his—Mr. Coffrin's—unfortunate matrimonial complications. He also mentioned certain business troubles, and remarked that life was not worth the struggle and that he wished he was well out of it.

He left the lodge at about ten forty-five to drive home to his place on the lake shore, seeming in a very depressed state of mind. It will be remembered that Mr. Coffrin had been living alone there for about six weeks, since his wife left him to go to Boston. On the way out of the village he stopped at Swanzey's garage and got ten gallons of gas, remarking to Mr. Swanzey that he might need all of that for a trip he intended taking.

"Very interesting, so far," remarked the investigator, "even though the rural journalese in which it's written leaves much to be desired. However, style doesn't matter. Facts are all that matter here." He continued to read:

Nothing more was seen or heard of Mr. Coffrin until next afternoon. He failed to go to his store in the morning, but as he sometimes absented himself without notice, his clerk, John F. Shortis, thought nothing of it. About four fifteen that afternoon, however, Curtis J. Williss, a Brockton man who had hired a cottage near Mr. Coffrin's house, tried to get into Mr. Coffrin's garage to get his car out. Mr. Williss had hired the use of half the garage, and had a key to it.

He found the door unlocked, but could not open it, and thought that, as sometimes happened, it was off the rollers. All efforts to open it proving of no avail, Mr. Williss looked in through a window at one side, and was horrified to see Mr. Coffrin lying on the garage floor, near his car.

Mr. Williss rapped on the window and shouted to Mr. Coffrin, but failed to arouse him. He then tried to raise the window, but finding it locked, ran to Daniel Swett's store, at the lake settlement of Pinedale, about a quarter mile distant, and stated the facts. Mr. Swett accompanied Mr. Williss back to the garage, where, after brief consultation, Mr. Swett proceeded to break the window.

"Very hasty and ill-advised action, I'm sure," murmured the investigator. "If people would only proceed with due deliberation—but that, I suppose, is too much to expect from mere human nature. At all events—" Then he went on with the newspaper account:

Overpowering fumes of gas escaped through the broken window, and it was only after several minutes that Mr. Swett could raise the sash and crawl in, then open other windows and ventilate the garage. His attempt to open the door failed, so at first he did not investigate the reason, but confined himself to opening the windows. In this work he was almost overcome.

Examination showed that the unfortunate Mr. Coffrin had been dead for several hours. The gas tank of the car was empty, proving that the engine had run until all the gas had been used up. The fact that all the windows of the garage were locked, and that—there being no way to lock the door on the inside—the door had been securely fastened with staples and wire, proved conclusively that Mr. Coffrin had committed a carefully planned and unique suicide, and had taken every precaution against being disturbed in its accomplishment.

Mr. Coffrin had evidently fastened the door, started his engine, and then sat down at the wheel to await death. At the last moment of consciousness, however, he seems to have repented of his rash action and tried to struggle out of the car, for, as we have said, he was found on the floor, and a cut back of the left ear, also a little blood on the edge of the "cozy wing" of the windshield shows where he fell against it just before collapsing. Coroner Bailey's verdict, rendered yesterday, is one of suicide by voluntary inhalation of carbon monoxide fumes.

Mr. Coffrin is survived by his brother, Alvin, of Great Falls, Minnesota, and by his wife, Elmira, who since the tragic event has returned to South Harbor to assist in settling his estate. Mr. Coffrin was fifty-eight years of age, a native of this town, a leading figure in local business, and a prominent member of the ——

"We'll let that part go," said T. Ashley, folding the paper and shoving it into his pocket. "All that matters is that Mr. Jefferson Coffrin is dead and that it's a curious case. Quite an entertaining novelty."

The investigator remained for several minutes brooding in his chair, looking—with eyes that saw not—over the limpid waters of the lake.

"Humph!" he communed with himself. "A new one, in the suicide line. Odd, very!"

II.

THAT afternoon, having nothing else to do, the investigator took his car and drove to the settlement of Pinedale, near which was the Coffrin home. A few words of inquiry at Daniel Swett's little country store assured him that the chances were small for hiring a house in that locality.

"There ain't none this time o' year, so far's I know," the storekeeper informed him, squinting with hard and suspicious eyes and rubbing a prominent chin not altogether innocent of tobacco-stained stubble. "An' as for a house with a garridge, you might's well hunt for frog-hair in January. What say? That there garridge down the road? No, sir! That's the one where poor Coffrin committed suicide last week. Can't be hired, mister.

"Turrible doin's, wasn't they? No, sir,

I don't cackelate his widder'd want to let her house to nobody. She's got her aunt from Fall River stayin' with her, now. I reckon they'll live right there till fall. Yes, sir, Mrs. Coffrin's to home, all right. She don't go nowheres now. As why would she, an' her goin's-on responsible for drivin' poor Coffrin to it. But I vowny, she's got paid off, good! Coffrin's business is in a turrible mux, they say, an' she won't get hardly a skrid o' money.

"If she'd only got his insurance, that would of fixed her, fine. Nigh twenty-five thousand 'twas, I hear. But now the comp'ny ain't goin' to pay her, not one namable cent. 'Cause the policy's got a suicide clause into it, so she can't collect, an'—huh? Oh, sure you can ask her if she'll let her house an' garridge. But I don't reckon—all right, mister, good-day!"

Mrs. Coffrin proved to be an acidulous and calculant-eyed woman of nearly fifty, to whom mourning black was no adornment. Her sparse hair was heavily streaked with gray, her cheeks sunken and chin retreating.

T. Ashley noted cigarette-stains on her fingers, and saw by the woman's contracted eye-pupils that she indulged in some form of morphine.

"No, sir," she replied, her glance not meeting his own as he stood on the side porch. "This house isn't to let, or the garage, either. I've had trouble enough, as 'tis, without any more bother—tenants, and so on."

"Very sorry, I'm sure," murmured the investigator, in his most sympathetic tone. "From what I hear—excuse me for mentioning it—you have had unusually severe afflictions. Being in the insurance business myself, I quite understand how eagerly some of our competing companies grasp at the—pardon me for the reference—at the suicide clause, to avoid payment of a just claim."

"Who's been telling you 'bout that?"

"My dear madam, in the insurance world all news travels fast. And the company in which your late husband was insured bears an unenviable reputation for sharp practices. I feel that you are being cheated out of what is justly yours."

"Aren't you presuming a little too far, sir?"

"Perhaps, perhaps. But when I see an injustice being done, it naturally arouses my indignation. Women are so easily duped, especially widows. And of course there's an excellent chance for you to collect all or part of your late husband's insurance."

"Who are you, anyhow?" demanded the widow, shrewishly—a most unpleasant figure of a woman. "Lawyer, or sharper of some kind, or—"

"Oh no, not at all," replied T. Ashley, with the suavest of gestures. He produced a card with the name "Wilfred K. Towle, Insurance," on it, and passed it over. "I'm merely a tired business man on a month's vacation, down at Restawhile Inn. Thought if I could hire a cottage or a house, at this end of the lake—"

"Well, you can't, so far's *I* know. Certainly this one isn't to let. And you seem to take a mighty big interest in other folks' affairs, I must say!"

"True, perhaps. Please pardon me. But you know an insurance man's professional interests are never wholly extinguished, not even when he's having a holiday at a beautiful lake like this. Please forgive me, madam, and forget that I ever mentioned the matter. Sorry to have troubled you. Good-by!"

III.

Not more than three days later he received a note, under his temporary name of Towle, asking him to come to the Coffrin house. The widow's attitude had undergone a radical alteration, and now she was all affability.

"I've asked you to call, Mr. Towle," she explained, trying to force a smile, "so that you might possibly advise me a little in regard to my husband's insurance. You were saying, the other day, there might be that is—a chance of collecting—"

"Oh, yes, your late husband's insurance. Yes, yes, a part, at least. That is, in case any reasonable doubt could be thrown on the coroner's verdict of suicide."

"I see. Are you looking for a commission, or anything like that?"

"Bless you, no!" T. Ashley disclaimed, smiling amicably. "I'm just vacationing, I assure you. And anyhow, such matters are out of my line. I'm only a common or garden variety of insurance agent."

"Well," queried the sharp-faced widow, "what would I have to do, in order to—"

"Do? Just prove the verdict was mistaken."

"You mean, show that my husband was killed? Murdered?"

"Not necessarily. If it could be shown that he met death accidentally, the insurance company would have to pay you."

"But how *could* he have met accidental death, with the door and all the windows fastened on the inside?" The widow's calculant air increased, her unpleasantly drug-contracted pupils seemed like gimlets boring at T. Ashley. Little enough she appeared to care for the late departed, but very much indeed for that departed's insurance. "How *could* he have?"

"Ah, that's a very interesting question now!" smiled the investigator. "You wouldn't expect me to answer that off-hand, would you, before I've seen the place of the tragic event?"

"You mean the garage?"

"Of course. May I look it over?"

"I don't see what good that could possibly do," Mrs. Coffrin objected. "But if you think it might help me any, I'll unlock it for you."

She fetched a key from the kitchen, and dangling it by a string walked with T. Ashley out through the back yard to the garage that stood in a little driveway leading in from the main road around the lake.

A singularly unlovely, gaunt and disagreeable creature she looked, thought the investigator. How, he wondered, could she ever have had the "past" that local gossip assigned to her? T. Ashley could hardly find it in his heart to wish the late Jefferson Coffrin back in life again, if that meant any dealings with this most unfeminine of women.

"Well, here you are," the widow remarked, as they came to the garage. T. Ashley closely observed it; a yellow structure with double sliding-doors and lighted by four windows. Mrs. Coffrin unfastened a padlock and ran one of the doors back. "Here's where it all happened."

"Thanks," said the investigator, stepping in. "Your automobile?" And he gestured at a touring-car that stood at the right of the garage.

"Yes," Mrs. Coffrin nodded. "There was a Mr. Williss hired this other space here, but after it happened he took his car away. That, there," and she pointed at the machine, "is what killed my poor husband. He was found right there where that board is kind of cracked, on the floor."

"I see. And the car was standing right where it is now, at the right?"

"Yes, it was."

"To get it in here, in this position, that other door has to be slid back, eh?"

"Yes."

"Very well." And T. Ashley fell to examining the arrangement of the doors.

To enter the garage at all, he saw, the padlocked door—let us call it the A door—had first to be slid open, admitting whoever wanted to come in. The second, or B door ran in the opposite direction. This, the investigator saw, was fastened by a large file without a wooden handle. The sharp-pointed handle-end of this file was thrust into a hole in an upright timber that occupied the middle of the front of the garage.

The A door slid outside of this timber, and the B door inside of it. To slide the B door, so as to admit a car at the right-hand side of the garage, the file had to be taken out.

T. Ashley looked around for a moment, then examined all the windows and gave special scrutiny to the one that storekeeper Daniel Swett had broken. The glass in this pane was still unset. Then the investigator came back again to the doors.

These seemed to interest him more than the windows, the car or the place where Jefferson Coffrin had been found dead.

He removed the file, slid the B door back, then closed it again and replaced the file.

"This right-hand door here, was like this," he asked, "when Mr. Swett and Mr. Williss got in?"

"That's what they claim," answered the

widow, with an angular gesture at the A door. She added: "And this one was locked, too."

"Locked? With the padlock on the outside?"

"No. I mean, it was fastened."

"How?" the investigator asked.

"On the inside. With staples and wire. It—I'm afraid it looks most awfully like suicide, don't it?"

"It certainly does," T. Ashley assented. "Staples, you said?"

"Yes, you know; the kind that barb-wire's fastened on with. On to fence-posts."

"I see. And barb-wire was used?"

"Oh dear, no. Just plain wire."

"Electrical wiring material, you mean? Something that Mr. Coffrin had here in the garage or around the car?"

"No, no. They say it was just ordinary iron wire."

"Like hay-wire," queried T. Ashley.

"Yes, that's it. Hay-wire, yes. The kind they put round baled hay."

"And you've got that kind of wire, and staples, here in the garage? Or in your woodshed, or anywhere round the place?"

"Why, maybe. But I—well, I don't know as I ever saw any here. I suppose Mr. Coffrin must have got some, somewhere," she explained, a little more hurriedly. "He must have planned all this and got good and ready for it, for some time. I know what I'm saying makes it look exactly like suicide, and Lord knows I want to upset *that* verdict if I can, but of course facts are facts."

"And we want to get all the facts we can," smiled the investigator. "Now, let's see. Where were these staples driven?"

"Why, right here, and here." She pointed with a bony-knuckled finger.

T. Ashley, stooping, saw at the bottom of the A door and about three feet from its edge, a couple of small, splintered holes. Other and similar holes were visible in the sill of the garage, close to the door.

He closed the door, noted the relative position of the two sets of holes, then queried:

"And the wire was passed through the staples?"

"Yes, and twisted up tight, so nobody outside could open the door. Oh, I guess Mr. Coffrin was determined to make a good, thorough job of it. He didn't mean to have anybody getting in here, interfering with him."

"It certainly looks that way, I'm sorry to admit. Sorry, for your sake and the insurance. By the way, madam, where's the wire and the staples? Got them?"

"Why, no. They were taken away, after the coroner's jury got through making their inspection here."

"Who took them away?"

"I—I don't know. Why? Is that important?"

"Oh, no. I was just thinking maybe I'd like to see them, if I could. But never mind."

T. Ashley now knelt in the doorway, and for a minute studied the staple holes and the woodwork surrounding them. He drew a small ruler from his pocket and made some measurements. Then he remarked:

"Your husband wrote a good hand, Mrs. Coffrin?"

"What?"

"Was he good writer?"

"Why, yes. But what in the world has that got to do with this?"

"Oh, nothing, except that he seems to have been rather an unusual man, in several ways. Left-handed people don't usually write a good hand."

"Why, Mr. Coffrin wasn't left-handed!"

"Wasn't he? Somebody down at the inn was telling me he was."

"Well, they're very much mistaken!" she exclaimed abruptly. "And now, have you seen all you want to?"

"Quite. It's been most interesting."

"Any reason to suppose I can ever collect any of that insurance?"

"Ah, who knows?" And T. Ashley smiled enigmatically. "Nothing is impossible in this world."

"Except to find an honest insurance company!" she tartly declared. "Well, if you've seen everything—"

"I have, thank you. I'll communicate with you as soon as I make up my mind what's next to be done so you'll get your just deserts. You'd best say nothing about this investigation. Good day, madam."

T. Ashley took his departure in good order, leaving Mrs. Coffrin tight-lipped and tense, peering after him with puzzled, anxious and morphine-narrowed eyes.

IV.

Next day, T. Ashley dropped in at the musty, cluttered little law office of Simeon Grimes, in the Chadwick Block at South Harbor. Perhaps you know the sort of place—an aged brick building, dusty stairs, dim-paned windows and a raffle of books, papers and the rubbish of years bestrewing an old-time, black-walnut-furnished den that in many years had known no thorough house cleaning.

Old Simeon was very particular about never letting Mrs. Grimes disturb his legal calm. "Don't want any women messin' round here, and won't have 'em!" He kept, in brief, the kind of law office that can be found only in remote New England towns, far up among the northern hills.

"I have come," announced T. Ashley, "to consult you in the matter of a will. What is your customary fee?"

"Well, that's 'cordin' to what my advice is, mister," replied Simeon Grimes, blinking through silver-rimmed spectacles that had been untidily mended with thread, stray ends of which stuck out near his grizzled ruffle of hair over loose-hung ears.

He had a long nose, a squint, hollow cheeks and "store-teeth"; smoked a corn-cob pipe, and always seemed to have been shaved day before yesterday. He fitted his office to a T.

Now, as he joined his finger-tips and leaned back in a creaking swivel-chair, he looked half lawyer and half farmer, which indeed he was. The legal profession in South Harbor was not so exacting as to keep Simeon Grimes wholly from agricultural avocations.

"Yes, sir, my fee varies some," he explained. "But for a general, av'rage case, ten dollars as a retainer is all right. An' now," after he had stowed the ten in a worn billfold, "now what's the case?"

"If a man writes his signature on a will, it's legal and binding, no matter how he writes it?"

"Yes, sir, if properly witnessed, 'tis."

"How about on a check?"

"Same thing. If he writes it, it's legal."

"Suppose he writes it altogether differently from his recognized signature, prints it or scrawls it, that makes no difference?"

"Not a dite," affirmed the lawyer. "He can write it with his toes, if he sees fit. Jes' so he writes it, it's O. K."

"Either hand will do?"

"Yes, sir. Why?"

"Oh, well, that settles a little matter I've been worrying over. It's in regard to a will that—but never mind. All I wanted was your opinion about the legality of signatures, under all conditions, just so the proper person made them. Funny thing, though, isn't it, how anybody can write with his left hand? The right seems so—well, so kind of natural. I've always figured that a cross-eyed man or a left-handed man must have something the matter with his intellect. Can't make it seem that a left-handed man is mentally all *there!*"

"Humph! You've got some funny ideas, ain't you?" demanded the bucolic lawyer with a certain show of resentment. "What 'd you say, now, if I was to tell you I'm left-handed, myself?"

"What? Why—nothing personal intended," disclaimed the investigator. "But I'd hardly believe it, just looking at you. There's nothing about you to—excuse me, sir—to indicate any abnormality. You really mean you can write with your left hand?"

With a touch of pride, old Simeon Grimes reached for a pen, dipped the pen in a huge glass inkwell and very neatly dashed off a signature.

"There!" he exclaimed, passing it over. "Anythin' the matter with that?"

"Not a thing," admitted T. Ashley, admiringly. "Do you do everything with your left hand? Shave with it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Eat with it?"

"Yes, do everything."

"You *can* use your right, though."

"Well, some, but I never do."

"If you did, you'd be ambidextrous. I heard of an old man once who claimed to

be ambidextrous because he couldn't write with either hand." Then, as Lawyer Grimes shot a keen glance at him, wondering whether this was a joke or not, the investigator arose. "Well, I must be going now. Good-day."

"Good-day, sir," returned Grimes, reaching for a ruck of papers on his desk. At the door, however, T. Ashley paused a moment.

"By the way," he asked, "did you ever collaborate with a writer?"

"Which?" the lawyer demanded.

"I mean, help an author with the plot for a story."

"No, sir, I never did. Why?"

"Well, I happen to be something of a writer, and need a little help on a plot. A few legal details, you understand. What would you charge me for some advice, say, about a few points of evidence in a story?"

"Oh, I dunno. Ten dollars, mebbe. When would you want me to do it?"

"Now's as good a time as any, provided we can have a quarter of an hour to ourselves."

"I guess we can, all right. The law business ain't so rushin', in the summer that anybody'd be liable to come in this time o' the afternoon. What's your story about?"

And Simeon Grimes settled back comfortably in his well-padded old swivel-chair, to listen.

V.

"Let me tell you the plot." T. Ashley sat down again, across the littered desk from the lawyer. "In the first place, there are two men involved, and the action takes place in a garage."

"Garage?"

"Yes. One of the men, in some way and for some motive I haven't worked out very clearly as yet, stuns the other and decides to finish him off—kill him, that is, in some such way as will make it appear like suicide. Well, he fastens the garage door with two steel staples and some iron wire, starts the engine of the man's car—leaving his enemy unconscious—and then gets out of a window.

"The window has the kind of snap-catch on it, that, when you put the window down, springs into a socket. You've seen that sort. They're common in the country. So of course everything's all secure at the garage, the deception is complete that the man has killed himself by breathing carbon monoxide gas, and nobody ever suspects the truth. What do you think of that, now, for a plot?"

"I think," said the lawyer with an effort, in a harsh and dry voice, "that it's a damn fool piece of rubbish, and would be laughed at in any magazine or book, jes' the same as 'twould be in any court o' law. If you can't think of a better story than that, mister, you'd better stop wastin' your time and mine."

"Ah, but wait till you hear the rest of it!" exclaimed T. Ashley, leaning forward over the desk. "The man's death passes as suicide until a certain criminal investigator finds that the dead man had no steel staples or iron wire at his house, and also that—judging by the angles at which the staples were driven in, and by the direction of dents in the work, where the hammer slipped—the job was done by a left-handed man. But the supposed suicide, you see, was right-handed. So of course—"

"Worse and worse," croaked old Grimes, his hollow cheeks quite bloodless now, his eyes blinking through the silver-rimmed glasses. He was shivering slightly, but for all that managed a crooked smile. "Who in the world would believe rubbish like that?"

"Nobody, perhaps. That's why I'm asking you to help me out with some of the fine points. The investigator of course finds out all the left-handed men in town. He discovers there are only three of them, and only one has any land fenced with wire. So the investigator examines some of the staples in that left-handed man's fencing, and finds they measure exactly the same, between points, as the staples used at the garage. And after that—"

"What rubbish! All stuff and nonsense!"

"After that he discovers, in the murderer's barn, some baled-hay wire just such as was used—"

"Wait!" gulped the lawyer, with quivering hand extended. "Who—for God's sake, who are you?"

"Who I am doesn't matter in the least. All that matters is this—are you ready to confess?"

"Confess—what?"

"The murder of Jefferson Coffrin!"

VI.

For a moment the lawyer remained huddled, shaken, with hands that twitched and eyes like those of a trapped animal. Then all at once he began speaking in a strange, low tone, almost like some inhuman mechanism:

"If you call it murder, yes. But it ain't. 'Twas just a fight, an' what I did afterwards don't make it murder. Wouldn't, in any court, if I could get an honest hearin'.

"We quarreled, yes, that's right, Coffrin an' I did. 'Cause why? 'Cause he was bound an' determined to divorce that worthless woman of his. She was a common village round-'round, when he married her, and worse afterwards. And I begged him not to try and divorce her and stir up a scandal. Just let her go, but not bother her none. She always swore if he *did*, she'd drag in every namable man in town as had ever got too friendly with her. And I'd been one of 'em, myself, a long time ago. So if Coffrin wouldn't quit and let her be, that might mean my ruination. And I've got a good wife and two grown-up children. Ruination—that's what. Kicked out of the church, the lodge, everything—plumb ruined, done for. Well—"

"I see. Go on."

"So I begged and implored him not to do it. But he was set on it, Coffrin was. Set an' determined. The very last night of his life, after lodge meetin', he and I had words about it. In lodge, before then, he'd said he was ready to kill himself, and I wish to God he *had*.

"He drove home. A little later, I did, too. I live a piece down the road, past his house. As I drove by, I see him in his garage, gettin' ready to lock up. I stopped and went in there and begun again, tryin' to argue him out of his divorce notions.

"He flew mad in a minute, and told me to go to hell. Ordered me out. I told him I'd go when I got damn good and ready. He was standin' right beside his car, with the lights still on, and Mr. Williss's car was on the other side of the garage. He said he'd throw me out. I told him he wasn't man enough."

"And what then?"

"So he come at me, and hit out. I ducked. He only hit me on the shoulder. I struck back. Must have swung on him harder 'n what I calculated on. Anyhow, he tripped over a place where the floor was broken and splintered, and hit his head, right back of the left ear, on one of them glass shields that he's got on the sides of his windshield. They're mighty sharp, the edges of them shields. So he dropped. And then—"

"Well?"

"Well, as God's my judge, that's what killed him. He was dead, all right. He didn't get up, or stir, or breathe. I was plumb paralyzed with fear. I got down on my knees and listened to his heart, but it had stopped. Oh mercy, oh Lord! He was an awful heavy man, and he must have hit that glass a terrible crack."

"I see. A blow back of the ear may very easily paralyze the respiratory center and prove fatal. And you—"

"Like a damn fool, I didn't drive to Swett's store and tell the truth. No, I got panic-struck. I figured nobody'd ever believe me, anyhow, and I'd go to the 'lectric chair. So then, this suicide idea come to me." The lawyer's words were tumbling out like a torrent of confession, his parchment-like face was crisped with a mortal anguish. "The suicide idea. After what he'd been sayin' that very night, I thought it 'd wash. So I—"

"You framed the suicide?"

"God forgive me, yes! I turned out the lights on his car and left him layin' there. Drove my car 'bout a quarter-mile past the store and left it up a wood-road there, near my house, with the lights out. 'Twas a dark, drizzly night, and nobody come by. Nobody see me. I sneaked home, got in the barn, found some wire and staples and a hammer, and got back to Coffrin's

garage, down around the lake shore, without a soul knowin'."

"You understood just how the garage doors worked?"

"Why wouldn't I? I'd been in it, dozens o' times!"

"And you figured that the garage must be completely closed, from the inside, to make the suicide theory go?"

"Yes, yes, that's right, and—"

"Clever! Very! That shows the advantage of a logical, legal mind. Well, what then?"

"You know, as well 's I do. You just told me, yourself, not ten minutes ago. Only thing you don't know, an' don't believe, is that I didn't murder Jeff Coffrin. Not in cold blood, that is. 'Twas a fist-fight, an accident, I swear to God, and—"

"You don't need to swear. It may have been an accident. I know how these things sometimes happen But in court—"

"Court! You—you mean you're goin' to—"

T. Ashley eyed the quivering wretch a long minute, and then laughed oddly. Speaking as if to himself, he mused aloud:

"It's not Simeon Grimes that matters now, in this case. It's the respective women. On one hand, a good wife and two children. On the other, a bad woman; a woman with a disgraceful past; a morphine-addict, heartless and full of vice and greed for the insurance of the man she wrecked and ruined.

"If I prove this a murder, which technically it may not be—since Coffrin may have struck the first blow and you may have simply acted in self-defense—the good woman will be disgraced and will suffer all her life. The bad one will get about twenty-five thousand dollars that she doesn't in the least deserve and that she'll turn to the worst possible uses. If I let it stand as a suicide, the good woman will be protected and the bad one won't get a penny. So—well, that's the answer to the problem."

"You—mean," gulped the miserable Grimes, "you—you ain't goin' to—"

"I mean," smiled the investigator, "I'm a man of ordinary human common sense. And this is not the first time in my career that I've tempered legal rigors with just that same kind of sauce. Of course I rather enjoy this little vacation case, in which my hypothesis has worked out so neatly. But as for the rest—well, you can just forget it. I'll leave you to your own conscience. That's about all the punishment you can stand."

T. Ashley rose to go. At the door he paused a moment.

"Rather a neat little story, eh?" he smiled. "Under the circumstances, I hardly think you'll insist on your ten dollar fee for collaborating with the plot. Good day, sir. Good day."

But the lawyer made no answer. Sprawled across the litter on his old black-walnut desk, there he lay in a dead faint wrapped in the mercy of at least temporary oblivion.

And thus T. Ashley left him.

THE END

A SEASIDE TRAGEDY

THERE was a maid, there was a moon, there was a summer sea;
And, pray, what more romantic combination could there be?
The waves came racing hand in hand and shattered at her feet.
And there upon the silvered sand she looked surpassing sweet.
But yet no word of love arose—no sound of ardent kiss;
The silence was a fearful thing, nor charged with rapturous bliss:
For though there was a maid and moon, likewise a summer sea,
Ah, saddest words of tongue or pen—there wasn't any *he!*

Ella Bentley Arthur.

The Starlit Trail

By KENNETH PERKINS

Author of "The Bull-Dogger," "The Gun-Fanner," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PREVIOUS PARTS

"PLUNK" REVERDY, tophand cowboy and born minstrel, is treacherously shot through the arm by a stranger who then steals his horse. Plunk puts a rifle ball into the marauder at long range. Later, the stranded cowboy is presented with a gentle horse by a mysterious Mexican. Tarante, a noted killer, is reported dead in a distant gulch. Reverdy accompanies old Jackson Brower moving his household to a desert claim. Beautiful Nellie Brower, granddaughter, remains near Mule Town as teacher at the Indian school. Reverdy's horse suddenly turns into a man-killer, and disables him. The cunning Tarante has struck from the grave. Meanwhile, bandits slay two of Brower's servants and run off the livestock. In Mule Town the old hag, Augustina, a palmist, incites a mob against Plunk. Nellie Brower refuses to believe he purposely deserted her grandfather. Plunk flees to the desert, determined to find the gift horse as proof of its share in the bandit's evil plot against him. John Powderhorn, Navaho chieftain, prepares to attack Mule Town because his nephew had been slain by a white man, supposedly Reverdy. Nell Brower, riding to warn Plunk, is captured by Indians.

CHAPTER XXVI.

JOHN POWDERHORN.

JOHN POWDERHORN and his band of renegades inhabited a ghost-town called Desolation.

This was a group of shacks which had been erected on the edge of a mesa some fifty years before in bonanza days. Its history was brief—the ordinary history of many of these mining camps which had a flare of riotous life, then went out like a match in the wind. Here was Desolation left to the coyote, the billows of sand, the sidewinder, the roadrunner, the centipede.

Then came something worse: a human being who had the imagination of a Homer, the trickery of a kit fox.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for November 7.

John Powderhorn had achieved his wealth by horse trading—mixed with a large amount of thievery and one superb stroke of luck: A silver mine had been discovered on some of his own land.

That was only a part of his history—the less important part. He had spent three years in a penitentiary for one of his murders—and it was only his money that saved his neck. When he emerged from jail he came as a butterfly from the imprisoning cocoon. He had been a worm. Now he was a witch-doctor.

It was in this capacity that he became the leader of several tribes of Navahos in the Soda Mesa country. The Indian chiefs followed him because of his bribes; their people followed him because he was a jesako priest with the power to see into the body of the sick; the power to suck out the evil spirit; the power to change from a mole to a bear, to a man; the power to raise certain warriors from the dead.

Indeed, it was said he had three of these warriors in his settlement of shacks at Desolation, and no man could take their charmed lives!

To see this giant, white-maned Indian sitting in what had once been the sheriff's office, you would not think you were looking at any such sorcerer. They called him a cloud swallower, a jesako, a shaman—but you could only see a loose-jointed, gin-sodden, piebald, wrinkle-faced breed. And he was forever chewing gum.

He spent most of the time—during the days whereof this chronicle deals—quarreling with his sons and nephews about the assembling of a machine gun which he had purchased from a Mexican general.

They went about this occupation on the floor of the sheriff's office—a dozen of them squatted on their hunkers, with screws and springs and rods and cartridges strewn all about with the dust and tobacco cuds and gum wads. Old John spat out his gum when the flavor was gone. That was why he needed an inexhaustible supply.

Outside, the street was noisy in preparation. The renegades were choosing their horses and weapons for the coming expedition. Squaws were waddling about with saddle packs. Mongrel dogs—a hundred of them—were yelping and snooping about. The place was swarming with half-nude children with sore eyes and mangy hair.

Into this scene came a white girl, Nellie Brower, and the gang of ragged horsemen who had captured her.

Despite the fact that she had had a scorching journey through the deep rocky gulches of the Sierra foothills, she seemed strangely fresh and lovely in that setting. Her dark ringlets, as dark as the hair of those Indians, shone with a luster, as if it were not black hair, but golden in a deep twilight. Her face was wan, but her very fear made it vivacious, agile in many expressions; terror and disgust, fatigue and hope were reflected there.

She saw the mongrel dogs and the mongrel children—but they made little impression on her.

The squaws stopped to gaze at her—and of these she was more afraid than of the men. She knew that certain of these Navaho squaws of the Soda Mesa Desert had declared their hatred for her—and for a very peculiar but definite reason: there was an intangible power—either a person or a tribe or a country or a supernatural force like the Bad Mind or the Cold Hand—which their chiefs called "Washington." This "Washington" had decreed that the squaws give up their children to be educated at paleface schools.

Nell Brower—so they were given to understand—had something to do with these schools. Hence, they argued, she must be held guilty of that unforgivable sin—the stealing of their children.

As Nell was being taken to the erstwhile sheriff's office—now the capitol of John Powderhorn's nation—the squaws looked at her, and she thought she saw in their tight eyes the only indication of emotion she had ever seen in an Indian countenance.

She was glad that her captors rode with her—as a sort of mounted guard.

Thus they came past an empty lot, where some Indians were driving a paling of stakes. A medicine man, with jesako drum and feathers trailing in the dust, was painting the face of a man that reclined upon the ground. Dogs and children watched. Squaws watched from afar.

The ground was cursed. The man whose face was being painted a vivid red—the red of a Navaho blanket—was a dead man. They could not put him into one of the shacks—unless they burned the shack soon after. And John Powderhorn—originally a trader and business man—would have none of his shacks burned; not even for his favorite nephew.

For this dead man, being prepared for the burial ceremonies, was none other than the murdered kinsman.

They brought her into the hot little shack which was Powderhorn's holy of holies.

"Who is this squaw?" he asked of her captors. John Powderhorn spoke Spanish, English and Navaho. This time he used the latter tongue—which the girl in a measure understood.

"Mule Town paleface squaw," said the breed. "I brought her to you as a hostage."

Old John muttered ominously that he had made a law concerning paleface squaws. His men were not to touch them. Too much trouble ensued. White men, yes. Squaws, no. Except in time of battle—"and then you can kill them."

But this was the time of battle, the breed said. His hopes of a few ollas of liquor and a few cayuses appeared to be diminishing. This woman was worth ten fighting men. John Powderhorn could dicker with the big chief at Mule Town—their sheriff. He would do anything to get her back. He would give you ten men for her.

But old John pointed out that he did not want ten men. He wanted the one man who killed his nephew.

The big square face of Powderhorn, the eagle eyes that had stared for seventy years at desert suns, turned upon her. It was a face as cruel and inscrutable, as devoid of expression as a piece of hide, deeply cross-hatched with wrinkles like a gila monster's skin, mottled, smooth, piebald.

"When you take a white woman prisoner, it always means trouble. They would rather have you kill her—than take her prisoner," old John explained. "It would be best to let this squaw go—or kill her."

The breed whom he had sent to Mule Town objected to either of these possibilities.

The Mule Town people were going to fight. So the herald-priest explained. They would not search for the murderer of John's nephew because they thought it impossible to find him. The herald-priest pleaded that to make them search the harder—he had brought this squaw.

Powderhorn took another piece of gum, chewed at it, and rolled the tin foil and paper into a ball.

His eyes narrowed. He nodded his silvery-maned head.

Powderhorn asked if they knew he had a machine gun?

They did not know. The herald reported that the whites would try to hold Powderhorn's men off until soldiers came from Fort Winfield.

"Very well," Powderhorn said in his pigeon English, "I will keep this squaw. I keep her alive till to-morrow night. Then I send Mule Town her scalp on coup stick. But if they catchem murderer of my nephew then I free this paleface squaw."

The breed stood at attention. No change came over his broad brown face, but if he had been a dog, his tail would have wagged.

He suggested that he had been through great danger to get this squaw.

Powderhorn grunted. Yes, his herald-priest had done it for gain. He knew him well! Hi-yu-skookum. The herald-priest would have his reward—whatever he thought just.

The herald asked what would be the objection to three ponies that had been broken to the saddle.

John Powderhorn shook his head angrily and answered in his English: "Hell damn! What white squaw is worth three ponies?"

Ah, Powderhorn would find this woman worth a lot when Mule Town heard of her capture. They would then try to find the man old John wanted! Thus spoke the breed, who was, in a manner of speaking, something of a wizard himself.

"I no pay three ponies for any squaw in the world," said John Powderhorn. "Especially if saddle broke. That means that three horse breakers have risk' life!"

Very well. The herald would be satisfied with two.

"Catchum pinto. Give him herald-priest for pay," the big chief capitulated.

The breed went out for his reward. The chief turned his piebald countenance again to his prisoner.

"You are heap big nuisance," he said in English. "You are heap very much in way. We stickum together machine gun here." He seemed at a loss. "Take squaw out of way. Lockem up in calf shed."

Another brave counseled that if old John wanted to keep her alive he had better protect her from the squaws.

John Powderhorn chewed as if in distress. It was true. "Heap very much nuisance. Damn, I get into trouble just because of you—and not because of wiping him Mule Town from map. Lockem up in closet."

There was a closet just off the sheriff's office which was cluttered with painted rawhide boxes, fiber bags and empty whisky bottles—all baking under a galvanized roof.

They led her into this oven, and she sank as if in a faint.

"Give her swig from tequila jug," said John.

She had an impression that the old renegade had a latent streak of mercy somewhere in his foul old carcass. But he dispelled this illusion:

"If we keep you alive, good! Paleface nation find rustler for me."

He called to one of his braves. "Very much nuisance. Not worth cayuse. Go get that cayuse I gave away. I have change' my mind."

The drink did not help the girl much in that fierce heat. It made her sick. The warped boards of the walls began to circle about her. She lay on the puncheon floor—for there was no furniture. She lay there among empty bottles, a miserable and delicate creature, condemned to die on the morrow if John Powderhorn was not appeased.

The incredibly rapid firing of a whole company of riflemen aroused her. It sounded like a battle in full and glorious swing.

"They've come to save me!" she told herself, excitedly. Every American for a hundred miles around will come and wipe these beasts off the face of the earth."

The hope and illusion was sustained for a few moments. She wanted desperately to live. She yearned to live for that other mortal who had been thrown away among rubbish—as she was thrown among those empty bottles. She yearned for him, as much as she yearned for life.

"Plunk Reverdy has come and is leading the battle!"

But after a few moments the illusion was dispelled. The firing was in the very next room—through an empty window.

Peering through the cracks of the board walls, she saw the shots ricochetting over rock slabs, kicking up dust, and burying themselves in an adobe wall not far from Powderhorn's shack.

She knew that they had succeeded at last—after many days—in getting that machine gun to work.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"EVERYBODY SHINE UP!"

EARLY in the morning of that appointed and memorable day Mule Town folk were out in the street.

Groups of men, cantina girls, ranch wives, boys, were gathered at certain places, intent on the perusal of Sheriff Hornuff's bulletins.

> Don't nobody leave town from now on. Powderhorn and his Outlaws will pick off stragglers.

In front of the sheriff's office, they read this:

> Don't worry. Plenty of Food and Water. And Them Outlaws wont git through the Pass till the Regulars from Winfield arrive. Then Goodnite to Powderhorn and every Stinkin Injun between Tucson and Mexico.

That was the sign that had the largest group of readers—because they came back to read it over and over again. It warmed the cockles of their hearts. It made the men laugh; it reassured the women; it increased the frenzied joy of the Mule Town small boys who anticipated the zero hour

with more excitement than a round-up or circus.

On the chow-cart, on the swinging doors of gaming rooms, on the front of the shooting gallery, were pasted copies of this pronunciamento:

> Clean Guns is what we want. Everybody Shine Up.

Also you could see in strategic places—the U. J. mine offices, the stage coach office, and all the cantinas--this inscription in scrawled printing:

> No booze to be drank from Now on.

It will be seen from this that Sheriff Hornuff was a very systematic man. And it was lucky for Mule Town that this was the case. A hysteria was gripping the town, and at any time it might break out like herd madness, leaving a mass of men, women and children as easily attacked as an outfit of cows.

And while this imminent disaster was upon them the old duffers of the town were complicating this by offering suggestions. Previous raids—which had taken place anywhere between Montana and Texas—were acted out by eyewitnesses. Sheriff Hornuff—so these old men said—did not know his business. They should do this and that. They should gather the women and children, the calves and blooded horses—and take them under escort toward Fort Winfield.

But Hornuff had seen a detachment of this sort wiped out once by a band of Indians. There was no canon to retreat to that was any better for defense than the canon in which Mule Town stood. To have all the fighters together was a good argument; likewise stragglers were pouring in all that day from the surrounding ranches. To take some of those women and children out in an attempt to reach Fort Winfield, was like sending out a detachment of sheep into a desert peopled by wolves.

So Hornuff went about his business. The zero hour was at sunset that night.

Let them come.

All that morning ranchers from the surrounding range trailed toward Mule Town. They came whole outfits at a time; the cowboys armed with six-guns and rifles and shoulder holsters; the women and children riding in buckboards or wagons bringing with them a weaning calf, a favorite colt, and the best horses of their remudas. The herds were out on the open range grazing, for the round-up was a good way off. No use worrying about those herds. John Powderhorn nibbled away at them as much as he pleased, anyhow--war or no war.

Then about ten o'clock in the morning came an outfit from the direction of Soda Mesa Desert. It was the old trader who kept the outfitting post at the desert gateway. He had a string of heavily laden pack mules and a couple of saddle horses.

"It's bad news, chief," the old trader said to Sheriff Hornuff. "They've started already."

"What-all do you mean by that? Powderhorn was goin' to give us till to-night to find the murderer of his nephew."

"That's all right enough. But they're on the warpath already. Leastwise some of his men are. That gal Nell Brower come horsin' down to the desert; stopped at my place for a rest. A band of Powderhorn's men showed up—and took her hostage."

"Took her hostage!" Sheriff Hornuff cried in a rage. "What-all do you mean by that?"

"Rustled her off!"

The old trader was surrounded. A dozen men began to pepper him with questions.

"Rustled her off?"

"Nell Brower? What was she doin' down thar? Huntin' for Plunk Reverdy? Serves her right!"

"Leave him tell us!" the sheriff cried. He turned to the old trader. "If you know so much about it why didn't you trail 'em?"

Others seconded this delicate question.

"Yes, how come you're safe home with your hide--and that poor little girl rustled off?"

"Are you all daft?" the old man cried. "They took her to John Powderhorn."

This stopped the mouths of his accusers.

"Was *you* there?" they demanded. "And let 'em do that?"

"I was thar, gents, and I'll tell you everything. I fought for her--with my

bare hands—like a puma. Didn't have no gun. I fought with the last ounce of my ole wanin' strength. So help me God, I fought till I dropped unconscious. Woke up finding myself bound and gagged. And the gal was gone."

The news spread around town in fifteen minutes. "Nell Brower was rustled by Powderhorn's men." It made Mule Town fighting mad. The men began to hope that nothing would happen to avert the fight.

In fact no more thought was given to the one loop-hole offered them: to find the horse-thief who had killed Powderhorn's nephew. No one wanted to find him. They wanted to fight Powderhorn—and exterminate his whole crew.

The herders and townsmen, armed with their rifles, swarmed around the sheriff's office, clamoring for action. Their blood boiled. As the spirit of fight possessed them, cowboys began to yip and shout and sing songs. Although no one had indulged in Mule Town's fiery liquor, it looked like a Saturday night of carousing.

Finally, Sheriff Hornuff decided it was time to form his platoons of fighters and send them to their several posts outside the town limits.

A nondescript score of frontiersman—crack shots all of them—was marched to the outskirts of the town where the cañon walls came down to meet the plain. They yipped and sang as they went, and the women stood on the board sidewalks, cheering, waving, running down to the sandy street to kiss this fighter or that good-by. A veritable procession it was, led by an old frontiersman on a pinto, and followed by a troop of dogs and boys.

The same thing was repeated when a detachment was sent to the southern end of the town. They sang songs, they cheered, they shouted confident victory:

"All as we've got to do is to hold that pass till the regulars come from Fort Winfield!" That was the slogan.

"But what if the regulars don't come!" some pessimistic old woman said. It was the palmist—who had been doing a phenomenal business on the Mexican side of the street since the declaration of war. "My card pack gives forth that the rider sent to Fort Winfield is taken by Powderhorn's men."

"Wall, your card pack ain't overly accurate," said an old rancher "Bein' three men was sent—and on different trails."

"What does your card pack say about three men?" they cried. She sat on the edge of the board sidewalk, and was immediately swallowed up in a gang of the more superstitious and more fearsome.

But fear had gradually vanished from Mule Town. The convening of all the cowboys from the ranches for miles around was not fertile soil for such an emotion. During the early part of that afternoon—that same aspect—the aspect of a *colmado de rodeo*—hung over the town.

Then something happened which changed everything.

From the detachment that had been sent to guard the southern pass two riders returned, bringing with them an Indian.

They led him to the sheriff.

"This here bird, chief, has come with another message from Powderhorn. He left his pony and six-gun down the cañon and held up a white shirt, so we let him in."

"How do you know he ain't got some dynamite in that thar medicine bag? Powderhorn's a great one for dynamite."

The Indian carried a bag or rabbit skin with a fringe of human hair.

"Ain't nothin' in it 'ceptin' some of his effects," said one of the guards. "And he said likewise Powderhorn's message is kep' therein."

"All right, Mr. Skunk," the sheriff said to the Indian ambassador. "What-all have you got to say."

The messenger announced calmly: "If you catchum bad hombre, big chief give back white squaw which his herald-priest takem prisoner at gateway of Soda Mesa Desert. And he will not harm her or any squaw or child or papoose or man in this town. But we drink ha-ho-wuck and smokum peace pipe. Big Chief Powderhorn no like 'em warpath. He like only catchum hombre who kill' his nephew."

"Otherwise he fights—eh?" the sheriff snorted. "Well, he's bitten off more'n he can chew then. *We* want to fight. And we're goin' to fight. And you shag back

there and tell him if any harm comes to that girl, there won't be a yaller-livered Injun left between here and Mexico to tell the tale. Just wait till one day more—do all the attackin' you want. But when the regulars git here—then, blooey! You'll be grinnin' just the way you are now—out of them brown teeth—but *you won't know it!*"

Yes, the man was grinning. It was not a grin that seemed to signify humor. It never signified anything—that grin which those half-breed Navahos wore when talking to enemy Big Chiefs. In this case, however, it seemed to have a certain radiance about it, born of a mordant humor.

And now as to that point about the regulars from Fort Winfield, the messenger had something very definite to say. But he did not say it in words. He said it in symbols.

He took that rabbit skin medicine bag of his which had been slung from his shoulder, and extracted a tobacco pouch. This he handed to the sheriff.

"I don't see anythin' incriminatin' about this tobacco pouch," said the latter.

As he examined it, others of the men about him looked over his shoulder. Then suddenly one of them let out an oath.

"That thar's Smoo Johnson's tobacco pouch, chief!"

This was a thunderbolt. Smoo Johnson—as many of them knew well—was one of the three riders the sheriff had sent to Fort Winfield.

"Does this here mean that you've killed Johnson?" the sheriff exclaimed.

The messenger shrugged his shoulders. John Powderhorn had given his pledge that he would not start on the warpath until sundown. The herald knew nothing of the owner of that tobacco bag.

"It means anyways that Powderhorn met up with him, chief," one of the bystanders cried.

The sheriff turned to the crowd and let them all look at the pouch. "Leastwise," he said in an undertone, "I'm glad I sent two other riders—and by different trails."

He came back now to the messenger who was still standing there with his rabbit skin bag.

"All right, hombre," he commanded, "you vamose good and quick afore we skin you alive."

The effect on that crowd of one rider being captured was considerably less than it might have been.

"If you think you kin bluff us out by any such sign language as this, you've got another think coming, Mr. Skunk. Tell your chief that we're goin' to fight to the last man. And I say the last man—I don't mean the last of *my* men, but of yourn!"

But the Indian did not vamose yet. He extracted another "symbol" as eloquent—more eloquent than the preceding. It was a bowie kife.

The sheriff took it with a snort of disgust. "I know!" he said. "You breeds think you kin intimidate us by declaring war with a sheaf of arrows or a knife or some sign like that. Well, we ain't got any use for bowie knives. We're goin' to fight with lead."

By this time others had had a look at that second symbol.

"It's Tim Hardy's knife, chief!" some one cried.

This was another thunderbolt—and figuratively speaking it was ten times louder than the preceding one.

That knife meant that another of Sheriff Hornuff's riders—dispatched to Fort Winfield—had been taken prisoner.

He lifted his fist and swore. For a moment the crowd thought he was going to take out his rage on the hapless and hated messenger then and there. But he contained himself. That is to say, he contained himself to the extent of calling this Indian all the vilest names ever invented.

The messenger was as indomitable as a rock under this whirlwind of abuse. He was like Puma Mesa against which the sands of the desert blew in puffs of cloud.

Several of the sheriff's men surrounded the Indian—one with a riata with the definite intention of dragging him through the street and throwing him bodily out of town—and into Goldpan Creek.

But the breed held up another article—as if protecting himself with a charm.

It was a wide belt of Spanish leather, elaborately tooled.

The sheriff knew without any one divulging the fact this time that the belt belonged to the third and last of his riders.

He looked at it with his eyes popping and staring from under the thick shaggy brows. If the word *Defeat* had been tooled on it instead of that wreath of leaves and flowers, the message of John Powderhorn could not have been any clearer.

Silence fell upon the crowd. Oaths would have been ridiculous, pathetic. They knew perfectly well that John Powderhorn had covered all trails to Fort Winfield.

What to do now?

A whole town of men, women and children were trapped with a horde of Navahos and breeds and renegades a few miles off in the foothills of the Sierra, dancing themselves into a frenzy of bloodlust. And there was no outlet—except for the whole nondescript crowd to make an exodus to the desert. And if they tried any such frantic move as that they would be attacked by the savages—like a sick mole torn to pieces by ants.

Powderhorn's messenger turned to go.

"Wait a minute thar, hombre," the sheriff said in a changed voice. "I've got one more thing to say. You go back and tell your chief I'm tryin' to find the man who killed his nephew. As you specify, the man will most likely drift into town—same as all the other white men who can git here in time. Maybe he's drifted in already. Leastwise, we'll make a hunt for him—and if luck's with us, we'll have him ready for delivery by to-night."

The old sheriff could not resist one parting sally:

"And if we don't git him, you and your tribe of snivelin' coyotes is goin' to be up ag'in' the worst fight of your thievin' throat-cuttin' lives!"

The Indian turned and shuffled along unaccompanied, down to the south end of town, and through the guarded pass. There he hopped onto his shaggy cayuse and rode away.

If he had any skill in the reading of countenances, he could tell his chief how his message was received.

He could say that they had made a brave attempt, but their faces—he could not help having noticed—were like the faces of bad poker players who have tried to fill a bob-tailed flush—and failed.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AT THE BAR-ACE.

WHEN Plunk Reverdy had been chased by those Navahos, after witnessing the murder of one of their number, he rode at breakneck speed down the bowlder wash of a gulch, to its mouth where it opened into a cañon; then down the steep cañon sides, his mount sliding on haunches over a two hundred yard fall of mesquite and rocks.

An hour or two of hide-and-seek followed among the labyrinth of arroyos, and he managed to get out of sight. He hid all day by leading his horse into the adit of a deserted mine.

At night-fall he came out. The arroyos had turned into a monotone of blue under the starlight. The denuded quartz of the cliffs and the wide stretches of alkali reflected the light. It was a mild glow in which one could discern riders as clearly as if it had been day. Riders were in the bottom of the very valley into which the mine opened. No use trying to run that gantlet now.

Reverdy stayed in hiding all that night and all the following day. Then he came out again.

He estimated that it would take him four hours to reach the nearest ranch—a cow outfit on the northern rim of the desert. To get out of the desert for a while was the wisest step he could take—at least until there was no more chance of his being mixed up with the activities of that detestable little rat, the horse thief with whom he had consorted the day before.

The trail to that ranch—which ordinarily would have taken, as I say, four hours—took him until dawn. For the danger of being tracked by those Indians necessitated his picking out the narrow gulches, the timbered slopes, and the dark stretches of sage, against which background he could not be seen.

Careful as he was, however, to keep

under cover, he found just before morning that he was being trailed.

He saw something moving against the red, starlit façade of the mesa above him. It was moving in the same direction as Reverdy himself. Hard as he looked he could not tell—because of the alternate bands of red rock and deep cliffs—whether this was a single rider or a band.

Nor could he answer this question some time later when he was striking across a sage plain. Looking behind him he caught glimpses now and then of a rider crossing patches of light between the black sage. A band in single file would have given the same impression.

He spurred his horse. But the poor old creature had had some hard usage in that escape from the breeds the day before. He was not only gaunt with hunger; he was bruised with the killing ride down canon sides and across rocky washes.

Thus, when within a few miles of the safety of that ranch, Plunk Reverdy heard the hoofbeats of a running horse, not far behind him.

He kept up the flight, as long as he could; then, coming to a big bowlder, he drew rein, slid from his saddle and ducked.

The pursuer came on. Yes, it was a single rider.

Plunk Reverdy was bent on firing as soon as he made sure that that rider was an enemy.

And the latter came galloping his horse right along too—without any idea at all of what was in store for him.

Plunk held the nose of his own horse to keep him from neighing a welcome to the other; then waited, all set for a duel.

But now when the pursuer hove into view and presented himself as a perfect target, the man in ambush saw that he was not an Indian

I believe that Plunk was enormously disappointed. He would have much preferred seeing an Indian there—trailing him for his scalp than to see that fellow who turned up.

It was in fact no other than the rat-faced, one-eared Slink Bottiler with whom Plunk had made "friends" the day before.

Plunk decided to let the pest ride on. He wanted no more to do with him. He hated the sight of him; he detested the very thought of him.

So he remained where he was—crouched behind that bowlder. But thoughtlessly he let loose his horse's nose.

The miserable brute—always to be relied on, as any badly trained fuzz-tail, to do the wrong thing at the right time—proved to be much more friendly than his master.

He neighed a pleasant good morning to the horse galloping past him.

The rider drew rein, whirled about, and leaped to the hostile side of his horse, gun in hand. But then immediately Slink Bottiler sized up the situation:

"Is that you, Plunk? What-all are you hidin' for, Plunk? Think I'm a Injun? Oh, no. It's only Slink Bottiler—your pard!"

Plunk was now in full view, the starlight beaming upon him.

It was perhaps lucky for Slink's feelings that his "pard's" face could not be seen. The expression was anything but friendly.

"Come on, Plunk! It's only me. Been trailin' you for miles. Never hankered for company so much in my life!"

He led his horse over to the bowlder—and the two men were companions again. This time with a bond between them—the bond of being fugitives on the plain together.

"As you know, I saw you rustling a horse yesterday," Plunk said in an incisive tone. It was as if to say: "What do you mean joining up with me again?"

The other took this accusation in an affable way of his own. "Oh, you did, did you? Well, I vum! Ain't that awful?"

"And you plugged one of those breeds. They were in the right, you in the wrong. What if the man you plugged dies? Those Navahos don't forget a thing like that too quickly."

"They're all hoss thieves themselves!" the other retorted.

"That 'll make 'em all the more wild. A bad man being wronged—as he wrongs others—is all the more sensitive. They'll scalp every white hombre they find in the desert."

"Well, they ain't goin' to find me, Plunk. I'm directin' myself to Mule Town. Which I'll stay there till this blows over.

And right now I'm headin' as fast as I kin for the Bar-Ace Ranch."

That, unfortunately, was where Plunk was heading. And it was for that reason—the desire to get to cover at the nearest available point—that the two men's trails had met.

They rode along, Plunk in the lead, not so much as looking over his shoulder to answer the general remarks of his companion.

The horse thief fell into a sulk finally.

"Thinks he's too good for *me*, does he?" he grumbled audibly. "Just because I plugged a dirty breed. What harm is there to that? What's pluggin' a breed compared to "—he dropped his voice—"compared to what *he* did? Ain't a man in the desert would hold Plunk Reverdy above me! So help me God—I'm better than he is! And I give him my hand—as a pal! Now look at him swellin' along there!"

Nevertheless, Slink Bottiler stuck to his companion. It was a great comfort, while riding over that open plain in the dark hour before dawn, to have a rider jogging along with him. Yes, even though it was a rider like Plunk Reverdy.

"And yet most like if they attacked us now," the rat-faced little thief was saying, "he'd leave me to their mercy. Same as he done when ole Jackson Brower and his women folk was attacked."

They reached the Bar-Ace Ranch at sunrise.

A rather inexplicable state of affairs existed there. The place was in a turmoil. Now, a cow ranch at dawn is apt to be a noisy place. The herders are in the corrals with the horses; the kitchen shack is a-clatter with pots and pans; the cows are mooing; the cocks are crowing; and the early morning breeze starts the windmill to squeaking.

But added to this the rancher and his wife and family—and all the hands—were bustling about as if the place had caught fire and they were trying to save stuff from the shacks and barns. Exactly like a fire, except that there was neither smoke nor flame.

Upon seeing the two riders coming in from the desert, there was a cessation of activity, a staring, then a recognition.

"Here comes some hombres who'll ride with us," the rancher called to his wife and the other women folk.

"The more the merrier," said a ranch hand—"and the safer!"

"I'll be caterwopously damned if it ain't Plunk Reverdy!" the rancher exclaimed.

"Oh, is that all!" one of the women said. She had reckoned, no doubt, that in that time of grave danger God had sent two new fighting men to help them in their exodus to Mule Town.

But the two fighting men turned out to be a rat-faced little mozo and Plunk Reverdy—a very doubtful accretion of strength.

The rancher turned his tune slightly. The rest of his men went about their business. The last time any of them had seen Plunk he was holding up a gang in the street of Mule Town to cover his escape from a branding.

The branding was forgotten now. But the cause of it was not.

A dead silence attended this event of two ragged hombres from Soda Mesa Desert reaching the portals of civilization.

Then the rat-faced man made bold to say:

"We're starvin'!"

"All right, we'll fix you up," said the rancher, who appeared to be a large-hearted hombre in his way. "You look hungry, too." He called to his chow woman. "Ham and eggs for these two gents." He added in a surge of generosity: "And kill a chicken for 'em. We won't have no use for our chickens from now on."

Plunk seemed to warm at this. He opened out like a flower before a stray, scant, but blessed ray of sunlight.

"What-all's happened, Bigsbee?"

"What-all's happened!" the rancher exclaimed. "I thought you must know. Didn't figure you'd come back to these parts unless you was forced. Look here, ain't you goin' to Mule Town—same's all of us?"

"I'm goin' to Mule Town," Plunk said non-committantly. "But what's all this packing up for—and what's this panic in your ranch about?"

"Why, John Powderhorn's on the warpath! A rider from Mule Town came down here a couple of hours ago—about four, I reckon—and told us every one's warned to congregate at Mule Town. I'm tryin' to collect my valuables as well as my women folk and get up thar afore this outfit gits wiped offen the face of the earth." He concluded with the same gesture of hospitality. "You kin ride along with us, Plunk."

This was a very significant sort of invitation. It meant in effect that the rancher was not forgetting what Plunk had done, but he was forgiving him—bygones were bygones. One of the most important of the laws of pioneers must be observed: to band together when the Indians were on the warpath.

"I figured you must of caught wind of the news down there, and was hurryin' into town," the rancher said. "Your cayuses—not to mention yourselves—sure look like you've et up some hard trail."

"We saw some Indians down on the desert rim," Plunk said. "Whether they were Powderhorn's men or not, I don't know."

The horse thief, who had stood somewhat behind Plunk's elbow during this meeting, was glancing apprehensively about. His ghastly face, his little rat's eyes, his pointed nose, were the picture of desperation. When the rancher caught his eye he looked to the sand and his Adam's apple worked convulsively.

Finally Reverdy asked: "Why is John Powderhorn on the warpath?"

At this question the horse thief thrust out his hand, touching Plunk on the elbow with a fantastic light gesture—as if flicking off a horse fly.

Reverdy felt in that touch an eloquent desperation—as if all the fear in the horse thief's miserable body were vibrating through these spidery finger tips.

"He's on the warpath," the rancher said, "because some fool white man tried to rustle one of old John's hosses. Got into a scrap with his men and plugged one of 'em—"

"Did he die?" the horse thief asked in a tight, high voice.

"Died a day later."

Reverdy and Slink Bottiler stood looking at each other. The news which a moment before had concerned them not at all now loomed in the light of a vital personal import.

The rancher left them and joined his men in one of the corrals.

Slink's lips were blue except where his tobacco stained them. They trembled. The juice ran down over his chin, and he didn't take the trouble to wipe it off. He was the abject picture of guilt and fear.

Reverdy could not help laughing.

"You poor little piece of nothing!" he chuckled. "You sure are in for it—aren't you?"

He turned toward the chow cart. The cook was calling to them. Slink Bottiler followed, his mouth driveling, his head lolling somewhat to his walk, like a sick man's.

They were starved. And Plunk ate the ham and eggs with a relish that he had never known could be enticed by any mundane food. The horse thief could not eat a bite.

He spat his tobacco wad and rolled up his cuffs. He tried a sip of coffee, then chewed off another hunk of tobacco.

"Look here, pard!" he began miserably, "you won't—"

He did not finish. The fat chow woman came in with a plate heaped with flapjacks. She saw by the way that Plunk went at his meal that she would be kept busy.

"Now you boys fall to in a hurry," she said. "I ain't goin' to fool around in the kitchen when I got to pack my things. We're all gettin' out o' here in five minutes."

This was directed to the inconsequential and miserable Slink—who, as she noticed, was dilatory.

"What ails you?" she snapped. "Set to and finish, man! You want us all to git scalped?"

This seemed to have an effect on Slink—very much as if the old lady had brought a lash down on his neck. He ducked his head and made a pretense of eating.

"I only hope we won't all get killed after we get to Mule Town," the cook said. She seemed to want to talk to the newcomers. Plunk's huge shoulders comforted her in a

time of such tribulation. Apparently she had not heard of his past.

"We'll need all you men to fight," she said. "Powderhorn's gettin' his tribes together for to burn down Mule Town."

"He can't do that," Plunk said. "Mule Town's in a good position—if we have a small bunch of men to hold the two passes."

"Yeah? You think so—really, mister?" She was reassured.

"Then Fort Winfield will hear about it. And good night to that whole gang of breeds."

Even Slink Bottiler began to eat, as this comfort was extended.

"Well, anyway," the cook said, "I hope there won't be no gun fight. It 'll be too bad to have any of our boys shot—all because of some miserable hoss thief. John Powderhorn ain't fair. Goin' to kill us all—just because he's got it in for some renegade we don't know nothin' about. And only think, mister"—she was addressing all her remarks to Plunk, who was not listening, whereas she ignored the thief, who was—"only think, Powderhorn allowed the sheriff just a day and a half to git the hoss thief and deliver him up!"

"Deliver him up to what, for hell's sake?" Slink Bottiler asked, dropping his knife.

"Deliver him to them Injuns, of course. Powderhorn said that he wouldn't touch the town if they give him his man."

Plunk looked up at this. The rat's eyes of the little fellow across the table were bulging—they were little tiny hideous things popping outward till the whites showed. He was fixing that fearful stare upon Plunk.

The woman hurried back to the kitchen, saying over her beefy shoulder: "Now, hurry up, you! If you cain't eat my flapjacks, then go out to the pump and wash your cup and dish."

When she was gone, the rat-faced man reached across with his two scrawny arms. His fingers opened like claws.

"Pard," he whimpered. "You won't tell! You won't, promise me, for God's sake. It was self-defense, pard. You'd of done the same, so help me God! Don't tell! No one else knows! It's only you that can give me up.

"My God, pard, do you know what it means? They'll give me up to Powderhorn. It means his squaws will torture me! I know! They stick splinters into you—and set 'em to burnin'. That's what they've done before. No, pard! I'll kill myself! They won't get me!"

Plunk was still eating ravenously, with the splendid, soul-satisfying hunger of a strong and conscience-free man.

"Let Mule Town fight him, pard! What good's Mule Town to *you?* Let 'em do some fightin' for a change! They can protect themselves. You just said that. It's a strong town. But I'm a poor, weak hombre. How can I fight a thousand murderous Injuns? It ain't fair! You wouldn't do that to a pard, would you?"

He had been whispering in a desperate, sobbing sort of tone. But he could not help raising his voice now: "Answer me, for God's sake, pard! Quit slobberin' around them eggs!"

Reverdy raised his head. You could hear voices in the next room distinctly. They could have heard Slink Bottiler's desperate petition if he had spoken a whit louder.

"Pard—"

"Shut up!" Plunk said. He listened for a moment to what was going on in the kitchen. One of the ranch women evidently had come in, and the cook was talking to her. Without doubt that ranch hand, whoever she was, spoke purposely loud enough for Plunk to hear. For she said:

"Who do you mean—that big hombre—the one with the brown hair? That's Plunk Reverdy. Looks like he kin fight? Well, I guess he does look thataway—but that's as far as he goes. He's cut out for singin' not fightin'. They was goin' to brand him in Mule Town for somethin' he done.

"Might as well put him in the chow wagon with the rest of us women folk. No use lettin' him ride with the men. If they's any fightin' he'll clear out."

Reverdy rose to his feet. His eyes, pallid from so many days in the desert, began to blaze. His face was drawn, gray—gray, that is to say, except for that deep, windburned flush.

Slink Bottiler figured out easily enough just what had happened. And he made use of Plunk's humiliation. It would come in very handy at that time.

"Look here, Plunk," he said rapidly and with a newborn assurance, "you know what Mule Town thinks of you. You heard 'em in there talkin'. I been to Mule Town off and on the past few weeks—and never is your name mentioned without they spit. I ain't found a single man-jack in the whole range yet that would hold out a hand to you—same as I've done."

Reverdy was still standing, staring in a dumb fashion toward that kitchen door. He seemed to have been dazed by the blow. If it had only been a man who had called out that insult from beyond that door!

Slink thought his words were falling upon deaf ears. He too got up and went to Plunk.

"Look here, pard, didn't I take you in while you was in the desert, thirsty and hungry? Me—a poor outcast, same as you? *I* didn't refuse to give you a hand, did I Plunk? Well, will anybody in Mule Town do as much?"

Reverdy threw him off. It did not take much of a gesture, despite the frenzied hold of those little birdlike claws on his arm.

The horse thief fell back with a weak thump upon the bench. He lay there terrified, gibbering. One word from Plunk and he could see the vision of himself in John Powderhorn's settlement, paying the ordained price.

Plunk was going.

"No, wait, pard—wait, for God's sake! Let me tell you just one thing!" The claws were at work again on the muscular arm.

Slink was pleading for his life, pleading to save himself from torture by the squaws. He spoke as rapidly and frantically as any man could possibly speak.

"Look here, pard—what if you give me up? By doin' that you save Mule Town, don't you? You save 'em from this raid. You save the men that wanted to brand you. You save the townsfolk which spit when they hear your name. Ain't I right, pard? And at the same time you give me up to be tortured—the poor little hombre which give you his hand in the desert!"

There was never in any court of justice a more cunning plea. There was the argument—a weighing of two things in a balance. On the one hand was Mule Town, who had cast him out; on the other, a pitiful, abject thing like a stray dog licking his heels.

A voice from outside was shouting:

"Come on, folks! Git to your mounts! We're hittin' the trail!"

The rancher threw open the door of the chow shack. "Here you, hombres. What-all are you confabbing about in there? Git to your mounts and foller us."

The horse thief turned, brushed past the rancher, and ran to his cayuse. He leaped aboard and wheeled off for a separate trail. The rancher and Plunk watched him for scarcely half a minute.

"That thar's a queer hombre," the rancher said. "He ought to stick with us and help us in case we git into trouble. He looks suspicious to me. Who in tarnation is he?"

Now, Plunk had the impulse at that very moment to leap to his horse and give chase. It was a choice between saving Mule Town, where there were two hundred respectable and worth-while folks, or to save this worthless bit of jetsam.

To save him meant a big battle, lives lost. It meant that Plunk himself would have to ride to the defense of Mule Town—a very disagreeable task. He would be insulted at every turn—probably even while he was fighting his hardest.

It meant that Nell Brower would be imperiled. Plunk did not know that she was at that very moment being held a hostage. He thought she was safe in Mule Town. And Mule Town, according to his roseate and youthful view, could not possibly be taken. It could be defended until Fort Winfield sent help.

Now which was he to do? Save the town from a battle, or save the horse-thief from torture? What would any man have done? That I do not know. But I do know that while Plunk was on the very verge of going after that sniveling, terrified coyote, destiny intervened by the merest little quip.

Plunk overheard one of the ranch women

saying to her companions: "Come on Jane, Tabby, Lou—all you womenfolk git into the wagon. And tell Plunk Reverdy he kin git in, too."

If that one little sentence with the stinging insult at the end had not been uttered at that moment, Mule Town might have been saved.

The rancher, watching the escaping horse thief, asked again: "Who is that hombre anyway—ridin' off thataway by hisself? Don't you know who he is?"

"He's all right," said Plunk. "A pard of mine. He's just ridin' to a nester's cabin over the hill— to warn a friend."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SACRIFICIAL ALTAR.

MULE TOWN sweltered during that long afternoon in a torture of expectancy. There was no more commotion. Every one had been assigned his duty. Guards were posted on watch at the base of the canon walls to prevent a possible attempt on the part of the invaders to climb down the steep trail.

The town had never been so crowded at any time in its history—not even during the spring round-ups, when the herders came for a rodeo and a carousal. And now on this afternoon every one seemed to avoid staying inside any of the shacks or cantinas. They all walked up and down the main street; they sat on the board sidewalks; they stood in groups making prophecies and watching the rim of the gulch.

The flare of shouting and yipping had gone out when the news came about those captured messengers. There was to be no help from Fort Winfield. The fight was between John Powderhorn and Mule Town.

"Powderhorn has two hundred fighters," the sheriff said. "And that tribe of degen'rit Yumans amounts to eight hundred. We got my deputies—twenty. They's ten good cowboys from the Bar-J. Fifteen from the Box-L. Ten from the Tumbling Deuce. Twenty from the Consolidated. About twenty miners and such which has gathered in town. The barkeeps and bouncers from the honkytonks makes twenty more. That gives us almost a hundred fightin' men. One hundred *versus* one thousand. Well, one to ten ain't always a losin' bet."

But even with these figures staring them in the face some of the more riotous and optimistic cowboys, eager for the smell of powder and the siege, began to sing.

They sang to quiet the nerves of the people, just as they used to sing on starlit nights to ward off herd-madness on the range.

Cowboy songs and bar-room ballads were lifted against those hot granite walls, echoing hauntingly in what had been a deadly and nerve-racking quiet.

Naturally enough they sang some of the very songs which their one-time favorite minstrel, Plunk Reverdy, had sung for them on riotous Saturday nights.

"I knew a calf-kneed lady
Down at old Pedro's bar,
And though her past was shady,
Her eye was like a star!"

A vision of the author of that song—who was no other than the pariah minstrel—must have been evoked in the minds of the barkeeps, the gamblers, the cowboys, the womenfolk, as they heard the rollicking lines. But no one gave the author much thought. The town was obsessed now with something else: the coming of John Powderhorn.

Plunk Reverdy's youthful genial face, his fine shoulders swinging as he stroked his banjo, his melodious barytone appeared in a momentary memory perhaps to every mind.

But then Reverdy came in the flesh!

They saw him following in the wake of a few horsemen, a chow-wagon from an outfit down there on the desert rim. A pathetic and lonely figure he was riding apart from the rest of the outfit, coming in to town for the first time since that day when they had tried to brand him.

He heard the strains of his own song being sung by a group of herders. It must have given him a very peculiar thrill.

What could he have thought as those rows of people on the board sidewalks stared at him, nudging one another, pretending

not to see? He most certainly thought of the old days when he sang that song for them to dance. They needed a dancing tune like that now. For every face was anxious, the women were pale, one white-haired ranch wife was crying as she kept two children by her knee.

Plunk would have liked to sing that song the way he used to sing it. He would have liked to find his banjo again, and keep those cowboys in time and tune. It was a good song, it was a happy song.

But of course this means of helping them was not to be considered for a moment. He had come to fight; he had come to be stared at with surprised and accusing glances; he had come to be flayed by the same old whip.

" Plunk's moseyed back here where he kin be safe as usual," said a raucous voiced woman.

He rode on at the tail end of the outfit he had joined that morning. He would not stay in that street long. He wanted to find Nell Brower—then he would stay in the background

The song stopped abruptly, for the herders who sang it, recognized its author. The chord of attempted close harmony went flat and was lost.

The idea of singing a song of *his* writing at a time like this! They should have been singing the songs of brave men. War songs, " Yankee Doodle," " Tenting To-night."

And when they stopped singing, Reverdy saw Mule Town in a guise which he had never dreamed of before. It was crowded—and the crowd was dumb. He had not supposed that so many ranchers could possibly have come to town with only a day's notice. He had not supposed that so many women and children and old men lived on that range. It was a hapless, anxious-faced mob. And they all looked at him as if to say: " We need fighting men to-day—not you."

But Reverdy gave no thought to this reception. His mind was awhirl with something else. He saw that woman with the two little tots crying; he saw an old man, waiting with a bundle of his earthly possessions, seated on the edge of the board sidewalk; he saw the little kids who had asked him to sing that day—the kids who had not understood his disgrace.

He saw a Mexican woman wailing, and looking at him with dry terrified eyes; he saw old Augustina the palmist with her ragged phrenological charts rolled up, her bandana of beads and card packs, her withered hands pecking at each other, her eyes imploring the heavens to save her poor withered old carcass. Augustina knew that the gods had forsaken Mule Town.

" Plunk's comin' to do some *fightin'*," said a woman.

He overheard this. It was a dum-dum bullet, calculated to spread and break bone and fester.

But it did not wound him. He might have turned to that woman and said: " I had a chance some few hours ago to save this pesky town. But I didn't. I wanted to see you all destroyed for the way you've destroyed me."

That was what he might have announced to the whole dumb, frightened mob.

But the one thought that obsessed him was this:

" What have I done? What have I done? I saved a sniveling desert rat—and sacrificed all these children!"

Remorse gripped him, shook him, worked into his veins like a violent acid. He felt like a changed man. He felt that their insults and accusing glances were justified—but pitifully insufficient for the crime he had committed. He would be punished for this. He felt the punishment coming; he expected it. It hovered over him every step his horse took, as he shambled along past those doomed people.

He prayed. His lips moved. He tried not to look at the kids. He prayed almost audibly. They might have thought the desert had made him crazy during those days of torture he had been through. He clutched at his breast. He looked up at the canon rim. He looked up at the hot sky—as if imploring some power to come down and punish him.

" To save a filthy horse-thief—I sacrificed them!"

But no! That was too hideous. No god or power in the universe would allow such a travesty of justice! He would fight like a maniac; they would all fight; they would win!

As if to reassure his own soul with this thought, he called aloud to some one in the street. It was an old rancher who had pretended not to see him.

"I figure we can last out, Skeeter, till the regulars get yere."

The man turned upon him—and sneered, as if he knew the whole truth:

"The regulars! No such luck! You'll have to fight, Reverdy. Too bad. But the riders we sent to Fort Winfield was all scalped or took prisoner."

Reverdy stared as if he were looking at a ghost. There was no possibility of that old rancher understanding why his words had so affected the youth. Reverdy felt of a sudden that his punishment was coming. A sentence was about to be pronounced upon him. He was standing in the presence of an inexorable and merciless judge. He had committed a crime against heaven itself!

Unable to utter a word, he turned his horse and headed directly for the sheriff's office.

The rancher watched him a moment, then said to the by-standers:

"Did you see that hombre's face?"

"It turned gray," said one.

"I saw yaller in his eyes," said another.

"His lips were like slag—losing all shape."

"Just as I thought! He's more plumb scairt than any man, woman or kid in this whole town."

Old Sheriff Hornuff was in his office in excited conference with some of his deputies.

The appearance of Plunk Reverdy at the doorway caused as abrupt a cessation of sound as it had a few moments before during the singing of "The Calf-Kneed Lady."

The sheriff peered under his thick brows at the newcomer, and the cleverest mind-reader in the world could not have told what he was thinking. The stocky little sheriff was a queer man, a harsh judge, a calm man, a sphinx. He had under his wing a whole range of helpless people.

There was a chance that the women and children over whom he had reigned for years would be massacred by Indians under his very eyes. In short it was not a time to waste much thinking over the advent of this discarded renegade from Soda Mesa Desert.

Yet the sheriff cut short a momentous palaver with his deputies. He stared at the desert-scarred youth, and then made that customary gesture of his—putting the end of his long gray mustache between his lips. He bit it once more. Then:

"*Plunk, my boy, I been wishin' you'd come back.*"

They all waited. One or two deputies grunted. What use could they have for a man like Plunk now?

"We just been estimatin' how much power John Powderhorn really has. They's a story goin' about that he got a holt on a machine gun somewheres or other. Wherever that machine gun's set up—that's where I'm goin' to post you."

Some one laughed.

An old deputy said: "Did you come back for to fight, Reverdy?"

"Did you come in here and bust up our meetin' for to offer your services as a sharpshooter?" another asked.

"Leave him have his say," the sheriff interrupted.

"I'd like to see you alone for just one minute, chief," Reverdy said.

Hornuff motioned his men out of the room. It was a peculiar procedure. The idea of paying any attention to Reverdy at a time like this!

They were alone. Plunk spoke quickly:

"Chief, you're busy, and I can't take your time telling you about my affairs. All I want to say is this: I want to fight to save this town. And I see you want to give me a chance. I was riding through the street, going straight to the Rex Hotel to ask for Nell Brower—because I wanted to see her first and tell her not to be afraid.

"But then I heard that your riders to Fort Winfield are all captured. That changes everything, chief, as you well know. I thought there'd only be a little gunfighting, holding those renegades off until the regulars came. But it looks serious now. We can't beat 'em without a troop from Winfield—you believe that?"

The sheriff nodded abstractedly. He was thinking about something else.

"Chief, I want you to let me try to get to Fort Winfield."

Hornuff looked up. Then he shook his head. "The trails are covered. You couldn't make it. I want you here. No use sacrificing any more of my fighting men. You'd be killed—or what's worse, taken prisoner, same's the other three."

"But I want to risk it, chief. I know the trails. I can hide in the gulches if I see any of Powderhorn's men. I'll get there—so help me!"

Hornuff studied him carefully. Then he shook his head as before. "It would take you several days—travelin' that-away. By that time the fight would be over. You're going to fight a machine gun, Plunk. I've been wanting for the last month to see you square yourself. And here's your chance. Whether you're what this town thinks you are or not, *I don't know*. But luck's with you, Plunk, because you're goin' to have a chance!"

Reverdy made a gesture of desperation. "Luck! Good God! I'm the unluckiest man in the world. Luck's against me—from the start. God himself's against me, chief! He's judging me for what I've done. Don't ask me to explain now. It would take too long—and you're in a hurry. Just take my word for it. I'm responsible for this whole hideous thing that's come on this innocent town!"

The sheriff was glaring from under his shaggy brows. What had happened to Plunk Reverdy anyway? The young fellow was excited abnormally, talking as if drunk—or rather drugged, his eyes dilated, flaming.

Hornuff studied him for a moment as if he could not make head or tail out of what he had just said.

"I'd admire for you to explain something, Plunk. Have you talked to any townsfolk since coming from the desert?"

"Just an old rancher—who told me about your riders being caught."

"No one else that knows what's been goin' on?"

"No one. I joined the Bar-Ace outfit this morning—"

"Didn't they know what-all's been happenin'?"

"Just that Powderhorn's on the warpath."

"Nothin' else? Nothin' that concerns you?"

"What do you mean by that—'concerns me'?"

"You say you was ridin' to the hotel for to find out where Nell Brower's at?"

"Naturally. She's the first one I wanted to see. To comfort her—you know what I mean, chief."

"Sure I do. But you ain't heard what's happened to Nell Brower."

Plunk felt that the sentence which destiny was to pass upon him for his crime was about to descend.

"What the hell are you talking about, chief! Nothing's happened to that little girl—to little Nellie—Nellie Brower, chief, what are you saying, for God's sake!"

"She went down to the desert to find you. Some of Powderhorn's coyotes picked her up—"

"Picked her up! What do you mean, chief! You're crazy! What're you trying to say!" Reverdy was shouting now. He took the stocky little sheriff by the shoulders as if to shake him.

"They caught her—and rustled her off to their settlement at Desolation," Hornuff explained, as if trying to placate a crazed man. "All as I kin do is to tell you the truth, Plunk. The gal's as good as lost. Leave go diggin' your fingers into my shoulders—are you daft!"

The clutch weakened abruptly. All the blood had drained from Reverdy's face. He understood now with an overwhelming assurance. He was paying the price for sacrificing that town.

He had sacrificed *Nell Brower!*

"No, no! It can't be, chief! Some one's sagebrushed you. I can't believe it! Those Indians wouldn't touch a white woman—you know that!"

"I know Powderhorn's Indians," said the other. "They're keeping her for hostage. Powderhorn sent a messenger saying that he'd release her only when we delivered up his man for him."

"The damned thieving coyotes!" Rev-

erdy fairly screamed. "I'll kill every man-jack of 'em. I'll fight the whole tribe! I'll wipe it off the face of the earth, so help me God!"

Old Sheriff Hornuff in the many years of his regime had never seen a face so gray, a pair of eyes so flaming. The boy's rage was like a mania.

Hornuff reached out his arms as if to hold him, but he seemed afraid to touch him. "Where do you think you're going, Plunk. You ain't goin' to the settlement! They's hundreds of 'em—most like likker-in' up and doin' their war-dance. What-all good is it sacrificin' your life to 'em. You stay here and help us!"

He made bold to catch Plunk by the arm just as the latter banged open the door. Outside in the hallway a group of deputies had gathered, hearing the loud talking, the scuffling.

"Get this hombre a drink, men. He's goin' daft. Hold him. Don't let him go. Wants to throw his life away—without so much as firin' a shot. And he's the crackest marksman we've got in town!"

Reverdy found himself tussling with six men. Most probably he could have knocked them all over, if he had taken that course. Instead the voice of old Sheriff Hornuff seemed to have touched a chord somewhere within his frantic heaving breast.

"Don't sacrifice your life—without you gain somethin', Plunk! That won't git the gal!"

Reverdy stood with his arms held by those deputies, his eyes staring like smoldering fires in the sunken sockets. He was a figure that would give any man a qualm.

"Sacrifice my life, chief?" he said breathlessly. "Why not, chief? Tell me that. What good's this rotten, murderous life of mine? I'm worse than them all—worse than Powderhorn and every cutthroat breed in his gang. I've sacrificed all the kids—the womenfolk—the helpless old coots in this town. What's the odds if I sacrifice one more—a measly, sniveling, worthless life like my own?"

"All right, Plunk," Hornuff said in his calm and soothing way. "I'll leave you do it. But I want to see you bump off a dozen renegades first. You kin do it, if you stay here and help us fight. If you go out alone to their settlement, you won't git a chanst to pot one of 'em."

They thought that this had its effect on Reverdy. The men found that he made no more attempt to resist their hold. He shoved them back, as if to show he had strength enough to stand on his own feet. The hallway by this time was crowded. It was crowded as far as the door to the street—and there on the steps and on the sidewalk a big crowd had gathered.

"You calm down, Plunk, and work off some of your revenge ag'in' them renegades by helpin' us stop this raid."

Reverdy answered with a softness and assurance that startled them all:

"There's not going to be any raid, chief."

There was a dead silence, although the crowd was large, and some of the men had been trying to elbow their way further into the hall.

Upon hearing this, Sheriff Hornuff threw up his hands—as if in defeat. No use arguing any further. The boy was locoed. That was all there was to it.

"Chief—you believe what I'm telling you. There's not going to be any raid. Because—" his coolness was cutting; his voice pierced that befogged and stuffy hallway like a knife— "because I'm going to see John Powderhorn."

"A lot of good that will do," Hornuff snorted. He was disgusted now with the whole business. He had other things to attend to besides placating a sunstruck boy. "Powderhorn won't listen to no argument from *you*. He won't listen to me—or to God or to nobody. If he don't git his man, he'll raid us. That's as good as finished already." The sheriff withdrew to his office door.

"If he gets his man—" Reverdy began—

The sheriff turned back. He peered fiercely under the shaggy brows. "You mean, Plunk, that you kin find the man for us—the hoss thief which murdered Powderhorn's nephew?"

Reverdy shook his head. He knew perfectly well that in the few hours remaining before the raid there was no chance of finding that man. That horse-thief knew what

was coming to him if he was caught. He knew that Powderhorn's squaws could keep a man alive for hours, while they plied him with the tortures of hell.

"No, chief, I don't have to find him," Reverdy said. "I've got him already. He's here before you." He did not address himself to the crowd, but looked Sheriff Hornuff fearlessly in the eye.

There was no tremor in Reverdy's voice. His lie was perfectly told:

"*I myself am the man, chief.*"

Reverdy cast a glance across the dumfounded faces of the crowd. He saw that they were all stricken, incapable of action.

"Better brush it up, chief," he said. "No time to lose if you want to save the kids in this town from massacre. Take me to Powderhorn now. And see that Nell Brower gets back safe."

CHAPTER XXX.

POWWOW

THE sun setting between two mesas cast a band of red light against the broken down shacks and wickiups of Desolation.

Below the town on the lower slope of the Sierra a horde of Yumans worked themselves into a murderous frenzy, strutting, pounding their feet, waving their arms, lowering and lifting their heads, yipping in a war-dance.

Desolation itself remained aloof on a jutting lip of the sierra. It was quieter up there. But another ritual just as barbaric was about to be performed.

John Powderhorn and some of his kinsmen, before leading the horde below on the raid, intended to heat their blood lust by the burial ceremony. Powderhorn's murdered nephew had been painted and decked for his journey to the next world.

It was now that a Navaho spy came riding as fast as his horse could climb that zigzag trail towards the settlement.

Once on the lip of the mesa he galloped his mount into the heart of Desolation toward the funeral fires, the mêlée of dogs and children and squaws, the medicine men, the mourning, peyote-eating warriors.

"They are coming," he said to John Powderhorn in their native tongue, "the sheriff and a posse and a prisoner. The murderer is being brought to you, Big Chief. And your kinsman is avenged."

Now this news was received with considerable disappointment.

I refer to all except Old John. The big chief, dreaming of loot and of scalping the whole population of a paleface village, had not forgotten about the murderer of his kinsman. Revenge was his first passion. Not all the burning towns of the world would have given him quite the perfect satisfactioin he wanted. If he could only get his hands on the right man!

He was at that moment gazing upon the clay-painted face of the nephew who had been his favorite and bravest warrior. He had it in his heart to make this burial ceremony a memorable one.

John Powderhorn was far less a fighter than a medicine man. He evoked a picture of the murderer being burned alive at one of those funeral fires and going into the next world groveling and whimpering while his victim went in the glory of a Navaho burial.

He turned from the contemplation of that clay. His face was grim with an age-old hate. His voice was tortured with a yearning that must be satisfied. The blood in his eyeballs was the blood of ancient savage ancestors—passionate primitive, cruel.

He was told that white men were riding up the trail with a white flag waving.

He sent his snake-priests and heralds to meet them. "Let the sheriff and his men and his prisoner come. Let them be told that Powderhorn would never violate their white flag."

While he waited for the posse to be led into town, Powderhorn summoned the breeds who had been on the scene when the fight between his nephew and the horse-thief took place.

He asked craftily if there was any one among them who could recognize this man.

One of them who had given chase after the horse-thief had committed the murder, spoke up:

He knew that the thief was a thin man

with a growth of beard, and with a face as red as though painted with powdered clay—like the dead at Powderhorn's. But that fight over the horse had happened in the wink of an eye. Powderhorn's kinsman lay wounded. His companions were blind with rage. When they gave chase they saw only the back of his head. This was all explained to the Big Chief.

"What will it matter?" an old snake-priest counseled in Navaho. "If they deliver a scapegoat you may torture him anyway as you torture the effigy of an enemy. And thus you will be avenged."

Powderhorn nodded his leonine head. These were perhaps wise words. But in his philosophy of life and death and revenge and justice there was a peculiar mixture of practicality. He would give up the raid only on condition that they deliver the right man to him.

The white men came.

Powderhorn received them in the one littered street. He stood in front of the paling of stakes. On one side was his shack; on the other some squaws were stringing baked cornmeal cakes on yucca fibre, tanning hides, weaving papoose baskets. Always slaving—even at a time like this.

Closer to the chief were four of his war-priests.

The white men, mounted, were led through the rubbish heap of the main street toward this scene.

There were six of them. Four reined and waited. Two others rode directly to the corral where the Big Chief stood glowering at them.

Powderhorn could not tell which one was the prisoner, for no one was bound. The little sheriff with the gray mustache and gray brows, and the rusty star catching the final ray of sunset, was in the lead.

Old John's lips were pursed in a grin as the sheriff dismounted with one of the men and came toward him.

Hornuff's mustache had turned grayer during the last day and a half. It had taken on almost the silvery color of his hair.

The giant Indian and the little sheriff faced each other. It was like a terrier facing a Great Dane. But the terrier seemed to know instinctively that all danger was past.

Powderhorn looked at the prisoner—a man of his own height. He looked at him with eagle eyes, his mouth still pursed in a wrinkled smile. It was a smile that might have been interpreted as genial or sardonic or incredulous, or immeasurably cruel. No man could tell.

Now, this ancient renegade of the desert had a far-reaching wisdom of mankind—particularly of Navahos and Mexicans and breeds. He also knew a thing or two about white men. But there was one thing he did not know and would not believe even if he had been told: that a white man will give up his life for a woman.

That was a legend as ridiculous to John Powderhorn as, let us say, the legend of a shaman turning himself into a mole would be to a white man. In his transactions with horse dealers he had never had occasion to test such a fantastic character trait. White men lied, white men stole, white men broke their promises, white men got drunk, white men yearned to get rich, white men prayed to their own gods; and, furthermore, white men fought for their mates and their young, just as a Navaho might.

And a white man might offer himself up to save a friend—if that friend were a man—just as a Navaho might. But as for his offering himself to be tortured in order to save a *woman*—no!

Thus was John Powderhorn's wisdom found wanting. Thus was he cheated. He did not ask Plunk Reverdy point-blank whether he were the guilty man; for he believed that Reverdy would, of course, naturally say no.

Now if the Big Chief had asked that question everything would have gone along smoothly. He would have been surprised, but he would have also been satisfied. For Reverdy would have said: "Yes, I am the man you want."

Instead of asking him, however, he asked one of his own Navahos: "Is this the man you saw fighting with my kinsman?"

The Navaho shrugged his shoulders and then declared that this man had the burned skin, the thin gaunt face, the stubble of

hair that had marked the slayer; but beyond that there was no proof.

Powderhorn looked at the tall youth standing without any bonds, facing him. He appeared brave. Powderhorn was pleased with the way he comported himself in the shadow of torture. In this way white men and Indians were alike—so thought John Powderhorn. He had seen white men hanged; and the only ones who showed signs of great fear were the executioners. And it was the case now. No one in that group of Navahos and horsemen seemed so brave as the prisoner.

"Hi-yu-skookum! I take this hombre," said Powderhorn.

"Let's get out of here pronto, chief," one of the posse urged. "Them breeds down in the valley are drinkin' theirselves crazy."

"Does this mean peace, John?" Hornuff asked.

"It means peace," said the old renegade. "No like warpath. But the Yumans who come at my call are plum cultus braves. They are in hell-damn frenzy. You keep your ranchers and your muckers out of the open trails bime-by. Otherwise"—he described an imaginary halo around his head with his crooked forefinger—"scalp 'em heap pronto."

"I'm thankin' you, John. When you say you'll keep the peace, I know you mean what you say. Your word's as good as any bond ever given to a man. And I'll do the same. I'm sorry, John, that this business came up. It waren't nothin' of my doin'. As you say, you yourself have men under you which you can't keep a tight rein on. Well, it's the same here. This murder of your nephew wasn't caused by me or by Mule Town. It was the mischief of one hombre."

Powderhorn nodded his head. He was satisfied. His prisoner would follow his noble victim and whimper and grovel at his heels as they crossed into the next world.

"Let's get out. Come on, sheriff. It's goin' to be a risky ride gettin' home."

But Hornuff was not yet through.

He caught Reverdy gazing at him with a mute and eloquent fire in his eyes.

"How about that white woman you're holdin' as hostage, John?" Hornuff asked.

"What white woman?" the Big Chief rejoined.

"Some of your men picked her up in the desert edge and rustled her off. You sent a messenger to me, sayin'—"

"Hootch-la!" the big chief exclaimed. "I remember. Hell-damn nuisance. What do I want of white squaw? I punished the brave who pullem this trick. Take off clothes—whip with horsewhip like hell. If you take her away this white squaw, John Powderhorn say 'Much oblige.'" He scratched his head in a moment's perplexity. "What the hell we did with that squaw?"

He was reminded by one of his henchmen that she had been stuck in a closet of his "office."

Sure enough! Old John remembered now. A nuisance. Clattered about in there with those bottles and kicked and cried all afternoon. Let the snake-priests get her out.

"You take squaw away pronto. Damn much oblige. I give you two cuitans—for gift."

The girl was brought. Nothing further was done about the cuitans, and Hornuff and his men were diplomatic enough to overlook the promise. Powderhorn was as hard to part from his horse as a miser from his gold.

Nell Brower was wan, white-faced, terrified. They had to help her as they brought her down to the corral where the powwow had taken place. But when she saw Reverdy she broke away from her renegade escorts and flew into his arms.

For a fraction of a moment she was shocked to see that Reverdy paid no attention to her. Then she realized that something of great import was happening. There was Sheriff Hornuff, and some of his deputies mounted. On the ground stood John Powderhorn. On either side of Reverdy were Navaho medicine men.

"What has happened?" she cried.

Sheriff Hornuff explained in a word. "The raid is not to take place. We have brought John his man."

She threw her arms about Reverdy's neck.

"What does this mean? Tell me, Sheriff Hornuff, and you"—she cried to the deputies—"what have you done?"

"You better come along, gal. Plunk Reverdy killed old John's nephew. That's the story. You're free."

"He did not kill him! It's a lie! It's the blackest lie any one ever told. He came here to save me! I know it! I was thinking all the time that if he heard I was a prisoner he would come. And here he is."

"Come on, gal," old Hornuff pleaded. "Here's your horse. Same one as he had. If you don't want to start trouble—and get this raid worked up all over again—you come along."

"I won't come along! I'll stay here unless Plunk comes with us, too. It's all a frame-up, and you men know what you're doing. Plunk's innocent of this, before God! I know it. And I'll die with him before riding with you cowards." She turned to the inscrutable but somewhat impatient Navaho chief. "Can't *you* see what's happened? They've brought you the wrong man. And he's consenting so I can go free."

Here she touched upon the one point that old John Powderhorn would not believe. These white men might have brought Reverdy as a scapegoat to save the town; but to save a woman—that was preposterous. The sheriff and his men would not exchange a powerful young man for a woman. And the man would not exchange himself for her either.

John Powderhorn showed his impatience. He had other matters to occupy his mind—the burial of his nephew, the torture of the prisoner.

"Take her away," he said, waving his huge arm with its talisman of skunk skin. "Tie her in saddle like basket papoose. No like powwow when we sing burial chant."

Nell Brower clung with all the strength of her body to Reverdy.

It was the first time Reverdy had felt her embrace. He did not return it, but as he stood there indifferent, indomitable, it was the same as if the two were locked in the first and last bond of love. It was a moment that could stand for eternity. Plunk Reverdy felt that he had won his game against that damnable god of luck that had been hounding him.

"Go on, girl," he said quietly. "You go back to the town. You forget me."

"Forget you!" she cried. "After what you've done!"

"I've done nothing. I told the sheriff to bring me here. It's my fault—this whole raid. I'm paying the right price."

"Your fault!" she repeated. "I don't believe you, Plunk."

"Take her away!" Powderhorn ordered.

Two of the braves tore the girl from her lover. Two others led Reverdy off.

The sheriff was the last to leave the scene of the powwow.

He watched his men taking the girl down the trail; he watched John Powderhorn walking proud but moody toward the paling of stakes where his nephew was to be buried.

He watched the breeds and braves taking the condemned man over to where the funeral fires were sending up skeins of smoke into the thin darkening twilight.

Sheriff Hornuff had wanted to shake Plunk Reverdy's hand. He had wanted to say something—something in the way of thanks for this confession of his which had saved Sheriff Hornuff's people. But what could he say to a hoss thief?

He sat in his saddle for a brief moment, chewing at his mustache. Yes—it may be hard to believe, but that mustache had silvered during the last day and night. He was saying to himself:

"I'd like to have told the boy that I wisht he'd cleared himself of bein' a coward afore dyin' thisaway. If he'd only had time to find that thar hoss with the stars onto its face! Then this here death would be a good death—and we'd remember Plunk!"

He turned to go—with something of a sigh of relief. "Well, I reckon bein' he's just turned out a hoss thief we won't none of us figure that he gave up his life—in a manner of speaking—as a sacrifice."

They could see little of Desolation now—for the desert twilight lasted only a few moments. They saw merely the dark shoulder of the sierra, and the burial fires gleaming like the eyes of wolves.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

The Pony Express Rider

By EARL C. McCAIN

A RANGY sorrel, dead tired from the long, hundred-mile trip from the Mormon settlements along the Great Salt Lake, lifted his ears sharply as he stumbled down from the rim of the desert and caught the smell of water. In a little depression among the blistering rocks and sand-dunes nestled a group of buildings: small, yet marking Ross's Post, the most important place on the Pony Express route between Salt Lake and Placerville.

The rider, quick to catch the awakened interest of his horse, straightened in the saddle. Slight though it was, the movement showed the buoyancy of youth; natural enough, since Dixie Rollins was only five days past twenty-one. Ross's Post was his destination and his dark eyes brightened as the horse quickened its step.

The trading post, two stories in height and housing a bar along one side, was the most important building in the settlement. It was flanked by several small shacks, sparingly built of boards.

Across the street from the trading post stood a small, squat building, with a big corral at one side. This was the Pony Express change station, and it was in front of it that Dixie halted the sorrel and slid to the ground.

Inside the office a tall, thin-faced man sat at a rough table, glancing over some papers as he talked to another man whose clothes stamped him as the station keeper. It was to the man at the table that Dixie directed his question:

"You're Jim Slade, the superintendent?"

Slade nodded, meanwhile searching Dixie's face with his keen, appraising glance. Slade was known as a real power in the Pony Express, with the ability to ride as hard and shoot as straight as any man under his direction. He possessed an uncanny ability at judging men; something that made Dixie a bit nervous as he went on:

"I rode down to try and get on as a Pony Express rider."

"Can you handle a horse and gun?" Slade asked sharply, letting his gaze wander to the new Colt that swung at Dixie's side.

"As for the first part of your question, I'm from Kentucky," Dixie answered smiling. "With a gun, I'm only fair."

Slade hesitated an instant, then said: "You're pretty young to be tackling work as dangerous as the Pony Express."

"I know, but I'd like a chance to make good at it. I have a brother, Clint Rollins, riding for you, and I'd like to show him that I can hold a man's job."

A change of expression flitted across Slade's keen face.

"So you're Clint Rollins's brother. It seems to me I've heard something about you."

"Good or bad news?" Dixie inquired, forcing his eyes to meet Slade's across the table.

"Not the best," Slade made reply, "but we'll pass that. In the Pony Express, we don't care so much about what a man has done as what he'll be in the future. When we hire a man he starts with a clean page, and it's up to him to write his own record on it by the way he conducts himself."

Dixie merely waited, and Slade, after a moment, went on:

"I guess I can use you, Rollins, because we're short a man between here and Salt Lake. I'll start you on the Red Pillar run, which is one of the easiest we have. You relieve the eastbound rider here each afternoon, ride twelve miles north to the last station you passed coming down, lay over there at night and come back with the westbound mail in the morning. It's what we call a 'turn around,' because you have to ride both ways each day, but you only make twenty-four miles. Most of the riders on the straight runs have to do forty or fifty miles a day."

Slade turned slightly toward the station keeper and continued:

"Potter here will have a horse ready for you when the mail gets in from the White Rock station to-morrow afternoon. That will give you a chance to rest to-night and to visit with Clint, who ought to be coming in from the south pretty soon now. If you're anything like your brother, you won't have any trouble making good. Clint is one of the best riders we have, and a man all the way through."

"Thank you, Mr. Slade," Dixie said, meaning it both for the tribute of praise to his brother and the job Slade had given him.

From the station, he led his horse into the Pony Express corral after he had told Potter that he wanted to use the animal part of the time on his run, then walked across the street to the post. He had bought a cigar at the bar and was just lighting it when a shout from across the street drew his attention. Several men who were loitering in the room moved toward the door and Dixie followed.

Up from the south, where the desert sloped away toward the horizon, came a fast-moving rider, trailed by the dust-clouds kicked up by his horse's hoofs. In front of the change station Potter had tightened the cinch on a long-legged bay and a wiry-looking little man swung to the saddle and trotted out to meet the other man.

As the incoming rider came closer and closer the man on the bay swung his horse back toward the station and broke into a gallop. By the time the horses were running neck and neck Dixie could recognize Clint, who raised himself in one stirrup, lifted the mochilla, or leather saddle-cover containing the mail-pouch, and passed it to the other man.

A moment and the bay was racing past the station, with never a halting of the mail-bag in the change of riders. Dixie had seen Pony Express riders before, but never one of those whirlwind changes, and it thrilled him to think that to-morrow he would be riding from Ross's Post on that same duty. He turned as Clint's horse, already slowing, neared the station.

With an ease that came from long experience Clint slid gracefully from the saddle in front of the corral gate and turned his horse over to Potter. His face and clothing were covered with fine, white dust. He was slapping this from his trousers with his wide-brimmed hat when Dixie, touching his arm, said:

"Hello, old timer!"

Clint turned quickly, evidently surprised by the familiarity of the voice. He was no heavier than when Dixie had last seen him, seven years previous, but somehow, he looked different. His face was leaner and stronger, with a certain hardness that had not been there before.

He took Dixie's outstretched hand, but it seemed as if there was a lack of warmth in his voice as he asked:

"What the devil are you doing here?"

"I'm going to work for the Pony Express. Mr. Slade has already given me a job riding between here and Red Pillar."

There was a touch of pride in Dixie's voice as he made the announcement, but not in Clint's reception of it. Clint spent a moment in thought, then ignored Dixie's remark as he said:

"I thought you were in California?"

"I was, until a few months ago."

There followed an awkward pause, broken by Dixie asking:

"What's troubling you, anyway, Clint? I know there's something wrong from the way you act."

"There is," Clint said evenly, and his blue eyes, hard as steel, met Dixie's. "I've heard you were mixed up in a mine robbery out in Sacramento and had to skip out to save your hide. I think you've got lots of nerve, trailing me here and asking Slade for a job, when you've got that kind of a reputation."

The fighting blood of the South came leaping to Dixie's head at Clint's words, but he checked the angry reply that came to his mind. Clint was his brother—an older brother, who, in former years, had always led him—and besides, there was something in what Clint had said.

But Clint's assumption that he was guilty before he had had a chance to explain rankled him, and he showed it in his reply.

"I'm not saying that I haven't done some things I wish I hadn't, Clint, but fortunately for me, Slade's a little more generous than you are. I did tell him I was your brother, because I was a little proud of what he said about you. But after all, I got the chance I asked for, and I'm going to show him and you, too, that I can make good."

Clint said nothing to that, and Dixie, knowing that he probably wouldn't, turned sharply and walked back to the trading post. He knew that Clint would have to lay over in Ross's Post, and he had intended to share his brother's room. But Clint's attitude had made that impossible, so he walked into the office of the trading post.

A tall, gray-haired man came forward and Dixie stated his business, explaining that he was to begin work as a Pony Express rider the next day. The tall man was old Dick Ross, founder of the post and friend to white man and Indian there for twenty years. When Dixie gave his name, Ross inquired:

"Any kin to Clint Rollins? He stays here every other night."

"I'm his brother, but I'd like a separate room if you have it."

Ross nodded and turned to a doorway at the side of the office. He spoke to some one in the adjoining room, and a girl came to the door. Her eyes, black and sparkling, seemed to find something of interest in Dixie as Ross said:

"This is my daughter, Mildred, Mr. Rollins. She looks after the boarding end of the business while I handle the trading post and the bar." Then to her: "Mr. Rollins is Clint's brother, and he's going to stay with us to-night."

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Rollins," the girl stated, emphasizing it with a smile that brought out all the beauty of her pretty little face. "I know your brother quite well, and I hope we shall become as good friends as Clint and I have always been."

"I'm your friend already," Dixie replied, and though he smiled as he said it, he knew that he had never made a truer statement.

The girl was small, with the lithe grace of an Indian in her movements. Her manner of meeting him showed courage and sincerity, and back of his instant liking for her was the age-old appeal of youth to youth.

A call from the bar took Ross away from them and Dixie spent a few minutes chatting with the girl. She told him they had

supper at six, then directed him to his room and disappeared toward the rear of the building.

As he climbed the stairs he heard the sound of a horse stopping in front of the bar, but he reached his window too late to see the rider.

There was a home-made rocker in the room and Dixie pulled this over to the window, lighting a cigarette as he sat thinking of the meeting with Clint. He felt a keen resentment at his brother's treatment, but he knew that he might have expected this if Clint had heard of the trouble he had been in at Sacramento.

Brothers though they were, there was a vast difference in the two men. Clint had always been stern and strong—a man at eighteen with rigid ideas of right and wrong. Their mother had come from Virginia, and from her Dixie had inherited his brown eyes and his tolerance and sympathy for others. He believed that any man, like a picture, deserved the best light, and it cut him that Clint, instead of showing him sympathy, had treated him like an outlaw.

An hour or so had slipped by when the girl called Dixie from the foot of the stairway and he went down to the dining room. Supper was being served on one long table, and he found Clint, Slade, Ross and several other men seated. Dixie took the chair opposite Clint, but while both joined in the general conversation, neither directly addressed the other.

There was one pleasant feature of the meal for Dixie. The girl waited on the table and engaged in conversation with every one present. But to Dixie it seemed that she showed him a bit of favoritism. Twice he glanced up to find her dark eyes studying him, and each time he was rewarded with a smile.

When supper was finished, Dixie, like all the other men except Clint and Slade, strolled into the barroom. He was standing at the bar, talking to Ross, who had relieved the bartender, when he heard his name called. He turned to face Jack Settes, a man he had known in California and the one person he had dreaded to meet.

Settes had the reputation of being one of the deadliest gunmen in the West, with a gun-trick that had cost many an unsuspecting man his life. The butts of two big guns protruded from his belt.

He was a big man physically, with a commanding personality to match his giant frame, and by the merest inclination of his head he motioned Dixie aside.

"I reckon you're a mite surprised to see me here, but I had business with you," Settes began, when they were some distance from the bar. "I heard in Salt Lake that you had headed this way to join the Pony Express, so I rode down to see you."

"What for?" Dixie asked, wondering if Settes's appearance in Ross's post was the signal for another battle with his past.

Settes, usually deliberate, took his time about replying. When he spoke again, his voice had been lowered almost to a whisper.

"It's about that affair at Sacramento. I reckon you knew that Tom Lakeman died after the robbery?"

Dixie nodded, and Settes, after glancing around went on:

"Lakeman thought you had a hand in the robbery and told the Vigilantes, so you were wise in making your get-away when you did. But when the sheriff learned that Old Age Hardy, a teamster, had quarreled with Lakeman that day and found Hardy hanging around the mine after the robbery, he arrested Hardy for the shooting.

"Of course, you and I know that Hardy never shot Lakeman, and that he didn't have anything to do with the robbery. But the sheriff at Sacramento was anxious to show that his office could maintain law and order without the help of the Vigilantes, so he bent all his efforts to convicting Hardy. He succeeded, and Hardy is to be hung at Sacramento on the twenty-fifth of this month, which lets you and me out, so far as the murder is concerned."

"You know I had nothing to do with it, anyway," Dixie stated.

"I know it, yes; but a lot of people think you did, and that's what I wanted to see you about. After the robbery the men who were with me at that time scattered, and Pete Crosby and Ed Dickson drifted to St. Louis. They got caught trying to rob a store there and Pete was shot through the stomach. Before he cashed in he got ten-

der-hearted about Old Age being hung for something he didn't do, so he made a statement to the St. Louis officers.

"Dickson wrote me at Salt Lake, saying that Crosby's statement, all properly witnessed by the St. Louis officials, is being rushed to Sacramento over the Pony Express to save Hardy's life. It left there on the second, so it ought to be here on the tenth. You'll be working as a Pony Express rider. I want you to grab that letter when it comes through and turn it over to me."

"But what will happen to Hardy if I do?"

"He'll most likely hang, but that's the best thing that can happen for you and me," Settes answered calmly. "You see, Crosby always figgered that you were hooked up with me in that robbery, because he had seen us together several times. His letter probably mentions us both, so it's a matter of protecting yourself as well as me that you get that letter."

Dixie was debating his answer to Settes, but he was saved a decision at the moment. The door leading from the office had opened and Clint stood at the end of the bar, quietly watching Settes and his brother.

For the first time since his arrival in Ross's Post, Dixie felt ill at ease under Clint's scrutiny. He evaded the issue with Settes by promising to see him later and walked across to where Clint stood.

"Who is that fellow?" Clint wanted to know, indicating Settes.

"A man I knew in California. Why?" Clint's dominating manner nettled Dixie, and his own attitude became half-belligerent.

"He looks like a bandit to me," Clint replied, "and you'd better be careful who you're seen with if you want to hold a job in the Pony Express. What does he want around here, anyway?"

"Perhaps you'd better ask him," Dixie answered angrily. "Only, I'd better tell you that he has the reputation of being the best revolver shot in California."

"I don't give a damn about that. It's *your* reputation I'm worrying about. The reason I came back here was to offer to share my room with you to-night."

"I don't want to share your room, since you insist on looking upon me as an outlaw," Dixie snapped, and deciding that was a good thing to let Clint think about, he strode from the barroom.

Back in his own quarters Dixie felt a little sorry for the clash with Clint. Had he been less tolerant, he might have blamed Clint indirectly for his trouble.

At twenty, Clint had quarreled with their father and left home to seek his fortune in the west. His letters were pages of romance to Dixie, then hardly more than a boy, and when Clint, a few years later, had written for Dixie to join him in California, the younger brother had eagerly accepted.

The long trip by slow-moving wagon-train had taken months, and by the time Dixie had arrived in Sacramento, Fortune had called Clint elsewhere. Thrown upon his own resources in a strange land, and too proud to let his parents know of his predicament, Dixie had fallen into the company of Settes, who had befriended him.

Dixie had finally got employment in a prosperous mine as a bookkeeper, when Settes, presuming on their friendship, had tried to get him to participate in a robbery of the place. Dixie had refused, but hesitated to report the intended robbery to his employers because of knowing Settes.

The mine safe held a fair fortune in gold that was awaiting shipment, and Dixie, thinking that he might be able to avert any robbery, had gone back to the office that night to make certain the safe was locked. He had been talking to Tom Lakeman, the night watchman, when Settes and several companions made their appearance, and in the fight that followed, fatally wounded Lakeman.

The fact that none of the outlaws had fired at Dixie had led Lakeman to believe that Dixie had been a party to the robbery, and he had expressed this opinion to a member of the Vigilantes. Hearing that these stern but often misguided advocates of law and order were searching for him, Dixie had made a hurried escape.

Since then, he had traveled from place to place, realizing that he was under a cloud that warranted suspicion, yet afraid to return and try to establish his innocence. He

had known nothing of Hardy's arrest and conviction until his meeting with Settes, and that had come almost at the moment when he had been given a man's chance by Jim Slade.

Dixie was still thinking of the case when he fell asleep that night, and by the time he went down for breakfast, Clint had ridden away with the westbound mail. Because he had slept so late, Dixie found no one else in the dining room except Mildred Ross, and he enjoyed quite a talk with her as he ate.

After that, he spent awhile with Ross and Potter, killing time until noon. In the early afternoon, Slade called him to the office and gave him a few final instructions about his work and the route to follow.

It was nearly four o'clock when Dixie, watching from the door of the change station, noticed a moving speck on the desert. A few minutes more and it took the form of a horse and rider; the Pony Express rider from White Rock. Mounted on a trim little roan and with a Spencer carbine in his saddle-holster, Dixie rode out as he had seen the other man do the day before.

The little roan, trained in the work, swung around of her own accord as the other horse drew near. The other rider was small and lean, with a face tanned by sun and wind until it resembled old leather. He grinned as he passed over the mochilla and said:

"New man, eh? Well, luck to you, Buddy, but you've sure picked out a hard way to make a living."

"I've had it that way before," Dixie called back, placing the mochilla on his saddle.

As the fleet little roan raced past the station, Dixie noticed Jim Slade watching him, and he also caught a glimpse of Mildred at the door of the trading post. It thrilled him to think that the man who had trusted him and a girl who had already found a place in his heart were watching him as he started on his first run as a Pony Express rider, both expecting him to make good.

Dixie knew that Slade had favored him by starting him on the Red Pillar run. The mail pouches, starting each day at Sacramento and St. Joseph, Missouri, met at regular intervals throughout the two thousand mile route. Here and there the meeting of the mails at points where stations were far apart made it necessary to insert a "turn around" run; short, but necessary to keep the mail moving.

Slade had said there was little danger on the Red Pillar run, but Dixie knew that didn't apply to other runs. South of Ross's Post, the Piutes were on the warpath, and half a dozen Pony Express riders had paid for their bravery with their lives.

To the north, peace held over the land of the Mormons, but beyond that, along the Sweetwater and the Platte, the riders were in constant danger, and Dixie felt a warm admiration for his brother riders as he settled down to a steady gallop, with only the thud of the pony's hoofs and the creak of saddle-leather to interrupt the silence.

The Red Pillar route for the most part was good, well-marked by the hoofs of the Pony Express horses as it stretched northward over blistering white sand and through desolate rocks and giant cactus. Dixie made good time, and he had been in the saddle only a little more than an hour when he came in sight of the Red Pillar station, so named because it stood at the base of a towering red cliff.

Dixie turned the mochilla over to his relief rider, who sped away on a sixty-mile night ride, then slowed up in front of the little station.

There was only one man at Red Pillar; a cheerful little Frenchman by the name of Le Ranier. He helped Dixie put away his horse, then returned to his work of cooking supper on the little box stove that stood at one end of the cabin.

Le Ranier had formerly been a trapper for the Hudson Bay Company in the far north and he had the knack of telling tales. It was almost midnight when the two men finally crawled into their bunks.

Daylight was just tinting the eastern sky when Le Ranier called Dixie. The Pony Express rider from the north was due there about five, and Dixie saddled his horse while the Frenchman finished getting breakfast.

They had eaten and Dixie was sitting in the door of the station, smoking a cigarette,

when a horse came loping through the rocky defile to the north. A moment more and Dixie was in the saddle and riding out from the station.

"There's some mail for Ross's Post, sent down from Salt Lake," the other rider stated, handing over a packet of letters with the mochilla.

Dixie waved his hand to Le Ranier as he passed, then swept out upon the desert, glimpsing an occasional coyote as he rode.

A few miles from Ross's Post the trail passed through a group of bleak, sandstone buttes, similar to those at Red Pillar. As Dixie galloped along the sandy path, he heard the sound of a horse approaching. Instantly he thought of Settes, but when the other horse rounded a high rock, he recognized the lean figure of Jim Slade, bound for Salt Lake.

The superintendent lifted his arm as a signal to halt and Dixie reined up alongside.

"Make it all right?" Slade inquired tersely.

"Fine."

"I figured you would when I hired you," Slade said, more slowly. "I had a talk with Clint the other night, after he saw you talking to that fellow in the barroom. Clint was right worried about you, but I told him all you needed was a chance to make good. I'm considered lucky in picking out men."

"Whether you're lucky or not, you sure know how to get at the best that's in a man," Dixie rejoined with feeling. "I'm going to do my best not to disappoint you." And when Slade had said "So long" and ridden on, Dixie knew that he would keep that promise, even though it meant an actual clash with Jack Settes.

That it meant trouble, he knew only too well. There was plenty of iron in Settes's massive frame; something that made all the more terrifying the lightning quickness of his gun trick. He hadn't bothered to ask Dixie to get that letter; simply demanded it, and he was accustomed to getting what he demanded.

Dixie had one advantage in facing Settes. He knew of his gun trick; that sudden sideways fall of Settes's big body, while his right hand, meeting a lurching holster, held a belching gun by the time his body struck the ground. Settes wore two guns, but it was his right that always did the killing, and so well did it perform that the left was never called into play.

As he had told Slade, Dixie was only fair with a gun; fairly accurate and fairly fast. He knew that in the matter of drawing he had no chance with Settes. But in thinking of that gun trick, he had hit upon what might prove a counter for it, and passing a cactus that threw its shadow at the right angle, he jerked out his gun and fired a shot that kicked up the dust in the center of the shadow.

His first clash with Settes came sooner than he expected; almost by the time he reached Ross's Post. He had turned over the mochilla and was almost at the door of the trading post when Settes, coming from the office, met him.

"What the hell's troubling that brother of yours?" he asked.

"I don't know. Why?" Dixie countered.

"He came into the barroom the other night and tied into me. Gave me to understand that I was to lay off you, or I'd have him to settle with. I reckon you hadn't told him who I am."

"On the contrary, I did tell him, with a little extra boost for you thrown in for good measure," Dixie replied, conscious of a sudden joy in his heart that Clint, after all, had tried to help him. "But a little thing like a reputation doesn't bother Clint. He figgers he's pretty nifty with a gun himself."

"He'll need to be if he tries to interfere with me again. That letter from Crosby will be in the mail to-morrow. I didn't want any trouble with anybody until after I get it, but after that, he can get action with me any time he wants it."

"I guess it's about time I put you right about that letter," Dixie said evenly. "I've been thinking about that ever since we talked the other night. I don't know whether I can clear myself on that case or not, considering the company they thought I was in and that I ran away as I did. But I'd rather risk a trial than let an innocent man be hung. I'm going to carry the letter through."

"If you do, you won't need to worry about standing trial," Settes said deliberately, though his eyes were like pinpoints as he met Dixie's quiet gaze. "I came here for that letter, and I'm going to have it, whether you get chicken-hearted or not." And as if further words were unnecessary, he turned down the street.

Dixie had half turned, intending to follow Settes, when a sound caused him to glance up. In the doorway stood Mildred, and her expression told him that she had heard all that had been said.

Instead of following Settes, he entered the office, and the girl, with an eagerness that gladdened his heart asked:

"What does all this mean, Dixie; about you having to stand trial unless you get a letter from the mail?"

"It's a letter concerning a robbery and murder in California that Settes wants. He expected me to take it out of the mail, but you heard what I said to him."

She nodded, then came another question: "How does he know that the letter will come through to-morrow?"

"He got a letter from a man in St. Louis, telling him when it was to start. It's easy to figure when it will be here, because the Pony Express always makes its regular time."

There was a pause, then Mildred said: "I've noticed that you and Clint aren't very friendly. That you took separate rooms the other night and that you seldom speak to each other at the table. Is that because of this?"

"Yes, or rather because of Clint's attitude concerning it," he explained, somehow finding it easy to unburden his chief worry to this girl. "Clint had heard that I had been in some trouble, and he jumped to the conclusion that I was guilty without even giving me the chance to explain. Shall I explain my part in it to you?"

"You don't need to," she said quietly, with a look that said more. And after an instant, she asked: "Why is Settes so anxious to get this letter?"

"Because it implicates him. He was the leader of a gang that robbed a mine and shot a night watchman. He is willing that an innocent man should be hung for the murder, rather than that his connection with it should become known."

The girl started to ask another question, then checked it, and Dixie, thinking that it might concern his part in the affair, didn't urge her. Ross coming in a moment later, interrupted their conversation, and Dixie later drifted into the bar.

Dixie was to relieve Clint that afternoon, and he debated telling Clint of Settes's threat. But because Clint had cautioned him about Settes, and because, in his anger, he had told Clint that he could get along without his help he decided against that. He liked to stick with a decision, once he had made it, and when Clint rode in that afternoon, Dixie took the mochilla on the gallop and sped away on his run.

Thinking of the clash with Settes and his threat Dixie rode carefully, though he knew he was in no particular danger as long as he held to the open desert. As he neared the sandstone buttes, he checked his horse a bit.

There were a dozen trails through the buttes, but the one used by the Pony Express riders was the best. Tempering speed with caution, he turned into a trail that paralleled the one usually followed, but he rode through and on into Red Pillar without incident.

Le Ranier must have found him a little quiet that night because he was worried, but he said nothing of the trouble on his mind. In fact, he waved the Frenchman a cheerful good-by when he took the mail the next morning and galloped away to the south; over a trail that ordinarily safe, was now fraught with the gravest danger for him.

In the early morning, what life there was on the desert was out, and twice Dixie's hand slid to his holster as he glimpsed moving objects in the cactus. But they proved to be only coyotes. He knew that the buttes offered a thousand places from which he might be ambushed and like the day before, he turned into an old trail where the soft sand deadened the sounds of hoofs.

Halfway through the danger zone, Dixie stiffened suddenly. He had caught the swish of a horse's tail in a cluster of cactus beside the main trail. He slid from the

saddle, and, gun in hand, made his way forward on foot.

A little farther and he reached a jagged bowlder that overlooked the trail. Silently as a cougar stalking its prey, he made his way around its base, then suddenly flattened himself against the rock.

Fifty feet away and slightly below him, Settes lay behind a rock, watching the main trail with a cocked rifle in his hands.

For several minutes, Dixie stood there, wondering just what to do. Below him, Settes lay, waiting to shoot him down, the rifle being ample evidence of his intent. At that distance, he could drill Settes with ease, and yet he couldn't pull the trigger.

There was sand at the base of the rock, and Dixie stepped out upon it, in full view had Settes been looking. But Settes had his eyes glued to the trail, all unsuspecting the danger behind, until Dixie's voice, calm in spite of his excitement, called:

"Expecting me, Settes?"

Quick as a flash, Settes twisted about, the latter half of his gun trick. But that trick had always been practiced with a six-gun, and he now held a rifle.

Dixie let him get the weapon almost to his shoulder, then he fired as he had been firing at the shadows, and Settes's great body slowly relaxed onto the sand.

Dixie had started forward, but he suddenly stopped, then moved back behind the rock. From the main trail came the sound of horses and Clint, with a rifle in his hand, raced into view. Behind him came Mildred, and both halted as Dixie stepped out into sight.

"What happened?" Clint asked, trying to hide the excitement in his voice as he leaped from the saddle and ran to Dixie.

"Settes tried to ambush me," and Dixie pointed to the object that told the rest of the story.

"Thank God, you got him first," Clint said fervently. "I got here as soon as I could after Mildred told me of seeing Settes leave the post with a rifle, but I was afraid I would be too late. Maybe you know how I felt, after the way I've treated you. I didn't understand, until Mildred told me what she had heard Settes say yesterday, and what she found in that letter."

"What letter?"

"A letter that Settes had received from a man named Dickson. It showed that Settes killed a man in Sacramento, for which another man was to be hung. A pal of his had confessed, and he wanted to get this man's statement from the mail to save himself. Mildred couldn't get the letter until after Settes left his room."

The girl was coming up from the trail, and Dixie remarked:

"So it was Mildred who saw Settes leave and got that letter. I wonder why she did that?"

"Because she wanted to prove your innocence, and she wanted to do that because she loves you. She's a good girl, Dixie, and there's no reason why you can't ask her to be your wife." And later, as Clint, with the mochilla that contained Crosby's letter, rode away to the south, Dixie again returned to his boyhood habit of following Clint's advice.

THE END

IF I WERE A PAINTER

IF I were a painter, I'd borrow
The crimsonest blossoms that grow,
And touch up the dull lips of sorrow,
And redden pale cheeks to a glow;
I'd copper the hair that is grayest,
And smooth off the wrinkles of years—
I'd change faded things to the gayest,
And paint out the very last tears.

Jane Burr.

A Blaze of Glory

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "The Gleaming Blade," "Nothing But Money," etc.

CHAPTER XV.

FACE TO FACE WITH ROSE.

THEY left me alone with my thoughts, which were not pleasant ones. The fact that I had a release from Helma in my pocket was the only mitigating circumstance in the whole muddle. What a fool I had made of myself! Yet no regular man could have walked coolly away from a burglary in process of operation, without interfering. It was just my miserable fortune in everything which concerned Rose Abbott.

I marshaled the facts as Abbott had stated them and came to realize that my only escape from being put in jail as a burglar was to make a clean breast of everything, backing it up by the paper I had persuaded Helma to sign and by her own confession, which should not be difficult to procure.

My standing in the collegiate world would convince Abbott that I wouldn't stoop to burglary. However, before I told the whole absurd story I would give Miss Rose Abbott a chance to take some action. That I might expect a visit from her pretty soon I was willing to bet.

They had not undressed me when they had put me to bed—merely removed my coat and shoes and slit my shirt sleeve to bandage the wound. I had regained most of my strength, thanks to the breakfast, and, not wishing to have her find me in bed, I managed to rise and slip into my coat, which was a bit uncomfortable in the left shoulder, due to the bandage. An hour passed, which caused my confidence in her appearance to wane, but then the key turned in the lock, and she appeared, followed by Harry Sears, one of the town's two policemen.

Rose wore a blue morning suit, and

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her lovely face was marred by an expression which was half mocking, half malicious. I rose when she entered and bowed coldly.

"You needn't wait, Mr. Sears," she said. "Just close the door and stand outside. I am not in the least afraid of this person."

"There ain't no harm in William Alden," he said with a friendly grin at me, after which he followed instructions.

"Well," said Rose, coolly taking the one chair in the room and sitting so the light fell upon my face, leaving hers in the shadow. "Well, Mr. William Alden, you seem to have added burglary to your accomplishments of making touchdowns and driving automobiles for hire."

"If you came here to gloat, Miss Abbott," I said bitterly, "I will be obliged if you will do your gloating somewhere else."

"Gloat?" she queried in a tone of surprise. "I am so indifferent to you that you awaken no emotions of any sort in me."

"That's not true. You hate me."

A flash of some real feeling crossed her face, but was gone in an instant. "Hate you? You flatter yourself."

"You know perfectly well that I am not a burglar—that I saved your father from being robbed and perhaps injured by scaring away the robbers. If you had any proper feelings you would be grateful to me. Instead you permit your father to think I was one of the burglars and come into my prison cell to mock me. It is just in line with the way you have always treated me."

Rose looked a little concerned, and hesitated for a second.

"You seem to think I should know something about your presence here. How do I know that you are not one of the burglars?"

I looked at her scornfully, and she had the decency to color.

"Answer yes or no. Am I a burglar?"

"I don't suppose so," she admitted.

"Don't you feel ashamed of yourself for not telling your father your opinion at once?"

"I didn't come here to be questioned by you."

"Then why did you come?"

"I wanted to see what you had to say for yourself."

"Just idle curiosity? I have nothing to say.

"Are you going to let them take you to the jail?" she asked uneasily.

"Certainly."

She fidgeted a bit and twisted her handkerchief, which she held in her lap, into a ball.

"If you will explain to my father what you were doing in the grounds, perhaps it won't be necessary."

"Do you want me to tell him I came to see you?"

Rose sprang to her feet and two pink spots came into her cheeks. "That isn't true!"

"I came to see you."

"You wouldn't dare, after Marblehead."

"Because you horsewhipped me, or because I kissed you?"

"Oh," she breathed. "Nothing so awful ever happened to me in my life."

"As a matter of fact, I came to see Helma."

"Oh, your sweetheart! How dear of you!"

"I may add that she has confessed everything—everything, do you understand?"

"I don't see what any confession of Helma's has to do with me. Why do you look at me like that?"

"Miss Abbott, everything else you did to me I could forgive, but to have you egg on that unfortunate girl to sue me for breach of promise is something that is too dreadful ever to forgive."

"How dare you?" she demanded in apparent indignation. "How do you presume to suppose I would interfere in the love affairs of my servants?"

"You know perfectly well that you never considered me as a servant; you know who I am and what I am, and I have complete evidence that you put Helma up to this. You needn't deny it; she has admitted it. Why did you do it?"

"Well," said Rose, dropping her pose, "I thought you were altogether too set up at Marblehead, for a chauffeur, and you needed taking down a peg. Of course it

never would have gone further than the summons."

"That's all I wanted to know. It's what I came here to find out. I may be a bit slow, but I understand psychology enough to know what your entire attitude toward me really means."

"And what does it mean?" she demanded, with narrowing eyes.

"That you are head over heels in love with me."

"Burglar," said Rose in an icy tone which knocked all the confidence out of me, "you are as crazy as a loon. You are so dangerous that I can't stay here another minute. I'll have you know that I am engaged to be married to Mr. G. Burton Anderson."

I sank on the bed, suddenly, as weak as a kitten and as weary as an old man. So my diagnosis was entirely wrong; I was an inflated, vainglorious fool.

"At least," she added, "I am practically engaged to him; he has asked me to marry him."

My spirits rose again; I might not be wrong after all; the game was still on.

"You came into the library last night," I said slowly, "in time to see him take advantage of the fact that I was wounded and that he was covering me with a gun, to strike me full in the face, knocking me to the floor."

An expression came into her face that I hadn't seen for a long time.

"Yes," she admitted. "I saw that. It was brutal."

"You are going to marry a brute like that?"

"Well, I don't know that I'll really marry him. My father wants me to."

"Why have you always persecuted me? Why do you hate me so you were willing to strike me with a whip?"

"I didn't want to do that. You goaded me into it. How dared you kiss me?"

"Just the same, you did hate me. What had I ever done to you?"

Rose considered. In the last few minutes our antagonism seemed to have vanished; only a truce, perhaps.

"You always exasperated me," she admitted. "You got on my nerves somehow. You couldn't even save my life without being obnoxious about it."

"Yet one night you were sweet to me. Do you remember when you wanted me to take you boating instead of Helma?" That was an unfortunate remark.

"You are insufferable," she declared. "I just wanted to find out if you would dare to take advantage of your position as my chauffeur. If you had I would have put you in your place."

"So I surmised. That's why I wouldn't take you."

Rose stood up again. "You came here as a chauffeur, laughing in your sleeve at us because you knew you were a football hero, and it struck you as smart to pretend to be a stupid native. You made fools of us. It was an outrage."

I took a step toward her. "Look here, Rose, can't we let bygones be bygones, and start afresh as friends?"

"How dare you call me Rose?" demanded this exasperating girl. "Who ever gave you permission to call me by my first name? No, don't say a word—I'm going."

"All right," I said sullenly. "Tell them to take me to jail."

"No," she said. "I'll go to father, tell him who you are, and all about Helma. That explains your presence in the grounds. He'll be very grateful to you and apologize for treating you as a thief."

"May I ask you one question?"

"Well?"

"Speaking of thieves, do you still think I defrauded your father?"

"I suppose not," she admitted. "He told me afterward it was your own land you sold him, so perhaps you had a right to demand all you could get for it."

"I'm glad you understand that. Now, can't we be friends?"

"No," she flashed. "When you leave here I don't want ever to see you again. Does your shoulder hurt much?"

"It's of no consequence."

She opened the door and went away without another word. I had a little time to think it over, and it seemed to me that it was a very satisfactory interview on the whole. I had accused her of being in love with me, and she hadn't burned me up.

It was evident that she had thought about me, and I didn't think she really intended to marry Anderson—that was just rebuttal of my charge that she cared for me. Yes, it looked as though things were coming along all right, despite her declaration she never intended to see me again.

CHAPTER XVI.

ESCAPE FROM HYDEPORT.

HOWEVER, the more I thought about the meeting, the more my satisfaction oozed away, because it didn't seem to have reached any conclusion. Despite the comparative lack of rancor with which she had borne the charge that she was in love with her former chauffeur, she had departed with a warning that I was never to see her again. Of course she was going to get me free of the burglar charge, and she had admitted that she had induced Helma to bring her ridiculous suit to get even with me for my behavior at Marblehead, and confessed that she didn't really think I had cheated her father.

But if I had made such progress, why had I not made more? She had departed in a resentful mood. I was going to be released and shipped away. All our meetings had ended with an air of eternal finality, our acquaintance was being continually discontinued. When two people loved each other, why was it so difficult for them to get along together?

When two people loved each other! Good Lord, that was the trouble. With insane fatuity I had informed Rose that she was in love with me, and I had forgotten completely to tell her that I was in love with her.

Lacking in intelligence as I was at twenty-four, I did know that a man ought to confess his love first, and he should never assume that a girl was fond of him before he had told the state of his own affections and asked her reactions to them.

I had been under the delusion that I was making love to Rose, when all I had been doing was to insult her by declaring that she was infatuated with me. Naturally she would deny it with indignation, try in every way to convince me that I was mistaken, even to the extent of marrying some one else. She had threatened to accept Anderson. I tried to put myself in her place.

What had I ever said to Rose to indicate the state of my affections? Nothing. From the first moment we met my tongue had been as sharp as hers. When I left the Abbotts my last words were a bitter summary of her character, which I didn't really mean, of course. But how could she know that?

At Marblehead, when I had a chance to make good if I had had any tact, I had infuriated her until she wanted to beat me, and did it with a whip. Anyway, I had kissed her.

And now I had baldly accused her of loving me, when she had every reason to suppose that my feeling toward her was active dislike. By so doing I had made the breach between us wider than ever. Well, if I ever got another chance I would try different tactics.

No matter what she said or how she behaved, I would make an honest and humble avowal of affection, so she should know exactly where I stood, whether she was inclined to favor me or not. Supposing I didn't get another chance? But I believed that if Rose loved me, and I suspected that she did, she would see to that.

It takes a long time to set down these rather incoherent reflections, but probably half an hour had not elapsed from the moment of Rose's departure until Mr. Abbott entered.

His manner was self-explanatory, so I knew that Rose had done her duty.

"My dear Alden," he said, "I want to apologize to you in the most sincere manner possible for the great injustice I have done you. My daughter has explained who you really are and why you came to Hydeport this time. I understand everything perfectly, and far from blaming you for entering my grounds, I am grateful. If it hadn't been for you I might have been killed, and I certainly should have been robbed of a large sum of money."

I took his extended hand with a smile of satisfaction.

"Under the same circumstances, Mr. Abbott, I should have taken the same course that you did. I was quite aware that my story sounded very fishy, and I was really ashamed to tell it, but it happened to be the only explanation there was."

"I couldn't understand an unarmed man tackling three robbers until I learned that you are actually Alden, the captain of the Harvard football team. Of course you would do a thing like that. I didn't see you play last season because my wife was sick, but I shall certainly be in the Yale Bowl this fall.

"I hope I shall," I said ruefully. "I wish you would get in a doctor and have him look at this shoulder. If that bullet put my arm out of commission I don't know how I'll face the coach."

"Most certainly. Higgins said it was only a scratch, but we can't take any chances. What a catastrophe for Harvard if you are seriously injured. I can't forgive myself for not having sent for a doctor at once."

"Why should you? What's a wounded burglar?"

"Please don't rub it in. I want you to be my guest for a few days."

"What would the servants say? Remember, I was one of them."

"Oh, pshaw, a chauffeur isn't like a house servant, and a boy who is going through college is excused if he takes up any sort of temporary work to help pay his tuition. I assure you that you must not let your former service here bother you. It doesn't bother me."

"I appreciate your attitude."

"I'm going to get rid of the minx who attempted to sue you. She's a pretty girl, but a Scandinavian, and they are apt to take a little flirting too seriously. Hey?" He gave me a dig in the ribs.

"I hope you won't do any such thing, and I am sure Miss Rose can tell you why you shouldn't discharge the girl if you ask her. But I cannot accept your hospitality for two reasons. One is that the coach expects me back for practice by to-morrow at the latest, and the other is that I couldn't stay under the same roof or sit at the same table with G. Burton Anderson."

"Come, come, my boy—you can't blame him for striking you last night. He came upon you standing over me with the door of the safe open, and naturally supposed you a dangerous burglar."

"He had me covered with a gun, knew that I was wounded, and while his pistol kept me defenseless and my hands were in the air he struck me in the face, knocking me down."

"Surely you do not state the case properly. I was not in full possession of my senses at the time and I don't know what was happening. I thought it was a brave thing of him to have come to my rescue."

"Ask Miss Abbott. She saw him strike me, and just before I fainted I heard her telling him what she thought of him for doing it."

"I shall. But you embarrass me. Mr. Anderson is my guest; he did me a service last night in bursting fearlessly into the room, and it was not his fault the real robbers had escaped. I can't ask him to leave."

"Not necessary. I am leaving. It's the best way out of it."

"Well, have it your own way. I again assure you of my gratitude."

"Thanks. Send along the doctor."

It was a relief to be cleared of the burglar charge, but now I began to worry about my arm. How long would it take to heal? You can't play football with a gunshot wound. I could have left the room, but I might encounter Anderson. I didn't want to see that fellow again until I had all my health and strength.

I knew by experience that I couldn't box with him, but if I could get him in a rough and tumble fight I thought I could give him more than he gave me. Men who box continually in a ring are handicapped by rules when they indulge in fistics outside an arena without a referee. They are accustomed to the three-minute rounds, with clinching forbidden, and certain blows barred, while they fight with padded gloves on their hands.

It seemed to me that I was so much harder than Anderson that I could wear him out of he didn't have his minute's rest in every three, and if I could break through

his guard and wrestle with him he wouldn't have a chance. Anyway, I yearned to try. He must know by this time that I was a college man and a pretty well-known football player. I wondered what he thought of that. I would have loved to see his face when he got the information. I hoped it was Rose who had told him.

In a comparatively few minutes Dr. Randall came up the driveway in his little car, and soon I heard his step on the stairs. He greeted me warmly when he entered, since he had known me for years.

"So you've been stopping bullets and been a hero," he began. "Let's have a look at that arm. H-m. Pretty good job of bandaging. I'll hurt you a bit pulling that gauze away. Here we are. That's nothing at all, William. I wish you'd seen some wounds I looked at in France."

"How long will it take to heal?"

"The bullet just skimmed your arm, cut the skin and let out a lot of blood; but it isn't deep."

"How soon can I play football?"

"Oh, that's what's worrying you! I did not know you played football."

"I'm only captain of the Harvard team."

"I didn't know that."

"As far as I have been able to find out, nobody in Hydeport reads the papers," I said wryly.

"I don't bother with the sporting news. Well, you can get back into scrimmage in a couple of weeks, no sooner."

"How about signal practice?"

"You can run through signals in three or four days, but don't do any tackling. Give it a chance to heal properly. And when you do go into scrimmage, wear a bandage over this for a couple of weeks, and a special pad."

I sighed with relief. No great harm done after all.

After the doctor had gone Higgins came to the door and knocked respectfully.

"Hello, Higgins," I called cheerily. "How's buttling?"

"Quite a change in your circumstances, sir, I'm given to understand."

"Not at all, Higgins, not at all. I'm not a bit better than when I was a chauffeur."

"May I ask why a gentleman like you should demean himself by going into service, sir?"

"I'll tell you. I am writing a book on the lower classes and had to get information at first hand."

"Oh, I see sir."

"What is the object of your visit," I asked, imitating his own pomposity.

"Shortly after you left, sir, a letter came for you. As you left no address I didn't know what to do with it, so I held it to be called for. Here it is."

"Oh, thanks, give it to me. And say, Higgins."

"Yes, sir."

"Do me a favor?"

"With pleasure, sir."

"Drop a little poison in G. Burton Anderson's soup."

Higgins looked shocked. "I couldn't do that, sir."

"Then will you drop a dish on his head when you are serving?"

"I never dropped a dish in my life, sir."

"You've dropped quite a few Aitches."

"Beg pardon."

"Never mind," I told him in disgust. What was the use of wasting comedy on a cockney?

I sat down with my letter, saw on the envelope the return address of Tom Gifford. So many things had happened in the past few weeks that I had forgotten that I had written him asking for the low down on G. Burton Anderson. The post mark showed that he had replied a week after my request had been received by him. With quickened interest I began the letter. It was as follows:

DEAR BILL:

So you have encountered G. Burton Anderson in your town. I happen to know a good deal about him, but if you suspect him of having committed a murder or stolen from an orphan or burned down a church I am afraid I cannot help you to convict him. I don't like the fellow, but so far as I know he hasn't committed any crimes. I believe him to be a four-flusher, because he lets it be understood that he is a man of great wealth while his father's estate was handled by my partner and amounted to less than fifty thousand dollars, which was divided equally between him and his sister.

He is supposed to be a writer, but the only stories of his that I have ever seen were in cheap sex magazines. I know I shouldn't read them, but one does such things, you know. Some of the boys think he gets more money out of *Town Tattle* reporting society scandals than through fiction. He hangs around with a lot of lively widows who have money and good connections, and I've seen him with chorus girls, but, as I've been with chorus girls myself, that proves nothing.

There is a rumor that he is engaged to a Miss Rose Abbott who summers up your way, and she is reputed to be the heiress to a big bag of dough. If you could meet the girl and cut him out you would be conferring a favor upon a lot of fellows in little old New York. I intend to get over to do a little coaching at Harvard in October and expect you to surpass your work of last season.

Yours for a victory over Yale.

TOM.

Since I hadn't really expected to find that Anderson was wanted for murder or arson, this letter was more satisfactory than I had dared hope. My rival was more or less of a bluff? Apparently he wasn't any better fixed financially that I was myself, and he didn't bear too savory a reputation among the fellows who knew him in New York.

Of course I couldn't take the letter to Mr. Abbott and have the man thrown out of the house, nor could I show it to Rose, since my prospects of saying a word for myself were very slight.

If I were to send a message to Rose that I would like to see her, I wondered if she would come. Curiosity might bring her. With this thought I rang the bell which brought Higgins hopping.

"Would you mind asking Miss Abbott if she could see me for a moment on an important matter?"

"Sorry, sir, but she has gone to the bathing beach with Mr. Anderson. They left fifteen minutes ago."

"It will do when she returns. On second thought, never mind. Don't bother to deliver the message."

She thought so little about me that she had left the house, immediately after arranging for my release, with the other fellow. She undoubtedly supposed I would hang around, waiting for a chance to get a word with her. I'd show her that she couldn't treat me like that. I would get out of Hydeport at once, be gone before she returned.

There was nothing, now, to stop me. My luggage was at the Inn in the village. All I had to do was put on my hat, if I could find it, and walk out. The latter was a difficulty because I had lost it somewhere in the grounds or in the house last night. No matter, I could pick up a cap in the village. I would get away immediately.

Without saying a word to anyone I opened my door, went down stairs and went out into the grounds. Just as I descended the steps Helma appeared at the front door.

"Where are you going, Mr. Alden?" she asked rather timidly.

"Hello, vampire," I said with a grin. "Please give my regards to Mr. Abbott, Mrs. Abbott," whom, by the way, I had not seen at any time during the excitement "and Miss Abbott. Also to Mr. Anderson. Please tell them all I thank them for their hospitality. I don't blame you, Helma, for serving me that summons. How much did she give you?"

"She gave me fifty dollars for myself and to pay the lawyer. He only charged ten dollars," said Helma. "I hope you ain't mad, because I didn't want to do it. Miss Rose said it was a wonderful joke. I don't understand your American jokes."

"You don't lose much, in this case."

"I'm sure Mr. Abbott will send you to town in a car," she called after me as I started away. "You are hurt, Mr. Alden."

"I don't want to be beholden to him. I'll walk. My arm doesn't hurt me at all."

I found the walk a bit long, despite my bravado, and I was glad to rest half an hour at the Inn before I made the noon train for Boston. It seemed to me that my quick exit was very bright; that it would pique Rose, and bring home to Mr. and Mrs. Abbott the outrageous way in which I had been treated.

Whenever I made a decision in regard to Rose I always did the wrong thing and this was no exception to the rule. I hadn't been on the train ten minutes when I realized that my business was to placate that injured goddess, not to pique or irritate her further.

After all my good resolutions to be meek and humble, to make my declaration properly and start all over again in the right way, I had left in a huff. Why should I be peeved because she had gone swimming? Perhaps she had made an engagement with Anderson. She knew I was not an invalid and she supposed I would accept her father's hospitality for two or three days. Given time I could always work things out properly. I was the best after-the-fact diagnostician in the world, but that never did me any good. On the football field I could figure out a play quickly enough, and I could outguess any of my opponents. When I tried to win the friendship of that girl, I couldn't do anything properly.

My abrupt departure seemed to have burned my bridges. Rose's militant pride would make sure I didn't get another chance. It seemed to me that my only hope was to write her a letter, telling her frankly my state of mind toward her. If she didn't send it back without opening it, it might impress her.

CHAPTER XVII.

MY FIRST LOVE LETTER.

WHEN I got to my room I seized paper and pen, determined to make my peace once and for all. It would be an abject surrender; I would declare myself hers to dispose of as she wished. I hated to think how she would triumph over the letter but I could stand her triumph better if I didn't see her do it.

But that letter was a terrible task. I didn't know how to begin or what to say. I made half a dozen drafts so crude and incoherent that I tore them up in disgust. After a solid two hours I produced the following missive:

My dear Miss Abbott:

I want to apologize to you most abjectly for everything I have ever done to offend you. From the first time I saw you I was attracted to you, but my pride and the knowledge that you summer folks looked down upon the natives, made me behave as though I disliked you.

Of course you are very proud and have a temper and a sharp tongue and for some reason or other you let me have the rough edge of both that time three years ago when I took you into my dory. And, because I felt very much hurt, I stiffened and replied in a way I am sorry for.

It was because I couldn't understand how anybody could hate another person the way you seemed to hate me that I thought it might really be a perverted kind of love you had for me, because I have always loved you, and yet I acted as though I didn't like you. When we talked at your house this morning, I know I should have confessed that I was in love with you and asked you if you reciprocated my affection before I told you that you were in love with me in such a blunt manner.

I want you to know that you inspired me to go to college by what you said to me that day in the boat, and if I have had any success I owe it all to you.

Perhaps you will laugh at me when you get this letter. Perhaps it is ridiculous presumption for me to think you may care for me. Well, I owe it to you to give you the opportunity to laugh at me. If you have done things to me that seemed excusable only on one hypothesis, like putting Helma up to suing me, you may have other reasons than what I hope. But this is the way I stand, anyhow.

Yours abjectly,

William Alden.

When I had finished this work of art I felt very proud of it; it seemed to me that it told the whole story and ought to set me right with her. Although I had written many themes in our English course, this was by far the longest letter I had ever composed, and there were spots in it that brought tears to my eyes by their pathos that night.

Instead of mailing it, I thought I had better hold it until next day to see if there were something important I had omitted, so I folded it and placed it in a drawer of my desk.

Then I went out to football practice where I came in for the worst tongue lashing that I had ever experienced in my life, worse even than what Rose had told me about myself upon occasion. The coach was wild with rage. At the very start of the season I had incapacitated myself and set the entire team back, so he said, at least a month. I was lacking in college spirit, a disgrace to alma mater and a whole lot of other things and I deserved to be removed from the captaincy.

Then he called in the doctor and insisted upon an examination of the wound. When the physician assured him that I could go into scrimmage in a fortnight, he was slightly mollified but he refused to give me any credit for licking three burglars. A man in training for the varsity had no business mixing up with burglars at all. Let old Abbott be robbed, he could afford to lose his money better than we could afford to lose the Yale game.

He decided to put me to work punting, since that wouldn't bother my shoulder.

"You'll have to do most of the kicking this year and you'll have to get at least ten yards more on your kicks," he explained. "With you back, they won't know whether you are going to kick or run around the end, and you'll disturb their kicking defence."

He refused to let me do anything for a couple of days, except study charts of plays that he had worked out during vacation, and I didn't get into football togs at all that afternoon.

That night I got out my letter to Rose and read it again. Most of my admiration for it as an English composition vanished on rereading, and, furthermore, I began to be ashamed of my frank and open confession of affection.

A chap of twenty-four is about the shyest animal in the world. Given proper settings, and a sympathetic girl, he may open his heart and confess how he feels in his soul, but to write a letter in cold blood to a girl who, in all probability will be unsympathetic, requires moral courage of a sort that I hardly possessed.

Supposing I was all wrong about her feeling for me. Supposing it was pure malice which had caused her to treat me so. What if she should show this maudlin letter to G. Burton Anderson? It didn't seem possible that a woman with any human feelings would do such an atrocious thing as that, but wasn't it atrocious to send a servant girl after me with a suit for breach of promise?

Anderson was on the ground, making love to her all the time. What if she reciprocated his affection, despite what she had said to me, and thought it was a good joke to let him see what a chump I had made of myself? I was putting myself into her hands without any protection whatever, and I didn't trust her.

You may think that love and trust go together, but I assure you they are two different things. I adored Rose for her beauty, her grace, her charm, her vivacity, her amazing personal magnetism, but I knew all the time that she was vindictive, bad-tempered, and had a wicked sense of humor. She was also stubborn. I hadn't forgotten that she had almost drowned before she would admit to me that she was in trouble in the water, upon that famous day three years before.

I had a boy's confidence that these bad qualities would disappear if she should love a man and give herself to him. I had read that the way of a maid with a man was incomprehensible, and that the finest girls in the world were unpleasant to their lovers before they surrendered. If Rose should come to me, I felt that she would be sweet and yielding and kind for the rest of her life, but if she didn't happen to want to come to me, she would raise the deuce with that letter. Perhaps I had better not send it, but instead write one that was less compromising, which would leave me a few shreds of self respect in case it was not accepted in the spirit I hoped.

No, it would not do to send it. I would write another, not to-night but to-morrow when I had time to consider, and I would word it cautiously, convey the same sentiments but in a tone not so abject.

I placed the letter back in the envelope which I had already addressed, tossed it upon my desk, and went to bed.

Of course I didn't write the second letter. I made half a dozen false starts, but my literary gifts were limited, my tact undeveloped, and my diplomacy hopeless. I produced one or two which were so chilling in their tone that Rose would have received a declaration and a cold shower bath at one and the same time. These I tore up. Thus several days went by.

A note came from Mr. Abbott expressing regret that he had not been present when I departed and hoping to see me again. He reiterated his gratitude and hoped that

my injury would not fail to heal quickly. Rose, of course, did not communicate with me.

I sent a polite reply to Mr. Abbott; my note to Rose was still unprepared.

When I came into my room from lectures about twelve thirty one afternoon, about three days after my return from Hydeport, I found a visitor seated in my armchair reading my copy of the Harvard Crimson. Hearing me enter, he laid the paper down, rose and proved to be G. Burton Anderson.

The sight of my enemy, impudently making himself at home in my diggings, was so unexpected that I couldn't find a word to say for a moment, and he beat me to the opening speech.

"You will pardon my intrusion, Mr. Alden," he said suavely. "When you learn the object of my visit I am sure you will forgive it?"

"What the devil are you doing here and how did you get in?"

"The janitor was kind enough to admit me. I have been waiting for you a quarter of an hour."

"Hum. Suppose you state your business. I don't like you and you know it; and you have a terrible gall to come here after what you did to me the last time we met."

"Naturally, you have it in for me for punching you in the face the other night," he said smoothly. "You must remember, however, that I only knew you as an impudent chauffeur and I found you in the dead of night, apparently having robbed the safe and knocked Mr. Abbott unconscious. Abbott is my friend and I was wild with anger. In my place you would probably have done the same thing."

"When I hit a man I don't first cover him with a gun and make him stick his hands up."

"I wasn't accountable for what I was doing. I apologize for that blow."

"All right, let it go at that. You've got a dirty streak in you just the same. I remember what you did to Helma."

"You should worry about Helma after what she tried to do to you."

"I know all about that, too, and I don't want to discuss it. If my shoulder was well, I don't mind telling you, I'd be rolling around this room with you now."

"If you want a fight I'll accommodate you at any time. I've not forgotten the way you tricked me into a clinch and threw me into the pond."

"What do you want?" I asked sullenly.

"It happens that I am the agent of a big weekly magazine and I had a wire from the editor to come to see you and offer you a big price for a series of articles on the Princeton and Yale games."

"I can't take money for writing about football. I'm an amateur."

"Lots of players do it."

"I won't."

"We can keep the fact that you are being paid a secret."

"That's the kind of a dirty proposition I'd expect from you, Mr. G. Burton Anderson. What magazine do you represent, *Town Tattle?*"

Anderson grew fiery red and his upper lip drew back in a snarl.

"I'm liable to forget you've got a bum shoulder and knock you for a goal."

I picked up a chair and swung it over my head.

"Start something," I invited.

"I'll wait until the Yale game is over. I don't want to deprive the college of its jack rabbit."

I made a dash at him but he had reached the door. I heard him running down the stairs. Then I threw open all the windows and wondered what I could use to fumigate the place. Imagine Rose Abbott being on intimate terms with that bounder!

Did he really think I would sign up with any outfit that had the bad taste to have him as its representative? I knew, of course, that lots of players wrote articles for the newspapers and magazines, but it seemed to me that it was making money out of their football reputations and hardly the thing for a fellow who wanted to preserve his amateur standing. Thank heaven I didn't need money badly enough to be tempted, even by a reputable magazine representative.

Things were warming up on Soldiers' Field. I was running through signal practise and working out a lot of ideas. There

were continual conferences with the coach who was not above adopting some of my suggestions. Our material seemed better, if anything, than the previous year, since we had received a couple of powerful linesmen and two good rushing halfbacks from the freshman team. Our quarterback candidates were not up to standard but there was one little chap who had been a substitute for two years, who seemed to me capable of running the team with a little special attention.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PROFESSIONALISM.

I STOOD on the sidelines during the first two games, although I could have gone into the second game since my shoulder was entirely healed. In practice we were working up an exceptional forward passing game, though you never would think so to see the way we played against the two weak colleges who came to the Stadium for the preliminary games.

Early in October a sensational paper in Boston threw a bombshell into the college by issuing a statement that I was a professional athlete and there was evidence in the newspaper office to prove it. As I had never played a game for money in my life, the charge did not bother me much, but it scared the student body stiff. The athletic committee immediately demanded that the newspaper submit its evidence although ordinarily such charges are disregarded unless preferred by a college with whom we are competing.

It happened, however, that some years before a famous player on our team was accused of being a professional, indignantly denied it and was allowed to play. Then it developed that many years before, as a youngster, he had taken some money for giving boxing lessons to kids. This was a technical violation of the rules governing amateurs, and our college, naturally, was eager to disprove any charges against me before the important games. I was questioned severely, but I had never given boxing lessons, in fact did not know how to box. I had never played baseball or football before coming to college and had not even gone in for track athletics in high school.

We got the newspaper to submit its evidence, and what do you suppose the charges were? That I had taken pay for fishing excursions! According to the paper, fishing is a sport like football or baseball, and since I was a professional boatman at Hydeport, and had actually taken a few dollars now and then, they declared I had no right to amateur standing.

I protested that I had also driven an automobile for hire and might be disqualified on the ground that motoring was a sport, and not only had I taken out fishing parties at Hydeport, but had gone to the Grand Banks and earned my share of a big catch of codfish.

The newspaper produced affidavits from two or three summer residents of Hydeport to the effect that they had paid me, and its editor was very triumphant about them.

Fortunately for me, the athletic authorities refused to admit that fishing was a sport in the sense of football, baseball and other competitive games. The Amateur Athletic people backed them up, and the charges were laughed out of court. But the newspaper had collected a lot of circulation during the excitement, and brought out all the details of my career, including working as a chauffeur for the Abbotts.

As far as I was concerned I had no doubt that G. Burton Anderson had unloaded the story on them and had been well paid for it, but they covered him up and I couldn't prove it. I got about a thousand letters of sympathy and congratulation and, apparently, came out of the mess with more glory than I had when I went into it.

Among those who sent me a telegram of congratulation was Mr. Abbott. Rose was silent, as was to be expected. From his telegram I knew that the Abbotts had closed up their cottage at Hydeport and returned to New York.

The message from Rose's father brought forcibly to my attention the fact that I had not sent her the message of confession and conciliation to which she was entitled. It had to be done, the sooner the better; I would write it and post it immediately to prevent the recurrence of cold feet.

Seating myself at my desk, I sought for the original letter as I proposed to use it for a model with necessary modifications. I went through my papers without finding it, then investigated more carefully. I remembered that I had left it lying on the top of the desk at the back; had seen it several times since, waiting to be sealed and have a postage stamp affixed.

It was not in the place where I had left it nor was it in the desk at all. I did not see how it could have been knocked off upon the floor, nor was it likely that the woman who cleaned up twice a week would have taken it upon herself to post it. What had become of it? My search became more and more frantic as it gave evidence of being fruitless. That letter, falling into other hands, would cover me with humiliation; I had even feared to submit it to the eyes of Rose. Had some one taken it? Who? Certainly none of my classmates would have been dishonorable enough to pry in my papers during my absence; I had no intimate friends, even now, who would be apt to steal a love letter as a joke.

And thus it narrowed down to one possibility, a horrible one. Mr. G. Burton Anderson had been alone in my room, I didn't know how long. He had no principles that I had been able to discover, he hated me, and if he saw a letter addressed to Rose lying on my desk he wouldn't hesitate to read it and carry it off.

The thought of that reptile reading and chuckling over my pathetic love letter was absolutely harrowing. If he destroyed it, that would be bad enough, but suppose he showed it to companions of the same stripe?

Would he show it to Rose? No, because he was in love with her himself. I could not bear to think that Rose would receive my letter from his hands, but he couldn't show it to her without admitting that he had stolen it, so that possibility was remote. My state of mind was such that I couldn't write a second letter to Rose at that time. In fact I brooded over the missing letter to such an extent that my playing fell off and I got a sharp call down from the coach.

The coach was none too hopeful by this time. Our team was stodgy and lumbering. Lighter outfits would get the jump upon our line and deceive it with comparatively simple plays. We lacked a really powerful driving backfield. Of course we had punch enough for a couple of touchdowns in early season games where we outweighed opposing teams ten pounds to a man, but that wouldn't get us anywhere with Yale and Princeton or two or three of the teams that came to the Stadium later on.

The coach began using me in line plays. I weighed one hundred and eighty-five in football togs, stood six feet and had a lot of power. He didn't like to waste my speed or slow me up by tiring me at line bucking, but somebody had to drive through guard or tackle for three or four yards of consistent gaining. Curiously enough I was able to squirm through better than either of our regular halfbacks. This convinced him that he would have to take me out of the line since we had several fast ends.

I began to throw forward passes as well as catch them, using our regular ends as receivers, and by the middle of October I was qualified to punt, buck the line, go around the end, go back to catch punts with the quarterback, or make use of my specialty of the past year, get away down the field and catch long forward passes on the run.

"The trouble with us this year," said the coach, "is that we are developing a one-man team, which is against all our principles at Harvard. I prefer to have a machine, with about three quarterbacks, six or eight backs, and three complete lines, all about equal in merit. I'd swap any one-man team for an organization in which every player was a cog in the machine, with the greatest of pleasure."

"Go ahead and develop your machine, then," I growled. "I'm not trying to be a star; you are forcing me to take on all these duties."

"I can't help myself," he admitted. "We haven't got a good team this year. Instead of eight backs I've got only two or three that are worth their salt. The ends are fair but the line is second rate and the substitutes are third rate. If anything happens to you, Princeton and Yale will beat us about thirty to nothing. I rely on you,

to keep them opening up. I expect you to run every punt back ten or fifteen yards which will offset the five or ten yards they are sure to outpunt you.

"We haven't got a goal kicker who can be depended upon, at present, though I am trying to develop young Brown. He's too light to play, but, by November, he may be able to drop goals from the thirty yard line. Our game this year is to develop a defense that will keep the other fellow from scoring, while your speed and tricks may be good for one touchdown at least against Yale and Princeton. I wish I didn't have to use you in any other game, but I'm afraid you'll get soft."

With his usual craft the coach was careful not to let it look like a one-man team in the first three or four games. I played ten minutes only with Holy Cross, then got yanked out and saw the rest of the game from the sidelines. We beat them by the narrowest of margins, a dropkick by Brown from the eighteen yard line after they had held our team for downs on their eight yard line.

Gradually it began to get around, despite all our efforts, that the captain was the greater part of the Harvard team, and the responsibility that rested on me began to weigh me down. I worried for fear I should go stale, or get soft. I began to be afraid of injuries in practice, and unconsciously tried to conserve my energies. When the second team showed us up one afternoon with me in the lineup the entire time, I realized that I was on the wrong tack.

The coach realized it too for he came to me and announced:

"I'm going to start you in the Western game next Saturday and play you until you are tired. If you get hurt so much the worse. The way you played to-day you are going back fast. You forget that anything is depending on you, and go in there and do your darndest."

"But if I get hurt it's all up with the team."

"It's all up with us anyway unless you get rid of the complex you are suffering from now. You are more likely to be injured if you are worrying about it than if you are just playing your game regardless."

So I played against Western and was taken out at the end of the third quarter completely exhausted. They were a smooth outfit who came down, trained to the minute, with an assortment of forward passes that almost demoralized our team. It was the best thing that could have happened to Harvard, for it showed us a passing game better than anything in the East. They concealed the ball so cleverly we never knew when a pass was going to be thrown, and they succeeded in making about three out of four of their efforts. They had no long passes like the one I had caught in the Yale game, but they had such a variety of tosses ranging from ten to twenty yards in all directions that they scored two touchdowns on us. Fortunately they didn't have much of a defense and we were able to score two touchdowns by straight football, kicking both goals while they missed one, which gave us the game.

I had no trouble getting through their light line for gains of six or eight yards and once I ran forty yards on a buck between left guard and center as their backs had been drawn over to the right side. They didn't have a defense for my end run from fake kick formation and I tore off a lot of territory in that way. But they were death on forward passes and we only got away with two out of ten that we tried.

The papers next day gave me credit for winning the game and announced for the edification of Yale and Princeton that we had a one-man team.

Yale was having her troubles this year while Princeton was coming along strongly. A minor team held Yale to a tie the day we beat Western but three or four of the best Yale players were out with slight injuries, so that meant nothing.

The evening before the Princeton game, which was played at Cambridge this year, I received a telegram from a source so unexpected that I could hardly believe it. The contents were brief but overwhelming.

> Wish you success to-morrow with all my heart. ROSE ABBOTT.

In view of the strained relations between us, of my failure to send her the letter

which might have won her friendship, her own silence for more than two months, this telegram lifted me into the seventh heaven. I kissed the yellow paper, pressed my lips against the signature although it was probably typed by a dirty handed office boy in the telegraph office.

That night I slept with it under my pillow. I would have sent a reply immediately but I didn't know her address in New York, and I promised myself to make a special trip into Boston next day to find a New York directory.

CHAPTER XIX.

A ONE-MAN TEAM.

PRINCETON came down a favorite, accompanied by a multitude of confident and cocky wearers of the orange and black. They had a big powerful team, alert as are all Princeton elevens, but with no very consistent offense. Their left end was weak, and that was their misfortune for we were able to get around it very frequently and offset their gains through the lines. I got away for several very long runs, our right halfback had no trouble in taking the ball for long gains between their left end and tackle, and, although they made several substitutions on the left side of their line they could not strengthen it. They scored two goals from the field.

Our special goal kicker dropped one goal over the bar and we fooled them with a forward pass taken by our right end which he carried over for a touchdown. It was a hard game and we were lucky to win it. I was in there working all the time, but did nothing as spectacular as in the Yale game of the previous season. Nevertheless the football writers gave me far more credit than I deserved, and again insisted that we had a one-man team.

I had sent off the telegram of thanks to Rose Abbott, and for a day or two after the game was hopeful of receiving a note from her. However nothing came, which caused me to set down the telegram as an act of common courtesy and of no significance.

On Thursday we moved down to New Haven and took up our usual quarters. Quite unreasonably we were big favorites; the victory over Princeton sending our prospects sky high, since Yale had pulled out a shaky victory the same day.

Everybody seemed to think that our success depended entirely upon me; the papers dinned it into our ears every day until the other fellows on the team became convinced of it despite of everything the coach and I could say. It was true we had worked out several new plays which depended upon my excessive speed, but without a strong line and proper interference that speed would be useless. They insisted upon my keeping under wraps the last few days, watched me, even in signal practice as though I were something brittle instead of one of the strongest and toughest customers who ever played for Harvard.

It was about five o'clock on Friday afternoon that a messenger boy came to our quarters with a note for me in a feminine hand. My heart gave a jump; most unreasonably I thought it might be from Rose though she was less likely than any girl I knew to send me a letter by messenger.

With a trembling hand I tore it open and glanced at the signature. Glory be, it was from Rose. She was in New Haven. The note was brief but marvelous. It was addressed formally enough.

> MY DEAR MR. ALDEN:
>
> I am here for the game, and I would like very much to see you for a few moments this afternoon if you can make it. There is something that I would like to tell you, and I would be pleased personally to extend my good wishes for to-morrow. I am staying with friends at 27 Cypress Street. Their name is Morrow.
>
> Cordially,
>
> ROSE ABBOTT

Would I go? Try and stop me! Rose had come around to me. She wanted to be friends. She would see me play against Yale. She would cheer me on. How wonderfully everything was coming out.

I grabbed my hat and coat and was dashing out the door when I ran into the coach.

"Whither away?" he demanded.

"I'm going to look in on a friend for a few minutes."

"Don't be gone long; remember what happens to-morrow."

"I'll be back in plenty of time for dinner."

A few blocks down the street I signalled a taxi, gave him the address and quivered with impatience because it didn't go faster. In less than ten minutes we drew up before an apartment building not very far away from the Yale Bowl.

The Morrows occupied suite seventeen. I pressed the bell, gave my name, heard the latch of the door click and ran up the stairs two steps at a time to the third floor. Number seventeen was the second door on the left. It was open and a trim looking maid asked:

"Mr. Alden?"

"I came to see Miss Abbott," I told her joyously.

"Yes, sir. Come right in."

I handed her my hat and coat and she motioned toward an inner door, which was ajar. As I passed into this room something heavy descended upon the back of my head and the light went out.

When I came back to consciousness I was lying on a bed. My head was aching frightfully. Wishing to touch the sore spot I found that I could not move my hands; they were tied to my sides, and my feet were also bound tightly.

"What's this for?" I demanded querulously, not yet grasping entirely the situation.

At the sound of my voice a man came within my range of vision. He was round faced and ruddy, with iron-gray hair, pig-like eyes and a large mouth featuring prominently two gold teeth.

"Hello, kid," he said genially. "You've come to, have you?"

"Who hit me? Why am I tied up like this?"

"If you want to know who hit you it was me. What I hit you with was this."

He produced a short club which I supposed to be a blackjack, though I had never seen one.

"You're tied up so you can't get away, and that's all there is to it, there isn't any more."

"But I've got to go back to training quarters. They'll be worried about me," I protested foolishly.

"A little worry never did anybody any harm."

"This is some kind of a trap."

"You guessed it."

"How did you get that young lady's name?"

"Oh, I had nothing to do with the decoy letter. A friend of mine fixed that up. We had to get you here and the letter done the trick?"

"But what's it about? Why should you want to harm me? I've got to play football to-morrow."

"You ain't going to play to-morrow, kid. That's why you're here. My assignment is to see that you don't get out of here until the whistle blows for the end of the game."

"I see," said I thoughtfully. Of course Yale had nothing to do with this. College sports are clean; nobody would regret my nonappearance more than the Yale management. Never in the history of big games had a player been forcibly detained by the opposing organization. There was some plot, but who was responsible, and why?

"You've got me, all right," I said with a sour grin. "Why pick on me? Why not capture somebody else?"

"That's the spirit," he said approvingly. "I don't mind telling you all about it, now that you are acting like a gentleman. You see Harvard is a one-man team. You are the man. You licked Princeton last week, and the odds are three to one on Harvard against Yale. Now some of us fellows that never went to college and ain't got none of this college spirit, like to pick up soft odds like that, but we are putting up a lot of dough and we got to see that we don't lose it. So we just kidnap you, and your eleven is all broken up.

"Yale licks the stuffings out of Harvard and we make a killing. We're not going to hurt you. When we turn you loose you can tell any kind of a tale you like because we won't be around any more."

"Gamblers," I said bitterly. "I've heard of you fellows doping race horses, and bribing professional baseball players, but this is the first time you've ever interfered with a big college game."

"Oh, we've pulled a few tricks before, but this is the biggest coup yet. Our mob is out now placing twenty thousand dollars at one to three. It's a lot of money to depend on one college kid, and you can't blame us for taking no chances."

"You are only ruining my life."

"You'll get over it. It ain't your fault."

"Nobody will believe my yarn about being decoyed and kept a prisoner. They'll think I've been on a drunk."

"It's the way of the world," said the gambler with a grin that showed a lot of yellow broken teeth beside the gold ones. I'd know him again if I saw him.

"You've got me, all right," I admitted. "I should like to know how you discovered the name of the only girl who could have drawn me from training quarters the day before the big game."

"A friend of ours knows all about you. We paved the way for this by sending you a telegram from the girl the day before the Princeton game."

"Oh," I exclaimed. "You dirty crooks!"

So the telegram from Rose had been a fake. She had not sent me her good wishes, probably hadn't given me a thought. And I had been so happy with the telegram, slept with it under my pillow, kissed the darn thing; sent her a reply which must have puzzled her. These crooked gamblers had broken in upon my secret romance, fathomed my feelings for Rose Abbott, played on it and betrayed me.

I lay quietly for a few moments in meditation. Who was there who would consort with these gamblers who could possibly know of my acquaintance with Rose Abbott. Nobody around Cambridge; somebody in Hydeport. And who knew that I was in love with her? G. Burton Anderson; there didn't seem to be anybody else in the world who could have supplied this information.

Anderson had stolen my letter to Rose. He knew of my infatuation. But he was a college man; he had been a suitor for Rose's hand. Surely he would not drag his own sweetheart into a horrible frame-up like this. He could not use her name as a decoy. It was unbelievable. Yet there was nothing else to believe. The jailor had withdrawn from the bed and was looking out the window. His back was toward me. I thought I would make a test.

"Say," I called, and the man turned around to see what I wanted. "I want to talk with Anderson."

The fellow gave a start that told me what I wanted to know. He tried to cover up but it was too late.

"Anderson? I don't know any Anderson."

"You lie. It was G. Burton Anderson who framed me."

An ugly look came over his face and he walked to the bedside where he stood looking down on me.

"Don't call me a liar, feller," he threatened. "I'm liable to paste you one in the jaw."

"You untie me and see if you can do it."

"Fat chance," he said with a laugh of contempt. "There you are and there you lay until to-morrow night."

I shrugged my shoulders because it was the only gesture I could make.

He turned away, then curiosity got the better of him.

"Say," he said. "What ever made you think any guy named Anderson is mixed up in this?"

"He's the only person I know mean enough to do a trick of this kind."

"Well, you're all wet. I never heard of any Anderson."

Of course I didn't believe him. Conversation ceased. I lay there thinking dour thoughts. It was already dark outside. The boys would be going in to dinner in a little while. The coach would be furious with me for failing to return, but he would not begin to worry until nine or ten o'clock. By midnight he would be searching the town. There was a chance that the taxi driver would be found, in which case they would discover where I had been dropped. But this was a big apartment building. Nobody knew the apartment I had entered; without a warrant for every separate apartment they could not search the building. There was no doorman or elevator-man so I could not be traced through those sources.

I felt sure that the coach would know that I was not voluntarily remaining away from quarters, but that information would

do him no good. In the morning they would run through practice without me which meant that the coach would lay his plans to conduct the game as though I would not play. I was the only decent punter, but our ends were fairly good, our line reasonably strong, but slow, and our backs fine on defense, but without much punch.

Our whole defense was built around my triple threat; too late to change our plans. We would be beaten before the whistle blew. The psychological effect of the disappearance of the captain must be considered. As like as not we would be completely demoralized.

I don't need to tell you that I suffered agonies as I thought of these things. I wiggled and twisted but the bonds were strong; unaided I should never get loose. My captor grinned wickedly at me as he saw my futile efforts.

"I used to be a sailor, kid," he told me. "You haven't got a Chinaman's chance of getting free. Work on them all you want."

At the end of a couple of hours the girl who had admitted me to the apartment entered with a tray of food, which she set on the table. It seemed to me that there was a gleam of pity in her eye as she glanced at me, but, as she was a confederate, I knew I could expect no aid from her.

My gambler was kind enough to untie my hands so I could eat a few morsels of food, but naturally I had no appetite. When the meal was concluded, he tied me up again, making an even snugger job of it than he had done in the first place.

I had refrained from making an outcry since it only meant that a gag would be thrust into my mouth, and I was uncomfortable enough.

"How many of you are mixed up in this affair?" I asked him, as much for the sake of making conversation as with any hope of getting information.

"Not many. When you have a sure thing you don't let in a crowd. My pal is out placing the bets. My job is to stay with you until the game is over."

"Who is going to watch me while you sleep?"

"I ain't going to sleep, kid. I can stay awake twenty-four hours for what I'm going to clean up on this game. You can go to sleep if you want to, but no nodding for me."

"How can I sleep trussed up like this?"

"That's your funeral. Stay awake or sleep, it's all the same to me."

There was silence for half an hour at the end of which time he went to a closet and emerged with a bottle of whisky and a glass.

"Want a drink?" he demanded.

"Certainly not. I'm in training."

"You were in training, but suit yourself."

He poured himself a stiff drink, drew the curtains, put on the electric lights, pulled a table alongside his armchair and made himself comfortable for his vigil.

I relapsed into my unhappiness, brooded over my disgrace, squeezed a few salt tears, and, despite my uncomfortable position, drifted into slumber.

When I awoke it was daylight, quite bright, which meant that it was well after seven o'clock. I was frightfully stiff and sore, but refreshed, nevertheless, from eight hours of the sort of sleep a very young man requires.

My captor sat in his chair, just as I had last seen him. There was a second quart bottle beside the first; evidently he had drunk steadily all through the night.

He was awake though, and favored me with a friendly leer.

"You're some sleeper, kid, I was going to wake you up two or three times for company, but I thought it was a dirty trick."

"Thanks for so much," I said bitterly. The dreadfulness of my situation had come back into my mind with a rush. In five or six hours the game would begin without me in the lineup.

The gambler rose, walked unsteadily to the door and called something that resulted, in a few minutes, in the girl entering with our breakfast which consisted of ham and eggs and coffee. As I had been unable to eat much of anything the night before, the aroma of the coffee and the fragrance of the fried ham appealed to my shameless stomach.

The jailor helped me sit up, unwound the rope so that I could use my hands, drew a gun from his pocket, laid it significantly upon the table beside him, ladled out on a plate a portion of the ham and eggs, and handed me my breakfast. He also gave me a cup of coffee. Telling myself that I needed all my strength in case I did make my escape in time for the game, I ate heartily.

My companion simply picked at his food. He had drunk so much that he had no appetite. After I had finished he tied me up very skillfully for a drunken man, and began again at his bottle.

The maid removed the remains of the breakfast. All was as before. The hours marched by in slow and solemn procession. The gambler finished the second bottle, went after a third, and started on that. He was getting very drunk. Somehow I began to hope his drunkenness might help me, though I could not see how.

Along about noon he fell asleep. Then I worked at my bonds with all my strength and with absolutely no results. I could not loosen them. Two hours to the game; each minute from now on would be increasingly anguishing.

At one o'clock the girl came in with lunch. She hesitated when she saw her employer asleep, then set down the tray on a table, went over and shook him violently by the shoulder. It brought him to part of his senses.

"Lunch time already?" he mumbled. "A' right. I'll loose the prisoner. Last meal on this train, kid."

He staggered over to the bed, fumbled with my knots, managed to unfasten them. Then he went back to his chair into which he sank with a flop. He took the gun with his unsteady hand, waved the other hand to the girl and said:

"Give him the whole tray. I don't want to eat again ever."

She laid the tray obediently beside me upon the bed, then made her exit. The gambler had his eye on me; just how much he could see out of it in his condition I did not know, but I had thought of a plan. There were two knives and two forks on the tray. I would conceal one under the sheet, hoping that the girl would take away the tray without noticing that it was missing. I ate more than I wanted, mussed up and disarranged all the dishes, finally pushed the tray away. My friend staggered over, and tied me up again, but this time he did not do it so well. He fell over on top of me two or three times.

Eventually the job was done, he returned to his seat, after lifting the tray from the bed and dropping it with a crash on the table. The noise brought in the maid, who cast a look of disgust at him, picked up the tray, and retreated.

My plan was based entirely upon the forlorn hope that he would fall asleep again. This he seemed loathe to do. He took a couple of more drinks, tried to engage me in talk, then muttered to himself for awhile. I estimated that it must be close to half past one. But he was nodding, nodding, his head fell over on his chest, pretty soon I heard a snore.

My chance had come. I felt for the knife, had a hard time locating it, since my wrists were fastened at my sides. But, as I pulled at the ropes, they gave a little this time. When I got my fingers on the knife I was able to twist it so that the blade sawed at the rope. The bonds were quarter inch rope, ordinary clothes line. The knife was a steel table knife which hadn't been sharpened for a long time. For a while it didn't seem to be making much impression on the rope but I sawed away steadily, minute after minute until finally the first strand parted.

Then I started on the second, and then the third, a long job, but it was done at last. My arms were free. I stretched them gratefully, then went at the ropes around my legs and ankles. As I could use the whole strength of my arms, it was the work of a few seconds to part these ropes. I tried to stand up, but fourteen or fifteen hours confinement had sapped the usefulness of my legs. I flopped over on the floor. The noise I made caused the gambler to lift his head and look around. I lay motionless. Apparently he did not observe that the bed was empty but sat there blinking. The table holding all the whisky bottles and the gun, was about ten

feet away. The gun was at his elbow. I began to crawl noiselessly on my hands and knees towards the table. When I was two or three feet away he heard me, seemed to recover his senses and fumbled for the handle of the weapon. At the same minute I sprang for him.

He had grasped the gun, but my hand was around his wrist and I was twisting it. He was no match for me, sober, in physical combat, and he was drunk, but I was weakened from my bondage. However, after a thrilling couple of seconds, the gun dropped from his hand. I gave him a shove, dived for the weapon and came up with it safe, the point towards him.

CHAPTER XX.

FREE AND IN THE GAME.

"HOW the hell did you get loose?" he demanded in fuddled surprise.

"Never mind. I'm leaving here. Interfere with me and I'll shoot."

"You wouldn't dare shoot," he jeered and lumbered towards me. I clubbed the revolver and struck him on top of the head with the butt of it, which finished him. He dropped to the floor and lay there. Then I started for the door to find the maid barring my path. I pointed the pistol at her and she shrank away.

"Open the front door for me." I demanded, and the girl darted down the corridor, unlatched the door and held it open.

"You are a fine young woman," I told her. "How did you get mixed up in this?"

She jerked her thumb back towards the bedroom. "My husband," she said.

"Well, go in and nurse him. He needs it badly."

I ran down the stairs, thrusting the pistol into my pocket. In a moment I was out in the street. The chill November air reminded me I was without hat or overcoat but I thought little of that. For at the moment I heard a distant rumbling, something like thunder, only I knew it wasn't. It was the roar of ninety thousand people, one of the most awe inspiring sounds to be heard on this earth. The game had started.

An automobile with Harvard colors was passing and I hailed it. They refused to stop and I swung upon the spare tire rack behind. The occupants were late for the game and speeding, and in five minutes I dropped off at the Bowl.

Then trouble began. I had no ticket. The gatekeeper firmly refused to admit me.

"I'm the captain of the Harvard team." I protested.

"You're a bum, that's what you are. A gate crasher. Get out of here."

"You must let me in. I've got to play. I'm William Alden."

"Not even One Eyed Connolly or Tammany Young ever pulled this one," said the man. "On your way."

It was no time for argument, the frantic cheering from the Yale side showed that Harvard was being driven back. I gave him a push and ran across the outer enclosure. The gatekeeper shouted, whereupon two policemen sprinted after me. I reached one of the entrances to the Bowl proper before they caught me, but there I was blocked by another official, and then the police caught up.

Heedless of my protests they started to drag me away when a youth with a Harvard official badge came up. I called to him:

"You must know me. I'm Alden. Make these people let me in. For heaven's sake get on the job."

The official was one of our undergraduates and he recognized me.

"Captain Alden," he exclaimed. "So this is why you are not playing. What happened to you?"

"It's too long to tell now. Get me to the sidelines quick!"

There was no time to go to the club house, I would be accommodated with football clothes torn from substitutes. The official grasped my arm and we ran through underground passages. For the first time I appreciated the great size of the Yale Bowl.

We came out at the fifty yard line.

"Wait till I get the coach," he said and ran over to the Harvard group watching mournfully the progress of the play. I got a glimpse of it. We were lined up on our five yard line and at that moment a Yale

back tore through our line, overturned our backs and fell across the goal line.

The coach came running up; his face stern but his eyes joyful.

"What's the meaning of this? Where have you been?"

"Kidnaped by gamblers. I've just broken out. For God's sake get me a suit."

He snapped his fingers and several players came running. In the passageway I made the quickest change on record, the coach tearing off my street clothes without regard for keeping them intact. In less than five minutes I was equipped for the contest.

Harvard was lining up to receive the kickoff when I ran out on the playing field. The Harvard stands recognized me instantly and a bellow of joy went up which warmed the cockles of my heart. I rushed to the half back whom I was relieving, shouted words of cheer to the team, hopeless and dismal, for it had been scored upon in the first ten minutes of play, and took my position. Then the official blew his whistle. The Yale fullback kicked off and the ball was in our territory.

It was a poor kick since it did not go into the air, but struck the ground some thirty yards from the point of kickoff and then bounded. It bounded straight into my arms as I stood on the fifteen yard line. Because it had not soared, the Yale ends had not had time to get down the field and I was free.

My interference formed ahead and I ran up the field. An end dove at me when I traveled five yards but I side stepped his tackle, slipped by a second tackler, while the interference disposed of two or three more.

Behind the interference I gained fifteen yards and then it was broken up. But I ducked and wiggled and evaded the onrushing backs intent only upon putting more white lines between me and our goalposts. Three Yale men came to me at once completely blocking progress, whereupon I turned around, ran back five yards towards our goal, then seeing open space to the right darted in that direction and regained the ground I had lost.

For a moment the coast was clear ahead and I dashed madly forward. Then the Yale quarterback came flying down and made a desperate dive tackle. But he was not the All America quarterback they had the previous year. I stopped dead in my tracks and he plunged along the ground in front of me. Turning to the left I passed him and forty yards ahead I saw the Yale goalposts.

The entire Yale team was pursuing me, most of them coming from the right side of the field, trying to drive me out of bounds. But there were none of them as fast as my legs could carry me.

I could hear the rising roar of the Harvard stands as it dawned on them that a touchdown was in sight. I don't suppose there is anything so exciting to a football crowd as a run through a broken field, the entire length of the grounds, to a touchdown, and that was what was happening. Amid an avalanche of cheering I crossed the goal line standing up, the nearest Yale man being five yards behind. In less than a minute after the kickoff the score had been tied, or would be if we kicked the goal. And we did kick the goal.

My chief emotion was to gloat over the gamblers who thought me safely trussed up and out of the way. What must they have thought when they saw me run out on the field? And how they must be cursing at that run for a touchdown.

As we walked back to kick off to Yale I had a chance to look at the audience. Comparatively few have an opportunity to see the crowd from the center of the field.

Of course faces are indistinguishable. I often chuckle when I read about a football player signaling to his sweetheart in the stands. All I could see was a vast circle of color, with white specks for faces, rising tier on tier until the last row of human heads looked like the top of a picket fence.

I could hear the man with the megaphone away on top of the Bowl calling off the names of players to the newspaper reporters who sit beside their telegraph operators high above us. To them we must look like a lot of ants going through queer formations.

In all probability Rose Abbott was in the stands, but I knew that I couldn't pick

her out. I hoped she liked my touchdown. And Anderson must be there. Perhaps he was her escort. Well, I would do my best to see that he and his fellow gamblers lost their twenty thousand dollars.

We kicked off to Yale and the game began again. Our fellows were all pepped up by the touchdown; no longer hopeless, they were out to beat Yale. They slammed the quarterback down hard without a foot of gain on the kickoff and on the very first Yale play we recovered a fumble and it was our ball on the ten yard line.

The Harvard side was calling for a second touchdown, and we had a chance if we were ever going to get one. But that Yale team was playing too, and it stopped two line bucks without a gain, made us ground a forward pass and hurried our center so he made a bad pass to our drop-kicker, and we lost the ball.

Then began an old fashioned Yale offense. It was a drive, drive, drive. Through our line, around the ends. Four yards, three yards, five yards, slow and steady. They got their first down and then they got another first down, and another. Then they were past the center of the field. To our astonishment they had the nerve to uncork a forward pass which was an exact duplicate of the one which I had caught and scored on the previous year. We were totally unsuspecting it at that time, did not cover the halfback who ran through our line thirty yards towards our goal, and, if he hadn't dropped the ball after getting his hands on it, they would have had a sure touchdown. But luckily for us the ball grounded and the pass was a failure.

We took the ball away from them on downs when they tried a second forward pass which failed, but we were unable to gain. One of my famous end runs resulted in a loss of ten yards and I was compelled to punt, giving them the ball on our forty-five yard line.

Again we had to withstand a terrible battering as they pounded on towards our goal. Finally we stood with only a couple of yards between them and a touchdown when the whistle blew for the end of the half. It was the luck of football.

In the locker room, the coach got me to one side and heard my story.

"Confound those gamblers!" he exclaimed. "With every other sport in their hands are they going to ruin football, too? My boy, I suffered more than you did during the last twenty-four hours. It was incomprehensible to me, your failure to return last night."

"Did you notify the police?"

"No. It seemed like poor sportsmanship. If you failed to show up, we had to keep quiet until after the game. We couldn't throw a shadow over Yale's victory if she won, and we couldn't risk letting anybody think that Yale had anything to do with your disappearance. I want to tell you that when we started the game without you I was a very sick man. How do you feel?"

"I'm in pretty good shape, considering. Do you think we can win?"

"I don't know. They have a more consistent attack and a strong defense. Your best plan is to cut loose with everything at the beginning of the half and if you score, play a defensive game for the rest of the afternoon. If your tricks don't work they will wear us down and the whistle may not save us next time."

We went back on the field ready to cut loose, take chances, behave recklessly, but score in the first five minutes if possible. It was Yale's turn to kick off, but this time the kick was high and our quarterback was downed in his tracks on the fifteen yard line.

He looked at me in amazement at the play for which I called, but nodded like a good soldier.

When the ball was put into play I stood in the half back position but just a yard from the line of scrimmage. I was through and down the field before Yale dreamed that we would dare try a forward pass within a few yards of our own goal.

The ball was passed fairly, but by no means was it as long a pass as Stephens used to throw. I caught it some twenty yards down the field, but I was fairly clear and I ran twenty-five yards farther before I was downed. We lined up on Yale's forty yard line.

On the next play I was through again with the entire Yale team on my heels but this time we fooled them because it was a short pass to the right, caught by the end who made fifteen yards on it.

This brought us to their twenty-five yard line in two plays, and our stands were screeching themselves hoarse, while Yale was growling encouragement to their team, asking them to fight, as though they were doing anything else.

They expected my end runs from kick formation, and seemed to have worked out a very effective defense for them. On the next play I took the ball from the quarterback's hands while playing close to the scrimmage line, and behind a very ingenious interference darted out towards their right end, who was prettily boxed, and I went around him without having a hand laid on me, to be brought down by their quarterback on their five yard line.

And now our followers were quite insane, and their frenzy communicated itself to us. We had rushed Yale the entire length of the field, it should be easy to push them back five yards more. But I was almost exhausted; the experience of the night before had worn my nerves to a frazzle and my strength was slipping. I couldn't think clearly. Their quarterback had banged my head on the ground pretty hard with his last tackle. I had no suggestions to make to the quarter.

And a Yale team on its five yard line shows the qualities that make its mascot the bulldog. We hurled two plays against their line and netted two yards. Then we tried a short forward pass which grounded.

The next play was intended to be a skin tackle drive but something went wrong, the mass piled up and then the ball dribbled out free and lay before the Yale quarter, standing just in front of his goal line.

I saw him pick it up, dragged myself out of the pile and rushed to him. Wishing to evade me he stepped back, only one step but he was behind his goal line; had retired voluntarily. I threw him and we had a safety.

A safety is the least understood score in football. It must be secured by the retiring of the side with the ball behind its goal line and not by pushing the man with the ball back. Had I tackled him in front of the goal and fell with him behind the line, it would not have been a score. It happened that the quarterback made an involuntary backward motion to avoid me, and was standing behind his goal with the ball under his arm when I threw him. It counted two points, and made the score nine to seven in our favor.

The crowd is rarely able to see just what happens in a play of this kind. When the score board showed two more points for Harvard our stands went mad, while Yale grumbled and protested. But it happened that the officials had seen the play clearly.

We were ahead but it was no safe lead. A goal from the field would beat us, or a touchdown, and only five or six minutes of the second half had been played. Plenty of time for Yale to win the game.

Yale, of course, kicked off to us, and this time I ran it back ten yards to our twenty yard line. We tried two or three plays with a total gain of only five yards, and then kicked. It was an exceptionally good punt, and our ends were down, giving Yale the ball on her thirty yard line.

Then began the most trying experience possible on a football field, that of a team which has a slight lead and is playing safe, seeking only to hold its opponent until time is called. Yale tried several end plays but these were not successful because of our good ends and my ability to cover ground as a defensive back. They could gain through our line fairly consistently, and they figured they had time to batter out another touchdown. Slowly steadily they advanced. At the end of the third quarter they were on our forty yard line.

Our coach began to send in fresh substitutes, to bolster up our guards and tackles who were wearing out under the constant banging.

Yale tossed in fresh backs who charged us full of power and ambition. They beat us back slowly but surely, disdaining to punt on fourth downs and several times getting their distance. Once we held them for downs and I got away on an end run which gave us twenty precious yards. But with three minutes to play they had us in

the last ditch. We were on our eight yard line. In three charges they had reached the three yard line and then it was fourth down with three yards to go. They were right in front of the goal posts, an easy goal from the field; far better, their general thought, to win the game by a goal than lose it trying for three yards on a single rush.

Their dropkicker took position about ten yards behind the line and at that moment I touched our left tackle on the shoulder and took his place in the line, sending him to half back. My speed might get me through in time to block the kick; it was our only hope. If the kick was blocked they had lost the game; if it crossed the bar they had won.

It was the most exciting moment of any game I had ever played; they tell me that a man in the audience dropped dead from heart failure at that instant.

The center passed the ball; I tricked the opposing tackle, and dashed through. A half back tried to stop me but I was over him and plunged wildly at the kicker at the moment that he was kicking the ball. I leaped high in the air holding my hands above my head. Glory be, I touched the ball with the tips of my fingers, deflecting its course. I dropped squarely upon the uplifted boot of the kicker with force enough to knock me completely out, and when I recovered the game was over. Time had been called at the moment the kick was blocked. Thus ended my football career, in what the newspapers called "a blaze of glory."

CHAPTER XXI.

CONCLUSION.

AFTER the team had dressed and we had escaped from the cheering, surging, crimson multitude to our hotel, I told the boys the whole tale of my detention, omitting, of course, the incident of the letter to which Rose Abbott's name had been forged. There was intense indignation, a desire to lynch the gamblers if they could be found, prophecies of what would have happened to the team if the gambler who was guarding me had stayed awake an hour longer.

The coach demanded, privately, just what motive had drawn me to an apartment in a strange town on the eve of the great game. To him, I showed the forged letter, and explained my suspicion that it was G. Burton Anderson who had framed the whole thing with the gamblers.

"I remember the fellow well," he said thoughtfully. "He was a pretty good lineman in a year when we were hard up for material in the line, but he had a mean streak in him that was shown on one or two occasions, and, in the Yale game, I had to take him out because he was laying down like a dog. To think of a man betraying his own college and his own team for a few dirty dollars—honestly, Bill, I don't think it possible."

Then I told him of my own experiences with Anderson, explained how he had stolen my unposted letter to Rose Abbott, and was the only person in the world who knew I loved that girl.

"Rose doesn't even know it," I assured him.

"Don't kid yourself. A girl always knows it, no matter how a chap tries to hide his feelings. They have some instinct that tells them whether a man is attracted or repelled by them. Why the deuce didn't you post the letter and avoid all this trouble?"

"I wish I had, now, of course, though she might not have taken it in the spirit in which it was written."

We celebrated our victory, broke training, cheered and sang and yelled ourselves hoarse that night. Yet for me, it was all sad. My football life had come to an end. Beginning with a hatred of the game and an intense distaste of its brutality, I had come to love it, to revel in the joy of battle, to take my bruises as badges of glory.

After all, there is nothing so exciting as football to a participant, not even war, now that it has become an affair of trenches and barrages.

In the old days when two armies hammered away with battleaxes and swords and spears, there must have been a terrific thrill in fighting. Now you are wounded by an

enemy a mile away, you don't have the satisfaction of giving *quid pro quo*, it's an entirely haphazard affair for the individual soldier. But in football you have the clash of battle, you fight desperately against men exerting all their strength and power against you. There is nothing to equal it.

The fellow who had another year or two in which to play for the college drew pleasure unalloyed from our celebration, but for myself and two or three other seniors, it was too much like attending our own funerals.

Because of the exertions of the game and my sufferings during the twenty hours preceding it in captivity, I slept deep and hard that night, to be awakened by the ringing of the telephone beside my bed. I rolled over sleepily, took up the apparatus and muttered "Hello" into the receiver. The voice that answered me shocked me wide awake in an instant.

"Is this Mr. William Alden?"

"Yes; it's Miss Abbott, isn't it?"

"Oh, you recognized my voice."

"It's a voice I would never forget."

"Thank you. I suppose you wondered why I called you."

"I don't wonder at all, I'm just glad."

"Well, I wanted to tell you I saw the game yesterday, and you were marvelous."

Although she could not see me, I felt myself blushing with delight.

"I was just one of the team."

"You were the team. When a girl has been as mean as I have been to you I suppose you think I have a nerve calling you up to congratulate you."

"Can't I see you, Miss Abbott? There is something I want to tell you. Something you should know."

"I hoped you would ask to see me; I didn't dare ask you."

"Where are you?"

"Here in the hotel. If you will come into the ladies' room in an hour, I'll be waiting for you."

"I'll be there in less than that time."

"I won't. I've got to dress. Au revoir."

I dressed in haste, my hands trembling with excitement. It seemed incredible that haughty Rose Abbott should have called me, and fished to make an engagement. In half an hour I was waiting in the empty ladies' salon, and I paced up and down for three quarters of an hour before she came. In her black furs, and crimson toque, she looked more like an American Beauty rose than ever when she came, rather shyly, into the room.

And immediately that curious antagonism which had always come between us asserted itself. I sought an excuse for asking for the interview, tried to make it appear as business.

"Miss Abbott, the reason I wished to see you was to explain a most extraordinary incident which occurred night before last."

"Oh," she said stiffening in her manner. "Is that the reason?"

"You observed that I entered the game late yesterday."

"When your team was almost beaten." she said, coldly.

"The reason was that I was decoyed to an apartment in New Haven, knocked on the head and kept a prisoner all night. I only escaped at the moment the game started."

"Really?" she exclaimed. "What a dreadful thing. I supposed players had to stay at their training quarters and couldn't be wandering around to be decoyed."

"I happened to be the captain of the team and was free to go about, but I should not have left the quarters if I had not received this letter."

I passed her the note which she read without much interest until she saw the signature. Then her eyes dilated and her cheeks flushed.

"You believe I wrote you this note?" she demanded, angrily.

"Of course not. Not for a second."

"Then why did you pay any attention to it?"

"I—er—well, I hoped you wrote it."

"Why?"

"You had sent me a telegram of congratulation before the Princeton game which I answered. It seemed reasonable, after that, if you were in town you might be willing to chat with me."

"I got a telegram of thanks from you

but I didn't know what for. I supposed it was some of your sarcasm."

"Who sent me the telegram, and the letter?"

"I don't know," said Rose slowly. "It's the most dreadful thing I ever heard of. Let us sit down."

She proceeded to a sofa, seated herself and motioned to me to sit beside her, which I did with alacrity.

"It must have been somebody who knew of our acquaintance, and there are not many," I surmised.

"True. Do you suppose it was that maid, Helma? She might be consorting with a lot of criminals. I wish you could realize how I regret that mad impulse which made me induce her to sue you."

Helma! I had not thought of her. But I was positive that Anderson was the culprit, except that I hesitated to name him because I did not know their relations.

"Did you come here with Anderson?" I said tentatively.

She raised her eyebrows. "No, indeed. I came with father."

"The last time I saw you, you said you were engaged to him; that's why I mentioned him."

"That was after you had said abominable things to me."

"For which I am very sorry, I assure you."

"I know. You said so in your letter."

"Letter, what letter?"

She colored and looked confused. "I—er—really—well, never mind."

"I didn't write you a letter, or at least, I didn't post it."

"Tell me your plans for the future."

"Wait a minute," I said, having the temerity to lay my hand on her arm, and delighted to observe she didn't shake it off. "I wrote you a long letter the day after I came up from Hydeport, and it was such an abject affair I was ashamed to post it. The letter disappeared and frankly, I suspected Anderson of stealing it. Did you see that letter?"

She was crimson to the eyes, but nodded her head.

"How did you see it?"

"Mr. Anderson showed it to me. He thought it was very funny, and, from his standpoint, the things you said about me seemed insulting, so he supposed it would make me indignant. He said that he saw the letter lying on your desk addressed to me, and he thought he might as well deliver it. I didn't take it in the way be expected. I was very angry with him for reading it, despite his excuse that the flap was open. I kept it."

"Were you angry with me?"

"A little."

"Only a little?"

"Mostly because you were such an utter idiot."

"Well, I'm glad you read the letter," I said with boldness. "I meant everything in it."

"About my being stubborn and so on."

"Yes, and the fact that I was sick with love for you, have been for three years, am now. So that's out."

Rose smiled, a friendly smile, yet with a trace of her old time mockery in it.

"Then as the case stands, you are in love with me, and you think I am in love with you."

"I don't suppose you are," I said, humbly.

"I was in a curious position," she said gently. "I had your letter, but because of the manner in which I received it, I could not reply. I had to wait until you really wrote me and you never did. If it hadn't been for your telegram a week ago I could not have called you this morning."

"Then you are not angry with me?"

"Well, not very."

"Look here, Miss Abbott, you know I love you. Now put me out of my misery."

"Imagine a man calling a girl 'miss,' and making love to her."

"I always think of you as Rose."

"Do you? But get back to Anderson, you suspect him of being responsible for this attempt to keep you out of the game?"

"I am sure of it. I questioned my jailor, and saw by his manner that Anderson was one of their gang. I hope you don't like him."

"Ever since that night in my father's library when I saw him strike you in the face, I've hated him, the beast."

"Rose," I exclaimed. "You do love me. Don't you?"

Rose hung her head, and didn't answer, but I was brave enough now. I put my right forefinger under her chin, lifted her adorable flower face and kissed her on the red lips. Finding no resistance I threw my arms around her and kissed her hard and passionately. To my joy, her lips responded, and then she got her two hands on my chest and pushed me away.

"Drive on, Jeeves," she said with a smile. "This is a public place and you are a famous person. Behave yourself."

"But, Rose," I demanded. "If you loved me all this time why did you treat me so?"

"Because you infuriated me," she said frankly. "I think I fell in love with you that day we had the conflict in the boat and you saved my life and were rude to me. I kept thinking about you, though I never saw you, and I felt you had gone into the world to make something of yourself. Three years later I saw you in your boat, apparently the same lazy native, and I was so angry I could have murdered you.

"The next day you turned up as my father's chauffeur and that was the last straw. The man I had liked was content to be a servant, which made it impossible for us ever to be friends. That's why I was so rotten to you all the while you worked for us."

"I only took the job so I could be near you."

"At times I thought that must be the reason, but I couldn't taunt an explanation out of you. When I found out about the real estate transaction I naturally assumed that to be the reason you came to our service, which meant that I had nothing whatever to do with your actions."

"I begin to understand."

"Well, I met you at Marblehead, found that you had been masquerading all the time; that you had made something of yourself, and thought so little of me that you had left us without an explanation. I have got a bad temper and I was ready to kill you that night. Of course I didn't really intend to whip you but after you kissed me I had to assert myself."

"Of course."

"I came home in a blind fury, and I nursed my wrath. Then I happened to have a chat with Helma who tried to make me think you had been making love to her and had abandoned her when you came into some money. So I advised her to sue you for breach of promise, knowing how that would humiliate you. Besides I thought it would bring you to Hydeport for an explanation, and it did. I was anxious to put things right with you when I called on you in the morning, but you have always had a nasty manner, and when you told me I was in love with you I just had to show you you were wrong."

"But I was right, all the time," I declared as I kissed her without the slightest resistance.

"Huh huh. When I came back from the beach and found you had fled, I was unfit for human association for a week. Then that idiot Anderson came back with the letter he had stolen from you. What a fool he was to think that your dear letter would make me angry with you. I've carried it with me ever since."

"You darling!"

She slipped her hand into mine and continued:

"I've seen every Harvard game this year. Sometimes I thought you must recognize my voice, I cheered so loud. And I was so proud to think I was responsible for your being in college and being a football hero."

"I'm not much of a hero, and in a week I'll be forgotten."

"Not by Harvard, or me. Now the question is how to tell my father."

"I suppose he will be furious."

"He'll have to get over it."

"I've got money enough to start in business. I'll leave college right away. Let's elope!"

Rose patted my hand and shook her head.

"We'll be married in June, after commencement, when you have your diploma."

"I can't wait until then."

"Oh, yes, you can. You've got to. After you've done such superhuman things to go through college, you must finish. Then

we'll spend the summer at Hydeport and in the fall start the business of living."

"I know a lot about the real estate business. I'm half in it already and with my little capital we'll get along. Of course we'll be poor for a couple of years."

"Don't forget I've got a lot of money and come into more when I marry."

"I can't use your money."

"But you have no objection to my using it, have you?"

"I suppose not."

"That's all right then. Oh, Bill, isn't everything wonderful?"

"It is probably the most marvelous world that ever was."

"Let's buy all the Sunday papers and read what they say about you."

"I don't want to read the rubbish."

"I'll read every line. I wonder how Burton Anderson feels this morning, the snake in the grass!"

At her insistence I bought several papers and brought them to her on her sofa. We opened them but the first item that caught our eye was not the football game.

Under a scare head was the following article.

> G. Burton Anderson, a New York clubman, former football player, and well known writer, was shot and killed in a brawl in the back room of a café on Main Street last night about ten thirty. The murderer escaped, but his description is in the hands of the police and they suspect that he is Charlie Morrow, a New York gambler. Anderson, Morrow, and one or two other gamblers bet heavily on Yale, presumably on information furnished by Anderson. A huge sum of money was lost, and the gamblers quarreled bitterly, according to the proprietor of the café. Finally the suspect, Morrow, is alleged to have drawn a pistol. Anderson struggled with him, the gun went off and the ex-football player fell mortally wounded. He died on the way to the hospital.

We couldn't read any more. Morrow was the man who had captured me. The quarrel was undoubtedly due to the upbraiding he received for permitting me to escape.

"Poor Burton," said Rose sadly. "Although he was practically a criminal, I knew him for years and we used to have good times together."

"It saves me from taking any action on my abduction. Don't feel sorry about him, Rose. The man was bad all through. Tell me, the morning you found me at the garage all battered up, you seemed to suspect that I had a fight with him. How did you know?"

"Why, I was awake late that night and I heard him talking to Wilkins on the driveway, through my open window. I caught your name, heard him say that you had taken him unawares but next time he would beat you to a pulp. Afterward I got the whole story out of Helma."

"Isn't there any place for us to go in this town except to sit in a public room?"

"This is very nice."

"But I want to hug and kiss you. I've been longing to so many years."

"Well," said Rose. "We have a parlor in our suite and father has gone out. I'd rather like to be hugged and kissed three years' worth."

So we went upstairs to her sitting room, occupied the sofa, sat there for hours, looked at each other, occasionally kissed and talked and talked and talked about our happiness and our future.

"You don't really think I am stubborn and bad tempered and mean, do you?" she questioned.

"I surely must have been crazy ever to think so."

"Oh, Bill," she said, blushing furiously. "I've just had a wonderful thought. Our children will be Mayflower descendants, even if I am not."

"Are we going to have children?"

"Oodles of them," said Rose.

THE END

Came Dawn

By CHARLTON ANDREWS

"YOU are a very sweet girl, Emma, and you will doubtless make some local man a wonderful wife. But in the career I'm about to launch myself on you would be hopelessly lost. To take you out of your native setting and transplant you to the hectic world of make-believe would be doing you a great wrong. For your own sake, then, my dear, from now on you and I must only be the best of friends."

Thus Ned Thorne, addressing his childhood sweetheart, Emma Cowperthwaite. Very earnest and sophisticated—blasé almost—was Ned.

Little Miss Cowperthwaite, aged seventeen, heard him out with a full heart. Her chin quivered and for a moment the tears that had welled to her eyes threatened to overflow.

But she was a brave little minx, was Emma, and a proud one. She got control of herself by a sharp effort of will, steadied her chin and her voice, and managed to brush the moisture from her eyes while Ned in gloomy magnificence was looking the other way.

Indeed, she even forced a passable smile as she replied casually, "I dare say you're right, Ned. After all, you haven't been a whole year in college for nothing. You must be a lot wiser about such things than I am."

"Oh, naturally," murmured Ned.

At the moment he felt relieved that she was taking his ultimatum so calmly. Considering their long and intimate friendship and the fact that not only they themselves, but all their relatives and acquaintances had for several years agreed that he and Emma would sooner or later marry as a matter of course, he had expected that this sudden breaking of the engagement would bring on something of a scene. Yet here was Emma actually smiling as she coolly accepted the loss of him!

"Oh, well," he consoled himself, "girls haven't the depth of feeling about such things that we men have."

A minute later Ned Thorne bade his childhood sweetheart a last good-by in the

most distressingly matter-of-fact terms, with scarcely a trace of regret in his voice, with the most formal pressure of the hand.

"Good luck to you, Emma," he said briskly. "I hope you'll get a fine husband one of these days, who'll give you a good home and—and—er—appreciate you."

"Good-by Ned," replied little Miss Cowperthwaite, exerting all her moral strength to continue casual. "And I hope you'll be a great success in your chosen profession and—and marry an experienced—er—artist like yourself, a girl capable of understanding you—and your genius."

Next moment she had disappeared into the house, and Ned was striding down the walk to the gateway.

Somehow he could not escape a sense of mortification. If he could have seen little Emma as she threw herself into an armchair in the Cowperthwaite drawing-room and burst into an agony of bitter sobbing, perhaps Ned's hurt self-importance would have been mollified.

"Oh, well," he reflected. "At any rate, that's that. I probably won't see Emma again for a long, long time. Meanwhile—"

Yet try as he would it was many a day before Ned succeeded in even partially banishing from his thoughts the happy hours he had spent with this gay, bright, affectionate creature.

She was a good little pal, Emma. And always carefree and—and wonderful company—and sympathetic—and so darn pretty—

But, of course, as Peter Waite had so often said, nothing—least of all a skirt—should be allowed to stand in the way of a man's artistic career.

Peter Waite was Ned's roommate at Barnwell College. Barnwell was clear across the State from Cullensville, where Ned lived with his widowed mother and his older brother, John Thorne.

John, who had been head of their family since the death of the father five years before, took on himself the responsibility of the home, leaving Ned free to follow his bent. And Mrs. Thorne was a firm believer in non-interference—so far as practicable—in the development of her two boys.

"Ned will find his work," she used to say often enough, "if we only let him alone. And blessed is that man who has found his work!"

So when Ned had ended his high school course and had gone away to Barnwell College, his mother had watched eagerly for the first signs of the vocation to which he was sooner or later to experience a call. The first intimation came upon her with devastating abruptness.

"Imagine it, if you can, mother: I played *Bassanio* in 'The Merchant of Venice' for Cap and Bells last night. And although the part is considered a very small one I practically ran away with the show. *Shylock*, *Portia*, and all the rest were laid in the shade! Peter Waite, who is acknowledged to be the best amateur player this college ever turned out, says I'm a born actor. 'Ned,' he said after the show last night, 'stick to this profession, and you'll be another Barrymore!' And Peter's leaving school this semester to accept a position in the Oglethorpe Stock Company in Yonkers—"

Thus Ned wrote his mother one fateful day.

So that was his call—he was to seek his career on the stage. Mrs. Thorne, whose male relatives had always been eminent doctors or lawyers or preachers, resolutely stifled her disappointment.

"He's my young one," she boldly reminded John Thorne that evening, "and what he most dearly wants he must have."

Brother John had shown a marked tendency to sneer from the moment he had been allowed to read Ned's letter.

"Whatever you say, mater," he concluded. "But I know it'll be an awful come-down to your pride to have a son who paints his face for a living."

"Come-down or no come-down," she answered firmly, "I'm his mother, and as such in moments like these I've got to be a good sport no matter how painful."

Thus it came about that after a not wholly creditable year as a freshman at Barnwell Ned Thorne got the family permission to leave college and go on the professional stage.

It was Peter Waite who virtually decided

Ned. Peter, as has been indicated, had for almost three months now been playing—as he described it—"fourth or fifth business" in the Oglethorpe Stock Company in Yonkers. And Peter's influence with the proprietor of that highly successful family amusement enterprise had been so great that he had succeeded in obtaining for Ned a promise of employment as a member of the company during the coming season.

"It's great stuff, Ned, old son," Peter assured him almost patronizingly. "Of course, the salary's small and the work's hard—to begin with. But think of what it leads to! Broadway and your name up in lights and on the twenty-four sheets!"

"I'd jump at it in a minute," Ned assured him earnestly, "if it weren't for one thing—"

"Don't tell me!" Waite interrupted. "I know. It's a frail."

"Yeh," admitted Ned with an apologetic shrug.

And then he told his friend all about little Emma Cowperthwaite, who had lived all her life in the same block with Ned and who was virtually engaged to marry him and who was so pretty and vivacious and—

"Makes no difference," Peter Waite stoutly interposed. "Not if she was the belle of twenty Cullensvilles. I ought to know. I had to give up just such another gal as you describe, myself. But I knew it simply had to be done.

"No, buddy, your little Emma is probably all that you say of her, and she'll doubtless make some local man a wonderful wife. But in the career you're about to launch yourself on she'd be hopelessly lost. Why, man alive, to take a small town girl like that out of her native setting and transplant her to the hectic world of make-believe would be doing her a great wrong. For her own sake from now on you and she must only be the best of friends."

"I guess you're right, Pete, at that," concluded Ned Thorne, thoughtfully stroking the chin he had so recently begun to shave.

II.

It was a real call and no mere hallucination which Ned Thorne had experienced. In September he began in the stock company in Yonkers as a general utility man. In October he was their juvenile lead.

During his first week he came on the stage as one of the college chums of the hero and spoke six lines. During the second week he acted as stage manager, ringing the curtain up and down and running hither and yon doing the "effects"—door slams, telephone jingles, and "voices off." In the third week the leading man, after an overfree indulgence in synthetic gin, was abruptly forced to take to his bed.

Both Peter Waite and another young gentleman of the company confidently expected to be called into the leading man's shoes. To their astonishment and chagrin, however, it was Ned Thorne to whom the part was intrusted.

"I watched you week before last," said Jim Allison, proprietor of the company, "and you did very well. Very well, indeed—with what little you had. I'm going to take a chance on you. Besides, you're up in the lines, aren't you?"

"Letter perfect!" declared Ned briskly. In addition to his other duties he had been acting as general understudy.

"Good," said Allison definitely. "Rehearsal at ten o'clock."

So satisfactory was Ned Thorne's performance that Monday evening and all the rest of the week that Jim Allison cast him for the lead in the next three bills.

It was, of course, sound business. The regular leading man had this time found an unusually potent variety of gin, and his recovery was deliberate. During his illness he received only half salary. Ned Thorne, meanwhile, more than filled his place without any increase in his beginner's stipend.

As an experienced showman Allison naturally knew how to capitalize youthful ambition.

Of course Allison could not be expected to know that Al Roberts, the famous Broadway theatrical manager, would drop in at the Oglethorpe Theater one evening when young Thorne was playing *Harry Brander* in "A Boy's Mother."

Al's chauffeur, to avoid running down a street urchin, had jammed the Rolls into a

trolley pole. The great producer was making for the nearest garage when his eye lighted on one of Jim Allison's three-sheets announcing the week's bill at the Oglethorpe. And there was the dingy old theater itself right around the corner.

"Watcha say we drop in and see the first act?" suggested Roberts, as usual following an impulse.

He was addressing his traveling companion, who happened to be Mallory Watkins, author of most of America's riskiest farces, "Come on, kid; maybe it 'll be terrible enough to hand us a laugh. Besides, 'A Boy's Mother' was written by Elbert Marks, and I want you to see what kind of work a *good playwright turns out*."

So Al Roberts and Mallory Watkins bought a pair of balcony seats—for which the former characteristically allowed the latter to pay—and slipped in unnoticed among the throng of factory workers who made up the majority of the Oglethorpe's patrons.

The two men had come to see the first act only, but they remained till the final curtain. Then Roberts hastened back stage, sought out Ned Thorne's dressing-room, and introduced himself.

"Kid," said Al, glowing with enthusiasm, "I enjoyed your performance great. You've got a lot of stuff in you. Drop in at my office on Forty-Second Street some afternoon this week. I may dig up a job for you. The hardest thing I have to do these days is to find young men who can act. With the gals it's different. They mostly take to the stage like a duck to water. But the boys are terrible.

"How much they givin' you here? Fifty? Well, I wouldn't think of startin' you out under a hundred an' fifty. And with *me* as your manager there wouldn't be any limit to what you might do. Well, so long, buddy. Good luck and God bless you!"

III.

So it was that in January Ned Thorne opened on Broadway in Al Roberts's newest delectation, "The Haunted Mattress." Audiences and critics instantly liked Ned. He was so frank and boyish and good-looking—so assured and yet so completely without self-consciousness.

Besides, under the tutelage of Roberts's stage director, Ned was rapidly learning the tricks of his new trade or, as the director preferred to term it, the technique of acting.

Ned was more than happy. He wrote glowing accounts of his success to his mother. He spent his leisure making the acquaintance of the celebrities of Broadway—actors, playwrights, managers—names that had been almost as demigods to him since at the age of twelve or thereabouts he had developed his first flair for the theater.

There were parties every night after the performance, where Ned met members of other theatrical companies, including the choruses. He rose before noon only when a morning rehearsal had been called by the meticulous director.

Naturally in the whirl of success and excitement Ned almost forgot little Emma Cowperthwaite. He did think of her once when his mother wrote him that Emma had gone out West somewhere to visit relatives. And occasionally he would recall her for a moment to contrast her with one or another of the Broadway butterflies with whom he was now nightly thrown into contact—gay, glittering, flashing creatures who spoke principally in epigrams—"wise cracks," they called them—who were all sophistication and audacity and nimble wit.

How eminently right was Peter Waite! Emma Cowperthwaite was just a small town girl, pretty and sympathetic and companionable and all that. But never the type for the wife of a Broadway star—which Ned with reason was confident that he soon would be.

Indeed, success poured rather than rained on young Thorne. Managers began to bid for his services. Al Roberts called him into the office at length, raised his salary another hundred dollars, and sought to secure his services for a term of years under contract.

It was at this point that Ned's mother fortuitously intervened. Mrs. Thorne was not only a good sport; she was also a business woman.

"My child," she wrote repeatedly and

with emphasis, "sign no contracts yet. So long as you are progressing they only restrict you. And when you cease to progress the other fellow will find a way to get out of his agreement. Five years at three-fifty a week, indeed! In less than five years I shall expect you to be making three-fifty a day!"

And as things turned out Mrs. Thorne was by no means overconfident.

One afternoon in April Ned received a telephone message in response to which he dropped in an hour later at the Ritz to meet Arnold Craft. Craft had just been elected first vice-president of the newly reorganized Positive Pictures, Incorporated. He was in New York particularly to engage new acting talent.

Positive was about to make another picture at their Long Island studio. Would Thorne consider working in it? It would not interfere with his engagement at the theater. He would merely have to get up earlier in the morning. And for his labor Positive would pay him at the rate of five hundred dollars a week.

Ned had only one qualm about accepting Arnold Craft's offer: he would for some weeks have less time to spend with Leone Crane. Leone was the gorgeous young songbird of the Melody Box Revue who had lately been absorbing most of Thorne's free time.

Leone—at least in her war paint, which Ned had never yet seen her without—was dazzlingly beautiful. And the quality of her wit, the steady flow of her slangy, drawled, satirical chatter was a constant delight. Moreover, she was the besieged of all besiegers among the smart men about town.

To be seen with her after the show at the Rue de Rivoli or any of the other leading night clubs was in itself a distinct *cliché* of importance even to so popular and so noted a young Broadwayite as Ned Thorne was now getting to be. Leone Crane must have been the sort of woman Peter Waite had had in mind when he so sagely counseled Ned to think no more long thoughts about small town girls.

It would be hard to give up those late dates with Leone. However, there was Ned's career to be considered and the justification of his mother's faith in him and five hundred a week, which after all was none too much for a fellow to make, heaven knew, when you considered the cost of living along the Great White Way.

So Ned Thorne went into pictures—that humbler branch of "the profession" which he had hitherto despised. And there again his engaging, boyish good looks and talent stood him in good stead.

When the officials of Positive Pictures, Incorporated, had viewed the first print of "A Woman Scorned," without exception they commented favorably on the impression the new juvenile had made.

"It's a fine led Arnold picked there," said Adolph Abramowitz, voicing the general opinion of his fellows. "Gif him hef a chence and he should ought to make another Ben Lyons. Is he under gontract?"

There followed various negotiations by wire, as a result of which in June, when "The Haunted Mattress" had decided to call it a season, Ned Thorne, after a hasty visit with his mother in Cullensville, returned to New York and became a motion picture actor exclusively.

As he waited with Mrs. Thorne there at the dingy frame railroad station, so familiar from his childhood, it flashed over Ned that somehow there was something lacking from the scene. And then he laughed as he recalled the many times he had departed from this same platform to visit relatives at North Bend or to go back to college at Barnwell.

Somebody else besides his mother had always been here to bid him a half-smiling, half-tearful good-by—a pretty little thing with a mass of bronze curls and big brown eyes.

"Have you forgotten Emma entirely?" inquired Mrs. Thorne when Ned had explained what had amused him.

"I'm afraid so, mother. It all seems so far away—little Emma—and the Ford coupé—and the soda fountain at Smith's drug store. It seems incredible that that's what life was for me—only a few short years ago!"

"Emma was a lovely girl," persisted Mrs. Thorne a bit dreamily.

"Oh, beyond question! You couldn't beat little Emma—for a small town girl."

"Of course," continued his mother, brightening, "she could hardly be expected to interest a man like you *now*—after all your success and experience. Yes, I can see your point of view, son. Emma was all right for Cullensville—"

"But not for New York," cut in Ned decisively. "Certainly not for Hollywood, where I'll have to go sooner or later."

IV.

However, it was nearly another year befor Ned was called to Hollywood. Meanwhile, he spent his days and often his nights at hard labor in the studios of Long Island.

Whenever Positive had no part for him they would either "loan" him—as they termed it—to some other company or send him out for a tour of personal appearances. These tours were a subject of much amusement to Ned and his fellow-workers.

"It's odd, you know," he would say, "but about the only times I've ever been in picture theaters I've been on the stage. I've always loathed the movies. I often wonder what people see in them?"

"Lovely women like me," Rhoda Begova or Fritzi Beautiful or Queenie Navarre would assure him caressingly. "And handsome lads like you with real pantomimic genius!"

"Quit your kidding," Ned always retorted. But secretly he wondered if they were not at least partially right.

Certainly he was even more of a success on the screen than he had been on the stage. They had begun to feature him already, and another year would undoubtedly find him a star.

And fortunately, his friends all said, success had not spoiled him in the least. He remained affable, democratic, generous. He put on no airs, made no pretenses. He was never annoyed when somebody came along who had "known him when."

Ned, indeed, was as popular with the "grips" and electricians and carpenters as he was with his fellow-players—perhaps even more so. His unaffected, boyish candor placed him in rather striking contrast with many of the older celebrities of the screen—in fact, with his young competitors, whose heads were usually turned with the first inhalation of success.

Naturally Ned was in great demand at all the social funtions of the Eastern film colony. The women of the screen had soon quite stolen him away from his former associates of the stage. Even Leone Crane, who had now taken to the road with her revue, was soon obliterated from Ned's memory.

Screen vamps vamped him, and baby-stare stars subjected him to their most studied wiles. Life for Ned outside of working hours had become just one date after another.

One by one in the course of the year the famous actresses of Hollywood came to Long Island and into the life of Ned Thorne.

They were new to him in every sense. His dislike of the movies had prevented his seeing them on the screen. He amazed them, indeed, with his complete ignorance of the most famous members of his new profession.

"No, I've never seen Marguerite Panthea or Dawn Hayes or Alberta Nevinson," he confessed one evening to the great Queenie Navarre. "As a matter of fact, my darling, unpardonable as it'll probably seem to you, I've never so much as caught a glimpse of your exquisite self upon the silver sheet!"

And by way of unspoken atonement he pressed a warm kiss on the gleaming shoulder of the gorgeous Miss Navarre.

Outraged she drew away from him. "I've been on every screen in New York all this winter!" she exclaimed. "Don't you ever go to pictures?"

"My dearest one," Ned replied quite truthfully, "I'm too busy *acting* in pictures."

"But evenings—"

"My evenings are devoted to you."

So they were just then; so they *had* been exclusively now for some weeks. And before Queenie had been Cecile Mallenby; and before Cecile, Irene Adair; and so on.

In fact, Ned was just now in the midst of his seventh love affair since he became a picture actor. Quite wonderful these

adventures of the heart had all been—happy days and nights with golden girls—beautiful, fascinating, luxurious, radiant of success.

It was a bit strange to Ned that none of these love passages had given any signs of permanency. Other men fell in love with these women and married them. Other men were always in love with them at the same time that young Thorne was on deck, and such rivals hated this upstart, always openly and sometimes ominously.

Notably Algernon LaDuque, from whom Ned had all unconsciously stolen the volatile Fritzi Beautiful, and Luis Otranto, who had for a time lost the "Russian Bernhardt," Rhoda Begova, to this youthful Barrymore—"*fresh* from the stage," as Luis would scornfully describe Ned.

With Queenie Navarre, however, things looked different. Queenie was truly magnificent—a tall, black-haired madonna with the devil flashing from her black eyes—and she loved Ned Thorne with a love passing the love of all other women.

Queenie, indeed, had loved a number of men in that hectic fashion. Some of them she had even married—and divorced. Owing to the complications of our legal systems just which she had married and which she had divorced was a matter of some uncertainty to Queenie—a matter, indeed, which her attorneys were endeavoring to have the courts straighten out.

When Ned did finally journey out to Hollywood to join the main division of "his beloved industry" it was to be greeted with ecstatic triumph and much public demonstration of affection by the magnificent and ebullient Miss Navarre. Thenceforward her life and soul, she told all and sundry, were dedicated to this handsome juvenile.

Miss Navarre was five years Ned's senior, and she obviously did not measure up to the Cullensville idea of what constitutes a lady. But these facts young Thorne generously overlooked.

"Queenie's all right," he assured Peter Waite. Peter had lately followed Ned to Hollywood in the hope that his successful friend might land him, too, in pictures. "She drinks a little more than is good for her sometimes, and her language isn't always just what you'd expect to hear in the Sunday school classroom. But what of it? There's nothing depraved about her.

"She's just a big-hearted, impulsive, generous girl. Besides, she's assured me herself that when we're married she'll settle down and be a regular, old-fashioned wife. The fact is, she's awfully tired of this wild Hollywood stuff. She told me last night she hasn't been to a changing-husbands party in months."

"You're absolutely right, Ned," Peter Waite solemnly assured him. "I'm glad to see you're broad-minded—as a man of the world ought to be. The old Cullensville training hasn't left any stigma on you. God, what narrow, uncomprehending people there are in the world! I've no doubt Miss Navarre will make you a wonderful wife—a wife that knows life and appreciates you. By the way, Ned, my hotel bill's three days overdue. Could you lend me fifty more till I get a start?"

So young Thorne announced to his mother back East, his engagement to Queenie Navarre. He had at last found the woman he needed.

He was sure his mother would admire Queenie when she knew her. Meantime she must discount any gossip she might hear. Hollywood, after all, was different from Cullensville. And there is no malice equal to that inspired by envy. And so forth.

Ned invested the greater part of his savings in the engagement ring. It was set with twin diamonds, heavy and deep and of extraordinary blue-whiteness. An expensive bauble, certainly; but Ned felt that no ordinary trinket would suffice for a woman who already owned basketfuls of jewels and who, indeed, was no less a personage than the world-renowned Queenie Navarre!

Their engagement was duly celebrated, beginning one Saturday evening.

First Fritzi Beautiful threw a party for them at her palatial home in the cañon at Beverly Hills. Fritzi, having amicably parted with young Thorne some weeks before, was now happily reunited with Algy LaDuque, and all was serene in *her* house.

In fact, all of Ned's former rivals, ex-

cepting those who were still enamored of Miss Navarre, had laid aside their hostility to the youngster. The guests included many of the élite of filmdom.

"I've got everybody that's anything except Dawn Hayes and Alberta Nevinson," declared Miss Beautiful early in the evening. "And they're such blue-noses they won't go anywhere. Afraid somebody might get a drink too many, I suppose."

"I'm just as glad they're out," said Queenie. "Those Puritan janes cramp my style."

"I don't know either of them," confessed Ned Thorne. "So I shan't miss 'em. They're in pictures, I suppose?"

The party was an enthusiastic one, befitting the occasion. Besides, as Luis Otranto observed, nowadays you didn't get a chance to announce Queenie Navarre's engagement every day—scarcely even every month, indeed.

White-clad Filipino boys carrying trays of cocktails in endless procession featured the earlier stages of the entertainment. At dinner there was unlimited champagne. And all through the night Fritzi's bar in the basement functioned one hundred per cent.

Ned Thorne did not indulge in alcoholic drinks.

"No liquor for me," he always said smilingly. "It makes me dizzy. Besides, I don't like mornings-after. Moreover, nothing could make me feel any better than I just naturally do."

He had no objections, however, to the drinking of others. "I like to see people have a good time in their own way," he explained; "and I'm no crape-hanger. 'Live and let live' is my motto."

Everybody else at Fritzi's party drank freely, Miss Navarre perhaps a little more freely than the rest. It was not many minutes before conversation and good-fellowship reigned throughout the little palace in the cañon.

Everybody spoke in tones about ten times too loud. Everybody laughed inordinately at every word that anybody—particularly himself—uttered. What would ordinarily be classed as extreme banality here passed for scintillant wit. Alcohol had for the moment lifted them all from the dull commonplace to intellectual Titanism. Of course this was not the case with Ned Thorne. To him their flashing *mots* were mere stupid prattle, their Gargantuan laughter was a somewhat exasperating animal neighing, their slurred diction, their feverish faces, their fixed stares and glistening eyes were matters for disturbing contemplation.

They were having a good time, he told himself as usual, in their own way. Who was he that he should criticise them? Besides, after this explosion was over they would revert to their normal selves—good-hearted, hard-working, well-meaning people. Perhaps after all, they needed this outlet for their surplus energies, even though he did not.

He viewed, therefore, with resolute equanimity, their fantastic antics, which took many forms of exaggeration and unrestraint. He laughed with them and danced with them, and kept an anxious eye on the woman who was to be his wife.

He amiably overlooked scores of breaches of decorum. This was not without some effort on his part, particularly when Miss Navarre was the object of familiarities of speech and action which stirred in Ned Thorne definite feelings of hostility and disgust.

"'Sall ri', Ned, m'boy," the understanding Miss Beautiful assured him in the midst of the festivities. "'S I allus told you, 'f you'd only take couple of drinks y'self you wouldn't care what anybody did. Don't get sore because 'Tranto's kissing Queenie. They don't mean anything by it. 'Sides this time 'morrow they'll both forget it."

Ultimately Miss Navarre arrived at a stage in her potations when exhilaration gave place to extreme discomfort.

"Neddy boy," she explained to her fiancé, "I feel shick. Ta' me ou' doors, f'r Go's sake!"

Ned took her outdoors and ministered unto her. "There now," he said after a painful interval. "Now you'll feel better. We'd better run along home now, hadn't we?"

Miss Navarre collected her physical faculties in order to concentrate on Ned a

look of supreme scorn. "Go home now?" she demanded. "I should shay not! Why, the party's jus' b'gun. Anyhow, how can you have the heart to ask me go home when I've jus' got all ready start over again?"

Further remonstrances on Ned's part were feeble. He felt that it would be a sacrilege to begin their engagement with a quarrel.

He took Miss Navarre back into the house, watched her sadly as she made for the punch bowl, and presently lost her altogether. When toward daylight the party began to break up, a search for Queenie failed to reveal any trace of her.

Ned Thorne at length departed for home alone in his roadster, the echoes of maudlin gibes sounding in his ears.

V.

Ned telephoned Miss Navarre at three the following afternoon.

"I'm awfully sorry I missed you last night, Neddy darling," she said huskily. "But I got into some sort of jam. I'll tell you all about it later. No, I can't let you see me now; I'm feeling rather low. You haven't forgotten that we're all going up to Algy's to-night? Oh, we couldn't possibly offend Algy! You call for me at nine. I'll be all right by that time."

Algernon LaDuque's party—like most others of its kind—was merely a repetition of Fritzi's affair. There were the same guests, the same drinks, the same inane jabber, and the same heartache for Ned Thorne.

His discomfort culminated rather early in the evening when he discovered that Miss Navarre, who by now had entirely forgotten a day of violent headache and jangled nerves, was not wearing his engagement ring.

"Neddy boy," she laughed when she had kissed him resoundingly, "I was wondering when you'd notice it. The fact is I lost your cute lil ring las' night—las' night—and I don't know where. How should I know where I lost it when I don't know where I was?"

A roar of laughter greeted this exquisite sally. Only Ned Thorne seemed unappreciative of Miss Navarre's superb wit.

"Never mind, laddy," she consoled him. "If it doesn't turn up you can get me another one. I won't mind even if you wait a couple of months."

As soon thereafter as he could make his escape without attracting undesirable notice Ned found his way to the pergola. It was quite dark there in the shadow, and as he thought himself alone he may have vented his heartache in a profound sigh or two.

At any rate, he presently sprang to his feet with a start when—as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness—he discovered that some one else was sitting on a bench not ten feet away.

Next moment the some one spoke, and the voice was unmistakably the voice of Emma Cowperthwaite—little Emma from Cullensville.

"Hello, Ned," she said simply. "Don't you know your old friend?"

He strode up to her eagerly and peered into her face—that sweet, familiar, sympathetic face with its big brown eyes.

"Emma!" he gasped. "What on earth are you doing here?"

She seemed rather surprised at the query. "Don't you know?" she asked.

"I hadn't the slightest idea you were in this part of the world!" he assured her as he took her hand and pressed it warmly.

At the moment as if by magic his unhappiness seemed to drop away from him. A rush of old-time contentment overwhelmed him.

"Emma!" he murmured. "God, but I'm glad to see you!" And then without taking any thought he swept her into his arms.

When she could free herself little Miss Cowperthwaite laughed—not at all discontentedly.

"Ned!" she protested gayly. "You—an engaged man! And—I'm happy to note—*not* a drinking one."

"No, no," he insisted, not releasing her altogether. "I'm not engaged. Or if I am, I won't be before another hour. Oh, what a damn fool I've been! Emma darling, I'll never doubt Providence again: He let you come here—*now*—!"

Presently it occurred to him to ask her

how she had happened to come—if, indeed, she had not been brought here in a golden cloud or at least a chariot of fire.

"I'm a tourist in a way, Ned," explained Emma, measuring her words. "Some friends got me an invitation to this party to-night. I wanted to see all the sights of Hollywood."

"You haven't been inside?"

"I peeped in for just a moment. Then I decided to come out here and round up my courage. You know I'm a bit timid about such things—"

"Don't go in," Ned implored her. "You don't belong. You'd be utterly disgusted—as I'm beginning to be—"

"Even you, Ned?"

"Even I—with all my knowledge of the world. Oh, Emma darling, I'm sick of it. I've seen life, I tell you. I've run the gamut of human emotions. And I'm through. You don't know anything about it all, thank the Lord!

"Emma, I'll never cease being grateful for this opportunity to tell you that I wouldn't trade you for all the rich and famous women alive, that you're the dearest, sweetest, truest, realest woman that ever breathed, and that I want more than anything else in all the world to have you for my wife!"

"Well," said the girl, evidently both amused and touched. "I *am* glad—after all that—that you haven't been drinking. You mean to say, Ned, that you'd actually prefer little Emma Cowperthwaite, of Cullensville to the world-famous Queenie Navarre?"

"I do!"

"Don't forget, Ned, that in the career that you've launched yourself on, I'd be hopelessly lost. Besides, to take me out of my native setting and transplant me to the hectic world of make-believe would perhaps be doing me a wrong."

"Don't, please!" Ned Thorne with bitter contrition recognized his own—and Peter Waite's words. "Forget what a young ass I was, Emma darling, and say you'll marry me. Please!"

Before Miss Cowperthwaite could reply there came a burst of hilarity from the house. A door had opened and shut, and a white-clad figure was ambling unsteadily down the path.

"Miss Navarre—" began Emma in well-feigned alarm.

"No, not Miss Navarre," retorted the newcomer, peering down at her; "Miss Beau'ful. Who the devil is it? Why, it's Dawn! Dawn Hayes! I thought you refuse' invitation?"

"I changed my mind," said Emma quickly, "at the last moment."

Ned Thorne was by now staring incredulously at his childhood sweetheart. "Dawn Hayes," he muttered like one in a trance. "Dawn Ha—"

"Why, of course," snorted the unsteady Miss Beautiful, dropping down on the bench beside them. "Di'n't you know who she was? He doesn' know anybody! Mr. Thorne, lemme present Miss Dawn Hayes, young woman whole dam' worl's gone cuckoo about. Miss Hayes, Mr. Thorne."

"Emma, you—you mean you're in pictures—?" he stammered.

The fact of the matter was slow in percolating to his bewildered brain. Certainly the irony of the situation was entirely lost on him.

Miss Beautiful, not realizing how ludicrous it really was, burst into uncontrollable merriment.

"*Is* she in pictures?" she asked loudly again and again. "*Is* she in pictures?"

"Yes, Ned," Emma confessed, "I've been acting for the screen now for more than a year."

"Emma Cowperthwaite—on the screen—Dawn Hayes," he murmured dazedly. "My Lord, I'd better start going to the movies!"

THE END

Charlie Chong and Beauty's Queen

By JAMES PERLEY HUGHES

"WE called to see if you could give us some help with our publicity. The hospital fair, you know."

Dr. Hong Kew was the speaker. With him was Low Kay Toy, secretary of the Chamber of Commerce. His words were addressed to Charlie Chong, editor, advertising manager and general factotum of the *Chung Mei Bo,* Chinatown's most progressive newspaper.

"Gladly," returned the editor, laying aside the rotogravure section of the San Francisco *Chronicle* in which he had been studying the frank display of the latest models of bathing beauties, "Anything that I can do to aid your worthy cause—please command me."

Dr. Hong Kew was clothed in the impeccable raiment of his calling. Frock-coated, bespatted and top-hatted, he simply compelled respectful attention.

"Interest in the fair is lagging," Low Kay Toy explained, "although it is only three weeks off. We must do something that will attract the women, especially the girls."

"We must stimulate interest," Dr. Hong added in professional tone.

Charlie Chong adjusted purely decorative spectacles upon a youthful, retroussé nose that he might look benignly upon his visitors, and then removed them that his eyes might sweep the page of bathing beauties displayed in the *Chronicle.* Then inspiration struck like lightning's bolt.

"Can you suggest something—something—er—striking?" asked Low.

"What's the matter with a beauty contest?" demanded Chong, as though the thought had been maturing for months, "I've been thinking that something like that would be a great attraction."

"A beauty show!" Dr. Hong Kew was a conservative professional man in an instant. "Not one of those vulgar one piece bathing costume things that the *fan quai* gloat over?"

"Oh not that. He doesn't mean that, do you, Charlie?" Low Kay Toy put in with warning wink.

"Of course not," Charlie Chong knew his people and their prejudices, "but a real beauty show with clothes and everything."

A snort from the shabby pine table to his left reminded the young man that Bong Lee, his editorial assistant and former schoolmaster, was present.

The snort was not one of applauding approbation. It contained an element of outrage. Condemnation, disapproval and repudiation—all were registered in that single exhalation.

"We might try it," Dr. Hong Kew went on, after he had spent several thoughtful moments tapping his thumb nail with his glasses, "but who will we get to run this beauty contest? Who will defy the spirit of jealousy that is ever rampant in the breast of woman? Who will quit a peaceful and orderly existence to be the butt of such a thing?"

Great dramatic moments are not always in the theater of war. upon the floor of parliaments or before the multitude assembled. They happen in the most obscure places—places like the dingy editorial rooms of Chinese daily papers. This was one of those high moments and Charlie Chong was the man to whom Destiny called.

"I will run the beauty contest," was his clarion answer.

"You!" Dr. Hong Kew's professional aplomb was shaken to the lower edge of his dove colored spats.

"But I reserve the right to enter and support a candidate of my own," Chong added.

Bong Lee groaned hollowly.

"Of course. Splendid! Splendid!" Dr. Kong's enthusiasm was just a trifle affected.

"He's just the man," Low Kay Toy acclaimed.

But Bong Lee frankly sighed and took up his writing brush to continue his plodding task of turning out Chinatown Chatterings.

Left to himself, Charlie Chong again appraised the *Chronicle's* rotogravure section, scanning a full page picture labeled "The Modern Aphrodite." The girl was beautiful, he told himself, as he studied the perfect mold of her figure. And then his mind replaced the Caucasian features with the Oriental lineaments of Tze Chan, the daughter of his pudgy employer. As the vision formed before him, a flush bepinked his high cheek bones and he hurriedly laid the paper aside.

"No," he told himself," Chinese girls cannot dress like that. Not for several generations, but a beauty show—a real beauty show—will be an attraction worth having."

Next he assaulted the citadel of Tze Mong, the publisher, to get his august permission to make the contest a feature of the *Chung Mei Bo.*

"It will make good circulation material," he concluded, when he had explained his plan.

"Perhaps," was the guarded reply, "Perhaps it will increase our sales but what of that?"

"And with greater circulation, the advertising rates will be advanced," the young man added with all the guile of his race.

Tze Mong capitulated against his better judgment and the next morning's issue carried a flaming announcement that a beauty contest would be added to the fair planned for the new Chinese hospital. The second day's publicity was even more appealing than the first.

Older Chinatown took off its heavily lensed glasses and rubbed them incredulously. Older Chinatown was rocked to its slipper soles. Within the precincts of the temple, venerable Ho Si Bing, necromancer and priest of mysteries, gaped widely, baring to the gaze of the shrine rats a single yellowed tooth, not unlike their own sharp, hungry fangs.

"Spirits of the wind and water," he muttered, when articulate words returned. "By the blue-winged dragon of Szucheun—whither are we drifting?"

In the humble abode of Bong Lee, the

scholar, dour grousings were muttered as he consumed his morning rice. His quaint betrousered wife fluttered ever at his elbow, unmindful of these raspings, but solicitous that the inner man should be well stuffed before she bared her mind.

"It is true that the girls of Tai Fong are to compete to choose a queen of beauty?" she asked, when Bong had gargled his third bowl of tea.

"A *fan quai* notion," the scholar dismissed the thought as one not to be given brain room by a person who knew his Five Books and Seven Commentaries.

"But are they really going to have such a contest?"

"And what if they are?" Bong Lee glared through his glasses.

"I was only thinking of our little Bong Mei."

"Our grandchild! An entrant in a beauty contest!" Bong snorted his words in high indignation.

"But she is so beautiful," the grandmother continued placidly. "Such a flower. She would win easily and add glory to the name of Bong."

"Glory!" the husband exploded, "Glory! Stench, you mean. What says the sage of Shantung? 'A woman is a flower in the garden of the home—a weed in the common pastures of men.' Bong Mei shall be no weed"

Having been married for fifty glorious summers, the wife of Bong Lee bided her time.

Meantime Charlie Chong wrote further appeals to the pulchritude of Chinatown, beseeching that it enter the lists and compete for the honor of queen of beauty. The response was a perfect zero.

Evening of the third day saw him dash to the home of the beautiful Tze Chan, the daughter of his employer. Tze Chan and Charlie Chong had arrived at an understanding, an understanding that followed the girl's foray into the Perfect Way of her ancestors, but the red placards of marriage had not yet been pasted upon the doorpost of the publisher.

"You've simply got to help me out," he told her after he had outlined his dilemma. "Can't you get some of the girls of your set to enter? It's for the hospital, you know."

"Perhaps," Tze Chan's almond eyes were half-closed in dreamy contemplation, "I will see what I can do."

"Please, Tze Chan," this most humbly.

"Call me Ruth," the girl corrected. "Then perhaps I can contemplate so modern a thing as helping a beauty contest."

He called her Ruth and many other things that brought the happy blushes to her cheek and when he departed, Tze Chan had given a promise.

And the promise blossomed to bear early fruit. Before the time for evening rice the next day, Chinatown's most dashing flappers were entered to a girl in the beauty contest. Never had the editorial offices of the *Chung Mei Bo* bloomed with feminine beauty as they did that afternoon and Charlie Chong's desk fairly groaned with photographs and neatly filled blanks that entered the fairest girls of the community in the competition for queen.

The story leaked uptown and the English language newspapers sent reporters asking for photographs to illustrate their announcements of Chinatown's latest step toward modernity. A new avenue was opened. The white ones were interested in the plans for the first Oriental fair. Bill Bailey and his son, Tom, press agents *de luxe*, were retained to broadcast the glories of the fete through the *fan quai* press.

Beauties beyond the dreams of pulchritude continued to appear at the office and when the list of entrants was made up the next day, lo the name of Tze Chan led all the rest.

"I am going to work to see that she is the winner," Chong informed Bong Lee, when he proudly displayed a proof for his assistant's inspection, "It would never do for her to be what the white ones call an 'also ran.'"

"Queen of beauty!" the old man's faded eyes swept over the litter of photographs still encumbering Chong's desk. "Queens of beauty! There is not one whom my granddaughter, Bong Mei, does not outglory as the sun outshines the moon. I would be willing to wager a week's salary—a beggarly amount to be sure—that my Bong Mei—"

"Why don't you enter her in the contest then?"

"Oh—I couldn't think of that," Bong replied weakly. Temptation was tugging at the sleeve of his tattered jacket.

"She wouldn't stand a chance with Tze Chan," Charlie goaded.

"The Master says: 'Vanity is a broken staff upon which only a fool will lean,'" Bong Lee replied, seeking philosophic authority to dam his ebbing spirit.

"Of course if you are afraid," Chong taunted.

"By the ring-tailed tiger of Honan, I'll do it," the scholar threw back his chair and arose, battle rage lighting his hollow eyes as though he were entering the lists of physical combat. "I'll do it, if for nothing else but to show that temple rat known as Ho Si Bing that the children of Bong are worthy of a crown."

"But Ho has no children," the young man pointed out.

"That is more the reason. That sterile goat cannot compete."

II.

DAYS that followed were hectic ones. The rules of the contest read that for every dollar given to the hospital fund, ten votes would accrue to the favored beauty in whose name they were cast. Rich fathers opened plethoric purses and bought votes by the thousand. Charlie Chong coursed the streets of Chinatown getting daughterless friends to aid the cause of Tze Chan, the beautiful. He longed for resources to throw into the balance, but an ill-starred venture in the peanut market had left him with but a single dollar in the savings department of the Canton bank.

Inspiration directed his steps to the temple where the venerable Ho So Bing struggled to maintain the ancient rites, but rats were more plentiful than worshipers within those hallowed precincts.

"I want you to help me," the young man told the necromancer, when he had briefly outlined his plan.

The single yellowed fang of the ancient grinned apologetically.

"I am sorry," he replied, "but I, too, have a candidate for the queen of beauty. I was about to go to your office to make official entry. This time I shall conquer, for I intend to show that sty of ignorance known as Bong Lee that his chit of a granddaughter is like a half-baked idol compared to the glory of true beauty."

"But I am supporting Tze Chan," Charlie Chong broke in, "Why not help me. Tze Chan is beautiful."

"Merely pretty," scoffed the sage, "I am sorry for you and for the daughter of Tze, but I have determined to show once and for all that Bong Lee is little better than a goat, the common or garden variety of goat. 'The vain man bows before the winds of adversity' says the revered Kong Fu Tze. Bong Lee shall think that a typhoon is blowing."

"And who—who are you preparing to enter?" stammered the editor, pawing through his mind for a name that was not upon his list already.

"A glorious beauty—a woman who—"

"But who?"

"Kwang Ming Fu."

"The actress?" Charlie Chong could not continue. His lower jaw had fallen, dragged down by utter amazement.

Ho Si Bing drew himself up to his full five feet, one, and again his one-toothed smile broke out.

"But she's a professional—a professional beauty!" Charlie Chong had again found voice.

"But such a beauty! What says the sage of Shantung? 'Petals of the plum tree blush in her presence because of their own unworthiness.'" and the priest filled his long-stemmed pipe to puff his defiance, pausing only to add: "She will have all the votes there are to buy. With Mock Low, the millionaire, gasping to win her smile, it is all over but Bong Lee jumping off a pier head, as he should have done, long, long ago."

Entry of the famous Kwang Ming Fu caused an incipient riot to sweep through the ranks of Chinatown's flapperdom. Ancient jealousies, budding ambitions, full-blown hopes—all were laid aside to meet the attack of a common enemy.

A committee waited upon Charlie Chong, a committee with an outraged Tze Chan at its head. Behind her was massed the beauty

of Chinatown, beauty militant and indignant. As the girls entered, Tze Mong, the publisher, knocked over two chairs and a table in ignoble flight.

"Is it true—this story—that Kwang Ming Fu is to enter the race for queen?" Tze Chan demanded, when they had crowded into the small cubicle that was Chong's.

"I have just accepted the entry from Ho Si Bing," the young man replied sadly, but none the less firmly. "He brought the papers and photographs not fifteen minutes ago. I could do nothing but accept them subject to the action of the committee."

"If that woman wins, I shall never speak to you again," Tze Chan whispered in tense anger.

"But listen—look here," Charlie Chong figuratively scrambled his brain for thoughts—quick thoughts that would produce results. "Look here—Listen."

"Don't you dare let her win. She has no right to compete. She is a stage professional. It is not fair," Tze Chan summed up the situation.

Chinatown's massed beauty flounced out of the editorial demesne to confer further at the candy shop of Perfumed Loveliness.

"I don't care who wins—if only that woman is defeated," declared the publisher's daughter at the conclusion of a saccharine session.

As the last French heel of assembled beauty clicked down the rickety stairway, the pudgy face of Tze Mong peered through a crack in the door of his private office. His protruding eyes beheld the usually sprightly form of his editorial chief and advertising manager draped disconsolately over a chair, gazing into space and muttering incoherently as though he sought to conjure the aid of the ubiquitous spirits of the wind and water.

"Did not the great Kong Fu Tze say 'He who meddles in the affairs of women builds himself a house of torment'?" inquired the publisher with a malicious grin.

"Oh—I'll get this straightened out." Charlie Chong gathered himself together with a snap.

"I wish you good fortune," Tze Mong replied soberly, "For myself, I think that I shall take a little business trip to Los Angeles."

"But you have only recently returned from there."

"Nevertheless I know when to take a business trip," the other replied firmly.

Hurried steps and the wheezing of an aged man speedily mounting the stairs broke in upon their dialogue. In another instant, the gaunt form of Bong Lee, the schoolmaster, lurched through the door.

"My granddaughter! My granddaughter!" he puffed, his breath coming gustily.

"Nothing serious, I hope." Tze Mong was quickly sympathetic.

"Serious!" Bong Lee gained sufficient breath to snort, "Serious? She tells me that scum of gutters known as Ho Si Bing is preparing to enter Kwang Ming Fu, the actress, in our beauty contest."

"He has entered her," Charlie Chong corrected.

The sallow face of the scholar reddened with choler. His deep set eyes glowed with a fire that seldom burned within their somber depths. From the shabby pine table he called his desk he picked up a writing brush and meticulously broke it into four pieces.

"Unless that wretched fraud takes that woman from the race, I will break him, even as I have broken this brush," he threatened in sepulchral tones.

"Oh, I'll fix that," Charlie Chong placated, "I was just going out to see Ho Si Bing about that very matter when you came in. Some of the other contestants have also objected to Kwang Ming Fu."

"You might tell him what will happen if he refuses," Bong Lee took up a block of square ruled paper to begin his daily grist of Chinatown Chatterings. "Some day that vermin is going to die the death of one of his own temple rats. Only rats and Ho Si Bing live in the temple. They are fit companions."

"As a compromise, would you consider withdrawing your granddaughter?" asked the young man, a plan beginning to evolve in his nimble brain.

"Withdraw her!" almost shrieked the grandsire. "Withdraw her? When I have just obtained the support of the Three

Brothers' Tong? Withdraw her—to satisfy the malice of that slimy worm?"

He laughed hollowly.

It was not without misgivings that Charlie Chong waited upon the venerable necromancer in the temple. Spurred by Tze Chan's whispered threat and the possibility of open warfare should these rival ancients appeal to force, he invaded the shrine in which the patriarch was both priest and acolyte.

"I don't know just what the committee is going to do with this entry of yours," the young man began, when the subject had been broached after the fourth bowl of tea. "I am afraid that—"

"The wise are free from perplexities, the virtuous from anxiety and the bold from fear," Ho Si Bing quoted from the twenty-eighth verse of the seventh book of the Analects.

"Yes, I know," Charlie Chong hurried on, "but the girls are raving. A committee waited upon me. I cannot make a success of this thing with warfare raging about my ears."

"The man of virtue makes the overcoming of the obstacle his chief business and success only a subsequent consideration," said Ho, this time citing the twentieth paragraph of Kung Yiy-Ch'ang, smirking at the same time to bare his single tooth ingratiatingly.

"I cannot trade quotations from the masters with you, worthy Ho Si Bing," Charlie Chong repressed a rising impatience in the presence of an elder. "My learning is not enough to fence with wisdom as my weapon. Frankly, something must be done. Just before I left, the esteemed Bong Lee said—"

"Then Bong Lee has been pricked?" an unholy joy seemed to light the faded eyes of the necromancer. "He fears for his progeny."

Charlie Chong nodded soberly.

"Ha-ha-ha. I thought so," and Ho laughed the cheery note that is obtained by drawing a rusty iron nail down a window pane.

"But listen, worthy sir," the young man pleaded, "unless something is done, things will happen and it is all for the hospital, you know."

"Let that mud worm withdraw his skinny granddaughter," was Ho Si Bing's ultimatum, "and then only, will I consider your suggestion. It places me in a very delicate position for I prevailed upon the beautiful Kwang Ming Fu to enter only after much argument. Now she has her heart set upon victory. She thinks that it will advance her professionally. But if that sty of ignorance will send his ill-gotten brat back to the laundry from which she sprang, I will think of your proposal. Until then—I shall do nothing."

Gloomily Charlie Chong retired from the presence of the necromancer. He knew there was as much chance of getting Bong Lee to withdraw his granddaughter as there was to bring the holy mountain of Shan Yang across the Pacific and with it cork the Golden Gate.

Through the streets of Chinatown he drifted, his head bowed low with thought. Force of habit took his stork-like legs to the home of Tze Mong, the publisher, and he was in the presence of the lovely Tze Chan before he had awakened from his musings.

"Did that woman withdraw?" were the words with which the girl greeted him.

He shook his head sadly.

"But you said that you would attend to it."

"I have a plan," Charlie Chong was just beginning to sight a way out of the difficulty. "We must make some rules that will overcome the obstacle."

"Rules?"

"Yes," a sudden inspiration swept through his benumbed brain. "For instance—Rule Number One—all entrants must be under twenty-five years old."

"All right." Tze Chan was safely within the favored circle.

"Kwang Ming Fu is exactly twenty-six years of age," Charlie Chong went on soberly.

"Splendid!" enthused the girl, as the plan burst upon her.

"And then," he went on, further light coming with his inspiration, "and then we would limit the entries to girls who speak English."

"Does that woman speak English?"

"Not a word."

"You're a dear," and then as her eyes were cast downward, "Father has been talking of posting the red placards before our door. I told him to wait until after the contest."

III.

SWIFTLY the days winged by. The night before the fair opening saw all the entrants in the beauty contest qualify—all save Kwang Ming Fu.

Last minute declarations were many. Strange girls came to the office of the *Chung Mei Bo* bringing their photographs, girls unknown to Charlie Chong, who boasted that he was acquainted with every one in the community.

Among them was Chan Ting Moy, the daughter of Chan Lung a fisher of shrimps. Dressed in the ancestral costume of her race, a costume long since laid aside by Chinatown's flapperdom, Ting Moy was a pretty little thing. The conservative eyes of Dr. Hong Kew, who was a member of the committee, rested upon her most approvingly.

"Only a half hour to wait," said the doctor, as they checked over the lists. "Entries close at twelve."

"Clever work—that of yours in barring Kwang Ming Fu, the actress," said Low Kay Toy, who also was present, turning to Charlie Chong.

"He had to do something," croaked Bong Lee, who was still grinding out Chinatown Chatterings.

The rickety stairs leading to the editorial rooms now shrieked with the burden of many feet, heralding the coming of late contestants.

"They will have to hurry," said Dr. Hong with a glance at the clock.

Into the room dashed the diminutive figure of Ho Si Bing, the necromancer. Behind him loomed the elephantine bulk of Mock Low, known far and wide as the Crœsus of Chinatown. Then followed the members of the Canton troop of players and in their midst was Kwang Ming Fu, their star and beauty, bedizened in a costume that would have added to the glory of the Mings.

"Your tricks are vain," shrilled the little man, as he faced the committee. "Your poor wits have deceived you. We are here to qualify Kwang Ming Fu."

"But she is over age," protested Charlie Chong.

"Who says that?" boomed the raucous bass of Mock Low, speaking with the authority that his millions gave. "Who says that she is more than twenty-five short summers?"

"We understand," Dr. Hong Kew began in his most soothing bedside manner, "we have been told that she is a trifle past—"

"But who says so?" bellowed the capitalist.

"At least that is the report," added Low Kay Toy.

"We have affidavits to the contrary," Mock Low presented documents resplendent with impressive seals.

All bore witness to the youth of the beautiful Kwang Ming Fu and were signed with duly attested names of men high in the business life of Chinatown. That these men were all deeply indebted to Mock Low was a coincidence that the committee did not know.

"I am afraid that we shall have to accept them," Dr. Hong Kew whispered into the nervous ear of Charlie Chong. "We have no proof to the contrary."

"Still I know that she cannot speak English," the young man blurted out.

"Speak English—ha-ha-ha," Ho Si Bing's laugh sounded more like the shriek of a banshee than an expression of mirth. "Of course she speaks that *fan quai* tongue."

"I spikee English—no spikee English—you b'long clazy," said Kwang Ming Fu.

Charlie Chong shuddered. He did not know that valiant efforts had been made during the past week to pound one hundred *fan quai* words into Kwang Ming Fu's beautiful but adamantine skull, but as her well-rouged lips voiced this jargon, he saw his dream temples in Cathay slump noiselessly to earth.

"What says the master?" piped Ho Si Bing, reverting to Cantonese when the test had been completed. "What says the sage of Shantung? The superior man does not

depend upon tricks in the time of adversity, but relies upon virtue to conquer the wiles of his adversaries!"

Majestically he turned upon his heel, as majestically as can any man of five feet, one, and stalked toward the staircase.

"And as for you, serpent," he directed his words to Bong Lee, "I spit upon you."

"You—you—turtle's spawn," the gaunt form of the scholar trembled, rage-torn, as he voiced the most insulting words known to the Cantonese tongue.

"I spit upon you," repeated Ho Si Bing.

Bong Lee seized a near-by paste pot with one hand and the editorial shears with the other. Murderous lights danced in his eyes as he lurched to his feet. Strong hands held him in leash as Ho Si Bing clattered down the stairs, jubilating in the wake of Mock Low and the beautiful Kwang Ming Fu.

"He shall die for that," the words rattled metallicly in the wrinkled throat of the scholar. "He shall die the death of a rat, a temple rat, for his insults."

It was not for some minutes afterward that Charlie Chong found voice to speak the words that were seething in his brain.

"Gosh!" he ejaculated, returning to English as he sometimes did when deeply moved. "Gosh—Gee whiz! I think I shall telegraph to the boss in Los Angeles. It's going to be some contest."

"It will be spirited," admitted Dr. Hong Kew in the same tongue, a language he spoke with even greater precision than Chinese. "Of course our local girls will be at a disadvantage pitted against a professional beauty, especially when a millionaire is giving her financial assistance, but it should redound to the benefit of the hospital."

"Yes—it will help the hospital." Charlie Chong echoed in a hollow voice.

And then came the great day of the fair. The crucial hour was at hand. The final sale of votes for the honor of queen of beauty was about to begin in one of the great wards of the new hospital.

Crowds had poured through the building during the day, inspecting the model private rooms with their snowy coverlets, the operating room, the nursery.

All about the hospital the fair was blooming. Thousands of white ones had come to see the sights and had left much money to swell the fund for the maintenance of Chinatown's new institution.

A fan-tan game in charity's name was operating with generous play. The Yut Ye Sam lottery was functioning for the cause of mercy. A baby show had just been judged without casualties and now the final sale for the crown of the queen of beauty was at hand. The four leaders in the race were as follows:

Names.	Votes.
Kwang Ming Fu	112,560
Tze Chan	96,450
Bong Mei	88,130
Chan Ting Moy	74,240

"Tze Chan second," muttered Charlie Chong, "I'm glad I telegraphed her father. He ought to be here in a few minutes."

Again he studied the board.

"Bong Lee has been busy," he mused. "The Three Brothers' Tong is probably throwing considerable aid to him. But this Chan Ting Moy?"

He scratched his head reflectively before memory brought back the simple beauty of the shrimp fisher's daughter.

"She hasn't a chance," was his mental verdict.

A stir in the hall as Low Kay Toy took the rostrum for the final sale. The purchase of votes opened with a rush. Kwang Ming Fu and her supporters soon made her lead even more impressive and to Charlie Chong it looked like a debacle for her opposition.

The lean form of the editor seemed to shrink to even more slender proportions as block after block of votes were thrown to the beauty of the stage. Desperately he appealed to friends of long years, but their aid failed to retrieve the lost ground.

Suddenly a voice was heard above the more timid bidders.

"One thousand dollars—ten thousand votes for Tze Chan," were the words that greeted his burning ears.

He craned to see the pudgy form of Tze Mong, the publisher, elbowing his way through the crowd at the door.

"Ah—you have come—come in time," murmured Charlie Chong as he gained his employer's side.

"I shall not let my daughter be disgraced by a woman of the stage," rasped the publisher. "Why did you not let me know of this danger?"

"I thought that I had it fixed," muttered the young man, abashed. "Everything was arranged until last night. Then I telegraphed to you."

Another stir at the doorway and they saw the gaunt figure of Bong Lee crowd through and approach the temporary rostrum from which Low Kay Toy was pleading for more votes, more money. And as he progressed, the word ran from lip to ear that Bong Lee, the scholar, had just been declared the winner of the Yut Ye Sam lottery's capital prize. Two thousand dollars had dropped into the emaciated hands of the schoolmaster.

"Before we proceed further," came the announcement of Low Kay Toy, "let us see these princesses of beauty, one of whom is soon to be our queen."

Kwang Ming Fu, star of the Canton players, was the first to be summoned. Magnificent in the garments of the stage, she created a stir among the many foreigners present, who joined in the demonstration launched by Mock Low and his claque.

"She shall not win," Tze muttered to Charlie Chong. "She shall not disgrace my Chan."

Another burst of applause led by the iron hands of the Canton Theater ushers, who had been trained in the *fan quai* ways.

"That vermin known as Ho Si Bing is responsible for this," growled gaunt Bong Lee to an aid on the other side of the room. "Have you seen him?"

"He is at present engaged at fan tan," was the reply.

"May the demon of ill luck dog his steps," prayed the scholar.

And now before the crowd paraded the lovely daughter of the publisher attired in a frock that must have come from Paris. Its rich amber tones set off the creamy splendor of her skin, while the bobbed hair was arranged most bewitchingly.

The heart of Charlie Chong thundered as she smiled and he realized in a panic-stricken moment that a victory for the actress would be nothing less than a cataclysm.

"Chan must win," he whispered hoarsely to the father.

And next came Bong Mei, the granddaughter of the schoolmaster. Her dress was an adaptation of the ancient style in which the trousers of old China were replaced by the Occidental skirt. A tasteful costume and a pretty girl. The legions of the Three Brothers' Tong thundered their greeting and restraining hands were required to keep an idolatrous grandfather from throwing his recently won two thousand dollars into the hamper that ground out votes for the queen of beauty.

"If that actress wins, I shall sup to-night on the carcass of a temple rat known as Ho Si Bing," was the cannibal threat of the scholar.

"And now—Chan Ting Moy," came the words of Low Kay Toy.

Dressed in the habiliments of the olden day with dainty trousers rich with embroidery came the petite Ting Moy. Her modest jacket was covered with needlework, needlework of rare design that told the ancient legends of an ancient race. Like a beautiful portrait done on ivory by an artist of the days of China's greatest glory was Chan Ting Moy—an epitome of the beauty of her people.

"Where did that shrimp fisher's daughter get those clothes?" demanded Tze Mong in a throaty rumble from his chief of staff.

"They look like those Chan wore when she tried the ancient ways," whispered Charlie Chong.

"Chan Ting Moy—Chan Ting Moy," were the words shouted from the floor as Low Kay Toy again demanded more money, more votes, before the issue would be decided.

A flurry of bidding swept the room. Votes for Chang Ting Moy were pouring in faster than the abacus of old Leong Ng Kew, the tallyman, could count.

A screech from the doorway and Charlie Chong turned to see the diminutive form of Ho Si Bing, the necromancer, dash in, as those at the entrance parted to give him room. In his hand he held a sheaf of bills.

The fan tan game that had held forth for charity had given up large loot for the wily priest from the temple.

"Get out of my way," shrilled the little man and then waving his money aloft, "One thousand dollars in votes for the beauteous Kwang Ming Fu."

Swiftly he wormed his way towards the rostrum, while the excitement of the closing minutes of the race was holding the attention of most of the crowd. But the eyes of Charlie Chong and Bong Lee, the scholar, were fixed upon him.

Like the beam of a mechanical crane reaching down to lift a burden, the bony arm of Bong Lee lowered over intervening heads to grip the necromacer by the neck scruff.

"Vermin," hissed the schoolmaster, as he dragged his victim toward the entrance.

"Well—there's that much competition removed," sighed Charlie Chong as they disappeared.

So spirited was the contest now that few besides the young editor noted the departure of the rival ancients.

Chong turned to see Tze Chan whispering in her father's ear, begging, pleading, entreating, he could tell by her gestures. He cursed himself for his ill-advised gamble in the peanut mart. But for the frown of the gods and lowering fogs, he would have had much silver at this critical moment.

"The vote now stands," Low Kay Toy announced, as a snap tally was made, "Kwang Ming Fu—201,870; Tze Chan—"

"The votes for Tze Chan are hereby given to Chan Ting Moy, the shrimp fisher's daughter—the darling of the ancient gods," shouted Tze Mong, the publisher.

"What?" shrieked Charlie Chong when partial quiet had been restored.

"Her orders," shrilled the owner of the *Chung Mei Bo*, gesturing toward his daughter.

A wild demonstration on the other side of the room where the followers of the actress had gathered. Mock Low was at their head. Frantic purchases of votes were made to regain the ground lost by the prize beauty of Canton players.

Tze Chan hurried to the side of pretty Bong Mei, whispering earnestly as she drew the girl aside.

"One thousand dollars for Kwang Ming Fu," bellowed Mock Low in response to the urging of the actress.

"That puts her way in the lead again," Charlie Chong gasped hoarsely. "If she is elected, Tze Chan will never speak to me again."

He squirmed his way through the crowd to see powerful friends who might be urged to aid a waning cause.

"Something must be done," he appealed to Dr. Hong Kew, immaculate in his hospital white. "It will stir up an awful row if—"

"The votes of Bong Mei are given to Chan Ting Moy, the shrimp fisher's daughter," sounded the clear voice of Tze Chan through the bedlam that was raging.

Another commotion in the ranks of the followers of the actress. Appeals to Mock Low, who hesitated.

"You swine," in the sudden stillness all could hear the words of the discomfited beauty of the stage, "you swine—to let a coolie's daughter defeat me."

"Just for that—I will let her," the millionaire returned, stalking grimly from the room.

"And the winner," shouted Low Kay Toy a moment later when the totals had been computed. "And the winner—Chan Ting Moy—queen of beauty."

Quickly the crowd melted, turning its attention to the other attractions of Chinatown's first fair. Charlie Chong lingered outside, waiting to see the beautiful Tze Chan and learn his fate.

The world seemed dull and drab and drear to Charlie Chong. Life was really not worth living. He saw her coming through the door, a vision of loveliness.

"I am sorry," he began, when he had drawn her to a quiet spot. "I did all I could but—"

"Wasn't it wonderful?" the girl enthused, her eyes shining. "It came out just like I planned. I found Chan Ting Moy and loaned her my old-fashioned costume. She looked like a picture, didn't she?"

"Then you didn't care—you really

didn't want to be queen," he stammered incredulously.

"Why, silly, I only went in to help you."

"But you said that you wouldn't speak to me if—"

"If that woman won," she finished for him, "but she was defeated, wasn't she?"

A murmur of voices in the street. A cluster of men came up the steps to the hospital, a cluster divided into two groups, each carrying a brand new canvas stretcher.

A bustling of starchy nurses within. Swift, deft movements by the immaculate Dr. Hong Kew and two brand new beds with spotless covers were filled with the first patients of a brand new hospital.

Dr. Hong Kew opened the untouched register and upon its unmarked page filled out the following:

Bong Lee, schoolmaster; cuts, bruises and abrasions.

Ho Si Bing, necromancer; cuts, bruises and abrasions.

Chinatown's new hospital was in operation.

THE END

SKIN DEEP

I OWNED a gargoyle green as jade,
Which came from overseas;
He squatted on his haunches with
His tail between his knees—
Provocative and ugly, he,
But charming, if you please.

His tongue lolled impudently. He'd
A most suggestive grin,
Which seemed to hint at evil things
And subtle sorts of sin—
To scorn old-fashioned righteousness
And sniff at discipline.

Long reigned his spell insidious,
Till one house-cleaning day,
I scoured him most unwisely with
Soap suds! To my dismay,
His green complexion faded out
Into a dirty gray!

Vanished, his charm degenerate,
His wickedness of mien!
A fascinating devil—yes,
He was, when colored green—
But now, a bleached apology
He looked, of what had been!

And lots of folk resemble him,
By gargoyle, *sans* his paint;
They long to smell of brimstone strong,
And think their pose is quaint—
More interesting 'tis, to seem
A devil than a saint!

Mazie V. Caruthers.

Love in an Attic

By CHARLES DIVINE

ALLEN DOWNES enjoyed getting out in the country. This picnic party in the fine June weather, with the tablecloth spread on the green hillside under the trees, and the laughing, lunching group around it, brought refreshment to his mind as well as his body. He leaned back on the grass, his long legs stretched out in front of him, his coat taut across his solid shoulders as he rested on his elbows, an agreeable young man to look at, with straight black hair, brown eyes under wide brows, and a well-trimmed mustache.

Ordinarily shy among strangers, especially women, he admired a certain kind of audacity in people, realizing that he lacked that quality himself; and for this reason, as well as others, he gazed, fascinated, at Eleanor Kendall at the other end of the tablecloth.

He thought of the fine, spiritual release he would feel if he could go up to her and say: "You're just the kind of girl I'd like to marry." But his next thought was that she would probably reply: "You're mad!"

That was the trouble with doing anything out of the beaten track of conventional behavior. Among men he feared nothing, and in his business dealings with them he never lacked confidence or failed to inspire it; for he knew his work well, was conscientious about it, and had a great affection for it. It had been his father's before him.

But, outside of business, he was a man who had not more than one or two audacious moments a year—and now, looking at Eleanor, studying the clear-cut profile of her face, he wondered if he could invoke the necessary daring, if he could ride roughshod over his shyness. He had never felt this way about a girl before.

He heard her exclaim to Stephen Addis, president of the Addis Metal Works:

"What! Another business man!" There was rebellion in her voice, spirit in her eyes. "I'm so fed up with business men that I'd welcome the chance to talk to a clam-digger!"

She gazed off across the hillside toward the shore of the Sound, while Mr. Addis appeared at a loss.

Allen sat up with a start, thinking that there was audacity for you!

"A clam-digger," went on Eleanor, "would be able to converse about tides and moons and—oh, perhaps something a little bit mad."

Allen lost his grip on his pasteboard picnic plate and let the olives roll off into the grass. He saw Eleanor leap to her feet and call out to her hostess: "Haven't you anything but business men here? This spot calls for a poet."

The next moment she was gone, striding down the hillside with a graceful, buoyant step.

Still clutching his paper napkin in one hand, Allen went over to his host, Harry Brett, and demanded in a low voice:

"You haven't told anybody here what business I'm in, have you?"

"No." Brett shook his head. "But if there's anybody here that you want to talk business to, I'll put in a good word for you."

"Don't!" begged Allen. "Don't breathe a word of it—especially to Miss Kendall."

"Why not? She's a lovely girl."

"That's just it. I take it she likes poets better than business men."

"She *would*," replied Brett emphatically, and went on to explain that Eleanor's father had been ruined by a business associate, and had committed suicide; that she had been brought up by a maiden aunt devoted to the real estate business and the suppression of all natural emotions; and that Eleanor, a sensitive, moody girl, now gay, now sad, had clung the more tenaciously to romantic dreams; she hated business; she loved poetry.

"Look here!" Allen got to his feet with a suddenly resolute air. "From now on I'm a poet."

Brett smiled.

"I've no objection. I'm broad-minded. Besides, it takes all kinds of people to make a world."

Allen, straightening his square shoulders, felt that he had succeeded in summoning one of the rare moments of audacity.

"I'd try to be anything that would interest that girl! Never mention a furniture factory to me again—not while she's around."

He started swiftly down the slope toward the Sound.

II.

For an hour they sat on the dock and talked.

"You don't look like a poet," remarked Eleanor, surveying Allen with all the sympathy of her hazel eyes, into which he gazed back significantly.

"But I never felt more like one."

He was aware of her beauty, of her black bobbed hair clipped short in back, and how the same duskiness which he saw in her long lashes hovered over the entire oval of her face, like the shadowy texture of a moth's wing.

"Do you make a living on poetry?" she asked.

"Not a very good one," he replied, and was glad that this much was true.

"It must take courage to do that."

"It takes nerve to do what I'm doing."

"I know," she said sympathetically. "The man who makes glue or cough drops lives in a mansion; the man who makes poems lives in—"

"An attic," said Allen.

"Do you mind it a great deal?"

"N-no."

"I admire you for it. The triumph of mind over matter." She gazed wistfully out over the water. "It's a shame that poets receive so little compensation from the world. This materialistic age has no room for poetry, has it?"

"Well, no room and bath. Only an attic."

Allen was surprised at the success of his audacity, elated to find that he had captured Eleanor's interest, and now desperately determined to hold it—forever, if he could. He thought to himself of all the uneventful days of his past when he had gone about never suspecting that the world also contained a girl like Eleanor. What a rut he had been in!

"Only an attic," repeated Eleanor. "And the glue manufacturer has country houses, yachts, and limousines. It's disgusting!"

A shudder ran over Allen; he had just bought a new limousine. As he went back

up the hill with Eleanor to join the others, he began to regret that he had mentioned the attic, for she continued to dwell upon it with growing enthusiasm: its advantages, romantic, spiritual, and economic. It became the symbol of an ideal. In an attic, she said, you were far from the madding crowd and closer to the stars.

"Did she say 'stars' or 'stairs'?" he wondered.

III.

THAT evening they climbed the hill in the moonlight.

"As a poet," she said, "you must find the tranquillity of this place an inspiration. What have you written since you've been here?"

He reflected that the only thing he had written since coming to visit Harry Brett was a check for the servants at his own country place on Long Island. But that would not answer Eleanor's question.

"Recite me a poem!" she urged.

The thought of his inadequacy afflicted him.

"I haven't written a poem here, yet. It—it's too quiet in Coatsville. Now, in New York—"

"I know how you feel," she interrupted warmly. "The millions of swarming people, the haste and excitement. All that breeds something electric in the air. Isn't that it?"

"Exactly!" He breathed easier. "You have taken the very words out of my mouth."

They walked in silence for a moment, a silence which he felt was vibrant.

"Where is your attic?" she asked.

He groaned inwardly. Oh, that attic again!

"Why—I have none at present."

"You gave it up, I suppose, when you left New York, in order to save rent. But you'll hunt up another when you go back, won't you?"

"I—I'll hunt up something."

What he had in mind was his duplex apartment in Riverside Drive.

Again silence fell between them, and again it was vibrant, causing him to feel as if he were standing on a spot about to be visited by an earthquake. He did not know what question of hers was going to lay him low.

"How do you feel toward the moderns?" she asked.

"I think there is a lot to be said for them," he replied, and hoped he had made a safe answer.

"Just what I think! Look down on the village and its lights: do you remember what Keats said about a little hill?"

"I'd rather hear it from your lips."

She quoted the lines beginning, "I stood tiptoe upon a little hill."

Later she asked him to bring one of his poems when he came to see her the next day, and he replied that he was sorry, but he was in the country for a rest and had decided not to pen a line of poetry for a whole month—a resolution that would not be difficult to carry out.

However, when he returned to Harry Brett's house, after having said good night to Eleanor, he felt that if he had in his hands a correspondence course in "How To Be a Poet in Ten Lessons," he would be willing to sit up all night reading them and try to be a poet by morning. Instead, he went to bed and dreamed of Eleanor.

IV.

IN the morning he hurried to the little frame house that sheltered the Coatsville Public Library, found a volume of Wordsworth, and set himself to memorizing "The Daffodils," which he knew was a good poem, as his professor in college had pointed out. Allen repeated the opening lines to himself again and again:

"I wander'd lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils."

When he met Eleanor and they started on their walk, he looked around in vain for something that would give him an excuse for saying, "That reminds me of Wordsworth's poem," so that he might go on with easy familiarity and quote the lines about wandering "lonely as a cloud." Eagerly he searched the sky: there was not a cloud in it; the clear blue was unbroken!

For half an hour he walked, listening to Eleanor talk of poets and their works, while he, who could take no authoritative part in the conversation, had to remain dumb and restive. Finally he spied an encouraging spot near the horizon.

"Do you see that little cloud?" He drew her attention to it hopefully.

"That's not a cloud," she replied. "It's a puff of smoke from the railroad."

"Are—are you sure?" he stammered, his hopes dashed. "Well, if it *were* a cloud it would remind me of Wordsworth's beautiful lines:

"I wander'd lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a—a crowd,
A host of—of—dandelions!"

She laughed.

He knew he had made a mistake in the flower, but what was he to do, he asked himself desperately, when Eleanor's nearness excited him and the fields all around were so full of dandelions that he couldn't think of any other species of flora?

That was on Tuesday. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday followed each other in that natural order; but Allen never knew it, conscious only that each day he grew fonder of Eleanor. At the end of a month, on a moonlit night, he took her in his arms and kissed her and asked her to marry him, to which she consented with all her heart. She was not afraid of sharing a poet's poverty, she said; after all, it was only love that counted.

"I hope you'll always think so," he said.

"I'd rather live with you in an attic than with a merchant prince in a palace," she went on tenderly. "Palaces are deadly. You are the slave of your servants. In an attic you are master of all you survey."

"But you don't have much to survey," he ventured.

"Oh, Allen!" she cried protestingly. "A poet's world is as wide as the earth."

She decided later that she herself would go to New York and pick out the attic for them—a task which she insisted upon performing with such sweetness that he could not deny her, seeing as he did that her heart was set on it.

"We don't need to begin to small," he suggested. "I have a little money."

"Oh, but think of how you deprived yourself, probably, to save it! We must not spend it now. I'll get a place where you can have a little room all to yourself, in which to do your writing. I'll do the marketing and run the kitchen—we must have a little kitchenette, of course. I really get an awful kick out of cooking! And, oh, my dear, how happy we'll be! Won't we, Allen?"

"I'll do my best to make you happy," he said fervently.

"Love in an attic!" She breathed ecstatically. "And with a poet for a husband. Could anything be more romantic?"

Allen felt suddenly miserable, realizing that he had gone too far with his pretended rôle of poet, and yet not daring to disillusion her.

He did not want to hurt her or to lose her, and yet he doubted his ability to go on forever living the life of a poet. Of course he could prolong his absence from the office of the Acme Furniture Company for another month, during which time they could marry and settle down in their new home in the attic, but after that he would have to begin his daily visits to the Fourth Avenue factory, keeping office hours instead of hours with the poets. What would Eleanor say when she knew?

He did not dare think of it?

V.

It was a scorching hot day in July when Mrs. Allen Downes led her husband into a section of New York unfamiliar to him and they mounted the four dusty flights of stairs to the attic. With each step he felt more and more like a mute, inglorious Milton, and a brute.

"See?" she said eagerly, showing him the first room. "This is the kitchen. It's also the bathroom. The tub fits under the table top next to the sink. When you want a bath you lift up the table top and hook it against the ceiling."

He gazed at it and gasped: "And if the hook breaks, you get brained by the kitchen table in the bathtub!"

"Oh, Allen!" she cried. "You mean you don't like it?"

"No—yes, yes, my dear," he made haste to say, perceiving the tears in her eyes. "I like anything you do. Forgive me. I was just being smart—if you could call it that." He bent over and kissed her. "Let's see the other rooms."

At the door of the living room she stopped, surprised.

"Why, where did all this furniture come from? It's brand new!"

"It was sent here."

"Not by you!" she exclaimed deprecatingly.

"No, no." He tried to account for it hurriedly. "It—it was given to us by—by Aunt "—his eye lit on the davenport—"by Aunt Sophie."

"You never told me about her before."

"No, but I will."

"Where does she live? Near by?"

"Oh, no. Far, far away. Up in Maine."

"Is she coming to visit us?"

"Never!"

"Never? Why, Allen—why do you speak with such an air of finality?"

"Well, you see I know Aunt Sophie. She's queer. She isn't like other aunts. Show me the other rooms, Eleanor."

"There's only one more."

She led him past a spot where the roof slanted down so low that she had to duck to avoid collision with the ceiling, a preventive measure which Allen did not grasp in time. As a result he banged his head.

"Oh, my dear!" said Eleanor. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"Not fatally," he sighed. "But it's hardly the place for a highbrow, is it?"

"I'm sorry," she said, and entered the narrow front room with its chair, desk, and bookcase, and a window about as large as a sheet of legal stationery. "Here is where you'll write your poems."

"Oh, yes. So it is."

As he thought of the tortures in store for him in this room, trying to live up to Eleanor's expectations of him, he began to feel the perspiration break out on his brow. Bending over, he looked out of the window at the streets below, where Abingdon Square, with a little triangular piece of park, lay between the trucking traffic of Hudson Street and the jangling dilapidation of Eighth Avenue surface cars, in a din where he could think of no poet except Kipling finding inspiration.

Between warehouses and decrepit red brick mansions the tumult and the shouting never died, children played lustily, and stevedores in blue flannel shirts without benefit of cravat slouched along toward the water front. In the diminutive park were benches on which men sprawled with several days' growth of whiskers on their faces and an abandoned crop of newspapers at their feet.

"It lacks the elegance of Park Avenue," he thought, but did not give utterance to the reflection.

"I'm going to leave you here with paper and pencil," said Eleanor. "I'll call you when lunch is ready. You probably have a lot of ideas you're just aching to write."

"Aching" was an appropriate word, he thought, sitting desperately in the chair, holding a pencil above a piece of paper that seemed to reproach him with its blankness, while the summer sun beat down relentlessly on the roof overhead.

The room was like an oven. So was his brain, he felt; everything in it was half baked.

He faced Eleanor at lunch, empty handed, confessing his failure.

"It's hard to get back into the swing of it," she said with intent to comfort him. "Are you trying free verse?"

He groaned.

"Not too free."

"Don't be discouraged." She leaned over the empty sandwich plate and kissed him. "You can work all afternoon."

But he found that the afternoon in that warm incubator failed to hatch a poem, although he made bona fide attempts to rime "spring" with "sing," and "moon" with "June," tearing them up in favor of a verse, "To Eleanor," which began with a line that grew more and more maudlin, but true:

"To hold your love is but my only thought;
I won you with a lie I hadn't ought—"

He dropped his pencil hopelessly; for one thing, he was accustomed to the refreshing

influence of an electric fan, an extravagance against which Eleanor would protest. Then suddenly he thought of Aunt Sophie Dimler, of Bangor, Maine, where he had definitely located her.

"I'm going out for a walk," he told Eleanor, "to—to compose my thoughts."

While he was gone an electric fan was delivered at the attic door, and when he came back Eleanor said:

"Aunt Sophie is very good to you. Here's another package from her."

VI.

EVERY day brought new gifts to the attic in the name of Sophie Dimler, luxuries to which Allen was accustomed, presents which lightened Eleanor's housework and gladdened her heart.

Once it was a kitchen cabinet, and another time it was a new dress, which fitted perfectly and bore the label of a Fifth Avenue shop. And every day, encouraged by Eleanor, Allen went into the seclusion of his room to sweat over fulfilling his mission as a poet. But he only filled the wastepaper basket.

Eleanor grew worried, and her anxiety gave Allen's heart a wrench.

"I'd never forgive myself," she said, "if I thought that your marriage with me had cramped your style."

He fidgeted in his chair and felt like a cad.

"It hasn't, Eleanor. It's made me the happiest man alive."

"But your work seems to suffer." Suddenly she drew out of a drawer great handfuls of crumpled paper. "I've been studying these scraps you left in the basket. They—they're terrible! A business man might have done them!"

And she burst into tears.

Holding her in his arms, he tried to comfort her, and though he succeeded in checking her tears, in removing the physical traces of her disappointment, he knew that spiritual discontent lingered in her. He went out into the streets to walk alone and think about this situation that had grown so far beyond him.

While he was gone Eleanor was surprised to receive two unusual gifts from Aunt Sophie—a bunch of orchids and one of red bananas. The bananas came in a package that contained the handbill of Mr. Ricco, the Italian grocer around the corner. It meant, she thought, that Allen's aunt was somewhere in the neighborhood, a fact so odd that Eleanor stopped at the grocery while doing her shopping to make inquiries of Mr. Ricco.

"What does Miss Sophie Dimler look like?" she asked.

"What she look like?" repeated Mr. Ricco in his broken English. "Very big, gray suit, long legs, black mustache. Very big man."

Eleanor gasped. As the truth dawned on her, her lips set tightly, desperately; with her thoughts in a turmoil she hurried back to the attic and surveyed the clutter of objects that had come as a result of Sophie Dimler's largess—rugs, tables, chairs.

Each chair was an expensive thing, even this little one with the simple rungs. She turned it upside down to examine it more closely, and suddenly her eyes became fixed on the manufacturer's varnished mark, under the seat.

She stared at it, dumfounded.

ACME FURNITURE CO.
Allen Downes, Pres.

She was still sitting in front of the upturned chair, as in a trance, when Allen entered the room.

At once he realized that something was amiss. Eleanor, silent at his greeting, continued to sit with averted head, making him conscious of a chill in the air even under the hot attic roof. Then he spied the upturned chair and the telltale label.

Somebody had blundered; he had ordered the factory to send furniture on which no trademark had yet been stamped.

"That's your name!" Eleanor pointed at it accusingly.

"Yes." He had to admit his guilt now.

"That's your business?" she went on breathlessly.

"Yes."

"You're not a poet at all?"

"No."

A tense silence fell between them, and

then Eleanor rose without a word and started to leave the room.

"Wait!" begged Allen. "I'll explain."

She turned and confronted him furiously.

"How can you explain a thing like this?"

"Because you said you hated business men."

"Was that sufficient reason?" Two red spots burned in her cheeks.

"Yes," pleaded Allen. "I loved you, and I wanted you to love me. I thought if only I could get you interested in me, you'd see that I wasn't beyond the pale after all. I *am* in business. I confess it now. I'm president of the company my father founded fifty years ago. It's a good company, and we make good furniture. Some of it is beautiful. As beautiful as a poem. Look at that!"

He picked up the overturned chair and set it on its feet.

"You talk of grace and simply flowing lines. This furniture has it; these things carved out of wood as carefully as a poem out of words. Don't you see?" His appeal brought no response. "And if I remember right," he went on, "there was a celebrated English poet named Morris who wasn't above making furniture."

"Yes," she admitted finally. "I'll grant you that." Her lips quivered. "But you told me you were poor!"

She burst into tears and sank on the davenport.

"It's not a crime to be rich," he said, sitting on the chair in front of her and seizing her hands, "when the money is made as honestly as ours is. Don't worry about the attic, dear; you can have one uptown on Riverside Drive, over my apartment. And the bathtub will not have a table hanging over it like a sword of Damocles. Why, in this attic here, dear, you never know what bath is going to be your last one!"

A smile struggled through her tears.

"But you *did* deceive me," she said. "It makes me mad—to think I was as easy as that."

"Please forgive me. I'll never be a poet again."

"All right, dear."

"What about Tennyson's poetry?" he demanded. "The Knights of the Round Table? Where would they have been without their famous piece of furniture?"

She looked up at him, still smiling.

"I won't grant you that argument."

"But you *do* love me—still?"

"Of course!"

He drew her over to his lap and held her tight in his arms.

"After all," he said, "you see a chair can have its beautiful moments!"

THE END

MY GUEST

THE winter's gone, declares Sir Optimist,
And where were blackened spaces grim with scars,
The summer takes us down an endless path
Vocal with song and luminous with stars.

Not so, disputes the frowning Pessimist,
You have been blinded by the dust of flow'rs!
The summer wanes, and hard upon her heels
The winter hastes to crush all that is ours.

And which is right forsooth *I* cannot say,
Nor if a zephyr or a mistral blows;
I am so busy entertaining Love
I know not whether winter comes or goes!

Edward W. Barnard.

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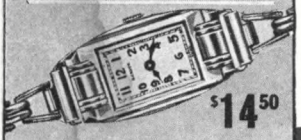

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Diamond, Initial Ring

LJ-7 . . . Gentleman's initial ring, very attractively priced. 10K Solid Yellow Gold, set with a brilliant, genuine diamond and 2 Solid White Gold initials on contrasting, genuine black Onyx. (Specify initials desired.) **Only $1.89 a month.**

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4 Genuine Diamonds

LJ-6 . . . Perfectly matched "Queen of Hearts" engagement and wedding ring ensemble of 14K Solid White or Yellow Gold. Engagement ring is set with a fiery, genuine blue-white diamond, and the wedding ring with 3 matched diamonds. Specify gold desired. **Both for only $2.87 a month.**

If purchased separately:

LJ-6A . . . Engagement Ring only . . . $19.75
LJ-6B . . . Wedding Ring only $12.50

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Ladies' 7 Diamond CLUSTER RING
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LJ-2 . . . Dazzling ladies' square prong cluster ring, expertly set with seven finely matched fiery, genuine diamonds. Looks like a $450.00 solitaire. 14K Solid Yellow Gold ring. **Only $2.65 a month.**

17 Jewel WALTHAM "Diplomat"
Extra Leather Strap FREE!
$2.37 a month

Only $24.75

LJ-8 . . . Imagine this for only $2.37 a month! Factory guaranteed famous 17 Jewel WALTHAM "Diplomat" at a remarkably low price. Richly engraved, permanent white case with link bracelet to match and a smart new leather strap included FREE. Usually $37.50 — now offered complete as shown at the sensationally low price of only $24.75 — $2.37 a month.

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Only $1.87 a month

LJ-9 . . . One of America's smartest Baguette wrist watches at an especially low price. Elegantly styled, modern lifetime case set with 2 genuine diamonds; fully guaranteed movement. Smart link bracelet to match. **Reduced to $19.75 — only $1.87 a month.**

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LJ-12 . . . Nationally known BENRUS at the price of an ordinary watch! Handsomely engraved white case fitted with a fully guaranteed SHOCKPROOF, JAR-PROOF, BENRUS movement. New type triple link bracelet to match. **$15.95 — Only $1.49 a month.**

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"My Chevrolet certainly runs smoother, has more power and snap to it since I put the Vacu-Matic on."—*J. H. Nelson, Minn.*

"On my Dodge 8 I am getting 6 more miles per gal., with more power and pick-up, which is all anyone could ask."—*Lee D. Esty, Calif.*

"I have twelve Vacu-matics on cars now, and they all show an increase in mileage. The car owners are very well pleased."—*Fred Taylor, Okla.*

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