ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

DEC. 29

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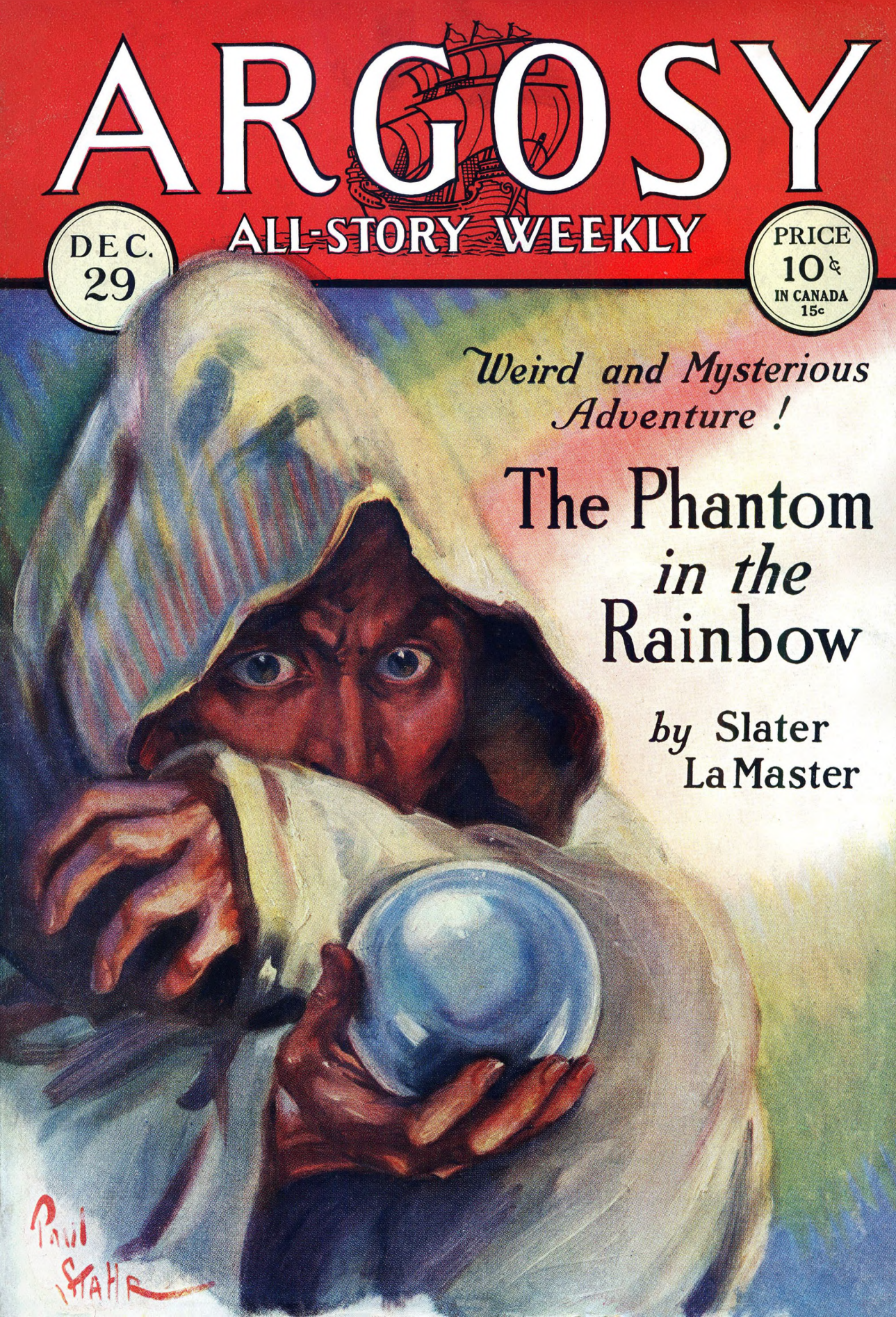

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December 29th Issue

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ARGOSY
ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 200 CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER 29, 1928 NUMBER 3

SERIALS

COMPLETE STORIES

OTHER FEATURES

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday throughout the United States and Canada

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, 280 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, and
LONDON: HACHETTE & CIE., 16-17 King William Street, Charing Cross, W.C. 2
PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE., 111 Rue Réaumur

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Single copies, 10 cents. By the year, $4.00 in United States, its dependencies, Mexico and Cuba; $7.00 to Canada and Foreign Countries. Remittances should be made by check, express money order or postal money order. Currency should not be sent unless registered

Entered as second-class matter November 28, 1896, at the post-office at New York, under the Act of March 3, 1879

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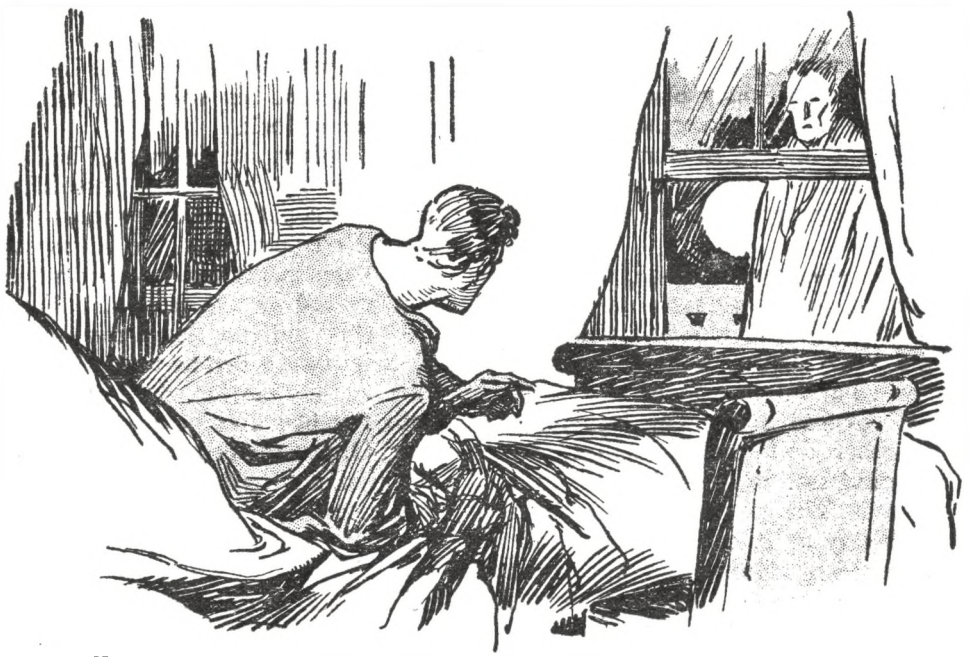
VOLUME 200 SATURDAY, DECEMBER 29, 1928 NUMBER 3



He was looking into his own face, which was staring at him through the upper sashes of the window

The Phantom in the Rainbow

When Edmond Fletcher, broker's clerk, stepped into a waiting limousine, he stepped into the strangest drama that was ever staged

By SLATER LAMASTER

Author of "Luckett of the Moon," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A SHIP COMES IN.

PRIVATE radio code snapped and snarled through the ether. Out of the very early morning mist, a great ship loomed up off Sandy Hook. The veteran captain, in resplendent uniform, stood tensely on one end of the bridge and closely scanned the Long Island horizon.

On that side of the huge vessel, down under the lowest deck, a freight opening was being cleared. These preparations were so far below that no one could notice them unless he was particularly curious and hung over the rail to see.

The vast promenade decks were deserted anyway at this early hour. Only a few passengers were astir, but among them was Bill Skyles, star reporter of the sensational New York *Morning Star,* returning from a European assignment. Ever alert to any unusual development, he felt the quiet tension pervading the crew and traced their interest to the skyline and the mysterious business below decks.

The monstrous greyhound of the deep gave one short blast and idled to a stop as a long dark cabin cruiser shot out of the fog which clung to the Long Island shore. The wasplike boat circled gracefully to the side of the steamship.

This was very strange, thought the reporter, for it was too soon to take on the pilot. Skyles, screening himself behind a ventilator, peered far over to view what might happen.

A covered bridgeway was flung to the other deck and something which he could not make out, was huddled across it. The gangway was withdrawn as quickly as it had appeared and the dark cruiser disappeared into the mist as the engines of the great steamship began to turn again.

"Now I would like to know," speculated the puzzled reporter, "what in the Cinder Regions has come to America?"

THE next morning, however, the newspapers carried no mention of this misty incident off the country's shores, nor could Skyles get any explanation of it.

The young June day, with all its fresh splendor, was especially delightful in an old residential section of New York where lived one Edmond Fletcher. This nonchalant young man lay tranquilly in bed, bathing in the warm sunshine as it filtered through the curtains of his little bachelor apartment.

Three stray cats and a large nondescript dog sat in a row like soldiers at attention watching Edmond Fletcher. These were friends that on various occasions he had picked up and brought home. The dog, a shaggy individual of mongrel mixture but very loyal disposition, had been the latest addition to his household.

About dawn, after the nature of animals awakening with the light, his pets invariably filed into their master's bedroom and waited in strained postures for him to arise. This was indeed a vigil. Fletcher was in the brokerage business, and his work did not begin until ten o'clock.

Belshasher, as his master had christened the big dog, saved a scolding by holding his patience every morning until nine o'clock, when the alarm sounded. Then in all anticipation he would flop his tail on the floor and bark.

If this and the alarm did not bring Fletcher out of bed he was privileged to take some liberties, such as jumping onto the bed and licking his master's face. Out of the bed they came together and it was a joyous romp to the breakfast eaten on the bathroom floor while Edmond bathed and shaved.

THERE were some distinctive qualities about the young fellow. He was inordinately two things: a gentleman, and a gambler. He would stake everything instantly to attain any sufficiently desired end.

But above all, he had the instincts of a gentleman born. At present he was experiencing genteel poverty; but to strip this youth of all the niceties of life, his pleasant little courtesies to every one, the innate refinements which distinguish the truly well bred, would have been as impossible as to separate the moon from its earth.

Edmond joyously led his retinue of Belshasher and the three felines, which he had chosen to call Fatima, Celeste, and Aphrodite, to their breakfast at his feet on the bathroom floor, even as if they might have been guests at a hunt breakfast.

In a few minutes Edmond Fletcher

was in a fresh, well-tailored suit and clean linen. In his dress he would make no sacrifice, no matter what else poverty might force him to forego. His retinue walked solemnly behind him to the door; and his shoulders thrown back, he jauntily stepped forth to the day's adventure in the market.

At the corner some fancy moved him into a florist where he purchased a little flower and stuck it in his buttonhole, even as though the fairest and most ethereal little lady in all the land had placed it there; ethereal indeed she was, for he had never met any one who approached his ideal.

At ten o'clock his play day began and he stood immaculately dressed by the ticker in the offices of Morton, Keene & Company. Entering the customers' room and seeing him there, one would have been more likely to take him for a partner in the house than any one else present. As Fletcher reasoned, he needed the appearance more than any of his superiors.

In nearly all forms of employment, Fletcher saw others drudge. But from ten to three was for him one continuous adventure. Always there was a little catch in his throat when the market opened. To him, when the gong sounded on the floor of the exchange and the opening prices started over the tape, it was as though the barrier had sprung at the race track and a thrill persisted until the close.

But at the present time the brokerage game was not yielding him much of an income on account of certain silly scruples which he possessed in a marked degree.

The excitement and uncertainty of gauging the possible trend were like wine in his veins and he loved it personally, but underneath it all there had been accumulating a deep sympathy and sadness for the poor customers who made this last stand of legitimate gambling in America possible.

The game did not seem quite fair to the harassed customers. Since the Civil War every year or so and sometimes much oftener the market was rigged sky high, securities were unloaded on the public at silly prices; and then the market inevitably broke all to pieces and the public was cleaned out. Again and again they repeated the process with a new crop of uninitiated.

There was something rotten to this young Don Quixote in such wholesale treachery. Of course these cynical opinions were not conducive to a large income. Money was made by playing the game, not by throwing cold water on it. His love of fair play was simply developing with such leaps and bounds that he would not deign to follow expediency as a guide.

Only a small clientele, who could understand this very altruistic salesman, remained with him and kept him going. Thus there existed the paradox of a young business man apparently successful in every way, who was actually very poor.

"AMERICA'S prince, Van Mortimor," said a man standing at the news ticker, "has not been found yet. Seems to have given the newspaper boys the slip yesterday."

"That's a clever fellow," bantered Fletcher. "He and I are the same age to the day, but we live alike only in time; in all other ways our lives have been so different!"

Then a great idea came to him. If he could only get to some young Crœsus like that, or any one of a dozen other enormously wealthy men, what he could do with his knowledge of this game! Think of all this great public's enthusiasm—investment loyalty and faith carried to the point of sacrifice, which was forever going wantonly to waste. What wouldn't he do if he had the opportunity to handle one of those great accounts?

To take the money of the small fellows who came to him and who, like so many sheep, always wanted to buy,

was little short of larceny. Day-dreaming was his weakness and along his mind flew on how he could interest one of these great overlords of finance, in letting him unify some of this much squandered blind investment loyalty in great productive enterprise.

His eyes dropped to the decoration in his buttonhole. Truly the idea was as delightful as the one that prompted him to wear the flower. It breathed something of the same spirit.

At noon Edmond Fletcher picked up the telephone on his desk and notified the office operator that he was going out to lunch. Once on the sidewalk he rushed a little because he wished to conserve his meager funds by eating in a good but inexpensive cafeteria outside of the financial district. Financial dyspepsia was worse than the other kind down there. In the district he dared not show himself in any but the very best restaurants.

As he strolled back to the office, any one who did not know how little there was in his pocket would have taken him for a wealthy, well-bred young man returning from his luncheon club.

A gentleman of distinguished appearance, gray haired and with a professional Vandyke beard, happened to be emerging from the Bank of the Western Hemisphere. Suddenly the elderly gentleman halted and stared at Fletcher. The man seemed in some manner very much shocked and evidently surprised that he received no sign of recognition. He had met the young man face to face.

A close observer of the incident would have seen that the professional man, if such he was, attended to it that the young chap should distinctly see him again—again without obtaining a flicker of recognition from Fletcher.

"A remarkable resemblance," muttered the elder party, as out of a growing curiosity he followed Fletcher.

"Oh, Mr. Fletcher," greeted Morton, one of the partners of the house, on his return, "that funny-looking Bullard Bland was in to see you. What does he do—wear pyjamas in the day time or sleep in his clothes?"

"Why, Bullard's all right—really a fine scout!" laughed Fletcher.

"Well, keep him out of the customers' room," Morton smiled kindly. "Looks bad for you as well as us to have him hanging around here."

As Fletcher idly sat by the ticker that afternoon he took himself to task. He was about ready for anything. Prospects were not very hopeful for him. Unless he suppressed his foolish idealism and eternal consideration for others, and began to play the game in the severely practical way as others did and as he so well knew how to do, he could never expect much more than a mere living in his present position.

"MAY I speak to you?" suavely queried the partner Morton at Fletcher's shoulder later that afternoon. Fletcher followed him into his private sanctum.

"Mr. Fletcher, we like you," he admonished ominously, "but you should do more business. What's your answer?"

"Nothing," asserted Edmond earnestly, "unless you wish me to sever my connection and go elsewhere."

"Fletcher," Morton coughed and paused as though he was angling for words to express himself, "you know we don't want you to leave. Honestly, my boy, what is the matter with you?"

"Morton," snapped Fletcher, and there came into his eyes a gleam of something which actually made the ever placid Morton uneasy, "you are inviting me to thrust the truth right into your teeth, and here it is: I am sick of seeing these suckers lose their money. Now fire me!"

Morton swayed as though some invisible fist had landed upon him. Next he braced himself in his chair and held up his hand warningly, as he stared shrewdly at the erect young fellow. He even neglected to relight his cigar,

something never before known to happen.

"No," he blustered hotly, "don't you dare leave here! I have noticed you moon-calfing around. It's a sure sign you are starting something big!" He cocked a knowing eye to the ceiling and complacently lit his cigar. "I think you are just scorning the small fry!"

"You know more than I do," answered Fletcher a bit wonderingly as he slipped out.

Morton's attention returned to a bunch of inquiry sheets which had poured in all afternoon. They were queries on this peculiar youth to be filled out for several commercial reporting agencies. All afternoon, too, Morton had been occupied answering the most silly sort of questions about him to an anonymous inquisitor whose compelling references could not be slighted by any brokerage house.

"I wonder," he sighed, "whether this kid is patronizing loan sharks, furnishing a hotel on the installment plan, or flirting with big business. He is surely exciting a lot of interest, and, anyway, I like him."

As the word "close" appeared on the tape, Edmond Fletcher bade good night to the office and stepped out into the warm and genial sunshine. It was to him indeed an auspicious day, but little did he realize how auspicious. He strolled up Broadway wondering just what to do next. He had no ties. These late afternoons were sometimes irksome.

One day an average good man, practically unknown and unacclaimed, holds the office of Vice President; a death occurs, and in the twinkling of an eye he becomes President of the United States. An honest son of toil is elected President, due to a split in the opposition; a civil war breaks out and we have a Lincoln. A minority on some confused issue elects a scholar, who would never get much beyond theorizing but for a great catastrophe. A world war comes our way and makes him the standard-bearer for all humanity. Sometimes an individual and a circumstance do collide magnificently.

The street agencies gave Edmond Fletcher an absolutely clean bill of health, a reference hard to surpass; and he happened to saunter up lower Broadway on a particular afternoon.

A LARGE car of foreign make edged into the curb as he stopped to light a cigarette. A uniformed chauffeur respectfully touched his cap to Fletcher and jumped out to open the car door.

Fletcher looked into the car to see who wanted him, but no one was inside.

"Do you wish to go now, sir?" asked the chauffeur respectfully.

Fletcher could have said "Where?" or "What is it you wish of me?" but to have done so would have violated one of his principles—it would have disclosed his hand, or betrayed his lack of information in an interesting and probably advantageous situation.

Instead, he answered, "Wait a minute," while he continued to light his cigarette, thinking quickly whether he should accept the invitation. He decided that at most it could only be a question of mistaken identity, or just possibly some practical joke at his expense.

At any rate, this luxurious equipage seemed to be very much in line with his desire to associate with the very rich. If he could just make the most of this amusing little incident, maybe it would lead to some wealthy acquaintances.

So he calmly stepped into the car and nodded to the driver. The motor made its way up to Lafayette Street, while Fletcher noted that this was a very powerful foreign make of car, an Isotta Fraschini; he believed it was the most costly Italian car.

The upholstery was exceedingly soft and luxurious, and he noted that the

chauffeur's uniform had been carefully tailored in a distinctive livery. He could not imagine any one he knew who could command such accouterments playing a joke upon him. So he came inevitably to the conclusion that it must be a case of mistaken identity, and began to wonder just where this bubble would break, and, more particularly, how he could get out of the situation gracefully.

Anyhow, for the moment it certainly was a most pleasurable feeling to sink into these downy cushions while he was being so smoothly propelled uptown.

Guardedly he kept looking around, for he had perceived that another beautiful motor, a Hispano-Suiza, was following him, nosing up close each time they slowed down. Lifting the tube, he spoke to the chauffeur.

"I think there is a car following us."

"Yes, sir," replied the man, touching his cap again, "that is your second car, sir. In case of any motor trouble, you can go ahead in the other car without inconvenience."

"Ah!" he thought.

On Lafayette Street the car picked up speed and the traffic officers began to salute the equipage. At first Fletcher thought an officer every now and then was friendly with the chauffeur. Then he believed they could not all be so friendly. Soon he decided the car must belong to some one of importance. Consequently he surmised that they must all be saluting the one presumed to be riding in the car. The person in the car was no other than himself.

This gave him a little shock. He had no idea of what he was doing and he did not wish to be placed in the position of impersonating any officer of the Police Department, a high national officer or any great person. Difficulties with the police are as much to be feared by a gentleman as a crook.

He was just about to ask some general questions in the hope of adroitly getting out of all this when the chauffeur touched his cap and spoke through the tube.

"Shall I start home, sir?"

"CERTAINLY," he said gratefully, after a mere instant's hesitation. This, he quickly meditated, settled it. If he did not understand the situation by the time they arrived home, wherever that might be, he would dismiss the car, or rather cars, at the gate. The chauffeur would think he was going in. If any one else saw him they would probably think he was some guest using the limousine; but he knew he would not be going in, nor would he be a guest if he could help it. He would simply go quietly away.

The car now sped up the avenue and turned through Fifty-Ninth Street. It ran up Broadway and gracefully swung into the West Seventies. Very unexpectedly, and much to his consternation, the easy gliding coach began to wend its way down to the docks under Riverside Drive. It seemed he lived on a ship, and you could not very well dismiss your car and walk away from the gangplank of a ship.

Fletcher could see that they were approaching a long rakish yacht, her white woodwork and brass rails agleam in the afternoon sun. At their approach a covered launch came from the yacht. *"Put-put-put-put!"* it sang as it kept coming toward them.

The car came up to a canvas-sided landing, at whose end, as if by magic, appeared a trim young sailor in the launch. The chauffeur stepped down and opened the car door; the young sailor saluted. There was nothing for him to do but step in, and *put-put-put-put!* he was carried out.

As he passed up the ship's canvased stairway he saw a captain adorned with much blue and gold appear on the diminutive bridge. The captain saluted and bowed. A steward led the way into a softly carpeted spacious cabin which gave a splendid view on all sides. The steward asked:

"May I do anything for you, sir?"

Edmond sank down on a lounge.

"Yes," he said, "draw the curtains. am rather fatigued."

The steward deftly did this, going around the cabin and then went out softly as Edmond stretched himself out on the lounge.

No sooner had the door closed behind the servant than, like a cat, Fletcher was on his feet. First he explored a writing desk thoroughly, but he only found stationery with a Park Avenue address embossed upon it, and other letter sheets bearing the name of the yacht Sylvia upon them. It all meant nothing to him.

Around the room ran bookcases full of most rare and interesting volumes. At random he looked them over hurriedly but gently. This is an attribute of a person who really loves books. He will under no circumstances handle roughly, mar, or mutilate a good book. A lover of good literature handles a book with as much care as a woman.

After a careful search he could find no clew which would solve his identity immediately, but this did not discourage him. He sat down in a comfortable chair and took a fragrant club-monogrammed cigarette from a gold humidor.

"Evidently," he reflected, "these people are my servants or I am the guest of their master. With all these facilities at my command I should be able to obtain the information I desire without making my situation worse."

Studiously he reviewed every little detail since he had left the financial district so ceremoniously. In a few moments he straightened up in the chair, tossed his cigarette away, and pushed a button which he noticed inlaid suitably on a near by table. The steward silently appeared as if from nowhere.

"Have I any mail?" Fletcher asked absently.

"You have quite a good deal, sir," replied the steward. "We were holding it to be delivered to your secretary."

"Thank you, but you may bring it in. I wish to glance through it."

The steward returned shortly with a pile of mail matter. The personal letters addressed in longhand were first put together on the table. Now followed several neat stacks of typewritten correspondence and miscellaneous matter separated to the best of the steward's ability.

Edmond's eyes were quietly riveted upon the first letter he saw. It bore this astounding inscription:

Sigmond Van Mortimor
Fifth Avenue
New York City

AS if beyond belief and just from reflex and automatic action his memory summed up what he could recall about this illustrious family. Its name alone was a magic talisman with which to conjure and in the popular mind meant unlimited wealth and power, for chancellors and treasurers of nations had actually stood humbly in line to borrow from its bulging coffers. Since Edmond was a boy its mighty power had become as subtle and mysterious as it was vast. Scarcely anything was generally known about how this tremendous wealth was handled, but its control was felt so forcibly in so many directions that it had become a sort of an octopus in the public imagination and was credited with owning well-nigh everything.

Evidently, it came to him, he was being mistaken for Mr. Van Mortimor. The readiness with which the steward gave him the mail dispelled any doubt on that score. A sort of numbness pervaded his entire person when he realized how far he had now gone in this dangerous business. He had certainly got into touch with great wealth quickly enough!

As his overwhelmed faculties returned to him, he appreciated that here was a situation fit for the gods. If he kept his head sufficiently clear and used nimble enough wits, this might

become his golden opportunity to become intimately acquainted with Mr. Van Mortimor.

A delicate situation now arose in his mind. Fletcher greatly desired to know more about his second self, his great temporary identity, but his reason told him not to open any of that mail. Instead he selected at random several important-appearing letters and laid them to one side.

As he expected, the ever courteous and extremely obliging steward picked up a letter opener, slit the envelopes and smoothed out the correspondence nicely in front of him. After that Fletcher selected the other letters which interested him, laying them to one side as before, and the steward repeated the process. Whereupon he dismissed the servant.

Finally he really found himself. Letters from friends on the continent, letters from fellow hunters in Africa, letters overintimate from women and much formal correspondence gave him an excellent understanding of his supposed identity. One on the stationery of the Savoy Hotel, London, considerably enlightened him. It ran:

DEAR SIGMOND:

Just reached London to-day after my visit to Nice. The past year which we have spent in the jungles of Africa has brought us very close together and prompts me to take the liberty of saying that this rough life may in some measure have prepared you for taking up your position and residence in America.

If you keep well no doubt you shortly will take interest as an empire builder, and fulfill your heritage in the fullest sense. Please believe that I am most sincere in my platitudes as your name is synonymous to me with great action, as against the noxious, wasteful, worthless life that you and I have lived here and in Europe since our early youth.

As ever your friend,
ARCHIBALD.

Another letter greatly astonished Edmond Fletcher. It was from Alexander, Cromwell & Klaton, Attorneys, New York City:

MR. SIGMOND VAN MORTIMOR,
Fifth Avenue, New York City.

DEAR SIR:

It is indeed a distinct pleasure to welcome you home. As your lamented father's chief counsel in his many great enterprises, may we not ask your immediate consideration of the important affairs which have fallen into your hands? You will find detailed accountings of everything in the hands of your secretary, but there are several matters of pertinent importance which we wish herein to press upon your attention.

Although twenty-seven years of age, you have not been here since you were fourteen. In the meantime while you were living entirely abroad, great changes have occurred at home.

The six great railroads in which your family has control have passed through the hands of the government administration incident to the war and need your attention as to the policies of management which should now be pursued.

The banks in which you are so heavily interested have become members of the Federal Reserve System and present new problems, which are beyond our authority to handle.

Areas of real estate which you own in New York City have greatly increased in value without adequate improvements on them, and present obstacles to civic progress.

Will you please let us know at your earliest convenience when we may come to see you or have the honor of receiving you at our office?

Very respectfully,
ALEXANDER, CROMWELL & KLATON.

In letter after letter, he gleaned that he had just returned home after having spent his life, since boyhood, abroad. Now he had come to take his rightful place in American life and to assume the authority with which fortune had endowed him.

FLETCHER put the mail aside. There would be plenty of time for details if this went farther. The problem which confronted him was what he should do at once. Obviously

the thing to do was, the moment he met any member of the family, to explain the whole thing and to apologize as gracefully as possible. It would be ludicrous to attempt an explanation to these servants and if he tried to inform the captain of the yacht it might result in his arrest with serious consequences.

Fletcher had found that if you were in a strange city and without identification, and needed a check cashed or some favor, the proper thing to do was to go to the best hotel there. If you ever were embarrassed in your dealings with any concern or family, go directly to the most important person in it and straighten out your troubles frankly. This intention steadied his overwrought nerves.

He had the curtains opened, and calmly surveyed the placid silvery Hudson. Shortly he noticed the yacht turn in toward a little white pier. He heard the telegraph on the bridge gently guide the swanlike boat up to the pier without the slightest vibration and the next moment the captain stood in the doorway.

"Mr. Van Mortimor," he spoke, "I have not had the honor of knowing you before this occasion, but I've had the yacht thoroughly reconditioned and I trust you will find it seaworthy in every respect."

This was the first time Fletcher had been addressed as Van Mortimor, and it gave him a distinct thrill. He disliked to admit so much pleasure and distinction at the deference the great name carried.

Fletcher's answers were very guarded, anticipating the result later of what he might say now.

"Quite so," was all the speech he risked.

He passed across the gangway and at its other end stood what seemed the duplicate of the car he had just left in the city. The door was open, he stepped in, the chauffeur saluted and they were off.

Before him he could see a castle-like structure on one of the Westchester County hills, overlooking the river. Around one side of this great undulating hill ran like a ribbon, a white roadway and into this the car turned taking the slight grades as though it were on a race course. He wondered at the reckless driving and then it occurred to him that this was all a private parkway, where no other cars would be met! Carefully tended shrubbery and parklike greensward spread out to his right and left, and after a few deft turns in the bright thoroughfare the car ran under an awning before the house on the crest of the hill. As the car was brought to a stop, he saw a large motor-load of trunks and baggage coming in from another direction.

"If I don't get out of this soon," thought Fletcher, "I'll be wearing the chap's clothes."

CHAPTER II.

GLORIA.

FLETCHER had small time for contemplation. A liveried man was swinging open a large grilled door. A venerable and stately butler was standing just inside, and as Fletcher passed the portal, he bowed and began a little speech.

"Mr. Sigmond, everybody below stairs wishes me to bid you welcome. We have long waited this day to have you again with us."

The feeble old man's emotion was truly touching and Fletcher wondered if he could really see him well.

"I am glad to be here," Fletcher vouched, watching to see if his voice would register a false note. Apparently not. As an afterthought he asked:

"Is any one to dine with me this evening?"

"Miss Gloria wishes to dine with you, sir."

"Very well," he answered as a ser-

vant led him to his apartments. Who, he puzzled, was Miss Gloria?

The main room held a large bouquet of flowers and by them lay a card with the fortunately enlightening words upon it:

"From your loving sister, Gloria."

He could hear baggage being quietly moved into the rear of his rooms. Stepping into a convenient bedroom, he mechanically began undressing to clean up and make himself presentable before facing the patrician girl below and apologizing for his awkward position. A servant obsequiously passed into the room, opened a door and turned on the bath.

In a few minutes Fletcher was completely refreshed and upon reëntering the room he found his clothes gone and in their place, carefully laid out, was a dinner suit.

"What next?" breathed Fletcher. "I hope I can get into his clothes!" They fitted him surprisingly well. With a few slight alterations, they would have been perfect.

"Bring me back the clothes I have just taken off; I wish to take some things out of them," he ordered. "And you may tell the butler I shall be down in fifteen minutes."

As soon as the man had withdrawn, he removed all of his effects to the dinner suit. Following which he put his own clothes in a chiffonier drawer and locked it, placing the key in his pocket. He meant to tell his own story and did not want any advance news released on it.

Momentarily, this young adventurer studied his expression and appearance in a mirror to make sure that he had fully regained his composure. His courage arose, and he even smiled. It was better to have lived, if only for a few hours, than never to have lived at all.

Thereupon, Fletcher descended. He wondered how he should greet this strange feminine aristocrat with the touch of Midas. He considered it better to let her greet him and then, after seeing the effect that his presence would have upon her, to explain the situation. As he reached the foot of the grand staircase, the dignified old butler led him into the drawing-room as if he were the world's eighth wonder, and so, Fletcher felt, he was!

It was a large, deep room with a highly polished floor. Period furniture and deep lustrous rugs of untold value lay scattered before him in elegant simplicity. Splendor sat unobtrusively about. Each thing was severely beautiful to his sensitive nature in its quiet perfection of detail. The very grandeur of his surroundings gave him the sensation of having unceremoniously broken into a royal court. But his eyes strained ahead for the high priestess of all this; ugly as sin, he supposed, like so many of our ultra-rich.

FLETCHER first saw her rising from a chair to meet him. There is a lithesome grace about some women which makes their every motion poetic. She was slender, and there was a soft femininity about her, a purity of breeding and beauty as though the power of the house through generations to pick and choose its women, had been concentrated in producing this utter thoroughbred.

Half dazzled, Fletcher could only make out that her hair was dark, and that her large gray eyes somehow wore a hurt look. He sensed the feeling of being a hunter who had just startled a fawn at some stream. But he only had this feeling for one fleeting instant; she was coming toward him, and the strange look had gone from her eyes.

He was so overcome by the loveliness of this girl advancing upon him that he was at loss for words. She put her arm around him and kissed his cheek ever so softly.

"Sigmond, how well you look," she began. "Really, what a wonderful

brother I have! Come sit close to me. I have needed you so badly. Just the two of us and you have avoided me so long!"

How any one could long avoid this girl was far beyond Fletcher's apprehension. However, the unexpected was coming at too alarming a pace. He had every reason to believe that the mere meeting with Gloria would solve the whole thing.

He had expected that as soon as she saw him, she would look at him in horrified amazement. A cold, withering look would follow as soon as her consternation at seeing this rank impostor had subsided. He knew how to counter the expected.

A humble explanation and apology would set things right, and if he could only succeed in confessing all the little reasons for the situation fully enough, the matter might become very humorous and really result in an interesting acquaintanceship.

Now all his plans were upset. But one thing he would, must do. He must make a clean breast of the whole thing to this lovely young girl.

She took his arm, and he felt an indefinable softness, the clinging weight of a feather and a thrill of strange contentment went through him. As if here were that utmost in the world for which he had always been unconsciously seeking, and now that he had found it, he well knew how unattainable it was.

She drew him to her side on a slender divan, its dainty lines well befitting her delicate little figure. He sat as one entranced while she diffidently cuddled up to his side and looked wistfully up into his face.

"SIGMOND, dear," she spoke gently, "you must love me—oh! so much. You must be a father, a mother, and brother, and everything to me; I haven't had any of them for so long. I'll tell you all sorts of silly things, and you must listen and help me, for there are so many intimate little matters in which I do not know what to do, and in which I cannot ask any one else's advice.

"There's the count, who says the most beautiful things, and threatens to die if I do not marry him. There's Phil Vordman, who dances divinely, and is the best polo player we have, who will call this evening.

"You are my whole family. Should I drink more? Our set often laugh at me and insinuate that I am a poor sport." Her sensitive countenance changed slightly.

"Oh, Sigmond, there are some ugly rumors about you, but I could never believe them, and you are so good, I knew they were lies. You are so strong, your face seems determined; I believe in you, Sigmond. You are just different from men I know." A shadow of doubt, even of disappointment, came over her face. He felt a slight chill in her voice as she drew partly away from him: "But I must bore you. Please forgive all this banal talk. It is the desire to confide in some one, that has been pent up in me. I hoped I could in you, but you have not said a word to me. Perhaps you do not like your little sister!"

"You are the most interesting person I have ever met," he answered truthfully. "I have so much to say to you, but I do not know how to start."

"How wonderful!" she exclaimed, beaming upon him. Her changing moods were reflected beautifully in her limpid expressions like some iridescent jewel struck by lights and shadows, or the delicately tinted lights which play from deep within some pure white diamond. How like a diamond, thought Fletcher! For he fully appreciated that no less than that very same stone could this girl cut hard and deep, for him.

At last she pensively said: "But you do not have to be so polite. You are my brother!"

The butler appeared in the doorway.

"Begging pardon, sir!" he said. "I have about outbowed myself in the hall. Dinner, if you please, sir?"

"You are the first one ever to nettle Parkins!" declared Gloria gayly.

Fletcher gave her his arm, as they passed into an immense feudal dining room. It was a formal affair, and scarcely seemed the place to make an explanation, especially with Parkins standing behind his, the master's, chair. Besides, they were in the presence of several other stiff-backed servants. It would have proved doubly embarrassing to the real mistress of the house, in view of her confidences.

They carried on the usual small talk of a formal dinner; he at one end of the table, she at the other, with a confusing array of glass and silver sparkling between them.

The butler pompously poured a different wine with each course, but Fletcher scarcely tasted it because that was what Gloria was doing. He had thus passed up sherry with the oysters and the soup, his sauterne with the fish. With an entrée and claret Gloria incredulously asked:

"Don't you drink at all?"

For once Parkins had his whole soft-footed crew out of earshot, and Edmond seized this opportunity to answer boldly:

"I am drunk enough on your eyes!"

"Oh!" was all she said, and settled back in her chair, badly startled.

SEVERAL leading questions put by her now, probably in all innocence, badly confused him. He noticed her studying him intently. He did not wish a public explanation of his ignorance of matters, and he thought he would give an excuse until he could get her alone again.

"I do hope you will excuse me if I act queerly at times," he pretended. "I experienced a slight injury at Ypres, and I do not remember as well as I should."

"I did not know that you were in the war!" she exclaimed in surprise.

He flushed crimson. Instantly she was by his side.

"There were lots of things we didn't know about you! Of course you were! I am dreadfully sorry," she pleaded.

"It is of no importance," he said, mentally detesting himself for having used such a distasteful excuse. Only his dire risk of premature exposure had forced him to do so. "Forgive me if I am absent-minded. I'll tell you about it later."

She excused herself immediately after dinner, but not before he had entreated:

"I have something of great importance to tell you—may I speak to you alone?"

"No," she smiled sweetly. "Join Mr. Vordman and me on the east terrace a little later. The moonlight is beautiful, and I shall need a member of the family. After he departs we can talk all night."

As one enthralled he went into a large library which opened conveniently where she had left him. There a telephone came to his notice, and he was reminded of something. He gave a New York number and heard a familiar voice.

"Mrs. Kelly," he spoke softly, first looking carefully around, "you know who this is. Use your duplicate key and take my dog and cats out for an airing and everything they can eat. Treat them as though they were your own children. I am compelled to be away a little while. Fine! Good-by!"

Then he sat and smoked. Absent-mindedly he ran his eyes down the wall of books nearest him. French authors they were, Baudelaire, Flaubert, France, Maupassant, and so it went, volumes in French and in English. Surely he could explain everything to her on the terrace later in the evening, he meditated, when they would be all alone as she had promised.

Eventually he noticed a collection of American authors and further observed that they were not in alphabetical arrangement as others in the room. Poetry and prose were mixed as well. Rather interested as he was always keenly observant of anything unusual, he noted that the first five authors from left to right were the works of, first, Poe; second, Walt Whitman; third, Thomas Paine; fourth, Nathaniel Hawthorne; fifth, James Huneker.

He started. By the strangest coincidence he ranked American authors in this order himself. Although he had never tried to graduate authors in order of preference beyond the fifth place, he ran on through the list and was practically compelled to agree with the arrangement. This was uncanny. Did he think like these people, too?

Being in the mood he read at random, mostly poetry. He was so absorbed that he did not hear Parkins until he spoke at his elbow.

"Excuse me, sir, Miss Gloria would like you to join her on the terrace."

HE arose and followed until at the far end of the house he came out on a long stone terrace, gray in the pale moonlight of a warm summer evening. Great trees in the gloaming made it look singularly cool and inviting. Just a sufficient amount of light came through a French window casement to illuminate the faces of the couple sitting there. They instantly became a study to Fletcher.

The young man arose. Gloria remaining seated, murmured simply: "My brother, Mr. Vordman."

Mr. Vordman replied: "I am indeed honored to meet Mr. Van Mortimor," as though he were being presented to royalty. Fletcher bowed, and did not offer his hand for fear he might have been supposed to have acquired Continental manners.

However, he indulged in a pleased smile—not of politeness, as it was taken, but at the idea of a Vordman feeling honored in making his acquaintance.

Vordman was a very handsome young fellow, well mannered and apparently likable in every respect, but Fletcher could not help but mark up a mental reservation against him before he began talking. Fletcher did not feel that the words "too soft" were fairly descriptive of him, but they were what rang in his mind. One unfortunate result of great wealth, he had observed, was that after a few generations it, time and again, saps the stamina of the family, and leaves its young men rather colorless.

Here, too, he found an entirely different Gloria, superficial, coolly polite.

The talk ran on, and Fletcher listened attentively and as politely as he could. Since he did not interject any remarks, the others, in deference to him, asked his opinion on the topics being discussed—sport, yachts, the doings at smart resorts. But Fletcher feigned a lack of familiarity with the local society, which was true enough.

Throughout the conversation he could not help but notice the constraint in Gloria's manner. She was affable, she was exceedingly charming in her little affections, but it was just as though a beautiful Dresden china doll was mechanically performing.

She was vivacious, but in no degree spontaneous; nothing flowed from her real self. Letter perfect were all her petty little conventionalities, but there was an icy barrier, beyond which one could not peer. Fletcher could only reflect that earlier in the evening he must have had a peep into her real heart.

Soft, melodious chimes within struck eleven o'clock. Vordman arose and excused himself. In a burst of cordiality, his parting words were:

"Come over and get potted; have a cellar of wonderful liqueurs."

Fletcher returned to the terrace. Gloria had undergone another transformation. She simply glowed her happiness at being alone with him.

"Freeda," she commanded in a kindly tone, "you may go." A herculean woman appeared from just behind the French casement, where she had evidently been the entire time. Fletcher was astonished. She was a giantess, and he thought how puny the ordinary man would be in her hands. She looked at Fletcher searchingly, but respectfully, laid a Spanish shawl on the arm of a chair and smiling in a stolid way silently withdrew. The duenna of the household was a good one.

CHAPTER III.

UNDER THE SHROUD OF NIGHT

"OH, Sigmond," Gloria began, "come close to me!"

The winsome girl had moved over on a cushioned settee, and he sat beside her. She nestled up to him and put her head on his shoulder. Her soft body intoxicated him. Her hair breathed a most delicate perfume. He felt her dainty little fingers close on his and then his arm was pulled around her. He looked away lest she read his expression.

"Isn't it beautiful this evening?" she sighed. "I love the view from this terrace, but it never was so lovely as to-night. I suppose it is because I am very happy, but I am more than happy, I am contented—that is the only way I could feel, now that I have you here, my very own big brother to love me, and cuddle me, and help me."

Fletcher felt her warm cheek against his as she again lightly kissed him. Her face was damp with tears. She relaxed upon his shoulder.

"I am so happy," she sobbed softly. He could understand, for deep emotions, which were very rare with him, affected him similarly.

"Hold me tight," she said tenderly, "I am just a silly little baby. I have been so lonely and my heart is so full to-night because I have you."

This was the proper time, but how could he tell her now? To disillusion her at the moment would be like bowling in a cathedral. He must turn the conversation into other channels and prepare her for what maybe he had to say.

"It feels so good to be myself," she confided. "To have some one with whom I can be unreserved and just human. I shall try hard to please you so that you will never leave me again for long."

Her tears were gone as quickly as they had come. The deep emotions which swept her were as April showers. He expected her to excuse herself to remove the traces of them. But this did not concern her. Evidently she did not dab at her face as much as the usual run of womankind. Eagerly she looked up into his countenance and asked:

"Do you like your little sister?"

This afforded him a splendid opportunity to talk.

"Gloria," he said, "most people and things are named inaccurately; but you are perfectly named. Every moment since I have seen you I have been struck with the thought that you are indeed a glorious little creature."

"Oh, oh!" she interrupted. "All women are vain, and I am going to be frank with you—go ahead, I just love it!"

"You seem as exotic as though you were a lovely flower growing in some tropical paradise—a thing apart from human mediocrity." But the fascinating glow of her soft eyes was dazzling him. Putting a brake on his ardor, he continued:

"I cannot make up more poetry, but I'll tell you a fairy story."

"How delightful!" she exclaimed. "I'll be a little girl and listen."

"This day has been the most wonderful one in all my life. Once upon a time, we shall say this very morning, I was a listless young man working in a brokerage office. We shall call myself, for instance, Edmond Fletcher.

Nothing out of the ordinary happened in such a person's life until after the market closed at three o'clock this day. I see myself arising in a little bachelor apartment about nine o'clock this morning. Aphrodite, Celeste, Fatima, and Belshasher are with me."

"Who are they?" She looked at him startled.

"They are my cats and Belshasher is my big shaggy dog."

"Oh!" she said with apparent relief, and settled her head back contentedly on his shoulder.

"THEY were my loved ones. Outside of them no one loved me. There were relatives who loved me sincerely but they were far away. Some I had thought cared for me and maybe one in particular."

"Who was she?" asked Gloria, placing her dainty little ear near his lips as though it was a great secret.

"She was a little girl who liked to dance all the time and always was demanding things to be done for her or given her."

"She loved herself," decided Gloria, and settled her precious little head with its mass of hair slightly disarranged, back again upon his shoulder.

"So it went. Outside of a few lifelong men friends, there was no one to care for me. But often I dreamed of a slender ethereal little creature—oh! so sweet and tender—who would stand apart from all other women."

"Only men with blue eyes can think like that," murmured Gloria, and she playfully kissed his fingers.

"Isn't it getting rather late?" inquired Fletcher solemnly. "And we are all alone."

"What does it matter? Can't I be up as late as I wish with my brother?" she questioned, and stretching her fascinating little body out on the settee, she pillowed herself on his breast and arms and asserted contentedly:

"I am simply too happy. Go ahead with the fairy story!"

"So I had gone to the office and after the close of business was sauntering up Broadway, when I met with a great adventure. A coach of a fairy princess was waiting for me just around the corner. I stepped into it and was whisked to a fairy boat which conveyed me to a great castle.

"I didn't know that the princess was waiting for me at the end of the journey, and not being accustomed to her station of life, I was somewhat embarrassed. By a happy coincidence I was mistaken for her brother, which gave us some happy hours together. The little princess was very lonely and—perhaps I entertained her for a little while."

Gloria was holding one of his hands tightly as though he were about to slip away from her, and in the semi-darkness she was looking wide-eyed into his face.

"Shall I finish the story?" he asked. He felt as though he was sounding his death knell, for what could ordinary beauty be to him now, after the superlative vision of Gloria's smile? Bitter indeed must this disillusionment be for him!

She buried her face on his breast that he might not see her and one little slender hand caressed his cheek as though she expected to read his expression as the blind do.

"Yes," she assented, almost inaudibly, as if she were afraid to finish it, "it is all a puzzle to me."

"All fairy stories do not end happily," he informed her sadly. "This one must end miserably for one of its characters, but he will feel better for having been truthful with the little princess. I am not your brother—I am Edmond Fletcher!"

She clutched him to her tightly. "Sigmond, dear," she gasped, "are you trying to frighten me?" He felt a tremor of fear run over her and sensed the same feeling of having hurt her that he experienced at their first meeting.

"You should not say such things. I need you desperately," she beseeched, as she looked up at him pleadingly. "Please do not scare me any more, as I am very nervous from what happened here last night."

HE gathered her tightly into his arms.

"My wonderful sweet little girl, I have only done what I thought was right. I would willingly do anything conceivable for you. I am going to do one more thing that bears on this subject and ask you a question, and then I shall never mention it again to you."

Tenderly raising her head, he implanted fully upon her soft warm lips a kiss, and he felt her relax in his arms as if her very soul were going out to him. She had innocently made no attempt to resist him, and she lay in his embrace for a long moment before he spoke.

"Who am I?" he asked.

"You are my brother—and do not kiss me so peculiarly!" She straightened up.

"You are Sigmond Van Mortimor," she answered, again defiantly, "and of course it was only a fairy story. Please don't tell any more like that one. I have your promise!"

"Ah-h well!" he sighed. "What's the use of my arguing with you?" and a deep silence seemed to wrap them in a dark cloak.

The moon had set; the trees loomed up like great black patches. He made her comfortable in his arms, for she had entreated:

"Just a few moments more, before I must give you up."

Fletcher looked out into the darkness supremely happy, holding in his arms the most entrancing bit of femininity that he had ever imagined. It was so very quiet. He was thinking what a miracle the day had produced; how adventure and romance were just around the corner to him who sought it.

Cuddled up to him she was asleep, he noticed, asleep with one of his hands pressed to her lips. What an exquisite sensation it gave him to have this surpassingly lovely creature dreaming in his arms.

For a few moments he just sat there before disturbing her, marveling at how hushed and peaceful it was at this late hour of the night, so far out in this ideal country. The darkness out beyond was like velvet, and where his hand had touched the balustrade he could feel the night's cool moistness.

Suddenly there came a plaintive, ghastly cry, from somewhere far down in the hollow among the trees, something gruesome, swelling louder as his flesh began to creep. He was not a coward, but this sound seemed inhuman. Never could he recall having heard such a weird and ghoulish wail. For strangely intensifying the dread voice and commingled with its shrillness was a trace of tune or song, some fiendish hopeless dirge of the unknown, scarcely understandable.

Gloria was awake and shaking. A convulsion of fear was sweeping over her. Terror-stricken, her little hands broke into a cold sweat. Fletcher sat frozen with fright. For fully half a minute the eerie wail rent the night, its undulating sound breaking into horror-laden notes, abounding in some sort of inhuman torment, which infected the listener.

Some inconsolable appeal, it seemed, which levied painful sympathy, as though its maker, having run the full gantlet of human emotions, sought a further and unearthly thrill in its own torment.

Fletcher suddenly remembered, in a dazed way, having heard of drug habitués, particularly users of hashish, who in their hallucinations gave forth such excruciating agony.

This was suggestive of such a fiend and more. Its bitter melody savored of the sigh of dank winds through valleys of tombstones and myrtle! The

morbidity of a lost dead soul was haunting the earth to some other than natural purpose! As suddenly as it had come it stopped, leaving the dismal darkness ringing with an oppressive silence.

HE was chilled to the marrow. Gloria weakly straightened up, clinging tightly to his hand. Her heart was beating frantically as the old butler and several servants, hastily dressed, appeared in the light.

"Is Mr. Sigmond there and safe?" asked Parkins, the butler.

"I am here," he spoke, and, supporting Gloria, he stepped into the doorway. "What is this noise?"

"We do not know, sir," the old man quavered. "Will you both please come in out of the lighted doorway? You can be seen for miles in the light. Pardon my suggestion, sir."

They went, Gloria huddled against him, to the foot of the stairway, while Parkins, with all the starch out of him, in a trembling voice went on:

"We heard it last night, sir. Miss Gloria has been panic-stricken. We have had the woods all round and the valley searched, but have found nothing unusual. Thank God you came today, sir! We have been apprehensive of your safety."

"Bring me a revolver," demanded Fletcher. "I am going down in the valley. The sound cannot be far away and we shall find some simple explanation of it."

Gloria clutched him hysterically.

"Sigmond, for any love that you may have for me," she begged, "do not go out of the house. Something dreadful would happen to you, I can feel it. You must be near me so that I may call you if it comes again."

Her entreaty was so serious that, without any argument, he took her to her apartment as she hung on his arm quivering, and with pallid face.

They met Freeda on the steps. A bare arm of huge proportions protruded from her hastily donned clothes. "Forgive me," said the giantess, "I slept after you sent me away, Miss Gloria."

Fletcher had some coffee served in the living room of Gloria's dainty little quarters, and shortly had her back in normal spirits. She did not wish to discuss the occurrence of the evening, and he did not hurt her by insisting on it. Finally he departed and Gloria called after him:

"If I send for you, come. If you wait to dress, I'll send Freeda to bring you."

Smiling, he sought his rooms. But when all alone in them he seriously looked out into the velvet night.

Between fresh, cool sheets he fell asleep. Exhausted but undaunted, he still smiled. If Fate would thus so mightily jest with him, he would laugh too. His last thoughts were, would he be able to literally wear the other chap's shoes? He expected them to be placed out for him when he awoke. Another's clothes might fit passably, but another's shoes had their problems, and might not fit so well as the pumps he had worn at dinner.

CHAPTER IV.

HIS OTHER SELF.

FLETCHER awoke about nine o'clock. His first impulse was to dive for the bathroom that he might not be late at the office. He put up one arm to ward off the advances of Belshasher, who was wont to leap up and lick his face about this time. Instead of Belshasher, he saw his valet enter.

"Do you wish to arise now, sir?"

"Yes," he announced, and he could hear his bath running. He bathed and, with the aid of the valet, was soon dressed. A pencil-striped suit practically fitted him. The shoes were full instead of tight, and he thanked his stars for that. The valet placed in his

buttonhole a bud from the bouquet outside. He smiled his pleasure, went downstairs, and was about to start for a walk when Gloria joined him.

She was delightfully refreshed and wore a charming, simple little morning dress.

"Good morning, my dear," she greeted him. "I could not breakfast until you arose."

She kissed his cheek, and together they went in. No reference was made to the night before, and, enthralled by her charming little mannerisms, he dallied over his breakfast for half an hour, an amount of time which he had not spent that way in all his days.

A clock chimed ten. In olden times when the alarm sounded in the firemen company's house the horses pranced and were nervous to go and firemen dressed automatically without any thought to it at all. Before the clock struck Fletcher was about the most languid and contented young man imaginable. The first chime rang; his body became taut as if a current had passed through him.

Down in the Street, the prices were coming over. Force of habit and an overpowering sense of duty brought him out of his chair. His customers were making and losing money, and God alone knew where he was!

"Excuse me," he said, "very important!" There was preoccupied terseness about him that left an anxious expression on her face.

A few quick steps brought him into the library. First looking guardedly around him, he gave his office number in a low voice. At least, long practice had made him perfect in talking into a telephone so that others could not hear. The answer came back:

"Morton, Keene & Company."

"Mr. Morton, please. Fletcher speaking.

"Mr. Morton," he began, "this is Fletcher. I shall not be able to get in to-day, and maybe not for several days. Real business is in prospect. Give general quotations by phone to-day to Sigmond Van Mortimor, Cleborough, New York."

"Repeat that, please, Mr. Fletcher," said the astounded partner. Then he added: "Congratulations. I trust for your own sake that you are not joking with me."

"Never so serious in my life," he replied. "Explanations later. Have somebody give me quotations, please."

Fletcher listened while they came over, intrusted his customers to the partners of the firm and hung up the receiver.

Gloria and he went riding. It was one thing he could do well, having come from a range country, where much of his equestrianship had been bareback. Gloria marveled at this, not understanding his prowess.

All nature seemed to be striving to paint a beautiful picture while they rode through bridle paths which were deep woodland trails.

They rode all morning, and he carefully led over the entire estate; but whenever he approached the deeply wooded valley which lay below the terrace Gloria tried to keep him from riding through it.

"I am superstitious," she said piteously, "about your going through the valley. You can guess the reason!"

In deference to her he did not insist, but he succeeded in gaining an eminence which commanded a better view of the lower part of the valley than the terrace afforded. From there he saw a sort of lodge, or bungalow, which aroused his strongest curiosity. Could that be the habitat of this ghoulish creature, or sound, or whatever it was? Only Gloria's entreaties took him back to the house.

"MR. MORTON, of Morton, Keene & Company, brokers, on the phone, sir," Parkins gravely announced. "They have been calling you for some time."

Fletcher picked up the instrument.

"Mr. Van Mortimor," the voice came, "this is Morton, of Morton, Keene & Company. Our Mr. Fletcher, who is detained out of the office, informed us that you wished general quotations. May I personally give them to you?"

"Yes, thank you," said Fletcher.

There was a moment's hesitation at the other end, as though Morton, one of the shrewdest room traders in the Street, smelled a mouse upon hearing Fletcher's crisp and familiar voice.

Then the quotations came. As Morton finished, trying with his usual canniness to hear a little more of this suspicious voice, he said:

"Mr. Van Mortimor, we are indeed pleased that you should call upon us through our Mr. Fletcher. May we ask you at first hand what you think of conditions abroad, since your opinion will help us in rendering you such service as you may require?"

Such a question, in any way that Fletcher could answer it, required more than monosyllables.

He said coldly: "Sorry, Mr. Morton, I am really out of touch with business conditions. I am afraid my opinion is of no value."

"Now, Mr. Van Mortimor, would you not say that there is a good deal of hypocrisy in what we get over here from the other side?"

"Mr. Morton," said Fletcher, "I am not interested in your opinions. Is that sufficiently clear?"

"Certainly, sir," apologized old Morton. "We are b r o k e r s, not prophets, and glad to serve you. I trust I did not offend you, Mr. Van Mortimor?"

Old Morton was playing safe on big business, but it was obvious that he thought it queer how similar this voice and Fletcher's were.

"No. I appreciate your interest, but I will not be quoted," answered Fletcher as he hung up the telephone and turned to the door.

On the threshold stood Gloria, her face wreathed in smiles as though she had made some pleasantly surprising discovery about this brother.

"You are interested in business," she exclaimed, "aren't you? I know now why you left breakfast so hurriedly. How remarkable! You must really like it from the way you act."

"Dear," he said, "I should like business if I had a million dollars"—then, as he saw a puzzled look on her face, he waved his hand and added, quickly—"to invest every minute."

"You make me very happy," she answered. "I can only conceive of a real man doing some kind of useful work. You are not in the least like what I have always heard you were."

IT was a narrow escape from the consequences of his momentary slip of the tongue. Every moment he feared that the bubble would break, but until it did he decided he had just as well play the game.

After luncheon with Gloria he spent the afternoon with his new secretary, Floyd. This young chap was a wizard for figures. In concise statements Fletcher had the enormous ramifications of the Van Mortimor fortune laid at his finger-tips. With Fletcher's financial knowledge he got an excellent understanding of the condition of everything; but he did not express opinions, lest his own secretary should wonder at his insight. At the conclusion of the conference he merely said casually:

"Prepare for me a statement of how many human beings work for enterprises in which there is Van Mortimor control."

The secretary had innumerable appointments and conferences to press on his attention. These Fletcher waved aside temporarily.

Altogether he was having a glorious week-end. The enormous castle-like house, its spacious grounds, the feeling of grandeur which permeated

everything about him, and the adorable little Gloria, were all so charming that Fletcher's over-acute sensibilities were highly satisfied. He was happy, delighted, no matter what horror might be lurking in the valley below them.

The evening passed quickly with his soul-satisfying companion. Some subtle sense told Fletcher not to stay up too late with Gloria. He succeeded in getting her to retire early, and it must have appeased the voice below, for they were undisturbed. Sunday morning broke bright and clear upon two gay young people who had slept serenely in the very shadow of some dread which they did not understand.

At last he came to the conclusion that there was no use in delving into that weird business anyhow. If he did get into the vicinity of the thing, it would only terrify Gloria. Rather than pain her, why not just let the situation solve itself. Naturally, however, he would be ever alert to protect her.

One evening, much to their mutual regret, Gloria went out after dinner, having previously accepted an invitation. She begged him to come along, since he would have been welcomed, but he pleaded fatigue, for he did not wish to risk a public appearance.

FLETCHER knew not how long he had slept, for it had been particularly sound and deep. The isolation of the house in its vast estate gave a singular quietness during the night.

Fletcher felt himself suddenly awakened by that plaintive sound of the first evening. It was very near. Involuntarily a cold chill ran over him. He felt that he was probably all alone in that part of the house and about to face something supernatural. Just under his window was the roof of a stone portico which had been made into a little garden. Steps ran up to it from the end of the east terrace which overlooked the unexplored valley. All this flashed through his mind as he lay in bed as if paralyzed.

The sound now came low and soft, but, oh, so weirdly! He knew it was the unearthliness of it alone which had awakened him, for it was so low that surely no one else could hear it. Evidently this was a personal message. He wanted to rush to the window, but he could not move.

On second thought, he remembered how the butler had urged him in out of the light the first night, and realized that it would have been very foolish to have exposed himself in the window. He thought it better to lie still and watch the window in the hope that the thing would appear within his vision, so that he might get some idea of what he was up against.

On came the anguish-stricken notes, nearer and nearer, as though it were groping along the side of the house to his window. Transfixed by fear and unable to move so much as his head, he stared through the casement at the portico. A stone balustrade ran along the edge of it, and the low, waning moon threw gray shadows between the little columns of the balustrade.

By the setting of the moon he judged it must be close after midnight and about the hour when this ghoul had called before. Why did not the marauder come within his vision?

The anguish-laden notes came low, but clear, yet they seemed to hesitate at the verge of the window. Was this fiend or incarnate voice waiting for the moon to set and leave the world in pitch darkness ere it entered? Was it trying to fill his soul with horror in the interim? His thoughts raced along with this ghastly accompaniment, this dying swan song of unearthly desire.

Some details in the room suddenly stood out vividly in his mind. A chair was sitting by his bed facing him as though something had been sitting in it studying him, probably a little earlier in the full moonlight. The window was wide open from the bottom, and

he would have sworn it had been half up from the bottom and half down from the top.

Something had been in the room. For what was it waiting? Why did it now hesitate?

The suspense was as horrifying as if a hangman were trifling with the gallows after the signal had been given to spring it. The haunting notes came fuller, and then something moved silently full into the window and stopped just in front of the sill as if it would send its plaintive song straight through as it peered in.

The moonlight came a little brighter, and the thing did not draw back as Fletcher had anticipated it would. Instead, it looked searchingly in, as if this strange, ghastly thing sought something by the moonlight, or, having finished its morbid errand, turned back for one last look before departing.

The moon must have been behind a cloud, for now the gray light flooded the stone roof, and Fletcher looked full into a pale face, a blanched and ghostly face—but, for all that, his very own!

His heart seemed to stop, he could not breathe. He was looking into his own face, which was peering at him through the upper sashes of the window. He did not move a muscle—he could not. This could not be a reflection, for the lips of the apparition were puckered up. Now it was whistling that weird tune again; Fletcher was motionless, and helplessly aghast.

FOR a brief moment while he faced the apparition, he felt himself dead. This, his physical body, was dead in bed, so that he had no physical use of it; but it still retained the faculty of perceiving what went on about it. To the strange accompaniment of the weird notes, he was perceiving himself disentangled from his present body and clinging to the window, taking one last look at his old mortal body before his tormented soul departed for parts unknown.

He wondered if he had been murdered as he slept and that this was his soul really departing to that bourne from which no traveler returns. He had no physical power to investigate whether there was any wound on his still form. He could not move; he could only stare at himself there at the window, the face blanched and agonized, but unmistakably his own. It was turning away from the window now.

He could see himself silently crossing the portico. That music of the dead—nay, dirge of the more-than-dead, was growing fainter. It was himself leaving, his very stride; and *this apparition wore his clothes,* the very clothes that he had worn to this house on that memorable day.

Strange sweet thoughts flitted through his mind. At least he was going in his own clothes. Even if he were dead, he had died in his own raiment and not as an impostor. There was something consoling about being honest in death.

The weird, ghastly music was nearly hushed; no such supernatural funeral chant had mortal ever had before, and the spirit was stopping by the balustrade again to look back.

His great climax of happiness with Gloria had ended in sudden tragedy. The dismal end was tragic and quick as the joy had been great and sudden—such were the laws of compensation in life. Needs be that he would once more look back at the scene where he had lived the sensations of an ordinary mortal's life all in two days and now he must pay as quickly with the penalty of his life.

The moon shone full on the figure by the balustrade. How often he had worn that old suit, how he had romped with his dog and cats in it; what simple pleasures with his friends he had wearing it down town. Those with whom he had lived in it came back to him, the simple life that he might have lived on for his full span, if he in these same

clothes had not been led out of his old surroundings into the glorious adventure now so tragically closing.

"Where do I go now?" he pondered, for he had lost all sense of feeling. His spectral body was leaving the balustrade outside and gradually fading away. "I can scarcely see myself any longer," he thought, "so it is to nothingness—oblivion."

He could not see; darkness engulfed him, and he knew no more.

When he awoke about nine o'clock in the morning, he found himself lying identically in the position he had occupied earlier in the night. His gaze in a sort of a fascinated way went through the window. The lower sash was fully up, and he knew it had not been left that way by his hands on retiring.

He was tremendously happy that he could see, but a horror seized him that if he attempted to move he would find himself incapable of action as in the night. A delightful breeze through the trees outside wafted into the room the scent of blossoms from the garden. His servant came in and adjusted the curtains at the window and seeing Fletcher looking at him mutely, asked:

"Do you wish to arise now, sir?"

Beyond his fondest hopes he could also hear; three of his senses had returned.

"Yes, indeed," he said joyfully.

Then as the servant stepped into the bath, he pinched himself, with the results most to be desired. Hurriedly examining his body he found he was not injured in any way. But beside the bed sat the telltale chair, and on the floor was a small envelope, empty and without any markings.

Arising and stretching his limbs, inordinately happy to feel life pulsating through his lithe young self and deeply thankful for each breath of the pure invigorating country air, he felt that he had miraculously escaped death.

He bent over and picked up the little white envelope beside the chair. It gave off a pungent perfume, and on holding it close to his nostrils he experienced a most nauseating sensation. He dropped it with a shudder, and went to his bath.

WHILE Fletcher dressed he dismissed his servant on an errand. From among his effects he hastily took the key to the chiffonier drawer where he had locked up the clothes worn on his arrival. Fletcher opened the drawer quickly and found it empty; all of his personal clothes and effects were gone. His own wallet, his watch, some personal papers which had been carried by him—in short every possible vestige of identification of his former self—had vanished. Some of these things he had worn in Van Mortimor's clothes for fear of detection by the servants, but they, too, were missing.

"Who am I now, anyhow?" pondered Fletcher as he descended the stairway. "If some unknown authority is depriving me of my former identity and conniving to make me Sigmond Van Mortimor, surely this can only be with the assent of Van Mortimor, and if I find that he is robbing me of my identity and placing me in his position, it is only a fair exchange that I become Van Mortimor with a vengeance! I'll feel out my way a little farther today; and if I am actually made Van Mortimor, I'll be a real one, and the world will know it!"

Gloria joined him at breakfast, charmingly fresh and delightful.

"Gloria," he cheerfully smiled, "I am getting restless. I think I should like to get to work. Would you care to go into town with me a few days?"

She was overjoyed at the prospect of being with him, and he had decided that in feeling out the strength of his position, he had better keep as many anchors to windward as possible, by having around him the most important allies with whom he passed muster as Van Mortimor.

"You know I want to do that," she

said laughingly. "Indeed, you will have to put up with having me near you at all times."

Nothing could have suited his plans better. The more important servants were sent to her Park Avenue apartment, at her suggestion, instead of opening his town house at—Fifth Avenue. Floyd, the secretary, was instructed to meet him at the apartment, and Gloria and Fletcher drove down together.

"Now we set out to conquer!" she exclaimed as they stepped into the car.

How little did she realize the truth of that, thought Fletcher.

They swept into Manhattan at lunch time and ate publicly at the Alexandrian. Word quickly spread around.

People bowed to Gloria, who recognized their greeting with a slight inclination of her head. Occasionally she smiled an invitation to some one whom she presented to Fletcher. In this way he met a severely dressed old lady, two blasé young men, and a charming young lady who was lunching with a distinguished foreigner.

"Only those," she said *sotto voce*, "whom we really care to know."

They were all playing the game. He noticed a little cold glint in Gloria's eyes as she glanced over the crowd. A few spoke to her when she did not seem to see. Fletcher realized that Gloria was now Miss Van Mortimor; although occasionally he caught a sly little smile when her face was turned so that only he could see. How superficial and cold this girl could be!

After lunch he drove Gloria to the Park Avenue address, and without entering excused himself for the afternoon, pleading that he wished to familiarize himself with the old city. Picking up his secretary, they fared forth.

THE day before, Edmond Fletcher had superficially informed himself with the life he was supposed to live downtown, and now, having given up the safe escort of his sister, whose introduction surely could not be doubted, he drove to the National Club, the most exclusive one in town, accompanied only by Floyd. As he was riding there, he asked innumerable but guarded questions, which this accommodating fellow painstakingly answered and in detail; for since his employer ventured no opinions, Floyd presumed Mr. Van Mortimor had only the faintest conception of business.

Several times Fletcher caught veiled suggestions in some of the replies which might lead to feathering the secretary's nest. This, thought Fletcher, was a perfectly natural trend in human nature, especially considering the character of the man the secretary was supposed to be serving. Incidentally, a way occurred to him of handling this fellow's natural avarice, for he really wished to keep Floyd on account of his quick grasp of affairs and his veritable genius in accounting.

They entered the National Club. Fletcher merely indicated the register to Floyd who signed: "Sigmond Van Mortimor."

He knew that he had been elected to this and other clubs in his absence. Several governors of the club and old friends of Van Mortimor's father introduced themselves to him or were presented. He was careful in his remarks and only carried on the lightest type of pleasant, mutually respectful conversation. This endeared him to the old chaps who were ultra-conservative.

He noticed however, one tall gentleman of distinguished appearance, with a gray shock of hair and a professional Vandyke beard, who seemed to be watching him intently. Something intuitively told Fletcher that this man was too much concerned over him. Otherwise, everything was proceeding beautifully. His plan was merely to present himself quietly but openly and see if he could be accepted.

From the National they drifted on to the Polo and Racquet Club, where

they went through about the same formulæ, but Fletcher got away from here as quickly as he gracefully could.

This was a younger set of men who insisted on discussing sports, even European sports rather than none, and he did not wish to feign too much indifference. Also they had been followed by the distinguished gray-haired gentleman of the National Club. Fletcher decided now that this fellow would absolutely bear watching.

As they left, an hour or so later, Fletcher bade the chauffeur stop on a pretext that he wished to look in a shop window. As the gray-headed man emerged from the club, Fletcher went directly up to him and, trying to put it as politely as he could, demanded:

"I do trust you will not misunderstand my concern in inquiring why you have been following me. May I ask for an explanation?"

"Certainly," smiled the stranger. "I am greatly interested in you. Allow me to introduce myself: I am Dr. Wendell Bates, the Van Mortimor family physician. The fact is, I am supposed to have brought you into the world, but I haven't seen you since you were about fourteen. No wonder you didn't remember me!"

The words "supposed to have brought you into the world" gave Fletcher a start. That was a point on which a physician ought to speak positively. If the man was sure of Sigmond's identity, why did he happen to use the word "suppose"?

Fletcher's mind began to work quickly. Here was a clew to something if he could only trace it. Why did this man follow him? Surely not out of idle curiosity. With this in mind he answered:

"This is indeed fortunate. Only today I was thinking that I should like to consult you."

"That will be a pleasure," said the doctor. "My offices are just around the corner. Would you care to come with me now?"

"Certainly," agreed Fletcher, and he indicated to the chauffeur that they were to follow him with the car.

FLETCHER was particularly on the alert. He was convinced this doctor knew something. Going up on the elevator he fenced carefully with a very polite but meaningless conversation. With an open avowal—that must never be made to any one but the principals—he wished to convey that he knew the doctor had some knowledge about him and elicit from the doctor some sign as to whether he was friend or foe.

They went into the consultation room and Fletcher stripped off his coat and shirt for a physical examination. The suave physician began an examination in a perfunctory way. All this time Fletcher watched him intently for some sign of suspicion about his identity. None came.

"Am I doing all right?" asked Fletcher casually. It was just a simple question that any one under examination might ask; and also it was the natural question from a blind pawn to his principal, or from one in doubt asking guidance from one in a position to give it.

"Nicely," answered the physician, just as noncommittally without the slightest noticeable added meaning.

Yet Fletcher could not help but believe the physician knew something about him. He decided on a broadside question.

"Doctor," he said, "the duties that I am about to take up will be quite extensive—possibly a little wearing on just one human being! Will you please advise me how I am to live?"

"Young man," said the doctor, as he looked him fully in the eyes, and it seemed that his heart was now in his words, "great things depend on you. Just be your natural self, above all be natural. Much more than I can tell you depends on it. Keep your mind clear above all things."

After this oracular advice, which Fletcher seemed to believe was given sincerely, he passed down into the street, reflecting that the doctor was a pretty good old chap, and wondering whether his interest in him was other than professional. He looked in his—or, more exactly, Van Mortimor's—wallet, and found money, crisp American bank notes. Some little money would be necessary for what he had in mind, and the paradoxical idea had just come to him that with all of his wealth, he might not have a cent in his pocket.

Driving to the Forty-First Street entrance of a building on Lexington Avenue, he directed his secretary and the car to wait for him, saying he would be inside some time. He passed through the lobby of the building to the Forty-Second Street entrance where he knew there was a subway station. He took the subway and in a few moments stood in front of the building in which was his little bachelor apartment. Realizing that he had no keys he rang for the janitress, Mrs. Kelly.

"Mrs. Kelly," he explained, "I have lost my keys. Would you lend me your key, please?"

"Sure," she said. "Do you think you left them inside or did you just this minute lose them?"

"No," he answered, "I am certain I didn't do either."

"For the love of Mike!" she gasped. "How have you been getting in and out to-day? I saw you several times."

Fletcher kept his face under control.

"Where are the dog and cats?" he asked anxiously.

"Up in the apartment," she avowed, both hands upon her hips.

Getting Mrs. Kelly's passkey, he took the steps several at a bound.

AS he approached his door, he heard a low dismal bark or moan. Belshasher was whining in a pitiful sort of way.

"Here is where I find out something about my other self," Fletcher reasoned as he noiselessly used the key and carefully closed the door behind him. He didn't want anything to rush by him and out.

His rooms were very dark. It rather nonplused him to find all the curtains drawn.

He waited awhile, his back to the door, for Belshasher to run to him as he knew he could not enter the apartment without the big dog knowing it and greeting him.

Instead, there only came the low but plaintive howl of the dog, seemingly from back in the bedroom. A feeling of horror passed over him. He knew that sound. Out in desolate countries he had heard a dog howl in that manner when some one was dead, and it usually was the dog's master. A creepy feeling spread to his fingers and toes. Was Belshasher already mourning him?

It connected up only too sinisterly with his nightmare of the night before. Was it a warning to go no further with this high-handed adventure in which he was so wildly engaged? Steeling himself to confront the horrible unknown, he advanced cautiously down the hallway, and peered through the portières, into his living room.

A strange sight met his eyes. There was a black rug on the floor, how black only he knew from trying to keep it clean, but it never had looked so weird as now, for near the center of it was just one murky splotch of sunlight shining through an aperture in the window curtain. Stretched out stiff and stark in the patch of light lay Celeste, apparently dead.

Across the patch of light slowly came Aphrodite placing each foot with measured funereal tread. From a corner gleamed softly two dull lights, which he took to be Fatima's eyes. They moved in dizzy solemn circles. The low, pitiful howl of Belshasher came dismally from the bedroom.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

The Hawk of Painted Rocks

Fresh from battling Santa Anna's Mexicans, Captain Hugh Dennison was to find a more dangerous foe in the robber baron of the Adirondacks

By WILLIAM MERRIAM ROUSE
Author of "Men of Iron," "The Painted Pup," etc.

Novelette—Complete

CHAPTER I.

A GALLANT FREE LANCE.

CAPTAIN HUGH DENNISON, late of the army, dismounted to let his horse drink from a brook that ran gurgling under the plank bridge they had just crossed. Although the captain wore the tailored broadcloth coat and nankeen trousers of a gentleman in civil life it was impossible to take him for anything but a soldier. It was only in this year of '48, after the victorious invasion of Mexico, that he had resigned his commission.

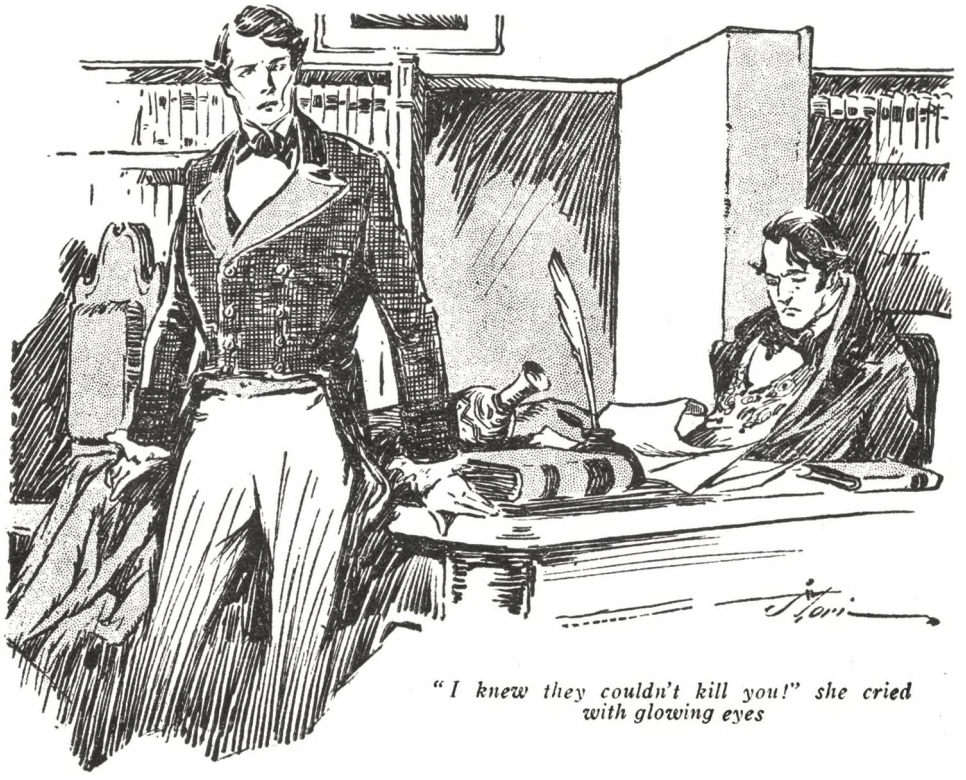
Rather fiercely blue, deep-set eyes softened as he passed his hand over the neck of Bravo, a magnificent animal that had carried him to the assault on Monterey and the defeat of Santa Anna at Buena Vista. Master and horse each bore a saber cut from that last battle, and a Mexican bullet had plowed along the shining black flank of Bravo.

Captain Dennison took this interval to see to his horse pistols. They hung in holsters, one on each side of the saddle; enormous weapons, carrying round leaden balls as big as the end of a man's thumb. The captain raised the hammers to make sure that the percussion caps were firmly placed and in good condition. This Adirondack wilderness into which he had lately come was unknown country to him, and if the people were as wild as the magnificent mountains he felt that he would have need of his weapons.

The thud of hoofs on the hard earth of the roadway brought Dennison to attention. Six feet of compact cavalryman swung into the saddle and waited. The captain's eyes had lost their softness now, and one hand was close to a pistol butt. In a moment a little cavalcade turned a bend of the road and slackened pace at sight of him.

A girl led. Two men, each with a rifle across his saddle, followed her. The girl drew rein upon the bridge and sat looking down at Hugh Dennison, with the men at a respectful distance behind her. The captain was held motionless by surprise and delight: if this was a rose of the mountains then he was glad that he had come.

The girl maintained an effortless poise upon her sidesaddle; she and the slim-legged chestnut that she rode were thoroughbreds. The toe of a little boot peeped out from under the flowing skirt of her black habit: a black os-



"I knew they couldn't kill you!" she cried with glowing eyes

trich plume swept from a silver buckle on her hat to a shoulder which seemed to have been molded into the cloth of that shapely bodice.

But it was the face under the hat that held Captain Dennison fascinated. Eyes the color of clear amber gazed steadily from a face turned with such delicacy of feature that milk white skin and scarlet lips were accentuated by that perfection. A mass of dark golden-brown hair, coiled low on her neck, matched the eyes.

Captain Dennison lifted his beaver hat and bowed; and he could bow nearly as well as he could fight. The beaver remained in his hand. He had forgotten his horse pistols, and the rifles of the two rather dull-looking fellows behind the girl. They were servants, evidently. She swung a little silver mounted riding whip and continued to stare. There was nothing of conventional feminine timidity about this young woman.

"WHO are you?" she asked, coldly, but in a clear and flawless voice.

"Hugh Dennison, madam. Lately with General Zachary Taylor in Mexico."

"An officer, of course," she murmured. It was rather a statement to herself than a question.

"I had the honor to hold a captain's commission."

"The regular army," and she glanced at the set of his shoulders. He smiled; and it was a very pleasant thing to see Captain Dennison smile.

"Of course," he replied. A little flicker of light played in her eyes and she seemed to make a sudden decision.

"What are you doing, sir, in this country?"

He wondered, a little wildly, if he was trespassing on a private estate. Certainly the road had all the appearance of a public highway; but she had spoken as a queen to some unknown mercenary.

"I thought I had had enough of fighting," said Dennison, with frankness, "so I resigned my commission and set out to be a country gentleman. They said in New York City that land up here was to be had for almost nothing. That's true, but with clearing and building it will cost as much as any other. So I'm going back to the army, I think, or to some country where there's a war."

"Ah!" Again the little whip lashed back and forth against her skirt. "Captain Dennison, I should like to have you come home with me and take dinner. I believe I can suggest a way for you to get land without money. Will you come?"

Hugh Dennison was astonished; for in that time it was not the custom for unchaperoned young ladies to make the acquaintance of gentlemen upon the highway, much less invite them home to dine. However, he was under no misapprehension. Her boldness was of a superior kind; she was a goddess speaking to a mere mortal. He pulled himself together.

"I shall be honored," he said, and he wheeled and rode Bravo up the bank to the road.

"I am Eve Pendleton," she said, "and these are my men."

A gesture of her whip toward the silent guardians turned the glance of the captain that way. They were broad-faced fellows, clad in butternut shirts and jeans. There was, however, a steadiness and determination in their appearance which marked them as trustworthy. Dennison's quick eye caught the glint of caps under the hammers of their rifles. This was no hunting party; why did they ride with loaded weapons? He began to think that his own caution might be justified.

"You are very kind," said the captain, as they moved forward. "I have been living in taverns since I left New York, and the farther north I come the worse they get. The Gray Goose at Valeboro is the worst of the lot. I suspect the fat tavern keeper is more concerned with smuggling goods down Lake Champlain from Canada than he is with his kitchen."

"I know your host, Chug Tupper," said Miss Pendleton, calmly, "from his black heart to his hide. The lout should be roasted on a spit over his own fire. He, if you please, is our justice of the peace!"

"Ludicrous!" exclaimed the captain. He was amazed at her calm hatred, and thrilled at the hint of a mystery. Here was a beautiful girl with at least one enemy. What more could a soldier ask?

She touched the chestnut with her whip and set a sharp pace, but Bravo was not pressed. He kept nose and nose with the lighter horse as they pounded over miles of mountain road and came at last to a ridge from which they could look down on the broad blue of the lake, the heavily wooded shores and the sharp cliffs which rose in places with startling abruptness. Eve Pendleton drew rein and pointed to a sweeping indentation in the shore line.

"There's Valeboro, where you're staying," she said. "You can just see the church steeple and some of the roofs among the trees. Those reddish cliffs off to the left are called Painted Rocks. They're full of iron ore. You can pick out the chimneys of a gray stone house there. I am living at present between Painted Rocks and the village."

WITHOUT waiting for him to reply she rode recklessly down the hill in front of them, nor did she stop again until they suddenly swept out of the forest into an area of cleared land about a small white cottage. It

was a snug little place, although in need of paint and repairs, with a small but luxuriant rose garden.

For Captain Dennison this was another surprise. He had expected this remarkable girl to lead him up graveled driveways to one of the pillared and porticoed mansions which the powerful families of this north country had scattered from Albany to the Canadian border.

The girl dismounted without waiting for Dennison's help. She flung the reins to one of the men, who was instantly at her side, and nodded toward Bravo.

"Take the captain's horse, John," she ordered. "You and Dick would better take turns eating to-night. If one of the Hawk's men has seen a stranger come here there'll be prowling. And load with buckshot. It will be easier to make a hit in the dark."

"Yes, ma'am," replied John.

Captain Dennison's spirit leaped. Prowling—buckshot! He was much pleased as he followed the girl through a doorway arched by rambler roses. A glance at the few fine pieces of furniture in the narrow hallway convinced him that this was not the real home of Eve Pendleton. The house was such as a small but prosperous farmer might have built for himself; the furniture belonged in a mansion.

"Upstairs in the chamber at the right," said the hostess, "you will find water in the pitcher, towels, everything. And Aunt Sally will serve our dinner as soon as you are ready."

The captain discovered a charming little room of mahogany and chintze. Decalcomania roses of pink decorated the bowl and pitcher, a pair of creditable charcoal sketches hung on the wall, pink and white curtains were at the dormer windows, and a pink and white valance encircled the four-poster.

Dennison sighed with a kind of sad happiness. He was delighted to be here, but he wished he could see some prospect of staying. If only there was fighting in this country, as there had been with the British in '12, he could get himself quartered here.

Captain Dennison washed and readjusted his stock with great care; he pulled out the ruffles of his fine linen shirt and reduced his hair, which he wore fashionably long and turned under at the ends to an astounding smoothness. No one had even called Hugh Dennison a handsome man, and no one had ever failed to take note of the distinction and power of his bearing.

He went downstairs to find Eve Pendleton dressed for dinner and waiting in a tiny parlor where a melodeon crowded one corner and a profusion of candles burned in magnificent silver candelabra.

But the eyes of the captain were for his hostess. Her shoulders rose from a rich, dark blue silk which made their whiteness still more startling. The hair of golden brown was drawn severely over little ears with loops of gold in them. There was nothing more beautiful, thought Dennison, between the halls of Montezuma and the regions of the pole. He told her so as he bowed and offered his arm, but he was not rewarded by so much as a smile.

They went into a small dining room where an enormous colored woman, turbaned and staring, waited to serve them. It was a critical gaze that she turned upon Captain Dennison. He smiled at her, and brought a flash of teeth in return. He placed a chair, and then he was looking at Eve Pendleton across a table beautiful with roses and silver and fragile china.

"To a soldier this is heaven," he said.

A CURIOUS smile played over the face of the girl. It was like distant lightning on a summer night. She met his eyes thoughtfully.

"I expected to wait until you had dined, Captain Dennison," she said, "before I mentioned the matter that

is uppermost in my mind. But perhaps it will be just as well to speak of it now. I need a man of intelligence, discretion, and great courage to do something for me. If you are the man I promise you land in return for the service. Let us say, five hundred acres."

"You flatter me!" exclaimed Dennison. "To serve you, Miss Pendleton, should be reward enough!"

"Wait!" she interrupted; and again that curious smile lighted her face. "I want a man—removed!"

"Do you mean," gasped the captain, "that you want me to kill him?"

"I meant what I said literally, sir. I want him permanently removed from the place where he is. If he dies in the process, I shall shed no tears!"

"I have been accustomed to war. Not—"

"Murder?" She gave a little bitter laugh. "I assure you, captain, that you are much more likely to be murdered than to succeed. No, I am not trying to hire murder done. But I am prepared to offer you the land you want if you will right a wrong where the law is helpless. Does that interest you?"

"For the present the land is not to be considered," replied Dennison. "If you'll explain I'll give you an answer."

"The man is called now the Hawk of Painted Rocks." Her eyes became hard as she spoke that name and for the first time Captain Dennison began to understand this strange girl. "The Hawk's name is Micah Baring, but if ever a fierce and cruel old man deserved such a title, Baring does. He even looks like a hawk, physically.

"Painted Rocks was the home of my people from long before the Revolution. It was built on a grant from the king and there are more than three thousand acres of the property left now. With the rents and the rafting of timber it produces a good income, and there is a fortune in iron ore in the ground. My father and I were alone in the world.

"I had gone to Paris with some friends, at my father's suggestion, when he died very suddenly. Of course I came home at once—and found Micah Baring in possession of Painted Rocks. He produced a deed conveying all of the property to him with the exception of this cottage and some furniture. That deed had been executed before our noble justice of the peace and notary, Chug Tupper of the Gray Goose! He swore that my father had signed it in his presence!

"The deed had been recorded. You can see how much more clever this was than the forging of a will. The Hawk's story was that he had loaned my father large sums of money, in part for my education, and that out of friendship he had left him undisturbed as long as he lived!

"The whole thing is a tissue of lies!" cried the girl, for the first time becoming excited. "Three of my servants, Aunt Sally, Dick Trow, and Honest John Lawton, followed me here, although they know I can't pay them. This fragment of land produces scarcely enough to feed us. When we need clothes the silver will go, then the furniture. But I shall stay, and fight! And now, sir, I ask whether you will undertake this affair for me?"

Captain Hugh Dennison drew a breath long and deep. It was simply made to order for him, all of this. Another might have hesitated at an attempt to dispossess a powerful man of an estate, but the captain had helped to dispossess armies. If there was little law in this wilderness, so much the better for him.

Moreover, the amber eyes on the other side of the table had become pools of infinite depth. To gaze into them was to drink strong wine. Yet Eve Pendleton made no promises with those eyes; she waited calmly now, as one who has proposed a trade. She even continued her meal, with an occasional sip of claret.

"I will try it," promised Dennison.

"And you will succeed," she told him, "unless they kill you."

CHAPTER II.

AT CHUG TUPPER'S TAVERN.

IT was still early in the evening when Captain Dennison rode back to Valeboro and the Gray Goose. His head was so crammed with information about the Hawk and his retainers, and Painted Rocks, that he had not as yet begun to make plans. He was to think over what Eve Pendleton had told him and return to the cottage next day.

In addition to servants and workmen of no particular importance it appeared that Micah Baring had gathered a little band of tough characters upon whom he could depend for his fighting, and that work which would not bear the light of day. There were at least four of them, captained by a certain Jack Hawley, for whom, it seemed, Miss Pendleton had a particular detestation. Hawley would stick at nothing, she said, and he held his men both by fear and by the power of a superior intelligence.

Eve's own people, she assured Dennison, could be depended upon to back him up in anything he undertook. Dick and Honest John were faithful though stupid, and they could and would fight for her. There was a certain comfort in this. Captain Dennison had fought alone, but he was not averse to having a good man or two at his back.

The Gray Goose, a long building with big wooden pillars and a double veranda in front, was still alight when he pulled up outside the bar and called for some one to take his horse. A stable boy came out, and after Dennison had given him instructions as to the care of Bravo, he went into the tavern. There was only one customer in the room, sitting at a table.

Behind the bar Chug Tupper, his fat face creased by a mechanical smile, was polishing glasses.

Captain Dennison ordered a hot toddy for his nightcap. While it was being made, the door swung, and a long, lean man, of a sepulchral pallor, entered. He glanced sharply at the captain; and coincident with that glance, Dennison remembered that as he rode in from the cottage, at intervals he had thought he heard the thud of hoofs behind him.

He stepped hastily to the door and looked out. The stable boy was leading away another horse.

The captain turned in time to see the newcomer thrusting a backward pointing thumb over his shoulder; evidently the captain was the topic of conversation between the newcomer and that other who sat by the table, turning a glass slowly in his hand.

Dennison had taken no particular notice of the seated man at the table when he came in, but now he gave him a searching stare. A handsome fellow, he was, with black hair and prominent black eyes, and the little traces of beard in front of each ear which were known as side bars. His low cut satin waistcoat revealed an elegant shirt and a heavy ring upon his finger caught and flung back the light of the candles.

Even as Dennison looked at him he rose and sauntered over to the bar. It was plain that he was going to speak, and the captain noticed a slight tremor of the hand which drew a cigar from his pocket.

"I have the honor of addressing Captain Hugh Dennison?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied the captain.

"My name is John Hawley." He extended a hand. "We have few travelers in Valeboro, and I'd be glad if you'd have a drink with me, sir."

"With pleasure," agreed Dennison. He could have asked for nothing better at the moment. He was going to get acquainted with Micah Baring's chief devil. This man could be no other. And the incident proved that already they were on the alert, probably through a watch maintained over the

movements of Eve Pendleton. The Hawk would not be one to underestimate her.

HAWLEY led the way back to his table. Dennison noted that the long and pallid man who had followed him sat down near by. The smile of Chug Tupper deepened as he brought their drinks.

"You are traveling for pleasure?" asked Hawley.

Under most circumstances Hugh Dennison had found it well to tell the truth bluntly, to friend and foe alike. So now he answered without hesitation.

"I have been looking for land," he said, "but I fear it would be too costly to create a home in your wilderness. It is beautiful but stubborn."

"Like some of the ladies," agreed Hawley, slowly, with a smile. "However, neither the wilderness nor the ladies ought to daunt a fighting man."

"Expediency, sir," said the captain, "is sometimes a good guide."

He was purposely vague, for it was by no means clear where Hawley was driving. The man continued to play with his glass, and debate something within himself.

"Are you of a mind to carve out an estate here for yourself?" he asked.

Dennison took a long swallow of his steaming drink. Now was the time to step carefully.

"I have the disposition," he replied.

"You don't object to war, even if it happens to be a private war?"

"War is my trade!" smiled the captain.

"Then," exclaimed Hawley, with sudden decision, "I think I have a proposition to make to you!"

"I'll listen, but I'll make no promises in advance."

"Oh, naturally not!" Hawley dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand. "First, I want to ask a question. Did Eve Pendleton bring you here to this country?"

"I never saw her before to-day," answered Dennison. "I met her on the road and she was kind enough to ask me to dinner."

"A very clever girl," said Hawley, "but I'm going to get ahead of her. You may have heard from her of Micah Baring, the Hawk, and Painted Rocks. I take it you have. Well, I am his superintendent. Long Abner, who's sitting behind me, is one of my men, and he was on duty watching the cottage to-day. We keep track of Miss Pendleton. While you were dining there I was on my way to find out what I could about you from Tupper."

"That's all clear," said Dennison.

Hawley leaned across the table, and in an instant revealed himself with a boldness which showed him to be infinitely more dangerous than the captain had supposed.

"Do you want to share Painted Rocks with me?" he asked, in a low voice. "Between three and four thousand acres of land! A store, a dock on the lake, a gristmill. And there's iron ore in that land, man! There are two fortunes, and the girl!"

Captain Dennison glanced away in order not to show the sudden flare of his wrath at the mention of Eve Pendleton. This situation must be handled with the skill of a fencer.

"You must have a plan," he said, quietly. "But why do you desert Baring?"

"We'll get to the plan later. I've always intended to take Painted Rocks away from the Hawk, after he had got it for me. At first he made a fortune in timber, and I helped him. Then he wanted the Pendleton estate. It was easy enough to fool old Jared Pendleton, a bookish kind of man. Micah played chess with him, and the Hawk can be agreeable. The girl was out of the country.

"Pendleton died. He and Micah used to drink port together over their chess, and you can draw your own conclusions. The Hawk had traced the

signature of Pendleton on a deed to Painted Rocks. I saw him, and called Long Abner so I'd have a witness. Chug Tupper fixed it up with a notary's seal and it was recorded. After that Pendleton had to die. The Hawk doesn't know it, but I've got him!"

Hugh Dennison shuddered, and laughed to cover it.

"WHY do you need me?" Hugh asked.

"Because I need Eve Pendleton. You can deal with her, but she has told those two bulldogs of hers to shoot any of the Hawk's men who steps inside her fence. She must give an obligation against the estate. We can fix that, and take the whole thing away from her later."

"And suppose," said Dennison, "I decide to go ahead without dividing? You've told me the whole story!"

"You wouldn't live to get well started!" laughed Hawley. "Moreover, Long Abner will swear he sat at table with us, and that we talked of no such matters. Chug will swear he saw Abner with us. You can't get along without me any more than I can without the girl."

"What share do they get?"

"They think they're going to share alike with me," said Hawley, dryly. "They'll hold an empty sack when I get through."

"And perhaps I will, too," suggested the captain, grimly.

"You would if I could fix it that way," Hawley remarked cheerfully, "but I don't see how I can."

"Didn't you ever think of blackmailing the Hawk?" asked Dennison. "Any one of you could do that."

"And die!" exclaimed the superintendent. "Do you think they call him the Hawk from mere picturesque fancy? If I demanded money from him he'd either shoot me on the spot or I'd die with my next meal, or my next drink. No, the old man was safe enough until chance brought you here and gave me an approach to Eve Pendleton."

They sat in silence for several minutes. Hawley made a sign to Tupper and the smirking tavern keeper brought more drinks. But Captain Dennison rose and left his untouched.

"I'll think this matter over, Hawley," he said, "and let you know to-morrow."

"All right!" Hawley rose gracefully and pulled down his flowered silk waistcoat. "Remember that Baring has men who shoot far and straight. He needs only a word from me."

CHAPTER III.

THE HAWK'S NEST.

CAPTAIN HUGH DENNISON slept that night because he had trained himself to sleep with death around the corner of to-morrow; but with the light of day his problem met him again. It was no nearer solution than it had been the evening before when he left the bar. He lay sunk in an enormous feather bed, and stared at the battered furniture of the chamber while he tried to discover what his next move ought to be.

Half an hour later the captain rose and shaved, and dressed with great care. From his saddlebags he took a case of duelling pistols and loaded them. One went into a trousers pocket and the other into the inside breast pocket of his coat. Then he was ready for breakfast, and he descended, humming a marching song of General Taylor's army.

"Green grow the rushes, O—"

It was due to be an exciting day. Dennison ate temperately, drank a quart of indifferent coffee, and called for his horse. He examined the pistols in the saddle holsters and made sure that Bravo had been properly cared for. Then he rode straight toward Painted Rocks.

So far as he could tell, Captain Dennison was not followed, though he thought it likely that Chug Tupper had set some one on his trail. Hawley would want to know all his movements, but this was now a matter of indifference. The captain chuckled at intervals as the humor of what he was about to do struck him afresh.

He was still in this mood when he found himself at the beginning of the long driveway which led up to the stone house at Painted Rocks. A low wall was set off by rough granite posts at the gateway. Dennison halted between them and considered the scene before him.

A broad lawn, dotted with oaks and cedars and maples, sloped upward to the house. There were touches of color here and there where tiger lilies and peonies blossomed; shrubs such as snowballs, hydrangeas, and lilacs were massed in convenient corners.

The house itself was the gray stonework of Colonial days; substantial to resist attack and showing the care of good workmanship. There were many casement windows and half a dozen chimneys rose above the high, peaked roof. It was a home which might be owned with pride in the ancestors who had built it, and now Hugh Dennison understood the glaze of hardness which the daughter of this house wore.

While the captain looked a man rose from behind the wall with a rifle in the crook of his arm. He was short and rugged and dark of skin. French and Indian, thought Dennison, as he stared indifferently at the rifle.

"What you want, hey?" demanded the man.

"I've come to call on Mr. Micah Baring," calmly. "Is he at home?"

"By gar!" The watchman was puzzled. "I was not tol' if you come here! I guess you go see, meester!"

Captain Dennison laughed and rode up the drive. It was something to have commanded a company of regulars. If he had hesitated he would probably have been held up at the gate. He stopped at the horse block before the main entrance of the house and dismounted, hitching Bravo to a ring in a stone post, but with a knot which would pull out at a touch. He might have need to leave in a hurry.

THE captain approached a massive oak door, found a bell handle, and pulled it. From within came a reverberating clang. The door was opened by a bulky, tow-headed fellow with a squint; most obviously not a servant. A bulge in a pocket of the short jacket that he wore indicated a pistol.

"Captain Hugh Dennison to see Mr. Micah Baring," said the visitor. "Announce me, please!"

The man backed away, after an instant of hesitation. With a sweep of his hand he pointed to a door at the side of the hallway.

"I guess that's where folks wait," he said. "I'll go tell Mr. Baring."

Dennison did not enter that room. He remained standing in the hall, with the door open behind him, and Bravo in sight. Anything might happen, and it was well to have a line of retreat After he had seen the Hawk face to face he would know more about his position here in the house of the enemy.

It was not many seconds before a step sounded upon the stairs. The captain looked up and saw a towering figure at the head of the stairway, in the somewhat dim region of the upper hall. It was as though the Hawk had come out to make sure that his ears had heard aright.

"Come up to the library, Captain Dennison," he invited, in a resonant voice.

"Thank you, sir," and Dennison mounted slowly that long flight of steps. He climbed with his ears alert to sounds from the rear and his eyes searching the floor above. But when he stood at the top, face to face with

the Hawk, he was convinced that there was to be no ambuscade. Baring was plainly curious, and after he had followed his guest into the library they took account of each other.

The Hawk was a man of vast power, which was felt even more than it was seen. The hooked nose, the jutting chin, and the sunken and smoldering eyes all added to the effect of the gaunt but heroic stature. But it was the subtle effect of his presence that took hold. There was the feeling of a deadly force which could instantly be unleashed, a force as ruthlessly destructive as a cyclone.

"Be seated, sir," he said politely, and he indicated a chair on one side of a broad table of Santo Domingo mahogany. The Hawk himself sat down on the other side and Dennison fancied he heard a faint sound, as of a smooth running drawer being opened.

There had been a moment in which to glance about the room, and more than ever Hugh Dennison was charmed by this house; more than ever he understood the feeling of Eve Pendleton for Painted Rocks. The vast fireplace was of carved white marble, shining with polished brasses; from floor to ceiling ran mahogany bookcases, filled with leather-bound volumes. There were cushioned seats in the deep windows, half hidden by draperies.

"This is one of the most attractive rooms I have ever seen!" exclaimed the captain, for a moment forgetting the nature of his errand. The peculiar smile of the Hawk brought him back to the affair in hand.

"Ah, you are interested in Painted Rocks?" It was strange to see so much sardonic humor under that mass of white hair, which might have been the crown of a benevolent old age. If Captain Dennison had been given to nerves he would have felt them now. The broad shoulders which spread out beyond the back of the Hawk's chair gave the impression of being ready for action.

"Yes," replied the captain. "Very much!"

"A frank and clever answer, which demands the next move from me!" Baring dropped the thin mask he had worn. "You are a man of courage to come here. What do you want?"

"I have come to suggest that you return Painted Rocks to Miss Pendleton," said Dennison calmly. "That is, if you wish to enjoy your remaining years in peace!"

THE two men stared at each other, Dennison with half a smile. It was clear that Micah Baring was as close to astonishment as was possible for his iron nature.

"Is that a threat, sir?"

"It is! I know about the forgery, and I suspect something more serious! But I am not a man to putter with lawyers and courts. I am a soldier, with two good men at my back and right on my side if you go scurrying to the law for cover. I am going to drive you out of Painted Rocks!"

"What you have undertaken is a little beyond you," said Baring.

"I came here to-day," went on the captain, "because I thought you might offer to compromise, to accept something in the way of a cash payment for giving up the property. And also because I wanted you to know that you had something more than a powerless girl to deal with."

"I never saw a man court death so eagerly," said the Hawk, and he raised one hand above the level of the table. In that hand was a long-barreled pistol. Without a word more he fired.

Dennison had been in the act of shifting in his chair. This alone save him from death. He remained rigid, with the smoke curling in front of him and the roar of the weapon in his ears. Above the little drifting cloud he read surprise in the face of Micah Baring.

"That is the first time I have missed in half a century," said the Hawk. "But I shan't miss twice!"

"If you make another move," the captain told him, "I shall put a ball through your waistcoat, at about the second button. I have had you covered, under the table, since we sat down here!"

Baring leaned back in his chair.

"You are going to give me more trouble than I thought," he said. "Now what next? I could kill you here with impunity, but I am afraid you would have trouble in explaining why you came into the house and shot me. Don't you think so?"

"True," said Dennison. He reached into his breast pocket and drew the second pistol; then he got slowly to his feet. "For the present I am through, and I'm going back the way I came. I've found out what I wanted to know."

He moved carefully toward the door, while Baring watched him in silence. The captain kept the old man covered as he opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. There was no one in sight. He descended with his back against the wall, a step at a time, watching below and above.

In the lower hall the man with the squint appeared, and instantly threw up his hands at sight of the pistols. The captain eased himself out of the front door and in half a minute Bravo was galloping away from Painted Rocks. He thundered past the hesitating guard at the gate and out upon the highway. There Hugh Dennison drew rein, and set his teeth, and fought to clear away the mists that persisted in gathering before his eyes. For Micah Baring had not missed that shot in the library.

That the wound was not dangerous was fairly certain, for by a great effort the captain had been able to conquer the shock and the pain, and get himself out of that house of danger without revealing his hurt. The bullet had been aimed at his heart, but the movement coincident with the pressing of the trigger had saved him.

It was probably a flesh wound, with possibly a rib cracked, but Dennison knew that it would take all of his resolution to ride back to the Gray Goose. Already shirt and waistcoat were wet through. He buttoned his coat and flung his head up. It was one of those times when a man had to keep the saddle.

Captain Dennison reached the tavern with hanging head and a dull gaze, but he was capable of dismounting and standing on his feet; and he did not forget to take the pistols from his holsters. On the way up to his chamber he ordered hot water, a meal, and a glass of rum sent up to him.

"You look pale, captain," smirked Tupper. "Had any bad luck?"

"An old wound," explained Dennison, "but nothing that prevents me from riding and shooting!"

ONCE upstairs, his legs gave way completely, and it was a matter of minutes before he could get his coat off and examine the wound. The bullet had ripped its way along his side after a glancing blow against a rib. But the bone was intact, and a few days would, no doubt, repair the damage. Dennison tore up a shirt and did a fairly good job of bandaging.

There was need of rest, and after he had eaten the captain lay down, without undressing, and pulled a blanket over him. He stared at the cracked and discolored ceiling. A fine mess he had made of his first move! For a week, at least, he would be out of active service. What would Eve Pendleton think of a champion who could not strike the first blow? The reflections of Hugh Dennison were by no means pleasant as he watched the sunlight creep across the floor.

It was mid afternoon when the creaking of a board turned his head toward the door. Inch by inch it opened, and when it was wide enough to admit a man Jack Hawley stepped into the room. He met the gaze of the

captain with a sneer as he crossed to the foot of the bed. There he looked down mockingly, with triumph growing in his face.

"Perhaps the old man didn't miss, after all," he said. "He mourned desperately to me because he hadn't shot straighter."

"I may as well admit that he scratched me," said Dennison, "but I was quite able to get up and let you in if you had knocked, as you should at a gentleman's door."

Hawley grew dull red. A hand went to his pocket, but he left it there.

"The Hawk suspects me," he said. "You've made a mistake, Captain Dennison!"

"I told him nothing about you. What little I said I might have learned from Miss Pendleton."

"What did you go there for, any way?" demanded Hawley.

"To measure the enemy, for one thing," replied the captain.

"You're a madman, or a fool!"

"Perhaps both!"

"What about our bargain?" asked Hawley, with increasing fury.

"I made no bargain with you!"

"Do you think I'm going to let you turn him against me? You want to set us fighting, and collect the spoils for yourself. You've been just a little too clever for your own health, Captain Dennison!"

Hawley started to withdraw the hand that had gone to his pocket.

"Stop!" roared Dennison. He flung aside his blanket and revealed a horse pistol leveled at the breast of his caller. "Bring that hand out empty!"

Pale to the lips, Hawley obeyed.

"Now get out!" ordered Dennison. "Do you think I'm fool enough to lie down in this place without a pistol within reach? You or the Hawk may kill me, but you'll find it hard work!"

Slowly Hawley walked to the door. The instant it began to close behind him the captain was in motion. He rolled across the bed and dropped to the floor, kneeling with the footboard as a breastwork. No sooner had the door closed than a pistol barked in the hallway. A splintered hole appeared in one of the panels and a bullet thudded into the spot where Dennison had lain.

The captain instantly fired over the footboard, and his ball carried away half the panel that Hawley had pierced. Outside there was a partially suppressed cry, then silence. Hugh Dennison smiled grimly as he moved out of the line of fire and sat down in a chair by a window. It was his opinion that Jack Hawley would trouble him no more that day.

Nevertheless, the situation was desperate. Dennison felt that he must get himself out of the hotel before nightfall; something might happen to him during the night, and, after all, he was only one against a half dozen or more. But for his wound he would have hidden himself in the woods and made camp. As matters stood, it seemed best to seek shelter at some distant farmhouse, and he was wondering whether he could find strength to ride, when a great trampling and cursing started below stairs.

THE captain had reloaded his empty pistol. Hastily he placed all four weapons on a chair in front of him. He added his powder flask, bullet pouch, and an open box of percussion caps. He was wishing for the weight of a good saber in his hand, when feet came running along the corridor. He cocked the horse pistols.

"Captain Dennison! Captain Dennison!" He had heard that voice across the dinner table last night. "Are you there? May I come in?"

"Come!" he cried, and rose. Eve Pendleton stood in the doorway with one of her men behind her, his rifle at the ready.

The captain bowed. "I am honored!" he said. "May I offer you a chair?"

She entered, a little disheveled and with a fresh scratch on the hand that held her whip. There were glowing sparks deep in the amber eyes.

"What have they done to you?" she demanded.

"The Hawk tried to kill me this morning," he smiled, "and Hawley this afternoon. So far I'm intact except for a flesh wound. Baring shoots pretty well."

She laughed, relieved, and sat down while her man stood guard outside.

"Hawley has his arm in a sling! We met him just now. But, oh, why didn't you talk with me again before you went to Painted Rocks? Honest John saw you go in there, but too late to stop you. It's a miracle that you came away alive."

"I believe you," agreed Dennison; and he told her briefly what had happened, beginning with the proposal of Hawley.

She heard him through in silence. "Captain Dennison," she said in a low voice, "I have done a great deal of thinking since last night. And what I have just heard confirms me in the belief that I was sending you to your death! Will you withdraw?"

"Do I seem to you like a man who would withdraw?"

"No, captain."

"Very well. Of course I shall not withdraw."

"The reward is too small."

"The reward is in serving you!"

For the first time he saw her cheeks faintly tinged with pink. She rose and spoke to the man at the door.

"Dick, pack Captain Dennison's things. He is going home with us. When you take them down, tell John to get the horse and saddle from the stable while you stand guard. We'll come directly."

The first impulse of Dennison was to protest that she was about to bring trouble upon herself by sheltering him. Then he realized that she might need his help within the next few days. He thanked her, and they went down to the porch, where a cariole waited. Evidently she had driven to Valeboro with the idea of moving him to the cottage.

Some of the villagers had gathered at one end of the porch. Chug Tupper came forward with a face crisscrossed by red welts.

"I did rather well, didn't I?" murmured Miss Pendleton, with a fond glance at her riding whip. Captain Dennison laughed, and then scowled down into the face of Tupper.

"Your bill!" said the tavern keeper. "And as for you, Miss Pendleton—"

"Silence!" thundered the captain. He reached out of the cariole, caught Tupper by the throat, and shook him until the man's teeth clattered together. With a final shake he sent Chug staggering away and flung a gold piece after him.

They drove off to the laughter and cheers of the villagers on the porch. Honest John and Dick rode behind, leading Bravo. Hugh Dennison settled back in his cushioned seat with a sigh of great content. His wound was bleeding again, but now that was a small matter. He turned and met the eyes of the young lady beside him, who drove with one hand while the other almost touched his own on the seat between them. She sparkled with laughter.

"Tupper tried to stop me from seeing you," she said. "Wasn't it foolish of him?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE HAWK SWOOPS DOWN.

THAT night Captain Dennison dined again at the table bright with flowers and polished silver. Aunt Sally beamed upon him, and afterward Eve Pendleton made him lie on a *chaise-longue* before the fire and tell her stories of the campaign in Mexico.

She refused to make plans for the

undoing of Micah Baring, she said, until the captain's wound should at least have closed in a satisfactory manner. That evening she and Aunt Sally dressed it properly.

It was not a serious matter to the soldier, but he made the most of the pampering. Such treatment had not often come his way, and when he went to bed that night in the charming little room which he had admired the day before, he considered himself one of the chosen of fortune. What did the Hawk matter now?

Captain Dennison would have been content, so far as he was concerned, to have matters remain as they were for a time; but he well knew that Micah Baring would not rest content. Sooner or later he would strike, and it was the business of Dennison to strike first. He wanted to move against the enemy while the Hawk still believed him incapacitated from his wound. For, of course, Hawley would have carried that news back to Painted Rocks.

So, as soon as the captain believed himself capable of violent exertion, he pressed the matter of making plans; and Eve yielded, in return for a promise that he would do nothing for a day or two longer.

"Have you thought of anything?" she asked, as they sat by a fire which the cool mountain night made agreeable even in summer. "Tell me that, and then I will tell you something which may help."

"Even if we had the men," said Dennison, "we could hardly storm Painted Rocks and drive the Hawk out. The arm of the law is feeble here, but that would be carrying things through with too high a hand. So it seems to me that the best thing we can do is to capture Baring.

"That was one of the things I had in mind when I went to see him. I wanted to look the ground over, and see how the chances were for a kidnaping. Unfortunately they're slender. He's well guarded and he seldom leaves the place. Even then two or three of his men ride with him, according to your man John. I know I could deal with the Hawk if I had him caged, but the problem is to cage him."

"If that's what you want," exclaimed the girl, "I can tell you how to do it! Our house, as you know, was built during the Colonial wars, when there was often need for a hiding place or for flight. Life might depend on it, especially when they used Indians in the fighting.

"So there's an underground passage from the spring house. It goes up to the rear of the library. A false wall was built into this room, and the room underneath, for the stairs. One of the bookcases swings out. You think the library is the Hawk's favorite room. Well! He must be there in the evenings a great deal, and alone!"

"That's the answer!" cried Dennison. "I'll take him out of his library and bring him here for a little chat! Unless he knows of the passage?"

"I'm sure no one knows of it," she replied. "There was no particular reason for keeping the secret, but my father did. He and I cleaned the passage out once in awhile, and I do not think any other person has ever heard of it. The secret had to be guarded for generations, and it became a habit."

"The Hawk is ours! Where is the spring house? And how do I find the entrance to the passage?"

"You aren't going to-night!" laughed the girl. "The spring house is at the rear. You lift out the flat stone in the middle of the floor and go down the stairs. But I'll be there to show you!"

"Risk you in that place?" cried Dennison. "With Hawley there? I think not!"

"I can take a risk as well as Captain Hugh Dennison!" she told him. "But we'll argue that later! It's not for to-night, or to-morrow night."

"But the next night?" pleaded the

captain. "You won't hold me to my promise any longer than that?"

"The next night, if you keep on improving," she agreed; and with that he was content.

CAPTAIN DENNISON and Eve Pendleton did not quite do the Hawk justice, as they were to learn. They knew that the cottage was watched. John Lawton reported that he had seen alternately Punky Jerdo, the man with the squint, and Long Abner in the woods near by. However, Dennison had persuaded himself that Baring was waiting to catch him on the highway.

Since Long Abner, Hawley's man, was employed for guard duty, it appeared that if the Hawk had discovered the treachery of his superintendent he had not chosen to do anything about it as yet. The captain wondered what would happen to the traitors, and when. He could not imagine Micah Baring as other than triumphant in a clash with Hawley.

On the day chosen for the attempt to capture the Hawk, Hugh Dennison was well pleased with the world and with himself. He had persuaded Eve Pendleton to compromise. She was to wait outside the grounds with the horses while he made his entrance into the house. If there was a light in the library, the attempt was to be made. If not, they were to wait until another night.

The wound had healed nicely, and Dennison expected no further trouble with it. Everything gave promise of success. The Hawk would in all probability be alone, and before he could get his hands on a weapon the captain would have him covered. There would then be no great difficulty in taking him with a pistol at his back down through the passage and out to the waiting horses. The only danger was a chance encounter with a sentry.

The afternoon was heavy with the laziness of summer. Inasmuch as there would be little sleep for them that night, Eve and the captain went to their rooms for rest after the midday meal. Dennison took off his coat and waistcoat, loosened the tight stock from his shirt collar, and stretched luxuriously out upon the most comfortable bed he had found in his travels north. The monotonous sound of the locusts was all that broke the stillness. The captain dozed comfortably.

How long he lay there he did not know, but he must have been asleep when the raid came; for suddenly he found himself on his feet in the middle of the room, with a scream ringing in his ears.

There was another cry, this one a shriek of mingled fear and agony. It was broken abruptly. A fall shook the house. There was a crash of breaking wood; and then silence made more profound and ominous by contrast.

All this had been a matter of half a dozen seconds, but in that time Hugh Dennison's feet had found his boots, and his hands the pistols which lay loaded on a table at his bedside. He sprang into the hallway with leveled weapons.

No one was there, and there was no sound. He ran along the hall to Eve Pendleton's room.

"Eve!" he cried. "Miss Pendleton!"

There was no answer; the silence seemed to grow more deadly. The door was unlatched. He pushed it open. The room was empty. A few articles of clothing were scattered about and the mark of a head was on a pillow.

Dennison turned and dashed out of the room; he cleared the stairs two at a time. All was quiet below. He ran through the parlor, the dining room, and tripped as he burst into the kitchen. The captain righted himself and turned. Aunt Sally lay enormously across his path. Hers was the fall he had heard.

She was breathing. Dennison raised

her head and dashed water onto her face; after a moment her eyes opened blankly. He became conscious of a faint but persistent pounding somewhere outside the house.

"Oh, Lordy!" groaned Aunt Sally. "Oh, my chile! Dat debble man get her! Now dey kill her sure!"

"Who got Miss Pendleton?" cried Dennison.

"Dat Hawk man! He come runnin' wid her on he shoulder, and hit me over de head wid he pistol! I lock de door! Look how he smash it!"

Captain Dennison had learned what he most wanted to know at the moment. He pushed aside the shattered door and sprang out. Between the impassive forest and the cottage there was no one in sight. The pounding became louder, and now it located itself in the stable.

DENNISON went forward with caution. In the stable doorway he found Honest John, lying unconscious with a bad cut on his head. His rifle lay at his feet, cocked and loaded. Evidently he had been surprised without the chance to fire a shot. The noise came from above, where the two men slept.

The captain ran upstairs and into their quarters. Trow was there, bound with many feet of stout rope. He had managed to roll from the bed and thump with his feet upon the floor. Dennison untied him and he got rid of the towel that had been jammed into his mouth to prevent him from calling for help.

"Is Miss Pendleton safe?" cried Trow, as soon as he could speak. "They were on me before I was awake, sir. It was Lawton's turn on duty, and mine to sleep."

"They've carried Miss Pendleton off." replied Dennison miserably. "John's downstairs with a broken head. The Hawk laid Aunt Sally out. It was her scream that woke me, I think."

"I'd go after her alone!" muttered Trow, with bowed head. "I'd go if I thought I had one chance in a million."

"We'll go to-night," promised Dennison, grimly. "I know a way to get into the house. And either I'll bring back Miss Pendleton or there'll be dead men at Painted Rocks to-morrow!"

"I'm with you, sir! And John will be, too, if he can walk."

They went down and brought Lawton upstairs. There was a long, bad cut on his head, but the skull was not broken and the captain washed and dressed the wound with confidence that Honest John was in no danger. They gave him brandy, and after a time he could talk.

"It was old Baring himself that done most of it, sir," he said. "All of a sudden I see him standing in front of me, and I glimpsed they was others back of him. Afore I could even raise my rifle he hit me, and that's all I remember. They must have come out of the woods quiet as Injuns, and of course in the daytime like this we wasn't expecting trouble."

Honest John had said it all. The Hawk had been too smart for them: he had attacked at the most unexpected time and he had done the one thing that would bring Hugh Dennison to terms, if it succeeded. The captain might have to make peace as the price of liberty for Eve Pendleton.

Dennison went back to the kitchen and found Aunt Sally in a chair, and near collapse. She was divided in misery between her aching head and the loss of her beloved mistress.

"He eyes dey shine like cat's eyes!" she groaned. "Dat man ain't human folks, cap'n!"

"No," agreed the captain, "he isn't human. When your head feels better go and see what you can do for Lawton. Then get us all some dinner. Trow and I will need it. To-night we're going to visit the Hawk!"

"Bless the Lord!" exclaimed Aunt

Sally, fervently. "Dat news make me well! Oh, my poor chile!"

Dennison went out and skirted the woods, with a pistol in each hand. A little way beyond the edge of the clearing he found hoof prints. There had been four or five horses tethered here.

It was too late now to follow the trail, if he had wanted to, and it would have been folly in any case. They might easily have left a man to shoot him or his horse from ambush. It was far better for Dennison to save himself for the night's work, but waiting made bitter the hours between then and darkness.

CHAPTER V.

THE SECRET PASSAGE.

THE captain paced the house, the grounds; he had Bravo saddled with the first hint of dusk. It was impossible for him to eat. He himself saw to the loading of both rifles. Although Lawton was unable to go, Dennison determined to storm the house if anything barred him from the secret passage.

He forced himself to wait until nine o'clock before he and Dick Trow set out.

It was a starlit night, which would enable him to find the spring house without great difficulty. And in the faint light of the stars he would hardly be detected crossing the grounds unless he went very near to one of the Hawk's men.

Trow, having worked for the Pendletons nearly all his life, knew the lay of the country perfectly. He was able to take the captain from the highway and through the woods to a position at the rear of the house. Dennison had told him of the spring house and the passage. They tied their horses, with one they had brought for Eve, well back in the woods. Then Trow led the way noiselessly to the stone wall surrounding the grounds of Painted Rocks. The dark mass of the stables and outbuildings lay off to their left; the chimneys and gables of the house were outlined in front of them against the starry sky. Dick Trow said that the spring house would be found in a direct line with one of the chimneys, from the spot where they stood.

"Wait where you are," ordered the captain. "If you hear shots get into the house the quickest way you can, and go shooting. Don't stop to ask questions. If you don't hear anything for half an hour, as nearly as you can judge the time, follow me along the passage. I've told you how to find it."

"I will, sir," whispered Trow, and the hands of the two men met. "Good luck, and you can depend on me. Please God you'll find Miss Pendleton safe!"

"I'll find her," answered Dennison, "and I'll find the Hawk!"

The captain found no difficulty in making his way toward the mansion. He went slowly, to avoid stumbling, and there was sufficient light to show him the outlines of the buildings. Guided by the chimney which Dick Trow had pointed out he felt his way through a vegetable garden, and along a hard-beaten path. Suddenly a small building rose before him and he guessed that he had found the spring house.

Dennison congratulated himself on the silence with which he had moved. His feet made no sound upon the yie'ding earth. His hands felt along the stone wall of the spring house as he sought the doorway. They found it, and to his touch the door swung inward on well oiled hinges. Over the threshold, with a hand extended in front of him, he stepped into total blackness.

Captain Dennison had known war, but he had never met with a shock such as the instant of stepping into that little building brought him. His outstretched hand pressed upon the flesh of a human face. There was a second of horror, of inaction. Then, with a grunt, mighty arms closed around him and he

knew that he had either to conquer or die.

The arms locked across his back; teeth tried to find his nose, his ear. He was lifted clear of the ground. But Dennison knew more than his share of the tricks of wrestling, of bare knuckle fighting. He brought an arm up and with fingers set into the eye-sockets of his enemy, forced that inquiring head backward. The instant that his feet touched the ground again he lifted a knee and thrust with it.

The hold was broken and the other man went down, with Dennison on top. By the feeling of the fellow the captain thought that this was Jerdo, the big man with the squint. That meant weight to handle. He managed to get a stranglehold. In less than a minute the Hawk's henchman lay completely quiet upon the stone floor.

DENNISON ripped off his captive's shirt and tied him hand and foot. Then he rolled the big body out of the way and felt for the edges of the stone in the middle of the floor. There was room to insert his fingers. He lifted, and found himself kneeling above a black void which seemed even darker than the darkness within the spring house. There were stone steps leading downward.

So far so good, or bad. If this man had been placed here as a guard for the entrance to the passage then the Hawk would be prepared at the other end. There might be a trap set along that dark way. On the other hand the man might be no more than a sentry posted at the rear of the grounds, using the spring house as a sentrybox. In any event there was but one thing for Hugh Dennison to do, and that was to go forward.

The steps led down to a level about ten feet below the surface of the ground, and there began a walled passageway just wide enough for one person. Dennison's head cleared the arched roof, but not by more than a couple of inches. The tunnel was admirably constructed for defense, or for holding off pursuit. There were right angle turns which one man could defend to advantage.

The captain groped his way with feet and hands. He did not know at what instant a pit might yawn under him, or when he might find a pistol at his breast. But there had been no preparation to receive him in the passage, and when his boot struck against the lowest step of another flight of stone stairs he began to find hope again.

These stairs led straight upward and ended in a little platform which must be behind the rear wall of the library, according to Eve Pendleton. The captain stood on the platform and found three walls of masonry surrounding him; the fourth was of wood. He ran his fingers gently over the smooth surface, exerting a little pressure here and there, until he found that it yielded at one side. Undoubtedly this was the bookcase that swung out into the room.

Now was the moment. Dennison waited a few seconds to rest and collect himself. He had no idea what he was going to find on the other side of that wall of books. It might be that he was about to look into the muzzle of a pistol. He placed his own smaller pistols one in each trousers pocket, and cocked the heavy ones for immediate use. Then he set his shoulder to the wooden surface in front of him and pushed. Slowly the wall moved. Noiselessly it swung until a tiny crack of light appeared.

The captain waited and listened. There was no sound. He pushed again, and was able to look through an opening a few inches wide into the brilliantly lighted library. From where he stood he could see nothing but books, a bit of the floor, and the white plaster of the ceiling. The ticking of a clock came to him. It was but a step down to the floor. Dennison was about to swing the bookcase back and drop into the room when a voice broke the si-

lence. It was Jack Hawley speaking, as after a long pause.

"The situation has changed since this afternoon!" Triumph, self-satisfaction, were fairly reeking in the tone.

"Yes!" The captain thrilled to the voice of Eve; it was a voice strained, but controlled, held steady by that high courage which she had already proved so well.

"I tapped old Micah on the head with a pistol butt when he was looking the other way. The Hawk was just a little too fearless, and careless. He treated me with contempt! And now he's in the wine cellar, with Long Abner on guard.

"Tupper is my man, too. The others don't know. But Long Abner has been told what to do and when the Hawk comes up out of the cellar feet first, they won't dare to say anything. We'll be three to three, with the brains on our side! You understand, don't you, Eve?"

"Miss Pendleton, fellow!"

"I like spirit in a girl!" Hawley laughed comfortably. "But Tupper doesn't! He still has the marks of your whip!"

"It might better have been you!"

"And you might better listen to a little reason!" retorted Hawley, with a trace of anger. "I've got you, and I've got the Hawk, and if your swashbuckling captain tries to get into this house he'll be shot dead!"

"DO you think you can kill a man like Captain Dennison?" Eve's laughter rang scornfully. "Not with a bullet! Not with steel!"

"Wait and see!" growled Hawley. "The men expect him. The house and grounds are guarded!"

"It is only on his account that I listen to you!" exclaimed Eve, with great inconsistency.

"I'm so glad you're seeing the light! Who but his trusted superintendent should inherit from the Hawk of Painted Rocks? You will make no protest, my dear Miss Pendleton, when the will is produced? Think of the captain!"

"Let me go to stop Captain Dennison," she began, "and I—"

Hugh Dennison thrust the bookcase back and jumped down into the library. In the Hawk's place at the desk, with his back to the opening in the wall, sat Hawley. He turned, but before his hand could grasp the pistol for which it reached, Dennison was upon him. The first blow flattened Hawley across the desk.

They closed, but although the superintendent was a powerful man he was no match for the toughened fiber of Dennison. The captain tripped him, brought his arms up in a double hammerlock, and when the man was reduced to utter weakness sat him back in the chair at the desk.

"There!" exclaimed Dennison, after he had slapped Hawley's pockets for pistols and gathered up two from the desk. "I'll finish the trade for Miss Pendleton!"

"I knew they couldn't kill you!" she cried, with glowing eyes, "but my faith wavered. I'm ashamed of myself!"

She made one of the most beautiful pictures Hugh Dennison had ever seen, sitting there in one of her own damask-covered chairs, with her golden brown hair falling through a broken net and the amber fire of her gaze upon him. A white shoulder gleamed through a rent in her bodice. It was apparent that Eve Pendleton had given her captors some little trouble.

"It's not for lack of trying that they haven't killed me!" smiled the captain, grimly, and with a wary eye upon his prisoner. "Take Hawley's pistols, Miss Pendleton, and get out through the passageway while there's a chance. Dick's waiting in the woods with horses."

"But you?" she demanded.

"I think I'll chat a little with Haw-

ley! Just now he's in a position where he'll be glad to talk!"

"I'm not going to leave you here," she announced, firmly. "Come with me! If the Hawk is really dead, as Hawley thinks, we'll be able to deal with this affair from the outside!"

The superintendent was recovering. His glance swept the opening in the wall, and swung to Dennison. He moistened his lips.

"You'd better make a trade now," he urged. "I can play the tracing game as well as Baring, and I'll produce a will properly witnessed, with Tupper to swear that it was signed in his presence. If you take a fight into the courts you'll risk everything!"

"How are you going to explain Baring's death?" asked Dennison, slowly. He was thinking hard, although he did not neglect to watch the library door as well as Hawley. It was a dangerous place to linger, and yet there was much in what Hawley said.

"THE Hawk's men will swear their souls away for a hundred dollars apiece!" Hawley said hurriedly, with reviving confidence. "Tony Labarge? Buckshot Joe Daby? Ha! I know them! Jerdo is loyal, but he won't be to a dead man. Long Abner is with me now. It's simple!"

"What do you want for yourself?" asked Eve, leaning forward earnestly.

"It depends on how much Dennison wants!"

"I want nothing!"

"Fool!" sneered Hawley. "Well, I want half the value of everything! I'll probate the will and then hand over a deed of the property for the cash! You can arrange a mortgage in advance."

"Shall I do it?" Eve turned to Dennison, after a moment of silence.

Suddenly the soul of Captain Hugh Dennison revolted at this compromise. They had not taken Monterey by such methods.

"No!" he thundered. "I'm going to take Hawley with us, and by morning he'll either help you to recover all your property or I'll turn him over to the authorities at the county seat! And we'll fight it out!"

Hawley went white. Dennison had advanced a step with the intention of carrying the man if he would not walk, when all at once the face of the superintendent regained its color. His lips parted and he gripped the arms of his chair. The next instant there was a cry from Eve and a voice with a familiar sound spoke from the front of the room.

"Drop them pistols, captain! And you, too, my lady! Back up against the wall, both on ye! And keep dam' peaceable!"

Dennison obeyed. The pistols thumped to the floor. Slowly he backed, turning, toward the nearest wall; and as he did so the casement windows at the front came into view. In one of them stood Chug Tupper, with a dirty but vicious looking sawed-off shotgun in his grasp.

"Just in time, Chug!" said Hawley, with a vast sigh of relief.

"It's lucky I listened outside the library door instead of knocking!" exclaimed Tupper. "When I found out how things was I come out and clumb up the woodbine!"

"Is Buckshot Joe at the front door?" asked Hawley, eagerly.

"Yep. And Labarge at the back. They don't know nothing yet. How'd you get the captain?"

"He came to me through that hole in the wall!" laughed Hawley. "He's going to stay awhile as hostage, perhaps, for Miss Pendleton's good behavior!"

"I brung my seal for her to sign papers, like you told me!"

"She'll sign now!"

"Jest say the word and I'll make her!" Tupper rubbed a cheek which still bore the marks of the riding whip. "I'd like the job, I would!"

"Ah, no violence, Chug!" said Haw-

ley, mockingly. "Unless, of course, the captain should get restive! We'll have to plan just what Miss Pendleton is to sign. There's time enough. Something like a deed of her cottage, I should think, as the price of the captain's life. We'll tie her up in various ways. It would be well to get both of them out of this country. Don't you agree with me, Chug?"

Chug rubbed the stubble on his fat jowls before he replied. He was far from being as cheerful as Hawley. His small eyes glittered at Eve and at Dennison, standing motionless against the wall.

The captain waited for a chance to draw one of the duelling pistols, still concealed in his pockets. Eve was tight-lipped, baffled, but undaunted. He wished now that he had made her leave the house.

CHAPTER VI.

WAR AT PAINTED ROCKS.

"I WOULD like better than anything to see the Hawk stretched out permanent," said Chug. "I allus was afeered of the critter. You sure you got him safe, Hawley?"

"He's dead," replied Hawley, drumming the desk with his fingers while he looked speculatively at Eve and the captain. It was clear that he was planning their fate, and with no smallest good intent. He would shave the margin of safety for himself as closely as possible in order to quiet them forever. Dennison knew that Hawley would like to kill him.

"You ain't seen old Baring's corpse yet!" persisted Tupper.

"No!" barked Hawley, impatiently. "But Long Abner's a man to trust for work like that, I tell you! He's as cold-blooded as a snake! He should be up from the cellar by now."

Close upon the heels of Jack Hawley's last sentence, another voice spoke in that room. It chilled like a winter blast. Four faces turned and stared at the rectangular opening among the bookcases.

"Long Abner will never come up from the cellar!" The tall, dark-clothed form and the sepulchral face of Micah Baring were framed in the passageway. "Abner has had an accident. His neck is broken!"

The Hawk brooded over the room, like death over a field of battle. Hawley had gone chalk white, but he was, after all, a man of courage. He did not give way to panic. Chug Tupper was fairly gibbering with fear. The shotgun sagged to the floor from his nerveless grasp. Micah Baring stepped down among them, with a pistol in each hand.

Behind him appeared the bulk of Punky Jerdo, his rifle held ready for action.

"I understand a few things now, Captain Dennison," said the Hawk. "I found your trail leading into the house when I went out to look up my man Jerdo!"

"You've disappointed us," said Dennison, "by not dying."

There was something akin to a sardonic smile in the Hawk's baleful eyes as he lifted one of the pistols, and let it hang carelessly in his hand.

"Abner was a traitor," he said, "and he's gone!"

"It was Hawley got us into it!" chattered Tupper. "It was him—"

"Another!" droned the Hawk, and with a swift upward movement of his wrist he fired at the tavern keeper. Chug Tupper tumbled forward out of his chair and lay in an unpleasant sprawl.

He would never again see the Gray Goose. Dennison heard a quick-drawn breath of horror from Eve.

At this instant Jack Hawley sprang for his arch enemy. It was possible that he had not seen the figure of Jerdo, looming just within the shelter of the bookcases. Or perhaps he had decided that it was better to die fighting

than to be butchered after the manner of Tupper. The pistol of the Hawk roared, but if he hit that moving target its course was not stayed. Both weapons were now empty. Hawley closed with the old man and they went down together.

This was Dennison's moment, and he seized it. He trusted that the watchful eyes of Jerdo would be taken by the battle on the floor for at least a few seconds. The captain whipped out his duelling pistols and fired one of them up at Punky Jerdo. Then he leaped for the door, with Eve beside him. He fairly hurled her into the hallway, snatched the key from the inside of the door, and slammed it shut after them.

The key turned, and a stout barrier was between them and the danger in the library. Dennison thrust the empty pistol, still smoking, into his pocket. There was no time to reload even if he had had powder and bullets with him. He had come to Painted Rocks expecting a sharp, swift battle; not a long drawn out, three-cornered war.

ABOVE, the frightened faces of women peered down from the third floor. Eve Pendleton followed his glance.

"They're the servants, and harmless," she whispered, clutching his arm. "But look downstairs! There's Buckshot Joe!"

The captain pulled her along the hallway to the front of the house. There he looked over the rail that ran along the stair well. A small, hairy man with a broken nose was gazing upward, trying to penetrate the shadows.

The rifle in his thick hands was pointed up the stairs.

"What's a going on up there?" he yelled. "Hey, you! Where's the old man?"

Blows began to thunder against the locked door of the library. Probably Punky Jerdo was using his rifle butt; and even that well-made door would yield shortly.

Dennison did not want to use his last shot now. He glanced about him. At the angle of the mahogany railing there was a post with a carved ornament as big as a beaver hat. The captain wrenched it free, and just as Buckshot Joe put foot to the stairs he dropped it with careful aim. Daby collapsed, stunned, and his rifle banged on the stair treads. Instantly Captain Dennison swung over the rail and followed the ornament. He landed on top of Buckshot Joe.

He heard the patter of Eve Pendleton's feet coming down to him as he planted his fist solidly behind Daby's ear; the man hardly needed more quieting, for an arm, and perhaps a rib or two had been broken by the weight that had descended upon him. Dennison got up and flung Daby out of the way. He jumped to the front door and tried the knob.

The front door was locked. The key might be anywhere. Dennison turned just as Eve joined him. He glanced down the long hallway that led to the rear of the house. There was no escape that way, for the form of a man loomed nearer and nearer, coming cautiously from the shadows at the far end of the hall. Tony Labarge had left his post to find out what the uproar meant.

There was scant comfort in knowing that Dick Trow must have heard the shots, and that he would come. He was not there now, and he was needed. A panel of the library door splintered, and the rifle butt of Jerdo shot through. It would not do to try to pass that doorway and get to the third floor. Dennison turned the knobs on doors at both sides of the lower hall. These also were locked. He drew his loaded pistol.

Tony Labarge was near enough to see who were in front of him. He halted and threw up his rifle; but even as he did so he was borne down from

behind, and he and Dick Trow clinched, slugging and battering each other on the floor. Captain Dennison took his finger from the trigger of his pistol. A shot had been saved, and he was about to need it. For at last the library door was shivering outward. It fell, and lay flat. Punky Jerdo leaped over it and plunged down the stairway.

Dennison had pushed Eve behind him as Labarge came on. So now he stood his ground, and he and Jerdo fired at each other point-blank, almost in the same second. The captain felt the wind of a bullet on his cheek. Punky Jerdo turned half around and fell.

He slid head foremost to the bottom of the stairs, with his empty rifle clattering beside him. He stirred and groaned, but he was out of the fight.

Dick Trow was still battling with Labarge. They banged and rolled across the hall. Captain Dennison straightened his shoulders. The mad joy of battle was upon him. He hurled his empty pistol at a door and sprang toward the stairs.

"HUGH!" Eve Pendleton hung upon his arm. "Are you mad? You'll be killed!"

"I'm going to get the Hawk," he cried. "I've waited long enough!"

"Then go up the back stairway!" she begged, panting with her effort to turn him. "For my sake! You can come down from above! Do you want to throw yourself on his bullets?"

Dennison yielded, and ran down the hallway, with her little heels tapping behind him. Then, as he paused, bewildered, she took the lead. She led him up two flights of narrow stairs to the servants' quarters, and along a corridor where half-open doors let forth the murmur of prayers, the sobbing of scared women. On the stairs leading down to the library Eve shrank aside so that Dennison could pass. He reached the lower steps and halted, staring into the room of tragedy.

Micah Baring was standing over the body of Hawley. He breathed quickly, and it was apparent that his late superintendent had given him something of a fight. But Hawley was done with fighting and with plotting now. A dark stain grew beside him. The Hawk then touched him with a boot toe. There was no answering movement.

"Jerdo!" thundered Baring, taking a pistol from the desk and turning toward the door. "Daby! Below there! Have you got them?"

When there was no answer the Hawk stepped into the doorway and looked downward. Dennison saw Dick Trow, who had evidently disposed of Labarge, drop to take cover below the angle of the stairway. He and the Hawk fired together. Dick rolled away from the stairs, clutching his shoulder.

Hugh Dennison had been moving softly, around the turn of the stair rail and toward the doorway. Now he was within striking distance. He sprang, with the ease of a cat despite his breadth and height. The pistol was wrenched from Baring's hand; a fist sank into the Hawk's ribs and sent him reeling and gasping across the room. He caught the shelf of white marble above the fireplace, and then he and Captain Hugh Dennison faced each other at a scant six feet.

"This is what I've wanted!" said Dennison.

"It would have been less trouble to kill you with a bullet," replied the Hawk, "but I am satisfied!"

Before the captain realized what the movement meant a slender dagger flashed in the hand of Micah Baring. All Dennison's boxing skill went for nothing now. He had to close in. The steel ripped along the sleeve of his upflung arm, but he caught the wrist that held it. Then he and the Hawk were breast to breast, fighting for holds with their free arms, kneeing and tripping

each other, stumbling the length of the great room.

Here in this white-haired man of iron Hugh Dennison almost found his match. He felt great muscles, as hard and active as his own, bulge and tighten under the broadcloth. Twice Hugh nearly went down. To heave against the Hawk was to heave against something that seemed as solid as the stone walls of Painted Rocks. Their strength was equal, but Dennison was quicker, and Dennison was younger. Back, ever back, he forced Micah Baring until they fell together into the embrasure of one of the windows.

For an instant the captain relaxed his hold. He tore down one of the heavy curtains, and the many yards of it fell over the head of the Hawk. Then Dennison dared let go of the dagger hand. He muffled the Hawk, rolling him over on the floor until he was utterly helpless. The point of steel struck upward through the thick fabric viciously, but impotently. Baring was trapped.

The captain straightened up. He saw Eve, ghost white, standing against the wall with a pistol in each hand. She let them fall now, thumping upon the floor. Her hands lifted to the high, corniced ceiling in a wild gesture of thanksgiving.

"I would have fired," she whispered, "but there was never a moment when I could be sure of hitting him and not you!"

"It's better this way!" panted the captain. "The Hawk is chained at last!"

DICK TROW came staggering into the room, with his jacket off and a dark-stained bandage around his upper arm. He sank into a chair. With his still useful hand he reached for one of the pistols Eve had dropped.

"I don't trust him!" he muttered. "He's like enough to swaller that curtain and jump up as good as new!"

"You're right! Keep the pistol on him!" ordered Dennison, and he rolled Baring out upon the floor. Even then the Hawk lost no dignity as he got up, a little stiffly. He glanced at the pistol, and into the eyes of Dick Trow.

"Yes, he'll shoot, if that's what you're wondering!" exclaimed Dennison. He picked up the other pistol that Eve had dropped. "And if Trow misses, I won't! Throw away that dagger!"

The Hawk shrugged, and obeyed. He sat down in the nearest chair.

"Where are they all?" he asked. "My men?"

"I shot Jerdo," replied Dennison. "He's helpless downstairs. Daby is unconscious, and badly smashed up. Dick Trow has disposed of Labarge somehow."

"Tied him up, sir," said Dick, "after a stranglehold had kind of quieted him."

For a moment the head of the Hawk sank to his breast. Dennison tore down another curtain and, with the pair, covered the still forms of Chug Tupper and Jack Hawley.

"We'll take you to the sheriff tonight, Baring," said the captain, "and send a surgeon out here. This affair has gone too far now to remain private."

"Ah?" Micah Baring raised his head, and a hint of the old glare came into his eyes. "Then you won't refuse a fallen enemy a glass of wine before a ride like that?"

"No." For an instant something almost like pity touched the heart of Captain Dennison. Despite his sins, the Hawk was a fighter; and he was a conquered man.

"I have one bottle left of a very fine old port," said Baring. "It's hidden by a false front of books on the third shelf from the floor, directly behind my desk. There's a tray of glasses with it."

"And there's a little knob by which you pull out the shelf," added Eve. "I

remember that my—my father kept wine there."

Even then Dennison took care not to trust Baring. He went on the errand pistol in hand, and with a backward flung glance every few steps. He found the shelf, and a decanter and some glasses.

"Will you join me, sir?" asked the Hawk. "And Miss Pendleton?"

"Thanks, but not now," replied Dennison. "I'm too tired to enjoy such wine as this, and there's still work to be done."

"And I will not drink with you, Baring, in this house," said Eve quietly.

"Quite right, no doubt," said the Hawk. He turned to Dick Trow. "And you, my man?"

"Why—" Trow hesitated, plainly divided between thirst and loyalty to his mistress.

"I'll give you a hot toddy when you get home, Dick," promised Eve. "You're wounded, and a toddy won't heat your blood like wine."

"All right, Miss Eve."

Dennison had poured one glass. He carried the tray to Baring. Something almost like a smile tugged at the thin, straight lips of the Hawk as he took the full glass. He watched the captain as he set the tray down.

"Your luck, Captain Dennison! I drink to your luck! It's with you tonight!"

The Hawk drank, and Dennison marveled that he took such cherished wine at one swallow. The old man looked up mockingly, and the light peculiar to his remarkable eyes deepened.

"We'll go now," announced the captain. "This is not a place of great cheer! Dick, are you able to bring in the horses?"

"Yes, sir," answered Trow, rising.

"Horses for three only!" exclaimed the Hawk, and for the first time Dennison heard him laugh. "Captain, when I was lying on the floor in swaddling clothes I heard you say that the Hawk was chained at last!"

"Yes," replied Dennison, wondering.

"A hawk," said Baring, wrestling with some sudden difficulty of speech, "dies—when—he—is chained!"

His head fell forward; all the great body slumped. Dennison, astonished, but still mistrustful, was slow in moving toward him. Micah Baring slid from his chair to the floor and lay motionless.

Eve's hand went to her face; white knuckles pressed her cheeks. She turned away toward the door.

"My father drank wine with him!" she cried bitterly, and fled into the hall.

Captain Dennison knelt, pistol in hand. But he would need that weapon no more against Micah Baring. The Hawk of Painted Rocks was dead.

CAPTAIN HUGH DENNISON and Eve Pendleton rode under the stars together, with Dick Trow behind them. Half the distance to the little cottage they covered in the heavy silence of reaction from this night of battle and swift death.

"You've won," said Dennison, at last.

"Do you think only of my victory?" she asked, in a low voice. "You also win, Captain Dennison! You'll have an estate!"

"Land is not what I want now!" he exclaimed. For some reason Bravo swung a little nearer to the chestnut, and they walked nose to nose in the quiet night.

"Have you asked for what you want, sir?" demanded Eve. "You do not seem like a backward man, Captain Dennison!"

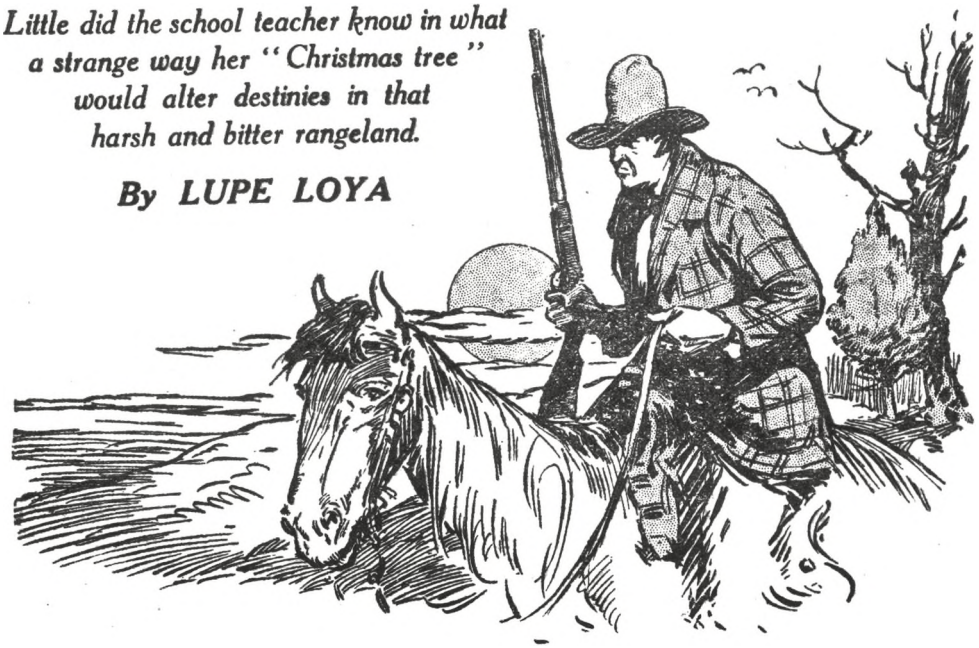
"I want—" But words failed Hugh Dennison. It was easier to reach an arm into the fragrant darkness. It found the slim waist of Eve. Her lips met his. Bravo and the chestnut rubbed shoulders as they went on evenly together.

THE END

The Tree of Destiny

Little did the school teacher know in what a strange way her "Christmas tree" would alter destinies in that harsh and bitter rangeland.

By LUPE LOYA



"Yuh wasn't figurin' on doin' nothin' to that tree, was yuh?"

THE dwarfed juniper spread its symmetrical branches under the hard winter sunlight, as though proudly conscious of being the one spot of green on the rocky floor of the Cerilla valley.

In spring, when new grass carpeted the great saucerlike expanse, and after summer rains, when the blossoming tumble-weed made a pattern of yellow polka-dots, the little tree was merely part of the pretty picture. But when December winds swept the valley, and the brittle, dried weeds bounded and rolled across the cold, grassless plain, it became a symbol of life and hope in a land sinister and desolate in its winter death.

Ruth Bain rode half a mile off the trail one day on her way to school, to look at the tree. That night, in the warm parlor of the Gregory ranch house, she spoke to Slim Fettritch about it.

"I've found my tree, Slim," she said, in her soft drawling voice. "The very thing for the entertainment! I don't think it's a regular Christmas tree, but whatever it is, it's a nice dark green, and the right shape. To get to it, you follow the fence about half a mile where the trail goes into Boulder Gulch—"

She stopped abruptly. A strange expression had come into Slim's face, and Dort Gregory, who had leaned over to strike a match from the glowing base-burner, straightened up with an abrupt exclamation.

An uncomfortable silence fell upon the firelit room. The two men looked at each other, then at the blond girl in the red-plush rocker.

This was not an unusual situation. Dort Gregory, son and heir of her hosts, had been courting Ruth from the day she had arrived to teach the Cerilla school. Gordon Fettritch, better

known as "Slim," son of the owner of the adjoining Circle F, was equally attentive but in a less obvious manner.

Slim was red-haired and tall, quiet-voiced and self-effacive. Dort was of stockier build, black-haired, black-eyed and pugnaciously self-assertive. The difference in manner was due partly to a difference in upbringing. Slim's father, called the Baron of the Cerilla because his lands had once encompassed the entire district, was a hard man, bitter and unyielding.

Tooth and nail old Fettritch had fought the natural development of the country, preferring isolated grandeur to the prosperity which comes in the wake of settlers' caravans. Only nature had been able to rout him from his stand. Drought, and failing cattle markets, had at last forced him to sell part of his holdings, but he had never ceased to hate the newcomers, and, in the words of the valley people, he "took it out" on his family.

Each boy was an only son, but Dort had been given every opportunity which doting and well-to-do parents could afford. He had not taken kindly to education, and had quit the State college after a year of it. This secretly pleased his father, who regarded "book learnin'" as foolishness, and considered his son's attitude an assertion of manly independence.

Slim, on the other hand, had supplemented the meager opportunities of the district school with a course of reading which included everything available in that distant range country. His self-education, hard fought for, had given him a broader outlook than most of the valley folk. Only love of his mother and sister had kept him under his father's dominance after he reached manhood. Their well-being was bound up in the Circle F, and the Circle F needed him.

"If you want that tree, Miss Bain," said Slim, "I'll get it for you."

"Not if your dad knows it!" Dort retorted with an unpleasant smile. "Yuh ain't forgot the row a few years ago over that self-same tree, have yuh? It's plumb on the dividin' line, half the roots on our place an' half on yours."

INTO the minds of both men swept the vision of a momentous episode during the fencing of the Gregory ranch. The two, then stripling youths, had stood by while their fathers waxed hot with anger as to which should have the lone juniper. Ridiculous, you might think, to quarrel over a stunted tree whose only earthly use was to gladden the eye with a spot of green during the arid winter! But petty disputes had marked every hundred feet or so of that contested boundary line; and a tree was a tree.

In the end the wires had been split, and six staples instead of three had been sunk into the posts that flanked the little juniper. Its spreading branches now hid the divided wire, but Baron Fettritch and Mark Gregory had never exchanged a word since that day.

"If you want that tree, I'll get it for you." Slim's quiet words, and his quietly determined face, kept recurring to Ruth Bain the next day at school. Her gay announcement to her handful of pupils that after all they were to have a Christmas tree, had been greeted with stolid silence. As she looked down at their faces, bitten by sun and wind, hard with the bleak hardness of the country, a feeling of hopelessness and frustration settled upon her.

It was not so much that these offsprings of nesters were undemonstrative, keeping their feelings under control, as that they seemed to lack all emotion. Their unchildlike stolidity had been from the first a cause for sorrow and wonder to the sensitive girl who had come to teach them. All her efforts to win more than dutiful respect from them had failed. She sensed that, at heart, they distrusted her even as they distrusted each other.

"Well, we'll see what a Christmas tree will do for them," Ruth said to

herself, with a sigh. "A real old-fashioned school entertainment, with a gift for each, and their fathers and mothers there to hear them speak pieces."

Planning for it, her spirits brightened as she rode home against a biting wind. As usual, she met Dort Gregory on the trail. For some reason Dort seemed to prefer not to meet her at the schoolhouse, and on the rare occasions when one or more of the children rode with her until their various paths diverted, he did not join them. This she attributed to the somewhat furtive embarrassment he frequently exhibited when a third person was present; it was almost as though he was fearful that some one might suspect him of being in love.

She told Dort of her plans as they rode into the stormy sunset, filling him with exultation at the suggestion that she accompany him to town, fifty miles away, on the following Saturday. Slim would have been her choice as a companion on this shopping tour, but the Circle F didn't boast a car.

"We may have to trim the tree with cranberry strings and popcorn," she said, laughingly. "But I know just what I want to get for each of those children."

"Yuh better let *me* get that tree for yuh," Dort remarked. His smile, crafty, one-sided, was hidden under the high collar of his sheepskin coat.

"Slim's promised to do that," she said shortly.

"W'al," Dort drawled, "I dunno! That tree don't rightly belong to him: not all of it. An' besides, unless I miss my guess, his dad'll have somethin' to say about it."

"Pooh!" said Ruth. "What difference could it make to his father? Anyway, Slim's a man grown, and I guess if he wants to help out the school by providing a Christmas tree, it's nobody else's business."

She had heard much about the domineering Baron, and sometimes wondered if it were true that his family were "skeered to call their souls their own." If so, this would be a good chance for Slim to assert himself. She didn't like the idea of his submitting tamely to unreasonable dictatorship.

Coming from a wooded country, it did not occur to the girl that any one would regard the cutting down of a single evergreen as a desecration. Like so many others, she failed to realize that almost every Christmas celebration means the death of a friendly tree.

DORT jerked his horse viciously, when the animal shied at a hurtling tumble-weed. It wasn't the first time his mount had suffered as an outlet for his jealous anger, nor the first time he had bitten back the words that now crowded to his lips.

He had never been denied anything he wanted, and he wanted this girl; but an innate cautiousness warned him to go easy in his love-making. This same inner voice had guided him when the question of whether Slim Fettritch was to be permitted to call at the Gregory ranch had come up.

Slim had ignored the enmity between the families, meeting the Gregorys on a friendly footing whenever their paths crossed; so there was no outstanding reason why he should not call on the teacher who boarded with them. Dort guessed, and rightly, that it would react unfavorably to his own cause if he were obviously unfriendly to Slim. Whatever obstacles he could place in the way of the man he had grown to hate during the last few months, would certainly have to be placed without Miss Bain's knowledge. One wrong word or action might turn the tide against him. There was a certain treacherous undercurrent of which he alone knew the danger.

The evening was a rather dull one. As usual, the elder Gregorys had retired to the kitchen, leaving the parlor to their son and the school-teacher. Slim didn't put in an appearance. Dort

noted with annoyance that Ruth looked up expectantly at every footfall on the frozen ground outside, and that she deftly warded off his rather clumsy attempts to bring the talk around to the subject uppermost in his mind. At nine o'clock she remembered she had some letters to write, and went to her room.

The small stove there was red hot. For a time she tried to concentrate on a letter, but, finding this impossible, decided the room was too warm. As she opened the window, a sound of voices coming from near the corral, caused her to hesitate. One was unmistakably a girl's voice.

"Oh, Dort, Dort!" the voice said piteously. "Why do you act this way to me?"

"What are yuh doin' here, anyhow, this time of night? Yuh know yuhr dad—"

"I came to see the school marm! I didn't come to see you—honest, Dort! I've got to see her! Let me go in. I want to talk to her."

"Say!" In the cold moonlight the man's big figure loomed between Ruth and the girl. "Say! You git home just as fast as you can git! Do you want your dad to go murderin' mad? Now you git on your horse, like a good girl."

The tones were blustering, but there seemed to be an edge of fear in them.

"Don't you love me any more, Dort?"

Ruth heard this entreaty as she grabbed up a coat and slipped out of the room. A moment later she faced the visitor, who was transfixed with astonishment.

"I'm the teacher. I overheard you say you wanted to see me.

Dort made a move to push the girl aside, but the look in Ruth's face stopped him. Ruth recognized her now as Slim's sister.

"I come to see you about my brother," she said, searching Ruth's face with a strained, almost anguished curiosity. "So you're the one he's in love with? Are you in love with him?"

The question left Ruth speechless. But the girl hurried on:

"If you're not, all I can say is, you oughta leave him be! You've made trouble for us right from the start! An' my mother is sick, an' oughtn't to be worried an' scared all the time like she is! She's afraid dad'll do Slim a injury, when he gets in one of them tantrums of his. An' so long as Slim comes to see you—"

"Edie, stop!" commanded Dort, collecting his wits. "I'll ride back with yuh! Yuh're just all upset over that fight to-night, an' don't know what yuh're sayin'. Come on now!"

"I won't stop!" shrilled the girl. "Dad said he'd half kill Slim before he'd see him throw hisself away on a painted-up, short-skirted town hussy, an' Slim got as white as a sheet an'—"

Dort seized one of the girl's trembling arms.

"Seems they had a knock-down an' drag-out up at the Circle F this evenin'," he explained to Ruth, not without relish. "Old man Fettritch thinks Slim is wastin' too much time down here, an' they had a little argyment, with their fists. It scared Edie, here, pretty bad."

HE patted the girl's slim shoulder and her small form seemed electrified at his touch. With adoring eyes she gazed up at him, forgetful for the moment of everything but his nearness. But as Dort went into the corral to saddle his horse, he was wondering how much Ruth had overheard.

"Won't you come in and get warm before you start back?" Ruth asked, noticing that the girl was shaking despite her heavy mackinaw.

"Oh, I wouldn't dare, miss!" Her eyes followed Dort's figure as he moved about the corral. "If dad ever found out, he'd kill me! You won't tell, will you? I wouldn't have come, only I had

to tell you what trouble you're makin' for us! Of course, if you love Slim," her eyes softened, "I couldn't blame you for lettin' him come. But if it makes no difference to you, won't you please tell him to keep away?"

Ruth's cheeks were burning as she made her way back to the house, but anger gave way to a heavy-hearted depression. She prepared for bed as quietly as possible, hoping the elder Gregory hadn't been aroused by the scene in the yard.

The feeling of being completely alien to this strange hard land, with its grudges and hatreds, came over her again as it had not since her first days on the ranch. Even Slim, whose strength was tempered with gentleness, and whose ideals and aspirations had heretofore set him apart in her mind, seemed no better than the others as she pictured him in the midst of that sordid family quarrel. The whole neighborhood would know about it, talk about it, grin furtively at old Fettritch's description of her as a "painted - up, short - skirted town hussy." Her face flamed at the thought.

Then there was Dort. Had he been too cowardly to show his affection for that scared little girl who had looked at her with such feverishly jealous eyes, or was he the sort who preferred to make clandestine love to his enemy's daughter?

Ruth never had quite trusted Dort, often wondering why. Now, as she thought of Edie's strained white face, she hated him. Even though the girl's infatuation had been no fault of his own, he might have been kinder about it; Ruth felt sure that only her presence that night had prevented Dort from brutally dismissing the poor girl.

THE bright winter morning dispelled, in a measure, the night's unhappiness; but the teacher had made up her mind she could never understand these people, and would no longer try. She would put them out of her mind, keeping to herself as much as possible. But she thought of Slim as she glanced down the long slope where the little juniper made a dot of green on the tawny plain; and her heart gave a queer leap when she reached the schoolhouse and saw him sitting on the steps.

The shy grin was gone from Slim's face as he walked toward her.

"I came to say good-by—for a little while," he began abruptly. "I'm clearin' out this mornin', for the Bar Y. It's quite a ways up country, so I won't get to see you but once in awhile. But I want you to know that you'll have your tree—on Christmas Eve."

She had intended to tell him firmly that if his family "felt that way about it" she didn't care to see him any more. She had meant to disregard him, along with the whole kit and boodle of these crude Westerners. But now, as he stood before her, broad-shouldered, resolute, his fine, sensitive face set in a new mold of determination, his eyes speaking down to hers with a volume of tenderness which his lips withheld, Ruth knew only one thing—that she loved him!

The surge of emotion set her trembling while she clung to his hand. She wanted to throw her arms around him, pillow his head against her fluttering breast, pour out the flood of sympathy and encouragement locked in her heart. But the words refused to come.

"Hey, teacher!" yelled a tow-headed urchin, sticking his head out the door. "Sammy Jones went an' put a froze horned-toad into the water pail!"

In a daze she entered the schoolhouse, and in a daze went through the routine work. She remembered saying "Good-by, Slim!" and watching his tall figure swing onto his horse and disappear down the trail. Why hadn't she kept him a little while? Asked him something of his plans? But he'd be back Christmas Eve!

Christmas Eve! The magic words ran through her mind like a song all day, and that evening she left the trail at Boulder Gulch and rode down to the juniper.

To her surprise, a mounted figure loomed up in the sunset as she approached the tree. She could see, even at a distance, that it was not Dort. The other rider, on the Circle F side of the fence, came up at a trot to meet her. She saw a heavy-browed, thick-set man in a dark blue mackinaw and bald chaps.

Sudden fear gripped her as the man rode beside her without speaking. Her impulse was to turn around and ride hard for the trail, but she forced herself to go on.

"Yuh wasn't figgerin' on doin' nothin' to that tree, was yuh?" the man asked suddenly, when she stopped before it.

"Why—er—not now! That is—"

"I guess you're the school marm, ain'tcha? Well, I'm here to guard this tree, by the Baron's orders. Somebuddy sent him a 'nonymous letter tellin' as how you're aimin' to have this here tree fer the school entertainment, an' kicked up a deuce of a row. Well, all I can say, miss, is that any young woman who'd cut down a fine little tree in a treeless land is a fool an' a wastrel!"

She hadn't thought of the matter in that light before, and her cheeks burned with a sudden consciousness of guilt. Even the little juniper seemed mutely to reproach her.

"Please tell your employer he needn't worry any more about this tree! I only wanted it to make the children happy. But I see now that it would be wrong to cut it down. I'm very sorry."

Ruth wheeled her horse around and cantered back along the fence. That night she wrote a note to Slim, telling him of her experience, and adding that now she didn't want the juniper cut down. She put the note in the canvas mail bag that would go to town the next morning with herself and Dort.

MRS. GREGORY usually accompanied her son on these Saturday excursions to the county seat, but on this particular morning she declined to go, without giving any reason. Ruth suspected that Dort had asked her to remain at home. Since the night Slim's sister had visited the ranch the teacher had distrusted Dort more than ever. But nothing must stand in the way of her getting the Christmas gifts she had promised the children.

Dort was in high spirits as he backed the car out of its shed and drove up to the ranch house. He had dressed with great care, wearing a new white sombrero and new boots.

Before they had got halfway to the bleak little town he asked Ruth to marry him. Although Dort had schooled himself for weeks as to what he would say, he was almost roughly abrupt as he put the momentous question. His pallor, his hot, piercing, black eyes frightened the girl. But she fought back the smothering sensation, calmly withdrawing her hands from his trembling grasp.

"Look here, Dort!" she explained. "I overheard every word little Edie Fettritch said to you the other night. If she loves you so much, you must have given her some cause. She's not the sort that goes about pursuing men. She's scarcely more than a child. I don't know how much loyalty you owe her, but I do know this: I don't like people whose affections switch so easily. And, anyway, I never could have cared for you—like that."

"Just because I paid Edie Fettritch a little attention, and saw her once or twice on the q. t., doesn't mean I was in love with her, or anything like it," Dort replied sullenly. "If she's got some fool idees about it, that ain't my fault. Yuh're the only woman I ever saw that I wanted, an' if I can't have

yuh I'll be damned if anybody else will!"

The rest of the day was a prolonged misery. Dort was maudlin and morose by turns, pleading one minute, threatening the next. He had laid his plans carefully, even going so far as to write in ahead to the county judge to tell him that his services might be needed to tie a marriage knot. It seemed incredible that his proposal, so long deferred, so meticulously thought out, had resulted in this humiliating refusal. What did the girl expect, for heaven's sake? He was good-looking, heir to a big ranch—the catch of the county, in fact.

There was one way left, one chance that had been in the back of his mind from the moment he had first seen her. He would use caveman tactics, sweep her off her feet, break down that icy barrier of reserve which had always kept him at a distance.

But when he attempted to put this into effect, his courage failed him, quailed again before those cool, contemptuous blue eyes. By sheer force of personality the girl cowed the beast in him, but she was inwardly trembling, almost nauseated with disgust, before the straggly little town came into sight.

To her immense relief Dort left her to do her shopping alone. She saw him go into the post office, and later, as she ate a hurried lunch, caught a glimpse of him in the street. He was with some cowboys she remembered having seen at the ranch during the fall roundup.

One of them, a shambling half-breed Indian with a flair for gaudy colors, she recalled particularly. He had been discharged from the Circle F and taken on by the Gregory outfit. At the time, Mr. Gregory had remarked that he was a "bad Injun." Dort disappeared with this man into a pool hall. Ruth, slipping out of the Chinese restaurant, went back to the general store.

Dread of the long ride back with Dort spoiled the happiness of choosing gifts for her pupils. Each one, she decided, must have something useful and something amusing; so she verily bought out the store's assortment of dolls and toy drums, socks, mufflers and handkerchiefs. Burdened with packages she went back to the car, standing in front of the hotel.

Dort came out of the building, helped arrange the bundles, and climbed into the driver's seat. His seemingly restored good humor did not reassure the girl, for she realized that he had been drinking.

Neither spoke as the car bumped out of town. Gray snow clouds hovered over the distant mountains. A sharp breeze whistled around the windshield and through the rents in the stiff curtains. Night was not far off.

They had gone perhaps three miles when a figure loomed up in the dust beside the road. It was the Indian herder. Dort brought the car to a stop at the man's signal, and spoke gruffly to him in Spanish as he stood grinning stupidly, one foot on the running board.

"Tonio figgers on goin' up to Honey Creek to see his folks over Christmas," Dort explained to Ruth. "D'yuh mind if we give him a lift?"

Did she mind! Almost she could have embraced that murderous-looking half-breed from sheer joy at the thought of his presence on the cold, dark ride ahead! Sheepishly he piled into the tonneau among the Christmas packages, and never uttered a word until the lights of the Gregory ranch house pricked palely out of the blustery gloom.

WEARY but happy, Ruth rode home alone, late, the day before Christmas Eve. Nearly everything was in readiness for the entertainment, the gifts tied up, cranberry and popcorn chains festooned about the schoolroom. The children were actually getting into the spirit of the thing, now that the great night was close at hand, fired perhaps by the happiness

which fairly radiated from their teacher.

For Slim would arrive to-morrow! Between the lines of her note he must have read what Ruth hadn't been able to put into words on the day of parting. He would dare now to say with his lips what before he had said only with his eyes.

She thought of the unpleasant revelation of Dort's character she had had on the way to town, and shuddered. Slim was a man and a gentleman. There must have been good blood somewhere in his lineage, a fineness which had persisted in spite of everything. Ruth could be proud of him, and respect him. Besides, she loved him!

Under a ruby-red sunset the valley lay like a sheet of beaten copper. Her eyes followed the fence to the tree, a pointed shaft of black against the brilliant light. She stopped, her lips curling with amusement. A mounted figure still stood guard there. Evidently Slim's father, if he had received her message, did not believe her.

The girl was mighty glad she had written Slim not to try to get the tree for her! It was bad enough that the mysterious "'nonymous" letter should have caused that terrible quarrel between him and his father, without adding fuel to the flame.

She suspected Sammy Jones, trouble-maker of the school, of having written that letter. Sammy knew and gloated over all the gossip of the district. It would have been just like him to think up that way to spoil the Christmas plans, of which he had been sneeringly contemptuous from the first, by setting father and son against each other.

Supper that night in the big Gregory kitchen was a rather gay affair. A fragrant aroma of hot mince pies filled the room. Red-faced and tired after her long day over the stove, Mrs. Gregory proudly showed Ruth the results of her day's labor. In the lean-to off the kitchen a huge turkey, plucked and ready for the oven, hung by its legs from a beam.

Dort, who had scarcely spoken to the teacher lately, was in an amiable mood. He and his father had a toddy together before sitting down to the meal. Ruth was still helping Mrs. Gregory wash up the dishes when Dort, with an exaggerated yawn, announced he thought he'd turn in.

"He was huntin' to-day, up on Honey Creek," the fond mother explained to Ruth. "The pore boy is plumb tired out."

She seemed to feel that Ruth would be disappointed at not having a long evening with Dort, although her keen eyes had noted the recent coldness between the two. She wanted to question the girl concerning it, but Ruth's reserve was impenetrable. She wouldn't have believed it possible if some one had told her that the teacher had refused Dort's offer of marriage. To her way of thinking, any girl in her right mind would have snapped at the chance of accepting such a fine young fellow.

They all retired early.

SHORTLY after midnight Ruth woke, roused from deep slumber by shouts and a banging at the kitchen door. Shiveringly, for the room was piercing cold, she got out of bed, wrapped a robe about her shoulders and lit the lamp.

What had happened? The shouting was in the kitchen now, one voice shrilling above the others. Some sort of struggle was going on in the passage outside. Mrs. Gregory screamed.

Ruth started toward the door, which flew open suddenly before she could reach it. A wild-eyed, white-haired man, his livid face twisting horribly, stood confronting her.

"You, you—" he choked, pointing a shaky finger. He cursed her. "You've made me kill my son!"

His voice rose to a hysterical scream.

Some one behind the intruder seized his arms and pulled him backward. A

strange man, who called him "boss," suddenly clapped a horny hand over his mouth to cut off the stream of curses that issued from it.

"What's the matter?" cried Ruth, trembling.

"It's old Fettritch!" quavered Mrs. Gregory, pushing inside the room, slamming and locking the door behind her. "Somebody shot Slim, to-night! One o' the Circle F men done it, but he thinks you're to blame somehow!"

The excited woman burst into tears. "He had a gun when he come in! He would have killed us all, if they hadn't got it away from him!"

Ruth staggered dizzily to the bed and sank down upon it. Everything in the room seemed to be spinning around in a black whirl. Slim, killed!

"Oh, it can't be!" she screamed suddenly, leaping to her feet. "It can't be! Where is he? Let me out!"

She fought off Mrs. Gregory, whose bulky flannel nightgowned figure blocked the way.

"Let me out!" she shouted, and tore the key from the woman's hand.

A cold draft of wind from the open door blew Ruth's thin dressing gown about her as she ran into the kitchen. Old Gregory, shivering, stood on one bare foot in the doorway. She rushed past him, out into the yard. The Circle F men were getting on their horses. There were three of them besides Fettritch. A fourth had just ridden up.

"Good news, boss!" the newcomer shouted, as his heaving horse came to a shuddering stop. "The doc says Slim has a good chance! It's only a shoulder wound!"

"Slim! Slim!" Ruth sobbed as she slipped like a shadow over the frozen ground to the corral, and somehow mustered strength to saddle her horse. The Circle F riders went clattering out of the yard, but she wasn't far behind as they pounded up the road.

Her body, clad only in thin pyjamas and the robe, was so stiff with cold that she could scarcely move. Her feet and hands were numb. Her mind, too, seemed numb, except for the one aching desire to get to Slim. The pony settled into a long, steady lope.

There were lights in the Circle F ranch house; figures moving in the yard. Somebody shouted at Ruth, but she paid no attention. It seemed for a long moment that she couldn't let her stiffened body to the ground. When she had done so, she stood swaying dizzily. A man ran toward her from the corral, and caught her before she fell.

"What th' hell!" he exploded as the half fainting girl sagged in his arms.

The next thing she knew she was in a warm room full of men. She stood in the startled silence, blinking back the tears that had suddenly rushed to her eyes. Through the blur, then, she saw Slim's form stretched upon a cot.

"Get that dam' gal out of here!" old Fettritch shouted. "What's she doin' here?"

But nobody stopped her as she staggered across the room and dropped on her knees beside the cot.

"Why did you do it, Slim? Why did you try to get the tree for me, after I wrote you not to?"

A smile of supreme content rested on Slim's white face.

"Did you write me, honey?" he asked, through pale lips.

"Didn't you get my letter?" For a moment Ruth was bewildered. Then she exclaimed suddenly: "Dort! He must have taken it out of the bag!"

"LYNCHIN' 'll be too good for Pelton when I ketch him!" the elder Fettritch was telling the doctor and the hands around the stove. "I put him on to ride that fence to-night, an' told him to raise a hullabaloo if enybuddy come near that tree! But I didn't say nothin' about shootin'. I'll have him up fer attempted manslaughter!"

"Pelton didn't do it, dad!" Edie Fettritch, who had been hovering on

the outskirts of the room, dragged herself forward, her face white and twisted with fear.

"Injun Tonio done it! An' Dort Gregory set him up to it!"

Fettritch got to his feet.

"What are yuh talkin' about?" he demanded.

Edie cast an anguished glance at her mother, then seemed to pull herself together.

"I had a Christmas present for—for Dort!" she quavered. "An' tonight, after you-all went to bed, I slipped out through my window to take it to him. I took the short cut over by Boulder Gulch, an' when I come out from behind the rocks there I saw Dort an' Injun Tonio. They didn't see me. I watched 'em ride down the fence 'till they come to the juniper.

"There was somebody else down there; that was Pelton, I reckon; an' they talked for awhile. Then two of 'em come back—Dort an' Pelton. They left Tonio there an' he went around behind that pile o' rocks at the edge o' the arroyo. When they come almost opposite to me, Dort pulled a big bottle out of his pocket an' him an' Pelton took a long drink. They rode on a little ways, an' stopped an' took another one. I could see 'em plain as day in the moonlight.

"'I gotta be gettin' back,' I heard Pelton say, an' Dort laughed. 'Aw, come on,' he says. 'Tonio'll take care o' that damned tree! Nobody ain't goin' to touch it!' Then they took another drink, an' rode down the gulch.

"I started home. I was scared. Way down inside me I had a funny feelin' that somethin' was goin' to happen. Somethin' terrible. Once I looked back an' saw somebody ridin' along the fence. I thought it was Pelton. Then, after I got almost home, I heard the shot.

"I was too scared to go back, right away. But after a few minutes I couldn't stand it any longer. I went back an' found Slim layin' there—shot. An' when I saw the blood an' him so white an' quiet, I thought he was dead! There was a little ax beside him on the ground, that he had started to cut down the juniper with. I don't know how I got back here—to tell you—"

"You was out—chasin' after Dort Gregory?"

Old Fettritch's face was livid as he advanced toward the trembling girl.

"I thought I loved him, dad!" she sobbed. "I thought you'd kill me an' him, both, if you found out! So I used to sneak out to see him. But I don't love him no more!"

"'Any more,'" corrected Slim feebly from the cot. "Cut it out, dad! If she fell in love with Gregory it's her own affair! She's found him out, anyways, before it's too late. An' after this, she and I are goin' to do our own choosin', an' our own lovin', an' if you don't like it, you can go plumb to hell!"

The Baron of the Cerilla stared at his son in flabbergasted amazement for at least thirty seconds. Then a slow smile softened his harsh features.

"I've been waitin' for twenty-five years to hear you say that, Slim," he said proudly. "I guess you got plenty o' the Fettritch nerve after all! Only it took this here young lady, an' a hole in the shoulder, to bring it out. Shake, son!"

The little juniper had never looked so crisply green as it did on that cold, sunshiny Christmas morning. Fate had stepped in to prevent it from being adorned with tinsel wreaths and gifts from the box of tree trimmings that had come in the mail from Ruth Bain a few days before. But it seemed well enough pleased with the one ornament that sparkled in the sunlight as the wind waved its pendulous branches.

At its very tip a single star gleamed—a big silver star, on whose shining points was picked out in letters of gold these words:

"Peace on Earth."

THE END

Incredulous of the sight that met his eyes, Sir Leo stood transfixed in the doorway

The Sword of Vengeance

Captured by the barbarous Seljuks, the English crusader Sir Leo battles with all his wit and courage to carry on his desperate and secret mission

By F. V. W. MASON

Author of "Useless," "The Trail of Mr. Solingen," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

SIR LEO DE COFFYN, an English crusader, rides toward the outposts of Guy de Lusignan's tottering Christian "Kingdom of Jerusalem," accompanied by his trusty sergeant, Diccon.

He incurs the wrath of the powerful and malignant black-robed Knights Templars when he slays one of their fraternity in succoring an outnumbered French knight; and a troop of them pursue him into the mountains. As they set upon him and his man-at-arms, a body of Hospitalers, Knights of St. John, ride up and fall upon their hereditary foes of the Temple. Sir Leo and Diccon are left on the field as the Hospitalers drive the Templars down the valley.

They give water to a dying Hospitaler. When he learns that Sir Leo rides on a mission to the outpost of Mont Saint Joie, the dying man lays an injunction on Sir Leo to repay the Hospitalers' assistance by slaying "that demon in the guise of Venus's self, that beauteous harpy white as snow, with hair the color of burnished copper, who slays men's souls"—Jocelyn, daughter of the wicked lord Amalric de Courçon, chatelain of Mont Saint Joie.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for December 22

Sir Leo nods grimly. He knows of this Jocelyn, and her corrupt father, Amalric.

Taking leave of the now dead Hospitaler, he and Diccon ride on through a pathless wilderness. Suddenly rings the cry *"Allah—il—il—Allah Akbar!"* A horde of barbaric Seljuk horsemen, worst fanatics in all Saladin's Moslem army, surround them, and the battle-wearied knight is stricken to earth.

CHAPTER IV.

DESTINED FOR THE TORTURE.

THE cold wind of the desert night gradually brought consciousness to the bone-weary English knight. He found, after a space, that he was still alive and thereat marveled greatly. But he was securely bound, with his wrists lashed together behind his back and his ankles made fast, so that he rode like a bag of corn across a foul-smelling Seljuk saddlebow. The high withers of the horse chafed his chest and caused the links of his hawberk to cut painfully through the gambeson into the flesh.

The raiding party, for so Sir Leo judged them to be, were riding silently in column under a myriad of stars whose feeble beams glinted dully on their pointed steel caps, and twinkled from the sharp spikes which finished the crown.

As they rode, he caught the sound of voices talking in a harsh dialect, of which Sir Leo could not understand a word, though he spoke Arabic fluently. As in a dream, the horses' fetlocks flashed endlessly back and forth before his eyes, while the bleak, pebble-strewn ground slid quickly by, like a treadmill.

Peering from his half-closed eyes, Leo discovered that the band numbered perhaps twenty, all well armed and mounted. His soldier's eyes quickly recognized that they were under experienced and able leadership, for a fan of scouts was thrown out ahead and on either flank.

Dully, the captive wondered what this portended. That Saracens, riding boldly in a body, should appear so deep in the territory of the Kingdom of Jerusalem was unthinkable. What did it mean? That they were not common robbers was patent. Their bearing and equipment vetoed that.

Suddenly a hand was thrust down and the fingers wound themselves among Sir Leo's hair, then the Seljuk wrenched around his prisoner's face. Leo closed his eyes and feigned unconsciousness during the time that the mercenary studied his still white face. Finally the Turk grunted and spat squarely into the Englishman's face, then allowed his head to dangle again. It required all of Leo's self-control to prevent him from rising in a suicidal effort to avenge the insult.

Not long afterward, a change come over the raiders. They commenced to laugh and chatter among themselves, casting off the silence which had hitherto hung over the long file of horsemen. Presently the distant, concerted yelping of dogs told him that the column was approaching a village. Never was a sound more welcome to Sir Leo's ears.

Shortly afterward a rustle of chain mail and the sound of men swinging to earth told him that the band had halted to rest.

From somewhere behind came the eager whinny of a stallion as he scented food and rest.

After some delay occasioned by a parley between the Seljuk leader and the village headmen, the balance of the troops dismounted. Leo felt himself dumped bodily to the earth, with a shock which drove the wind from his body.

That the visitors were not altogether welcome he soon discovered, in that here and there rang angry Arabic oaths as the gentler mannered natives watched the raiders boldly take pos-

session of the village as though it were a captured town.

QUITE deserted for the moment, Leo lay sunk in utter misery, with realization that an escape from the wild, soldierly barbarians would be next to impossible. Already sentinels patrolled the outer streets to the subdued clink of their mailed shirts, while their comrades arrogantly strode into any house that pleased their fancy. Others unsaddled and tethered their horses in a depression, a small *wadi* behind the last row of houses.

A little girl pattered by, clasping a treasure of some kind to her breast and sobbing loudly.

Leo ventured a low call, and to his satisfaction the urchin paused, wide-eyed.

"Come closer, little princess," whispered Leo. "See, I cannot hurt thee."

Her curiosity piqued at the sight of his great frame so strongly bound, the child drew closer and stood gaping, her sorrow quite forgotten for the moment.

"My lord?"

"A piece of gold shall be thy reward, oh, fair one." Leo felt that flattery might not be wasted even on such a tiny daughter of Eve. "A shining piece of gold. What village is this?"

"Haiad Berak." The child's voice was tremulous but clear.

When her shadowy outline loomed nearer, Leo could see her scraggling locks and wide, white eyes, as her tiny hands twisted themselves in the single, scanty garment she wore about her chubby middle.

"And seest thou another, bound like myself?"

There was a long pause while the child looked about. During it the bubbling, heartbroken wail of knee-haltered camels drifted down the night wind from a compound behind the village. Overhead the fronds of the date palms rustled softly.

"Yes, my lord," she murmured, "there is yet another. He sitteth up and feels his side."

A pang of relief shot through him as he realized that Diccon was alive at least, and, as never before, he realized the truth of the adage concerning those who are in misery.

"And tell me, oh, child of Gabriel," he continued, "whither lies the Great Bitter Water?" The English knight felt that if he could learn the direction of the Dead Sea, with this as a point of departure, he could orient himself well enough.

The child opened her lips to reply, when suddenly she turned with a scream of fear and darted off, as a tall, half-naked Seljuk appeared. Sword in hand, he dashed after her, uttering furious curses, and in a thrice overhauled the pitiful fugitive. He flung his crescent-bladed scimitar toward the glowing stars above, brought it flashing down, and cut a despairing wail from the child into silence.

With a contemptuous kick the Seljuk stirred the small, limp body, then wiped his blade on her skirt and came back to where Leo strained with impotent fury at the cords which cut into his wrists and ankles.

Three shattering kicks the Turk delivered, then while Leo, sick and powerless, lay gasping, he stooped, and gripping the Crusader's hair, grinned wolfishly.

"Save thy strength, O dog of Roum," he snarled, as he bent down with a flash of white teeth below a great, hooked nose that resembled the beak of a carnivorous bird. "Save thy strength; thou wilt need it all when the sharpened spike pierces thy entrails!"

Impalement! At the thought Leo's heart seemed to pause as though his chest had suddenly become too narrow to encompass it. Then he set his teeth and addressed the mocking giant bending over him.

"It is," he said, speaking distinctly and in fluent Arabic, "clear to see that

thy gutter-bred sire mated with sow. Thy over-long snout hath a swinish twist most obvious to behold."

STRAIGHTENING rigid under the insult, and growling a fearful imprecation, the Seljuk drew his scimitar with a sibilant *sweep!* But as his naked arm flashed up, a horde of furious villagers, armed with spears and daggers, came charging past the slashed body of the child. Instead of slaying the helpless Crusader, the Seljuk hesitated, stepped back and squared to meet the attack.

While the rasp of steel meeting steel sounded above him, and bare feet trampled his body and legs, Sir Leo struggled with the strength of the doomed to break the lashing which secured his wrists, but strain and heave as he would, the cords would neither give nor part.

High, furious shouts reëchoed from dwelling to dwelling; then in a body the Seljuks charged, and with the force of disciplined unity, scattered the villagers in shrill discomfiture. As the householders broke and vanished among the shadowy alleys, the raiders did not pursue, but let them go and stood shouting with contemptuous laughter until an officer strode up and uttered a few guttural commands.

Then two white-robed giants laid down their round, nail-studded shields, stooped, and caught up the English knight to bear him toward a small stable set at some distance from the rest of the village. With muttered curses they dropped him to the slimy floor, and paused as Diccon's firmly-trussed form was also thrust inside the windowless den. It reeked of foul sheep dung and other animal odors with a bitter ammonia stench which, for the moment, blinded both prisoners.

This accomplished, the heavy door was slammed shut; and a grating whine from outside informed the discouraged prisoners that bolts were being shot home.

"My lord?" Diccon's voice was scarcely louder than the whisper of the night wind as it rushed through a gap under the door.

"Aye, Diccon," Leo spoke lightly, striving to conceal the hopelessness which dwelt in his heart. "How fare you?"

"Is my lord hurt?"

"Nay, only mightily bruised and weary," whispered the knight. "And you? I saw blood on your face just now."

In the darkness the man-at-arms shifted his position with a suppressed groan. "'Tis nothing, my lord, a mere scratch i' the jowl. 'Twill nicely match that other I got at the intaking of Ascalon!"

"Another scar for the maids of Chester to fondle," said Leo, and laughed under his breath.

"Ah me," sighed the sergeant. "'Twould seem there's small chance just now of any likely wench ever pressing this cut with her pretty fingers."

"Diccon?" An infinitesimal spark of hope was born in the English knight's imagination. "Do you wear your spurs?"

"Nay, the villains have left me stripped but for my hawberk and buskins."

Silence fell, during which the measured tread of the guard posted outside the door sounded clear and remindful of impending doom.

"Could we but cast off these bonds," Leo fell to thinking aloud, "we might, perchance, force the roof and so gain the stable yard."

"Alack," grunted Diccon after a silent struggle, "these cords would hold Leviathan himself."

WITH all the years of his campaigning at his call, Leo pondered over their plight, seeking in the recesses of his experience for a means of escape. With the effort he wandered into a reverie.

It seemed that he lay bound upon the threshold of a high-vaulted chapel of outlandish conception. At he lay there helpless, two women entered and trod softly down the chancel, pausing to gaze at him with strange, bright eyes.

That they were exactly alike he perceived with no little amazement. In form, face and raiment there was not a whit of difference. Yet by the same token there *was* a difference; intangible, but yet compelling, as they stood there with the thick braids of their sunset-tinted hair coiled in pearl-strung glory about their small, proud heads.

Suddenly one of the twain opened her mouth and laughed, but to Leo's fevered imagination, no sound came forth. Her bright, sharp teeth glinted like those of an angry cat, while her blood-red lips appeared to writhe back in wanton pleasure. She knelt and passed her hand beneath his head and allowed it to fall back, so that the throat above the hawberk lay pulsing and exposed.

A tremor shook him, and his flesh quivered in the hot aura of her breath, but far from feeling revolted, a sense of sensuous pleasure possessed him. Closer she came, her lovely green-hued eyes fixed on his. The scent of jasmine filled his nostrils, and it was as though the fragrance bore him off in bliss beyond human conception.

At this point the other sister laid a slender, pallid hand upon the first maiden's shoulder, and with a gentle, steady pressure drew her back. With a snarl of fury the other clutched him the more closely, her lips drawn back in a savage smile of triumph. With a voice like the ringing of a golden goblet struck by a rod, the second sister spoke:

"He is mine, Jocelyn," she said, "thou canst not—"

"Master?" Diccon's murmured tones came as from a great distance. "Master—they are planting two great stakes in the courtyard."

As the vision dissipated, a bitter revulsion seized Sir Leo, leaving him aghast at the stark realities of his desperate situation. An insensate rage possessed him at the loss of his reverie, and he bitterly cursed the utterly amazed man-at-arms. At length he regained his composure and relaxed with a deep groan.

Then, without thought or effort, came a ray of hope. Trembling with anxiety, he rolled over on his face and with a sense of exultation, felt the pressure of the great buckle which secured his belt.

"Diccon, can you loosen a stone from the floor?"

"Yes, my lord, but to what avail?"

"Harken." Sir Leo painfully rolled his body across the filth-littered floor until he could press his lips to the sergeant's ear. "Grasp the stone firmly and rub strongly upon the upper edge of my belt buckle. The edge is thin; too many times have I cut my hand against it. In a little space the edge should become sharp. Do you see?"

With a voice trembling with sudden hope, Diccon twisted his head around, appearing in the deep gloom as an ungainly dark monster, and said, "Yes, my lord, I see. Now hold firm your waist and 'twill be done!"

The grinding process seemed endless, while the guard outside tramped eternally up and down, humming a strange wild air as he strode. Ever and anon the sentry paused and listened to the restless muffled noises which drifted from the village. When the wind veered from that direction, there came on it the sound of angry, loud voices and bursts of wild laughter. Then, once, came the squeal of a woman in pain, whereat the Seljuk on guard sniggered, then sighed.

AT last it was done and Diccon slid the cords knotted about his wrists back and forth over the edge of the buckle. After an eternity of sawing, the strands gave way and Diccon

fell to rubbing his deep-cut wrists to restore the circulation. It was the work of an instant to cast loose the ropes which bound his ankles.

"So far," muttered Leo, as at last his cramped limbs consented to bear his weight. He paused motionless, listening as a gathering billow of cries broke the night stillness of the village.

"Ha!" thought Leo, "the villagers are aroused!" As the two men stood tensely in the fetid darkness of their prison, came the ringing clash of weapons and a high raised scream.

They could hear their guard hesitating on the doorstep, then apparently having come to a decision, he pounded off to join in the fray, shouting hoarse imprecations as he went.

"Quick now, the roof!" With the speed of men born to meet emergencies where death is the penalty of delay, Sir Leo clasped his sergeant by the waist and hoisted him up to the poles which supported the dusty thatch roof. Great armfuls of powder-dry reed came drifting down and the interior of the stable was filled with choking dust which filled the eyes of the desperate Englishmen and nearly strangled them as they struggled to suppress thunderous coughs and sneezes.

Leo heard the sergeant's grunt of joy as the first stars showed through a ragged black hole; then with greater fury he widened the hole to his satisfaction.

"Are you ready, my lord?" Diccon reached down a broad hand, powerful and springy as a trap, and, apparently without effort, drew the knight up beside him on the beam. At that moment a burst of flame broke from a fired house across the square and began to burn brightly, lighting up the deadly struggle which raged through the village's narrow streets.

The loot-maddened Seljuks were seeking to close in together against the raging villagers who had isolated groups of the raiders and were cutting them down piecemeal.

"Quick," whispered Sir Leo, "to the ground ere the fire lights the sky. Follow me."

As silently as swooping owls, the two sprang to earth on the far side of the stable which had held them prisoners. Against the rough, whitewashed walls they flattened, while the sounds of conflict resounded from all sides. Peering around the corner toward the village, the fugitives saw that another house had taken fire and was now tossing a torrent of madly dancing sparks skyward. Running forms silhouetted against the rosy glow darted back and forth like ants whose hill is destroyed.

"Now to find the horses." Leo darted boldly from the shelter of the prison, and, with Diccon at his heels, dashed across the smoke-filled square.

But luck was against them. As they paused in a doorway to wipe their smoke-stung eyes, out charged three yelling Seljuks, fresh from murder, if one were to judge by their dripping weapons and blood-spattered robes. With a shrill cry of recognition the leader darted at Leo, who stood stock-still until the Turk's dagger flashed back.

Then, with the resistless spring of a cornered animal, he hurled himself full at the advancing Seljuk's throat. His fist crashed squarely on the point of the barbarian's jaw, throwing the Turk's head back with a sickening force which toppled him backward into the man immediately behind and caused his fellow to stagger and fall.

With incredible speed, Diccon stooped and caught up the Seljuk's crooked dagger which had clattered to the stone paving, and, in a trice, plunged it deep into the heaving side of the second looter. Sir Leo, meantime, had no time to aim another blow, as the third Saracen leaped upon him like a panther.

Strong beyond his fellows was that follower of Saladin, and his powerful arms twined themselves like pythons about the Crusader's body as he strug-

gled to lift him from his footing. But the green island of old England had bred a match for him. In silent, deadly embrace they swayed to and fro in the yellow-red light of the conflagration, while their writhing, inky shadows mocked their struggles on the wall behind.

THEN the Seljuk succeeded in wrenching free his right hand. It darted back to the belt he wore and wrenched something free. Leo knew what it was, and at the same time saw he could never catch that flickering hand in his. With a mighty heave he raised the Turk bodily from the ground, holding him poised for an instant, then, as the Seljuk's bright blade flashed viciously downward, he hurled him with all his force to the dung-strewn cobble street.

An opaque billow of smoke enveloped them and set the two Englishmen coughing and weeping as they groped about the ground to recover the weapons of the falling Seljuks.

"A close matter, my lord," gasped Diccon as they turned down a flame-lit street in quest of the stables. The village had become a bedlam—the arcades were overrun with bewildered and terrified women and children, who darted, wailing, back and forth as their men hunted down the last of the despoilers.

"The street ends yonder. Hasten, for God's sake!" Through the rose-tinted smoke Leo caught sight of a line of tethered horses which snorted and reared with fright of the conflagration now crackling in great sheets of flames. A few horses still retained their saddles and bridles, no doubt being held ready for sentries about to go on post. These same sentinels were now fighting for their lives in the flame-spouting village.

As Sir Leo and Diccon fumbled at the halter shanks, there came a swelling chorus of cries as a ragged line of fleeing Seljuks burst from the village in the direction of the horses. Diccon and his master caught their silhouette against the glare.

"Cut and ride to your left," shouted Leo, as he led a fear-crazed horse from among its biting, kicking fellows.

With Alexandrian simplicity they hacked through the halter ropes with their newly acquired daggers, hurled themselves into the unfamiliar peaked saddles, and, with the furious Seljuks but a few paces behind, wheeled and dashed off into the friendly darkness at a headlong gallop. Behind them roared the fire, for a space glowing redly on their broad backs, but at last it faded and gave way to the kindlier light of the stars.

CHAPTER V.

SALADIN'S HOST.

WHEN the first green streaks of the coming day appeared over the desert's rim, Leo and his follower were still doggedly paralleling the forbidding range of low mountains on their left. They rode in silence, while the clink of their horses' shoes striking on loose stones sounded loud out of all proportion.

Now and then a fugitive spark appeared as steel struck rock. Weary to the bone, the two nodded in their saddles and strove to forget the hunger and thirst which tortured them. They rode hopelessly onward while the sky lightened with promise of day. Vaguely, Leo realized that night would not find them alive if water and shelter were not found before the tropic-desert sun rose to its shining zenith.

Once, as they rode rode around a sharp headland of the mountain range, Sir Leo chanced to glance up and saw a long column of white-clad riders in the distance.

"Back, Diccon," he croaked, "get behind yonder rocks."

Setting spurs to their horses, they trotted swiftly to the shelter of a high

pinnacle of rock about whose base a number of great fallen slabs offered a safe retreat. They dismounted, and with the precaution of experienced warriors that they were, tightly blindfolded their horses and twisted belts above their nostrils. They had not the least desire to have their presence betrayed by an ill-timed whinny, for it seemed certain that the advancing horsemen would pass within a stone's throw of their hiding place.

"Pray God the ground mists hide our traces," whispered Diccon, his dry old face tense as he watched the approach of the enemy through a crevice.

"Be they untired and observant, they scarce can fail to see our hoof marks," remarked Sir Leo gloomily, and unhitched a small, round shield from his captured horse. He readjusted the arm-straps and tested the long sword he had snatched from the fallen Seljuk during the struggle of the night before. Bending it appraisingly between his hands, he saw it was wonderfully tempered and sharp as the edge of his own dagger.

Furthermore, he was forced to admit to himself that the rounded edge had a better cut to it than the straight three-foot sword to which he had been accustomed since childhood.

Scarcely had the two wanderers taken refuge when the advance guard appeared, riding like phantoms through the drifting mists. With their blood halted in their veins, the English watched them near and saw that they, too, were Saracens, but not Seljuks, their arms were different in that they carried half moon shields and light lances decorated with waving tufts of horsehair near the spear head. Their swart faces were much smaller and rounded. By hundreds they rode by, to the accompanying jangle of accouterment.

"Egyptians," whispered Diccon. "Mark their striped coats; this is what comes of my Lord de Chatillon's raid 'gainst the Caliph o' Cairo!"

Scarce able to believe his eyes, Leo watched like one bereft of his senses, as he realized that what they saw before them was not a small Moslem raid into the Christian domains of King Guy de Lusignan, but a formidable invasion in force. When the advance guards had passed without noting the freshly turned sand leading to the pinnacle's base, Sir Leo felt more assured, in that the tread of the Saracens' horses erased their own.

"*Pardieu!*" exclaimed the Crusader excitedly, "'tis the advance of Saladin at last, and the daft king of Jerusalem harkens to the treacherous words of that double-dealing Grand Master Riderford! A curse on all Templars!"

FOR over an hour the expedition trampled the sand in a long, apparently endless column of strangely-assorted horsemen and camel riders. All the nations of Islam seemed to be represented in that martial array, whose spear points twinkled like waves beneath the morning sun.

At last they passed, and the hindermost stragglers on sick or feeble horses had followed the main body.

Then the Englishman woke to action, grimly buckled his shield back in place and swung up into the saddle, thrusting his feet deep into the brass shovel stirrups.

"Now, Diccon, we ride as never before." With thoughtful mien he studied the now distant army, winding its course like a tremendous dark serpent over the distant dunes.

"It is in our power to save the frontier for Christendom. Come! Mont Saint Joie cannot be far. That it lies on the edge of these mountains I know. 'Twas built by Raymond of Tripolis to control the caravan route 'twixt Byzantium and Mecca, that foul cradle of Mohammed!"

Touching his breast to make sure that his precious parchments were there, he touched the fiery barb with his spurless heels and set the golden-

hued mare to a steady gallop. On they sped, while the wind whispered in their ears and their eyes strained for sight of the massive square keep of Mont Saint Joie.

At the end of perhaps two hours' ride, Diccon, whose horse had proved the stronger of the two, and consequently rode ahead, uttered a loud whoop of joy, for there, faintly seen below, lay, not the castle they sought, but a narrow, ribbonlike road stretching off into the distance.

"The pilgrim road, my lord," shouted the sergeant.

"Aye," said Sir Leo, "the pilgrim road at last, God's grace!"

Without slackening speed he pressed on, racing down the treacherous slopes into the valley, while the dreadful tidings burned in his heart. It was all clear now: the presence of the Seljuks, and the long column of enemy, no doubt but one of many.

They had swiftly crossed the border, he conjectured, avoiding Mont Saint Joie, and would, ere long, swoop down upon it from the rear. With De Courçon's castle reduced, the whole of Christian Palestine lay open to Saladin's advance; and advance Saladin would, until the vacillating king at Jerusalem gathered his luxury-loving knights about him.

Three figures stood out in the situation with crystal-like clarity. First, old Raymond of Tripolis, count of the best lands in Palestine and wise with more than fifty years of campaigning. Leo remembered how the old count had sought to curb the warlike gestures of the more recently arrived Crusaders, adventurers who had yet to carve out domains for themselves.

He it was who struggled against the sinister influence of Gerard de Riderford, that French adventurer, who but recently had risen to the Grand Mastership of the all-powerful Templars.

Second, was the sharp-chinned Grand Master himself, deeply intriguing and dissuading the inexperienced king from the wise advice of the wary old Raymond, and urging confidence in the hot-headed De Chatillon. Third and last, was Guy I, King of Jerusalem, weak and uncertain, unable to credit the advice of either.

Sir Leo sighed. Surely no less a force than the good God above must interpose if the Holy Land were to be spared from the torches and swordsmen of the Infidel.

"My lord!" Diccon reined in, his face lit with excitement, and pointed to a roughly hewn stone set into the ground by the roadside. Unable to read himself, the sergeant could, nevertheless, make out a broad arrow pointing down the hard-packed road they had followed.

"Good!" A vast relief seized Leo as he read the inscription and realized that their goal lay but five leagues ahead. At the same time he glanced at the barren skyline before them, and perceived with relief that as yet no towering smoke cloud rose ahead. At least Mont Saint Joie yet stood unharmed.

WHILE a maze of thoughts filled his tired head, Leo galloped his sweat-lathered mare into a fertile, orchard-grown valley, at the far end of which lay the newly erected Castle of Mont Saint Joie. They rode for perhaps three quarters of an hour along a hard, straight road over which whispered the palm fronds.

At length they beheld a great gray tower rising sheer and forbidding above the palm tops, thrusting with stark, massive majesty up into the glowing blueness of the sky. There was something ominous, overbearing about that towering square structure, and to his ears the voice of Sir Ugo repeated: "'Tis an abode of demons."

By the side of the road which made its way in an unswerving line to the castle gates, slaves toiled in the fields and women, returning from market, straight and statuesque beneath the

burdens they carried on their heads, paused to stare at the two wild-eyed riders, who spurred foundering horses headlong down the street. A high spiral of dust drifted in their wake.

Lepers whined curses as they tottered aside, nearly crushed beneath Sir Leo's thundering hoofs, and rangy village curs raced snapping behind the horses.

Dirty beyond description, bereft of casque and shield, and with his torn and befouled surcoat flickering out behind, Leo's eyes fixed themselves on the shadow of the arched portal ahead. He narrowly missed a bad fall as a solemn file of yellow-gray camels issued suddenly from a narrow side street. As usual, they were fastened one to the other from croup to halter in single file, and offered no gap through which the horsemen might dash.

The ill-smelling beasts halted uncertainly in obedience to the shrill yelling of their Arab drivers, and their supercilious, long faces stared mildly as Diccon and his master thundered down that quiet, untroubled village street.

"May Allah strike thee with all the plagues of Egypt," snarled the caravan leader, but Sir Leo, with a strong twist of his wrist, guided his mount around the head of the column and only brushed against the heavily corded bales with which the leading camel was loaded.

At last the blue-black shadow of the yawning gates drew near, affording Leo a glimpse of the portcullis spikes hanging like teeth above the narrow, cobbled passage. In the gateway itself lounged half a dozen pikemen wearing brilliant orange surcoats and tarnished steel casques, who watched the approach of the riders with complete unconcern until they observed the wild disarray in which the English rode.

Then three of their number crossed pikes to bar the entrance, while Leo reined in the panting mare.

"Stand aside," he shouted. "I bear urgent news for Sir Amalric de Courçon."

A beetle-browed pikeman caught at Sir Leo's bridle and glowered up at him.

"Nay, not so fast, fellow," he grunted, his tone bordering on contempt as his eyes took in the filthy surcoat and dirt-caked features. Her tender mouth wrenched, the bay mare reared in protest. "Nay, rather get yourself to the water spout and cleanse your ugly features ere you try to force the gates of Mont Saint Joie."

Before the pikeman spoke, Sir Leo's eyes had noted several things; that the guards' weapons were ill-cleaned, that the orange surcoats were stained and greasy, and that all three pikemen had the air of undisciplined, ill-conditioned rogues.

CHAPTER VI.

THE UNHOLY CASTLE.

AT the underofficer's words, the knight's blue eyes blazed, and leaning forward he dealt the swarthy man at arms a ringing blow on the side of the head.

"Stand back, dog!" he snapped in a low, dreadful voice. "How dare you touch the bridle of a knight?"

The guard scrambled to his feet, and the underofficer half drew his sword, but something in the stern, impassive face above restrained him, so that he sheathed the weapon with a snap and sprang to salute, allowing Sir Leo and his sergeant to ride across the hollow-ringing drawbridge toward a second and higher wall.

Between the first wall and the second ran a deep, dry ditch, perhaps fifty feet wide, completely dominated at the corners by lofty, loop-holed flanking towers.

Disgust filled the English Crusader as he found the inner gate completely untended. The guards who should have

manned it lay snoring in the shade of the walls, so that he and Diccon penetrated unchallenged into a vast courtyard.

Upon looking about, he decided that the main door to the living quarters lay across the courtyard. Accordingly he cantered over, flinging himself to the ground as a negro slave with great gold hoops in his ears hurried forward to catch the bridle. The black's eyes widened at the disheveled soldier, who turned and briefly inquired the way to the Sieur de Courçon's chambers.

He left Diccon with the horses, and, following the black's directions, Sir Leo entered the edifice and hurried down a dimly-lighted, echoing passage which seemed to lead, as nearly as he could judge, to a point near the base of the great tower he had seen from afar. After the glaring heat outside, the cool, musty smell of the stones was like a strength-giving elixir.

From ahead he caught the sounds of faint, softly-played music. Wondrous sweet it sounded in the ears of the exhausted knight. Now indistinct voices could be heard. The passage led up a flight of stairs to a gallery, along which Leo found brightly garbed servants hurrying with platters, wine jars and great bowls of steaming rice. They seemed to form an endless procession.

Without a word, the Crusader strode through their ranks, and with his mailed feet ringing clearly on the smooth flags of the floor, issued into a great vaulted hall.

He halted on the threshold utterly amazed, and wondered if by mistake he had not intruded into the zenana of some puissant Arab prince.

Unbelieving of what was before his eyes, he stood transfixed in the doorway, while his gaze wandered back and forth. From long beams which supported the roof hung streamers of many hued silk as gorgeous in color as tropic butterflies.

In the center of the floor a troupe of lissom girls postured in some slow dance of the Orient to the insinuating music of cymbals and reed pipes, bending their slender, rounded bodies to and fro with the ease of serpents. Their supple limbs, scarce veiled in gauze, flashed back and forth, while sequins attached to their girdles seemed to launch a thousand glancing sparks into the air. From the waist up the sheen of their olive-tinted flesh was uninterrupted, save for an occasional necklace.

From them Leo's eyes wandered to a group of perhaps fifty men and women who lay sprawled upon a great raised divan, bolstered on all sides with gorgeous silken pillows. In garments of almost fabulous value, and decked with flashing jewels, they lolled, their eyes listlessly following the dancers.

Sir Leo found himself unable to believe that these scented, luxuriating creatures were in truth knights of Christendom. Their frizzed hair, their beards shining with oil, filled him with disgust. Then his gaze came to rest upon the two figures which dominated that glittering assemblage. As though stricken with paralysis he stood staring open-mouthed.

"*DIEU!*" muttered Leo. "The dream!" His hand wavered uncertainly to his throat. It was evident that his intrusion had as yet passed unnoticed by the occupants of the divan, who sat, their eyes clinging leechlike to the flashing, rounded limbs on the floor.

There she sat, the wanton lady of his dream, her small lovely head thrown indolently back, as she watched the rout with eyes veiled by dark, incredibly long lashes which swept upon the alabaster whiteness of her cheek with the sharp contrast of a raven's wing cast upon a snowy bank.

She wore a low-cut, close-fitting robe of heavy green silk shot with golden arabesque designs, and when she moved Leo had the impression of a ripple

traversing the surface of some still pool. Her vivid lips parted in a smile, slack and faintly lecherous, as she slowly raised her head and met Sir Leo's wondering gaze.

From the tangle of his red hair to his dusty, blood-stained feet she leisurely surveyed him, a curious gleam in her large eyes. His wild array and haggard eyes seemed to move her not at all, nor did her burning glance waver. So, for a long instant, they gazed across the wide flower-hung banquet hall, until the old man who sat at her right followed her look with his watery reddened eyes. He reminded Leo of a fierce old boarhound gone flabby with soft living.

"*Nom de Beelzebuth!*" he roared, while the dewlap which hung from his massive jaws crimsoned like the wattles of an angry turkey. "What is this?"

Uttering a grunt, he heaved himself upward and stood glaring down at the intruder, his massive iron-gray brows knit, and his bloated, red-splotched face twitching. Leo thought he had never in his life seen such a giant.

"May the foul fiend fly away with me," thundered the lord of the castle, "who let this gallows scavenger pass?" On thick legs he swayed, hiccuping and belching as he waited for an answer.

The music died away in caterwauling discords, so that the dancers, losing step, stopped uncertainly. A short, red-faced drunkard in a shimmering azure robe reached out over the dance floor and hauled one of the Nails to the divan, and fell to fondling her with complete disregard of the scene taking place.

Sir Leo drew himself up and his voice rang like a trumpet call through the lofty banquet hall.

"I am Sir Leo de Coffyn, Knight of England, and special deputy of his Majesty Guy, King of Jerusalem!"

"Guy, King of Jerusalem!" shrilly mimicked a girl-faced reveler, whose painted face and lips appeared horrible and grotesque beneath a crown of scarlet flowers. "King Guy, ha-ha-ha!" The creature went off into bursts of inane laughter.

While tardy men at arms choked the passageway behind him, Leo advanced over the shining floor until he stood before the dais in all the foulness of travel-worn array. A scraggy crow in the company of macaws and peacocks.

The giant who had first spoken descended a step or two and Leo could see that he was old, and his flickering blue eyes were weary, only touches of paint and hair dye gave him the semblance of strength and middle age.

"My message," announced the English knight, "is for the ears of the Sieur de Courçon alone!"

A gust of heavy, intoxicating incense from one of the curious brazen censers swinging from the carved beams above, passed Leo's face and left him delighted, weak from a subtle lassitude. With an effort, he controlled himself.

"Speak out!" hiccuped the old man, and wiped his wine-stained fingers on the breast of his surplice of brilliant orange velvet. For all his decadence, the speaker's satyrlike face retained more than a hint of power and will. "I am Amalric de Courçon—Scourge of the Saracen," he added with a touch of defiance.

At this, a ripple of mocking laughter circled the company.

"FOR your ear alone," insisted Leo, while his eyes again sought the fair pale face he had seen on entering. With the thought that the consummation of his double mission was so close at hand, his pulses leaped.

"My lord," he insisted, "these parchments are most urgent!"

But the Sieur de Courçon wagged his head with drunken gravity.

"Damnation," he hiccuped petulantly. "Let them wait. Is a man not able to enjoy his feast in peace? And you, sir, set yourself at ease."

Utter disgust of that soft and sodden

company twisted Leo's lips, and as a vision returned of the swiftly-riding column he had seen that morning, he felt sickened. On one bloated face after another his glance fell, and proportionately his despair increased. Here was a fine match for the flower of the implacable Saladin's army! If these painted and scented creatures kept the frontiers of Christendom, God help the weak and defenseless in the realm of Guy de Lusignan! In a sudden gust of anger he cast discretion to the winds.

"Fools! Drunkards! Beasts!" he railed. "While you lie guzzling, the Saracens surround you. Recreant knights are you all. I tell you Saladin sweeps on!"

Overstrung by the terrible events of the preceding days, Leo emptied the vials of his wrath upon the lord of the castle and his guests, lashing them with every term he could remember, until spent and furious, he could only glare at them from furious blue eyes. Like a ruddy beacon the long scar on his left cheek flamed a dull read.

De Courçon fixed him with a terrible stare.

"Saracens, you say?" he demanded with a hiccup. "Saracens?"

Leo swept a weary arm to the east. "Thousands they come. I saw their vanguard but four hours gone. The hosts of Arabia, Egypt, Barbary, and Ind!"

Suddenly the girl at De Courçon's side plucked her father's sleeve while he wavered in half belief.

"He is mad," she murmured in a voice that somehow reminded Leo of a chime's clear, ringing notes.

A moment De Courçon hesitated, swayed by indecision, then he turned to the men-at-arms standing in the doorway.

"Ho, guards! Arrest yonder madman who prates of Saracens. Saracens! Ha! Ha! Ha!" His great, fat sides beneath the orange surplice quivered with unholy mirth. "Saracens! Fool to know that never a blaspheming son of Islam dares even to look across the border. Saracens! Aye, make him fast, he is mad with the heat of the desert. Take him to the lower tier o' the prisons, 'twill cool his hot tongue!"

A dozen burly guards pinned Sir Leo to the rose-strewn floor, and in a trice passed belts about his arms and ankles, thus securing him.

Rough hands searched his jerkin and drew forth the packet of letters for which he had risked his life. They were passed up to De Courçon, but he, deep in a wine cup, merely motioned aside the clerk who prepared to read them, and tilted his great golden flagon upward, allowing a cascade of purple Cyprian wine to trickle down his throat. Some of it spilled and wandered down his fat, bull neck. How much like blood it looked.

The sweating guards stopped to pick Sir Leo up, but once more the damsel on the divan raised a languid, bejeweled hand.

"STAY, father," he heard her say. "He taxed us on our mode o' life, but of its charms he knows naught. 'Tis a poor hospitality to plunge him to the dungeons: rather let him be an honored guest among us."

With a raucous laugh the chatelain assented; then, while the girl watched with deep, half-veiled eyes, they brought him struggling to the dais. So Leo, bound hand and foot, was laid on soft, down-filled cushions at the feet of that sunset-haired maid, who studied his furious features with mocking, challenging eyes, and deliberately sipped amber-colored wine from a fragile-stemmed goblet.

Much in the same manner that a serpent's victim lies looking steadily at its captor, Leo relaxed upon the pillows that felt like cool hands laid upon his racked and exhausted body.

From where he lay he studied the small oval of her face, noting the gently arched and slender brows, the deep

pools of gentian blue which were her eyes, and resting in wonder upon that delicately chiseled mouth. As he looked, her carmine lips parted in a languorous smile, and, amid an aura of faintly suggested perfume, she bent down with a brimming goblet in her tapering white fingers and held it to the dirty, bedraggled prisoner at her feet.

"Drink, my lord," she commanded in a low, measured voice, "it will do our valiant preserver good." Without knowing why, he obeyed, and felt the fiery wine spur his flagging senses to new life.

Now the shock of his subjugation had passed, Leo felt able to think once more. Distractedly, desperately, he recalled that hurrying, efficient column, a dagger plunged at the heart of Christendom. He looked despairingly about at the revelers, his gaze ranging down the dais in the wild hope that perhaps some of that besotted company had believed his warning.

From one sweating, maudlin face to another he turned, and in all that company there was but one who looked remotely troubled. He was a lean-faced knight whose bald head shone brightly in the subdued light from the many stained-glass windows which ranged the banquet hall. He sat aloof, staring fixedly at the vaulted roof, one gnarled hand clenched under his jutting chin.

Once he looked at Leo, then fell to thinking again. But, widely smiling, a slave girl who reclined on the couch beside the knight passed her slender, olive-skinned arm about his neck and drew him down, at the same time thrusting a beaker of cool, tawny wine before him.

The English knight's heart beat high with hope, for the bald knight's seat was just below that of De Courçon, which meant that he must rank high in authority. Still the knight hesitated, fingering his chin, but as the sloe-eyed Arab girl insisted, he sank back, absently pulling his sheathed dagger out of the way so that it should not press into his side.

Then, seeing that himself alone could he trust, Leo turned again to the chatelain's daughter, his mind striving to evolve a plan which might yet preserve Mont Saint Joie and bar the passage of the hosts of Saladin. At that moment the Lady Jocelyn—for indeed Sir Ugo had spoken truly as to her name—bent low again and spoke in languid, drawling French.

"Come, my lord, why so surly?" She clapped her hands and summoned a trio of shining, semi-naked Nubians who pattered to the edge of the divan and kneeled, touching pink finger nails to their orange-hued turbans. "Look! Command what you will, these slaves are here to obey!"

Coming to a decision, Leo rolled over on his side and smiled upward, the heavy locks of his red hair dangling over his sun-darkened forehead.

"Forgive me, Lady Jocelyn," he murmured. "My manners have been of the market place. I have suffered somewhat and have been distraught. Let your mercy equal your beauty, if such a miracle is possible."

A vague hesitation marked the Lady Jocelyn's manner as though she pondered upon this sudden plea, but the bound knight's steady blue eyes seemed to carry no hint of duplicity.

AT length she smiled that slow, full-lipped smile which quickened the blood in Leo's pulses, and turned with a rustle of silk to where sat her gross father, whispering a moment in his ear.

The old Silenus paused, his head doddering, and listened, hesitated a moment, then burst into a roar of metallic laughter, which made the other revelers turn their heads in sudden amazement.

"O-ho!" he bellowed, "'Tis a worthy thought. Oh, thou child of Eblis, 'tis a thought most rare!"

With a quick motion of her index finger the lovely chatelaine beckoned one of the negroes, who stooped and swiftly cast loose the belts which held Sir Leo fast. In an incredibly short time he was led from the banquet hall, bathed and dressed in garments of marble-cool silk. But, obeying an innate caution, he replaced his hawberk of chain mail beneath the richly embroidered robes.

As he passed along the winding corridor in returning to the scene of the saturnalia, he noted the various entrances and stairways with the care of one whose life depends on it. He and the soft-footed slaves were traversing a gallery, so, pleading for a breath of air, he took opportunity to study the countryside from the eminence on which the castle was constructed.

"Blind! Blind as a miller's camel," he muttered, while he noted the tranquil life of the prosperous town below. The guards still lounged dozing in the gateway, their pikes tilted against the stone work of the walls, and their casques laid aside in the heat of the day. "Faugh!"

His soldier's heart was disgusted at the utter slackness and absence of even a semblance of discipline. This was what rich seductive Palestine did to all who dwelt there. How often had the same sad story been repeated. The arriving Crusader's heart was full of his glorious purpose—a few years; then, if he survived, he settled to a life of Oriental debauchery, draining his manhood to the dregs.

As night fell the ingenuity of the feast's masters had, as yet, scarce been tested. Elaborate new spectacles were presented, novel, highly seasoned foods in weird and exotic shapes were brought in. Some courses were in the guise of peacocks, castles and swans. Whole fleets of sugar-powdered pastry ships were launched upon the creaking tables.

True to his purpose, Leo affected to partake of the feast with real enjoyment, and drank long drafts of strange and powerful wines, which, combined with the throbbing strains of the flutes, *raitas,* and *dherboukas* played by wine-inspired musicians, affected him strangely. Wilder and wilder grew the music as the night wore on, until, in a frenzy of rhythm, the musicians set even the negro slaves in the corridors to shuffling and stamping.

Through it all the Lady Jocelyn reigned supreme. When a flagon was drained, it was she who called to have it refilled; when a guest turned aside some offering of food, it was she who pressed a substitute. And when the dancers came again, it was the sunset-haired chatelaine who shrilled encouragements in Arabic, so that they postured, whirled and writhed in the most lascivious of sensual dances.

Leo watched her, fascinated, as she turned, now here, now there, guiding the bacchanal to a climax with sure and expert hand. Her pale features glowed with a new color and her gentle, swelling breast heaved, while that carnal droop to her mouth gradually became accentuated until it dominated her entire expression.

SHE turned her ravishing, lambent eyes on Leo, and passed her fingers through his hair, stooping low and brushing her scented, golden-red tresses across his face.

"Is it not good?" she breathed. "Is it not better than the hard cot of the barrack, the thirsty march, the lonely hours of the night?"

Struggling desperately, Leo felt himself swept away, and, ere he knew what he was doing, drew her firm, r o u n d e d body into his arms and pressed kiss after kiss on her eager mouth.

The flambeaux fixed in great iron sockets on the wall were growing dim, giving off the aromatic odor of pitch, and by their light Leo's swimming eyes feasted themselves upon the unearthly beauty now passive in his arms. She

pressed a jewel-incrusted goblet of some strange Indian liquor toward him. In a gulp he drained it and seemed to drift into a Nirvana such as the Prophet Mohammed promises to his faithful.

At that moment a necklace of heavy gold which rested about the slender white pillar of her throat slipped forward on a level with Leo's eyes. Vacantly the image of a golden coin strung to the necklace's center reached his brain, and unconsciously he struggled to pick out the straggling Latin characters which appeared in relief about the head of a crowned male.

The glittering surface wavered dizzily before him, but with the born tenacity of his race he read on while the Lady Jocelyn turned to beckon a slave.

"C-l-a," he spelled. "Is that 'a' or 'u'? No, it's an 'a.' C-l-a-u—Claw, ha-ha! The simple pun seemed immensely amusing. With drunken gravity he returned to his puzzle and reached up two hard fingers to hold the shimmering coin steady.

"It amuses you?" The Lady Jocelyn's lovely face was held closer. "'Twas found in an ancient garden near the sea."

"Claud—" insisted Leo. "Claudius— How does it go? Claudius and Messa—" As though an asp had stung him, he started back, as he finished the inscription: "Claudius et Messalina Imperatores."

Messalina! The white, drawn face of the dying Hospitaler arose before his fevered imagination. Leo threw himself back and raised himself on an elbow, while the chatelaine's brow grew dark and her mouth shut in a straight, cruel line.

"How now, Sir Knight?" she demanded.

But Sir Leo stumbled to his feet and burst from the hall, rushing blindly away and sending food-laden slaves reeling right and left, while their bowls and salvers crashed ringing to the floor. Dark streams of sauce and food crawled in widening rivers over the flower-strewn tiling.

He had escaped the spell! The thought was reassuring, and only then did he realize how narrow had been that escape. High up on one of the lesser towers he climbed, and, leaning far out over the edge, let the rushing coolness of the night wind restore his sanity and reason.

"And now to find that baldheaded lieutenant," said Leo to himself. "Let us pray he is not too wholly drunk." He turned for one last look at the valley lying still and silent in the strong light of the stars. Even in his harried condition he could not fail to notice the transformation.

From the wide expanse of the market place, now tenantless and deserted, to the row of more imposing dwellings belonging to the lesser knights and nobles, the whole town seemed transformed into a dream city. Mean whitewashed hovels and bazaars, hideous and foul-smelling by daylight, appeared as alabaster palaces in that kindly light.

THEN, as he looked away, the least trace of a movement caught his eye behind the rim of palm trees at the far end of the valley, and he watched with bated breath for a further sign. But nothing happened, though he lingered for a long ten minutes.

"A strayed camel," he decided a bit dubiously, and turned his steps downward.

As he reached the level of the high, crenellated inner wall which completely girdled the castle of Mont Saint Joie he caught the sound of furtive footsteps advancing in his direction. Without a second's hesitation he slipped into the shade of a bastion and waited, clutching a dagger which he had succeeded in purloining from an unconscious neighbor during the feast.

The other man was walking with

hesitation, as though uncertain of his surroundings, and presently a very pale shadow fell on the ground before Sir Leo. He balanced on his toes, every muscle tense, waiting to grapple should the stranger appear suspicious.

The other's steps continued until he appeared in full sight. Leo breathed a sigh of relief as he recognized the newcomer as the bald knight at the banquet.

"My lord." Leo spoke low, but the other whirled about with a snort of surprise and a blade gleaming ready in his hand.

"Who is there?" he demanded with a hiccup. "Out wi' you, or I call the guard."

"I come out," said Leo, "but from no fear of your valiant guard. Call till your gorge bursts," he laughed contemptuously, "the villains are all dead drunk. Not a sentry on post."

"Ho, ho!" chuckled the bald knight. "'Tis our lusty messenger. And are the Saracens here?" he demanded with a sneer, and swayed slightly.

"No, fool," growled Leo, "but they will be. Come, man, rouse yourself. I tell you I spoke truth! What's your rank and title?'

The bald knight hesitated between anxiety and anger at the Englishman's tone."

"Keep a civil tone," he growled, "or I'll slice you into gobbets." He took a step forward and appeared to change his mind. "My name is Geffroi, de Balduc, Knight of Normandy, and by some called Geffroi of the Bloody Hand. I am also captain of the guard of Mont Saint Joie, lieutenant of the Sieur de Courçon."

He hiccuped again and put out an unsteady hand to the massive battlement.

"You! Officer of the guard?" Scorn rang in Leo's every accent. "Then of a truth de Courçon must be mad!"

"Eh?" The drunken knight straightened. "How's that?"

"Aye, he must be mad," repeated the Englishman disdainfully, "to put over the guard a fool whose addled wits are pickled in wine. Fitter you are to be a swine herd."

Leo's tongue railed bitterly in a stream of abuse calculated to sting Sir Geffroi into some semblance of sobriety.

GOADED past endurance, the tall Norman rushed at Leo with his dagger leveled at the Crusader's heart. But Sir Leo stepped lightly aside, and smote the captain of the guard a ringing blow on the side of his head which sent him reeling against the rough, cold stone of the donjon wall. The Norman was quick, however, and turned even as he fell, striking at his opponent with the speed of a cornered leopard.

As Leo reached for the captain's throat with his right hand, pinning his adversary against the wall, the Norman's dagger flashed down, straight at the Englishman's side. But ere it fell, Leo's left hand caught the raging captain's right and pinioned it. A stern, noiseless struggle ensued as Sir Geffroi exerted all the strength of his wiry body, bearing down with his right hand and guiding the twinkling dagger point lower and lower.

The eyes of the two men met, Leo's cold and baleful, Sir Geffroi's gorged and bulging, as the English knight's grip on his throat tightened. Could he get his dagger home before his constricted lungs gave way?

Only the scraping and slipping of the combatants' feet could be heard, that and Leo's panting breath as he toiled with the energy of despair to push away that shining strip of steel which relentlessly came closer and closer. It was almost to his breast, then he exerted his husbanded strength and relentlessly pushed back the Norman's threatening dagger.

"Yield?" Leo whispered.

The Norman, whose tongue had commenced to protrude, dropped his

dagger clashing to the floor as signal of defeat while Leo released his grip, allowing the captain to draw great deep breaths into his tortured lungs.

"And now, my friend," he snapped, "call your guard!"

But Sir Geoffroi could only gasp and rub his throat, while Leo picked up the dagger and returned it to him.

"Nay, what a man you are!" muttered the bald-headed veteran. "There're not many in the Holy Land can pin old Bloody Hand to the wall like a rat on a barn door!"

He turned with the intention of calling the guard, drew a deep breath, and opened his mouth. But he uttered never a sound, while the air rushed out of his lungs with a hollow groan. Thunderstruck, the gaunt Norman leaned out over the battlements.

"*Dieu!*" That one word he uttered, then fled down the stairs bawling for the guard at the top of his lungs.

Leo, with a deadly presentiment in his brain, rushed to the machicolations and peered out. His blood went cold, and the hair on the back of his neck stood on end, for there, flooding the native village and pouring down from the neighboring hills rushed a vast silent army, whose spears were rapidly converging on the open gates of Mont Saint Joie!

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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A Christmas Dinner on a Rock

FEW men have ever eaten Christmas dinner alone on a rock in mid-ocean, but that was the experience of Joseph Gray, an English writer of sea tales and mate of the sailing ship Merry Lass that took fire in the middle of the Indian Ocean on her way to Singapore with a cargo of alcohol. The fire, before it was discovered, had gained too much headway to be extinguished, so the captain ordered all hands to the boats.

The first boat with the captain on board was never heard of again; the longboat in charge of Gray drifted about in the dark for several hours before it smashed on a reef like an egg shell. The mate alone succeeded in reaching land, all his companions were dashed to death on the reef or drowned.

Daylight showed the sole survivor that he was marooned on an islet so small that it was nothing but a cluster of rocks rising above the waves. It was less than a half mile wide, and surrounded by a *cheval-de-frise* of reefs, over which the sea boiled; beyond was the desolate expanse of the Indian Ocean, with not a sail or a smudge of smoke in sight.

The shipwrecked man remembered it was Christmas Day and the thought of Christmas dinners increased the pangs of hunger and thirst. Exploring the islet he found a pool of sweet water in the hollow of a rock, and hidden in the coarse grass which the sea wind had combed over it he stumbled on a sea fowl's nest full of eggs. He also killed one of the birds with a stone, and as he carried a metal matchbox his matches were dry and he kindled a fire of dry grass, over which he roasted the sea fowl and cooked the eggs. The fowl was tough and poor and the eggs had a strong, oily flavor, but the sauce of hunger made the meal palatable.

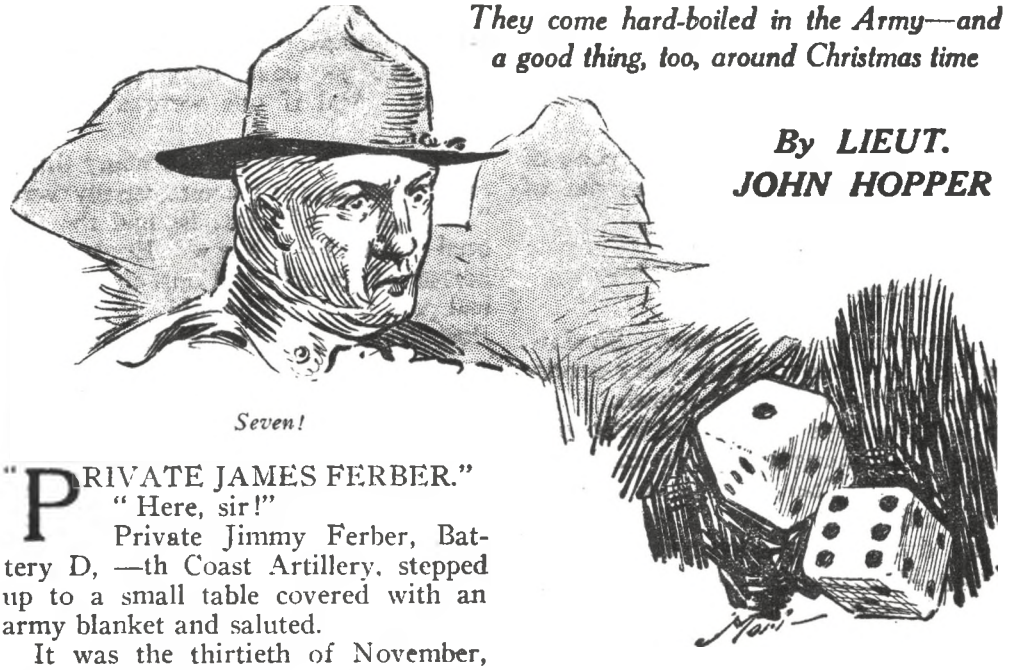
Next day, just as he was finishing the last of his strange Christmas dinner, a P. and O. steamer sighted his signal and sent a boat to his rescue.

Minna Irving.

Corporal Santa Claus

They come hard-boiled in the Army—and a good thing, too, around Christmas time

By LIEUT. JOHN HOPPER



Seven!

"PRIVATE JAMES FERBER."

"Here, sir!"

Private Jimmy Ferber, Battery D, —th Coast Artillery, stepped up to a small table covered with an army blanket and saluted.

It was the thirtieth of November, and, as it was the last day of the month, pay day in the United States Regular Army.

There were four men seated around the table: the finance officer, who was paying the troops, a finance sergeant helping him, Captain Saul, Jimmy's battery commander, and Sergeant Kirk, top kick of Battery D.

"Seven dollars," called the finance sergeant.

The finance officer counted out the sum from the piles of money on the table, and handed it to Jimmy.

Half an hour later, Jimmy Ferber sat on his bunk in a squad room of D Battery's barracks, and studied the five and two ones he held in his hand.

Seven dollars! That was right. His entire pay as private in the United States Army was twenty-one dollars per month. Fourteen of it he had allotted to his aged mother. Fourteen from twenty-one left seven.

That seven dollars represented his entire worldly wealth. The railroad fare to that hard, frost-bitten town in Vermont, which he called his home town, was exactly six fifty-eight.

No more pay days until after Christmas.

Well, he had enough money to pay his way home. Visions of a weather-beaten, crumbling farmhouse, huddled in the lee of a rock-strewn hillside, came into his mind. He might be able to get enough money from his brother to pay the way back from Christmas furlough.

Jim's lips met in a straight line. His knowledge of the barren existence on that farm told him that his brother would be fortunate if he had enough money to eke out the winter, without giving any away for railroad fares.

Jim shook his head mournfully. A sigh escaped his lips. When he had enlisted in the summer, his hopes had been high. He had hugged his mother gleefully. "See, ma! It won't be no time at all before I'll be back. Christ-

mas. You won't know me, ma; uniform, presents for you, and everything."

That had been in the summer. Adventure, travel, quick promotion, conquest of the world had been ahead of him. Oh, yes, all these the recruiting officer had promised him.

The words of an old Army song he had heard somewhere drifted out of the back of his mind:

> In the Army there's sobriety,
> Promotion's very slow—

Promotion *was* very slow. So slow, in fact, that men of thirty years' service were retiring only as corporals.

And the pay! It had been impossible to save anything out of seven dollars a month. There had been so many little things to buy. A month is a long time, and a soldier has to have many little things; things which cost money, such as polish for brass, shoe polish, special oil for rifles, laundry.

Jimmy's eyes stung, and he blinked rapidly to keep back a tear. For, after all, Jimmy was very young. In fact, he was quite the youngest man in the regiment. He had had to stretch his age in order to get in. Here he was, a soldier, in company with men old enough to be his father; swearing men, drinking men, some good, many bad, but all of them experienced in the ways of the army and the world. Out in civil life, young men of Jimmy's age were just beginning to go to high school parties.

"Come on, dice! Get hot!"

The old army game. For the first time, Jimmy became aware of the crap game in progress at the far end of the squad room.

The sight was not new to him. It was the usual occurrence on pay day. It would continue until the money of the battery found its way into the pockets of one or two men, soldiers of long service both in the army and in the army game. Then the battery would be broke, bumming cigarettes until next pay day, while the very small, lucky minority would live in opulence for the month. But that was the way with the regulars, nothing ventured nothing won. Might as well be broke as have only twenty-one dollars. And if one were a winner, then—

Jimmy had been invited many times to try his luck, for recruits usually were "easy pickin's." But he had the old bred-in-the-hills New Englander's horror of gambling. Consequently, he had paid his small monthly bills at the Post Exchange, the tailors, and had been content.

This day, he let his gaze linger on the group of men around the blanket spread on the floor. Excitement and dreams made his hand tremble and brightened his eyes. Men had been known to clean up a thousand on a pay day. What presents couldn't he bring home for his mother, his brother!

THEY made room for him at the circle. They were not surprised; gamblers never are when a newcomer joins the game.

He watched for awhile. His hand was cold upon the seven dollars in his pocket. What if he lost? Now, at least, he had enough money to take him home. Dared he risk losing it? It made him sure of getting home. And, after he got there, he could probably scare up enough money somehow to take him back. His youth abhorred the thought of arriving on Christmas empty-handed. He had promised so much. He wanted to be a hero in his mother's eyes, in the eyes of the hard, coldly critical town in which he had been born and reared.

A streak of luck, just a little one, would be enough. There was Corporal Dick, wooden-faced, graceful, practiced, hauling in a ten and several fives.

The twin ivory cubes passed around the circle and finally came to Jim. With shaking hand, he picked them up.

"Two dollars."

He tried to make his voice calm.

"Faded," came from one of the olive drab clad members of the circle.

With beginner's luck, he threw a seven. And, like a beginner, he picked up the won two dollars.

Again he threw the bounding dice on the blanket. Another seven!

A curse of protest from the man who had been covering him. With glistening eyes, Jimmy "dragged" another two dollars.

Corporal Dick, a soldier of indeterminate age—he might have been anywhere from thirty to sixty—glanced at Jimmy with the amusement of the experienced. The corporal knew a beginner. They all started thus: luck of the mad. And then, surely, inexorably, fortune frowned, and the dazed recruit found himself outside the game, broke.

"Let your money ride, Ferber," Corporal Dick called. "Don't waste that run of luck. Double your winnings."

Jim glanced at the steel blue eyes, set in grayish, leathery face of the man who had spoken. But he did not see Corporal Dick. Instead, snow-covered hills dotted with green pine, a dirty-down-at-the-heel farmhouse.

This time the dice showed six. Sweat broke out on him. It was easy when the cubes rolled sevens. But this was work, this was danger.

He made his point, and breathed more freely. Following the advice of the corporal, he let the four dollars ride.

The gods of chance smiled again. This time the tumbling dice came up eleven.

"Shoot the eight dollars!" he cried.

"You're faded," a voice snarled. "This luck can't last forever."

But it did. A little four came forth. With terror shortening his breath, Jim rolled and rolled. Each time the dice kept off of seven—and also off four. Finally, with a shout of relief, he made it.

Sixteen dollars on the blanket, and all his! He drew ten, and played the remaining six.

And, promptly, up came a pair of aces.

Ruefully, he dropped five dollars on the blanket.

Luck had turned. He rolled an eight this time. On top of it, a seven. He was through, and passed on the dice with hand that shook.

WITH one hand and one eye, he counted his winnings. He did not want the others to see how serious it was to him. Seven dollars! Seven! Added to his original seven, it made fourteen dollars! Enough to take him home and back again!

A small voice urged him to drop out of the game, to leave the circle. He had his traveling money. Why stay?

But the fever of the gambler was in him. True, he had fourteen dollars. But it had been so easily obtained. Just a couple of minutes, and, presto! he had half his pay for the month. He would stay just a little longer, until he had enough to buy a nice present for mother.

The dice came to Corporal Dick. He picked them up with caressing fingers, the fingers of a professional gambler. Under tropical suns or in intense northern cold, Corporal Dick had spun the dice. He would stay in one outfit until the men knew him too well, then he would ask to be transferred to another.

Almost disdainfully, he threw four dollars down upon the blanket. While he waited for some one to cover, the dice clicked rhythmically in his closed hand.

Jimmy Ferber decided to try his luck at a new angle. He put down four dollars alongside the bills of Corporal Dick.

For a second the corporal hesitated. It was as though he were almost reluctant to shoot. Then, a slight shrug of his bony shoulders. This wouldn't be

the first recruit he had taken over. It was a good way for them to learn, and he might as well have the money as anybody else.

The dice spun on the blanket.

Seven.

Jimmy's eyes distended. They could not believe themselves. But there was Corporal Dick calmly clicking the dice in his hand.

"Shoot the eight." His voice was cold, metallic.

Jim hesitated. Then, recklessness rushed over him in a wild sweep. He had lost the four. There they were on the blanket.

If Corporal Dick should fail to make the next point the four dollars would be his again, and also Corporal Dick's four.

Clutching his last two dollars tightly in his fist, Jim followed every movement of the corporal. Ten. Ten was his point to make.

In agony, Jim watched each cast of the dice. Each time they spun very neatly, and kept away from ten and seven alike.

At last the master tired of play-acting. Once more the cubes spun merrily on the blanket.

Ten.

The color drained from Jim's face.

He had but two dollars left.

Misery possessed him. Now he realized that he could have gone home anyway, even if he only had the original seven dollars. He would have chanced getting his return fare. He so wanted to see his mother and Bill. He had never been away from home on Christmas.

In misery he waited for his turn again at the dice.

It finally came. His trembling fingers took the cubes.

"Two dollars," his hollow voice announced.

He stared at what luck gave him. One dice supported two black dots, the other one.

He rose to his feet. There was a lump, hard and big, in his throat. He felt sick.

SOMEHOW he made his way up the aisle between neat, olive-drab blanketed cots to his own, and sat down. His shoulders drooped. He had no money—none. The mind, ever a torturer, showed him a picture of home. Christmas Day, cheerless, only ma and Bill.

Jim's hand touched a letter on his bunk. Some one must have left it there while he was — shooting craps. He hated to think the words.

It was postmarked Vermont. From Bill.

DEAR JIM:

I am writing to find out when you are coming home. Ma talks of nothing else these days. She says she's never planned on a Christmas so much since pa died.

Ma isn't doing so well lately, Jim. She's pretty well along in years, you know. She complains a good deal about her heart. So, I think it's just as well you're coming home this year at least.

We get a check from the government every month for fourteen dollars. I don't know what we'd do without it, Jim. Farming in Vermont gets worse and worse every year. There wasn't hardly anything doing in crops this fall. The brindle cow got sick, so we had to get rid of her. If it wasn't for ma, I'd pull out of here myself.

Be sure to let us know when you're coming.

Ma sends her love.

Affectionately, your brother,

BILL.

Jimmy Ferber carefully folded the letter and replaced it in its envelope. Then he threw himself full length upon his narrow cot. Passers-by might have thought he was sleeping. So little, sometimes, do our outward appearances suggest the hell inside.

IN the army there are two things which are inescapable: inspection and guard. Jimmy Ferber was on guard.

His post was a lonely road which ran past somber quartermaster warehouses. A hedge coursed the other side of the road. Beyond the hedge a December moon gleamed coldly down upon the colder waters of the restless Atlantic.

The ground was heavy with frost. Snow was in the night air, but none had yet fallen on Fort Sunset.

There was snow in Vermont. Bill's last letter had told of it; deep, white drifts mercifully covering the overworked soil, and even lending a charm to the weatherbeaten farmhouse. Inside, a crackling wood fire heated the belly of the old iron stove in the living room. Ma would be there, sitting, gazing into the fire, and dreaming of other Decembers when farming was profitable and pleasurable in Vermont —and the many neighbors made up sleigh ride parties which ended in a supper and a dance in the social room at the white church.

Jimmy walked his post slowly. The hour was nearing midnight. Just a week, and it would be Christmas Eve.

He had not yet written home. Unable to bring himself to the task which would take some of the cheer from lives already too drab, he had let day after day slip by since the catastrophe of pay day. He knew that he had to let them know some time soon. Yet, he waited. For what? Youth surrenders so unwillingly.

Not long after midnight, Corporal Dick, corporal of Jimmy Ferber's relief, was making the rounds on his inspection, as required by army regulations. From experience and by habit, he moved cautiously, without sound. He had walked almost the length of the road without finding the sentinel. He was beginning to curse under his breath. The night was sharp.

Piercing the darkness, his keen eyes sighted a form sitting on the ground, its back resting against a tree. Carefully Corporal Dick advanced. A sentinel sleeping on his post! Well, he'd soon awake and find himself in the guardhouse.

A not too gentle hand dropped upon Jimmy's shoulder.

"What the damn hell!" exploded Corporal Dick. Then his tone changed to one of complete wonder. "What the damn hell?"

The kid was crying!

"What's the trouble, son?" he demanded gruffly. To himself, he thought: what an army this is getting to be—nothing but sniffling kids any more!

Surprised, Jimmy jumped to his feet. One overcoat sleeve hastily swept across his face to eliminate any traces of possible tears. The other hand carried his rifle to the port.

"Nothing," he answered tonelessly.

Corporal Dick's keen, slightly squinty eyes stared full into Jimmy's face. The corporal knew men, and he was sizing this one up.

"Now, what is it, kid?" he demanded less gruffly. "Somebody been riding you? Or are you just homesick?"

The last question found its mark. Corporal Dick, wise in the ways of men, had known that it would.

"Come on, tell us about it. Sometimes it helps, kid."

Jimmy had the reserve of all New Englanders.

"No, it's nothing. It's all right."

He waited for the corporal to question him about his general and special orders.

Corporal Dick was a gambler. Notwithstanding, he was a good soldier. He did not intend to have one of his men blubbering on post without knowing the reason why.

"Better tell me about it, Ferber." His voice was kind.

Kindness pierced to Jimmy's heart. He had no real friends in the battery; none, at least, in whom he could confide. Most would have laughed loudly at his naïve confession about his mother and brother, and Christmas "back home at the farm."

And so, the whole worry poured into Corporal Dick's ears. The enlistment, the disappointments, the attempt to win at dice, Bill's letter!

When Jimmy had finished, Corporal Dick was silent for a long time. He had not noticed that Christmas came the following week. He had forgotten that there were homes in the world, homes outside of men-filled army barracks.

His sympathy was brief. Corporal Dick was unused to rendering sympathy.

"Hell, kid! Don't worry about it. Something 'll turn up, it always does. Now walk your post and forget about it."

When Corporal Dick returned to the guardhouse from inspecting the half dozen sentinels walking several miles of post, he did not throw himself into a chair, put his feet up on the table, and resume reading the latest "thriller" serial. For some time he stared at nothing on the blank wall he faced. Finally he spoke one word out loud.

"Christmas!"

In the darkened outer room, where the first and second reliefs were trying to snatch some sleep before it came their turn to walk post, one or two men rolled over in their bunks.

THE next night Jimmy sat on his little white quartermaster cot. Laboriously he was writing a letter, using his knees and a writing paper box for a table. There were no tables in that long squad room, only two long rows of cots, each the same.

He was finding the letter very hard to compose. It was to Bill, saying that it would not be possible to be home for Christmas. How could he say it in the best way, the way which would least hurt that little woman with iron-gray hair and bright blue eyes?

Soldiers of Battery D lounged about the room; some in groups, talking, others lying on their bunks, reading or sleeping. In all this, Jimmy missed the spirit which had pervaded his whole being like a warm bath in other years—the Christmas spirit. Where was that air of good-humored mystery, of presents for loved ones, surreptitiously smuggled into the house and concealed; where the air of pleasurable, subdued excitement waiting to burst forth on Christmas morn?

Wearily he turned his thoughts from his comrades in arms back to his letter.

"Hello, kid. Whatcha doing?"

Forcing a smile, Jim looked up at his visitor. It was Corporal Dick.

Going on, the corporal said: "Remember what you were telling me about last night?"

Jim was perplexed. In fact, he was a little ashamed that the corporal had discovered him last night in such an unsoldierly position. But why had the corporal remembered? It seemed out of keeping with his nature.

"Maybe we can fix it up."

Jimmy half rose to his feet in his eagerness.

"Fix it up! How?"

Corporal Dick took from his pocket a rumpled five-dollar bill.

"It ain't much of a stake," he said, half apologetically. "But I've made lots of money on less before. There's a game in Sergeant Curri's room this evening, and I thought you and I might drop in and see if we could pick up a little Christmas money."

The light faded from Jim's eyes. His face fell.

"No—thanks. I can't do it; I have no money. And besides, I don't want to gamble any more."

For an instant, Corporal Dick was taken aback. Then:

"Aw, I got money. I'll give you two fifty and me two fifty."

Jim was shaking his head.

"You won't even have to play, see, kid? I'm lending you the two fifty, get me? Then you give it to me. You don't have to play at all. It's like an investment. I'll do all the playing. If we win, you get your share of the in-

vestment; half, which is right, see? If I lose, then you'll owe me two fifty when pay day comes around."

Corporal Dick was all in earnest. He was trying hard to convince "the kid."

"Come on, kid! It's all a chance. You ain't taking their money. They got it from the rest of the men in the outfit. Some of it's yours that you lost on pay day. You've got a right to get it back. It 'll see you home for Christmas, anyhow."

SERGEANT CURRI, being a high ranking noncommissioned officer, had a small room of his own. Now the air was fetid with stale cigarette smoke. Three men knelt about a blanket spread on the floor.

The door of the room opened to admit Corporal Dick and Private Jim Ferber.

The three on the floor halted their game for an instant to glance over the newcomers.

Sergeant Curri's small black eyes took on a sudden glitter.

It was well known in the battery that there was bad blood between Sergeant Curri and Corporal Dick. Both men were experts in their chosen line—dice. Before the coming of Corporal Dick to Battery D, the half-breed Sergeant Curri had had a goodly share of the battery's pay each month. He resented the intruder. Now, more often than not, his own pay found its way into the pockets of the corporal.

The cubes came to Corporal Dick.

With skill and luck, he rolled. Before Jim's fascinated eyes the pile of greenbacks pinned beneath the corporal's right knee grew to most amazing proportions.

Finally the corporal missed his point and passed the dice. He counted some money and passed it to Jim.

"A hundred bucks. Keep it for awhile."

Again the dice came to the corporal. Again his luck held with him. Sevens and elevens in a row. Then, points to be made, and were made.

"Come on, bones!" cried Corporal Dick exultingly. "Christmas is coming, do you know it? And I'm Santy Claus. Got to get presents for Santy Claus."

Hate contorted the face of Sergeant Curri. Cold sweat broke out on his skin. Before the entry of Corporal Dick he had been a big winner. Now he was hopelessly behind.

Suddenly he snarled:

"Beeg cheat!"

Sergeant Curri spat into the face of Corporal Dick.

For an instant the corporal, so engrossed had he been in his game, hesitated in surprise. Then he rose calmly to his feet, picking up the pile of money in front of him as he did so.

"Half-breed liar," he sneered.

A shrill scream of hate flew from the sergeant's lips. Before the onlookers could interfere, his hand leaped to his blouse.

Jim saw the ugly black thing come out with the hand.

"Look out!" he cried to Corporal Dick.

Too late. The automatic roaringly spat twice. Corporal Dick grabbed at the region of his middle, and sagged in midair for an instant.

"What the damn hell?" he asked wonderingly, thickly, and pitched forward on his face.

In less time than it takes to tell it, the two who had been in the room originally with Sergeant Curri, disappeared. Jim, dazed and horrified, stared down at the prostrate form of Corporal Dick.

For an instant, Sergeant Curri peered intently at the young man before him. Then he swiftly darted to Jim's side and thrust the pistol into his hand.

Sergeant Curri was gone. Like a man unable to comprehend, Jim stared down at the gun which his hand held.

A group of soldiers burst into the

room. Their arms proclaimed them to be members of the guard.

The sergeant of the guard, who was with them, glanced at the still form of Corporal Dick clutching the greenbacks in one fist. Then the sergeant of the guard looked at Jim. He understood.

"Into the guard house," he called to his men, indicating Jim.

CHRISTMAS EVE.

In the guard house.

One light, close to the ceiling, cast shadows down into the huge cell, which was like a chicken crate, save that the slats were black iron instead of frail wood, and the occupants men, instead of chickens.

There were about a half dozen men in the cell, sitting or lying on the coarse straw mattresses. Most were asleep.

"Christmas Eve!" the man on the corner cot exclaimed. His voice sounded weird in that tomb of silence. His face was hidden in the shadows.

"Christmas Eve!" he repeated again, then laughed, a hollow, bitter laugh. "Hell! There ain't no Santa Claus!"

Jimmy Ferber raised his head from his hands. The shadows beneath his eyes were not put there by the yellow glow from the ceiling. In his soul were remorse and bitterness.

Christmas Eve! What mockery! This couldn't be Christmas Eve!

A door in the outer room of the guard house opened. Flakes of snow drifted in.

"Post Number One O.K., sir," came the report from the sentinel on guard.

The door was shut again. Silence.

What were ma and Bill doing now? Waiting, waiting eagerly, impatiently for him to come. He had never sent that letter.

Other years they had always had such fun. It had been so good to be alive, to love, to be loved, to be at peace with the world. No matter how poor the crops or how meager the money, there had always been the Christmas tree, bearing its age-old tinsel and ornaments, there had always been thrilling sounds from the kitchen as the morrow's turkey was being prepared, tinkly sleigh bells of neighbors, dropping into cry a cheery "Merry Christmas."

Jim stared with strained eyes at the yellow globe, high above him on the ceiling. How foolish he had been. It was all his fault; if only he had kept the seven dollars he had received from his pay, he could have gone home. New Englandlike, he attributed his misfortune to gambling. His mother had warned him, the people in the Vermont village abhorred it. Yet, he had fallen.

To gamble had been so unnecessary. He counted over the lucky men of the battery who kept out of the pay day games, went their own way, spent their own money. After all, there were quite a few of them. Now, they were home—home!

And he, who had been so long taught to avoid all forms of gambling as devices of the devil, had fallen.

He had fallen a long way.

A man was in the hospital. What his condition was, Jimmy did not know. He had been told that it bordered upon death. The coming of death would mean that he, James Ferber, would be charged with murder.

His eyelids clenched.

God! He had not done it. But his story had not been believed. The sergeant of the guard had seen him, gun in hand. Those who could tell kept silent. Sergeant Curri was a dangerous man, and had a vengeful nature. The two who had been in the room well knew that, for they were cronies of his.

CHRISTMAS EVE in the ward of a small army hospital.

Quiet. Practically all the beds in the two long, white rows were empty. Strange how few were sick around Christmas time, when the work was light, and passes plentiful!

A white-coated orderly tiptoed into the ward. He went to an occupied cot with his clinical thermometer.

The pyjama-clad figure on the cot was waiting for him.

The white bandage wrapped around the head of the sick man made him look grotesque.

"Tell me the truth," he cried, as he grasped the orderly's sleeve. "Have they got young Ferber in the guard house for doing me in?"

The orderly was snappish. He was due at a Christmas party at his girl's house.

"Yes. I told you that this morning when you came to. Why're you so het up about it? I should think you'd be glad they got him. I would if I had a bullet through my belly, and a creaser across my skull. If that one had been a quarter of an inch lower, you'd be pushing up the grass-roots right now. Gosh! But you sure have been dead to the world! Five days, and not a peep out of you."

"The dirty half-breed skunk!" breathed the sick man.

"What's that you said?" asked the orderly in a perfunctory manner.

Five minutes later, the orderly had gone to his Christmas party. The ward was silent again.

The wounded man lifted himself to his elbow. He listened. Apparently he was satisfied.

With difficulty, he dragged himself from his cot. For an instant, he swayed upon his feet, as though he were about to fall. He put his hand to his head.

It is hard to kill an old soldier who had been through three campaigns, and fought in a dozen engagements.

Slowly, wearily, like a very old man, he went along the row of cots until he found a bathrobe and a pair of slippers.

Then down the hall he shuffled, to the section of the hospital reserved for orderlies' quarters. When he dragged himself out of one room, his hand was tucking a regulation automatic into the pocket of his bathrobe.

The radiators in the day room of D Battery were sizzling merrily. There was the click of ivory balls as a group of men played pool at the table in the center of the room.

Another group of soldiers, in the corner nearest the door, were listening to a radio.

There was a definite sense of warmth and cheer in the room. Large red bells hung from the ceiling. Christmas wreaths were at the windows through which snow falling silently into the darkness could be seen.

The program coming over the radio was evidently one of Christmas carols:

"Peace on earth,
Good will to men."

The music stopped. Then the cheery voice of the announcer:

"This is station ——. You will next hear a Christmas bedtime story for the kiddies. All about Christmas and Santa Claus."

The group about the radio laughed. Bedtime story! Santa Claus!

The door leading into the day room opened. A chill gust of air swept in from the barren hall outside.

Those, in the group about the radio, who were facing the door, glanced up to see who the newcomer was. Their jaws dropped, and their eyes bulged wildly.

Sergeant Curri was in good humor. There was plenty of money in his pocket. He was thinking of the little Christmas celebration it would give him the next day. It was easy to have money, now that Corporal Dick was gone.

He had not noticed the door opening, as he was sitting facing the radio.

Curri laughed.

"Santy Claus! Ha! Ha! The only Santy Claus I ever see was named Curri."

At last, he noticed that something was wrong with the men sitting about

him. Curious, he twisted his chair in order to look toward the door.

He leaped to his feet with an oath. His hand darted for his trousers pocket, but halted precipitately.

A horrible apparition stood there, a black pistol, unwavering, pointing straight at Sergeant Curri's heart.

The figure in the doorway was wrapped in a flimsy hospital issue bathrobe, which was generously sprinkled with snow. The bandage which covered his head nearly reached to his glittering eyes.

Below his bathrobe the legs of his pyjamas failed by a good deal to reach the snow-covered slippers he wore. Cold-bitten red shanks were exposed.

"Santy Claus has come, Curri," Corporal Dick snarled. "He's after presents—for the guard house. Come along."

IN his office, the Officer of the Day had fallen asleep in the chair. At the knock outside the open door, he awoke with a start.

Was he dreaming? What was that implacable figure in hospital garb? With him was the sergeant of the guard, and one other, who cringed.

The Officer of the Day listened to Curri's confession. Now and then, his eyes would glance in wonder at the figure in bathrobe ever beside Curri.

When Curri had finished, the face of the Officer of the Day was hard. His comment was short.

"In the cell with him. Solitary."

When the sergeant of the guard had departed, the Officer of the Day listened to the story this remarkable wounded corporal was telling.

"Yes, I think it can be arranged. Yes. To-night," was the answer of the Officer of the Day to Corporal Dick. "Now, corporal, I think you had better let me take you back to the hospital in my car." His admiration broke through his officer reserve. "My God, man! You must be nearly done up."

Corporal Dick shook his head.

"I'd like to see Private Ferber first, sir."

The Officer of the Day made a couple of telephone calls.

A few minutes later, Jimmy Ferber entered the room.

"Private Ferber," began the Officer of the Day, "you are hereby released from confinement. The real culprit has been apprehended. I have already procured for you a leave of absence for one week, and you may leave immediately. I want to congratulate you, Ferber, on possessing such a friend as this corporal."

The O. D. rose to leave.

"I wish you a Merry Christmas. Ferber, you have yours to thank because of this corporal—Corporal Santa Claus!"

The contrast between the bedraggled, pale Corporal Dick and the jovial conception of Santa Claus struck the O. D. Turning to the corporal, he said in kindly tones:

"I'll be waiting outside for you in my car."

Jim's head was swimming. Dazed, he could not believe it all. Free! Free! One week's leave. He would be home by to-morrow afternoon—Christmas Day.

He turned to Corporal Dick to pour out his wonder and thanks.

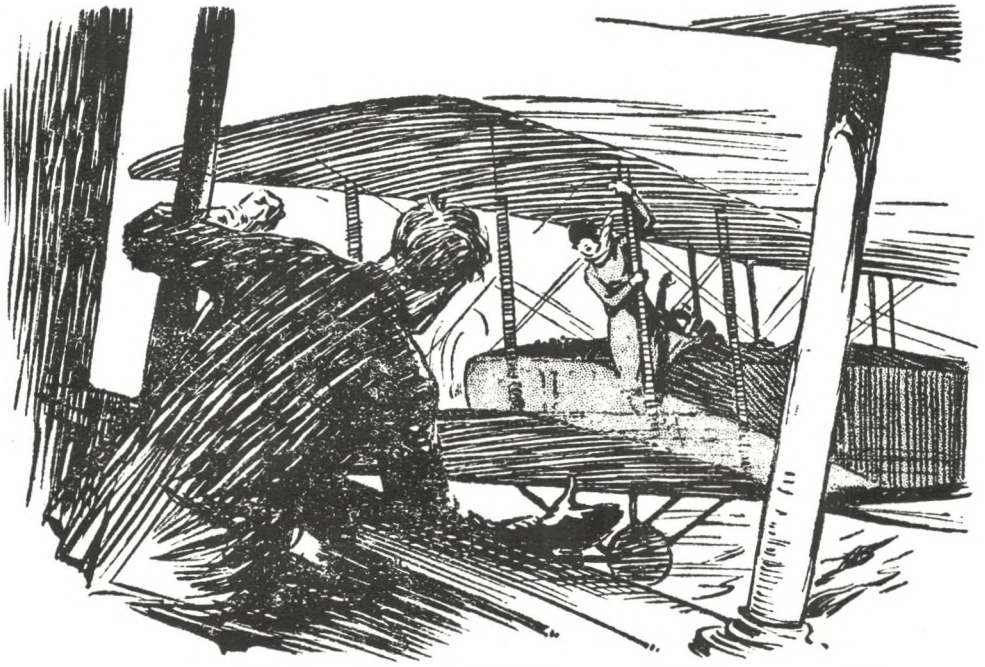
The corporal shook a weary head.

"Don't bother, kid. Beat it, and get your train. I just wanted to tell you, don't gamble any more. They ain't nothing in it. The first Christmas I stayed away from home was on account of a crap game. But I was winning. I ain't been home for a Christmas since. It's too late now.

"Go on. Beat it, kid. Think of me when you're with ma and Bill. Always go home for Christmas—some day you can't.

"Merry Christmas, kid."

THE END



While his heart thrilled, his brain was telling him that this was a foolhardy stunt

The Silver Fang

Malabar MacKenzie finds need of all his piratical heritage to cope with the tangled Oriental plots and passions on the steamer Vandalia

By GEORGE F. WORTS

Author of "The Crime Circus," "The Return of George Washington," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

MALABAR MacKENZIE, wealthy young connoisseur, is standing in an Oriental room of the Metropolitian Museum when a frightened young woman, pursued by two Chinese, slips him a green purse as she hurries by. He waits, but the girl does not return. One Chinese comes back and tries to get the purse, and Malabar knocks him out.

Arriving at his Park Avenue apartment, he is told by his father, Jason, that he is a disgrace to the family, and to his namesake grandfather, Malabar Mack, pirate of the Malay seas, known as the "Silver Fang." Jason tells him to get out.

In the purse, Malabar finds a jade butterfly, a passport for Sylvia Lavender, and two tickets for the Orient. One is for passage on the Vandalia for Rangoon; so he engages a suite for himself at a price which leaves him with seventy dollars cash; and, slipping a revolver in his suitcase, he leaves for the pier, trailed by one of the two Chinese.

On the pier, he sees huge and villainous-looking Captain Lavender guarding an immense wardrobe trunk. Sylvia

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for December 15

sees Malabar, thanks him for the purse —and advises him not to have anything more to do with their risky affairs.

The boat, which is full of Chinese, leaves. Malabar overhears an argument between Sylvia and her grandfather, in which she is finally overborne. When the pilot boat leaves the Vandalia, Malabar is amazed and bitterly disappointed to see Sylvia jump aboard and return to New York on it.

With all the spice gone from the adventure, Malabar strolls past Captain Lavender's cabin, on Deck C, and glances through the narrow slit of the window—to see two mandarins and the armed captain standing guard over the huge trunk, which, partly open, discloses a cherry lacquer box almost as huge, and inside, a bronze chest! Along the wall stands a line of Chinese guards.

After Malabar had passed on, he sees one of the two Chinese who had followed Sylvia in the museum. The Oriental, drawing his gun, steps up to Captain Lavender's door; and the captain jumps out on him, cracks his neck against a stanchion, and throws him overboard!

CHAPTER VIII.

OUT OF A CLEAR SKY.

MALABAR took pains to lock the door of his suite and shoot the brass bolt. What he had seen on D Deck had completely unnerved him. And it had taught him many things. It had taught him, first of all, that his father's hand was not present in this grimly mysterious affair. Chinese did not hire themselves out to have their necks broken. And the neck of that screaming yellow man had certainly been broken.

With that question answered, Malabar went on to others more perplexing. Why should Captain Lavender be wearing the same kind of watchfob that old Malabar Mack had worn? Why should he have in his possession the old pirate's stationery? For Malabar was now sure that that note, with the silver fang surrounded by the crimson circle at the top, had come from no one but Captain Lavender. The powerful character of the handwriting was sufficient evidence.

On another important point Malabar was quite certain: the chest within a chest must contain treasure of fabulous value, if a man's life was worth so little. And once again his mind pictured under that bronze lid, gems which would have stirred the pulses of an Indian rajah; emeralds and sapphires and diamonds and rubies, a solid coruscating mass of them, against the soft yellow gleam of gold.

Malabar went into his bedroom, where a steward had turned down the covers. But Malabar knew that it would be futile to go to bed now. His heart was beating fast; his mind was a millrace, and questions scurried through it like darting eels.

He strolled into the library and glanced at the titles on the back of books. His eyes fell to the title, "The Curious Lore of Precious Stones." It was by George Frederick Kunz, the greatest living authority on precious stones and jade. Malabar had read that thick blue volume from cover to cover. He had consulted it often for information pertaining to jade. Opening it now, he read:

> Jade is termed the concentrated essence of love. Fashioned into the form of a butterfly, a piece of jade acquires a peculiar significance in China, because of a Chinese legend which relates that a youth in his eager pursuit of a many-hued butterfly made his way into the garden of a rich mandarin. Instead of being punished for his trespass, the youth's unceremonious visit led to his marriage with the mandarin's daughter. Hence the figure of a butterfly is a symbol of successful love—

Malabar closed the book and put it back on the shelf. There had been a

jade butterfly in Sylvia Lavender's purse. He had, at the time, not thought of its romantic significance. It now occurred to him that any girl as lovely as Sylvia Lavender would have many suitors. Perhaps she had yielded to one of them; some unknown man had given the jade butterfly to her as a seal upon their love.

The young man, wandering lonesomely about his luxurious suite, thought of many things. His quest of Sylvia Lavender had come to a humiliating end. But now, what about that chest of treasure?

Since he had met Miss Lavender, he had been hoping for some glimpse that would reveal to him the cause of tonight's mysterious activities. His hopes had been granted. He knew now that the bronze chest was at the whirling vortex; yet the mystery was still unsolved.

Why was it being shipped in this fashion? Why had it not been placed in the ship's strong box, a steel vault under the purser's office? Why were those mandarins burning incense before it? Was it a sacred treasure? It must be! But what was it doing in America? And by what right did Captain Lavender use the Silver Fang?

THE word "treasure" clinked in Malabar's mind like the rattle of golden doubloons. What would old Malabar Mack have done if he had been placed in Malabar's position? Malabar's smile was wry. His grandfather would have spared no effort to steal that treasure!

Malabar passed on through the living room and out upon his private deck, thinking of chests of precious stones, of his piratical grandfather, and of his humdrum self. He had told his father that he intended to become a pirate. Here was an excellent opportunity! Malabar thought of the Chinese who had screamed as his neck snapped—and dismissed the idea.

The fog was thinning again, and Malabar could dimly see stars. He seated himself on the rail, grasped a stanchion and looked down at the star-specked black water which foamed astern.

It must have exerted a hypnotic effect upon him. He was suddenly dreaming that he was falling through illimitable space. In his tired brain, a clarion warning sounded. He awoke to find his hand slipping from the stanchion, his body inclined at a dangerous angle over the water, a strange, faint buzzing in his ears.

Fiercely he renewed his grip on the stanchion and blinked his eyes. He must have been sleeping in this precarious position for hours. The night had passed. The opalescent hues of dawn were shining in the upper atmosphere. The water below him had taken on the rich velvety color of lapis lazuli.

The buzzing he had faintly heard on waking was growing louder and louder. It seemed to come, not from the ship, but from the atmosphere.

Malabar looked suddenly into the sky. His eyes came to focus upon a moving speck of black. It might have been a bird; a black vulture, he thought, come to claim that yellow man whom Captain Lavender had tossed overboard.

It swiftly came nearer. Wings and a black fuselage materialized. It swooped down, sideslipped and, straightening out, came skimming only a few feet above the silver-calm sea.

Malabar, leaning out from the rail of his private deck, saw a figure climb out of the after cockpit. His heart leaped when he saw the backdraft of the engines sweep out in a little fluttering banner the short skirt of a girl's blue suit. Next he made out the hat she wore—a snugly fitting black one. He wanted to laugh and shout, then he saw that the girl was waving to him. He waved in return.

The plane, of the land type, came nearer. Now its twin propellers were spinning just below him. The tip of

the wing nearest him was all but grazing the side of the Vandalia.

Malabar's heart was beating in exultant rhythm. In open defiance of Old Bluebeard, and at desperate risk of her life, she was returning!

His heart became cold a moment later. He had guessed that she was fearless; now he was certain of it. Clinging to struts, she wriggled up on the port wing. She began crawling down the wing toward the tip. Malabar wondered why the Vandalia did not stop. Its speed was not even checked.

The girl in blue came nearer to Malabar. He could now see her face clearly; she was looking up at him. An excited little grin was at her lips. Here eyes were half shut against the blast of wind.

SHE made another gesture toward him. And Malabar understood—or believed he understood. Leaning far out he reached down toward her with one arm. The plane, without pontoons, could only slacken speed. There was no landing deck on the Vandalia. The girl must transfer herself from plane to ship while the plane was moving at a safe piloting speed.

Malabar wrapped his left arm about the stanchion and leaned far out. While his heart thrilled, his brain was saying that this was a foolhardy stunt.

Sylvia Lavender suddenly stood up and reached for his hand. If she missed his hand, the sweep of wind would hurl her backward into the sea, into the murderous swirl of the Vandalia's propellers. She would be sucked under to certain death.

But her hand, a fierce, cold, clutching little claw, found his. Malabar firmly enfolded it with his hand. The plane's pilot glanced up through glittering goggles, and made a curt salute. His twin motors roared. The black plane slid up in a rolling turn and Malabar, with the girl swinging precariously at the end of his arm above the foaming water, braced himself.

"Hold tight!" he called.

He pulled her up with a quick outward swing; caught her around the waist with his left arm and lightly lifted her over the rail to safety.

For a moment he held her so, cradled in his arms, her head upon his chest, one of her arms lightly around his neck. And Malabar's brain wheeled with questions. Her status, in his estimation, had changed radically since she had left the ship a few hours ago. Then she had been a fascinating enigma.

No less mysterious, she was now a factor in a ruthless scheme which stopped at nothing. She was the granddaughter of a heartless murderer. Yet he realized the futility of even trying to shake off the fascination of her. He was truly infatuated.

He might have had conclusive proof that she was Satan's own daughter, and his infatuation would have been no less. Though she were a villainess, an adventuress, whose interest in him was only that of a schemer for a useful tool, he would still have been utterly intrigued by her. Lightning and love do not care where they strike.

The black vulture was now a dwindling speck, buzzing back to land. And Sylvia Lavender was looking up into Malabar's face. She was pale and her eyes were dark and glowing.

"It was awfully good of you," said Sylvia Lavender.

"Why, not at all," said Malabar.

They were as casual about it as if he had only helped her to alight from a taxicab.

"I had to get back," she said.

"I see. You took long chances."

"There was no other way. I'm frightfully indebted to you. You saw what happened. My grandfather simply would not have me along. But I know that he needs me."

Malabar wanted to say: "What your grandfather needs is a jailer. I saw him cold-bloodedly murder a man last night." And he wanted, again, to

ask her about the mystery of that chest.

But he knew that questions would only antagonize her. He had a difficult course to steer. His unreasonable heart dictated one, his reasoning brain another.

"If there is anything I can do to help you, you know you have only to mention it."

That was foolishly gallant, a rash, a reckless offer; but Malabar was looking into her glowing brown eyes, and he was spellbound.

"YOU can help me hide," said Miss Lavender. "I must hide from him until we are so far away from land that he can't wireless for a plane to come and take me back again. He would! He'll be simply furious! I expect to be put ashore at every stop we make. Where does this deck lead?"

"Into my suite."

"You mean, it's your private deck?"

He nodded.

She impulsively exclaimed: "How perfectly luxurious! And this is all yours, in here?"

"Until Rangoon," said Malabar significantly.

Her eyes narrowed a little at that, and Malabar wished that those long, silky, curving lashes would not affect him the way they did.

"You might hide in my suite," he added, and knew that that suggestion, if taken, might lead to dangerous complications.

Sylvia looked at him straightly. It occurred to Malabar that she was, perhaps, thinking that his offer was unconventional. It promptly struck him that she shouldn't think anything of the kind.

He held open the screen door for her, and she walked into the living room with an air that impressed him as resolute. Just as if she had anything to fear from him!

His suspicions of her grew as he showed her from room to room. She commented upon the luxuries of the Prince of Wales suite with the naïve enthusiasm of a schoolgirl. She tried out a deep leather armchair before the fireplace in the library, stretched out her hands toward an imaginary fire, and remarked that it was heavenly to travel in such grand style.

"You're terribly rich," she sighed. "No wonder you can be whimsical."

"Whimsical?" repeated Malabar. He was thinking, with that rich imagination of his, how charming all this might be under other circumstances; what a delightful honeymoon might be enjoyed in this suite; what an adorable bride she would be. His mind came to a full stop upon the vision of a poor screaming yellow man.

"I mean," she explained, "to be able to afford, with a large gesture, all this luxury for a wild-goose chase."

"Are you sure," asked Malabar gravely, "that it is a wild-goose chase?"

She replied simply: "You'll discover, sooner or later, that it is. I wonder if I could have something to eat?"

"Certainly," said Malabar, and pressed a button in the wall.

He opened the deck door a moment later to admit the steward. He was the type of steward that Malabar particularly disliked; a cockney with a foxy grin, somehow obscene eyes, and an offensively ingratiating manner; the kind of cockney who would come slithering out of a London fog and open your taxi door for you, fawning.

"I wish to order breakfast for two," said Malabar.

The steward, who knew that Malabar had come aboard alone—who knew that Malabar had engaged this suite alone—gave Sylvia Lavender a look that made Malabar want to knock him down. The girl seemed innocently oblivious of its meaning. Evidently hungry, she ordered a large breakfast.

Malabar, not so hungry, ordered more sparingly. He added sternly: "I don't suppose it's necessary to say

that this young lady's presence here is not to be mentioned."

"Oh, I understand, sir," exclaimed the steward. "I understand perfectly, sir. I know just 'ow it is, sir."

Malabar was more inclined than ever to knock him down. The cockney departed, leaving the atmosphere in a more highly electrified state than it had been before. But Miss Lavender did not seem at all self-conscious or embarrassed.

She chatted pleasantly about the thrills of the flight from shore, of the the pilot's difficulty in finding the Vandalia, of her fears of how she would leap from the plane to the deck, as she had decided to do.

MALABAR resolutely refrained from asking questions. He knew that she would either lie or be evasive, or simply refuse to answer. Yet it seemed more and more incongruous to him that this pretty, innocent-looking girl should have anything important to do with that grim company in Suite C.

The steward returned with a laden tray and set the table in the dining room. Malabar was presently enjoying his first meal with Sylvia Lavender, although the use of "enjoying" is hardly justified.

As she graciously poured his coffee and asked him with an angelic smile how many lumps, Malabar was smitten with the pangs of self-pity. What a shame it was, he reflected, when you fell in love with the wrong kind of a girl. Ordinary love was bad enough. This kind might readily drive a man mad.

"After breakfast," he said, with some difficulty, "I'll leave, and you may lock yourself in."

"It's awfully sweet of you," said Miss Lavender. "Six hours ought to be a wide enough margin. I think I'll use most of it sleeping. I'm a wreck. Supposing the captain begins wondering about that plane? Some of the deck hands or officers certainly saw me come aboard. What will happen if they decide to search the ship?"

"We'll have to run that risk," Malabar answered.

For a moment they ate in silence. Malabar laid down his utensils with an air of decision. This simply could not go on any longer! He must ask questions! He leaned toward her with an air of intense earnestness.

"Miss Lavender, won't you clear up this mystery?"

Over the rim of her coffee cup she looked at him with round shining eyes. She put the cup down. She was smiling sweetly.

"I told you on the pier last night, Mr. MacKenzie, that you were trespassing on dangerous grounds. I'll repeat that now. Remember what happened to the bull in the china shop?"

"What," Malabar asked, with a wry grin, "happened to the bull in the china shop?"

"After he had smashed all the china he was turned over to the matadors."

Malabar, still smiling faintly, said patiently: "Things have gone too far for you to put me off now. What is in that bronze chest?"

Her eyes grew large, as if in alarm. "You saw it?"

"Through the window of Suite C."

"It really isn't any of your business."

Malabar had expected that. "I intend to make it my business."

"You'll be sorry, when your throat is slit."

"Is it—temple treasure?"

Her gaze had become stony, her mouth obstinate. He had clashed with that steel will of hers, and was getting nowhere.

"Well, we'll leave that for a moment. I'm curious to know why, Miss Lavender, you bought a passage to Hongkong via rail across America and steamer across the Pacific, and a pas-

sage to Rangoon on this ship—both dated the same day."

"I did answer that, Mr. Interlocutor," she said flippantly. "I bought the two tickets to throw certain people off the trail."

"Chinese?"

"Yes."

"The Chinese who followed you into the jade room at the museum yesterday wanted your purse, to ascertain how the chest would be routed. Is that correct?"

She sighed. "You missed your calling. You should have been a detective. Yes, that's right."

"I WISH you didn't feel so antagonistic toward me, Miss Lavender. I helped you yesterday, didn't I? I'm helping you now, And I'd like to continue to help."

"I'll answer that question about the two tickets definitely," the brown-eyed girl answered. "The chest you saw in Suite C has a twin. That twin, identical in every respect to the chest you saw, is now on the way to San Francisco. In San Francisco it will go aboard the steamer Siberia, under heavy convoy, for Hongkong."

"A decoy chest," murmured Malabar.

"Did I say it was a decoy? Or did I say that this chest is the decoy?"

Malabar demanded: "If this chest were the decoy, would your grandfather have killed a man who attempted to get into Suite C last night?"

She had turned pale, but she was not so alarmed as he had expected. Yet she obviously controlled her voice when she said, still fencing:

"Did he?"

"He did."

"That proves nothing," said Miss Lavender. "No one must know which is the true chest and which the decoy until both reach Hongkong."

"But this chest is not the decoy."

"I don't know. I can't answer. I'm being altogether too frank with you as it is. My grandfather, if he knew that I'd told you so much, would whip me."

Malabar believed that. Miss Lavender went on:

"The only reason I've told you so much is because you were so kind yesterday. But I think you're exacting more than a pound of flesh in return."

"There's another point I'm anxious to clear up," said Malabar. "Last night, once when I came in here from the deck, I found a note on the floor. I think your grandfather wrote it. At the top of the sheet was a device that my grandfather used when he was a trader on the China coast and in the South Seas.

"It was his house flag, his personal emblem—the curved point of a cutlass on a field of red—a silver fang. He was wearing the same emblem for a watch fob."

"I wrote that note," said Miss Lavender, "out of a friendly wish to keep you out of trouble. My grandfather has been using the silver fang as his own emblem since your grandfather, Malabar Mack, left the China coast and came to America. They were great enemies. I think my grandfather bought Malabar Mack's trading steamer, the Shark. Didn't that entitle him to use the silver fang?"

"I think it's mighty mysterious," said the young man. "Suspicious!"

Sylvia Lavender shrugged. She nibbled at a piece of toast, put it down deliberately, gripped the edge of the table.

"Suspicious!" she cried. "How about yourself?"

"Myself?" Malabar blurted.

"How do I know why you're on this ship? You haven't given *me* any reason for my answering your questions. What right have you to question me? I don't know what your game is, Mr. MacKenzie, but I do know your reputation. The grandson of Malabar Mack, the notorious pirate! The son of a Wall Street pirate!

"And what about your own reputation? A night club pirate! You're a tremendously rich young man. You're spoiled. You can afford to indulge your whims. Either you're part of some elaborate organization which we know is attempting to seize that chest, or you're indulging a whim, giving in to your inquisitiveness, rushing off on an unknown adventure, answering the call of the pirate blood that's in you!"

Malabar had risen from the table. He was white with fury.

"In either case," he said stiffly, "what are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing," said the girl. "Unless you become too inquisitive. Then I won't attempt to call off my dogs. I suppose, with matters as they stand between us, you'd better withdraw your offer of hospitality. I'll find somewhere else to hide."

MALABAR, trembling with anger, was still functioning as a well-bred young man. He bowed with the stiffness of a German Junker acknowledging the greeting of a kaiser.

"You will stay here, of course, Miss Lavender. What has been said—"

He was interrupted by a heavy hammering at the door.

Malabar left the dining room and went to the door. He opened it. A plump, freckled young man in the company's uniform, with the gold sleeves and collar of a second mate, was standing there. Upon his round, homely face was an apologetic grin. His eyes were as blue as robin's eggs.

"Excuse me," he said, "but are you Mr. Malabar MacKenzie?"

"I am."

"Captain Hartley wants to have a word with you up in his office. I don't mind tellin' you that hell's poppin' on this ship. But I was told not to talk."

"I'll be up in a minute."

"I'll wait," said the freckled young officer.

"Suit yourself," said Malabar, and closed the door.

He returned to the dining room. Sylvia was smoking a cigarette. Her eyes were big and curious.

Malabar said curtly: "The skipper wants to see me. God knows why."

"Maybe he saw me come aboard."

"If he asks, I'm going to tell him I haven't seen you. It's none of his damned business."

Sylvia Lavender put her head back and softly laughed. Then asked:

"Why do you bother yourself about me? You're kinder than a rich uncle. You know we're enemies, don't you?"

"Armistices," he answered, "have been known to follow wars."

"What kind of armistice, Mr. MacKenzie, do you suppose could possibly follow this war?"

"The kind a minister supervises at an altar," said Malabar. He was gratified to see color, in a deep pink tide, sweep up into her face.

"You're very funny. You're without doubt the most mysterious and most maddening man I ever knew."

"The feeling is mutual, Sylvia."

She continued softly, easily, to laugh. "And, in some ways, the kindest."

"I'll be able to say later whether or not I can return that compliment—let us say, when this chest is delivered in Hongkong." He glanced at his wrist watch.

"It's ten fifteen," he said crisply. "Lock the door after me and shoot the bolt. Don't even let the steward in. I won't return until, say, six this evening."

"You're simply too kind—Malabar!"

CHAPTER IX.

HIGH-HANDED MEASURES.

THE second mate escorted Malabar to the boat deck and to a door above which was screwed a shining brass plate bearing, in relief, the word Master.

Malabar entered a large, airy room electric with hostility. Men were seated all about it. At his desk was Captain Hartley, tugging at his waxed white mustache points. In a chair near by sat Mr. Morrison, the purser. Beside him, stiffly erect in his chair, was the tanned, grim first officer, whom Malabar had encountered on D deck last night. And in a corner was the Chinese with the saffron skin and beautifully oiled and parted hair who had accosted Malabar in the Room of Mirrors at the museum yesterday afternoon.

They gazed at Malabar with varied expressions; Captain Hartley, with a sharp, level, frowning pair of sea-blue eyes; the first mate, with a grim, wise smile; the purser with oystery eyes devoid of human emotion; the Chinese, with the veiled mystery of yesterday afternoon and last night. His shoe-button eyes were as inscrutable as the inset agate eyes of a clay Buddha.

Captain Hartley cleared his throat and said with stiff formality:

"Kindly sit down, Mr. MacKenzie."

Malabar obeyed. He seated himself, lighted a cigarette and looked from face to face. He was worried, but he did not betray it. No matter what this inquisition might concern, it would inevitably deal with Captain Lavender, with Sylvia. When certain points arose, he must think swiftly and say as little as possible.

Captain Hartley leaned toward him and said:

"Mr. MacKenzie, certain very mysterious happenings aboard this ship have have been brought to my attention. As you seemed to have some part in them, I took the liberty of summoning you here. Before we get down to brass tacks I want to warn you that I know a great deal about you.

"I knew your grandfather. I know, by reputation, your father, and yourself. I know that you are one of the richest young men in America. I do not propose to offend you, but I want you to understand that your status here is that of an ordinary passenger.

"If you had chartered this ship, you could do what you wished with her—within reason. But inasmuch as you are merely a passenger, I must remain the final judge of all occurrences aboard which are brought to my attention. Do you understand that?"

"I do, captain," said Malabar.

"The first point I wish to question you about is the very mysterious disappearance of a passenger, a Chinese gentleman, a close friend of Mr. Yung Foo, who sits over there. Last night his friend, Mr. Wat Yen Chang, disappeared from this ship. Mr. Yung believes that he vanished between the hours of one and two in the morning. What do you know of his disappearance?"

Malabar had made up his mind, very definitely, to disavow any knowledge of the murder he had witnessed. Captain Lavender had, it might be said—if a point were stretched—killed the Chinese in self-defense. Certainly the Chinese he had killed was a miscreant.

And Malabar further felt that he owed it to himself to follow this mystery through to its ultimate end because his own name was involved. He was not at all satisfied with Sylvia Lavender's easy explanation of her grandfather's use of the MacKenzie Silver Fang.

So he lied deliberately and without trouble to his conscience when he answered the captain's question and said: "Nothing, sir."

CAPTAIN HARTLEY sat back, picked up a half-smoked cigar, lighted it and slowly puffed.

"Between the hours of one and two this morning, where were you?"

"On D deck."

"What were you doing on D deck?"

"I am certain," was Malabar's answer, "that my ticket entitles me to freedom in all parts of this ship to which passengers are not expressly for-

bidden. I will say, however, that what I was doing on D deck was harmful to no one."

Captain Hartley frowned again. He glanced at the first officer.

"Mr. Bangs, kindly tell me what you saw last night on D deck. And what you heard. Everything."

"I was coming down for a bite of lunch," obliged Mr. Bangs, the first officer. "I should say it was about 1.30 A.M. As I was coming down the stairs from C deck, I plainly heard some one screaming. It sounded like a woman screaming in terror.

"By the time I got down the stairs and out on D deck, the scream was still in the air, or seemed to be, sir. Then I saw this fellow—I mean, Mr. MacKenzie—running like mad along the deck. His face was as white as a sheet. And I can't tell you what a terrible look he had in his eyes. He was making awful faces, sir. He ran past me without even seeing me standing there."

Mr. Bangs paused and took another breath.

"I knew something was wrong," he went on, "so I ran after him. He was certainly going fast, too. But I caught up to him, and clapped my hand on his shoulder and spun him around, and I thought he was getting ready to faint, he was so scared. That's all, sir. As I told you, I asked him what he was running for, and he told me it was none of my business."

The captain nodded and turned back to Malabar.

"Perhaps you'd care to explain to me now, Mr. MacKenzie, why you were running down D deck so hard, looking so scared."

"I'm afraid," said Malabar, controlling his voice and making it calm and steady, "that Mr. Bangs is a man of imagination. Why should I have been scared?"

"Why were you running?" Captain Hartley snapped.

"For exercise," answered Malabar. "I always run ten laps around a ship before turning in. I like to keep in condition, captain."

The captain sighed with impatience. He looked sharply at the freckled second mate, who was grinning. The grin vanished.

"Your running had nothing to do with those screams Mr. Bangs overheard?"

"No, captain. It occurs to me that Mr. Bangs may have overheard screams of laughter from some cocktail party. A great many of them were going on last night."

Captain Hartley grunted.

"You know nothing, then, about the disappearance of Mr. Yung's friend, Wat Yen Chang?"

"No, captain: nothing." And Malabar wondered whether or not he was really acting wisely in deliberately shielding Sylvia's grandfather. Shielding a murderer made a man an accessory to the crime.

"I am afraid," said the captain, heavily, "that we are making no progress, Mr. Yung. It is evident that Mr. MacKenzie knows nothing of the disappearance of your friend. Perhaps we shall have to attribute it to suicide."

Mr. Yung had arisen. With his subtle instincts, he knew that Captain Hartley was dismissing him. He sent a veiled, strange glance that was somehow a threat, at Malabar, and left the room. Captain Hartley now placed his hands on his knees, clenched the cigar in his teeth and glared at Malabar.

"NOW, young man, we shall get down to business. Mysterious things are happening on this ship: and I, personally, am positive that you are at the bottom of them. Do you know this Mr. Yung?"

"No, captain."

"Will you explain to me what all these Chinese are doing on this ship?"

Malabar's air was one of innocent surprise.

"Are there many Chinese aboard?"

"You know damned well there are!" the captain exploded. "The ship is crawling with Chinese. They go slinking in and out of doorways and around the decks."

"I know nothing about them."

"If I may put in a word," spoke up the freckled second mate, "it's always been my experience, in these runs, that flocks of Chinks travel back home this way."

"Your opinion," Captain Hartley snapped, "was not asked for." He sternly addressed himself again to Malabar.

"I am positive that you are evading me, Mr. MacKenzie. And I want to warn you that I will tolerate no nonsense. As I said, I knew your grandfather—a pirate masquerading as a peaceful trader. I know all about your father. I know you well by reputation: a rich and wild young man. I wish to remind you that I am the captain of this ship. I will tolerate none of your pranks."

Malabar looked at him steadily. Red crept up behind his ears and stained them. Pulses in his temples visibly throbbed. He was not used to being addressed in this manner and he hotly resented it.

Captain Hartley went on, in the same harsh voice:

"This morning, at dawn, a black airplane was sighted. It flew close to the port side of this ship. A woman was seen to climb out of the cockpit, to crawl along the upper wing and to reach up—and be lifted aboard by you. Do you deny that?"

Malabar would protect Sylvia Lavender to the best of his ability, but he saw that a denial would be idle.

"Captain Hartley," he said stiffly, "you are the master of this ship, but I must again remind you that you have absolutely nothing to say about my personal affair. If an airplane had brought a woman to this ship and I had helped her aboard, it would have been my personal affair."

"Kindly bear in mind," barked Mr. Bangs, "that you are addressing the captain of this ship!"

"A passenger who comes aboard a ship in such a way as has been described," put in the purser, giving Malabar at the same time his catlike smile, "that is to say, by airplane, unless she has a ticket, is a stowaway. If there is a stowaway in your suite, Mr. MacKenzie, we must ascertain whether or not she has a ticket and a passport."

"There is no stowaway in my cabin," Malabar asserted. He said it in a loud, ringing voice, being technically within the truth. Sylvia had a ticket entitling her to a first-class passage to Rangoon and a passport visaed for every country at which the Vandalia would touch. She was, therefore, not a stowaway.

Captain Hartley sprang up.

"I will not quibble with you any longer, Mr. MacKenzie. By my orders, your suite is to be searched. We have gone over the ship, so to speak, with a fine-tooth comb. The woman who came aboard from the airplane is not to be found. I am certain you have hidden her in your suite."

"You have no right to enter my suite."

"The captain of a ship," spoke up Mr. Bangs, "has the right to inspect every nook and corner of his ship."

Malabar was too indignant to argue. Never had he been treated so outrageously.

In angry silence he followed the group of officers to the door of his suite. The captain's brisk knock met with no response. Malabar felt terribly sorry for Sylvia. Adventuress though she might be, it seemed a shame to visit this indignity upon her.

The captain turned the knob. To Malabar's surprise the door opened. It had not been locked—and he had warned Sylvia not only to lock, but to bolt, the door.

He followed the searching party inside. He anxiously hovered about them

as they progressed from room to room. Perhaps their sense of delicacy prevented them from inspecting his bedroom until the last. They finally entered it, and looked about, a group of baffled men.

The bed was rumpled. It had certainly been used.

But Sylvia was not in the room. She was not in the suite. She was not on the private deck.

Sylvia was gone!

CHAPTER X.

FORBIDDEN JOY.

WHEN the ship's officers, perplexed and slightly embarrassed, had withdrawn, Malabar locked and bolted the door to the deck and hastened back to the bedroom. He glanced at his watch. The conference in the master's office had consumed two hours. Those two hours Sylvia had put to good use.

Malabar examined the bed Sylvia had slept in. It still bore the imprint of her slim body, although that imprint was not warm. Over the bed hung the fragrance of the perfume she used.

Puzzled and curious, Malabar went into the adjoining bathroom. It, too, was fragrant with sandalwood and some delicate flower. The walls of the tub were covered with tiny drops of water. A cake of soap was still wet. A large bath towel was still damp. It was evident that the mysterious little beauty had made herself unashamedly at home; had slept in his bed, had bathed in his tub—and then gone about her affairs.

Malabar seated himself on the edge of his bed and gazed absently at his luggage, which he had not yet unpacked. He noticed that one of the clasps of a suitcase was sprung. It did not occur to him for a moment that that meant anything. Then, with rising interest, he picked up the suitcase, placed it on the bed and opened it.

Within was confusion. The clothing which Hodges had packed with such expert care had evidently been taken out and jammed back in. He examined the other suitcase, and found that the same state of affairs prevailed.

No doubt remained that Sylvia had investigated his luggage very thoroughly. He knew why. She had hinted that she suspected him of being in league with some organization that was determined to possess the bronze chest, and she had simply looked for clews to bear out her suspicions.

Malabar was not at all angry. He was, in fact, delighted. Her audacity amused him. Her very eagerness was one of the qualities that he admired most in her. She was not unlike some of the fresh little flappers he knew. He liked them. It seemed to him that the more he saw of Sylvia in action, the more she fascinated him, and the more the delightful mystery of her grew. It did not occur to Malabar that he was in the predicament in which all infatuated men sooner or later find themselves: her every act, when it was not one of discouragement toward him, was charming!

Malabar went to bed somewhat exhausted. When he awoke, it was evening. He bathed, shaved, dressed and had dinner served in his dining room. When he went out on deck night had fallen—a night created with a fine regard for romance and lovers. A soft wistful breeze sighed along the decks. A silver highway stretched across smooth black water to the moon.

Here and there on the decks, young people were gathered in clusters of two! Two side by side in steamer chairs. Two side by side at the rail, gazing at the silver-blue moon, gazing into each other's eyes.

Malabar, a lonesome young man, walked restlessly about the decks. Against his better judgment, he went down to D deck. He knew he didn't belong here. He knew that trouble lurked for him in the vicinity of Suite

C, yet its attraction was irresistible. He wanted to see Sylvia again. He must see her again. This time, he would not ask questions.

LEISURELY, he passed the door behind which lay the tantalizing mystery—the secret doubly sealed, in cherry lacquer and in bronze. The shutter was down to the bottom of the window frame now. There was no aperture through which he could glimpse ruby-button mandarins bowed over smoking braziers. Light gleamed at the shutter, but no glimpse was available.

Malabar encircled the deck. As he approached Suite C, he again slackened his pace. Perhaps it was only in imagination that he detected the faint, Oriental odor of sandalwood incense smoke. He went to the rail and looked over the side at the rushing black water. At this very spot, last night, a yellow man had been killed—and dropped into the water like a sack of ashes!

But Malabar was not thinking of that now. He was thinking of Sylvia. He had dreamed of Sylvia.

He presently heard the door behind him open and close with a soft click. When he looked around, a girl was walking slowly up the deck. She was all in white, and she wore no hat. It was the first time Malabar had seen Sylvia without a hat, and the young man's sigh was descriptive enough. It was curly brown hair; a little unruly—just unruly enough so that you were strongly tempted to smooth it with your hands.

That glimpse of her slim young loveliness, all in white, gave Malabar a bad few moments. She had such little feet, such trim, beautiful legs! A wave that was almost sickness went over the desperate young man. He had no right to be even slightly interested in this beautiful, provocative young woman. Common sense said, keep your distance, Malabar.

But the Chinese say: A man burning with love will follow the undulations of a thought.

Malabar translated it into prompt action. He followed. He kept twenty or thirty steps behind her, in the unenviable position of the cat that saw a king. She had let him know, frankly enough, that she had no use for him, no time for him; that her only interest in him was a coldly selfish one. She had used him twice. She could use him now for a doormat, if she wished!

When she started up the deck stairs to C deck, he followed at a discreet distance. When she started up another flight of stairs, he followed still. It struck him that she had no definite destination. She progressed slowly, from deck to deck, pausing now and then at the rail to look out over the sea, permitting him the delight of a glimpse of her lovely profile. Then she would go on—and Malabar would follow.

He was honestly ashamed of himself. Never had a girl placed him in his present desperate predicament. Always in the past, he had been the one who was pursued.

Sylvia, with little stops along the way, eventually reached the top deck, the boat deck, which was the most romantic spot on the ship. It was all in darkness, except for the dim radiation from the lights at the mastheads and from the chartroom windows, the farther radiance of the stars and the blue, ethereal light of the sailing moon.

Malabar, bathed in this mellow glow from other worlds, sighed heavily. He was being an utter fool. Yet his mind, mellowed by all this, was happily engaged with young romantic phrases: Blue moon—Love moon. Utter nonsense!

The slim girl in white was standing at 'thwartship rail, facing the bows and the blue moon. The soft, warm breeze was blowing her white dress. She was, in that ethereal glow, a slim gracious statuette; a symbol of all

feminine loveliness, of audacity and unflagging courage.

Malabar could resist no longer. He approached her. With such ardor, with such longings, Pygmalion must have approached the cold and lifeless Galatea.

THE breeze was tossing her short, brown curls about. She turned to Malabar and gave him a smile so sweet, so winning that the young man's heart became a poignant ache.

Resolutely, Malabar gripped the rail. He could not, however, take his eyes from her face. In the dimness it was hardly more than a glowing pale oval, relieved by the twin dark blurs where her eyes were and the cupid's bow of her smile.

Her merry voice exclaimed: "Isn't it a marvelous night!"

Malabar became angry, partly at her ability to take him so casually when every fiber of his being was afire for her, partly because they just missed being entirely alone. Behind them, at a distance of fifteen or twenty feet, was a steamer chair. A darkly shrouded figure reclined in it.

"Marvelous," he said huskily. Then, with an attempt at humor: "I see you're not ironed to a stanchion in a chain locker, yet."

"Were you amazed when you didn't find me, Mr. MacKenzie?"

"Relieved! I was accompanied by half the ship's crew!"

"I was afraid that would happen. Thanks so much for the use of your suite."

"It was a distinction," he said dryly.

"I've slept all afternoon."

"So've I. Was your grandfather furious?"

"He nearly had apoplexy."

Malabar's mind was saying: "I can't do it. I can't go on this way. I can't keep it back!"

He couldn't, either. He was probably as surprised as she to discover that he had seized one of her hands, was pressing it, rather foolishly, but very fiercely, to his chest.

"Sylvia, I can't go on like this. It's too much to ask of any man. I love you. I'm crazy about you. I don't care a damn what's in that bronze chest. I don't care a damn about anything but you. God knows, I didn't mean it to happen. But yesterday, in the museum, you hit me harder than I'd ever been hit in my life."

And Sylvia, in an alarmed small voice, was saying: "Don't be impulsive, Malabar. Keep that ice on your forehead!"

He blurted: "I can't fool about it any longer. I'm simply mad about you. Some day you'll be free of all this. Then you'll be free to come to me. I've said some harsh things. It was nothing but resentment. You've treated me like a snake—and I adore you."

In his earnestness, Malabar had drawn the slim, resisting figure in white toward him. Now he placed his free arm about her shoulder. Her skin, under his hand, was thrillingly warm and soft.

"Please, oh, please—" There was the flutter of panic in her voice now.

He uttered the plaintive, age-old rebuke: "You've got to love me! Nobody could love you so much without getting just a little in return."

Sylvia was not struggling, but she was certainly not yielding.

"It's some one else!" he cried.

"No!"

"Then I have a chance!"

"I won't say that."

"But you do like me!"

"I do. Of course, I do. You're nice. But you must stop this."

"We're alone," said Malabar savagely. "I love you. Say you love me and I'll stop it."

"I like you very much," she said. "But I can't love you."

"Why?"

She wailed: "Questions, questions, questions!"

"Haven't I a right to ask that one?"

"No one has a right to ask any one that one. I can't love you. I can't tell you why. Won't you let it go at that —Malabar?"

Her voice, broken, should have aroused his pity. But it only fanned the flame. Malabar had slipped out of his rôle as a well bred young gentleman. He was being denied a thing that he wanted more than he had ever wanted anything in his life. It was old Malabar Mack, in his hot-blooded young days, who faced this girl.

"Tell me why you can't love me?"

"I can't."

"More mystery!"

"Yes, more mystery!" she cried in a voice that mingled anger and fright.

Malabar did what old Malabar Mack would certainly have done, in his hot-blooded young days. He freed his other hand and wrapped his arm, with the other one, about her slender body, crushing her against him.

A POWERFUL athlete, Malabar enjoyed for a savage moment his physical domination of her. She was helpless. She could not move a hand. Her face, a white moth, was tipped upward. She could not avoid his kiss. With her soft slimness held close, he drained that moment of its pleasure. He would, presently, kiss her.

She was saying, in a choking little voice, "please—please—"

Malabar lowered his hungry mouth to kiss her. But he did not kiss her. As his heart leaped to the joyous thrill of that expected bliss, the Vandalia flew into fragments. Blackness fell, an obliterating weight, upon the sea.

Or so, at least, it seemed to Malabar MacKenzie. One moment he was about to drink his fill of ecstasy from the lips of the one woman who had ever aroused him; and the next he was spinning through oblivion.

He would not know, for a long, long time, what it was that had struck him so brutally from behind.

His next stopping point in the journey of awareness was a sense of cosmic disarray. The stars were wheeling and dipping. The world was emitting the roar of a baffled animal. And Malabar was lying neatly arranged on deck—alone.

He was the victim of a dizzy nausea.

A whisper reached him across the moonlit deck:

"—or in a melon field, stoop to adjust his boots."

Malabar struggled to a sitting position. That whispered sentence was the last half of the quotation from Ho Tung, the former part of which had been delivered to his apartment while he was having his final quarrel with his father. The quotation ran:

"Under the peach tree, the wise man does not stop to adjust his hat, or in a melon field, stoop to adjust his boots."

More mystery! From whence came that ghostly whisper? Malabar, lacking all dignity as he sat on the deck and peered about him, believed that it must have issued from one of the bell-mouthed ventilators, or from the very air about him.

Then his roving glance fell to the shrouded figure in the near-by steamer chair. As Malabar pushed himself to his feet, the shrouded figure moved. As he started toward the chair, the shrouded figure pushed the steamer rug aside and lightly arose.

Malabar grunted. It was Mr. Yung, the friend of the Chinese whom Captain Lavender had murdered last night; the saffron-faced, shoe-button-eyed Oriental who had spoken so casually to Malabar in the Room of Mirrors!

He seemed anxious now to leave this spot. As Malabar lunged foggily toward him, he did so with no little alacrity.

The moon coldly illuminated his face. There was nothing inscrutable in his eyes now. Hate gleamed in them.

Mr. Yung walked swiftly past Mal-

abar and vanished down a stairway. Malabar looked angrily about him. He was all alone. Sylvia was gone. Mr. Yung was gone.

In a mood of bitterness and dejection, the grandson of a China coast pirate returned to his luxurious suite.

CHAPTER XI.

A SINISTER SHADOW.

MALABAR'S mind, as he switched on the lights, was dominated by the belief that, by his rough methods, he had lost Sylvia forever. He tried, as he bolted the door for the night, to discover some little encouraging thing in her recent attitude. Hadn't she seemed willing to have him put his arms about her? Hadn't she actually lifted her mouth for his kiss.

He could find no hopeful answers to these or similar questions. Any chance he may have had for winning her favor had, in that hopeless struggle, been lost.

Malabar, trying to think of better ways and means, smoked a dozen cigarettes on his private deck. He roamed about his luxurious suite. When midnight came, he retired. He wasn't sleepy, but he knew the need of a clear brain for to-morrow's developments. Trouble would arrive from some quarter, of that he was certain.

He undressed, got into his pyjamas, switched off the bedside light, climbed into bed—and tossed.

Sleep was not for him. In the wall on his left was a square window. It was open. Through the fine mesh copper screen which covered it he stared at the satiny white wall of a cabin. Under some near-by, unseen decklight it was golden. By the power of suggestion, it took his mind back to the bronze chest, to its sparkling, glowing contents. Emeralds, sapphires, rubies, diamonds, against a field of soft yellow gold. A mandarin's fortune!

He squinted his eyes and stared through the screen at the golden cabin wall. He became, of a sudden, interested in a decided variation on its finely woven pattern. In the very center of the screen was a round hole, perhaps an inch across. It looked as if it had been cut cleanly, perhaps with scissors or a sharp pocket knife. He wondered why the hole had been cut there, and, wondering, must have dozed.

Warned by some vague sense of something amiss, the sleeper sharply awakened. He was still lying on his side, still facing the little square window which gave on the 'thwartship corridor.

As his eyes became clear of the mists of sleep, he made out, against the golden wall, a black silhouette of a man's head. The silhouette was at least a yard in diameter. Whoever was casting that large shadow must be standing close to the deck light.

It moved as Malabar stared at it. Some deck hands, he presumed, was idling there. Malabar glanced at the glowing dial of his wrist watch. The time was 3:44. He would remember that.

Again the black silhouette moved upon the golden wall. Visited again by the prescience that something was wrong, Malabar closed his eyes to mere slits. The shadow, thrown along the golden wall, had become smaller, indicating that whoever was throwing it had moved away from the light and toward the window. Malabar, now intensely interested in the shadow play, suddenly glimpsed the substance that was causing it.

A ghostly head and shoulders slid across until the head and the very center of the top of the window merged. No light was cast upon the face. The head and shoulders might have been cut out of black paper and suspended there. This optical illusion did not, however, amuse Malabar. He knew that invisible eyes in that silhouetted head were staring into his bedroom.

For a long time, a full two minutes at least, the unknown watcher remained motionless. Malabar grew nervous. He was tempted to call out, but he did not. Whatever was happening, he would see it out. He narrowed the slits through which he gazed.

SUDDENLY, somehow occurred the thing that Malabar had anticipated. A light flashed upon his face, a bright beam of light which Malabar quickly identified as that of a pocket flash light. The blue-white beam was held steadily upon his face for ten or fifteen seconds, then it traveled slowly down the bed, as if that unknown watcher were acquainting himself with every detail of its scene.

The light flashed off. Malabar heard the faint click of metal upon metal.

It occurred to Malabar that that bed, now so well established in the memory of the mysterious unknown, might not be a safe place to linger. With stealth, without a sound, he left the bed and stole across the room to the bathroom doorway. He was tempted to tiptoe through the suite and out on deck, then around to the cross corridor, but he was curious to know what the unknown watcher's plans were. He had seen enough to realize that the man outside was bent on some sort of mischief.

Standing in the bathroom doorway, where he commanded a diagonal view of the little screened window, Malabar waited. His half-formed suspicion of the spy's purpose was presently verified, in a manner that sent icy chills sprinting down his spine.

A slender metal barrel, perhaps four inches long by an inch or a little more in diameter, came into view, gleaming faintly. It was attached to a thinner barrel.

Trembling with excitement, Malabar watched. The metal cylinder slid up to the round hole in the center of the screen. He now saw that corrugated bands or grooves encircled the slim barrel.

The barrel was pointed precisely at the spot on the bed where his head, but a moment before, had been lying.

Malabar held his breath, marveling a little at the infinite pains the unknown was taking with this grim business. One after another, six sharp spurts of red flame issued from the corrugated little barrel, and the sharp odor of burned nitrous powder drifted through the bedroom. The flashes made no more noise than clapping hands.

Malabar clenched his teeth, to prevent their rattling. The hot blood of fury was rising to his temples. They were striking at him in the dark, while he lay, supposedly, asleep! Some time during the day they had taken the pains to cut that little hole in the screen so that the Maxim silencer on the end of the pistol could be introduced into the room!

Regardless of his appearance, he raced through the suite, unlocked and unbolted the door to the deck, and rushed out. A man in a blue suit, with his back to a stanchion, stared at Malabar with terrified incredulity. It was Mr. Yung.

Malabar, a grotesque figure of revenge in white silk pyjamas, dashed around the corner of the cabin and into the 'thwartship corridor. A Chinese in European garb, a giant of a man whom Malabar had never seen before, ran and vanished around the corner. Malabar sprinted after him. When he reached the port side, the tall Chinese had disappeared.

Against the rail, gazing curiously at him, were Captain Lavender and Sylvia.

The son of a China coast pirate swung about to the Lavenders. He felt confused. He wondered if they were at the bottom of this.

Sylvia's eyes were round and wide with terror. Captain Lavender sent Malabar a piercing glance, seized the girl by the arm and propelled her, half running, down the deck.

An indeterminate sound behind him

caused Malabar to spin about. Another Chinese was crouching, half-hidden by the rounded corner of the cabin wall. Something in his hand glittered.

Malabar saw it leave the man's hand, saw the glint of it as it came through the air—a silver streak. He dodged, but was not fast enough.

His senses were jarred by a terrific impact against his chin, and at the same time a savage throb of pain shot through his lower jaw.

Malabar sagged against the wall of the cabin. His senses were slipping. His brain groped for meanings in a red mist of confusion. Had Sylvia inspired this cowardly attack on him? Captain Lavender? Mr. Yung? All three? He put his hand feebly to his jaw and encountered something hard and metallic there, something that had attached itself to his chin.

His fumbling fingers ran along a thin spike of metal which was wet. Wet, he now realized, with his own blood. He grasped the thing and pulled. The man who had thrown it started toward him, bent forward, with yellow hands curled up under his chest.

Malabar grasped the dagger and pulled. It would not come away. He must free himself of it before this crouching devil who had thrown it attacked him. He gave it a wrench and it came free—a long dagger with a blade, which, to his confused senses, seemed no thicker than a stalk of wheat!

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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Then and Now!

SLEIGH BELLS, and horses prancing over drifted roads all glistening white. Mittens and mufflers and garments long, of heavy woolens and very thick, and likely as not a heated brick for a crisp, cold night and the wind so strong!

Far bright stars and a house alight with eager faces and welcome smiles, for dear ones coming the slow, slow miles—an old melodeon sweetly playing "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear"—waxen candles bending, swaying on a goodly cedar tree, and an open fire with gay flames dancing up the chimney merrily; holly at door and windowpanes, and mistletoe hung on the chandelier—and cheer!

That was then, and now is now—but the magic of Christmas does remain, though we see it differently, and how!

Flash of short skirts and of silken hose! No heavy woolens or tiring clothes. The fastest motor, good in any weather— If snow has fallen lightly as a feather, a highway swept and kept open to the eager traffic that brings dear ones together.

The winter sky and each twinkling star laugh to see how swiftly we go so far. In the waiting house on the distant hill, a fire of driftwood, though all aglow, is helped by the furnace down below! A button is pressed and a big pine tree comes bright with electric bulbs; sprigs of fragile mistletoe are hung over every door; holly gives welcome here and there, and cheer surely radiates everywhere, while music hums from the radio.

All our modern thoughts just soar with gratitude for the many things we never had before! And the spirit of Christmas is now as then, a magic for good in the hearts of men!

Peter A. Lea.

"We ain't calc'latin' ter take in nobody. Three is a plenty."

Biggs, Bum, and Squinty, Ltd.

Three unsentimental prospectors who didn't believe in Santa Claus, were the mysterious Biggs, Bum, and Squinty—and the more the little mining town talked about them, the less it knew

By ERIC HEATH

BIGGS leaned forward, his elbows on his lanky knees, and thoughtfully jabbed at the fire that seemed about to breathe its last gasp in the decrepit old heating stove. Bum scratched his left ear. Squinty screwed up his face into the ghastly contortions that always accompanied one of the most important actions of his daily routine, the slow, painful process of filling his corncob so that it would actually draw.

Then Biggs, leader of the odd trio, condescended to answer the storekeeper, Pop Garfield, by drawling over his shoulder:

"We ain't calc'latin' ter take in nobody. Three is a plenty."

"Naw," agreed Bum.

Squinty thought it sufficient merely to nod his head.

"Unany-mous!" pronounced Biggs, solemnly.

Pop Garfield assumed the air of one who is unjustly treated.

"Well, I was jes' askin'," he defended himself. "Shows I got faith in yer hole, don't it?"

Bum chuckled, his leathery face creasing into a grin.

"Nor you ain't the only one, Pop," he declared with a wink.

"Well, say—" Pop Garfield began in an injured tone; then, with an abrupt change of tactics, he shrugged. "I reckon yuh know yer own business," he went on, indifferently, "but seems like yer wouldn't be bloomin' idjits enough ter try workin' that thar sized stake all by yerselves."

Biggs looked at Bum, and Bum looked at Squinty. Then they joined

in a significant grimace that chagrined and irritated Pop Garfield, who was afraid he had gone too far with his probing.

"Diggin' yaller nuggets out by the cartload ain't no work to speak on," remarked Biggs placidly.

"It ain't a job yuh git so tired of that yuh wanta quit!" asserted Squinty.

"Reckon we'll soon be hirin' yer ole dray-hoss, Pop; then we kin set back an' let him do the luggin' fer us," put in Bum.

Pop Garfield was about to reply in the same jocular vein, when an icy blast swept into the little store, making the sawdust on the floor whirl around, and flapping the discolored shade that drooped wanly over the one small window.

The men looked up. A stoop-shouldered figure shuffled in.

"Shut the door, can't yuh?" growled Squinty.

Pop, always anxious for an unexpected customer, looked disappointed when he saw that it was only "Ol' Bart."

"Howdy," said the newcomer pleasantly, edging over and trying to squeeze his way within three feet of the stove. "Looks like it's a goin' ter snow, don't it?"

"Well, ain't that amazin', though, this time o' year!" jeered Bum. "Reckon I ain't never seed it snow in November afore."

BART appeared not to notice this gibe. He drew a stool as close to the fire as he dared, and hunched himself on it, holding out reddened, blue-veined hands toward the feeble heat.

"I hear you boys is doin' purty well up thar," the old man ambled on, amiably. "I hear yuh got a purty good—"

"Yuh hear a powerful lot, don't yuh?" snapped Biggs.

Bart paid no attention to the interruption. "—layout, and I reckon yours might work out purty near good as mine, but—"

"Purty near good, eh?" sneered Squinty. "Ain't that interestin', though, fellers!"

"Course, I wuz here fust. I got the pick," Bart continued, unruffled.

"Jes' when do yuh reckon yuh'll be flashin' out as a bloomin' cap't'list?" inquired Bum, with mock politeness.

"Come Christmas time," answered Bart firmly.

"I swan!" Biggs flung out, elevating his eyebrows.

"Drat the dum' thing!" Squinty exclaimed, biting savagely on his pipe which refused to draw. With a growl he knocked out the tobacco and began refilling it.

"Yeh, come Christmas time," repeated Bart. "I been workin' on it purty long now, but I'm sure to strike it afore long."

Pop Garfield, leaning indolently across the counter, gave the trio a slow, significant wink. Ol' Bart's faith in his claim had become a standing joke in the little community. When, nine months before, Biggs, Bum and Squinty had made their first appearance at the almost imperceptible dot on the landscape known as Essieville, they had been immediately regaled by the story of Bart's "fust pick."

Bart himself was by far the most voluble about it. He seemed never to tire of the subject and had talked about it, with elaborate and glowing details, to every living creature in Essieville, barring the chickens, dogs and pigs. On occasion, when he could get no one to listen to him, he had even been heard mumbling about it to himself.

His parchmentlike face became animated and his faded blue eyes glowed with an eager fire, as he rambled on:

"I reckon they'll be su'prised, all right. Yeh, I reckon. Nan'll come to the door, rubbing her hands on her apron like she does, and she'll say: 'Why, pa! Where did yuh git all them parcels? What's in 'em?' she'll say,

An' George an' his'n wife'll come over, an' little Ted. Why, Lor', Ted must be 'bout eight by now.

"Le's see. He wuz goin' on three when I left. Yeh, I reckon 'bout eight. An' he'll say, 'What did yuh bring fer *me*, grandpa?' Jes' like that, he'll say. An' Nan an' Tom kin take it easier then. They been workin' too hard anyways, doin' the plowin' all by theirselves."

Bum got up, yawned and stretched.

"I shore hate to miss this elevatin' discourse," he remarked, "but a pore ole guy like me as has to work fer a livin' can't set gabbin' all day."

Though Biggs and Squinty pulled themselves out of their chairs lazily, it was evident that they welcomed this interruption.

Jauntily, the trio made their way to the door.

"So long, Pop," Squinty said. "Let yuh know when we want that hoss o' yourn."

"Say," Pop exclaimed, "if I kin be of any help to you gents—"

Biggs made a gesture which dismissed this offer for once and all.

"We ain't lookin' fer no partners," he declared airily. "What we got we keep, the three of us. This here comp'ny's what yuh call *Limited*."

THE door banged shut behind them. The sound seemed to bring Ol' Bart back to reality. He glanced over timidly at Pop, who had suddenly become unusually busy, sorting out some empty bottles on a shelf.

"I was wonderin'," began Bart.

Pop kept on, as if he had not heard.

"I was wonderin'," Bart repeated, a little louder, "if yuh could let me have—"

Pop swung around. "Now see here, Bart," he replied in a hard, matter-of-fact tone, "I ain't the one to kick a feller that's down. You know me. 'Live an' let live.' That thar's my motto. If a guy's credit is good, O.K. But there's such a thing as—"

Bart's withered old hands trembled. Flushing, he turned away from the other's searching gaze.

"I jes' thought a mite o' flour an' some pertatoes—"

"When yuh pay what yuh owe me, sure. I ain't runnin' no charitable agency. I gotta live, same's other folks."

A kind of mute despair seized upon Bart. He got up and came over slowly to the counter, leaning on it so that he was facing Pop. His tone had changed from querulous pleading to earnest protestation.

"Then yuh think I ain't good fer it?" he demanded. "Ain't I told yuh the fust thing I'll do is ter pay yuh every las' cent when—"

"Yeh, I know," Pop broke in wearily. "When yuh strike it rich. How do I know when that'll be, huh? S'pose yer claim don't work out ter nothin'?"

An incredulous smile spread over Bart's face, as thought Pop had said something supremely foolish.

"But it's goin' ter!" he cried. "It's goin' ter, come Christmas time."

Pop was about to remind him that he had said the same thing the preceding year, and the year before that, when he had been working a claim that had finally proved utterly worthless. But, before speaking, he realized how useless it would be to argue on the subject. The old man's faith was tenacious, unshakable. Not even laughter and jests at his expense could make a dent in it.

With a shrug of resignation, Pop went slowly toward the flour barrel. Bart looked on silently while the storekeeper poured a meager amount of flour into a paper bag. It was only when Pop laid the flour and the potatoes on the counter between them, that Bart said:

"I'd starve afore I'd ast yuh fer credit, ef I didn't jest *know* I'd be able to pay yuh right soon."

Pop grunted. Gathering up the packages, Bart turned and went slowly

out into the bitterly cold, wind-swept street.

ESSIEVILLE, in all of its paltry history, could boast of few notable characters, but the coming of Biggs, Bum and Squinty, had brought an entirely new element of interest and excitement to the little town.

During the nine months they had been there, the trio had never lost their prestige. This was principally due to the fact that they had carefully fostered the atmosphere of mystery which they had created from the very first.

Their dark hints as to their pasts, though wildly contradictory, made all Essieville shiver delightfully, nevertheless. For instance, Bum had given out proudly on one occasion that if they knew his right name they would recognize in him a notorious train robber whose daring exploits had completely baffled the police. Several days later he had confided to a chosen few that he was, in reality, an absconding bank cashier.

Squinty modestly let it be known that he was a retired sea captain, who had commanded hard-boiled crews of brown Kanakas, though it would have been difficult for even the most fertile imagination to picture him in such a rôle.

Biggs contented himself with a past that had been devoted to making a fortune in Alaska, fighting gorillas, and leading ten thousand coal miners in a bloody strike that shook the industry to its very foundations.

Essieville did not strictly believe all these things. However, Biggs, Bum and Squinty were always listened to respectfully and eagerly.

General opinion regarding the real worth of their claim was divided into two strongly opposing factions. The more practical and experienced townspeople were inclined to think that their mine was a "frost," while the more romantic and credulous souls fully expected to see them any day blossom forth in tailor-made evening clothes and high silk hats, with flaming carnations in their buttonholes.

Biggs, Bum and Squinty never made the mistake of telling exactly the same story twice. One day was sufficient to plunge them from hilarious enthusiasm into the gloom of doubt. To one gossipy old soul they would proclaim that they were headed for Riverside Drive, "Where they grow the mansions, yuh know?" while another municipal broadcaster learned that they were headed for the poorhouse and wanted to find out exactly where it was located.

Pop Garfield was considered the only reliable oracle on the subject of Biggs, Bum, and Squinty. At gatherings around his stove, which was the forum, the social club, in fact, the very heart of Essieville, he had announced that he thought the trio were just putting up a big bluff.

But this was by no means his true opinion. He was too shrewd to say what he really thought. Secretly, he believed the three men had a good thing, and the reason for this belief was their firm and persistent refusal to "let any one else in." Consequently, had the chance been offered to him or even hinted at, Pop would have been only too delighted to risk his modest savings in order to slide in under the ropes.

THE winter was unusually severe that year. Essieville shivered under a blanket of snow. Before November had drawn to a dreary close, there had been two heavy storms, accompanied by a cold so penetrating that it seemed to freeze the very marrow in people's bones. It placed all Essieville in a state of sullen tension. The townsfolk shivered and waited. Only the most necessary business was carried on.

The sanctuary offered by the stove in Pop Garfield's little store was always overcrowded during these days.

It was generally conceded that the best way to pass the time was to talk. It was too cold to do anything else.

At all of these informal meetings, Biggs, Bum, and Squinty had "reserved" seats. The three whole chairs, that did not totter, were always religiously held for them, and no one would have dared to usurp these sacred places. Pop was comfortable enough, sprawling across his counter. Most of the others had to content themselves with boxes, the narrow window sill, broken stools, or mere standing room.

Bart was very seldom there, but his absence was never noticed. One evening when he did come in, shivering with cold, a gangling youth with buck-teeth called out to him, laughing:

"Where yuh been, Bart? Diggin' out yer gold?"

"I been workin'," he replied, simply.

No one offered to make way for him, and he sagged heavily against one end of the counter, rubbing his hands together.

There were several snickers which the lanky youth who had spoken took for encouragement. With a sneering smile he pursued:

"How many millions did yuh git *this* week, Bart?"

The taunt seemed to sting the old man to life. He threw back his head proudly and sent his tormentor a challenging glance.

"Yuh'll be a mite more respeckful, maybe, when you find out how things are, come Christmas time," he answered, slowly.

Some one else spoke up. "Why, you poor old duffer, don't yuh know it's 'most Christmas time now?"

Bart's gaze shifted to a battered calendar that hung lop-sided on the wall, held there by a rusty nail.

"Not yet," he said, in what was hardly more than a whisper.

He began to cough, a hollow, racking cough, and the conversation of the loiterers drifted to other channels. He pulled a crumpled, soiled handkerchief out of his coat pocket, and blew his nose.

Presently, he tightened the worn muffler around his throat. "Well, reckon I'll be goin' along," he said. But no one answered. No one heard.

A few moments later Pop Garfield noticed a wrinkled sheet of paper in the sawdust. Going around the counter, he picked it up. After glancing at it casually, he scanned the writing more carefully. Then he folded it.

"What yuh got there, Pop? Letter from yer sweetie?" some one called.

"Say, if that don't beat all!" Pop exclaimed irrelevantly. Then, in answer to the questioning glances directed toward him, he explained: "What do yuh think? That ol' guy Bart has 'em all believin' he's comin' home Christmas with presents an' money an' what not!"

"Has who believin'?" a voice asked.

"Why, his folks. He dropped this letter from his daughter out of his pocket jes' now. This girl, Nan, he's allus talkin' so much about. Well, she an' the rest o' the family lives on a farm out in Iowa somewheres, jes' like he sez; an' they're hard up an' expectin' him to come an' set 'em on their feet. They got a mortgage to pay off on the farm, an' I don't know what all!"

"They'll shore have ter take it out in expectin'," Squinty remarked.

"Why, say," the lanky youth drawled, "ef he wuz ter die up there workin' that mine, yuh couldn't git enough gold out ter bury him with!"

"Well, that's what's likely to happen ter him, ef he don't lay off this kind o' weather!" Pop declared.

"Why don't somebody put the poor ol' geezer straight? Tell him ter forgit it an' go home while he's got the strength ter git there?'

Pop shrugged. "Tell him?" he cried. "Easy ter say, ain't it? Well, you jes' try tellin' him any sech thing, and see how fur yuh git. I argyed with him enough, Lord knows, an' yuh might jes' as well save yer breath."

"I'm sorta sorry fer his folks," another voice spoke up.

"Aw, that's their lookout, ain't it?" Biggs asked, with a shrug. "Ef yuh wanta know what I think, I say he's a damn ol' nuisance ter have 'round a good town like Essieville."

This closed the discussion, for, as usual, either Biggs, Bum, or Squinty always had the last say.

BY the second week in December, Old Bart hardly ever left his room. His cold had become much worse. Several women who were neighbors of his, took it upon themselves to carry him hot soup or coffee or rolls, whenever they could spare the time from their household duties, or whenever they happened to think of it. One of them suggested that the town ought to contribute so that a basket of food could be brought him for Christmas.

"Say, he'd be insulted!" Pop expostulated, when he learned of this plan. "Don't yuh know what a proud old guy he is?"

In spite of Pop, however, the project went forward.

When asked to contribute, Biggs, as spokesman for the trio, said:

"Naw, we ain't goin' to give nuthin', see? Not that we're stingy, but it ain't the right princerple. If yuh begin that, why, yuh'd be feedin' all the ol' bums that 're hangin' 'round waitin' fer handouts."

If any one else had expressed such a sentiment, there would have been a storm of indignation, but the trio had earned the reputation of being "hard-boiled" and also of never doing what any one else did, and so it passed without comment.

It was on the 4th of December, when contributions for Old Bart's basket were still being gathered, in driblets, that a cloudburst of excitement, such as Essieville had never known before, and probably will never know again, swept down upon the settlement.

Old Bart, who had hardly spoken to a soul for the last few days, and had gone about with a sly gleam in his eyes, strode into Pop's store. Reaching the counter, he pulled himself erect. The light of triumph was on his face as he flung a fifty-dollar bill on the counter.

"Take out what I owe yuh," he said in what came very near being a commanding tone.

Pop stared at the bill, too astonished to move.

"Somebody leave yuh a fortune, Bart?" asked one of the gaping onlookers from a place near the stove, as soon as he could find words.

"Nope." Without turning to the speaker, Old Bart drawled slowly, "I got—a—mine, ain't I?"

"D'yuh mean to say—" stammered Pop.

"I'll take my change, ef it ain't too much trouble ter yuh," Bart replied.

Without another word, Pop counted out some bills and silver, and pushed the little pile toward Bart.

"I reckon that's right," he ventured tentatively.

Bart shoved the money into his pocket without replying. He looked around the room with a haughty glance.

"Anybody know where's the best place to buy fur-lined gloves?" he asked. "I'm plannin' on buyin' a pair to take my son fer Christmas, an' I want the genuwine article."

They were too awed to answer, and, with another glance around, the old man left.

The news swept from house to house, store to store like wildfire. Those who refused to believe Bart had struck it rich, soon were able to see for themselves, for, later in the day, he returned to his room, his arms laden with parcels.

"Jes' a few presents I'm takin' my folks," he explained to the curious who were now watching every move he made.

"Well," Biggs voiced the opinion of

the trio that evening, "now the ol' fool has his money, I hope he beats it, so's the rest of us kin have a little peace an' quiet."

BIGGS, Bum and Squinty showed their indifference by staying away from the station when Old Bart was ready to depart, armed with a ticket to an obscure little farming town in Iowa. But all the rest of Essieville was there, shouting, laughing, calling messages of good-will to Bart, and good-bys, just as though he had been the most important personage in the town. The seat where he sat in the train, and the one opposite were piled high with presents for "the folks."

Pop Garfield regretted that he was unable to leave the store and join in the general confusion. There was nothing he liked better than hubbub and commotion. It made him feel expansive.

He looked up with surprise as the trio entered the store. Bum bought some tobacco.

"Ain't yuh seein' Old Bart off?" he asked.

Squinty sniffed, spat into a corner, then answered:

"Naw. We got somethin' better ter do."

"That sure was a funny thing," Pop rambled on. "I'd 'a' swore he'd never 'a' found no nuggets in that thar claim o' hisn, onless somebody put 'em there."

"C'mon!" Biggs ordered sharply. "Yuh goin' ter stand here all day gassin'?" The other two made a brusque gesture of farewell, and followed him out.

When they were walking up the deserted street, Squinty asked: "Yuh don't think he surspects nuthin', do yuh?" He frowned anxiously. "Kinda funny the way he sez, 'Onless somebody put 'em there.'"

"Naw, he don't surspect," Biggs replied. "Say, who'd ever dare accuse us of doin' a thing like that? Ain't we hard-boiled as they come?" He paused as he bit a generous hunk from a slab of tobacco, then demanded: "But, say, Squinty, you ain't told us yet how you salted the old fellow's diggin's."

Squinty's leathery face broke into a grin as he explained:

"It was easy 'nough. I hid behind some scrub pine near where the old cuss was workin' his sluice-box. Finally, 'long about dinner time, he filled the sluice-box with gravel an' beat it fer his cabin ter git somethin' to eat. I sneaks over an' empties that sack of ourn into the gravel in the box. I covers 'em all over good so's Bart won't find 'em until he finishes washin' the hull wheelbarrow load o' gravel. Atter I got through, I sneaks back ter watch what'd happen."

"An' what did he do atter he'd washed them nuggets out?" demanded Biggs, impatiently.

"Wall," continued Squinty, "when he picks them chunks o' gold offn the screen, he jest held 'em in his hands an' stared at 'em as if he'd gone loco. Then, dang me if he didn't start ter bawl like a babby!

"It made me feel so plumb disgusted, seein' that old fool cryin' into his whiskers that-away, I jest up an' left—headed fer Jonson's corral an' gave that ornery white mule of hisn a swift kick ter relieve my feelin's."

The three men trudged on in silence for a few moments, then Bum exclaimed:

"We sure gotta make one grand big splurge with the three dollars and ninety cents we got left between us, on Christmas Eve, or it 'll look kinda funny."

"Yeh, we gotta do that," Biggs agreed. "It 'd be worse'n p'isen to have our repytations sp'iled here in Essieville."

"That's what I sez, too," Bum said earnestly.

"Me, too," piped up Squinty.

THE END

But this time Harald was ready

He Rules Who Can

Greek plots and counterplots rack the wealthy and corrupt Eastern Empire, while over the hostile legions lies the shadow of Harald's Norse battle-ax

By ARTHUR GILCHRIST BRODEUR

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

HARALD SIGURDSSON, Norwegian prince, arrives in Constantinople in 1038 with five hundred house-carles, trained fighters all. After a fight over a dancing girl, Cyra, in which he worsts Georgios Maniakes, Prefect of Police, he is arrested. But John the Eunuch offers him command of the entire Varangian guard, the Norse half of the Emperor's bodyguard. Harald accepts, on the basis that he serves the Emperor alone. John, whose brother Michael married the widowed Empress Zoe, is real ruler of the Eastern Empire, playing one faction against another, and planning to have his younger brother Constantine succeed the dying epileptic Michael. Harald, entangled in Greek lies and intrigue, hardly knows whom to trust—John, accused of murdering the former Emperor; Zoe, weak but rightful Empress; or the Patriarch of the Eastern Church, loyal to Zoe and foe to John.

Harald is fascinated by Maria, one of the Empress's retinue, and convinced that John has played him false, he promises her to kill the Eunuch. Then he learns that the Patriarch had lied to him about John's death, and he finds himself torn between his oath of allegiance to John and his oath to Maria.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for November 24

Meantime John has sent Harald, with his Varangians, to command the fleet, and Georgios, with the Immortals —the Greek half of the Emperor's guards—in charge of land operations, to wage war against Sicily; and gives Harald secret orders to bring Georgios back in irons after the war, for Georgios plans to usurp the throne.

But Constantine is making his own plans. He kills Cyra, and sends her severed hands in an ebony coffer to Harald, with a forged message from John—which causes Harald once more to swear vengeance on the Eunuch. While John and Michael are in Mesopotamia, putting down a rebellion there, Constantine conspires with the Patriarch and Zoe.

Enlisting the Varangians on his side by showing another forgery, which pretends to be an order from John telling Georgios to murder Harald, the idolized Varangian chief, Constantine overthrows the small guard of Immortals left in the city, and proclaims Zoe Empress once more. He brings up an army of Paphlagonians from his native province.

John returns to Constantinople, victorious, but with the dead body of Michael, who had succumbed to his disease. The Eunuch is cut off from his troops and arrested, and the troops are dispersed to the provinces.

Aldhelm, Prefect of Police in Georgios's absence, and Harald's right-hand man in command of all Varangians left in the city, demands John to be put to death at his hands for his treachery to Harald. Constantine gladly surrenders his brother to the Varangians' vengeance. But in Aldhelm's office John is able to prove that the order commanding Harald's death was a forgery. Aldhelm, still suspicious, places John under heavy guard, sends word to Harald—if he still lives—and informs Constantine, now Grand Strategos of the empire, that John has been cut to bits by the Northmen.

Aldhelm's messenger, returning from the palace, finds a fleeing girl. It is Maria, who tells the Prefect that Constantine had persuaded the Empress Zoe to make him her heir, and then his men had seized her, killing all the Empress's attendants except Maria. Aldhelm suspects that Constantine has not dared to kill Zoe yet, for fear of a popular uprising; and Maria believes that he has probably sent her to the nunnery on Prinkipo Island. Aldhelm determines to await Harald's return.

In Sicily, despite outright treachery on the part of Georgios, Harald has taken Messina and Syracuse, and informs the Greek that from now on, "he commands who is the better man." Georgios glares, torn between rage and fear of the Northman.

CHAPTER XX *(Continued).*

THE WOLF BREAKS HIS BONDS.

HARALD had said rightly that the Greeks dared not march inland alone; and while Harald commanded the fleet, they could not advance on Palermo by sea.

Some ships there were which never left the port: those which Harald had stripped of their Greek crews, filled with Northmen, and laden with the plunder his men had taken. These, their fire-tubes trained and ready, were prepared for any attempt Georgios might make to take for himself the rich booty of his rival. The Greek commander seemed to pay no heed to them; but Harald knew he coveted their precious freight, which would go far to satisfy the greed of his Immortals. But no Greek cared to try conclusions with the Varangian axes.

Six weeks passed, and Georgios fretted till he could bear no more. He stalked into Harald's quarters with a dozen officers at his back.

"The fleet has returned, and we can march," he began resolutely. "My men threaten revolt if they are not led against Palermo."

"Revolt?" Harald smiled. "It will gain them little. They cannot force me to do what I will not; nor can they conquer Palermo without my aid."

Georgios turned purple; his great teeth gnawed at his lips.

"Yet," Harald resumed quietly, "I am minded to satisfy them. The peasants are well enough trained to hold stout walls, with a few of our engineers to man the catapults for them. Bid your fellows break camp."

The Greek officers were much relieved; but Georgios withdrew with swelling chest and fiery eye. He understood that Harald, while apparently yielding, had played with him. Harald had given him an order, and he must obey, or face the anger of his men. He had tried, many times, to assert his superiority over Harald, knowing that in such an army there must be but one commander. Now Harald had made himself that commander.

"Did your men break camp?" Georgios fumed with rage; but there was nothing he could do. His men were indeed on the verge of mutiny.

Harald summoned Ulf Uspaksson.

"We break up when Georgios is ready," he said. "Bid Eilif bring the ships as close in as he can, and send the boats for supplies."

Ulf grinned. "Time enough for that, Harald. I have been on the sea wall, and have seen that which may need looking to first."

"And that?"

"A Greek ship has entered the port," Ulf explained. "Eilif went aboard her to learn her business, and has but now come off with her captain, and a Varangian from the city."

Eilif entered while Ulf spoke. With him were a tall Varangian and a Greek, both in rusty mail and brine-encrusted cloaks. The captain was a little man, very self-important; and for all the ravages a hard passage had made on him, he was fresh-shaven.

Harald could not keep back a smile at sight of him; it was the same coxcomb officer who had challenged him so insolently when he first sought to enter Constantinople. The fellow was humble now, and fawned before the man he had once insulted.

The Varangian stepped forward and gave Harald a case of oiled leather, stained with salt water, which had faded but not loosened the seal. Opening it, Harald drew out a parchment, which he passed to Eilif.

"You read Greek," he said.

The Gautlander studied the manuscript laboriously, and uttered a cry of astonishment. Catching the interested eye of the Greek captain, Stephanos, he said to Harald:

"It were well that I turn this into Norse." And in Norwegian he read, slowly, to be sure of his translation:

"'The Emperor is dead. Signed, John, no longer Orphanotrophos.'"

The three Northmen stared at each other.

"No longer—" Harald echoed.

"The Emperor dead!" Ulf repeated.

"Let us question this fellow," Harald suggested.

"Wait!" Eilif broke in. "There is more; in Norse, and signed by Aldhelm."

The officer pricked up his ears at the name Aldhelm; John's name he had not taken in, for Eilif had rendered it by the Norse *Jon,* not by the Greek *Joannes.* Eilif handed the letter back to Harald, saying:

"Aye, Norse, though such as an Englishman might write. And in runes, by the ghost of Odin!"

"Wise man, that Englishman," Ulf grinned. "Well, he knew that things best hidden from Greek eyes are written in letters Greeks cannot read."

Harald nodded shortly, the while he read eagerly. Both Greek and Latin script were mysteries to him; but every Northman of good blood knew runes. When he had finished:

"Take these men away," he ordered Ulf. "Give them food and gold; then

give the Greek in close charge and come back."

WHEN Ulf returned alone, Harald held up the parchment.

"This is Aldhelm's word," he said, and read: "'Giorgios has an order, signed with John's name, to cause your death. John has proved that Constantine forged that order. Constantine now rules the city; John, who swears he has kept faith with you, waits your pleasure in one of my cells. If this finds you alive, look to it!'"

Harald's eyes roved out over the city and the water, as if seeking a solution of the riddle.

"I call to mind," he said softly, "that just before we sailed, I saw Constantine in close talk with Georgios, by the quay. It was then the order was given; and under a false signature, that John might bear my anger if the trick failed."

"Also that Georgios might have guarantees for his own safety if John accused him of your murder," Ulf hazarded. "But Constantine may have acted on John's command; the Eunuch has thriven on treachery; why should he not prove false to you?"

Harald disagreed. "In that case John would have signed the order himself; and Aldhelm writes he has proved the act Constantine's. Constantine, then, is my foe, not John; and Constantine rules Mikligard."

All at once his face set like granite. "If Constantine, and not John, wished my death," his drawn lips scarce formed the words, "then it was Constantine who—" His voice died; he was thinking of the severed hands of Cyra.

Ulf looked at Eilif, and Eilif at Ulf, neither caring to speak. For a time Harald sat silent, seeming not to see them. Then, with a gesture as if to clear mists from his eyes, he rose.

"The Emperor is dead! And Georgios wishes to be Emperor. I have heard John say so. If John spoke truth, we shall know it when Georgios learns of Michael's death. Bring back Stephanos, and the Varangian!"

The Norse messenger and the Greek captain came in under guard, the Greek's little eyes turning every way in suspicious fear. Harald fixed him with a cold gaze.

"How did Constantine rise to power?" he asked.

Stephanos squirmed, reluctant to answer lest he displease somebody, somewhere.

"You have nothing to fear if you tell the truth," Harald assured him. "I will protect you. But if you speak not, or lie— Show him your knife, Ulf."

Ulf drew steel, all too obviously willing. The Greek paled, and stepped back, but two Varangians held him fast.

"Mercy, my lord!" he gasped. "I will tell!" And tell he did.

Harald turned to the Varangian who had brought the letters, and asked:

"Has the Greek spoken truth?"

"In all things," the Varangian answered, likewise in Norse, "save that John is not dead."

"Good. Now go, and hold yourself at my command. Take this Greek windbag away, and see that he gets no chance to speak with Georgios till I command it. Let none of you dare breathe a word of this."

Once more alone with his two officers, Harald asked Eilif:

"How soon can we sail?"

"For Palermo? To-morrow, if Georgios is ready. I have kept my ships provisioned. The crews are still aboard."

"Well done!" Harald approved. "But it depends on Georgios whether we sail for Palermo—or for Mikligard."

"What mean you?" Eilif questioned.

Ulf snorted. "Think you," he asked, "Georgios will waste time on Palermo, when a crown awaits him at home?"

"Not he!" Harald laughed. "Once he hears the throne is empty, save for a woman, he may forget Palermo, and risk all on a bigger stake. If he plans evil against us, we must know it in time to outwit him."

"You have a plan already!" Ulf exclaimed eagerly.

"Aye. To test his treachery, I must give him the means to show it. You, Eilif, will warp out the five treasure ships before sunset, and moor them in the Great Harbor with the rest of the fleet. Then bring ashore and beach the ten slowest pamphylians, and bid the crews make ready to scrape their hulls; but work slowly, so that the careening is not done before dark. At sunset leave them there in charge of their Greek crews. Have all other ships moored well out, with all boats inboard.

"You, Ulf, will go about at dusk among our men ashore, ordering thirty companies to withdraw as swiftly and silently as possible to as many of the swiftest ships. Send wine casks filled with water aboard those thirty galleys, and bid all on board them shout and carouse as if mad drunk—but see to it that they drink nothing. Command the captains to watch for flares from the shore, and when they see them to put to sea in pursuit of any ships that seek to escape. At the third hour after nightfall I will permit the Greek Stephanos to go to Georgios, and you may be sure Georgios will get the news of Michael's death out of him. Have a boat ready for me at that hour."

Ulf licked his lips. "A good trap for traitors!" he chuckled.

THE winter night fell fast, bringing with it gusts of rain. The wind gathered from the southwest, kicking up choppy waves that the rain tried in vain to flatten. Aboard the fleet few lights shone, save at the outer fringe of the forest of masts, where thirty ships rang with maudlin shouts and drunken howls. The beach was black dark, blackest of all where a few hulls loomed in dim contrast with the white, wave-whipped sand.

In the lee of a heap of stones, the ruin of some ancient wharf, Ulf Uspaksson crouched, hiding something carefully under his heavy cloak. He shivered, chafing at his cold hands, for the wind off the hills was cutting. Suddenly he stiffened, every sense alert.

Above the whish of the wind and the drum of rain, he heard sand crunching under many feet, punctuated thinly by the restrained chink of mail. He could see nothing in the darkness; but the sounds drew closer, louder, between him and the city wall, where a few lights still glimmered like yellow blobs in the wet night. Hugging the stones that had him, Ulf waited, trying to keep his teeth from chattering.

He felt, rather than saw, a crowd of men draw in upon him, perhaps a bowshot away. Their footsteps were clear now, crushing the sand with little grating noises. Officers spoke in muffled tones.

Then came another sound, the hissing grate of keels thrust over sand, followed by splashing of water.

"Quiet, ye dogs!" The voice growled in Greek, and though it was hushed, Ulf recognized it.

"Georgios!" he chuckled softly to the wind, and tugged at the bundle under his arm.

One after another, the ten beached ships were run out, now and then fouling in the dark with a thump of wood on wood that drew stifled curses from Georgios. There came splash on splash as men waded into water they could not see, the rattle of chattering teeth as the cold bit them, the jangle of armor as they swarmed over the sides, climbing by the oarports. The chock of oar against oar, and the drip of raised blades gave warning that the Greeks had taken the bait.

Ulf rose stiffly, his eyes trying to pierce the murk in search of the disappearing ships.

"They must keep close to the sea-wall to avoid running into the fleet," he muttered. "Trust Georgios to think of that!"

Impatiently he waited, brittle with cold, his ear cocked to catch the dimming noise of the oars, till the rain drowned out all sound but its own pounding.

"Now!" Ulf breathed. Opening his packet, he struck flint on steel. His fingers were so numb that he tried thrice before his first flare caught. It sputtered in the rain, spat, and burst into a stream of light. A second, and a third, flung their streamers across the dark.

Then, as if in answer, the carousing aboard the thirty pamphylians ended in one wild yell; while from the city wall great fires, fed with naphtha till they became pillars of flame, threw the whole north end of the harbor into bright relief. Three thousand oars bit the water as one; the steady beat of drums and the grunt of the laboring oarsmen thrummed in diapason to the yells of excited men.

His eyes straining out over the illuminated water, Ulf saw ten lean shapes silhouetted by the flare from the walls. With shouts of alarm, their crews sheered out to find cover in the darkness beyond; and as they did so, other shapes, dimmer, shot from the dark and took form to south and east of them.

"Caught!" Ulf danced to keep warm, laughing and hugging himself.

GEORGIOS was indeed caught, and knew it as soon as the fires soared from the city wall. He had need to hug that wall as close as he dared, till he passed Ortygia; for he was in no mind to bump his ten stolen ships into the main fleet. The thirty carousing Norse crews lay well to the south of him; but he had less fear of them than of the more silent companies that slept, sober, aboard the other ships.

But as soon as the roaring fires brought his ships into sharp relief against the restless waves, he turned perforce, fearing showers of stones from the battlements, and seeking the cover of the darkness.

His only hope of escape lay in putting behind him that broad band of water irradiated by the leaping flames, and nosing, under cover of the dark, between its edge and the northward end of the anchored fleet. He dared not raise a single sail, lest the violent rain squalls drive him against the cliffs under the walls; he could trust only his oars; and he dared neither light his lamps that his rowers might see, nor have the drums beat to give them time, for fear he betray his position. Accordingly the oars lashed the water in a frenzy of mistimed strokes, blade clashing with blade, losing speed and giving the helmsmen a bitter struggle.

But other drums could beat: drums aboard those lighted ships, from which no longer came drunken shouts, but the steady, even chock of oars dipping in perfect rhythm. A long, lean prow shot athwart him; another, and another. Here and there the flames on the wall mounted, revealing a white rag of sail to the east. Some of the thirty had set their lateens, to run before the wind, get well ahead of him, put about, and turn him back!

It was all over; but Georgios, having put all to the hazard, was not minded to give in. Lights gleamed to starboard, lights ahead; to port and astern were the cliff-lined walls, and the flares that reached out to expose him. If he could make speed, ram or drive between those who blocked his way, he might yet win free.

The fires rose higher, their tongues of light pursuing him. A shout across the water, savage yells, and the clang of arms!

"Heave to!" cried a voice; and Georgios cursed in frenzy.

"Row!" he bellowed.

But his oarsmen, walled-in, defenseless below decks, dropped their oars

and ducked beneath the benches. One after another his ships lost way, drifting, tossing in the choppy waves. His fighting men gathered on the fore-and-aft bridges, ready to sell their lives dearly for him; buf the rowers, whom battle always caught in a red shambles, would not stick it out.

A sudden shock almost threw Georgios from his feet. The crash of wooden beaks on plank told him that the pursuers were driving into his ships one after another. The loom of prows overhung him. The whistle of arrows beat through his rigging.

"You are surrounded!" boomed a voice from the dark. "Throw down your arms, or die!"

HE gave no answer, but clutched his sword hilt. He could die. But the thrumming drums, slower now, yet steady, and the reel of his decks, gave proof that the nosing prows were pushing his little fleet on, toward the flame-lit city wall. He would be held there, imprisoned by thrice his weight of hulls, till he was crushed against the rocks.

His men understood, too, and their courage melted. They knew they could not board their more numerous foes, knew they must die either against a wall of spears or a crueler wall of storm-lashed rocks. They pressed about him, begging him to yield, to save them.

He had drifted in now, under the glare of the fires, which shone full on the gleaming helms and spear-points of his foes. Every ship of his was menaced by them, across his bows, to starboard, and astern. Rail grated against rail; and the Varangian bulwarks were packed with grinning faces and thirsty ax blades.

Georgios hurled his sword to the deck, and his men, only too willing, followed his example.

Then the Varangian decks vomited men. Over every beaten ship they poured, surrounding, overpowering the dejected Immortals. Caught in the press, Georgios was flung from his feet, overborne by a living torrent, bound hand and foot.

He wondered dully why the ships did not crash against the cliffs; and only when lifted to his feet did he see that the conquering Northmen had thrust out the captured galleys as well as their own, and were forcing their crews to pull back inshore. He was beaten, as he had been beaten at every turn, by the cursed barbarians.

Ungentle hands thrust him under a newly kindled deck lantern. He looked up, to find himself eye to eye with Harald.

"You will not be Emperor this year, Greek," Harald said.

Georgios gritted his teeth. "What will you do with me?" he demanded.

Harald stood with feet apart, braced against the roll of the ship.

"Take you in chains to the city," he answered, "as I promised John."

Georgios cursed and tore at his bonds till the breath went from him.

"And my men?" he finally found grace to ask.

"I shall do with all of them what you meant to do with all save the thousand you put aboard stolen ships: leave them in Sicily, to fight the Moslem."

Georgios felt the shame of it. He had fallen full into a trap, cunningly laid for him; and it was bitter to know it.

"You dared not take all your host," Harald went on mercilessly, "and you did not hesitate to leave the rest to face my anger when I should wake to find you gone. Fear not for them: I shall leave all my Varangians save my own house-carles, to protect your Immortals from the Saracens! Likewise I shall leave all but a few ships of the fleet, lest good soldiers be caught in a hostile land without means of retreat. My men will see to it that yours depart not till they have made a good fight for the faith."

Georgios gnawed his lips, thinking

of what might be in store for him at Constantinople. Stephanos, in the hands of two Varangians, came into his sight. A faint hope lighted Georgios's dark face.

"But John, who ordered me seized, is dead!" he exclaimed.

"So Stephanos told you, knowing no better," Harald answered. "John lives!"

CHAPTER XXI.

RETURN.

IN the teeth of the rising gale Georgios was transferred to one of the treasure ships, and his men held on board the captured galleys till the wind should allow them to be landed in safety. Then, leaving the crews that had taken part in the surprise with instructions for the fleet, Harald warped out his five treasure-laden ships and Stephanos's galley to the open bay, and with reefed sails ran before the wind.

Day followed day, the breeze always brisk, but not always following; so that the crews must fall to the oars and pull their gold-laden keels eastward. Scarce a sail they saw, for both Greeks and Moslems find even Mediterranean winters too chill for hot blood. On the sixth day they left Crete behind and entered the waters made safe by the power of Constantinople. Three days more of tracking through the dotted Grecian isles brought them to the Sea of Marmora.

At San Stephano they beached keels, and held a ship council.

"We bide here till night," Harald declared. "I have no mind to show myself to Constantine's patrols. Under cover of the dark we shall slip by them."

"And be caught, as we caught Georgios," Halldor objected.

"If so, we shall put up a better fight," Ulf retorted grimly. "We have fire-tubes of our own. But," he conceded, "when we put in at the imperial port, we shall be taken like rats in a burning shed."

"That we shall not," Harald answered with conviction. "We shall creep through the Bosporus, and so into the Golden Horn, making port in the Zeugma Harbor, where those on guard are Varangians. Moreover, we shall put a score of house-carles aboard Stephanos's cutter, and send her on ahead. If we are challenged, Stephanos shall answer for us. They will not question him."

"Harald is no fool, you Iceland lads," Eilif reproved them. "If aught goes amiss, he will give you good fighting; but there will be no blood spilled for lack of a well-laid plan. Give the oarsmen wine, Harald, that they may row well for you to-night."

ALDHELM started from sleep, to find the tousled head of Ulfgar bending over him.

"What now?" he growled drowsily.

"Enough, Prefect. Harald Sigurdsson has landed."

Aldhelm leaped up. "Where? When?" he demanded, wide awake. "In the city?"

"Almost," Ulfgar replied. "One of the port watch rode in from Zeugma Harbor with word of his coming. He stole through the patrols like an owl in the dark—a swift shadow, and gone—and had his six ships under the wall almost before our lads there could challenge."

Aldhelm was dressing as fast as he could make his fingers move.

"What force has he?"

"His house-carles, what the wars have left of them. Something under four hundred."

"They have had good fighting then. But how did they get free of Georgios?"

Ulfgar laughed silently, showing all his teeth. "They brought him along, trussed like a beef for slaughter."

Aldhelm invoked the saints. "A hard man, Harald, by my salvation!

But I knew not he was bold enough for that. This is a bad time for him to come, and with so few men. Constantine will have his head before noon to-morrow. I would he had brought greater forces. What does he mean to do?"

Ulfgar grunted. "That is what he means to tell you, doubtless. He has sent for you."

Snatching up his sword, Aldhelm ran for the door. "Fool!" he called, running. "Why could you not say so?"

"Your horse is saddled at the gate," the officer shouted after him. While the rapid pound of his chief's feet still rang on the stairs, Ulfgar was on his way to the guardroom to share his news.

Aldhelm rode pell-mell through the echoing streets, caring not how many waked at the sound of his horse's hoofs. He neither slackened pace nor halted till he clattered under the wide arch that gave on the battlemented Zeugma Port. Here he reined in with a pull that brought his horse back on its haunches, sprang from the saddle, and tossed the reins to a waiting Varangian of the port watch.

A group of men waited him in the shadow of the merlons. Torches shone on their mail and outlined their faces.

The captain of the port hurried forward, but Aldhelm leaped past him and grasped Harald's hand.

"Hail, and welcome, Harald!" he cried. "You, too, Thiodolf—and Eilif, Halldor, and Ulf!"

Each in turn wrung his hand; and not till then did he turn to Helgi, the port captain.

"You have done well, Helgi, to send to me so promptly," he commended.

The officer showed white teeth. "It was Harald's will. He is safe here with us—till morning. After that there will be no hiding so many men."

"Too many to hide, too few to fight," Aldhelm said with distress in his manner. "Where are the two good themes you took to Sicily, Harald?"

"Carrying on the war, I hope," Harald answered. "But we are none too few either, if you are still my friend, Englishman."

Aldhelm's eyes reassured him. "As to that, I have five thousand men who will go to purgatory for you. But there are thrice as many Paphlagonians encamped between the walls."

"Let them stay there. Who guards the palace? Paphlagonians also?"

"Six hundred of them," Aldhelm replied, "and six hundred Varangians. We of the guard put Constantine in power, and he thinks it prudent to keep our friendship; but like all Greeks, he trusts no man fully. Varangians hold the Chalke; Paphlagonians hold the Daphne and the rest of the palace as a guard of honor for him."

"Will the Varangians obey you if you bid them quit the Chalke?"

Aldhelm shook his head. "A Varangian on post obeys only the Emperor and his own grand commander. When men of my police were detached to guard the palace, they passed from my authority."

"WHAT of the Empress?" Harald asked.

"Shut fast in the convent on Prinkipo by Constantine's orders."

"What?" cried Harald. "The people endure this? The Varangians permit it?"

"The people know it not: Constantine has given out word that she lies sick of a slow fever in the palace, and has made him her heir."

"But you! The Varangians have ever been true to the Crown."

Aldhelm shrugged. "I waited to hear from you. If Georgios had slain you I should have struck; if not, I held it best to wait for your orders. Then there were the Paphlagonians to reckon with."

"Why did Constantine not bring them within the walls?"

"Because he feared to quarter them on the folk, lest they breed trouble;

and because I warned him that I, as prefect of police, would not allow the law to be broken without a fight."

"Well done!" Harald approved. "You have saved the lives of good men."

"But I see not what you can do," Aldhelm lamented.

Harald turned to the port captain.

"Fetch the Greek Stephanos," he said.

Stephanos came, under guard. He seemed shrunken, stripped of all dignity, among the tall Norsemen. He turned instinctively to Harald, who opened on him brusquely:

"Constantine has ordered my death. How will it fare with you when he learns you came hither with me?"

The Greek shivered so his lips could not frame speech.

"You hold your commission from John," Harald resumed, "and John is a prisoner in the Prefecture, unknown to Constantine. I can bring him back to power. If I do, it were well for you to be on his side and mine."

Stephanos gazed from one Northman to another with shifty, troubled eyes.

"My life is in your hands," he answered huskily.

"You may save it if you obey me; otherwise you die before morning. You are to hasten to the palace, demand audience with Constantine, and tell him that Georgios, with all his ships, has been sighted off Chios. Aldhelm will go with you, and return here with you, to make sure that you say neither more nor less than I bid you. Aldhelm, is the Bucoleon Port guarded by Varangians?"

"Nay; by fifty Paphlagonians detached from the palace guard. We hold all other ports as well as the walls; but the Bucoleon, where an alarm from the outer coast patrol would be bound to come, is the key to the palace; and the usurper has it garrisoned with men of his own race. Few though they be, they can hold it: their fire-tubes command the channel, and only an insurrection within the city would menace them."

"Then," Harald decided, "Stephanos cannot say he hastened hither from Chios by sea to bring the news. He must say that he lost his ship, was cast ashore, and took horse from Assus, using the imperial post stations to make the more speed.

"You, Aldhelm, will tell Constantine that your men admitted him at the Kaligaria gate, and that you made all speed with him to the palace. We must convince Constantine that Georgios, having heard of Michael's death, means to seize the throne at once. If you convince him not, Stephanos, and if you are not back before dawn, I will have your head!"

Aldhelm vanished, half carrying the Greek with him.

When they were gone Eilif asked: "What means this?"

"What would you do," Harald countered, "if you were Constantine, and heard that one like Georgios was on his way to overthrow you?"

The Swede considered. "If I heard he was off Chios when the messenger who saw him took horse, and if I had three themes outside the city, I would send them at once to the forts commanding the Hellespont, to stop him."

"YOU see my purpose," Harald nodded. "It is to get those troops out of my way."

Eilif chuckled. "When did Harald learn to think like a Greek?" he mocked.

"When a Northman wants a thing, he goes straight to it," Harald answered. "A Greek goes roundabout, thinking it safer. These Greeks have so enmeshed me with intrigue that I have learned to play their game, lest I perish. I but ask myself what I would do if I were a Greek, and then trick them into doing it."

"All very well," Ulf growled, "but what is there for us to do?"

"Much. Two of the swift pamphylians we brought from Sicily Eilif shall keep here, ready for departure. The rest of the loot Helgi shall hold in trust for the Varangians I left in Sicily. You, Thiodolf, take Stephanos's cutter, sail for Prinkipo, and bring back the Empress. There will be none to resist you but nuns, and you should be back within two hours. Then put the house-carles aboard the two pamphylians and see if you and Eilif can get them off the lighthouse south of the palace as secretly as we came hither."

"If we fall foul of the patrol?" Eilif questioned.

"Then sink it, or go down! But avoid the patrol if you can. I think the word I have sent Constantine will get rid of them. And if you keep all armed men below decks, you will doubtless be taken for part of the patrol yourselves. All pamphylians look alike."

"Fair orders," returned Eilif, and swung down the wharf.

"You, Halldor and Ulf, bide here with me. Have you wine, Helgi?"

Within the port blockhouse they sat and drank till a soldier announced Aldhelm's return. Harald rose at once.

"Well?"

Aldhelm looked happy. "The message was delivered, and Stephanos is here. Constantine is badly frightened. Orders have gone to the Paphlagonian themes to march at once to hold the Hellespont. I have orders to put half my companies on the walls and keep the rest on police duty."

Mellowed by the wine, the Northmen burst into shouts of gratified laughter.

"Sit down and drink, Englishman," said Harald hospitably. "Then you shall take Georgios to the Prefecture and hold him safe there. Place your men as Constantine commanded: they need not stay there long. In the morning there will be uproar in the city: when you hear it, send every Varangian under your command to the palace. They must be there before the mob."

"Mob!" exclaimed Aldhelm.

"Aye. I will see to that. But you are to lead the mob, not fight it. Helgi here will send out his lads as soon as folk gather in the market places for their morning trade, to spread the report that Constantine has imprisoned the Empress in a nunnery. The folk love her, and will fight for her. They must be told that the Varangians will arm them from the arsenal at the Strategium, and join with them. Halldor, Ulf, and I go now to the palace.

Ulf gasped. "To the palace! You will thrust your head in a noose!"

"Not I," laughed Harald. "Are we not plainly Varangians? Who will think to challenge three of the guard in a city policed by Varangians?"

Ulf pointed to the medallion on Harald's breast. "Hide that then, and your face," he advised.

"So I shall, thou old gray wolf. Come!"

To the palace they sped, Harald setting a sharp pace. The streets were empty, save for an occasional night prowler, till they reached the Forum of Constantine. There they ran full into a marching column of Varangians.

"You take the wrong way!" the officer spoke sternly. "To the walls!"

Harald muffled his face closer in his cloak. "We are held for police duty," he answered, and passed on.

"CONSTANTINE moves swiftly," he observed to Halldor.

"Aye, when he is frightened. Mayhap too swiftly for us."

"I will have his life," Harald spoke through set teeth, "if I meet him in hell the next instant!"

They had fresh proof of the Greek's energy when they neared the palace, where, from the subprefecture close by, a second troop of police passed, marching at the double. At last the three came to the gate of the Imperial inclosure.

Before the Chalke gates a dozen pikes halted them.

"Stand, Varangians!" a voice challenged. "Your errand?"

"A good one, brothers," Harald answered. "Where is your officer?"

The captain of the guard came forward, still wearing the insignia of the police, but bearing on his breast the double eagle of the Imperial bodyguard.

"Constantine keeps good watch, to hold Varangians here," said Harald.

"He admits none who have not business here. What is yours?"

Harald let the cloak fall from his face, and the officer seized his hand.

"Aldhelm said you were here or I should have thought you a ghost!" he cried.

"I am more alive than Constantine will be by this time to-morrow. By noon the Empress will be free and on her throne again."

"But—"

"She is sick, you would say? Nay; just now one of my ships has gone to bring her hither from the nunnery into which Constantine thrust her. You of the guard have always been faithful to her. Will you be faithful now, or take orders from her oppressor?"

The captain flushed. "He has lied to us, then? He told us she was here, and that we must guard her with our lives against all who sought to harm her. Our duty is to her; only from her and from you, our Grand Heteriarch, can orders come which will bind Varangians."

"Good. Hide us here to-night. When morning comes, I will give you further orders."

"There will be fighting?"

"There will, but not for long. How well is Constantine guarded?"

"Too well for you to come at. He sleeps in the far wing of the palace, the Daphne, with his Paphlagonians about him. Will you order us to take him from among them?" The officer's tone was hopeful.

"Nay, there are ways that will cost less Norse blood. Have you any news of the harbor patrol?"

"The ships? Constantine has sent them to the Hellespont, with orders that every sail in the ports shall follow. What news of Georgios?"

"I am weary," Harald answered, "and there is toil ahead. Georgios is in my hands. Where do we sleep?"

The captain of the guard led them to his own quarters, a well furnished apartment off the guardroom. As the door closed on them, they heard the clank of armor, and knew that the guard was changing.

"Your plans," Ulf growled, "are like a sword of fine steel, ground to sharpest edge, and with a gross flaw below the hilt."

Harald composed himself on his couch. "The flaw?" he inquired.

"When Constantine learns you have roused Varangians and the folk against him, he will slip away by the water gate, the Bucoleon Port. The Paphlagonians in the Daphne will cover his flight, and the Bucoleon is fortified."

"I have prepared against that," Harald answered drowsily.

CHAPTER XXII.

ON TO THE PALACE!

THE day dawned in a splendor of crimson fire against ragged clouds, and a keen wind from the sea. Cocks crowed from farmyards far outside the walls; the famished dogs of the city streets howled back at the cries of early venders.

"Harald will want us soon now," Ulfgar observed, stamping restlessly along the battlements to warm his feet.

"At the first sign of turmoil down yonder," Aldhelm replied, staring out over the city. "Constantine suspects nothing; the Paphlagonians he sent from the palace found us on the wall as he had ordered. Curse these Greek dogs for lazy lie-abeds! The sooner

they arouse and get the business over, the sooner our men may eat."

Yet the folk were in truth up early, merchants opening their booths with the sun; beggars stretching on church porches and automatically holding out their hands as their eyes opened; citizens walking abroad to make purchases for breakfast; roisterers reeling home from the night's debauch.

The hum of many folk suddenly swelled on the keen air, burst into a clamor, then into a howling. From square to square, wherever the throng was thickest, came shouts and uproar. From his height Aldhelm could see the gatherings thicken. From colonnade and arch they streamed, gaining speed and density; alleys disgorged their rivulets of running forms into the greater channels of the main streets. Down the Mese, from the Forum of Theodosius, rushed a screaming multitude. On the housetops clustered women and children, leaning over to see and hear.

"Look yonder!" Ulfgar's eyes lighted. "The whole city is out!"

A bell began to peal; men yelled at every corner; here and there knives flashed. In the forums, where the press was greatest, a ripple of light above the heads of the throngs marked armor.

"Soldiers speak to them!" Aldhelm observed.

"Varangians!" Ulfgar added. "Helgi's men from the Zeugma Port! They are Harald's wasps. May they sting deep this day!"

"Come!" Aldhelm called, running for the nearest stair, "ere they fill the streets so thick we cannot pass!"

Once down the stair, Aldhelm ordered the advance sounded, and strode off at the head of his men. The Varangians advanced at the double, their column at first filling the street from side to side, brushing from its path the stragglers of the growing mob; but as the press thickened, they were forced to break up and work their way down whatever byways were open.

As each battalion converged on the Mese, it dragged along a disreputable train of excited Greek rabble. A second and vaster mob stretched out before them, radiating from the Forum of Constantine; and as the Varangians shouldered through—none too careful of ribs and toes, yet cheered to the echo—they caught the gleam of arms and the ripple of mail.

"Helgi has thrown open the Strategium, and armed them!" Ulfgar rejoiced. "See, how the fat burghers strut in soldier's finery! Pah! They hold their weapons like women!"

"They will use them like fiends!" Aldhelm answered.

For all their efforts the troops could not penetrate the Forum, and were forced to turn back and make a circuit. When they emerged from the side streets, they were at the very head of the multitude, and halted to learn how far matters had gone.

The sight of their marshaled spears drew howls of delight from the populace.

"They were ready enough to set their mangy curs on us once, or to hurl pots down on us from the housetops!" Ulfgar grumbled. "But to-day, when they need our help, we are heroes!"

Standing on carts above the folk, men from the Zeugma Port had been haranguing the throng; and as soon as the cheers for the Varangians died down, these took up their speech again:

"Behold! These are the men who will help you rescue your empress! Follow them to the palace! Tear the usurper's head from his shoulders!"

Once more rose that monstrous howl of mingled excitement and blood-lust. Men in rags, men in silks and velvets, men scarce clad at all—and every fourth man wearing mail looted from the arsenal that Helgi's lads had flung open—shrieked and clamored for Constantine's life. Their armor, made for Northern limbs, flapped and rattled on those lesser Eastern folk like the trap-

pings of a scarecrow; but all brandished arms, and all were in a killing frenzy.

AS the Varangians debouched into the vast vacancy of the palace square, the rabble at their heels, a single man stepped to meet them from the porch of Santa Sophia. At sight of him, cheer on cheer burst forth, like the roll of waves on the strand: first the crashing salute of the soldiers, then the prolonged roar of the mob. All near enough to see him knew his proud height, his scarlet cloak, the gold medallion of his rank: the Grand Heteriarch, Harald, champion of the true crown.

The enormous square was filling, as the folk streamed out from behind the Varangians and poured forward. As well as he could, Aldhelm set his men to herd them back, lest they rush the palace before Harald was ready.

Harald looked at the mob, one sea of heads and tossing weapons, those behind struggling forward, those in front thrust back by the soldiers. Behind them trailed a flood of late comers, themselves innumerable; and in their wake the shrubs and lawns of the gardens were trampled into desolation.

When the stream had trickled out, and square and garden were packed with frenzied men, Harald gestured for silence. Then he shouted to them:

"Look at the gate!"

Every eye obeyed. The bronze leaves of the archway guarding the imperial inclosure were shut tight; spears bristled from its sentinel towers. Beyond, on the battlements to either side, the sun smote flame from helmets and weapons. Cordage creaked as catapult-arms were drawn back on the palace ramparts beyond.

"Those are Varangians!" Harald called aloud to the mob. "They take orders from me. When the time comes, they will open that gate to you. Wait till their trumpets sound—then advance, and take the palace. I go to prepare your way."

He came on past the troops, stopping for a word with Aldhelm.

"Give me half your men," he commanded. "And bide here to see that these fools do not go mad and rush the wall. There are enough engines on the Daphne to kill thousands—and the Daphne is held by Paphlagonians."

"What will you do?" asked Aldhelm.

"Make a feint at the Bucoleon Port. Ulf and Halldor went off before dawn to bring up Eilif and the ships. They will deliver the real attack under cover of our threat. When my trumpets sound from the port, the Varangians in the Chalke will open these gates, and we shall attack the Daphne from two sides at once. If all goes well, Constantine cannot escape."

Harald spoke with deliberate calmness, but the hard flash of his eyes betrayed his repressed impatience.

Aldhelm detached Ulfgar with three thousand men to follow Harald; and they marched south along the great wall, just out of missile range from the Daphne, amid tumultuous cheers. As they advanced, a few scattered engines hummed, and great masses of jagged stone hurtled at them, to fall short and smash on the pavement in a cloud of dust.

The crowd stood its ground, watching them depart. An hour passed; two hours, the breeze tempering the heat of the mounting sun. The mob's spirits rose still higher as their bodies warmed. They shook their weapons at the palace, yelled curses, pressed forward as far as Aldhelm's men would let them. They would have swept him aside, to batter at the gate and the resisting walls, but that a few stones lobbed over the Chalke from the Daphne wall taught them caution.

HARALD'S men hastened on to the shore, where the rampart thrust its foot into the very brine; nor did they heed the threats hurled at them from the helmet-lined

parapets of the Daphne. Down beyond them lay the Bucoleon, "Port of the Lion," the emperor's private harbor. They could see its walls, shutting off assault by sea; and above the ramparts rose the masts of two ships. From their tops floated the double eagle banner of the empire, to deceive the Paphlagonian garrison; but in signal to Harald, a small red streamer rippled above the eagle.

Harald saw. "Blow trumpet! Rush the wall!" he commanded.

The Bucoleon was a walled triangle, her longest side the main rampart of the imperial inclosure; her base the sea wall, the third side giving by a gate on the palace gardens. On the sea side she was further protected by the square tower that also served as a lighthouse.

Straight for her long wall the Varangians rushed, shields raised to protect their heads from dropping arrows. Their trumpet call, their battle cry, drew to the rampart a line of mailed heads; then a drum beat the alarm, and shafts began to fly.

The Northmen, skilled in the siege-warfare of the East, drove through the hail of arrows and darts to the very foot of the wall; there they clambered on each other's shoulders, forming a living pyramid to scale the battlements. This wall had no gate; the only entrances were the sea-gate, and the archway giving on the gardens. Sure there could be no attack on those sides, the garrison all gathered on the long wall of the inclosure, to repel the fierce assault of the Varangians.

Simultaneously Harald's trumpet blew the recall: it was not his purpose to storm, but to hold the enemy's attention till Eilif and his crews could come into action. But his men for once paid him no heed: they were not his house-carles, but Aldhelm's police, who for months had been cooped in the city, spoiling for action—and they had seen their comrades stricken down by Paphlagonian arrows. They pressed the assault.

The defenders were few, being drawn from Constantine's scant six hundred of the Daphne guard; but they fought desperately, and from the advantage of towering walls. Some plied their bows as fast as they could strip their quivers; others rolled great stones to the merlons and thrust them into the thick of Harald's men. Thrice they shattered the Norse pyramid, and the Varangians withdrew to reform, leaving crushed and writhing bodies behind.

Harald ran to the rear to get another sight of his two ships, and came back exultant.

"Storm on!" he shouted. "Help comes!"

Once more they gathered, this time in two smaller bodies, to divide the resources of the defense. One pyramid rose at the apex of the walled triangle; the other midway to the shore. Desperately the Paphlagonians strove to meet this double threat, raining down huge missiles and thrusting with long spears.

The first pyramid wavered, crumbled, and came down in a welter of tumbling bodies; the other was held upright in spite of all by the sheer mass of men behind it. Ulfgar and three more reached the top, scrambled over the parapet, and lashed in with red blades to hold their own till help should come. About them the Paphlagonians swarmed and hacked. One Varangian went down, another, till Ulfgar was left alone. Then Harald sprang to his side, and four more; and the whole pyramid collapsed under a rain of stones.

The six Northmen set their backs to the merlons and fought for life. Ulfgar was bleeding from a gash in the thigh; another Varangian, half disemboweled, struck on with diminishing strength. The ax Hell rose and fell furiously; then, pressed too close to use its edge, Harald thrust savagely with its edge horn. Half the garrison were plucking at them, while the other half

struggled to prevent the pyramid below from reforming.

SUDDENLY the wolf-pack that leaped and slashed at the few Northmen on the wall hesitated, gave back, half turned. From below them, at the sea-gate, came the thunderous beat of axes on the doors. As the Paphlagonians turned to meet this new attack, Harald was among them, Ulfgar and one other at his side. The three fought like demons, hacking, stabbing, leaping back to dash in again.

Then over the wall poured a wave of men, the crest of the reformed pyramid; and while the Paphlagonians wavered between them and the force below storming the sea-gate, there rose over the seaward rampart a stupendous sight. A mast, dangling a crimson war-shield, thrust over the wall a ship's boat lashed to an improvised boom, and filled with Northmen. Then another mast thrust out a second boatload. From both boats the house-carles tumbled over the battlements, and fell on the foe.

The Paphlagonians were rolled up, overpowered, and disarmed. The house-carles set to work binding the beaten men, tossing their surrendered weapons into the water, opening the sea-gate. Through this, too late for the action, poured a third mass of house-carles from Harald's ships.

Harald ran to the stair giving on the archway and the palace gardens. He tugged at the bars, threw them aside, and sounded his trumpet.

"On!" he commanded. "On, or we are too late!"

He drew back to let the host surge past him into the gardens, and caught Eilif as the Gautlander would have followed.

"The Empress?" Harald panted.

"Thiodolf found her not on Prinkipo," Eilif answered. "We think Constantine must have her."

Harald released him and ran down after his men, using all his fleetness to catch up with the foremost, wondering the while if the Empress had already been murdered.

Through the gardens the Varangians rushed, breaking through a maze of hedges and trampling the flower-beds, their hungry eyes fixed on the gleam of the white building ahead, with their untold treasures.

"Ye had no palace-spoil when Michael died!" Harald roared. "Take it now!"

With a yell of joy the men scaled the terraces of the palace's middle wing and poured through its sacred doors. All save the house-carles swarmed through its halls and corridors, smashing and looting. The carles followed Harald along its wall to the water gate of the Daphne. As they made for it, they saw a pamphylian resting on her oars at the end of the long garden walk that ended at the beach, while her boat waited at the strand.

"He has not fled yet!" Harald exulted, and led the way up the stair to the garden entrance of the Daphne.

Once within, the house-carles, dazzled by untold wealth, would also have scattered to loot; but Harald summoned them together with a blast of his horn.

"Our work brooks no delay!" he thundered. "We have Constantine to capture. Take fifty men, Ulf, and hold the door. Come, lads!"

Through chamber and passage they poured, till they came to a halt, astounded, in the gold-lined throne room. Raging, Harald ordered them on:

"Hunt, ye dogs! There is time for gold afterward!"

A tremendous roar drowned his words, mixed with the clash of arms. It so echoed through the enormous building that none could tell whence it came; but it was instinct with awful menace. After a bewildered moment Harald understood; the larger part of Constantine's Paphlagonians was at bay between Chalke and Daphne, fighting loyally to prevent the entrance of

Aldhelm's police and the mob. Constantine would not be where there was bloodshed; and he and Zoe must be found.

Thudding on as fast as they could, the house-carles burst into a splendid peristyle, from which a dozen rooms opened off. Harald brought them up to a sudden halt. He was at a loss. One way led to Constantine, and only one. But which?

"Shout and clash your shields!" Harald commanded, and the men obeyed lustily. The din brought armed heads through one of the doors.

"That way!" shouted Harald, pointing with his red ax. "He will be among his guards!"

The heads disappeared more suddenly than they had come, their owners running headlong to warn their master. Close on their heels the pursuers rushed, up a wide marble staircase, into a corridor, up a second, narrower stair. Breathless, they emerged on the battlements.

ON the edge of the parapet stood Constantine; and beside him a woman, clad in imperial robes, her head veiled in cloth of gold. About the two were perhaps two-score wild-looking soldiers; and along the merlons were posted three-score more, waiting with bent bows, or standing ready at the catapults. Now and again they loosed, picking their targets carefully.

As the Varangians massed, Constantine turned, saw, and went suddenly pale. He was mailed and helmeted, and wore a sword; but he looked as unlike a soldier as a man may.

"Hold them off!" he squealed, just able to raise his voice high enough to be heard. His Paphlagonians rushed from their stations to form a pitifully thin screen between him and his foes.

The Varangians would have charged, but Harald waved them back. His eyes blazed, but there was a thin smile on his lips. He stood a moment, listening to the din of the mob below, and the hammer of steel on shields in the Chalke, where, with all the advantage of position, but desperately outnumbered, three hundred Paphlagonians were fighting their last fight to save their coward master. The Chalke would certainly be filled with battling Varangians, whose numbers alone still held the furious mob in the square from following at their heels.

"Our settlement is at hand, Greek," Harald spoke. "Within the hour you shall be dead flesh!"

While his men and Harald's waited, weapons quivering to strike at the first word of command, Constantine forced a wry grin.

"What have you against me, Heteriarch?" he asked unsteadily. "What madnesss has turned all Varangians into traitors? And what do you here," he stiffened with a great effort, "away from your command in Sicily?"

Harald rested the horn of his ax on the flagstones.

"I have come," he said deliberately, "to render payment for the hands of Cyra. Your brother will rejoice to learn how well I have paid."

Constantine shook visibly, and a look of desperation came to his face. He leaned over the parapet and called down to the mob:

"Ye folk of Constantinople! They have lied who told you I imprisoned your Empress. Behold her here beside me, who am her most obedient slave!" He grasped one of Zoe's hands and raised it high in his own; and so stood a moment, trying to force her forward.

"It is the false Varangians who strike against her, seeking to make Harald Emperor. Smite them, and save her!"

A wild shout burst from the myriad throats in the square below; a shout of mingled rage, hate, and bewilderment.

Zoe pulled back on Constantine's hand, striving to keep herself out of sight of the folk. Constantine dragged her forward.

"Show yourself!" he hissed at her.

She drew herself up proudly and stood forth between two merlons, where all could see her; quietly, like a statue. The yells of the mob redoubled; yells of joy now, and wild acclamation. Then, so quickly that the act was done before it could be guessed, she snatched off the veil of gold that shrouded her face. Constantine caught at her arm in vain. The veil fell; her head shone golden in the sun; but her glorious hair was shorn.

As they saw the clipped locks of their beloved Empress, the people raised a howl of fury. They knew what it meant. It was true, then: Constantine had forced her into a convent, and brought her forth again to save himself from their wrath.

He had meant her presence to convince them of his loyalty to her, but her rage against him had shown her a way to turn his cunning into his ruin. Zoe ran her fingers pathetically through her shorn hair, and stretched her arms out toward her people with all the appeal she knew how to put into such a gesture. The multitude fought to crowd past the backs of Aldhelm's battling Varangians, brandishing their weapons, shrieking like demented beasts.

MADDENED by his failure, Constantine wheeled on his Paphlagonians.

"Drive yonder dogs from the ramparts!" he screamed. "To the ship!"

"Sweep them over the edge, Northmen!" Harald shouted.

Then two forces met with a crash. The clang of blade on shield deafened the ears; the stones underfoot grew slippery with blood.

At first, desperation lent the Paphlagonians strength; but as soon as the long Northern axes and mighty Northern limbs gave the house-carles clearance for their strokes, the Greeks were pushed back closer and closer to the battlements. The fight swirled in a score of eddies here and there about the parapet. Now and again some soldier, torn with wounds, was hurled from the merlons; and at sight of his armored body flashing and whirling in the sun, the mob raised a cry of wild blood-lust.

His ax circling, Harald strove to cut a way to Constantine; but the cunning Greek evaded him, dodging behind the backs of his men. At last, with a sudden rush, the house-carles broke their foes; but, carried too far by their charge, they left a wide gap open before the stair. Constantine saw his chance, and fled through it under the very fall of Harald's ax. Nimbly the Greek ducked, doubled, and sprang down the stair. Recovering, Harald sped after him.

As fast as he ran, Constantine was faster, his feet winged by despair. From room to room, through hall and chamber, the pursuit went on; till a sudden rush of many feet and the sound of bloodthirsty yells from the court between Daphne and Chalke warned the fugitive that the mob was in the palace, and his last guards overpowered or slain.

The Greek turned like a hare, and made for the gardens. As Harald pressed after him, the Varangians of the palace and Aldhelm's police burst into the Daphne. Behind them roared the mob, waving their weapons, just in time to see Constantine flash across the gardens. Forgetting all else, they flooded in pursuit, howling for his blood.

With a frenzied burst of speed Constantine made for the water gate beyond the farthest hedges. From the ship's boat at the shore a knot of sailors came to meet him; but Ulf and his fifty, darting from the door where they had been posted to meet such an emergency, cut the seamen off.

With his last strength Constantine sped between the two groups and made for the boat; but just as safety was in sight he stumbled and fell. Harald

was on him ere he could rise. Dragging him to his feet, the Northman set him with his back against a tree.

"Draw sword, dog!" he panted.

Constantine cowered against the trunk, wholly unmanned. His hands shook, unable to grasp the hilt.

"Draw, or I give you to the rabble!" Harald threatened.

Fumblingly Constantine's fingers touched his hilt; then, with a snarl like that of a cornered beast, he snatched out his sword and leaped forward. His treacherous, furious thrust turned Harald's guard, ripped through the good mail, and brought up against a rib. Harald swung once, and beat the sword from the Greek's hand.

Constantine stood still, disarmed, licking his dry lips. Harald picked up the fallen blade and thrust it upon him.

"Will you die in cold blood?" he asked.

Constantine looked at the sword in his nerveless fingers, as if uncertain what to do with it. Then, as suddenly as before, he thrust again; but this time Harald was ready. The ax whirled, fell, and severed Constantine's right hand at the wrist.

"One for Cyra!" Harald cried, and whirled up his ax again.

In his triumph he had forgotten the populace. They streamed up to him now, shouldered him aside by their very numbers, and flung themselves on their Empress's oppressor. In one wild rush they bore Constantine down. The next instant they pulled him to his feet again; but in that instant he screamed horribly. When they raised him to their shoulders, his eyes were two bloody holes.

Shouting and singing, they formed a ragged procession, and bore the mutilated Constantine in ghastly exultation back to the Daphne.

"Show him to the Empress!" the mob roared. "Show her how her subjects punish her foes!"

Back in the garden Harald reeled against the tree where he had stood Constantine. His side was bleeding, and his stomach felt faint.

"By all the saints!" Harald gasped. "This city is hell, and its people devils!"

IN the wide court between the towering walls of the three palace wings, the victorious Varangians herded their prisoners. Above them, on the portico of the Daphne, Zoe sat in judgment. Beside her stood Harald, his flesh wound bandaged. From the palace square came the shouts and cheers of the folk, now acclaiming the Empress they had helped to restore, now scrambling for gold thrown down from the ramparts by palace eunuchs who had skulked like rats during the fighting.

Zoe, her shorn hair hidden by a skillfully arranged coif, bent angry eyes on the captive Paphlagonians—a scant two hundred who had escaped Varangian steel and the fury of the mob.

"Crucify every tenth man!" she ordered.

Harald interposed. "By your leave, Augusta, it is an ill thing to slay surrendered prisoners; and the Prefect Aldhelm promised them life."

Zoe frowned; and her cheeks, which she had not had time to smooth with her marvelous cosmetics, showed fine wrinkles.

"They have borne arms against their Empress!" she exclaimed; but as her eyes met Harald's, her anger faded in a smile.

"Since you ask it, they shall be pardoned. Where is Constantine? That traitor shall not be forgiven, even for you!"

"I should not ask it," Harald replied; "but he is dead of his hurts."

"Then justice is done!" and Zoe leaned back in her chair with a sigh.

"There is one more offender," Harald interposed. "Ho, you who command the Palace Guard!"

The captain of the Chalke guard came forward, his eyes downcast.

"I ordered you," Harald reproached

him coldly, "to admit the police and folk as soon as my trumpet sounded from the Bucoleon. You delayed in obeying; otherwise Constantine's men would never have gained time to hold the passage to the Daphne."

The officer raised his head and met Harald's gaze.

"I was wrong," he said. "Constantine sent me an order to hold the gate. I answered that I had your command to open it. He prayed me then to wait, declaring that the Empress was safe in the Daphne, and by making terms with the mob he could save good Varangian lives. I hold it an officer's duty to spare his men; and I knew you had with you force enough to take the palace."

"You spared your men, and in consequence men of mine perished," Harald said sternly. "Had you opened when I bade you, the foe would have surrendered at once rather than face the folk."

The officer fell to his knees. "I have said I was wrong," he repeated, "and am ready to pay. Strike."

He thrust out his neck and waited for the blow.

Harald threw down his ax. "Blood enough has been shed this day. Go free. But if ever I give you an order again, obey!"

Zoe rose and laid her hand softly on Harald's arm.

"Take me to my chamber," she commanded, yet with a gentle grace.

Harald removed her hand, and shook his head.

"Your pardon, Augusta; I have business. I will come later."

The Empress's cheek flushed. "You are too much the barbarian," she said coldly, "to know that the invitation of the Augusta is a command. Remember the duty of a soldier, as you but now taught it to yonder captain; and 'if ever I give you an order again, obey!'"

She paused, and a weary look came over her features. "Where is my woman Maria? I have not seen her since they seized me. Is she alive?"

Aldhelm spoke up: "I will send her to you at once, Augusta."

With a curt bow Harald turned his back on Zoe, and made his way with Aldhelm toward the Prefecture. As they passed through the imperial gate, the folk, just dispersing, greeted them with rapturous cheers.

Zoe stood gazing after them, biting her lip.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HARALD'S WAY.

"HAS Georgios been sent to the palace?"

Aldhelm nodded. "As you ordered, Harald. He will do no more harm now, for Zoe has had him cast into prison. A hard fate for a man who, for all his faults, was a brave soldier."

"Fetch John to me."

The Eunuch came, guarded by two Varangians. Harald met him with a hard stare. John was well clad, well fed, but his face had lost its inscrutable calm, and was openly troubled. At sight of Harald, however, something of his old self, a smooth graciousness, came back to him. He held out a hand in greeting. Harald ignored it.

"Aldhelm believes you have kept faith with me," he began, "and that it was Constantine alone who plotted my death, and murdered the girl Cyra. He sent her hands to me in a coffer, just as I sailed, with a letter offering them as a gift from you."

John's face showed utter dismay.

"A foul trick!" he cried. "A dog's deed! By my faith, I had nothing to do with it! I set a price on his head for murdering her. He even planned to poison me. But, by my soul, I knew not he had sent her hands to you!"

Harald regarded him narrowly. "But it was you who first imprisoned her?" he demanded.

"I meant but to frighten her, lest she run Zoe's errands too often," John insisted. "Am I a fool, to anger you, on whom alone my plans against Georgios depended?"

Harald's face cleared, and he took John's hand. John smiled, a smile of keen relief, mixed with genuine friendship.

"You are a dangerous man to cross, Harald," he said. "That you are here, and Zoe on the throne, means that my brother is dead. I loved him once; but he broke my heart, and I do not grieve for him now." He raised his eyes calmly to Harald's. "Once I held your life in my hands," he continued; "now you hold my life in yours. What will you do with me?"

"What you will, except place you in power again. God send Zoe wise and good ministers who will not betray her!"

John sighed. "I had hoped," he said, "that you had learned I was the best ruler this realm could have. There was a bargain between us; I kept my half."

Harald's eyes flashed. "And I kept mine! I swore to support you as long as you kept faith with me. You have not harmed me, it is true; but you lied to me. It was you and your dead brother who slew the old emperor—not Zoe, as you said. A murderer and a liar is not fit to rule. You had best leave the realm. I will give you an escort of Varangians outside the city; and it will be well for you if Zoe learns not that you still live!"

"You are young and a king's son," said John, looking thoughtfully at the tall Northman. "Some day you will reign. You, too, are a hard man. It may be you will yet learn that such men as you and I must lie and murder to keep either power or life. Farewell!" With a step that dragged a little, he left the court.

"What will you do now?" Aldhelm asked. "Go back to Sicily? Or rule Constantinople in Zoe's name?"

"I have had enough of this land." Harald shuddered. "It is an evil place, where a man must choose between dishonorable prosperity and death. I have done with it! I have ordered my carles to have all ready to sail to-night on the tide, when I have said farewell to the empress."

"It is an ill thing to lose you, Harald," Aldhelm rose and took his hand. "We have been friends so long, and have done such deeds together."

"Why should we part, comrade?" Harald asked, his stern face softening. "Come to Norway with me. Ulf and Halldor sail with me, and Thiodolf. In my ships I have much gold, and some steel: both ready to win back my kingdom. There will be a place for you at my side."

Aldhelm's eyes dimmed, and he slowly shook his head.

"When I leave this place, I, too, go home. There is a little stead in Sussex, where the fields are very green. But there is another thing, Harald. You are such a man as I could follow to the death—now. But John said a true word. The time may come when you will be too hard for men like me to love. It were better to part now in friendship, than later as foes, Harald Hard-Measure!"

Harald stared at him, and his eyes were troubled.

"Mayhap you are right, Englishman. I do not brook opposition. Well, I have known you, and that has been a gift from the saints. Where is the girl Maria, whom you said you had here?"

"I sent her to the palace to be with the empress. Men say you love her, Harald. It is also whispered that Zoe loves you. Beware both mistress and maid! A Greek is no fit mate for a Northman."

"Good advice, whoso will take it," laughed Harald. "Now let me have food and a bed. It is long since I have slept. And be here before sunset to wake me, and bid me farewell."

Aldhelm put both hands on his friend's shoulders. "My men will wake you. I will say farewell now, comrade. It is not good to draw out partings. If ever you come to England, may I be there to welcome you!"

SHORTLY before sunset Harald left the Prefecture and trod the Mese for the last time. His men were all on board the two treasure ships. A boat was to pick him up at the water-gate after his audience with Zoe.

"Norway!" he whispered, and smiled. His longing for home brought the mighty peaks and winding fjords so close that he could almost see them. He was roused from his dreams by the challenge of the guard at the Chalke; and the same officer whom he had pardoned that morning opened the gates to him.

"The Augusta expects you," the man said. "Good fortune—Augustus!"

Harald started: the Varangian had greeted him with the title of emperor!

"Thanks, Sultan of Egypt!" he retorted mockingly, and passed on.

Others than Aldhelm knew, then, the offer Zoe had made him so long ago. The palace was full of eunuchs with double-hung tongues to spread the rumor.

Instead of going through the Daphne, he crossed the open court between the Chalke and the throne-room, irritated that the jaded favor of the empress had fallen on him, and that she thought to make him emperor in spite of himself.

There were no guards at the entrance to the empress's apartments—no one, save a white-robed eunuch with drawn sword. At Harald's approach the eunuch prostrated himself; and the door opened quietly. Maria stood there, beckoning him in.

He had not seen her since his departure for Sicily. The clean air and hard-fought fields of the great island had almost driven her from his mind. A man of action, he had thought first of the things in hand. But now he forgot all else—his interview with the Empress, even his longing for home—in the beauty of her eyes. He stood and stared at her.

"Will you keep Augusta waiting?" she whispered.

He moved within, like one in a dream, feeling her follow close behind him. Her nearness, the remembrance of her promise to him, made his anger at Zoe keener.

With her wonted grace, that alone made her seem lovelier than other women, Zoe lay on her low divan; her delicate complexion freshened, her shorn hair trimmed and curled till it was almost as fair as in its unrestrained glory. She smiled enchantingly, and held out her hand in a languid gesture. Behind her stood the Patriarch.

"You have saved me my throne, as you promised," the Empress spoke. Her voice, low and rich at all times, was happy now. "You have been ever faithful, daring all things, overcoming all things. Your reward shall be as great as your deserts."

"I ask no reward," Harald answered.

The Patriarch struck in with a flash of his former fire.

"Whether you ask or no, you shall receive! You have overthrown the usurper, saved this city and land from the enemies of God! Aye; and those sacrilegious hands that oppressed the head of Holy Church have been palsied by your might!"

The Empress nodded in agreement.

"What mean you, Holy Father?" Harald asked wonderingly.

"You did not know?" Zoe smiled. "This very day my servants, spying out those who had befriended Constantine, found our holy Patriarch imprisoned in the house of the Syrian Demetrios, foully treated, and weak with abuse. Had you not saved me,

how could I have saved him? The Syrian dog and his brother are even now atoning their crimes on the cross. And you ask no reward! Tell him, Most Holy, the honor in store for him."

THE Patriarch's wan face grew warm with zeal.

"My son, at the command of the Divine Augusta I have proclaimed throughout the palace that this night shall see you espoused to the Empress and crowned Emperor! Nay, protest not! It is announced, and so cannot be undone."

Harald met their eyes. Zoe was smiling happily, triumphantly. The Patriarch's face showed open exultation. On Zoe's other side stood Maria, demure, her eyes cast down, but her hands were tightly clenched.

These Greeks, who thought that to proclaim a thing made it real! Harald raised his head high.

"I sail to-night," he said, "for Norway—free of all Greek fetters!"

Zoe's eyes lowered; but almost instantly she looked up, the smile again curving her lips.

"You will never see Norway again," she murmured. In her confidence she was subdued, and her stilled excitement made her very lovely. But Harald's eyes sought Maria, silent and shy.

"You have ordered your ships made ready," Zoe's musical voice went on, "but you will never reach them. The vestibule is full of soldiers—Paphlagonians. One step across this threshold, and you run into their points. You have no choice but between me and death!" She laughed softly, beguilingly, as if she invited him to join in her amusement at his helplessness.

Harald's senses leaped to wakefulness. A twist of his shoulders brought the ax Hell under his hand. His fingers, hidden by the folds of his cloak, grasped it. With his left hand he tore away the medallion of his office, and cast it at Zoe's feet.

"Give me death, then, and freedom!" he answered.

The Empress sat up, tense with anger. "It may not be death!" she stormed. "Fool! Perhaps a prison, dark and foul, where you shall rot till you change your mind! Think not you can escape from me, either in life or in death!"

She clapped her hands and the door flew open. Through it spears twinkled, and the lamplight fell on mailed bodies. They were sturdy men, thick-set, with black hair and gleaming eyes.

"Take him!" Zoe commanded.

They came on, but the door was too narrow to admit more than two together. Harald swept the ax from his baldric and sprang—straight at the Empress. His left hand tore her from her couch; his right poised Hell's blade above her head.

"Back, dogs, or I strike!" he cried sternly.

The Paphlagonians stopped so suddenly they stumbled. Their eyes filled with horrified amazement, and they glanced uncertainly at the Augusta.

The Patriarch flung himself on Harald's back, clawing and tearing with all his feeble might. Harald hurled him off with a shrug, never taking his eyes from the soldiers; and so he did not see Maria creep up behind him.

Zoe's face paled beneath its artificial color. Her love, or the desire she took for love, was no match for her love of life, her abject terror of death.

"Back!" she screamed at the soldiers. "Withdraw!"

The Paphlagonians drew away from the door, but they hung about the vestibule like hungry wolves. Harald, still clutching the Empress to him, sprang to the doorway. There were a dozen of the soldiers, armed with swords and pikes. As he watched them, his ax lifted, something smote him hard between his mailed shoulder blades. He half turned, his blade still threatening Zoe, and saw Maria and the Patriarch

behind him. On the floor lay a broken dagger.

"A shrewd blow for old hands, father!" Harald laughed. "Take the lamp, girl! Go before me into the gardens, straight to the water gate. Now, ye jackals! Stand back, if ye would save your Augusta's life!"

Maria sped out into the night, flashing by the astounded group of Paphlagonians, who snarled at Harald, not daring to touch him. For herself, Maria could find the gate in the dark, blindfolded; the light she carried was a beacon for Harald.

She held it as high as she could, thankful there were no shrubs taller than her reach between Harald and the gate. Sobbing she ran, but none the less fleetly, her heart aching to know how Harald fared, yet afraid to pause an instant to look back, lest some one be in pursuit.

SHOULDERING the wretched Zoe like a sack, Harald strode out of the chamber, glaring fiercely about him. The soldiers closed in behind, points lifted, creeping as close as they dared; but the cruel ax edge threatening their mistress's throat, they shrank from attack. So Harald passed into the darkness of the gardens.

Now was the moment of real peril. In the dark and in the open, he could scarce hope to keep the Paphlagonians off for long. They could steal about him, ahead, behind, on both sides, and thrust before he could see them. His eyes straining for the black loom of trees, he took advantage of what shelter he could, leaping from one dark patch to another. And always he must look ahead for the flickering glow of Maria's lamp.

He stumbled on the root of a tree, and a spear hummed past his head.

"Hold your weapons, or she dies!" he shouted. And there was silence—silence broken only by little tinklings of mail, as the men who dared not strike crept closer in upon him.

Then the light that danced ahead stopped, and there were distant voices. A shout:

"Harald! We come!"

Footsteps, heavy and swift, mingled their crashing fall with the snapping of twigs. An impact, followed by the sound of mailed man striking mailed man, and the clang of weapons. Then, as the Paphlagonians gauged the number of their foes, magnified by darkness and the noise of their approach, there came the stealthy sounds of men slinking away.

"Harald!" came the shout again, close at hand.

"Here! Who comes?"

"Ulf. The Englishman sent us word you might be in danger at the palace. We were waiting at the landing, and sent back for another boat's crew. There are a score of us."

"The girl with the lamp?"

"Thiodolf has her."

Harald set Zoe down. Feeling her life no longer in danger, she began to hiss with hate and ruffled dignity, like a disturbed cat. They stood so close together that, even in the dark, he could see the flame in her eyes.

"So I am free in spite of you!" he exulted. "Harald Sigurdsson chooses his own land and his own wife, and prefers the maid to the mistress. Farewell, Augusta!"

He ran toward the light, his men following as close as they could. When they came up with Thiodolf and Maria, Harald snatched up the girl and ran on, calling:

"To the boats!"

Maria was struggling in his arms, the pounding of her fists like the thud of velvet paws against his steel shoulder.

"Zoe!" she wept. "What have you done with Zoe?"

If Zoe were hurt, all Maria's longing was to minister to her. She had helped to save Harald's life, loving him too well to see him perish; but to be carried off by him far from her mistress and

Constantinople was no part of her plan. But Harald held her fast, the only loyal Greek he had found in all the land.

A FEW yards beyond lay the shore. A voice challenged from the dark, in good, mouth-filling Norse. Answering, Harald found the loom of the boats, lowered Maria gently to the stern thwart, and thrust off. She was crying softly, but with abandon, as if she would never stop.

"Give way!" Harald shouted. The boats slid from the sand; the oars dipped.

A few swift strokes brought them to deep water; and a single light displayed twice, then hidden, brought an answering gleam from the two treasure ships. Stroking up quietly, the oarsmen brought the boats under the looming hulls, and all climbed aboard, Harald tenderly lifting Maria to the deck.

"Cut the cables!" he commanded. "To your benches, carles!"

The great ash oars were thrust out as soon as the ships' boats were hauled aboard, and the two pamphylians headed into the wind. Thiodolf and Eilif at the steering oars, they fended off the shore and bore north, the palace lights giving them their direction. The breeze blew steadily, holding them back, making sails useless; but the huge-limbed house-carles tugged at the oars like men. Slowly at first, then faster, the lights of Mikligard the Great dropped behind.

On the high poop deck Harald stood above the crouched figure of Maria. She turned from him, and stretched her arms out over the water.

"Oh, my mistress!" she sobbed. "Shall I ever see you again?"

"If she sees you again, she will slay you, from jealousy and disappointment." Harald spoke softly.

Like cold steel the words fell on Maria's heart. As Harald uttered them, she saw their truth clearly, and shivered. Maria was young, and as Harald gently placed his cloak about her she was beginning to realize how sweet life might be. Her face brightened and the heaviness went from her posture, but she still seemed deep in thought.

"She was my lady, my Empress, and she trusted me." The girl again bowed her head. "But—I loved you, and when the Patriarch plucked my own knife from my girdle, and struck you with it from behind—I forgot Zoe. I obeyed when you told me to take the lamp and guide you." She raised searching eyes to his face.

Harald laughed softly, slowly, holding her glance: "Believe not that I would have killed your Empress, lass. I am called a hard man, but I am not that hard. I but knew the Paphlagonians believed I would slay her, for so would they have done if they were in my place."

At once the girl rose and stood by his side. Her hand sought his. Together they looked back over the water murmuring in their wake.

"Why do her ships not pursue us?" Maria asked presently, her wondering gaze scanning the dark waters of the empty straits.

"Her ships, sent out by Constantine, still watch for Georgios, off the Hellespont, not knowing Zoe has him in prison," Harald smiled. "We are safe."

As long as the faintest gleam of the city, fast dropping astern, reached toward them over the water, Maria watched it. When night had swallowed it wholly, and nothing seemed astir in the world but the ships and the water that lapped their sides, she turned and looked at Harald with quiet eyes.

"Zoe loved you," she said.

Harald's eyes sought the far northwest, where, beyond two seas, lay Norway. He shook his shoulders, and the ax Hell stirred between them.

"I shall have a better kingdom, and a better queen," he said.

THE END

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

A GOOD suggestion this of Mr. Parke's—except that a list such as he proposes would fill up half the magazine!

Hammond, Ind.

Why not print a roll of honor, listing the names, ages and the length of fealty of loyal subscribers?

I began with the first number of the *Golden Argosy* and have read every number since the first issue, besides many of the magazines that were later incorporated into the ARGOSY.

I approve of the new methods of story make-up and the addition of more sketches at the beginning, but I dislike most of the "Westerns" on the grounds of unreality. Have your writers cut out some of the tiresome dialogue and their stories will read better. I hail Talbot Mundy and Anthony M. Rud as old friends. GEORGE PARKE.

MANY of our readers want more air stories—and will get them, whenever we find good yarns like this one:

Riverbank, Calif.

I received your picture for my ten coupons O K to-day, and I wish you to know I appreciate it very much. Many thanks.

I always enjoy ARGOSY and I've just finished "Useless," by F. V. W. Mason, and think it's great. Let's have some more air stories.

JOE VITOVEC.

AND here is another reader who got a kick out of Anthony M. Rud's recent novelette:

Oakland, Calif.

Speaking of a coincidence, I was perusing the November 3 issue of the ARGOSY, and started the story by Anthony M. Rud, "The Albino Ogre," when I very excitedly read that in the opening chapter of the story he was wanted for murder in Aurora, Illinois, U. S. A. It just happens that I was born and raised in Aurora, Illinois, so would be interested in knowing whether Mr. Rud simply put his pin in the map and found he had hit that town, or whether I could be of real value to the authorities in letting them know that their chase was all over.

Incidentally, I have been an ARGOSY fan for eight years, and have never missed an issue in that time. The stories are all A-1, in my mind, and since I read any type of tale that has a real interest for the reader, I am not hard to please. Just bring 'em on in the order you have been doing in the eight years I have been a fan, and I won't holler if you advance the price to two-bits.

I personally would like to advise some of the more critical minded readers that if they would compare two issues of the ARGOSY, in other words, twenty cents' worth, to any twenty-five-cent magazine on the market, for real live fiction, and for actual entertainment they will quit complaining, or else they are fond of pictures, not good reading.

Best wishes for your continued success, for you must have made a success in the past with your dandy array of good writers.

L. J. CARR.

NEARLY all our newcomers have been received enthusiastically—probably because we are combing the magazine field to enlist all the best for ARGOSY. Here is a good word for some of the latest entries:

St. Joseph, Mo.

It must be admitted that there is a wonderful improvement between the present issues of ARGOSY and those of a year ago, in my estimation. I used to read an occasional copy, but since R. de S. Horn's "Golden Traitor" I have been watching for each new issue, and I'll continue to do so for as long as the magazine keeps up as it is.

I appreciate the historical stories probably more than I do the others, and I'm certainly glad to notice that you are running one in almost every number. But at the same time the mystery stories—such as "The Pagan Ruby," and the adventure yarns—"The Albino Ogre" and "The Redhead"—must not be forgotten. It seems that you have struck a fair balance in your contents.

L. R. INGLES.

ANOTHER old-timer! He would like to secure copies of the magazine containing "The Blind Spot." Who can help him out?

Glenside, Pa.

Being a constant reader of the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY since its infancy, in fact, since its birth, I would like to offer my opinion and viewpoint in the Argonotes.

Long before the consolidation of ARGOSY and *Allstory*, I read my first copy of your pub-

lication. At that time it was considered an outlaw publication in magazine circles. Nevertheless, it prospered.

Some of my favorite authors are Max Brand, Zane Gray, J. U. Giesy, and Junius Smith, also your *Mme. Storey* tales. I noticed a letter from Chicago, from a Mildred Smith, commenting on "Seven Footprints to Satan," a very good piece of fiction.

And last but foremost, the story that remains with me is one that in all probability is almost forgotten. I refer to the story called "The Blind Spot." If possible I would like to have this story republished.

Wishing your publication continued success, I am, BENJAMIN BEST.

MR. HARONEY is one of the many new readers Eugene Cunningham is bringing to ARGOSY:

Stockton, Calif.

I sure am mighty glad to see that my old friend Cunningham is writing for ARGOSY. I have been reading Cunningham's stories since his first story was published and haven't missed any of his stories during that time.

I was a regular reader of ARGOSY back in 1912, and then I went in the navy, and from that time on I never had much time for reading.

When I saw the cover of the ARGOSY for October 6 featuring Cunningham's "Lord of Liarsburg" it was like finding an old friend. Haven't missed an issue since, and that is not half of it. I am not going to miss any.

The staff of writers contributing to ARGOSY is the best in the field and insure the continued success of the magazine.

W. H. HARONEY.

HERE is another interesting account of a first acquaintance with ARGOSY:

Glens Falls, N. Y.

When a child I attended the old Level School in Lower Providence Township, Collegeville, Pennsylvania. One day after school we were playing in a barn on one of the small farms. During our explorations we found, high up in a loft under the eaves, enormous stacks of old, coverless magazines. There, thirteen years ago, started my friendship with ARGOSY and the *All-Story Weekly*.

Being only a schoolboy I could not buy any magazines, but that did not bother me as there was enough to read for several months in that old loft. The only time we yelled was when one was missing. They were marvelous stories. I'll always remember how we looked, walking down that old country road; school books under one arm, magazines under the other.

As soon as I was old enough to earn I bought the ARGOSY and *All-Story*. Thursday was my red-letter day. I was working in West Chester, when the strike of the New York publishers delayed them for several weeks. I felt lost without my fiction. How I cheered when the strike was lifted. I took a day off and, with more than half a dozen magazines, went up to my room to read.

It was a blow to me when the ARGOSY and the *All-Story* combined. I still can't understand why you didn't raise the price to twenty cents and give us the same number of stories there were in the issues just after the combine.

I've taken some awful risks to read your magazine, but the fiction usually repaid me. In my opinion the finest story you ever published was "Whistlin' Dan Barry." The rest of that series, "The Untamed," "Dan Barry's Daughter," and "The Seventh Man" were also very good.

Do you remember the array of authors on the "Ten Foot Chain"? I've never read anything like it since. "The Ship of Ishtar" is another I'll always remember; also "Brass Commandments."

Seltzer is my favorite Western author, Footner for mystery, Merritt and Giesy for the "different" stories, Worts and MacIsaac always furnish action.

I believe that four serials and four short stories is the right number to have. You mix 'em up well enough to suit almost everybody's taste. The magazine is better now than it has been for many months; in the October 27 issue you have one of my favorite authors, Talbot Mundy. RICHARD H. KLIGER.

HERE is a ranch that has gone one hundred per cent for ARGOSY. Incidentally, another George M. Johnson serial starts in the near future.

San Francisco, Calif.

We never liked Westerns until we read "Tickets to Paradise" and "Trouble Ranch," G. M. Johnson. How about another serial of G. M. J.?

We own a ranch north of San Francisco, and the cowboys, even the trainers and stablemen, and Chinese cooks, read the ARGOSY. The cooks like baseball, fight stories and the sea.

It is getting difficult to get an ARGOSY in this city. I guess there are so many readers. I buy two for our family of seven, and it's getting to be a weekly worry. All the newsstands have been ordered off the street by the "Down Town Association." Unless I get a copy on Thursday, no use to hunt for one on Friday—bookstores all sold out. I had an awful time to get one this week—the "boss"—husband—and sons were eager to finish "Trouble Ranch." I just happened to go out to the race track—Tanforan Park—to see some of the thoroughbreds we shipped from the ranch for a twenty-day race meet, and there I met our foreman and, to my surprise, he had nine ARGOSIES. I never saw so many ARGOSIES all in one bunch before. He kindly gave me one—his own copy—the rest were for the ranch.

"Trouble Ranch" ended fine, all of us were pleased. I guess our ranch is different from most Western ranches. My brothers and I inherited it from our grandfather, who came to California from New York in "forty-nine."

We sold a big piece to my brother's law partner, who has a game preserve, but we still have miles and miles left. We raise thoroughbred horses because grandfather loved them. He raised many famous horses. We also have Angus cattle for live stock shows. It is fall round-up time now—and the yearlings are so cute.

We keep up the old Spanish traditions; no one is turned away. Also like the old Spanish, we raise nearly everything. The cowboy can go into the orchard and pick peaches or melons; he can catch trout in our own streams in season. We have five hundred acres of vineyard attended by expert Italians who go to their own homes at night in the trucks and are back at dawn.

In the stories and movies of Westerns everything looks so dry and crude; not a tree. Wish you could see the fig and walnuts my grandfather planted. Huge, widespreading trees. The cowboys don't go to town and get drunk. While all are good shots, they are peaceable and don't go gunning for a human being, but they do go out and lasso the Indians, who are employed on the ranch as roustabouts. They get very peeved with these Indians, who, every now and then, stage a war dance and then disappear, generally after pay day. So the cowboys bring them home willy-nilly. The boys have a big hall, sixty by forty feet, near the bunk house. It has two fireplaces, and when the evenings get chilly the Indians must bring in the logs for the fireplaces, makes the beds, and keep the bunk house clean. The boys have a radio, and dance in their hall, read, and play cards.

The Indians like wild game, venison; and they get sulky when venison is not in season. We give them a sheep or hog to slaughter for themselves and feed them plenty, but they are never satisfied. One of our cowboys got married last June to a rich orchardist's daughter, and we will lose another nice boy—Texan—who will be married next month to a rich miner's daughter—a co-ed. University of California—so you see the cowboys are not as tough as some stories and movies make them, but more like one of Geo. M. Johnson's heroes. The ARGOSY is very good lately. Keep it up.

ELIZABETH TAYLOR.

THIS reader thinks ye editor is a genius! No, just a fellow who is plugging along determined to secure for the pages of "our magazine" the best and the most varied fiction the market affords:

Detroit, Mich.

To imagine a man who selects and edits the material contained in ARGOSY is beyond the scope of my imagination. A man who can choose stories of variety, entertaining, wholesome, and above all, stories that add unto its hosts of friends a multitude each issue, is also beyond my imagination.

I have been reading this magazine for ten or twelve years, although not regularly until five years ago. The war interrupted my good intention of being a "regular," and now since that has been made less vivid over a period of years, I wish to state that it would almost take another war to force me to miss another issue.

Beyond saying that this, "our magazine," is the best published at any price in any country, State or province, with its wonderful mysteries, editor, staff and circulation; and wishing for the reincarnation of all scientific writers—that 'll be about all. W. H. L.

"THE SHIP OF ISHTAR" was written by A. Merritt, but is now out of print in book form.

Chicago, Ill.

A few years ago I started a serial story in the ARGOSY, "The Ship of Ishtar." I do not remember the name of the author. Could I secure this in book form? I am very anxious to finish this story, and any information you can give me will be appreciated.

Have been reading ARGOSY for nearly seven years, and it's great.

"The Golden Burden" is a fast number. I never could have enough of Fred MacIsaac's stories.

Mme. Storey is another favorite of mine, and I'm glad we are to read another of Hulbert Footner's tales next week.

F. SCHULZE.

YOUR CHOICE COUPON

Editor, ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY,
280 Broadway, N. Y. C., N. Y.

The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:

1.....

2.....

3.....

4.....

5.....

I did not like.....

because.....

Name.....

Street.....

City..... *State*.....

12-29

Looking Ahead!

Coming in the next issue

THE LONGHORN TRAIL

A Western Novel

by GEORGE M. JOHNSON

A tale of the adventurous trail-herd days—of those hardy cowmen who rode north from Texas with the huge longhorn herds—of the perils and dangers of the long trek over wild and lawless country—and of the romance that sometimes waited at trail-end for some fortunate sons of the range.

MORE THAN A DOUBLE CROSS

A Complete Novelette

by W. WIRT

Philadelphia—with gang warfare and police corruption running hand in hand. Another excellent and swift-moving crime story by the author of "Kill Him, Jimmie—or I Will."

Both in the ISSUE OF JANUARY 5th

Also An Unusual Feature Short Story

MAN O' DREAMS

by WILL McMORROW

Way back to the dawn of history—to the days of the Stone Age—this unusual story takes us.

ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

"First In Fiction" ***Out Every Wednesday***

"At smart parties I find that my favorite, Lucky Strike, is the chosen cigarette."

Mrs Jerome Napoleon Bonaparte

Mrs. Jerome Napoleon Bonaparte,
a leading figure in New York, Palm Beach and Newport social life.

For a slender figure—
"Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet"

"It's toasted"

No Throat Irritation - No Cough.