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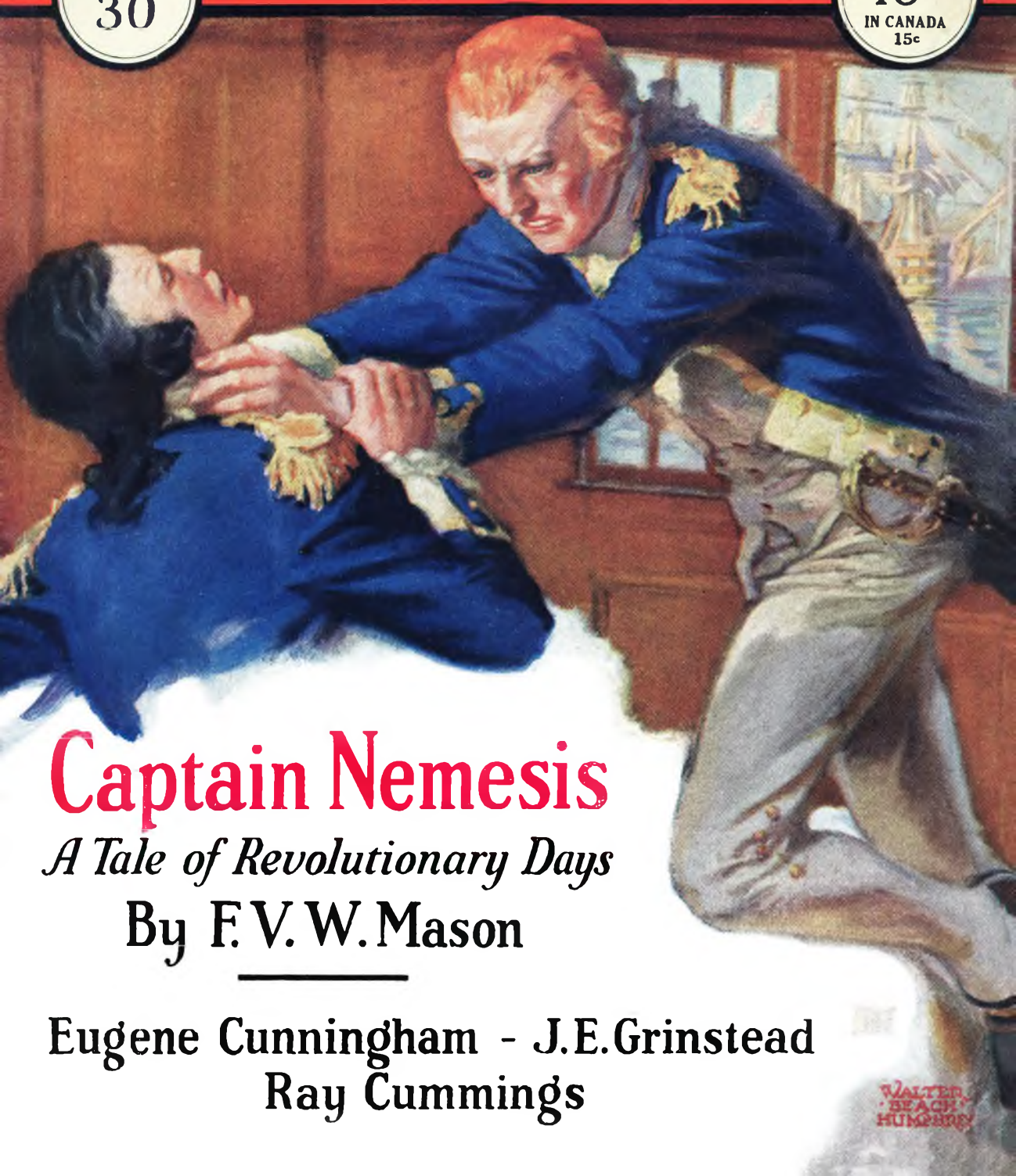

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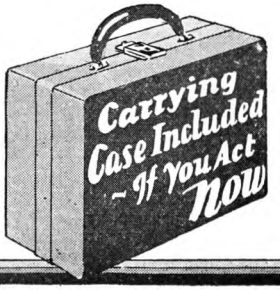

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VOLUME 202 | CONTENTS FOR MARCH 30, 1929 | NUMBER 4

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ARGOSY
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VOLUME 202 SATURDAY, MARCH 30, 1929 NUMBER 4

She stood there, a soul-healing vision, in the inferno of the convict hole

Captain Nemesis

Caught in a net of lies, and treacherously disgraced, Nathan Andrews, naval officer from the American Colonies, pitted all his strength and determination against overwhelming odds and deadly perils

By F. V. W. MASON

Author of "The Sword of Vengeance," "Useless," etc.

CHAPTER I.

COURT-MARTIAL.

"LIAR!" Lieutenant Nathan Andrews's lithe figure hurdled the paper-strewn table which separated him from his tall, imperturbable accuser. With a flush of anger on his clean-cut features, the prisoner pinned his victim against the dark oak wall of the Avon's wardroom, before the scarlet-coated marines who stood guard could make a motion to restrain him.

"Liar!" growled the furious officer again and, seizing the other by the throat, shook him violently. "I'll call you out, you lying blackguard!"

Before he could complete his threat a trio of burly marines in stiff top hats wound their arms about the prisoner

and dragged him, raging, back to the chair which served as dock.

"Mr. Andrews!" The voice of the president of the court-martial, Admiral Tennant, was as chilling as the breath of an iceberg, and his cavernous eyes, glowing like live coals beneath their bushy eyebrows, fixed themselves on the disheveled, panting prisoner who sat crushed into his chair, with the hands of three red-faced marines gripping his broad shoulders.

"More of your damned colonial savagery, sir," warned the president, his white-wigged head thrust forward menacingly, "and officer or no officer, I'll have ye clapped in irons!"

The profusion of gold lace on the admiral's heavy epaulettes and collar glittered brightly in the mellow afternoon sunlight which came streaming in the after ports of His Britannic Majesty's frigate Avon, as she swung to her moorings in Spithead Bay. The wardroom's low wooden ceiling caught the reflection of sunlight on the wavelets outside and cast a false radiance onto the fateful scene.

Order having been restored, the fat deputy judge advocate shook the long white curls of his official wig pettishly and addressed the witness who had so aroused the anger of the prisoner.

"And now, Mr. Sherburne, pray continue your account," he lisped.

The witness's face, congested by the prisoner's iron grip, was slowly regaining its natural pallor as he struggled to resume his poise. Before attempting to speak, he straightened with trembling fingers a golden epaulette, then cleared his throat painfully.

"'Twas, I vow, with the deepest sorrow, my lord," he bowed smoothly, deferentially to the grim old man behind the central table, "that I beheld the accused," Sherburne inclined his dark head in the direction of the red-haired prisoner, "take secret counsel with three seamen of the Avon's crew—three damned insubordinate colonials like himself!"

"Order!" roared the moon-faced deputy judge advocate. "I'll trouble you, sir, to state facts. Pray omit personal opinions."

The fourteen officers who composed the board of the court-martial stirred at the interruption and shifted their positions with an audible creaking of chairs. A glittering, imposing group they appeared, with their vivid blue and scarlet uniforms, white breeches and bejeweled decorations. But an experienced student of mankind would have found nothing impressive in the gross, bloated faces of the majority.

LIEUTENANT ANDREWS'S defiant glance, running from one to another of these stupid, sensual faces, summed them up in the most part as choice products of the vicious system of favoritism and corruption which was in that year of 1772 sapping the very life of the English army and navy. Like heavy, evil-living, powerful beasts they seemed, ready to pounce avidly upon their victims.

Only here and there did the colonial's blue eyes fall on a cleanly-molded, clear-eyed officer of that type which had raised the British navy to the pinnacle from which it dominated the seven seas and the maritime world. But these types were in a hopeless minority and of lower rank than their resplendent fellows.

Meanwhile, the witness resumed his accusation in the smooth mincing accents affected by the macaronies of Whitehall, while his slender bejeweled fingers played with a pair of spotless kid gloves, tucked into his belt.

"As I have said," continued Lieutenant Sherburne slowly, "I accompanied Mr. Andrews ashore, and in a near-by tavern chanced to overhear a part of his plot to aid the desertion of these colonial seamen. I followed him unperceived to the Sign of the Bower Anchor. There he again held close counsel with these desperate fellows and furnished them with gold."

The accuser turned away from the light, a deep cleft in his jaw giving his visage a slightly feline expression as he faced the board. His voice was clear and each word came out sharply, evenly, carrying a ring of truth and spontaneity that filled the uneasy prisoner with alarm.

"Imagine my amazement and horror, gentlemen! I vow I could scarce credit my senses, when, with my own eyes, I saw the accused personally conduct these same villains to a jetty." Sherburne paused to permit the full import of his words to sink in. "After a short space there appeared a boat from the Ellen, a merchantman sailing at twelve of that same night for the troublesome port of Boston."

A perceptible murmur, hostile in pitch, arose from certain members of the court; others remained silent, studying the easy straightforward bearing of the witness.

"It was fortunate," resumed the speaker evenly, almost carelessly, "that, as I followed hard on the heels of the deserters and their protector," he shot a malevolent look at the glowering prisoner, "I encountered Mr. Lackworthy of the Cherub yonder." He pointed out of the latticed stern ports to a tall ship of the line moored some two cable lengths away.

"For I feared that my bare words would never suffice to convict a fellow-officer of a crime so heinous, so enormous, and so impossible for one holding the commission of our gracious sovereign King George. Gad's my life, the thought fair sickened me!"

The righteous lieutenant plucked a lace-trimmed kerchief from his cuff and pinched his sharp aristocratic nose with it.

The deputy judge advocate looked up over his square, steel-rimmed spectacles and squinted short-sightedly at the graceful figure before the president's table.

"You have done, Mr. Sherburne?"

"I have an it please you, sir," replied the officer bowing deeply; then, with an expression of ineffably outraged sensibilities, he turned on his heel and stalked catlike across the silent wardroom to his chair. His glance avoided the rigid face and astounded eyes of the prisoner, who sat in sheer bewilderment as though thunderstruck.

The deputy rustled among his papers a moment, blowing out his fat red cheeks with minute puffing noises, then blinked up.

"Boatswain Manley!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" A tall, coarse-featured warrant officer in blue jacket and white duck trousers stepped out from among the witnesses. His heavy shoes with large metal buckles seemed enormous as he rolled across the costly Persian rug which adorned the wardroom floor, and his deeply tanned face took on a bewildered look at the sight of the glittering solemn assemblage.

This second witness seemed ill at ease, his small greenish eyes roamed restlessly about the court, and he twirled his varnished black straw hat nervously between the thick thumbs and forefingers of his tattooed hamlike hands.

"Tell the honorable court," directed the deputy judge impressively, "of the desertions on or about July 23, 1772, omitting nothing and adding nothing."

WITH sinking heart Nathan Andrews watched the stolid warrant officer being sworn, and then only did he realize how perfect was the net of evidence which entangled him. Dull, consuming rage was his only sensation; once this ghastly farce was over, that white-skinned, mincing blackguard yonder would feel the quality of Carolina forged steel.

"Yes, yer ludship," the warrant officer was saying, "we lost two ordinaries on the 30th of June—"

"Damn the 30th of June," broke in the officer for the prosecution.

The boatswain's tarry pigtail which

dangled over his wide collar quivered with apprehension and he blinked uncertainly, like a puzzled brown bear.

"Aye, aye, sir," he stammered placatingly, "maybe it was the 31st, sir."

The chill voice of Admiral Tennant broke in.

"There's no 31st of June, my man," stated the president shortly and tapped his discolored teeth with the tip of his quill pen, "but no matter, 'tis with the 23rd of July we're concerned."

The two gold rings which adorned the warrant officer's mahogany-colored right ear clinked against each other as he nodded eagerly.

"Aye, yer ludship, 'twas on the 23rd they jumped ship." Now on surer ground, the boatswain hurried his testimony: "'Twas the 23rd to be sure. I remember 'cause 'twere a Friday—"

"Dammit, man," broke in the officer of the prosecution irritably, "the 23rd was a Saturday. But get to the point. Did, or did not, three rascals out of the American colonies jump ship that day?"

"Aye, aye, sir. There was three o' them to be sure, sir." The fellow bobbed in his anxiety. "One from Boston, one from Charleston and one from Malabar."

"Fool," grunted the prosecutor, "Malabar's in India! Nevertheless—three Americans deserted on that date?"

"Yes, yer ludship."

With vast relief, the second witness disappeared through the wardroom door.

Next was summoned a short, dark-faced officer with a receding, tremulous chin. He appeared very ill at ease and not a little uncertain as he was sworn. To Nathan his manner seemed patently furtive as he saluted the court.

"And did you, Mr. Lackworthy, upon the night of July 23, encounter Mr. Sherburne of the Avon?"

"Yes, sir." The dark-faced officer's voice was so low that Nathan could barely catch the words.

"Could you identify any of the men he was following?"

"I—I think so, sir."

"Aren't you sure?"

The officer hesitated and his fingers picked nervously at the gold buttons of his coat. "Yes," he stammered, "I—I'm sure."

As he replied, the witness's look unconsciously wandered to where Lieutenant Sherburne sat with his dark, penetrating eyes riveted on the speaker's face.

In the first witness's stare there was a certain menacing quality, and Lackworthy shivered slightly as he again faced the court.

"Is one of those men present?" inquired the prosecutor sharply.

"Why, yes, sir—that is—"

"Where is he?"

Gathering himself with an obvious effort, the third witness turned deliberately and leveled his forefinger at the pale-faced prisoner who stared at him with flashing blue eyes.

"There is one of them," he muttered in a low voice. "I am sure that is he."

NATHAN ANDREWS'S jaw dropped in surprised dismay and he felt a cold hand gripping his heart. Every eye in the room was fixed upon him, from the stern old admiral to the huge marines whose top hats brushed the stained oak of the low ceiling. Their scarlet coats wavered before the prisoner's eyes. So sure had he been that this disinterested brother officer would come to his help that when the blow fell it was crushing.

In vain the officer for the defense went through the motions of cross-examinations, in an evidently futile effort to break down the solid wall of circumstantial and direct evidence which had been built about the accused. In desperation he at last called the prisoner himself to the witness stand. As he crossed the floor to take his place, Nathan Andrews felt his courage rise

and his head clear. He bowed with dignity to the president and to the silent board.

"Administer the oath," directed the admiral tersely, and something like pity crept into his hard old face as he looked into the sensitive face and clear blue eyes of the prisoner. While the deputy swore the accused, Admiral Tennant glanced at the court and as quickly looked away in disgust. He was of the old school, born and bred in those days before a foppish clothes-horse might buy the command of a ship of the line.

"Young sir," said the president gravely, "I need not impress upon you the seriousness of the crime with which you are charged. Let us hope that the fact that you, yourself, are a colonial is an unfortunate coincidence. Rest assured that this circumstance will in no way influence the court." The old man's eyes caught the flicker of hostility among the board as he mentioned the word "colonial." "I therefore charge and counsel you to speak wholly and unreservedly in your defense."

With a grateful look into the old officer's deep-set eyes, Nathan passed a muscular hand over his crisp red hair and tucked a handkerchief into the waistband of his white pantaloons.

As he turned to address the silently hostile board of officers, the evening sun flashed on the golden buttons of his coat and cast a multitude of tiny bright spots against the massive beams of the wooden ceiling. Through an adjacent port he could see the Lion, seventy-four-gun ship of the line, swinging grandly at her moorings, like a great animated castle.

Within the harassed colonial rose, with a sudden surge, the pride of a house whose men, generation after generation, had served ships of England, since first the haughty Dons swept up the channel to find in its restless depths a watery grave.

A new confidence that he would win free possessed him; not all these soft, home-bred English could daunt the grandson of Lord High Admiral Andrews. He filled his chest and stood at rigid attention with the sunlight playing in his rich red curls as he addressed the court.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I am as ignorant of the reason for Mr. Sherburne's infamous assault upon the truth as I am for his unwarranted dislike for me. To him, and to certain others, the fact that I am a colonial seems offensive—why, I shall not venture to guess."

"You deny the charges?" broke in the officer for the defense.

"Certainly! For the atrocious pack of lies that they are!"

"You can disprove them?" The questioner's tone was silken.

"Aye, as God lives!" Nathan Andrews's reply rang out to the farthest corner of the stuffy wardroom, making the somnolent marines jump at the vibrant quality of his voice.

"Yes?" A polite doubt was insinuated into the prosecutor's voice.

"Yes."

"Then," the prosecutor suddenly rose from his chair and leaned far out over the table, so that his sallow face was not a foot away from that of the astonished junior officer, "please to tell the court where you were the night of the twenty-third, if you were not aiding and abetting the deserters." His voice grated like the rasp of a knife on stone.

"Why," said Nathan Andrews quickly, "that I will—" But, of a sudden, he paused and his handsome face flamed scarlet as he drew back from the savage, challenging look of the prosecutor. He looked about in a troubled fashion and his sturdy brown hand crept uncertainly to the plain lace ruffle at his throat.

"WELL?" There was a challenging note of triumph in the inquisitor's question.

"Why—I'd rather not say—" He stammered, and stood wretchedly aware

of the hostile atmosphere of the ward-room. "But I swear upon my sacred word of honor—"

From the back of the room came a contemptuous mocking laugh. "*His* word of honor!" And Lieutenant Sherburne held jeweled hands to his sides.

At the sound, Nathan whirled and would once more have hurled himself upon his sneering accuser, but this time the marines were ready and locked their bayonets together with a ringing of steel, effectively barring the way, in spite of Andrews's infuriated struggles.

"He lies, my lord!" stormed Nathan and whirled back to face the granite-featured president. "I tell you he lies! For three hundred years have the Andrews served the British navy with honor. I would not—nay, could not—do the vile thing yonder lying scoundrel says. It is a lie!"

Without moving a muscle, and keeping his stern gaze fixed on the unhappy officer's face, Admiral Tennant said but three words:

"Where were you?"

An inward struggle took place in the prisoner; for a moment he stood silent with bowed head.

"My lord, I regret I cannot say—"

"Come, come, sir," said the president with a rising inflection, "do you realize what your refusal means? 'Tis a virtual admission of guilt. If you were not with these deserters, as two honorable officers have sworn, where then were you?"

Perceptibly the blood ebbed from Lieutenant Andrews's already pale face, leaving it a deadly ashen-gray, and at his sides his hands clenched and unclenched themselves so fiercely that the knuckles gleamed whitely.

"My lord," repeated the young officer in a toneless voice, "I cannot say. It is another's secret. But I was not with the deserters—on my honor!" His blue eyes were raised in an unvoiced appeal to the only man who had shown the least hint of sympathy.

"Will *you* not believe me, sir?"

The white head above that gorgeous gold-laced breast shook twice. "I cannot, young sir, the evidence leaves me no choice."

Numb with despair, Nathan was conducted to his chair, while the court-martial adjourned to deliberate — a mere gesture.

CHAPTER II.

SENTENCED.

LIEUTENANT ANDREWS found himself quite unable to believe it all. The familiar wardroom where he had eaten and drank and gambled, where he had studied to improve his chances of success in his chosen career, spun about him. Even the wooden-faced marines standing at regular intervals along the wall seemed unreal.

That the career on which his heart was set was about to come to an irrevocable, inglorious end was unthinkable. He, Nathan Andrews, trained since birth to take his place some day among the great of the British navy, was about to be cashiered! Great God! It could not be. He felt hot and cold by turns.

The sound of a step impinged on his consciousness, and he saw, standing at his side, little Ingoldsby, the only other colonial officer of the ship. The midshipman's round face wore a look of complete dismay.

"Gad's my life, Nat," he piped. "What ails you, man? Tell 'em where you were or there'll be old Nick to pay."

"Oh, God!" groaned the prisoner. "Don't you see, Billy? I can't! I was helping my—a friend—a matter I can't reveal and keep my honor."

"Well," said the boy, staring at the empty chairs of the board, "you seem like to lose it anyway."

"Alack! There's no helping it, Billy," answered Nathan sadly.

With the heavy steps of the returning officers, the midshipman scuttled away like a frightened rabbit and, seeking the complete seclusion of the musty-smelling cable tier, buried his tousled head in his arms and burst into tears; his hero and patron saint was in dire straits.

"Gentlemen," the voice of the president was charged with gravity. "Have you arrived at a verdict?"

A loud buzzing sounded in Nathan's ears as he stared with fearful intensity at the modishly wigged staff captain who acted as foreman.

"We have."

Nathan fixed his eyes on the speaker's face, searching it for an indication of his fate.

"Do you find the prisoner guilty or not guilty?"

The room seemed to whirl about, and the defendant's heart banged like a kettle-drum in his breast, while sweat broke out on his forehead and trickled, unchecked, down his face.

As from a great distance came the fateful word:

"Guilty."

It seemed as though an electric current passed through that tense assemblage; even the immobile marines, in their scarlet jackets, appeared to sense the dread significance of the verdict. Not every day was an officer brought to trial, though scarce a week went by but some poor rogue of a seaman was whipped for some offense, real or fancied.

"Thank you, gentlemen." Admiral Tennant arose and bowed deeply, his dry old face seemed even more wrinkled than before, and his angular mouth was set in a tight, thin line. The gold lace on his collar sparkled with a thousand tiny rays as he arose.

While Nathan, with a burning sensation in his brain, sought to grasp what was taking place, the president faced the prisoner and cleared his throat with a little cough. He felt the marines help him to his feet, but he impatiently shook off their hands and stood erect, facing the ominous glittering figure behind the central table.

"Mr. Andrews," said Admiral Tennant in a lifeless, monotonous voice, "the court is of the opinion that the prisoner is guilty"—the old man paused amid a terrible silence which permitted the sound of distant oars bumping in their thole pins to be distinctly heard—"of the charge preferred against him, which, being in breach of the Articles of War, sentences the prisoner—"

It suddenly seemed to the ghastly pale officer before the bar that the force of gravity had ceased to function, and that he floated unsustained in the close atmosphere of the wardroom as he waited for the next words.

"—To be cashiered."

As he heard the solemn sentence, a torrent of blood rushed to Nathan Andrews's face, as though he were on the verge of an apoplectic stroke; he drew a deep breath, but the granite-faced old man was still talking. What else could there be to say? He, Nathan Andrews, was a broken officer, his treasured career irrevocably shattered.

"And to be transported to the Naval Prison at Spithead; there to wait transportation to the penal colonies in Australia. The court further sentences said prisoner to hard labor for not less than twenty nor more than thirty years."

LIKE the blows of a hammer, each word fell crushingly on the consciousness of the colonial, who, nevertheless, remained rigidly upright, staring with a strange fascination at him whose words destroyed all that life held worth while.

As the disgraced officer stood motionless, stunned by the severity of his sentence, the admiral seated himself and commenced to collect his papers.

Then, with a movement incredibly swift for so large a man, the prisoner turned and faced the silent board, who

sat as though appalled by the outcome of their course.

"Gentlemen," cried Nathan in a clear, ringing voice, "since childhood have I yearned to bring honor to the British navy—since boyhood have I studiously prepared myself to do my part, however small, to uphold the glory of that service, deeming it the highest, the most sacred privilege to be an English officer!" Like thrusting sword points, the prisoner's deep blue eyes flickered over the pursy, uneasy officers, who shifted uncomfortably in their chairs.

"But, because I am of the American Colonies—aye, I have marked your thinly disguised contempt for all colonials—you choose to believe the foul, slandering lies of that white-faced macaroni, and so condemn a loyal officer to disgrace. But, as God's above, I will not rest until I see the flag of the mighty English navy tumbled in defeat on my quarterdeck!"

Inarticulate with fury, the admiral leaped to his feet and signaled the gaping marines to hale the broken officer away. Like stag hounds closing in upon a hard-pressed buck, the scarlet-coated figures seized the one in blue and marched him stiffly down the aisle, while the startled officers drew aside, as though to permit the passage of a leper.

As the file passed through the last row of chairs, Lieutenant Sherburne, his handsome dark eyes agleam with triumph, stepped close and murmured a sentence in the ear of the prisoner, who walked firmly with head held high.

"And, upstart," whispered the immaculate Englishman, "waste no time in thoughts of Molly Lancaster—to her you will be more dead than the dead!"

"Ah!" Suddenly the motive for the whole diabolical plot became clear as the waters of a spring.

"Harken, John Sherburne," said Nathan in a low, vibrant tone, "without you, hell lacks its finest masterpiece—do not think that I shall not escape. Then, you and your pitiful puppet, Lackworthy, will, soon or late, curse the day you perjured yourselves to ruin an honest man. Beware, John Sherburne, I am not feeble and I lack not patience--"

But the sinewy hand of a marine sergeant was clapped over the struggling colonial's mouth, and he was dragged away with the mocking laughter of the dandy ringing in his ears.

CHAPTER III.

THE PRISON SHIP.

THE whining creak of the prison ship's ancient timbers, as she plowed leisurely along the Bight of Benin, was the only sound which reached the ears of Nathan Andrews, sprawled on the foul straw of the convict hold. Far above, through an open hatch, he could catch the clear sheen of a few cold stars. How far away they were, yet no farther than she whose image constantly rose before his suffering eyes.

He reached down and crushed a large cockroach which had crawled inside a leg of his dirty canvas breeches, his only garment; then he eased the heavy gyve which chafed the skin above his ankle. In the dim light he could trace the course of the stout iron chain, leading from his leg-iron to a great main chain, whose massive links ran from one end of the hold to the other, fastened at the extremities to eyes let into the timbers of the Cerberus's fabric.

Snores, guttural and melodious, resounded from all sides, as the other hundred and seventy odd felons, who stretched themselves along the length of the main cable, sought surcease from their wretchedness in slumber.

"A plague on this den! Oh, God, for a breath of air!" gasped Nathan; he thought longingly of the fresh ocean breezes that swept up the Santee River to his father's great white plantation

house. The sweat of indescribably foul bodies mingled with other vile stenches, poisoning the lungs of the luckless wretches who must, perforce, endure it for four months or more.

"Eight hours till our walk on deck," meditated Nathan savagely. "God above!"

The torture of his wrists, aching in the cold manacles which encircled them, became unendurable; he shifted his position and, in so doing, drove an elbow into the face of a condemned garroter who lay jammed against the Carolinian's back.

"Oh, blast ye!" roared the murderer, and lashed out with his fist, striking the man on his other side. In an instant the hold was in an uproar. The unhappy wretches roused themselves and swung their manacled fists wildly in all directions, screaming hideously at the top of their lungs.

Hands from the blackness struck Nathan's face and body until, in desperation, he flayed out right and left with his mighty arms which, though wasted by two months' undernourishment, had not lost a great part of their power.

A smoking yellow lantern glimmered at the hatchway, and a dozen heads in the flat blue caps of the warders appeared.

"Silence, you dogs!" commanded a voice from above. "Damn ye, silence down there or we shoot!" In the tumult which resounded in that hell afloat, a tern's mewing cry could as well have been heard.

"Silence!" roared the chief warder. But the battle raged on with half-smothered animal cries and bellowings, as the convicts tore and twisted in their chains, the better to attack their fellows.

In the feeble lantern light, struggling black shapes writhed to and fro across Nathan's line of vision, as, crushed flat against the slippery filthiness of the side, he waited for the volley which was imminent.

There was a gleam of steel, yellowly luminous, about the opening, as a dozen long barrels were thrust down into the hatchway.

"Fire!" Twelve streaks of orange-red flame lit the hold with the stunning suddenness of a thunderbolt; Nathan had a flash of furious, brutal faces, grinning and slavering on all sides, hairy arms and heads silhouetted for the fraction of an instant, then came the deafening crash of the reports, as the prison ship warders again fired into the thick of the struggling human mass. Immediately, choking powder fumes drifted down to meet the rising wails of the wounded.

A third rolling volley was fired, and again the flashes lit the terror-stricken hold, tingeing the smoke from the preceding volley a blood-red, and transforming the convict hold into a picture of hell itself.

SHRIEKS of insane terror and blasphemous cries of desperate defiance resounded, while Nathan coolly sought, as best he might, to avoid the line of fire.

"There, that 'll larn ye obedience!" called the voice. Dull thumps of wood on wood immediately followed as the hatch cover was replaced and battened down, inclosing the powder fumes with the other stenches.

"Fools!" muttered Nathan. "Crazy, unthinking fools."

"Aye," answered a voice from the Stygian darkness, "fools they are. These senseless struggles accomplish nothing, the witless swabs!"

The Carolinian started, as he recognized a voice quite dissimilar to the accustomed coarse, oath-sprinkled accents of his fellow convicts.

Groans from the wounded prisoners resounded and a victim shrieked in agony. "Water! For the love of God! Water!"

"The poor wretch might better ask a pardon," muttered Nathan with a grim laugh. He sighed. "Ah, well,

they'll be free of this nightmare ere long, lucky dogs."

"Blasting my topsides, sir, but your accent," came the voice out of the gloom, "is from no English county, I'll warrant!" The speaker broke off into a spell of coughing as the thick fumes of spent powder sank to the lowest level of the hold.

"You are right, sir," replied Nathan, "rather would I die than call myself English, now."

"At a venture, sir, you hail from the American colonies?"

"Yes," replied Nathan hesitantly, "I am from the Carolinas—and since you speak of the matter of accent, I'll wager neither is your voice that of a man born and bred on that thrice-accursed island."

"You are very bitter, sir, against the English," observed the unseen stranger.

"I have reason and to spare." Nathan's fetters clanked dully as he clasped his wasted hands about his kness, and in the darkness Sherburne's face mocked him.

"No more than I." The stranger's voice shook with an intensity of emotion. "Bethink you, sir—a New Englander am I and," this with a touch of pride, "two months gone was I master and part owner of the Speedy Fortune, tidiest brig nor ever cleared Boston Harbor light."

Nathan Andrews sat very still as of a sudden was born the germ of an idea which gained in clarity as the other pursued his narrative.

"With uncommon favoring winds we made a most profitable voyage into Hull," continued the other, "and I had begun to count the days till I should see my wife and the child which was to have been there to greet my return." A strident, tremulous note entered the speaker's voice, and Nathan strained his sight to get an impression of him, but in vain.

"We were but two days out of Hull, when a damned shiny sloop o' war bore down and fired a shot athwart my bows. Puzzled, but having naught to conceal or to fear, I hove to, waiting for the warship's boat to board us. After a space, it drew alongside and up came a damned sneering, high-and-mighty officer.

"'We have reason to believe, ye colonial dog,' says he, 'that you are harboring deserters from the fleet in this pig trough o' a packet'—and my Speedy Fortune as sweet as a meeting-house pulpit! So that gold-laced scoundrel turned his damned villains loose and they ransacked my ship from truck to keelson, while he—curse his soul—taunted me and threatened me with ruin if such men were found. That he did, sir; threatened me!"

Half stifled by the sour, nauseous atmosphere, Nathan strove to concentrate on the other's tale and forget the plucking at his throat.

"Then," said the speaker bitterly, "to my astonishment they dragged from the lazaretto six desperate colonial fellows wi' the mark o' the navy cat yet fresh upon their backs. 'Before God, lieutenant!' I swore, 'I knew nothing of their presence—stowaways they are!' But for answer the ruffian felled me on my own quarter deck with a blow to the jaw. You can easy guess what then befell. A mockery of a trial—the confiscation of my sweet little ship—and here am I, a felon, condemned to twenty years in Australia." He laughed bitterly. "Ah, yes, I love the great and just English race! Bah!" The stranger spat savagely in the darkness.

"TRULY," said Nathan, after a pause, "I pity you; 'tis a terrible thing to have one's fortune and honor wrenched from one. In truth, my heart goes out to your wife, poor soul; no doubt 'twill be a vile tale which will be brought her."

"Nay," replied the stranger, with quiet dignity, "Esther will have abiding faith in me; she will know."

Nathan Andrews settled back against the damp reeking boards of the side, and wondered if Molly Lancaster, too, in spite of her impetuous heartbreaking letter, held an "abiding faith" in him—if she, too, would "know" in the face of the distorted, garbled version of the court-martial which that white-faced John Sherburne would see that she heard.

He could visualize the dandy's sad expression, as he rendered an apparently reluctant account of his brother officer's shameful treachery, of his brazen effrontery in denying the charges, ending with a hypocritical sorrow that a lieutenant of the glorious British Navy could sink so low.

"But, Mistress Lancaster," he would say, "for your sweet sake, I will do my best, and bring to bear such influence as I command, to win his release as soon as possible."

In the darkness, the colonial passed a dirty hand over his brow and brushed back the long hair which hung in disordered, greasy wisps about his naked shoulders.

While the other prisoners lay silent, the voices of the wounded convicts sounded ever feebler, as they lay helpless and untended on the vermin-harboring straw.

Nathan seemed to hear the voice of Molly Lancaster. Then as he shut his eyes, she stood there, a soul-healing vision, in the fetid inferno of the convict hold. In her young grace she seemed slender and pliant as an iris, infinitely cool and dainty, with her sensitive, perfectly formed lips parted just enough to show the purity of her white, regular teeth; in the shadows of her soft brown eyes there was a troubled look, and she held out her hands with a little gesture of appeal.

"Molly! Oh, Molly!" whispered the disgraced officer hungrily. "Oh, my love!" And eagerly his gaze drank in the loveliness of her, from her tiny, pointed satin slipper, fashioned of silver-shot silk, to the rakish little straw hat, set high on the side of her powdered, luxuriously long curls.

As he stared, she seemed to be demanding something, and passed her hand petulantly over the elaborate feather fan she carried. Then, for the first time, she seemed to see the haggard, unkempt creature crouching at her feet in the chains of his dishonor. She started back, her scarlet lip curling in mingled disgust and dismay.

The sight stung Nathan to the quick; and he held up a wasted arm so that the manacles clinked softly. "Molly!" he implored. "Oh, my true love, have faith in me!" He reached to catch the flowered silk of her voluminous skirt, but, instead, his fingers skinned themselves on the rusty surface of the great chain which ran the length of the hold.

Instantly the vision vanished. A tortured sob, wrung from the depths of the Carolinian's soul, broke the stillness, and was answered only by the querulous groaning of the ship's timbers and the hissing wash of the waves outside.

SUNK in utter despair and with a new steel-like quality in his heart, Nathan at last fell into a specter-haunted sleep in which the lovely vision reappeared. She was dressed as she had been on a certain fateful night, in tight-fitting knee breeches and smart lace-trimmed coat, with her own glorious hair crushed under just such a modish wig as was, at that moment, affected by the Corinthians and Bucks of Whitehall.

Again he seemed to see her, quite unconscious that he followed her breathlessly as she marched boldly to the door of the Golden Wheel, that notorious gambling hell, with her little head held high and walking with a delicious mannish swagger.

"Molly!" he cried in his sleep. "Are you mad? What is this crazy prank? Thank God, your good Betty found me in time—"

But, as on that terrible July evening, she sprang lightly aside, and darted into the yawning door before Nathan could stop her.

In his dream he saw it all again. Heard her clear laugh ringing high, admirably carrying on her deception at the gaming table, while he hovered despairingly in the background, fearful to use force and thus draw an attention which would forever blast the good name of willful Mistress Molly Lancaster.

He saw again the same evilly scowling gamester, stung by his losses, flinging insult at the stripling who won and won until the golden guineas were piled high before him. He lived again the sudden deadly struggle, ending with the gamester stretched on the floor and Nathan fighting his way to the door, with Molly, suddenly white and contrite, at his heels.

The ragged Carolinian convict stirred in his shackles as the scene changed, and he saw himself reading that astounding missive received in prison after the blow had fallen. How eagerly had he opened that scented note to read encouragement from the girl for whose sake he had held his tongue—how could he have blasted her name before a court-martial?

Then snatches of the terrible accusations in Molly's letter came back. "So, after all, you are a vile thing, a traitor to the Service you swore you loved above all else. I pray you forget that such a person as Molly Lancaster ever lived, and know that your unworthy memory has been wiped from her mind and heart forever. A liar, villain, and traitor—"

Those were but the least of her passionate reproaches. His brain burned with the rankling injustice of it all, little knowing of the amazing tissue of lies Molly had heard from Sherburne's carefully chosen envoys, and that she had not realized that the crucial night unaccounted for at the court-martial, was the one spent in rescuing her from her folly at the Golden Wheel. But, with that letter, she had slain his faith and his hope, if not his love.

At last, just as the dawn watches tramped by overhead, Nathan fell into the deep, dreamless sleep of exhaustion.

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN NEMESIS.

ABOUT six of the morning following, the hatch cover was removed. The opening allowed at least a part of the incredibly poisonous air to escape from the hold. Cursing feebly, the convicts stirred in their chains, and, one by one, sat up, hairy, lawless fellows, for the most part, with evil, bearded features and shifty eyes.

When the light at last awoke Nathan from his uneasy slumber, he roused himself, painfully stretched his long arms, then stifled a yawn with the back of his dirty hand, and stretched again.

"Prodigious fine muscles you have there, sir," stated a voice that Nathan recognized as that of the ruined shipmaster. "I fear me they'll not last much longer like that."

The young colonial turned deliberately and looked at his right-hand neighbor for the first time; he had been too absorbed in his own misery to notice him the night before, when they had been shackled side by side to the main chain.

He now saw a solid, square little man, clad in a tattered blue cotton shirt and a pair of filth-smeared serge breeches that must have once cost a pretty penny. Like most seafaring men of the day, he wore in his ears small rings of thick gold; this, and that indescribable far-seeing quality of his eyes, were all that marked him as a sailor. Otherwise, thought Nathan, he far more resembled an earnest country preacher, such as he had seen many a time holding forth along the American coast line.

A slow smile lit the sailor's face, which had not yet lost its deeply burned tan, and his thin lips parted, as he held out a stubby, powerful hand, on the back of which was tattooed a skillfully wrought blue anchor.

"My name's—well, call it Jonathan Trumbull—Jo Trumbull at your service, sir."

"'Tis a pleasure," said Nathan, as their hands met, "and doubly so had we encountered each other any place but here."

A black-haired rogue, with a scarcely-healed scar along his right cheek, interrupted.

"Ah, there's two o' yer high and mighty nobs here, is there?" he laughed derisively, and beckoned others of the convicts to look at the spectacle of two criminals who addressed each other with all the grace of a drawing-room manner.

"Thinks yer too good fer us, eh?" continued the black-headed prisoner. "I seen yer dirty nose in the air ever since yer landed in this hell ship—but, blast my eyes, yer'll learn yer place afore we fetch Botany Bay."

Following his lead, the surrounding prisoners heaped all manner of abuse and insult on the two who sat silent and grim-faced, until Nathan, losing patience, suddenly lashed out and smote the insult-spouting convict a shrewd blow on the jaw, which knocked that astonished worthy over backward, sagging on the chain, with a trickle of blood running from between his snaggled yellow teeth.

"Dogs!" thundered Nathan, and struggled to his feet, swaying with the motion of the vessel. "'Twould not tax one to be your betters; and know, you miserable cut-purses, that I choose to assume that distinction."

A growl of rage reëchoed in the hold. "Kill him! Kill the cursed swell head!"

"Strange him, George!"

"Break the damned macaroni's neck for him!"

Several of the nearest convicts got to their knees and measured the restraining chains to see if they permitted an assault on the man who so contemptuously reviled them.

NATHAN stood ready, his blue eyes flashing fire, with his great fists balled and the chain dangling between them. At his side stood the little shipmaster, Trumbull, watchful and calm, his gaze sweeping the nearest evil-featured wretches.

"Come on, curs who yelp so loud!" Nathan's voice filled the entire hold. "Come till ye learn who's yer better. Bah!" He jerked his head disdainfully. "Not one of you low-flung rogues has the spirit of a louse."

The threats sank into an ashamed silence as not a man dared advance. "Asses, idiots!" railed the Carolinian. "Ye've not even the sense to bide your time, but needs must riot like dumb beasts till the warders shoot you down."

He glanced about and saw that every face in sight was turned in his direction.

"Oh, fools! Not to know—" The ex-officer glanced up at the hatchway and, seeing it void of heads, continued in a lowered voice, while all about him fell silent: "That—much can be accomplished by patience and united effort. Know, all ye here, that, if you will obey me, I can promise that not one of our number will ever rot on the shores of Botany."

His naked chest heaving, Nathan looked at the rows of faces, glimmering palely in the half light of the hold, and saw here and there a man who seemed less wolfish than the rest. A long breathless moment the rascals wavered between raucous disbelief and half confidence.

At last in a far corner of the hold, a very thin convict swayed to his feet and raised his manacled wrists on high.

"Aye, mate, we'll wait; God knows

we'll all rot afore we reaches the prison stockade—so ye can count on Jeremy Ash to keep his corner quiet."

Then, one after another, convicts in all parts of the hold arose and expressed their willingness to maintain discipline and obey orders.

Nathan turned quickly to Jonathan Trumbull. "Quick," he whispered, "mark you well those that speak for order." Then aloud: "Now, my lads, that's better—be careful and be wary. Divide yourselves into squads of twenty each, then let the leader communicate with me and, by God, I'll have us all free in a fortnight!"

Even the wounded, crouched below the great chain, turned their colorless, sweating faces in the direction of that tall, commanding figure, and hope, tremulous and fugitive, appeared on their fierce features.

"Aye," came a low, rising rumble of voices, "for two weeks we'll obey ye. We'll obey! Hurrah for—for—" The convict mass halted for lack of a known name, and peered eagerly at the red-haired giant who had given them hope. "Your name! Your name, mate?"

"Is," Nathan gave a brittle laugh that had the sound of broken glass in it, "Captain Nemesis!"

"Hurrah! Fer Cap'n Nemesis!—Nemesis!" And the wild-eyed rogues rolled the name over and over on their thick tongues.

"Ye can call me Captain Nat for short," he added, and sat down, leaving the hold abuzz with conversation.

As the Carolinian sank down again on the louse-swarming straw, Jonathan Trumbull crawled near and said in an undertone: "Beware, captain, of yonder rogue you stretched senseless." He pointed to the black-haired fellow, who had now somewhat recovered himself, and lay nursing his swollen jaw and glowering at the man who had smitten him. "Beware, I say. I fear me he may slip a word to the warders, and then, Captain Nat, your handsome neck is like to stretch on the end of two fathoms of rope."

CHAPTER V.

MUTINEERS.

AS the prison ship Cerberus reached the blazing, windless area which lies below the twenty degree latitude, and lay becalmed off the coast of Senegal, Nathan felt that he had reason to congratulate himself. Everything had gone well, better by far than he had dared hope, and, with a surge of confidence, he realized that he now had at his command a not unwieldy force of one hundred and fifty men—for some twenty had died of wounds received in the riot and from effects of the noxious atmosphere.

With these he felt that a break might be attempted with some chance of success, in that the ship's company—warders, marines and sailors—numbered less than seventy. Then he smiled grimly to himself.

"We'll trample that damned flag under foot and start afresh—" He turned again to the New England ex-captain. "Have you marked the position of the guard at the hatch, as each gang goes up?" The hollow eyes of Captain Nat—as he was now called—searched those of Jonathan.

"Aye," replied the ex-shipmaster with a little nod of his hairless head. "They stand flush against the coaming. Count on it that one good shove would topple them over into the hold; and once there—" The New Englander grinned wolfishly and passed his powerful brown hands over a face which streamed with sweat in the fearful heat of the hold.

"And the rack of pikes?"

"Near the base o' the mainmast—" replied Trumbull without hesitation. "I'll so contrive it that my gang is near't when the signal's given."

Nathan nodded his shaggy red head

thoughtfully as he squatted on his dirty bare heels and played absent-mindedly with the shining strip of chain which gave his hand exactly eight inches play. He seemed to be fresh from bathing, so moistened by perspiration was his body. Little streaks of white showed on his skin where streams of evil-smelling prison sweat had washed away the encrusted dirt.

"Well, Jo," said Nathan at last, "be of good heart, for your rogues with the pikes should hold quiet such guards as may be on deck; their fellows, you may be sure, will be sleeping below in this fearful heat."

Jo nodded his bald brown head in assent. "Don't worry, Nat," he murmured grimly, "I'll not fail in any detail—and you can count on Ash and O'Hare as well. That you can."

"Who is this O'Hare?" inquired Nathan. "He seems once to have been a gentleman."

"United Irish," replied Trumbull quickly. "Transported for treason to the heavy German clown in Whitehall. I believe he was a surgeon once."

A smile of satisfaction lit Nathan's face. "A surgeon, say you—well, here's luck!"

Trumbull's eyes darted to the ringleader's face. "Tell me, Nat, when this is over, what's your plan?"

The Carolinian chuckled softly. "'Tis a good one—a broth of a scheme, as our Irish friend would say—'twill make our fortunes yet—material of course."

"And that is?"

Nathan put his hand on the New Englander's ragged shoulder. "When we're free, my good friend, you'll be the first to know," he whispered. "But until then—bide your patience, Jo."

"'Tis a genius ye are, Captain Nat. None but a trained mind would have recognized the weak spots in the system. Every rogue o' our number knows his duties and his place. To my mind few assaults in force were ever better planned."

"Then mark this well," Nathan bent close and whispered in his lieutenant's ear, "to-morrow we will strike—just as Jeremy's gang comes up and O'Hare's goes down — yours will be ready for the pikes."

"And who's to knock the damned lobsters back into the hold?"

"Buttersworth and Jonas, of O'Hare's gang," decided Nathan, after a moment of reflection, "they're sturdy lads, and reliable."

SO, while the Cerberus lay becalmed and motionless, as though set in glass instead of water, the desperate human freight with which she was laden nervously tensed their muscles for the coming of the next day, and dreamed, in the furnace-like heat, of the blessed liberty they would regain. So vivid was the dream of escape that few of them could sleep, and turned and twisted endlessly in their fetters, counting the minutes to dawn.

"Ah," grunted one, rumored to be a pirate of no small distinction. "And to-morrow we'll lie sweet and drunk i' the scuppers, and by the heart o' Blackbeard, I'll play duck on a rock wi' that murdering chief warder's heart!"

"If he has such a thing," said the other bitterly, and touched a livid row of wales across his shoulder. "Master Wallop's a demon-sired fiend o' cruelty that 'd make Cap'n Low himself green with envy."

"But tell me, mate, think you Captain Nat plans to hoist the black flag?" inquired a pinched, haggard wretch whose continual spitting and coughing proclaimed him to be far gone in consumption.

"He?" snorted the first speaker. "Never, he's too high and mighty for that." A look of sinister craft crept into the fellow's hair-fringed face. He drew the other's head close as he muttered: "Once these bracelets are off, we'll make an end of Captain Nat—

'tis well planned—then heigho for the Red Sea trade!"

"Aye," agreed the second speaker, "that's the course. Who'll be captain once the damned colonial's over side?"

"Black George, to be sure," returned the other in surprise; "he were mate under Velasques—and hates our fine leader no little; he's sworn to cut Nemesis's throat wi' his own hand—"

"That's the course, by God," whispered the second, as he stared at the tall Carolinian's naked back. "I've always hankered for the Red Sea trade—one ship o' the Mogul and we'll all be rich. But think ye, mate, that Cap'n Nat's so easy overcome? He's the strength of ten ordinary men!"

"A blow from behind will suffice—and now hold your tongue."

So with minds that dwelt eagerly on the morrow, and with the golden light of hope brightening their dark hearts, the majority of them fell into fitful slumber, listening to the hollow, methodical tramp of the sentries on the deck so far over their heads.

Near one end of the great master chain lay Nathan, going over his plans step by step with the painstaking persistence of the born commander who will not rest until the whole matter be neatly fitted together.

His skin crept with loathing as he stretched his length and felt the dampness of the foul straw, but his lips parted in a grim smile with the realization that, if all went as it should, he would be pressing it for the last time.

"And to-morrow," he meditated, "we shall be free—pure air to breathe!" The very thought set his heart to thumping, and with the nervous ecstasy of a soldier about to do battle, he flexed the mighty muscles of his arms until the cold iron encircling his wrists bit in with an icy grip.

"Aye," was his last thought, "and I'll have to watch that slippery-eyed, unhanged pirate they call Black George—but he'd not dare betray us; the others 'd pull him to gobbets."

When at last the dawn lit the horizon, it tinted a flat mirror-like sea and cast its rays upon the slack motionless sails of the Cerberus as she lay inanimate with her crew preparing for another day of the terrible heat. Barely visible far away, to the Cerberus's port side, lay a thin blue streak which marked the coast of Africa.

"THIS will be another scorcher," observed a mahogany-faced seaman as he glanced appraisingly at the sunrise glow. "Hell and brimstone! Yesterday was like to gi'e us all the sunstroke and to-day'll melt the brass of the cannonades or I'm no judge!" He fell to scratching a ripple of sun-melted tar with his yellowed big toenail, following the black streak's meanderings across the worn white planking of the deck to the scuppers. "More o' this and the sea will be bubbling for fair—aye, Job, to-day'll be hotter than the Widow Jones's mulling iron."

The other sailor gave a grunt of assent and energetically scratched the coarse brown hair of his head, then pulled his greasy pigtail over his shoulder and fell moodily to braiding its frayed end, which much resembled oakum both as to color and quality.

Meanwhile the ship's officers appeared on deck, one by one, and had that same seaman been an astute observer he would have quickly seen that in each new face anxiety was written large across the heated features.

"Aye, it 'll be main hot," he nodded gloomily, "and this damn old relic 'll not move a foot all day." The speaker looked up suddenly. "Tell me, Abner, ha' ye heard what ails that plaguey boy what was took with the vomit yestermorn?"

"Some says colic," returned the man Abner, and spat a little jet of brown fluid over the side into the vivid greenness of the water. "Some says his narsty nature's struck in, and some says—"

About to speak further, the seaman's eyes narrowed and he bent his head close to his companion, but there came a sudden ringing shout which made every slow-pacing marine whirl in his tracks, finger on trigger, looking here and there in alarm.

"Posts!" bawled the officer of the watch, in excited stentorian tones—and an instant later the marine's bugle shrilled insistently, summoning on deck sleepy sweating figures in tight scarlet jackets which flashed painfully upon the sight in the brightness of the morning sun.

"Fall in!" The bony, horse-faced lieutenant in command barked out his orders with the rasp of a man whose nerves are frayed, and who has serious work ahead. "Fix bayonets!" Like waves breaking on a moonlit reef, the long sword bayonets flashed out. Then the metallic click of them being locked into place aroused Abner to speech.

"Gor," he muttered anxiously, "wot's up?" He glanced sidewise at his companion. "Must be a convict mutiny or I'm a Dutchman—which I ain't—"

"Uh," agreed the man Job, and drew back among the tarpaulined guns to allow a file of blue-coated warders to pass. "I'm sorry for the jail birds at the bottom o' this—there'll be the fruit on the yardarms afore this week's out."

Breathlessly the two seamen watched the scene while all of their fellows who could find a place of vantage gaped in curious alarm, as a double file of marines lined the starboard deck and surrounded the hatch leading into the convict hold.

This done, six of the warders stepped forward with long, lead-tipped cat-o'-nine-tails dangling from their fists. At the head of the stair leading into the foul-smelling pit below, the foremost warder, a tall, pock-marked fellow, tucked the lash beneath his armpit and peeled back the blue sleeve from his muscle-corded arm. He grinned savagely, and taking the shaft again in his tattooed hand, cut three or four whistling slashes through the air: more than one seaman winced reminiscently at the swish of those cords.

One by one the six warders disappeared down the ladder, closely followed by some fifteen or twenty of their number who bore cocked and loaded pistols in their hands.

ON the bright sun-lit deck there was, for a moment, complete and absolute silence; the marines with grounded arms staring blankly at their own long blue-black shadows which the already burning sun cast upon the deck. The Cerberus's officers were clustered in a blue and white group at the rail of the quarterdeck, talking in hurried undertones among themselves. The gold and scarlet officer of marines straddled his legs and, pursing his lips into a soundless whistle, stared fixedly at a lifeless ensign dangling from the maintopmast.

Then from below burst a sudden outcry, followed by a rising gale of groans, wails, curses, and supplications, mingled with a curious crackling sound—of whips lashing bare flesh.

"On deck, ye mutinous rogues!" "Stir yer stumps, ye bloody-handed cutthroats!" "Ah, God!" "Pity!" "Mercy!" The cries came floating up while all eyes focused on the yawning blackness of the aperture.

The tall pock-marked warder reappeared, his red, dripping "cat" held ready as he motioned to the marines to fall back, leaving a path down the deck between the double rank of stiff, motionless men in red.

"Ah!" said Job in a low voice. "See 'em come, the bloody devils! Murder us, would they?"

From the hold appeared a shaggy, filthy head whose bloodshot eyes rolled and blinked desperately in the sudden brightness. The convict held his manacled hands high to the heavens, with

the chain swinging between them like a pendulum. His dirty fingers were bent like poisonous talons.

At the smell of him the marines who stood nearest wrinkled their noses in disgust.

"Down there, dog!" snapped the head warder, and pointed along the deck with his cat-o'-nine-tails. "Move fast!" With his words the long cords flicked about the wretch's hairy chest, and, as he doubled in agony at the searing pain, the sweating warder dealt him another blow across the knees "to straighten him up," as he announced with a hoarse laugh.

Up came the convicts, tall, short, bent with age, or round with youth, all in indescribable rags, and with their chained hands stretched toward the burning blue above.

"Gawd! The stink o' them!" Abner turned away his none too delicate features in disgust, while Job pinched his copious red nose 'twixt calloused, rope-burned thumb and forefinger. "It's like the pit of the Duke of York's playhouse when the fleet's in."

"And here's for you!" growled the chief warder. "It 'll take that high and mighty look off your gallows bird's face!" He swung the thongs swishing through the air and struck Nathan squarely across the face. Giant though he was, Nathan reeled under the shock of it, and would have fallen but that a marine, not unkindly, thrust out his musket stock and stayed the tottering prisoner.

As he limped along the deck with his ankle chains clanking, Nathan's heart died within his breast, leaving in its stead a strange hard substance that was as cold as the fingers of the North Wind.

"Here's the end of Nathan Andrews," he thought dully, and felt the warm blood trickle from his twisted, swollen face down the grime and filth of his naked chest. "Black George it must have been—well, the rope will cut all this short." He uttered a low, strident laugh which earned him a musket butt in the ribs.

How his arms ached, exhausted from the terrible conditions under which he had now existed for nearly two months; the weight of the heavy manacles seemed ponderous beyond description. He lowered them a trifle and instantly felt the cold prick of a bayonet point in the skin over his kidneys.

NATHAN'S left eye felt wholly blinded by the "cat's" savage slash, but as he waited for the others to be herded on deck, his right eye wandered aft and rested on the blur of blue and gold just discernible on the quarter-deck.

His teeth met in a bitter grin of despair. There were the officers, in the familiar uniform he had once worn—a uniform he had expected to wear to glory and advancement. But for the sake of a girl of little faith, he would be up there on equal terms with the best of them, and wearing clean white linen. As his eyes fell, they caught a faint shadowy movement which caused him to look to the masthead.

There hung the flag he had sworn to throw in defeat on the deck of his own ship! Vain boast! The Carolinian's strong teeth shone in a wolfish smile. Well for the English that they were going to hang him!

"This 'ere rogue," whined a nasal and ingratiating voice, "is one of the precious Cap'n Nat's closest mates; thick like thieves they were, sir."

Nathan turned his head as much as he dared, and beheld the traitorous Black George, freed of his shackles, in the act of pointing out a certain blithe spirit whose name was O'Hare, till recently Fellow of the Royal Medical Society of Dublin.

"Sure and 'tis Judas's prize pupil we have here," mocked the white-faced Irishman. "And did the English give ye thirty silver shillings, ye spawn o' hell?"

He spat at the grinning, fawning wretch, who, assured of his own miserable life, eagerly swore away the lives of his comrades in dishonor.

But a warder's fist shot out, which, catching the ex-medico on the point of the jaw, stretched him quivering, at the feet of the marines, while an officer duly entered O'Hare's name in a list he carried.

"An' him!" The traitor's gnarled forefinger was leveled at Jonathan Trumbull.

The New Englander stared impassively beyond the accusing finger, a distant look in his eyes, as though he were making his peace with a world too full of sorrow to endure.

Thus along the crowded deck strode Black George, pausing ever and anon to point out some unhappy creature whose few remaining virtues had given Nathan Andrews some confidence.

The scuffle of the informer's bare feet drew near to the accompaniment of convicts cursing fearfully under their breath lest Black George denounce them.

"And this scurvy gallows bird, good sirs," whined the traitor, "is the ringleader—captain of the whole plot." The fellow leered venomously at Nathan, who stood with head yet held as though on parade, the warder's red welts standing in ridges across his unshaved features.

"Hold your tongue, knave!" grunted the officer with the list, at the same time motioning the warders to drag away the protesting informer.

As Abner had aptly foretold, it appeared that the yardarms of the yet motionless prison ship would shortly creak under those hideous "acorns," such as the cruel old King of France loved to behold.

"THIRTY blood-minded rogues," observed Captain Holman genially, as the travesty of a trial came to an abrupt ending. Sweating profusely in his thick blue uniform, he sat behind a desk, tapping his teeth with a quill pen, while his eyes wandered over the heavily chained condemned men. Suddenly he paused, as though struck by an idea, and turned to a leaden-complexioned junior officer who served as clerk of the court.

"What's the day, Harvey?" he inquired.

"November the first," replied the clerk, passing a thin hand over his pallid, sweating features; he felt ill, and the windless day was hotter than ever. Even the officers of the court dabbed their handkerchiefs at their faces incessantly, and most of them had laid aside their wigs.

"Hah," said the captain with a soundless laugh which set his fat cheeks to shaking, "how goes the jingle?"

Curiously, Nathan's eyes rested on that broad, red face, wondering what had entered the captain's mind, when that hardened individual began to recite: "Thirty days hath September, April, June and November—"

Then a premonitory pang shot through the colonial, as his mind, more alert than those of his companions, grasped the trend of Captain Holman's train of thought.

"Thirty days hath November," repeated the captain ponderously, and seemed immensely amused at the idea; "and thirty blood-minded rogues—Hah-hah-hah!" Forthwith the officer, with heat-tautened nerves urging him on, began to laugh, his white neckcloth jerking in time to his outbursts.

"One mutinous rascal a day," he gasped, and wiped the tears of mirth from his eyes. "'Twill be a great lesson to those knaves! Well, we must begin, or we'll lose our proportion. Sergeant!" The captain turned aside. "Pick me out yonder red-haired ringleader; he's a rogue ripe for hanging; and you, Mr. Hendries, order a noose from the main yard—"

As Captain Holman crouched over his desk like an enormous red bullfrog,

his eyes encountered Nathan's white disfigured face. For a long moment they looked at each other, the gaunt ragged prisoner staring death in the face, and the plump rubicund captain. Then the Carolinian stepped forward to the accompanying rattle of fetters, for, though freed of their ankle chains, the doomed convicts wore even heavier manacles about their wrists.

"Permit me to offer my thanks, good sir," said Nathan softly. "Your promise that I hang first is the one kindness I have met with on this floating hell."

Captain Holman was visibly startled. "Eh? What's that?" he sputtered, while even the stolid, animal-faced warders gaped. "You want to hang? Why?"

"Yes," said the Carolinian, "you wouldn't understand—you've not wit enough."

The Englishman ignored the gibe.

"So I'm not bright enough, eh? Well, maybe I'm not—probably I've not even dreamed of the crime you're transported for—maybe I'm not," he repeated. "And you want to be hanged? Well, well, I'll hang you at the end of a week if I've not guessed your reason—"

"For God's sake, sir"—Nathan held out grimy, supplicating hands—"let me be first!"

"No!" Captain Holman's pudgy fist banged on the desk. "Sergeant, pick me out another—and note that Master Ringleader 'll swing on the eighth day."

Trembling and blanching whiter than their prison pallor, the weaker natures among the condemned men strove to hide behind their fellows, until the red-coated sergeant reached in and dragged forth a shivering rat-faced convict.

"Coom, leetle wan," quoth the marine in a broad Devonshire accent. "It's a kindness to ta-a-ak you furst."

But strangely enough, as the moaning, terror-stricken wretch was haled forth to die, the leaden-faced junior officer uttered a strangled gasp and pitched senseless across the table, presumably overcome by the heat and excitement, while streams of spilled ink dripped to the floor in great spattering blots. O'Hare, ever a surgeon at heart, peered curiously at the stricken man.

A few minutes later the remaining twenty-nine mutineers lay in a fetid little hole under the bows, listening to the dry roll of drums which sped the soul of the first condemned man as he struggled spasmodically below the quivering main yard-arm.

"Faith," said O'Hare meditatively, "and he's the lucky boy of us all." He fell silent; then, as though voicing the thoughts of every man there present, he murmured: "I wonder who'll next dance the floorless hornpipe?"

CHAPTER VI.

BLACK HORROR.

NATHAN reached out in the utter darkness in which he and the remaining twenty-three doomed had existed for a suffocating, intolerable week, and sought to raise his hand in salute as the French captain tendered his sword. It seemed he was on the quarter-deck of a mighty ship of the line, from which could be seen the smoking wreck of his late adversary. The gold-mounted sword handle was almost within his grasp, when suddenly the Frenchman became transformed into the evil form of Black George, who held out, not a shining sword, but a well-greased noose.

"Hell's fire," swore Nathan as he aroused himself. "Another day of this and I'll go mad!"

The calm, bitter voice of the ex-surgeon broke the sultry stillness of the hold.

"Have ye forgotten, Nat, my boy, that for you there'll be no other day? Lucky dog that ye are!"

"Yes, I'd quite forgot," sighed Nathan. "I'll confess I clean forgot that trifling fact."

"'Tis a sad, inglorious way to die," commented the Irishman from the gloom. Nathan could not have said whether O'Hare was distant one foot or ten, so perfect was the obscurity of the stifling den.

At the sound of voices chains clinked and the foul straw rustled as the condemned prisoners aroused themselves from the hopeless lethargy into which they sank for hours on end.

"There's something wrong wi' this vessel," croaked a hoarse voice. "There's seven of us gone—seven days—and the calm begun a week afore the—the mutiny were to ha' took place." The speaker paused as though calculating. "Let's see now, seven and a week's sixteen."

"No," corrected Trumbull unemotionally, "it's fourteen blessed days we've been becalmed. Oh, God! This heat, I can't bear it."

Then the doomed men fell silent for a long time, with only the sound of their labored breathing disturbing the silence as they expelled the poisonous atmosphere.

"Why don't the jailers come?" asked Nathan at last. "They're late to-day. No manners—to keep a gentleman waiting for his hanging."

Again silence for many minutes, or mayhap hours—they in that lightless den could not have told.

"There's something wrong," complained one of the prisoners. "I've counted slow to fifty thousand. I wonder— Oh, God, but I'm athirst!"

Hours later Nathan spoke again.

"I can't make it out, O'Hare; they are long overdue for me; and it's past the time for our bread and water, or my poor belly's a liar. What keeps 'em back?"

Only the squeak of rats rustling among the planking above their heads answered him.

"A most prodigious calm this, no wind even yet," remarked Jonathan Trumbull quietly. "I wonder what's befallen. Have ye noticed, Nat, there were fewer footsteps about the deck yesterday than the day before?"

"Aye," agreed another voice quickly, "and all this blessed day I've heard the tread of but one man in the spar gallery."

A sudden and inexplicable chill gripped the Carolinian's heart. "My God!" he said suddenly. "What can be wrong?"

"Gentlemen," came accents of O'Hare, late of the Royal Medical Society, "I believe I have the answer." The Irishman's voice was charged with gravity. "I know now—seven days, yes, yes," he muttered thoughtfully. "That's it—it can be nothing else."

"Well?"

There was patent alarm in voices from all corners of the dark den.

"WE are in the hands of God!" said O'Hare solemnly. "An enemy more pitiless than any pirate, more powerful than all the fleets of England, has boarded this ship!"

"For God's sake," cried Trumbull in a shaking voice, "who is this enemy?"

"You remember the clerk who fainted at our trial?"

"Yes, yes," breathless voices chorused from all parts of the blackness.

"At the time I noticed him and wondered. Gentlemen" — O'Hare's polished tones were very grave—"the enemy I speak of is—smallpox!"

As the ex-surgeon's voice died away upon the completion of his dreadful announcement, it seemed as though the loathsome den in which the condemned men were sequestered were devoid of life for five palpitating seconds. Then one poor wretch voiced the despair filling his soul in a heart-chilling cry of terror which set the hair to bristling on the heads of his fellows.

"Oh—oh—God! They'll leave us to starve," the affrighted creature wailed. "Oh, God—we'll rot like trapped rats—die here in the dark!"

Nathan felt a man clamber across his legs, and heard the sound of a body crashing furiously against the heavy oak boards of the door, triple-barred on the outside with only a narrow grating at the top to admit air.

Panic suddenly seized the majority, and in a blindly struggling mass they joined the first man, hurling themselves against the walls of their prison.

"Help! Help!" they howled. "Hang us—but for God's sake, don't leave us to starve in the dark. Help! Help!" Their raving reminded Nathan of lunatics gibbering in the grip of some unnamable terror.

Tirelessly the prisoners hammered their manacles on the doors, piteously beseeching death rather than the fate to which they seemed committed. One after another the panic seized them, until all save the Carolinian, Trumbull and the Irish doctor were lunging ineffectually against the door, which withstood their assault with as much ease as though feathers, rather than bodies made strong with desperation, were being launched against it.

Above horrified, insensate yells Nathan heard the voice of the New Englander praying quietly, earnestly and without fear, as though the shipmaster were in a meetinghouse of his beloved Boston.

"Cease, ye fools!" roared O'Hare at last. "Ye gain naught by these mad miaoulings. Stop and listen!"

Breathing the foul air in great gasping lungfuls, the horrified convicts halted at last, to sink sobbing to the floor. No footsteps sounded outside, and the Cerberus lay silent as the grave.

"Some one may come," said Nathan in a voice he strove to make reassuring. "Surely there must be some poor soul left alive."

But in his heart he had no hope. He settled back against a damp wooden side with teeth tight clenched as he prepared himself for death.

How long the doomed men lay in silence Nathan never knew. Endlessly they waited, eternally hopeful of hearing the sound of blessed footsteps coming down the narrow passage which led to their prison. But the deathly, uncanny stillness was unbroken. From the deck overhead came no sound of shouted commands, no familiar shrilling of the boatswain's pipe, no rattle of sails being raised or lowered.

Gradually the conviction grew that they, condemned to death, were the only souls alive on a great charnel ship, which still lay motionless on the breathless, burning bosom of the tropic sea.

AFTER an incredibly long time, during which thirst and hunger exerted their ravages, a ghastly unfamiliar stench began to creep in the tiny port cut in the door.

"'Tis the voice of the dead," croaked O'Hare with a ghastly chuckle, "and 'twill not be long ere we too say our little piece."

Two of the convicts, ex-pirates, cursed the Irishman horribly; then one, a felon named Feathersoft, began to sing wildly:

"Each rogue to his flaming gun,
Get the bloody work well done
With cutlass, pike or pistol.
When we can't longer strike a blow
Then fire the powder and up we go.
'Tis better swim the sea below
Than hang in chains to feed the crow,'
Said jolly Ned Teach of Bristol!"

And, here and there in the Stygian darkness, rough voices, cracking with thirst, took up the infectious gruesome refrain:

"Said jolly Ned Teach of Bristol!"

It was fearful to hear the doomed wretches howling verse after verse of that lewd, blasphemous and seemingly

interminable ballad. Its macabre quality sent a shiver through Nathan's being.

Then, with a dull, gnawing pain in his stomach, he fell into a feverish sleep, in which appeared again the Lady Molly Lancaster. Like a spirit from a far-off world she seemed, the scent of her dainty gown like an elixir of strange powers was wafted to the pinched nostrils of her lover.

"Molly!" Nathan whispered brokenly. "Molly, my dearest one—"

"Yes." Her voice had in it the mellow quality of distant church bells which toll the Angelus. "Yes, Nathan, what would you?"

She regarded him with eyes that wavered between demure gravity and arch mischief—that strange mixture of melting maid and hoyden which had ever fascinated Nathan since first they played as lad and lass by the placid moss-hung banks of the Santee, that majestic river flowing in tawny grandeur past the plantations of their parents.

"Ah, Molly darling," he gasped, feasting his burning eyes on her beauty, "I'm prodigious tired, dear. I think I'll rest—rest a long time."

He shut his eyes and seemed to feel the life flowing out of his weary, exhausted body; felt the blood slow in his veins and a great lassitude engulf him. How wonderful it was! Then, like the peal of a wrathful silver trumpet came her voice.

"Nathan! Awake, you sluggard! Oh, Nathan, awake—for my sake!"

CHAPTER VII.

TRAPPED BELOW DECKS.

AND Nathan awoke—to find the ship rolling gently to and fro. The calm was at an end, and before long the vessel was wallowing in the trough of a rising sea, which wrenched the helpless Cerberus to and fro with merciless power.

With a strange new strength in his heart, the Carolinian rose to his feet and, stooped by the massive beams above, he groped to find the door. At last his fingers touched the cold dampness of the iron bands which reënforced the portal, then felt for the iron-barred panel that admitted the air. As his fingers gripped one of the bars, he drew a deep breath and, setting his mighty shoulders, pulled with all his new-found strength. Back he surged until his joints ached and his muscles crackled. As a result there came but a tiny creak in the wood. Then he heaved twice again, to pause with the sweat running down his face in streams.

Trembling with anxiety, he ran his hand over the bar he had wrenched and found, to his inexpressible joy, that it had been loosened quite perceptibly. In the stifling dark he stood, momentarily paralyzed by his discovery.

"O'Hare! Trumbull!" he called. "The wood is somewhat rotted. I've loosened one of the bars!"

Instantly all the other twenty-one prisoners pressed forward crying for information.

"Avast there! Stand back!" implored Trumbull. "Belay! Give him space! Damn you for thick-headed swabs!"

"Sure," said O'Hare gravely, when he had inspected the bar, "and with time I'll warrant ye can do it—three bars will suffice, then by the mercy o' Mary, ye'll be able to slide back the bolts, if"—and he paused significantly—"if ye can reach them all! God pity us all, if there's a bolt out of reach near the floor!"

At the end of an hour, the prisoners gave a hoarse cry of joy as the panting Carolinian staggered back with the first bar in his hand.

"God above, what a roll!" cried Trumbull with a gasp as the Cerberus tilted drunkenly on her side. "If this sea worsens, the old hooker's like to turn turtle."

The straining ears of the convicts could catch all manner of strange rumblings and hollow thumpings, as gear left loose during the calm commenced to roll with the motion. And at the same time, the nauseating stench from down the corridor grew stronger, as though decomposed bodies had commenced a horrid progress back and forth across the decks.

"And now for the second," cried Nathan. As the words left his lips, there came the sound of a heart-shaking, thundering crash which pitched all the struggling, despairing survivors in a heap at one end of the den.

"God ha' mercy," shrieked a voice, "she's struck a reef!"

"Aye, and badly, too!" yelled the New Englander above the awful grinding of riven timbers which made the Cerberus tremble like a wounded animal.

"Quick, Nat! For the love of God —the other bars!" O'Hare's voice held the ring of final despair.

Like a maniac, Nathan hurled himself forward and gripped the bar beside the gap left by the others. Urged on by the frenzied cries of the others, he set his back and, putting one foot against the short iron-bound door, pulled with all his might. He felt the bar give a little, so little that he despaired of ever freeing them all before the wounded Cerberus should sink.

"Faster!" cried Trumbull, "she's sliding off the rocks and she'll fill main speedy!"

WITH foam flying from his writhing lips, the ex-officer strained and pulled until shimmering red spots glowed before eyes which seemed to start from his head. Though the gurgle of inrushing water sounded menacingly in his ears, the Carolinian knew he must pause an instant, and was dismayed to find that the flooring under his feet was tilting at a distinct angle.

Overhead the dull rumble of a gun carriage breaking loose of its breeching told them that the sickening roll had increased instead of lessening.

"Quick, man!" implored O'Hare, "and 'tis old Davy Jones himself we'll be seeing if ye don't."

Once more Nathan groped about the pitchy darkness and set his strength against the bar, which came out suddenly and sent him staggering back.

"Thank God!" The strident shouts of the unseen prisoners rang loud in his ears, "Speed ye! Cap'n Nat! Hearken how swift the vessel fills. Try the hole!"

With a heart drumming hope, Nathan thrust his bloody fingers out of the gap, but with a sense of despair found his hand stayed at the wrist.

"No, the space is not large enough," he shouted above the clamor of the terror-stricken wretches who felt the vessel sinking under their feet. "For God's sake, peace while I try the third bar!" Thinking rapidly and in a frenzy of haste he gripped the loose second bar and levered against the fourth upright. Under the leverage the wood crackled almost at once.

"Oh-h-h!" yelled a voice in Nathan's ear. "We're doomed! Feel the water, water—the water! Help! Help!" In abandoned panic the poor soul shrieked out his terror, clutching Nathan's shoulder with a dripping paw.

It was true. A cold ripple of water lapped the Carolinian's naked feet and filled him with a blind, raging rebellion at being caught and drowned in the dark like a rat. His whole body went cold. Then, with a mighty effort of his will, he recovered himself and attacked the third bar with even greater fury, while the tilt of the deck increased. At O'Hare's direction the cooler men formed a wall of bodies behind him to keep the colonial in reach of the door. Inexorably as a racing flood tide the water rose inch by inch to their ankles—to their knees.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

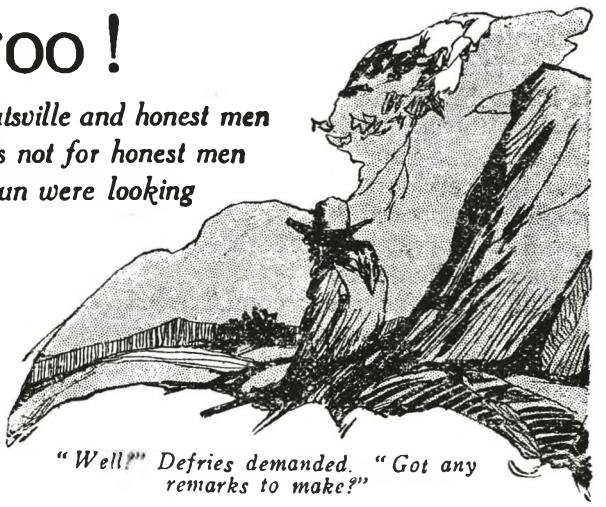
Chigaroo!

Rustlers ruled the town of Hatsville and honest men were hard to find—but it was not for honest men Rex Harden and his six-gun were looking

By EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

Author of "First Buccaneer," "Lord of Liarsburg," etc.

Novelette—Complete



"Well?" Defries demanded. "Got any remarks to make?"

CHAPTER I.

THE 13-BENCH HORSE'S BRAND.

"STRANGER," said Rex Harden to the squat, grizzled man on the screw-tailed roan, "is this the trail to Hatsville?"

The grizzled cowman pulled in his horse and spat judicially into the sand. Thereafter, he looked thoughtfully over and up and down Rex Harden's general outwardness, from Stetson to boots. The 13-Bench brand on the gray horse's hip occupied his attention for a perceptible moment. Then he answered deliberately:

"Well, if yuh think yuh been hoorawed, by them as told yuh this was the Hatsville trail, then I'm plumb hoorawed, too. For I shore did figger I was usin' that meetroplus o' the greasewood no more'n a hour back. Course, now, it might've been a my-rage. But if it was, that my-rage Ol' Crow that's served out for a my-rage two-bits in the my-rage Ace o' Hearts saloon in this-here my-rage Hatsville, why, it has got more real authority than ever Roy Bean in All His Glory had! Tell yuh what, son: jist yuh keep ridin' this trail for about five mile an' see if yuh don't plumb bump yo' nose smackdab into the town! *Adios!*"

He jogged on past and left Rex grinning a little. But, perhaps a hundred yards past, the grizzled man suddenly yelled like a timber wolf suffering a stomach pain. Rex turned and saw that he was being beckoned up to the man. He set in the rowels and loped to where the grizzled man waited.

"Oh!" said the native. "Don't blame *me* if yuh don't like it!"

And he whirled his screwtail Slash-R roan and was gone like a frightened coyote, developing a smooth speed that the borrowed gray of Rex could not have equaled with twice as many legs as nature had given him.

"Well!" remarked Rex. "You're a downright comical hairpin, you are—if that was meant for a joke— *If* it was meant for a joke. But suppose it wasn't? Suppose that fella was talkin' straight? Oh, hell! If I start worryin' this far off the ground, I'm apt to end up down at Terrell wearin' my hat sidewise an' claimin' I'm Napoleon. A cattle association detective ce'tainly oughtn't to worry—he ought to try to be happy an' joyous an' carefree, all same lil bird, the short time he usually has got to live."

HE jogged on, grinning a shade tightly and making a cigarette. The sandy trail wound in and out between the greasewood and mes-

quite clumps, among ocotilla and Spanish dagger and yucca. Ahead of him he could glimpse, like a polished scimitar dropped on a billiard table, the silvery curve of the Rio Grande in its green bosques. He rode with mechanical alertness, and so, when a horseman appeared far over on his left, heading the other way, but paralleling the trail, Rex slid a hand behind him and got his glasses from a saddlebag.

"Well, I swear to Goslin'!" he cried, when he had focused the binoculars just in time to catch a last glimpse of the rider. "Yes, sir, if that didn't look like Newt Defries I'm a Chinaman—an' far back as the Hardens can recall, there's never been a laundry in the family. But what'd he be doin' down here? He married up in Fort Worth an' I thought he'd got plumb out o' the cow business."

He thought a good deal about his old friend Newt Defries as he covered the remaining distance to the edge of Hatsville. Like those two immortal punchers in the old song, he and Newt "had rode the range together an' rode it side by side" and had shared tobacco and money and thoughts without reservation. He thought he would have to make inquiries in Hatsville. Even if Newt had gone and joined that different and hogtied and opinionless class known as Married Men, Rex thought he would like to come up with the lanky hairpin and buy him one drink.

"Even if he does have to take sassprilla!" he grinned to himself and reined in, about that time, before the First—and last—Chance Saloon on the skirt-tail of Hatsville.

The town was typical of the border—a sandy main street running between

twin rows of plastered or unplastered adobes used for stores and saloons and more saloons and residences. The wide, roofed gallery of the First Chance was deserted when Rex pulled in his gray before it.

He swung down and was knotting reins on hitchrack when a red-headed, foxy-faced cowboy came sauntering outside. Rex was quite conscious of the sharp, red-brown eyes roving over him. He turned and nodded with the grave colorlessness proper in a stranger. The red-head suddenly grinned; he looked swiftly over-shoulder, then stepped close.

"My stars, but ye shore take yer time gittin' here!" he said. "How's Rusty? An' ol' Squinch?"

Rex rocked a little on his heels and regarded the curious one with twinkling blue eyes. He knew very well that the mistake in identity responsible for this warmth of greeting was due to one thing and one thing only—that 13-Bench brand on the gray.

The joke of the matter was that he had borrowed the gray from old Cay-Cassius Kelly, the stuttering owner of the Half-Circle K. Kelly, in turn, had received the 13-Bench horse in a trade and had not bothered to vent the brand and slap on his own. Of the 13-Bench folk, Kelly might have known a deal, but Rex Harden knew absolutely nothing.

"Squinch comin', too?" the redhead persisted. "I kind o' hope so. Not that I'm runnin' ye down, none, fella. But in this kind o' business somebody like ol' Squinch is shore a red ace in the hole! Mebbe ye can pull it without a speck o' trouble. But I never yet see Squinch fall down on a job o'—"

A lank, dark six-footer stepped through the saloon door at this juncture. One might have thought he had been listening to the voluble redhead. One might have thought so—anyway, Rex Harden did. For in a careless tone, the intruder remarked:

"Well, Chigaroo, what's all the noise about?"

Instantly, the redhead's eyes narrowed and he stared hard at Rex, then glanced with a frown at the 13-Bench brand again and back at Rex. His foxy face was foxy indeed, as he turned slowly to the black-faced utterer of that outlaws' warning.

Rex understood perfectly. Which was the principal reason he had been hired to look into matters around Hatsville. Matters pertaining to "wet" stock moving both ways—into Mexico and out of Mexico. He knew outlaw lingo and outlaw signs as well as the old Long Rider who had taught him the mysteries.

"WHERE you from, stranger?" inquired the newcomer, easily. "Right good hawse you got. 13-Bench—why, that's ol' Rusty Ranfrew's outfit, ain't it, Rojo?"

"Shore!" nodded the redhead. "I used to work for Rusty. I was just askin' this fella if Rusty an' his foreman, Squinch-Eye Toomie, was comin' to town soon. Reckon?"

Not only Rojo, but the dark man also, regarded Rex very steadily indeed. More probing, he knew. But since he could not play any part with them and thus discover what was behind all this, it seemed to him just as well to part with them here and now.

"Do'no'," he shrugged. "They never said a thing about it to me. But"—he hesitated, both actually and in appearance—"I did hear a lil somethin' about—another cattle association detective driftin' over this way. Seems the last one that come was so welcome that the folks made a permanent citizen out o' him. O' course, this is maybe just one o' them rumor-things."

"Can happen," nodded Rojo and the dark man together. "Well, I reckon folks'll be jist as glad to see the new fella as they was to see the other'n."

"I bet you!" grinned Rex, and went on past them into the saloon.

He found himself a place at the end of the long, rough plank bar. Coming down the room to this point, he had been thoughtfully regarded by perhaps twenty men. It was rather hard to place each individual, for this was a country where a perfectly honest cowman or puncher or trader or freighter might sprout a villainous growth of whiskers and wear clothes that would not have been stolen from an unwatched line by a swamp-nigger.

But he gave them one thing—a uniform "salinity" of appearance. He went so far, in his own mind, as to believe that he had never seen quite so many salty-seeming gentlemen—all unarmed—together.

The bartender came down languidly, twirling a waxed mustache point. He spun a glass to Rex and followed it with a bottle, then held out a plump and not too clean hand in an accustomed way. Rex fished into the pockets of his chaps and produced a silver dollar. The gentleman of drinks took the coin, but with his left hand. Still he held out his right and Rex looked at him with curious frown, head on one side.

"The' ought to be three more drinks in that dollar," Rex suggested gently, at last.

"Artillery," sighed the bartender. "Ag'inst the lawr, stranger, to pack a hawglaig inside the cor-po-rate limmuts o' the town more'n ten minutes. I'll take care o' your weepins."

Rex grinned and unbuckled his cartridge belt. He rolled it around the long-barreled and bone-handled forty-four and watched it go to a nail over the backbar. Then Rex fell to meditating; and the sum-total of his thoughts was that Rojo, the red-headed and unwary hairpin, had evidently been expecting a 13-Bench man to arrive for some particular job. That it was a criminal undertaking, Rex had little doubt. Honest men do not "chigaroo" each other very often.

He felt an elbow graze his own and looked sidewise. Rojo was beside him, grinning cordially. Rex permitted himself return of the grin.

"Ye be'n workin' for the 13-Bench, huh?" grinned Rojo. "Don't ye mind Kittrick. He is a kind o' suspicious hairpin by nature. He—"

"Look here!" said Rex abruptly, but in tone as low as Rojo's. "I am a suspicious hairpin by nature, too. I come ridin' in on a 13-Bench hawse—happens. You come up an' begin claimin' acquaintance with Rusty Ranfrew an' Squinch-Eye Toomie. An' for all I know"—his tone of horror was a very work of art—"you may be sher'f o' Hat County!"

"Why, didn't Rusty an' Squinch tell ye about me?" demanded Rojo, in honest surprise.

"Not a word I can recollect!" vowed Rex grimly, and with perfect honesty. "Not — a — single — word! So, you see—"

"WELL, if that don't beat three of a kind!" said Rojo, gaping. "Who did they tell you to see here?"

"That," Rex grinned, "would be tellin', *amigo mio!* Now, if it's information you're huntin', it's exactly what I'm after, too! What outfit is claimin' yo' attention about now?"

"The Snake," said Rojo with meaning. He seemed to wait.

"'At so?" said Rex politely. "Just think o' that!"

Rojo fished in a vest pocket and brought out his cigarette papers. But when he had taken one out and again reached into a pocket, it was to bring out a forty-five shell. He set the paper on the bartop and with the cartridge-lead drew a rough sketch of a writhing serpent. In its center was a square and inside that rudely indicated box he made a cross. It was his "brand." Rex knew that, but the trouble was, there were so many such brands! Not all the picture writing on rocks of the southwest was made by Indians!

What he lacked, here, was definite acquaintance with local Long Riders. Evidently, he was expected by Rojo to recognize that brand as showing a man of the local outfit who could be trusted —trusted by a gentleman riding a 13-Bench horse toward a certain particular job.

"I'm *almost* satisfied," he shrugged.

"*Por amor de Dios!*" cried Rojo amazedly. "I'd call ye a suspicious gunie! How much reference d' ye have to git from a man before ye"—he lowered his voice quickly—"can ask help in downin' a man?"

He chanced to be facing the front door. He looked quickly at Rex, then with a grunt slid away and went out. Rex, watching him go, thought that the glimpse *he* had had, of a man in the front door, had shown him the big dark man, Kittrick. He sauntered up toward the door and made a cigarette. Standing so, he could see Kittrick and Rojo with a lean and young-looking cowboy, a very well dressed rider, who stood beside a stocky roan horse. Even before this roan turned and showed the 13-Bench on his hip, Rex thought sardonically that he could have read that brand.

And when the three of them turned suddenly and looked in his direction—that is, toward the First Chance saloon, he knew that they were discussing him. Suddenly, they nodded, all together. The boyish-looking rider knotted his bridle-reins over a hitchrack on that side of the street and they crossed over. On impulse, Rex slid in between two drinkers and hunched his shoulders reposefully. He heard them go clumping past and turned a little. They went to the far end of the bar and were much surprised at his absence.

So he turned and rested his elbows on the bar-edge. They came back, but, rather to his surprise, merely nodded to him. But the handsome youngster with the daredevil face, he who had come in on that other 13-Bench animal, looked long and steadily at Rex.

"I shouldn't wonder," Rex meditated when they had had their drink and drifted out, "I shouldn't wonder if maybe I have found me my long-ropin' gentleman. I could wish I had a better grip on politics around here. Maybe I could figure, then, who's to be downed."

Into the front door pushed now a heavy-shouldered man; a fellow of middle height and square, seamed brown face. Belligerently, he looked about the barroom with icy little gray eyes. Then he roared:

"Who the hell belongs to that dam' hammer-headed gray 13-Bench outlaw?" he demanded.

"I do," said Rex, appearing in front of him rather like a jack-in-the-box. "An' I don't allow no shorthorn pilgrim to claim kin with him, either, by sayin' he's hammer-headed! S'pose you chew that awhile."

Unpleasantly, the heavy-shouldered man eyed him for a split second.

"*Muchachito*—lil boy," he said softly, "in about thirty seconds yo' own maw couldn't tell you from a nickel's worth o' catsmeat!"

CHAPTER II.

THE SHERIFF OF HAT COUNTY.

IT had a hollow ring, to Rex. Evidently this gentleman was but the tail of that procession of three which had just left the barroom. He was doing what none of the others wished to do. But if Rojo, alarmed at having talked so loosely to one now proved an impostor, had suggested steps being taken toward the said impostor, a fist-fight here would hardly answer the purpose. It was not like Hat County, anyway—by what Rex had heard of Hat. A bullet from behind was Hat County's chosen pleasantry.

Too, the ferocious one was making no move to bring Rex to the catsmeat stage. That had a suspicious look, too. It began to seem to Rex that this fel-

low was attempting to frighten him—not so much that he would hightail out of the First Chance and Hat County, but enough to make him go for a possible hideout and so give excuse for killing him. All this flashed through his mind—with other matters.

"Let's see," Rex said cheerfully. Ostentatiously, he fished in the pockets of his chaps, then drew his hands out, fists clenched over silver dollars, one in each palm. "Sorry I ain't got a penny to bet with you."

He stepped in swiftly and slammed the catsmeat man on the chin, then drove him backward under a furious volley of punches that came from every angle and landed smackingly on the other's face and body. The fellow fought back and with a kind of pleasant fury. Evidently he had not balked at being chosen for this rôle. He seemed to like fighting.

Back and forth they went, hammer and tongs, with men sliding out of their way. He was a hardhead, that heavy-shouldered man. He had already assimilated enough punishment to put an ordinary man down and out.

Rex stepped into a righthander that nearly sent him down. It did drive him reeling backward and he saw the other's hand go toward his shirtfront—which was a gesture Rex had been very watchful for, during the entire session. There were tables along this wall for card-players. Rex had just crashed into a chair. With what was no more than the tail of his backward skate under the fellow's blow, he caught up the heavy chair and hurled himself forward.

Up swung the chair, not overhead—there is a technique to this sort of fighting, also—for there it would be too easily blocked. But sidewise and in. It crashed on the heavy-shouldered gentleman's side-head and he spread out like a dying buzzard upon the floor. His right hand flopped limply out and from relaxing fingers slid a sawed-off forty-five six-shooter.

Through the front door, as if answering a cue, popped a hawk-faced man, who moved flashingly for all that he had one leg without knee joint. He was a grim, efficient-looking customer—as hard and as belligerent in looks as were the twin silver-plated Colts in his hands.

"Grab yo' ears, stranger!" he snapped at Rex, in voice that popped like any mule-whip. "Grab 'em—or else—"

Rex let the chair drop and lifted his hands. He had hesitated even in the face of this imperative command. For if this were part of a scheme to remove him from the First Chance to the confines of Boot Hill, he thought that he might as well and profitably try drawing from under his shirt as to be downed without drawing at all. Then he had seen the gold badge on the hawk-faced one's gaping vest.

"Goodness me," Rex drawled, breathing heavily. "Is the winner always arrested in Hatsville? Why'n't you bust in when this fella went for his hideout—in a fist-fight he had commenced?"

"Yuh can't come into Hat County, young fella, raisin' hell an' makin' threats to ride our folks without seein' me first. I'm just dam' sick an' tahred o' yuh Bitter Crickers."

REX regarded him thoughtfully, then turned and looked up and down the silent, much-entertained men along the bar. He selected a young cowboy of not too intelligent face and transfixed him with a blue eye that was abruptly very hard and very, very cold.

"Friend," he said to this one, "two paces front an' center an' argue with yo' sher'f. Just tell him the gospel truth about this catsmeat fella on the floor. Oblige me—*will you?*" The sheriff's was not the only voice which could crack like a mule whip!

Almost as if pulled by a string, the cowboy moved out and told his tale.

But already, the sheriff had glanced quickly from the bulldogged .45 beside the senseless one's limp hand, to Rex Harden's beltless, weaponless waist; he was frowning.

Suddenly, he swore bitterly and holstered his guns; shrugged at Rex:

"'S all right, young fella!" he snapped. "I come in on a false alarm. I was told, down street, that a hard case was raisin' hell up here an' so I come in—nat'ly. I'll just throw Mister Higgins, here, into jail for a spell, to cool off his blood so's he won't git a sunstroke. I wonder—"

He broke off to stare curiously at Rex. What he wondered was an obvious thing to Rex. For the cowboy's testimony had made it plain that the ferocious Mr. Higgins had come in absolutely "cold turkey," to start a war with this efficient young rider of the 13-Bench gray. The sheriff wondered why Higgins had wanted to row with the stranger.

But he managed to conceal his curiosity while waking Higgins. The which he accomplished efficiently, if rudely, by battering the soles of the Higgins boots with a slat broken from the chair Rex had swung. Mr. Higgins came to, completely and suddenly, under the stinging blows. He leaped into air with a catamount howl and glared wildly about him, snatching, the while, a ten-inch bowie knife from a sheath at the back of his neck. The sheriff slapped his knuckles deftly and the bowie fell from Higgins's hands.

"Come on to the *juzgado*," snarled the sheriff. "I'm tahred o' yuh, Higgins. Yuh're gittin' to be a plain dam' nuisance, like fleas or bein' broke. Packin' hideouts, are yuh? I'll hideout yuh!"

When the sheriff had marched his prisoner out, Rex drifted from the First Chance. He had some work to do, if he were to get started on his trail of those gentlemen he sought. And there was still running in his mind the idea that Kittrick and Rojo and that handsome 13-Bench fellow were somehow mixed in with the stock thieves he wanted most earnestly to convince of the error of their practices.

He went slowly down street, studying the places of business. No doubt, there were honest and intelligent men in this community, but—how to find them? He was a trifle surprised at the sheriff's actions in the First Chance. For one thing had been impressed upon him, when he was starting for Hat County. The sheriff, it was said, was either frightened or crooked. No help could be expected from him. It was believed that he knew the names of those murderers who had ambushed the first association detective sent to Hat.

"But somehow, I am downright bogged up," Rex frowned to himself. "He acted fair enough an' square enough with me. An' if he's either crooked or scared, then he's dam' crooked! For he's ce'tainly not a bit scared!"

THE rows of buildings in the town were not solid blocks. In the main, each 'dobe, large or small, was a separate structure, with its own side walls. So there were varying distances between one store or saloon or dwelling and its neighbors on each side.

Coming along the street looking at signs, Rex saw, near the edge of town, a small 'dobe set some five feet beyond the Square Dealers' Store. It had a window glass show front that extended for six feet or so along the side wall that Rex could see. This show front was curtained for two-thirds its height by gingham. But at the show window corner that gingham curtain had sagged a little.

Rex, looking mechanically that way, having seen the sign creaking over the walk above this building's door, caught a glimpse, though the gaping curtains, of a big, black-clad man with pale face as moveless as a rock. Another step,

and Rex was looking at three men he recognized instantly—Kittrick, Rojo, and the stranger for whom he had been mistaken. They were very grim and interested of expression, these three and the big man.

Rex glanced again at the sign and read: "Roscoe Sulleyman, Lawyer—Land Agent—Cattle Loans—Investments."

"Yes, the big man would doubtless be Sulleyman—and why was he so thick with these fellows? Rex made a mental note to look into Mr. Sulleyman's business and character.

He drifted into what that old Slash-R rider, back on the trail, had called the "my-rage Ace o' Hearts Saloon." He had a drink and studied the lean, efficient-looking back of the sheriff, who was sitting in a card game at a table across the room from the bar, with his back to the front door.

Analyzing the sheriff, Rex became conscious of a man rambling and muttering about some one he would "as soon down on sight" as eat his next meal. The voice came from a card table beyond the sheriff's seat. The talker was a boozy-looking, loose-mouthed man, whose watery blue eyes roved here and there and back again.

Apparently, he was not considered as a serious practicer of homicide. The men with whom he played ignored him as they studied the cards. Nor did the sheriff—who faced him as the Almost-Killer faced the front door—seem to feel it necessary to leap up and arrange for peace bonds. He studied his hands, his head a little sidewise to avoid the curling smoke of his stogie. The red-faced man maundered on.

Rex leaned against the bar. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of movement in the front door. And in that instant the red-faced man sprang up with a howl, a pistol in hand. In the doorway was that handsome 13-Bench rider, his olive face twisted now in a killer's snarl. Instantly, one of his Colts roared and a bullet took the stogie from the sheriff's mouth.

Rex was moved by instinct in what he did. He did not merely think that this was a trap, intended to get the sheriff and make it seem an accidental thing—a business of a straying bullet. He knew that the red-faced man was part of the machinery; that his threats against a vaguely identified newcomer to Hatsville had been merely an introduction to the killer who had come into the door and fired squarely at the sheriff of Hat County.

How much of this the drinkers in the Ace of Hearts had expected there was no saying. But of their surprise, now, there was no doubt. Rex's hand twinkled inside his flannel shirt. There, on a wide leather crossbelt, was a cunningly-contrived holster, sewed to the belt. And from that holster, now, flashed Rex's second gun, before the killer in the door could correct the miss scored by his first bullet. He reeled and the second bullet from Rex's .44 killed him stone dead.

But the red-faced man was now doing what was perhaps the nerviest deed of his whisky-soaked and furtive career. The sheriff had whirled to see who was shooting. Straight at him, the red-faced man was firing.

There was no mistaking his intention. He was not even looking at the man in the doorway; his desperate eyes were on the sheriff's back head. He fired at that almost point-blank range while Rex was jerking his gun around to cover this second murderer. It was impossible to beat him to the shot. But at least, Rex thought grimly, the sheriff would be instantly avenged.

Down across the card table, scattering the pasteboards, slapping a cowboy in the face with his dropping pistol barrel, the red-faced man crashed—nor ever moved again of his own accord and doing.

Rex stood there at the bar, and when the sheriff got up and slid over with back to wall, guns in hand, Rex sucked

in his breath amazedly. It seemed incredible that the second murderer could have missed at that four feet distance.

"A' right, sher'ff!" Rex called. "They're both down."

CHAPTER III.

"BLACK JACK" DEFRIES.

"YEH," said Lam Burrell meditatively, "Dud Coten has been dead two weeks. Killed in a drunken row with a mean breed. I was his chief dep'ty, so I in-herited the sher'f star. An' in that two weeks this is the fourth time I can actually say I been shot at."

It was explanation of the puzzle Rex Harden had been studying—reconciling the reports about Hat County's sheriff with this lean, hawk-faced man who seemed honest. He nodded and studied his man.

"I tell yuh, young fella," the acting sheriff said explosively, "things are in a right sad mess in this county! I don't go around braggin' about how dam' honest I am, but the's some things I can't swaller no matter how big the spoon. An' playin' fish to some an' beef to others jist ain't in my line. If I'm goin' to be sher'f, why, I'll swaller the star. 'Cause if I was to set up for a long ropin' sport, then I'd come out in the open an' let everybody see me buy a rope that'd stretch from this to Arizony, by Jiminy!"

"Hear you lost a cattle association detective—" Rex drawled, squinting serenely against the smoke of his cigarette. "Sudden!"

"Suddener!" Burrell corrected him grimly. "Without throwin' a bunch o' roses so's they'll come down an' crack me in the head, it was a dam' good bullet that killed Sher'f Coten! I'll straighten out Hat County or pass out in the smoke! Clean it up! This rustlin' bunch; Black Jack Defries's gang—clean up the whole mess with Judge Colt a-swingin' the broom!"

"Black Jack—Defries?" Rex repeated, staring hard-eyed at him. "Black Jack Defries's gang? Just what d' you mean by that?"

"They started out rustlin', but I have got a hunch they've had a rise in life an' nothin' but banks an' such like pay well enough for 'em nowadays. The stock-thefts that pore dam' nitwit of an association man was tryin' to stop, I figger they're done nowadays by smaller men. Black Jack has got a lil place over against Hog-Eye Mountain in the Humpbacks. He's plain poison, young fella—hell on wheels with his smoke-poles. Shoots 'em to see 'em kick. I got to collect him. He's the worst this border country has had for many a year!"

"Ah, hell!" cried Rex. "Don't try to tell me anything about Newt Defries bein' a murderer! Not a thief, either! I knew Newt inside out; the' ain't a thievin' nor a murderin' bone in him!"

"Nah? The' was the Rocky Crick stage business. Five masked men, but Defries, he's easy to pick, for size an' color an' bein' so skinny. A passenger tried to hide out a gold watch on him an' Black Jack put three bullets into him an' reckoned that'd be a lesson to the other passengers. I could've got him that time, but Coten held me back. He was in with Black Jack or skeered, one o' the two."

He looked narrowly at Rex, then toward the door of the sheriff's office. Then he leaned toward this fast young gunman, who had saved his life in the Ace of Hearts!

"Yuh don't have to tell me a thing," he said in a low voice. "But if yuh ain't a Ranger, why then the association detectives are gittin' better an' better. Shore-ly seems so to me!"

"Glad you think so. The sher'f's office bein' what it is since Coten cashed in his chips, I don't mind tellin' you plain that I'm here on the rustlers' trail. They have got to be too big a nuisance. But I got somethin' else on my mind, too—Newt Defries. Some-

body has give this country the wrong idee about Newt. He's plenty salty, but he's as straight as I am or as you are. I'm goin' to have a talk with him."

"I don't pay yo' wages, so yuh're free to put in yo' time any way yuh want to. But even if yuh was his friend one time, all bets are off with Black Jack these days! He come into Hatsville a couple year back; drinkin', gamblin', raisin' hell. One night a lil picture dropped out o' his coat onto a table, an' a couple Mex' he was playin' with made some remarks about the woman it was a picture of. Well, sir! He killed them two like a terrier killin' rats. Funny! One o' the boys caught a look at the picture; he says it was a gambler's woman up at Santone."

"Which way d' I head for his place?" inquired Rex. "East? A' right! See you when I get back."

HE rode out of town on the trail through the greasewood, with the hazy blue saw-edge of the Humpbacks ahead of him. And as he rode, he thought of Newt Defries. He could picture Newt as Black Jack; as a masked man who shot down a helpless stage-passenger over a hidden watch. But there was no doubting Burrell's acquaintance with Newt. And Rex could not deny that many an average cowboy had gone suddenly down the left-hand trail, leaving his old friends on the right-hand.

He made a dry camp that night and went on before dawn. And presently he was in the rugged foothills of the mountains. There was a dim trail winding between great bowlders, until he came out on a long and clear slope. And suddenly a Winchester went *whang!* up the slope and a bullet came dusting past him. He reined in as a second shot plowed up sand on the other side of him. The .44's were too neatly placed to be anything but warnings to halt.

He waited, but from the bowlders uphill came no further sign of hostility. So they had been warnings. He yelled that he was looking for Defries. In answer to a shouted question, he gave his name and was ordered to make himself comfortable while Defries was notified. So he hunkered in the shadow of his gray and smoked cigarettes. His face grew more and more grim. All this elaborate sentry-system seemed to bear out the reputation Burrell had given Newt.

"Defries says he don't want to see yuh none a-tall!" was the answer that came downhill to him.

Rex got up and looked up the slope. Elaborately, he climbed on the gray and lifted the reins!

"You tell Defries I'm not takin' 'no' for answer!" he yelled grimly. "I'm comin' up to see him!"

"Stay back!" the hidden sentry commanded. "Stay-back—or—"

Again his Winchester whanged. Rex rode steadily on, ignoring the bullets that kicked up tiny dust fountains around the gray's hoofs. Then, with the fifth or sixth bullet, the gray made a coughing, grunting sound and crumpled to the trail. Rex jumped clear.

"Yuh ask' for it!" snarled the sentry, from his position twenty-five yards uphill. "Now, yuh'll walk back to Hatsville!"

For answer, Rex began to walk toward him, hands swinging easily clear of his Colt butt. A bullet took his hat off. But he kept moving forward, and suddenly he heard the familiar voice of Newt Defries, who, he had been sure, was watching. It was familiar, but never had Rex heard that unfriendly tone addressed to him.

"Turn around an' git! I—we don't want to hurt you!"

"I'm comin' up to talk with you. Unless you drop me here. Make up yo' mind, one way or the other. For I'm comin'."

He came on and turned the bowlder upon a hard-faced rider who glared at

him and seemed about to jerk up his Winchester again. But Newt Defries was leaning against the bowlder behind him. Rex stared at his old friend. And almost he could have turned around and gone back to Hatsville, to tell Sheriff Burrell that he believed in "Black Jack" now.

Superficially, Newt was pretty much the same tall, lean, dark-haired, dark-eyed man he had been four years before. But now his face was very thin. The mouth was almost lipless, from long and grim compression. There were deep furrows from nose to mouth corners. Not a friendly, not a pleasant line in it. His eyes were deep-set and very bright. He looked steadily at Rex.

"There's nothin' to talk about!" he snarled. "I told you I didn't want anything to say to you. Now, I'm goin' to donate you a hawse an' you can hightail. An' don't come back again!"

"Do you think you have to act that way—to me?" Rex drawled. "I don't usually go rammin' in where I'm not wanted. But sometimes the's more'n just old sake's sake to make me do it. I reckon this is that time. Whether you want to talk to me or not, I want to talk to you. An' if you want to forget ever'thing that ever happened, I reckon I can't do a thing to change yo' mind. But the's other things. Send this fella back a piece, will you?"

NEWT DEFRIES'S face seemed to tighten even more than was habitual. He hesitated, then jerked his head at the hard-faced man. The sentry went off somewhere among other bowlders.

"If you can forget old times so complete," Rex began awkwardly, "I reckon I can't. When I have worked an' rode an' gambled an' drunk an' seen the elephant an' heard the owl with a fella, it sort o' leaves a mark on me. An' when he has been a straight-shooter an' I cut his trail some later an' —folks tell me it's a crooked trail, I want to do two things—smack the folks midway between mind an' mouth an' find out how come they're let to say that."

He stopped, waiting. But Newt Defries said nothing. Nor was there the faintest change of expression in his bitter face.

"Newt!" Rex said pleadingly, "we have gone through too much together for me to let you shove me off with this kid sulkiness. They're callin' you all kinds o' murderer an' thief in this county. An' here you sit, not fifty miles from Hatsville, an' let 'em say it. I do'no' what has got into you. You know you quit the Three-Bar-B to go to Fort Worth an' get married—"

"Never mind that!" Defries cried savagely. "I don't give a little bit of a damn what they're sayin' in Hatsville —or anywhere else. I'm up here on my ranch an' I'm not askin' a thing from anybody. I haven't got a friend in the world, an' I don't want one. I got no use for one. I pay my hands an' they're salty customers. But I don't trust 'em as far as you could throw a brass bull by the tail. An' if they want to try comin' up here after me, Black Jack Defries, for train robbery or stage robbery or murder, let 'em come! I'll send 'em howlin' home!"

"You're not tryin' to tell me you're runnin' a robber gang!" Rex cried—and grinned. "Listen, boy! I know you too well!"

"Do you? Well, ne' mind! I know that Coten had warrants for me for the Rocky Creek stage robbery an' killin' a passenger. Somebody recognized me an' told it around. When I run onto that somebody— Well, ne' mind that, either. Coons'll bring you down a hawse. You throw yo' kak onto him an' go on back to town. You can tell Burrell that my word to Coten goes for him too. He can come an' come shootin'—any time!"

"What does yo' wife think o' all this?" Rex demanded abruptly.

And almost took a step backward.

For Defries's face was convulsed with fury until it looked fairly maniacal. He had always been fast with a belt-gun. But in all their years together, Rex had never seen Newt's hands move as now they moved. He felt that he stood here on the thinnest line he had ever known, between living and dying. For the muzzles of his old friend's guns gaped at him and the hammers clicked back. Rex waited, lifting his chin a trifle; stiffening.

"You—you—" gasped Defries. Then as suddenly as he had thrown the muzzles to cover Rex, he let them sag. "My wife think of it? Why, she thinks— Go on downhill! Go on! now! I'm tellin' you—go!"

And Newt turned away hurriedly, ramming his .45's back in the holsters. Something slid to the ground and Rex stepped forward to pick it up. It was an oval gold frame like a large brooch. There was the face of one of the prettiest girls Rex had ever seen on the photograph it held. He knew instinctively that this was the picture which had cost those two Mexican gamblers their lives.

"'It was a gambler's woman up at Santone,'" he recalled Burrell's sentence. "How can that be? Newt'd never marry a gambler's girl, an' he was ce'tainly married in Fort Worth, that time."

He called to Newt Defries and was ignored until he said "Picture." Then Defries whirled and rushed back. Rex waited with face blank, holding out the photograph. Defries snatched it from him, and his deep-set eyes bored into Rex's inscrutable face.

"Well?" Defries demanded. "Well? Got any remarks to make? Ever see her? Anywhere?"

"I do'no' what it's all about, Newt," Rex told him softly. "But I do know the's somethin' wrong, somewhere. Else you wouldn't be makin' a dam' fool o' yo'self like this. Listen, *amigo mio!* Cut out this dam' foolishness, now. It can end just one way!"

"I'm the only one that knows how it'll end!" Defries said, and his tone made it seem a grim, a sinister riddle. "The only one! Tell Burrell that."

CHAPTER IV.

THE RUSTLERS' HOLDING-GROUND.

REX sometimes acted on impulse. So it was when, heading back toward Hatsville, he overtook a stocky cowboy of nineteen or twenty, with a stupid face and a mop of tow hair. He jogged along with this youth for a half dozen miles, and in that distance learned that his name was Sime Newbolt—"Simple Sime"; that he owned nothing in the world but a shaggy pony, shabby saddle, and the clothes he wore.

And found in the very beginning of Sime's aimless, boastful chattering, that the youngster had a great and burning admiration for men too wise to work for mere monthly wages. So Rex cocked his hat at a devil-may-care angle and began to hint of dark and desperate and profitable deeds that lay behind him on the trail. Sime's eyes—a washed-out blue for color, with no more expression than a china doll's—widened and he listened fascinatedly.

"So I gunned it out with the sher'f an' his three dep'ties," Rex finished such a tale. "Left 'em lyin' the' an'—so far's I know—they're around the' yet! What 'd I care? I had the ol' *dinero*. Reckon this is a plumb peaceful country o' yo's, Newbolt. Nothin' I have seen shows color."

"Oh, we got some salty folks!" Simple Sime said quickly. "Yes-siree! Long-rope gents as slick as any ye ever see! An' if I was to tell what I have see—"

He nodded and winked and tried to look very wise. Rex sneered at him and passed over the Durham and the papers:

"Ah, hell!" he said good-humoredly. "Don't try that 'n on me, New-

bolt. You haven't seen a thing, to mention with things I know."

"Nah?" cried Simple Sime, warmed by the smoke of the donated cigarette. "Nah? I could tell a lil story about fo'-five hundred head o' prime cows, in a certain place I know about—an' nobody knows I know about—" More nodding and winking and wise grins.

Rex laughed:

"You want to take somethin' for that lyin' o' yo's," he grinned. "You run onto some lil fella's round-up an' one o' the old cows had been wadin' in a tank, so you figgered they was 'wet' stuff."

He bent over the saddle horn and roared at his humor—but watched that silly face keenly through narrowed eyelids. And Sime responded automatically to the ridicule.

"'S at so?" he cried indignantly. "Well, I reckon I know when a good job o' blottin' brands has been done. 13-Bench fits mighty neat over lots o' irons in this country! An' that back-cañon in the South Humpbacks ain't no round-up ground o' Rusty Ranfrew's. I reckon I know; I rode for Tom-Steven Riddle long enough, an' the Slash-R joins onto 13-Bench range. I know better! An' if Tom-Steven hadn't fired me for gittin' drunk an' accident'ly shootin' off my pistol an' ruinin' his hat, I would 've told him about runnin' onto these cows in that cañon south o' 'Pache Lookout."

"'Pache Lookout? Ah-h, what cañon's south o' that?"

"It's a box-cañon ye'd never think about bein' more'n a gash. It crooks around a wall. Fifty yards away it looks like a scar in the hill. Ye take the trail from the Slash-R house comin' toward Hatsville, ye see. But ye turn off at the rock—at 'Pache Lookout, that is—an' go south a mile or so, over the cow trail. I just happened onto it, takin' the trail for a short cut. 'Tain't nobody's range that I know of."

Rex looked at the simpleton and shook his head. This was no sort of country for a fool to be loose in. He felt sorry for Simple Sime; he would doubtless ride into Hatsville and tell somebody else about seeing that holding-ground of the rustlers. And he would live about long enough for half a cigarette afterward.

"Huh!" he said to himself suddenly. "An' somebody 'll be reachin' me a harp, about that time, if this nitwit happens to say he run into me on the trail away from the'. Not so good! Not—so—good—a lil bit, even!"

HE looked with sudden concern at Simple Sime.

"Just happened to think," he said, "that you're headin' for Hatsville. My stars! You must be awful brave. Well, I like a brave man. I hope you hand it to that feller plumb center. I think about half his fightin' is done with his mouth, anyhow. You oughtn't to have much trouble beatin' him to the draw. But my advice is to go right out huntin' him an' don't give him a chance to dry-gulch you from behind a house."

"What ye talkin' about?" cried the boy, gaping nervously.

"You—an' that fella Kittrick, o' course. That's what you're goin' to Hatsville for, ain't it? To down Kittrick because he's been makin' threats to shoot on sight?"

"Kittrick? Shoot on sight? Me down that there streak o' lightnin'? Oh, my soul! Why—why, I never had no trouble with Kittrick! Me an' him, we never had much to do with one another. But I never done nothin' to him. I can bring fifty men to swear I never! What's he after me about?"

"Hell, I do'no'! You must've done somethin'. But if you haven't, then, o' course, it 'll be all right. Just ride on into town an' hunt him up an' explain that you don't want to kill him—"

"Explain! To that wolf? An' him with notches on his guns till they look

like a bear cub 'd cut his teeth on 'em? Like hell I will! I won't go to Hatsville! An' if Kittrick sees me—well, I'll see him under my arm!"

Rex drew out a gold piece and flipped it across to the boy with a grand Long Rider's gesture:

"Easy come, easy go!" he grinned. "If I was about yo' size, I'd not stop till I hit Kansas. An' I'd forget I ever saw a wet cow!"

He watched Simple Sime bicycling out of sight on a cross trail—the rowels of his rusty OK's raking the shaggy pony's side and the quirt rising and falling rhythmically. And then Rex grinned tightly:

"South o' 'Pache Lookout Rock," he said to himself: "Well, well, well! Even a dam' fool serves some end in this life. Me, I reckon I will go snoopin' some, south o' the rock."

So he turned off and headed for a dim shoulder of the Humpbacks, well beyond that peak called Hog-Eye. And he hummed a little as he rode, for ahead was prospect of action, and he lived on that. He wondered if his dead predecessor had known of this holding-ground. Probably not—Harkness had been killed right in Hatsville, in a dark end of town, one night, and the then sheriff had claimed the murder a deep mystery. Harkness had made no report to headquarters about finding anything.

"First sign o' any stolen cow," Rex meditated. "First sign anybody we know of has seen. I do hope they haven't been moved on."

The mountains grew larger. It was a broken country that he entered, crisscrossed with stock trails through the scrubby greasewood. He rode alertly and so he heard the soft footfalls of another horse, before seeing the animal—or its rider. He reined in and dropped hand to Colt butt, then let his Hog-Eye branded mount go forward a step at a time. A big roan came suddenly around a jumble of bowlders.

"Well!" cried Lam Burrell, amazedly, taking hands away from pistols. "I never looked for yuh at this end o' the range!"

Rex reholstered his gun and grinned at the sheriff.

"Reckon not," he shrugged. "Ridin' for yo' health?"

"Kind o'," Burrell returned, with a queer noncommittal tone that did not escape Rex. "You see Black Jack? Did, huh? Well, are we all wrong about him? Did he say he never stuck up that stage—or any other?"

"He said, as he was chasin' me off his range, that he's the only one that knows how—oh, all this business!—is goin' to end. He said: 'Tell Burrell that.'"

"HE did, huh? Well, that was awful nice o' Black Jack. But I do believe he's mebbe wrong. He won't have so dam' much to say about how it ends up as he acts like! Well?"

"Did his wife come into Hatsville with him?"

"Wife?" Burrell frowned. "No woman with him that I know about. Didn't know he was married. But what makes yuh ask that?"

"Do'no'," Rex confessed with a shrug. "But he's shore-ly soured on the world. Wouldn't talk to me, even. I don't *sabe* him a lil bit. But I have been considerin' the various deals in this country an' I don't believe new men are runnin' off the stock—even if the gang is branchin' out to knock over stages an' banks an' the like. Because, the style o' the jobs hasn't changed; the amount o' stuff rustled is just as big. I think it's the same ones as in the beginnin'."

"Can happen. But if yuh're right, Harden, it just means a few more pounds on Black Jack's load. Means that he's the fella got five hundred head o' cows from the Slash-R an' a hundred good saddle horses from the 3-Quarter-Circle, in the last three months."

"What d'you figger the 13-Bench is doin', in this business? If you come in as an honest sher'f, an' a 13-Bench man rides into town to down you, an' is thick with Kittrick an' that foxy-face, Rojo, an' the lawyer, Sulleyman —well?"

"Dam' if I know! I wish I did. Funny! I can't picture ol' Rusty Ranfrew takin' o'ders from Black Jack or anybody else. He is a curly wolf. An' he has been here since—well, Hog-Eye Mountain is two thousand foot high; an' when Rusty come in here an' set up as stockman with a speckled calf an' a sore-back hawse, an' *got* him plenty cows, Hog-Eye was jist a lil bump on the scenery a man could jump his hawse over! An' he hasn't backwatered once from anybody! Goin' to town?"

"No-o, I figger I'll kind o' look around an' collect a rough idee about the lay o' the land an' all. I thought I'd drift up yonder to the end o' the Humpbacks. I can cut the trail that leads to 'Pache Lookout, this way, can't I?"

"'Pache Lookout?" said Burrell harshly. "What yuh want around 'Pache Lookout? Young fella, first thing yuh know, I'm goin' to git to suspicionin' yuh. Yuh ain't been around this country long enough to know much about things—unless somebody's been tellin' yuh. An' if yuh been told, I would ce'tainly like to know who told yuh!"

"Well, that's a secret," Rex grinned. "But who told you? About takin' a look around 'Pache Lookout? Come on, Burrell. Speak yo' lil piece! Why, dam' it, man! If Black Jack Defries is bossin' this outfit, way you figger; an' I'm too friendly with him, way you figger, also; then why would I down two o' the gang—his gang, as you figger—to save yo' skin. You a stranger to me?"

"I do'no'," Burrell confessed. "But after yuh rode out, I got to thinkin'. An' it come to me to wonder about yuh some. Yuh took up so for Defries, yuh know."

"I would give a lot to have absolute ce'tain proof that he's the same old Newt Defries he always was. But I'm an association detective, Burrell. I am goin' to earn my pay no matter which way the trail leads. Who told you about the stock in that holdin'-ground south o' 'Pache Lookout?"

"A Mex' kid I have had out scoutin' around. He come up, afoot, to the cañon rim. See the cows down the' with too many men around 'em to be an honest affair. So I thought I'd have a look-see before mebbe makin' a fool o' myself goin' out with a posse."

"I got the news about the same way —accidental. Le's go, then!"

THEY came in mid afternoon to the mouth of that box cañon of which Simple Sime had spoken. It was in a welter of arroyos and cañons; a perfect place for gentlemen not wishful for publicity and desiring to be in position to defend themselves from attention if it should come.

"Slash-R's fifteen mile over yonder," Burrell grunted in a low voice, as they studied the gash in the mountain from shelter of a huge rock. "13-Bench is thirty west—the house is. I reckon Roscoe Sulleyman controls this range here."

"Slash-R? That's Riddle. How does he stand? Honest cowman?"

"Well, he has lost a lot o' stuff to the rustlers. So he's honest that way, anyhow: He wants the rustlers smacked," Burrell said dryly. "I wouldn't swear as to how many calves he figgers a good crop to ary one cow."

"I'm goin' to have a look at the cañon," Rex said suddenly. "No sign o' anybody right in the mouth—an' I can go plumb quiet when I'm as scared as I'll be in yonder! You cover my back."

He slid off his horse and went like a shadow from rock to rock, until he had reached the cañon mouth. Here

he looked down suddenly at a sweep of thin earth over the rocky floor. It was cut up by cloven hoofprints—pointing outward. Six-shooter in hand, he stole into the cañon, turning the elbow of it cautiously. But when he could see the whole stretch of it, he understood those hoofprints. There was not a cow in it. He ran back to Burrell.

"We'll have to trail the herd!" he grunted. "They been moved."

It was slow work, though both of them were trailers above the average. Across cañons and draws, moving toward the flats, the trail led them. There was no way of estimating its general direction and then blindly riding fast. Here on every hand were openings for a turn-off, and they had no idea of where the herd was heading. So they rode at a walk, with eyes on the rocky ground. The sun sank lower and lower.

Abruptly, they topped out of a cañon and ran into the tail of the cattle; a half dozen weary cows. They went on quickly, now, watching for the men. They found them at about the same instant that the herders discovered their approach.

There were four men that Rex could see, sitting their horses in a line a quarter mile long on a grassy slope of the foothills. Burrell flung up his carbine and with its flat report, dust jumped from the ground beyond the nearest man. The rustler fired at almost the same moment and his bullet buzzed spitefully by them. Four to two.

"Somebody's goin' to chase up the Golden Stairs!" Rex grunted sardonically to himself.

He opened up on that rider and frowned. For the fellow was leaving —flat in the saddle and quirting his horse. Lifting his eyes a bit, Rex saw, far up at the head of the rustlers' line, a man beckoning, beckoning. Then the four of them were running away. From his saddlebags, Rex jerked his binoculars. Hard to make anything of those flying riders. But—he had particularly noticed the sentry's shirt, on Newt Defries' Hog-Eye ranch. A mackinawlike flannel, of large and gaudy checks. There was such a shirt, on one of these fellows. And the man who had beckoned them wore a wide, rather flat-brimmed white hat. So had Newt Defries.

"Make 'em out?" Burrell said in his ear, with an odd note.

Rex turned and found the sheriff grinning a little, a sardonic, knowing sort of grin that lifted only one corner of his thin mouth. And he knew that Burrell, too, had seen Newt.

"Well, we'll shove on over to the Slash-R an' git some he'p from Riddle, to take this herd to town. I—well, Harden, it's the way the world waggles, I reckon. I'm sorry yuh're havin' to buck an ol' sidekick to earn yo' pay. But it's no fault o' yo's!"

"Just my grief," Rex said grimly. "But plenty that!"

CHAPTER V.

OF A WARM AFTERNOON.

DISMOUNTING before the sheriff's office, having seen the recovered cattle under guard in a corral on the edge of town, Rex roused himself from moody silence to hear Burrell muttering some sort of a chant under breath. When he had made out the words, Rex's face tightened. For it was a sort of tail to his own gloomy thoughts:

"Newton Defries, alias 'Black Jack' Defries; John Doe, James Doe an' Thomas Doe—"

Those were to be the warrants asked for, doubtless. Charged with theft of the half thousand head which even superficial examination had shown to wear, under a Three-Bars Half-Circle brand, the irons of most of the outfits in this neighborhood. Rusty Ranfrew would not be charged. Whatever Simple Sime Newbolt had thought about 13-Bench covering other brands,

it had not been borne out in this herd, at least.

Going idly, half-absently, along the street, while Burrell hied him to the county attorney's house, Rex came abruptly upon Simple Sime himself. He stopped short, frowning, and eyed the fool. Roaring drunk, was Sime. He stood rocking on runover heels at the edge of a sidewalk, grinning foolishly, and now and again lifting up his voice in a wild yell. Rex understood perfectly—it had been his goldpiece which had tickled the knees of the gods. With money in his pocket and a burning thirst, Simple Sime had not been able to withstand the lure of town.

"Yaaaiiiaaah!" Sime greeted him, with the devilish faculty of the very drunken. "The's the ol' fella hisself! Got them cows, huh? Tol' ye they was the' in that cañon! Tol' ye so! Ye can trust Sime Newbolt ever' time. Ye found that out. An'—an' "—he wrinkled his silly face now, in the throes of painful thought, readjustment—"ye wasn't no *buscadero!* Ye was workin' with the sher'f. Why, I bet ye're another dam' 'sociation de-tective!"

He waggled a triumphant, accusative forefinger at Rex, who, turning, saw a half dozen interested auditors of the charge. Blankly, Rex stared from them to the fool and back again.

"Is he al'ays like this an' if so, who is he?" he inquired.

"The county nitwit," Kittrick, the big dark man shrugged, blank of face as ever Rex could be. "He turned up yeste'day, three sheets in the wind; had some money he says a fella give him on the trail. Got real drunk. Reckon he thinks you're the association detective he was paid by, to tell about that bunch o' blotted cows somebody had over by 'Pache Lookout!"

"He must think somethin'," frowned Rex. "If he thinks a-tall!"

He moved on, whistling. But, already, it made his spine crawl to have his back presented to that silent, ominously watchful group in the saloon doorway. He drifted up to the First Chance Saloon and found himself regarded here very intently, if furtively, by the drinkers.

It irritated him that Hatsville was the kind of town in which he could not say, studying these men, whether those who were so interested in him were rustlers, or merely townsfolk who rather expected to see him, next time, face up in the street. He drank sparingly and brooded.

Presently, the sleepy quiet of early afternoon was shattered by a pistol shot somewhere outside. Before the drinkers in the First Chance could turn their heads, a second followed. Then silence. Rex was one of the first outside. But already men were gathering about something in the middle of the sandy street fifty yards away. The drinkers from the First Chance went at a trot to join them.

A cold-eyed and red-faced young man stood with a pistol in his hand, looking quietly down. A second man, a nondescript rider whom Rex did not remember having seen before in town, was reholstering a pistol. And face downward in the sandy, reddened street, looking like a bundle of old clothes, lay Simple Sime Newbolt. Beyond his outflung right hand was a black-handled Colt .45.

BURRELL burst through the crowd at this moment and glanced swiftly from the dead man to the other pair. The cold-eyed young man regarded the sheriff easily and shrugged.

"Too much tarantler-juice, I reckon. I tol' Sime a spell back to cut out some o' his hollerin'. An' a minute ago, when Jaggus an' me was comin' up the street, Sime passed us. I felt kind o' funny after he was behind me an' I whirled around an' he was throwin' down on me. I beat him to the shot. Jaggus pulled, too, but I got him plumb-center. The damn fool!"

"Jist the way it was," nodded Jag-

gus. "Jist. I would've downed him, but Chick got him plenty. He had his gun under his shirt. Happens I was jist headin' for the First Chance to hang up mine."

Rex had no desire to get too prominent here. But he was trying to remember something that eluded his memory like a drop of quicksilver. He much desired to bend over the fallen fool and turn him over; to see if he had been packing that gun in a shoulder-holster and, if so, how the holster was slung—for right hand or left hand. For it was in his mind that he had noted something odd about Newbolt, on the trail.

But had the fool used his left hand, or his right, most often, as he rolled cigarettes? He wished that Burrell would examine the body.

The cold-eyed and red-faced young man now reholstered his weapon. As he moved, his open vest fell back and a deputy sheriff's star twinkled on his shirt-front.

Burrell knelt and turned Sime over. The silly, dead face was twisted in an expression of blind panic so marked that every onlooker gasped. Burrell looked up with blank face.

"Had it in the waistband o' his Levis, I reckon; no holster."

"Must 've been packin' two," a man muttered behind Rex. "I see him hang one up in the Ace o' Hearts."

"That gun's been fired," mumbled Burrell, picking up the Colt from under Simple Sime's fingers. "Well, Rogan, I would've liked it better if yuh'd drilled him in the shoulder—the pore damn fool!"

"Seemed to me I could hear his shot as I turned," shrugged Chick Rogan calmly. "Nitwit he was, but a fool's bullet kills you just as dead as a judge's."

Roscoe Sulleyman, among other things, was county attorney—so Rex had learned. He watched now while the big, still-faced lawyer came through the press and looked down at Sime Newbolt. Almost was Rex moved to speech, but he had no proof whatever that a framed killing, like one he had seen upon a time, elsewhere, had occurred here. In reason, he knew that the gun Lam Burrell had picked up was not Sime Newbolt's—the fool probably had been wearing no weapon. It was what certain crooked police officers called an "alibi" gun—one planted on a dead man, to bolster up a claim of self-defense.

"Likely that fella Jaggus fired in the air after Rogan killed the nitwit," Rex told himself. "Then shoved the gun under Sime's hand. Well, I got troubles o' my own! First Sime—now me!"

He was very wary thereafter. He turned corners widely; he looked a half dozen ways at once as he wandered restlessly, mulling his problems. But when trouble came, it materialized so swiftly and unexpectedly that he was almost caught unaware; almost killed without knowing what had struck him.

Passing a 'dobe-walled corral on the edge of town, he heard suddenly a heavy double thud in the sand behind him. Automatically he whirled, snarling like a startled lobo.

There had not been a single soul in sight, anywhere, an instant before. Now two men had evidently dropped over the corral wall into the street, from the corral.

As Rex turned, a bullet almost burned his ear and the savage-faced man who had fired was loosing a second shot.

Flat in the street Rex hurled himself and as he landed, he landed with the hidden Colt in hand. Bullets burned the air about him, kicking up geysers of sand.

He replied with more speed than accuracy, wholly intent on spoiling the aim of these two. The second man had been only an instant behind his companion in opening up. Three straight misses. Rex lamented ab-

sence of his left-hand gun, against this pair of two-gun men.

REX knocked one of the men down with his last two shots, seeing dust rise in little puffs from the man's vest with each shot. But the other killer was lowering his pistol-muzzle with a sort of concentrated ferocity in his bitter, dark face. Rex waited for the bullet that would end everything.

Then to the top of the 'dobe wall came a squat, red-shirted man with a short yellow beard; came in a monkey-agile jump. A bullwhip was in his great freckled paw. It flicked out and the lash wrapped around the gunman's wrist. Rex saw only the blur of movement, that ended with a dull explosion. Then the little killer came face downward in the sand.

"Ri-ise an' shine, friend!" grinned the yellow-bearded man on the wall. "The scoun'el has shot hisself! I jerked his hand, d' ye see, just as he was lettin' go the hammer. The muzzle was coverin' *him* when he fired."

Rex came swiftly to his feet and across to the fallen men. Both dead.

Men pounded up, among them Chick Rogan, the deputy. He glanced flashingly down at the dead men, then covered Rex twinklingly with the Colt in his hand. There was an odd blankness about his cold blue eyes.

"Gentle, now, Chickie, m' lad!" drawled the wielder of the bullwhip, from where he squatted still on the wall. "There are lots o' witnesses that this young fella is not resistin' arrest. Gen-tle, now!"

Chick Rogan flashed a furious glance at the yellow-bearded man. But evidently the warning had effect. And Lam Burrell arrived at this moment. Briefly, Rex told his tale. From the wall top, the yellow-bearded man punctuated it with tiny cracks of his whip, which he handled as a stage magician handles jugglers' toys.

"Huh!" grunted Chick Rogan incredulously. "That's Little Bernard Azle an' Monte Kain. Never hear about either one of 'em huntin' trouble with a stranger!"

"Oh, the's heaps an' heaps o' things ye never hear about—yet," supplied the bullwhip cracker cheerfully. "Ye're quite young yet, Chickie, m' lad. Quite—young!"

"An' my friend on the wall," Rex added, "he popped up just as the second bushwhacker was takin' a good aim—knowin' my gun was empty, I reckon. He caught the fella's wrist with his whiplash an' jerked, an' down went Señor Rogan's Sidekick—I mean, Señor Dry-Gulcher!"

"Abs'tively!" nodded the yellow-beard, energetically. "Me, I was asleep in my wagon in the corral. But, as some o' ye know an' others may yet find out, I sleep wi' one eye awhile, then wi' the other. So these two friends o' Rogan's—I mean, these two lousy murderers—disturbed m' sleep. I watched 'em peep-peep-peepin' over the wall. All of a sudden, over they jumped. I come after, wi' my bullwhip—just in case, ye know."

He looked thoughtfully at Chick Rogan, then at Lam Burrell.

"Ye know, sher'f, me being a freighter an' all, I'm mebbe not in Hatsville enough to really be a citizen. But if I was, I would say to ye that lookin' around for another vest—wi' somebody in it, o' course!—to pin Rogan's star onto—well, that'd be a move that wouldn't hurt the feelin's o' some several o' us a-tall."

"Listen here, Bill Box!" began Rogan angrily.

"Chickie, he come up an' when he sees his two friends on the ground, he throwed down on m' young friend here. His thumb was mightily quiversome on the hammer, too—until I must speak wi' him some—"

"I have been thinkin' some along that line, Bill," nodded the sheriff with the ghost of a smile. "Well, Harden, yuh better come on up to the office with

me. Rogan 'll see to handlin' these fellas for the coroner. Tell the doc to let us know when he's ready, Rogan."

THEY waited in the office until the inquest was ready to begin. There Rex and Bill told their stories and the gray little doctor looked at his jury. The jury moved its feet noisily and glanced furtively from one another to the big, impassive county attorney. Roscoe Sulleyman seemed to shrug. So it was called justifiable homicide and Sulleyman said that the county attorney's office would take no action.

"But it does seem to me, young man," he said grimly to Rex, "that for a stranger, you're taking a very active part in our community life. And there is the matter of your having a pistol in violation of our ordinances."

"Oh, didn't I tell yuh?" cried Burrell in pained tones. "I have made Harden a special dep'ty."

The three of them—Rex, Burrell, and Box—had supper in a Chinese restaurant. Rex was silent, but Burrell and the stocky freighter seemed in very good humor indeed. Back in the office, Box looked across at Rex with a twinkling eye.

"O' course," he meditated aloud, "I would've helped this young fella out, anyhow. But reco'nizin' him as a up-an'-comin' young fella that helped out a friend o' mine that was recent in jail in Iresburg, well—that made me the more willin'. Son, anything I got is yo's to command! I have heard lots about ye an' all good!"

"Sher'f!" cried a cowboy, popping into the office, mopping his face with a shirt sleeve. "Sher'f! Yuh better come to Hawseface Rodriguez's *cantina*. Black Jack Defries an' his gang's the', an' they are actin' up, plenty."

"How many?" snapped Burrell, over his shoulder. For all his stiff leg, he was at the wall, jerking down the Greener riot gun from its pegs. Two buckshot shells snapped into the barrels and he clicked the gun shut.

"Black Jack an' four others, all packin' two in sight!"

"No time to collect anybody else, I reckon," grunted Burrell. "Reckon the four o' us can handle it, huh?"

They followed him out and to the left, toward that end of town farthest from the lights of the saloons and other open houses. It was five hundred yards or so to the long, one-storied 'dobe that showed a line of lights. They came cautiously up, moving to encircle the place. Burrell stole up to a window and looked in. Then moved to the door and thrust his head and gun muzzles inside.

"R o d r i g u e z! Hawseface!" he called grimly. "Come here! Where's them fellas? Ah, hell! Yuh gi' me any o' yo' lies an' I'll bust yuh wide open. I mean the five fellas was here a few minutes ago."

"But, *señor!*" protested the proprietor. "I say that no men were here for an hour. I—"

They had all moved up near the door now. And all whirled at that dull explosion far down the main street. It sounded like a black powder blast. Burrell leaned forward tensely.

"Wonder what that was? Reckon we better see. Nobody here, anyhow."

They went toward the light at a dog-trot. But they had no need to go farther than the Ace of Hearts to learn the occasion for the sound.

"Bank!" a man cried to them, recognizing Burrell. "Five-six men blowed open the big safe an' hightailed out o' town before anybody ever waked up to fire a shot at 'em. Got clean out, yes, sir!"

CHAPTER VI.

CHIGAROO!

IN the darkness that was relieved on only one side by lights from the Gilded Cage dance hall next door, Rex stared swiftly around at the Hatsville folk who had crowded up. Sheriff

Burrell was selecting his posse to pursue Black Jack Defries and the other robbers. He was picking his men carefully; passing over some who crowded closely against him, to beckon men standing quietly in the rear.

The several townsmen who had seen the robbers going out—with the twenty odd thousand from the Hatsville State Bank—had agreed in their descriptions of the fugitives. All had seen Defries's tall, lean figure in the van, clearly enough to identify him as leader.

Staring idly about him, occupied more with grim thoughts of Newt Defries's undoubted turn to outlawry than with the actual robbery, Rex suddenly noted the handsome, well dressed man whose dark eyes were roving curiously over all the silhouetted scene. Looked like a lawyer—or gambler, Rex thought. He was certainly a fine figure of a man. Then he saw beside and a little to the rear of this stranger a woman. She turned, and light from the Gilded Cage shone upon a pallid face and set shining her yellow hair.

Rex fairly gaped at her; then his eyes went swiftly to the dark-clad, faint-smiling man beside her. "A gambler's woman—" For this was the face on that picture in Newt Defries's locket. He nudged a man beside him and asked in a whisper who the stranger was. The citizen addressed looked that way, answered briefly and turned his attention again to Burrell's selections.

"New gambler; just opened up today. Name's Luck Sones. That's his wife by him. They say he was here three-four years ago. He's got the old Sky-Limit place; rented it from Roscoe Sulleyman. Reckon this robbery is bustin' up his openin' night plenty!"

As he rode out beside Lam Burrell, in the lead of the posse, Rex found himself puzzling over Mrs. Sones and her relation to Newt Defries, rather than concentrating on the business of overtaking the robbers. Was it possible, he wondered, that Newt's wife had run away with the gambler? That it was this which had so embittered Newt? But the theory had one important weakness—Newt Defries was not the man to suck his thumb while another took his wife. No-o, he decided, that could hardly be. For Sones and Newt Defries would not both be alive now.

It was not hard to follow the trail, at first. They dismounted and struck matches and found it, identifying the hoofprints of a horse shod all around and with an intoeing near hind foot. Straight toward the Humpbacks it led them, and as day broke, a Mexican stood beside the trail, gaping at them. He waved them on at Burrell's question and straight into the face of the dawn they pushed their tiring horses.

"Hell," grunted Burrell to Rex, abruptly. "We're goin' straight for 'Pache Lookout!"

They drew rein at the Lookout and cast about for the trail. Rex found it—turning down the stock trail that led toward that secret holding ground of rustled cattle, in the box cañon. Cautiously now they went forward, silent, but for the creaking of saddle leather, the blowing of weary mounts. At the mouth of the box cañon they drew rein, sheltered by bowlders.

"Le's just the two o' us have a peep inside," Rex suggested to Burrell, and they rode, half crouching in the saddle, over the rough ground. No sound nor any hostile indication greeted them. Rex was in the lead at the elbow, around which lay the cañon pasture. The cañon was empty. But this time Rex saw something which attracted his eye. He rode on into the cañon and toward that fluttering object behind a greasewood clump. He reined in and frowned down at the dead man.

"WELL, I be damned!" cried Lam Burrell, behind him. "If it ain't that tinhorn Nap' Gaspard! I wondered where he was!"

Rex looked swiftly around and

stabbed a forefinger out at another huddle in a shallow depression of the cañon floor. They rode over to this body, and again the sheriff identified the corpse.

"Dink Sly! He was workin' for Rusty Ranfrew. Leastwise, he come to town with Rusty a month ago, last time Rusty was in from the ranch. Say, this is shorely lookin' queer, Rex! By jiminy, it is. 'Twas in here my Mex boy—an' Simple Sime Newbolt, too—see them cows we got back from Black Jack. An'—"

"Two more yonder!" Rex interrupted.

"Ad Gabble—he was a sullen kind o' loose-holstered nester—an' a driftin' cowboy they called Fears," so Burrell explained these two.

"Reckon the' could've been a squabble among the gang, an' Black Jack downed these *hombres?*"

Rex swung down without answer and began investigating the pockets of the two fallen men. Nothing of any interest—except that each had five twenty-dollar gold pieces—and not a penny of other money.

In the pockets of Gabble, the nester, were five twenties—and no more. But the tinhorn gambler, Nap' Gaspard, had a leather wallet with ten twenties in it. He had, also, a few dollars in silver. And a crumpled half sheet of cheap ruled paper on which had been printed neatly the words:

Five hundred to Los Alamos sundown Friday.

Rex looked up curiously, while Burrell puzzled the curt note.

"Five hundred head to the railroad corrals at the Cottonwoods by sundown Friday—that would've been sundown yesterday. By jiminy, Rex, I don't make head or tail out o' this!"

"I'd say these fellas had been dead since about the time we come snoopin'," Rex ventured. "Well, I reckon the's nothin' to do but leave 'em here while we go on huntin' our robbers."

They found no fresh tracks anywhere in the cañon as they rode back toward the mouth. Burrell was moved to sudden voicing of his thoughts.

"Yuh know, if Hat County never owed Black Jack one before, it 'd be in debt to him now for downin' them rattlers back the'. Ever' one was a hard case. I wish I knowed who wrote that order Nap' had. Say! Mebbe Black Jack had give 'em that o'der an' they wasn't mindin' it quick enough. Mebbe they was figgerin' to double cross him an' he found out about it. That 'd be plenty reason for killin' 'em—to him!"

"Yeh—but Newt never wrote that note. I know his writin' from the back an' the's not a single thing about that printin' that's his."

The posse—twenty odd of them—rode quickly forward to meet them. Briefly, Burrell told of their discovery—without going into details concerning his and Rex's speculations. Then they cast about again, hunting the robbers' trail. But not until they had circled and ridden for a half mile did that shod horse's intoeing show in a soft place on the rocky floor.

As they were riding forward, to them came faint, far-away, the sound of firing. Without a word they spurred forward. The firing continued, but instead of growing louder it seemed fainter the farther they went, while remaining ahead of them.

"Runnin' fight," said Rex suddenly. "Now, who could the gents be, you reckon, Burrell?"

"Well, we're headin' for the 13-Bench. I do'no'! By jiminy, Rex! Damme if a sher'f in Hat County oughtn't to've been born a fortune teller! She's shore a trail tangled as ary spider web I ever see!"

THE firing had died away by the time they came into the foothills and saw lying at the bottom of a long slope the long 'dobe house of the 13-Bench. All around the place

there seemed to hang an odd mantle of quiet. Burrell jerked his hand up.

"Le's go!" he yelled. Downhill poured the posse, and Rex frowned.

"Do'no as I like this," he thought. "If the' was folks with homicidal yens down in that house—well, it 'd be just too bad. For us!"

But as they slid to a halt in the door-yard before the house a grizzled, hump-shouldered man materialized from the doorway. He stood looking at them, hands hooked in crossed cartridge belts close to the walnut butts of the long-est-barreled Colts Rex had seen in many a day.

"Bank robbers, Rusty!" cried Burrell. "We cut their trail back a way headin' this way. We—"

"They been yere!" nodded Ranfrew. "Black Jack Defries's outfit. Cleaned out my corral over yonder. I went down to see whut the racket was about an' they run me back yere. I'm by m'self right now. Head on over past the Two Burros into that *malpais*. You will mebbe jump 'em, but I do'no'. Anyhow, fresh hawses ain't goin' no faster'n tired, over that rough stuff."

"Come on!" cried Burrell quickly. "We can mebbe scatter an' git around an' head 'em off. I know that *malpais* like a book."

It seemed to Rex, who had been studying that vicious old face in the doorway, that whatever Rusty Ranfrew told him would be precisely and exactly the thing he would not believe. Now he backed quietly off from the others. But Rusty Ranfrew was not one to miss anything moving in his neighborhood. As Rex went around the corner of the ranch house, Ranfrew yelled at him:

"Whar you goin', son? The Two Burros trail's thisaway."

"But not the robbers' trail!" Rex yelled swiftly. "Burrell! They holed up in the bunk house! Come on!"

His horse died under him in that moment, and upon his shirt he felt little thumps here and there—as if fingers were tap-tapping the flannel. But that line of flame, spitting out of chinks in the log bunk house beyond—where he had seen three faces in a little window—told him what was happening to his shirt. Before they had fired—those men in the bunk house—and in the instant when he had yelled to Burrell, he had heard a long-drawn yell from where Rusty Ranfrew stood.

"Chigaroo! Chigaroo! Chigaroo!"

Rex came down with the horse and kicked his feet clear of stirrups. Over he rolled and around the corner of the house, conscious as he did so that a squat figure had leaped from the back door of it and raced off toward the bunk house's shelter.

"What's it?" yelled Burrell as Rex scrambled to his feet, around the corner. "Rusty yelled somethin' an jumped for the inside o' that door like a gopher hittin' its hole."

"The gang's in the bunk house. He was tryin' to toll us off. They shot the thread out o' my shirt seams!"

The posse jumped to the ground. Burrell sent half of them into the house, where windows of one end and the back door commanded a view of the robbers' fortress. With the first exchange of fire it occurred to Burrell—as to the possemen—that the five or six robbers seen riding out of town had mysteriously multiplied themselves.

"I reckon," nodded Rex to this remark, "that some 13-Bench folks other than Rusty Ranfrew are th'owin' in with 'em. Rusty likely had a guilty conscience an' he figgers this is the big showdown."

FOR the next hour or so it was not an exciting battle. They could only guess that a man was killed or wounded by their fire. They doubled up on the besieged; one man would fire from a window of the house and when a robber returned his shot, a second posseman would slam a bullet at the robber marksman.

Rex was outside, with the possemen who formed the left-hand tip of a rough crescent, the center of which was the ranch house, when he saw evidence of men trying to get out of the bunk house on the wall that was hidden from view of the attackers. He was about to yell a warning to Burrell when from a hill two hundred yards beyond the bunk house came a puff of smoke. The robber outside—barely visible to Rex—cried out shrilly with that shot. He came crashing over, in full view of Rex.

"Who'n hell's on that hill?" grunted the citizen beside Rex. "Yuh reckon some more folks has come out from town?"

Rex grunted noncommittally and stared at the hill. A patch of color showed momentarily up there—looked like a patch of a man's shirt visible for an instant around a large rock. And Rex left the battle very swiftly and quietly, borrowing some one's horse and vanishing without being noticed.

He rode straight away from the house and circled that hill from its rear. Presently he dismounted and went like a hunting cat afoot. Just ahead of him a rifle whanged.

He stole on more quietly than ever, and thrust his bared head around a rock to see a man almost under him; a man leaning comfortably against that very rock. Newt Defries! Two others were in sight, flat on the ground on the hillcrest, sheltered behind rocks, with their Winchesters shoved forward. Evidently, that gentleman of the surly manner and the vivid mackinaw shirt was still farther on.

"Newt!" Rex whispered, and Defries came to his feet like a spring uncoiled. He glared at Rex, who beckoned him around the rock—with pistol muzzle.

"Well?" grated his one-time friend, when they stood facing each other, sheltered by the rock from view of Defries's men. "What's it?"

"Newt," Rex said grimly, "the's some things I want to know. You have got the answer. You're goin' to talk, too! I'm here in Hat as detective for the association. I'm takin' a hand in this whole bandit business, because I have got an idee that when we catch the bank robbers an' murderers we'll have the stock rustlers, too."

"Never was anything wrong with yo' head," Defries nodded sardonically. "But if you expect me to do any talkin'—except with my guns—you're off. 'Way off!"

"No, I'm not; Nary inch off. Why didn't you kill Sones—that time?"

"Sones? What d'you know about Luck Sones—an' Lilian?" snarled Defries, thrusting his savage face into Rex's. "Come on or—"

"Ah, stop it, you damned fool! D'you think I'm turnin' on you? That I'm one o' yo' enemies, too? Has all this sulkin' around addled yo' head so you can't tell when a man 'd help you all he could? I know Sones got the girl. But I do'no' how. Seems to me that you would've drilled him plenty."

Defries stared past him; his face twisting, twisting; teeth caught in lower lip.

"We had the weddin' day set, that time in Fort Worth," he said dully, at last, between his teeth. "Turned out, it was Lilian's weddin' day, a' right. But not mine. Not mine. She married Sones. He's quit gamblin' an' was stock buyin' an' quite a fella. They'd been about to marry before I knew her. She wouldn't, then because he was gamblin'."

"Then you come to Hatsville?"

"Not first. I stayed drunk for six months. Went from one end o' the border to the other, gamblin'. Rex, Rex! If you was never plumb downright crazy about a woman, you got no idee what I been through. I done my damnedest to get killed. But I couldn't! Yeh, I come to Hatsville; an' Roscoe Sulleyman figgered I was the man he wanted in his crooked deals. He of-

fered me a job. Well, I turned it down. An' he an' Rusty figgered they had to down me, then, to shut my mouth."

SUDDENLY he seemed very, very tired. All that he had been through was weighing on him now. Rex touched him awkwardly on the shoulder and Defries shrugged, with the ghost of his old, one-sided grin.

"Well, 'twas war then! I sent three o' their pet, prize gun-fighters to hell one after another. I went to see Roscoe Sulleyman an' I do'no' yet why we both wasn't killed that night. I got this Hog-Eye place o' mine an' hired me some hard cases I could trust. It was war between me an' Hat County! They kind o' give up tryin' to lead-poison me. They began tellin' it around I was rustlin' an'—well, doin' ever'-thing that Sulleyman-Ranfrew outfit was into. You heard how I was rec-o'nized by stage passengers? An' it never come to you to wonder about—Kittrick?"

"By George!" cried Rex, staring. "O' course! He's a ringer for you, masked. His gang 'd naturally sling 'Black Jack' around among 'emselves durin' a stick-up! I was in a split-stick, ol'-timer: I didn't see how to go around that recognizin' o' you an' I couldn't figger *you* turned rattlesnake an' killin' a helpless passenger."

"I put a man in Hatsville right off. I knew lots about what was goin' on. No use tryin' to law-court that ring. It was air-tight. The county attorney in the cattle business. Sher'f Coten, his right-hand man. That crooked dep'ty—Chick Rogan—likewise. So I have smacked 'em hot an' plenty, ever' chance I got. I found that herd in Blind Cañon. We downed the herders when they fought. I was headin' it for town, to let it loose in the street, when you an' Burrel come up."

"Yo' man tell you about the bank robbery? They worked that slick. Man run into the sher'f's office yellin' that Black Jack was in Hawseface Rodriguez's place. We went down, to find the hole empty. But that made her easy—Black Jack had just left to stick up the bank. Kittrick was ridin' point, masked. Folks took him for you."

"I heard, yeh. We jumped the skunks this mawnin' an' we run 'em scan'lous! They'd stopped to see how much they'd got. They went off leavin' the tow sack with the bills in it. Ten thousand."

"Ten thousand?" cried Rex. "They got off with twenty thousand! You must've overlooked some, Newt."

"Nah. We chased 'em clean here to the 13-Bench. Then Rusty an' a bunch o' his cutthroats run us back. We camped here an' kept 'em holed. I figgered a posse'd be along *pronto*. They couldn't have had much more o' the cash with 'em. You see, they was just openin' the sack when we opened up on 'em."

HE led the way back around the rock and Rex, ramming his hand into the captured sack of currency, looked at the bright, new bills and frowned absently. Now, where could the other half of the stolen money be? Then he recalled how the robbers had ridden from the back of the bank to the main street, in their get-away. Back of the bank, past the rear of—Roscoe Sulleyman's office!

"I bet I know where the other ten thousand went!" he grunted. "I bet it's in Sulleyman's office. The gang heaved another sack down at his back door. Newt! If we was to jump Sulleyman sudden, I bet we'd find that sack hid around some'r's!"

"No good! He'd say it was recovered by him, the county attorney. He's bossed Hat County's crookedness for ten year! Nobody's bucked him. I have never uncovered a thing I could make stick. He don't do much writin'. I collected samples o' his hand, letters an' things he couldn't deny in court. But he never puts his crooked stunts onto paper."

"Who wrote this — printed it?" snapped Rex. "'Twas in Nap Gaspard's pocket when you-all downed him. It's about the rustled cattle."

"Roscoe Sulleyman! I know that sidewinder's writin' better'n I know my own fist! I have got letters an' law papers he signed. I've been collectin' 'em ag'inst a time they'd do to prove his brand."

Then he shook his head and the triumphant expression faded from his face. He handed back the note to Rex.

"Ol' timer, I always did have lots o' use for yo' head, but I don't see how you're aimin' to pin this onto that scoun'el! I tell you, Rex—the law officer that tries to hang the deadwood onto Roscoe Sulleyman, he could make a livin' at county fairs barrelin' greased pigs, by George!"

Rex regarded him twinklingly, and began to whistle. Newt Defries stared at him, head on one side.

"'Ain't no hawse what cain't be rode'—'at's what the white folks say; 'an' the' ain't no man what cain't be th'owed.' Well, mebbe so, an' I shore hope you're right. But he'll swear that note was about a downright honest job, long, long ago; an' he'll have plenty swearin' to back him up."

"Sones is in town. Opened up the ol' Sky-Limit gamblin' house. An'—Lilian is with him. You know about Sones bein' a Hatsville man two, three, four years ago?"

"Heard somethin' about it. Don't see that it makes a difference."

"Call off yo' gladiators! Newt, we'll just leave Lam Burrell an' his outfit to metagrobolize the robbers. The's plenty in the posse to handle that bunkhouse crew. They won't try breakin' out this side, because they won't know you're gone. You got three men. That makes us five an' if Bill Box, the freight contractor, is in town, he'll know some honest folks the'."

"But—what're we aimin' to do?" Newt Defries asked, hopefully.

"Tear the lid off this rustlin', thievin', murderin' gang!"

CHAPTER VII.

"THERE'S TWO KINDS O' LUCK!"

"YOU-ALL stick here in the corral," said Rex to Newt and the three grim warriors of the Hog-Eye. "I'll drift up an' scout around. Then I'll come back or send for you. But if you should hear noises that sound kind o' like shots or greetin's like that, come splittin' the breeze, an' organized for battle!"

He thought it was safe to show himself. He doubted if any news of the battle at the 13-Bench had reached town. None of the posse was likely to have come back and it was improbable that a straying rider had chanced upon the fight and ridden to Hatsville to report it.

It was pitchy dark in the street. He stood for a moment looking with eyes grimly whimsical at the yellow lights of saloon and crib and gambling house and dance hall. It was time Hatsville —and Hat County—had a house-cleaning. Rex was sufficiently a frontiersman to believe fervently in the antiseptic qualities of powder smoke. Law was not easy to administer in such a community as this—not without first crippling the crooked controllers of county politics.

"I wonder how far my bluff'll work?" he told himself. "Well—"

He passed the First Chance saloon. A couple of doors beyond was the entrance to the newly-opened Sky-Limit of Luck Sones. The place was going full blast. Looking in, Rex saw the tall, handsome figure of Sones moving from poker tables to faro bank. Lilian was acting as lookout for the faro bank.

"Looks like the lady didn't do so well for herself, when she double crossed Newt!" he said, with sardonic satisfaction. "Sones went back to

gamblin' an' makes her work in the room. An' if that dark spot I see on her neck is what I figger 'tis, he likely manhandles her, too. Serve her right!"

With which unchivalrous dismissal, he went on toward the Ace of Hearts. Here he went in and found an atmosphere of sullen quiet among the hard-faced men at the bar. They gaped at him. He guessed the reason, but pretended not to. He went to the bar and ordered his drink. A bartender inquired concerning the posse. Had it come back? Had Black Jack Defries been captured or killed?

"Dam' if I know," shrugged Rex disgustedly. "My blame' crowbait busted his laig an' I come back; caught a stray by pure luck an' come on to town. This business o' hightailin' all over the landscape huntin' trailless bank robbers ain't my idee o' how to spend yo' time."

"But" — Roscoe Sulleyman had come silently in the front door and stood regarding Rex without expression—"we heard that Burrell had picked up their trail outside of town."

"Well," shrugged Rex, looking from Sulleyman to Sones, who stood beside the county attorney, "he said he did. Reco'nized one hawse's tracks. But when the trail petered out, it was headin' toward Hog-Eye Mountain."

"Toward Black Jack's place," nodded Sulleyman. "There's no use blinking it—Hat County has got to settle with that outlaw now, once and for all. He's making us a disgrace to the whole State! I hope Burrell goes straight to Black Jack's ranch and gathers in the gang—even if he has lost the trail."

Queerly, the atmosphere of sullen tension, uneasiness, vanished from the Ace of Hearts like wind-blown smoke, with Rex's tale. Men crowded about him, asking questions. And precisely according to the caliber of the men, Rex observed a sort of inner amusement that had no apparent connection with the solemn questions they put. They asked gravely if Lam Burrell was going to lead the posse to the Hog-Eye even if the robbers' trail did not lead straight to the ranch house. And when Rex professed ignorance, they looked at one another and their eyes laughed in sober faces.

HE got away finally and went deviously to hunt Bill Box, whom he found in a private poker game in his bachelor quarters—a 'dobe house on the edge of town. He drew Box aside and told him briefly what had taken place. They stood in the dark front gallery of the house and the stocky freight contractor smacked his thigh delightedly.

"Best news I hear since Cleveland was elected!" he cried. "Burrell's got Kittrick an' the others, with the 13-Bench outfit, too, holed up in the bunkhouse! Oh, *Dios mio!* She's too good to be true. I'll gather up some men we can trust—plenty! We'll force a showdown with Roscoe Sulleyman."

"I got a lil job to look into, now that I've seen you," Rex put in. "I'll be around; you collect yo' citizens an' we'll see Sulleyman together."

As he came to the corner, it seemed to him that somebody was going ahead of him. He snapped out a question and there came the quick patter of racing feet. He jumped forward and saw a dim shape pass the lighted window of a house. Almost, he let go the hammer of the pistol which had jumped into his hand. Then he shook his head. Might be some kid, just scared. But he ran after, and caught a glimpse of a slender rider, running well for all his high-heeled boots. A cowboy in a red shirt, with a black Boss Stetson.

Rex cut down behind a row of buildings, heading for Sulleyman's back-door. But before he reached it, a man jumped out ahead of him, calling him softly by name. It was a pallid young fellow in citizen's clothes. He waved aside the forty-four muzzle carelessly.

"Been looking all over town for

you," he grunted. "Somebody wants to see you. Oh, don't shy off! You can come gun in hand, if you want to. It's no trap. And if you're a friend of Newt Defries, it's to your advantage —and his."

"Who's it wants to see me?"

"Can't tell you. You'll just have to come blind—if you want to help Defries—and yourself."

Rex grunted in surrender. The man led him back along the rear of the buildings and rapped upon a door. Then he waved Rex forward.

"Come in, please, Mr. Harden," Lilian Sones said. "This is the only place in which I can talk to you safely. It's about—Newt. Please!"

He went in, frowning. She faced him with a twisted smile, as if understanding his thought of her.

"I've heard a great deal about you. Newt used to talk of you in—in the days at Fort Worth, two years ago. So when I heard that you were here, I had to tell you what I have learned tonight. Mr. Harden, I served Newt very shabbily, once. Myself no less so. But that is not important, to-night. I am going to do Newt a good turn now. If you know where he is; if you have still any influence with him; go to him and say that he must leave this county; leave this section. He would better leave the State, the country! For Luck Sones and Roscoe Sulleyman are planning to pin on him a murder which will set every man's hand against him: the murder of a rancher's wife. There will be—circumstances connected with this crime so revolting that wherever Newt was found, he would be torn to pieces by the mob. They have picked the woman to be the victim and they have a degenerate brute who will commit the crime. They are making their evidence now!"

"HOW come yo' husband's so thick with Sulleyman that he'd frame Newt this way?" Rex demanded, trying to be suspicious, but failing before her terrible dull earnestness—the more impressive because of her very lack of any show of excitement.

"Luck? He has been hand-in-glove with Sulleyman for years. For two years past, Luck has been the agent of the rustling ring here. He has sold the stock stolen. He hates Newt. I think he would have killed me, except for his boast that he would break me. He feels that I still love Newt. And"—still that dead monotone, as of one reciting facts—"I do. I never loved any one else. But I found that out too late. All I can do, now, is send this warning to him, by you."

"I'll see that this don't come off," he nodded, staring down at his boot-toes. "But—how about you, ma'am? You can't go on with this kind o' life. Anybody that'd frame a business like this—"

"Never mind me. I'm the same as dead now—in mind. Tell Newt to go! To South America, anywhere, and start over again! You can't prevent this crime. I don't know whom they've chosen, for either victim or murderer. I can't testify against my husband. Nobody can face this ring."

"Mebbe not," said Rex with the beginning of a grim smile. "Well, I have got some things to do now. I ce'tainly do thank you, ma'am, an'—an'—"

"Go!" she said. "Quickly."

But instead of returning to the corral in search of Newt Defries, Rex moved again along the rear of the buildings. At the door of Roscoe Sulleyman's house, he listened. No sound. He slipped around to the front and found it dark. So he came back to the rear door, with a length of wagon spring-leaf. This he used for a lever and heard the snap of broken fastenings. He dropped the spring and whipped out a Colt. Then he went inside—on all fours, just in case some one were inside and should fire at a man's normal level.

But there was no sound in the place. Presently, having explored the whole length of it, in the darkness, he ventured to strike a match in the rear room. It was Sulleyman's sleeping quarters and his search of it revealed nothing.

He had looked over the place inch by inch, almost. He lifted his eyes. Nothing on the 'dobe walls but cheap chromos. He went narrow-eyed across to a gilt-framed horror. It was flat against the wall, not hanging by a cord. He touched it. Solid. He pulled at it and it came forward like a trapdoor, revealing a deep cavity. And there was a thick sheaf of brand-new bills, identical with the twenties in the tow sack recovered by Defries from Kittrick's band.

There was a black ledger, too. Stuffing the bills into his shirt, Rex opened the thin book. And shook his head marvelingly. That one so shrewd as Sulleyman should have kept an accurate-seeming account of all his dishonest receipts and expenditures, seemed incredible. But there they were and even he recognized names of payees. The ledger, too, he took. Then he looked sardonically at the gaping hiding place. He would just leave that as it was—token to Sulleyman that he was found out.

THERE was the sound of a key grating in the lock of the front door. Rex snuffed out the candle flame and slid toward the back. There he paused to listen. A light was struck in the office. He heard Sulleyman's deep, smooth voice:

"You're sure, Nep? He told Box that Kittrick and the rest were being shot up by Burrell's posse? I didn't think the man lived who could lie to me without my knowing it! But he did! We can't have such an exception around. I'll have to attend to Mr. Harden's case."

"Yes, he says to Box they got back half the money from the bank. Said Kittrick an' all the 13-Bench outfit are gone coons. An' he says, too, they got that note I took from yuh to Gaspard, about takin' the cattle to Cottonwoods. They got some letters an' papers o' you's, too, that'll prove yuh done that printin'. Harden's got the note on him."

"You go to the Sky-Limit and say to Sones that we have to be ready for trouble to-night. I don't think Box can gather so many who'll mix in this. And under my command, our crowd are the authorities. It may be a good idea to have this showdown. There are some gentlemen here—Box, for instance—whom I wouldn't miss at all, if they should be removed to-night in a battle. But we'll strike first, anyway. Pass the word to Shorty Gabble to have his outfit ready. They'd better slide over to the Sky-Limit. And Harden is to be downed on sight by anybody who runs into him."

Rex was outside the back door now. He pulled it noiselessly closed, but for a single, tiny crack. Through this, he watched when Sulleyman came into the rear room bearing a candle. Automatically, it seemed, the gang boss's eyes went to that gaping hole in the wall. He stopped and glared at it.

"O—my—God!" he said slowly and distinctly. Then he whirled, letting the candle fall. His running feet shook the house. There came the sound, at the front door, as of one tearing it from its fastenings. Rex turned and ran down the line of buildings.

He gained Bill Box's corral and found Newt Defries in such frame of mind that he was ready to charge down the street in search of Rex. To him he sketched briefly a part of his discoveries. And the five of them went looking for Bill Box's citizenry. There was no sign of them on the street. Indeed, a sinister quiet gripped the whole town now. So Rex led them to the back of the Sky-Limit.

As they reached it, there was a sudden terrific outburst of firing from the

street in front. The five of them jumped to the back door of the gambling house and saw pouring into it men who turned to occupy windows. Some were bleeding. One or two gained the shelter only to fall upon the floor, where they received no attention whatever.

Bullets were drumming on the street wall. Among the men inside Rex recognized many of those hard faces he had noted along the bar in the Ace of Hearts. There was Sulleyman, bareheaded, wild-eyed. He was roaring in his big voice. The firing died in the room and Sulleyman bellowed to the attackers:

"You men outside! Put away your guns and go home. I order it, as county attorney. These men here represent the forces of law and order in Hatsville! You are defying the authorities!"

From the street, the firing had stopped during his talk. Now a bullet came, like a contemptuous reply, through the doorway. It struck one of the men staring at Sulleyman. He spun like a top, wringing his hands, then collapsed.

"One o' you boys hightail around an' tell Bill Box to come hellin' when we open up back here!" snapped Rex. "Cut stick, fella!"

He waited two minutes, by count. Then at his nudge, the four of them yelled terrifically. The shrill sound penetrated even that clamor in the gambling room. The garrison whirled. They opened fire on the rear door, through which Rex, Defries and the two cowboys had jumped. But the quartet had gained the shelter of the heavy counter holding the roulette wheel.

So from front and rear the rustling ring of Hat County was raked and riddled, as the citizens outside raced across the street and took the front door and windows. Sulleyman fired point-blank at Rex, who had risen to his feet with smoking gun in each hand. Newt Defries saw and sent a bullet through the convulsed white face.

SUDDENLY, there was silence in that shambles. Rex shook his ringing head and looked about him. He heard a choked sound, seeming far away. Mechanically, he turned. Luck Sones was standing as if about to edge through the back door and his thumb was pulling back the hammer of a pistol, the muzzle of which was covering Newt Defries's back. Rex had no idea whether or not there remained a shell in either pistol he held. So he whipped up both guns and let go the hammers, right, left. The two shots roared together and Luck Sones came crashing downward.

"I reckon," drawled Rex, "the's two kinds o' luck. An' yo' name meant the other kind!"

Lam Burrell, with a bandage around his head, burst through the front door, which was crowded, behind him, by faces of the posse he had taken out of town. Bill Box turned to him calmly.

"Ye git Kittrick an' Rusty Ranfrew an' the others?" he inquired blandly. "Did, huh? Then I reckon Hat County's more salubrious to-night."

"Got 'em," growled Burrell. "But I got knocked out when we charged the bunk house an' these scoun'els yere, they took an' hung Rusty an' all the others that was alive, before I come to."

Presently—it was perhaps an hour later—Rex went in search of Newt Defries. Up and down the streets he went until he saw, walking very slowly ahead of him, a man—and a woman. He went softly up behind them and:

"Chigaroo!" Rex called warningly. "Just wanted to tell you, Newt, me an' Lam Burrell figger to buy the 13-Bench from the bank. So we'll be yo' neighbors. If you're stickin' on Hog-Eye."

"Oh, I—we're stickin'," said Newt Defries.

THE END.

The eyes of all three were fixed on Glace as he hung up

The Woolly Dog

Murder or suicide? Every clew leads to bafflement as Glace and Bryce question their elusive and quick-thinking suspects, and the seer Semi Dual consults the planets in their courses

A Semi Dual Story

By J. U. GIESY and JUNIUS B. SMITH

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

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

GORDON GLACE, who is telling the story, and James Bryce, private investigators, are retained by Smithson, city editor of the *Record,* to look into the apparent suicide of Helen Hart, who ran an advice to the lovelorn column.

She had been found in her expensive rooms in the Glenn Arms, dead, with cyanide solution in a partly drained glass by her side, clasping a toy woolly dog in her arms. Before her was a picture of a boy, a year or two old, with a similar or identical dog. She had, the doctors said, been a mother. Cyanide powder is found on the dog's wool; the police think she spilled it, in her nervousness, while mixing the solution. She was found by Molly May, cabaret dancer, who had an eight-thirty appointment with her.

Inspector Johnson believed it was

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suicide—until it is discovered by the hotel detective, Jeppy, that two calls were made from her room about eight, to Hubert Mumm, jeweler and rounder. A telephone number on her scratch pad proves to be that of the *debutante* Opal Raleigh, who is intimate with Mumm, and who had been seen in the hotel lobby, that evening, with Lorne, Helen Hart's lawyer. Finger-prints on the telephone stand prove to be those of Miss Raleigh.

The cabaret girl shows that her errand had no connection with the Raleigh matter, but was to get advice from Helen Hart and her lawyer. She has a letter from Miss Hart, making the appointment.

Puzzled, the three detectives consult Semi Dual, a mysterious genius, keen, intuitive student of life and human emotions, and a master of the ancient lore of astrology. He is greatly interested, and prepares to discover, by astrology, whether Helen Hart committed suicide from sorrow or mother-love, or whether it was a fiendishly clever murder "plant."

CHAPTER VII.

RELUCTANT WITNESSES.

JACOB J. RALEIGH'S mansion was a thing of brilliant white walls set down in the midst of well-cared-for grounds, the next morning when the long, low, racing police car in which we rode purred up and stopped before it.

We marched through the grounds up to the massive artistic metal grill-work of its door. Bryce punched a bell and we waited until a functionary appeared in answer to its summons. And then it was Johnson who asked for the daughter of the house.

The servant's glance appraised us from a wooden face. "Miss Raleigh 'as not come down yet," he informed us, a sound of disapproval and finality in his words.

"Time she had then, brother," Johnson returned, entirely undismayed. "Now you go tell her Inspector Johnson wants her to do that little thing for just a few minutes. Shake a leg."

"Inspector—" the flunky gaped.

"Johnson," said our companion, and flicked back the lapel of his coat.

"Er—yes, sir," the man he addressed assented. "Won't you come inside?" He held the door wide and we passed through it into a reception hall from which ran up the splendid sweep of a stairway, circling the wall of the room, which extended clear to the vault of the roof not unlike that of a feudal hall. "Be seated, sir. I'll inform Miss Raleigh," he said, and hastened away up the stairs.

"Some dump," Johnson mumbled.

I nodded and glanced about. There was a monster fireplace with aged fire dogs before it. Gorgeous tapestries in neutral colors draped the walls. Sumptuous was the only word to fit it, the only word to convey its hint of Jacob J. Raleigh's wealth.

There was a long carved table on one side. On it we placed our hats. And thereafter we waited, until, without the least sound to hint of her coming, suddenly Opal Raleigh appeared on the stairs.

The light of the morning streaming through a tinted window bathed her face and figure briefly as she descended with an expression of reserved interrogation on her face.

I rose, and my two companions followed suit. We waited, standing, as she came toward us, youth, grace, beauty in her every movement—waited until she spoke with a tinge of hauteur in her voice:

"Good morning, gentlemen. And to what am I indebted for a visit from—the police?"

"We're hopin' that the debt will be the other way around, miss," Johnson replied in rather clumsy fashion. "We just wanted to ask you a question or two, if we may?"

"Yes?" I fancied the lids above the girl's dark eyes narrowed and tensed a trifle. "I'm sure I can't imagine what about. But—won't you be seated?"

"Thanks," Johnson accepted and sank onto his chair as Miss Raleigh settled herself upon another and crossed silk-sheathed legs. "You see, miss, what we wanted to find out is whether you was at the Glenn Arms night before last. You see we was told you was."

"And did you have any reason to doubt your source of information?" The girl smiled, but I felt her smile was forced.

"Why, no," Johnson admitted in so apologetic a fashion that I decided to help him out.

"As a matter of fact, Miss Raleigh, there is no reason to doubt the fact that you were there. What we are really seeking to learn is the approximate time you were there and whether alone or with a companion?" I said.

HER glance turned toward me as I spoke. Between their lids her eyes were covert in their regard. They impressed me as keenly watchful, as if weighing questions her red lips refused to utter, even while the latter spoke:

"I see, even if I fail to see in what way it can possibly concern you. But since I was seen, as it appears I was, why I suppose I may as well—confess." And again her smile was forced. "However, I was there for only a few minutes in the foyer. I went there to meet a friend, and when I failed to do so I left. If the information helps you I'm sure you are welcome to it. Anything else?"

I had to admire her, really, to give her credit for the control which she displayed. For the girl was startled. Or worse. I rather thought she was scared. Her figure, easy to read in its every line as she sat there, thanks to modern styles of dress, was tense, despite the fact that she tried to give the impression of insouciant ease. And that very fact inspired my reply to her half-challenging question:

"Not unless you wish to add to what you have said, Miss Raleigh."

"But what could I add?" Her eyes went wide. And again she smiled. "I've stated the facts. I went there to meet a friend, was there a few moments, and left."

"And we thank you for putting it so concisely," I said and rose. "By the way, were you acquainted with Miss Helen Hart?"

"Helen Hart," she repeated, and again I could not help a feeling of admiration for her poise. She frowned and stood up slowly.

And I nodded. "Yes. You see, she was found dead in her rooms at the Glenn Arms the other evening, and during the investigation which followed we found your house telephone number written on a pad in her suite."

For a moment Miss Raleigh did not answer. I saw her breast rise and fall as she breathed. And then her expression lightened. "Oh, yes, I know who you mean," she said. "She was on some paper—something of the sort. And she did telephone me a few days ago, I remember. I imagine that may explain her having written down the number. But I never met her in my life."

"That is a very plausible explanation," I accepted. "And we thank you again, Miss Raleigh. Sorry to have disturbed you, but after we found the number, as I've told you, we thought it best to check up on the point."

"Of course," she assented quickly, and I saw her catch her breath.

"And now," I prompted Bryce and Johnson, "we'll say good morning."

I led them out of the house and down to the car before the latter spoke. Perhaps exploded would be a better word. "An' what sort of a play is that! You shoot at her, get her wingin' an' then walk out like a john biddin' his sweetie da-da. She was lyin' from

the take off, but she couldn't have kept it up."

"Quite so," I said. "And that's the answer. She was just plain scared. And she lied. Of that there's no manner of doubt. But the other night she called Mumm from a dead woman's room; and she's apt to go on the wire again this morning, now that we've jangled her nerves. Get to the nearest telephone and call the station and have a watch put on Raleigh's number."

"Rollin' hoopsnakes!" Johnson emitted a growl of comprehension. "Hi, Larry—get to a drug store or some place where I can get into a telephone booth."

Five minutes later Bryce and I waited in the car while he entered a pharmacy on a corner, and Jim shook his head.

"Anyway that kid's quick," he remarked. "Every time you handed her a tip she played right up to it. The way she come back after that telephone number wallop you handed her was good."

"An example of modern youth. They live fast, think and act the same way, nowadays, Jim," I told him as Johnson came back and climbed into the car.

"An' if that dame puts anythin' on her house wire we'll take it off, now," he declared. "What next? Do we go to see Mumm or Dick Lorne first?"

"Mumm's the word," Bryce suggested, grinning.

JOHNSON eyed him, grunted in inarticulate fashion, and spoke to Larry. We were off along the street.

And presently we drew again to a halt in front of an expanse of shimmering glass windows, set between the passing throng and a dazzling display of costly baubles of the jewelers' art. From the corner of each window small letters of gold leaf proclaimed this the establishment of H. B. Mumm.

Leaving Larry sagged down behind the wheel, we quitted the car, crossed the busy sidewalk and made our way inside, inquiring for Mumm of a clerk as carefully groomed as an usher at a wedding, to whom I handed a card.

He hurried away down an aisle of mahogany finished cases, returned in due time, and acted as our guide to a room where the man I had seen the night before sat at a desk. It was a beautifully furnished office, on whose walls were a number of French dry point etchings and a single beautiful oil.

He rose as we entered and put out a hand on which a splendid gem glowed. He was as meticulously garbed as his salesman, dark, as I had already noted, and at least superficially suave.

"And what can I do for you, gentlemen?" he asked after we had introduced ourselves and he had seen us seated.

"Chiefly," I took the lead, "you can tell us if you will if you received a telephone call, night before last, at the Parkway Club, somewhere around eight o'cock."

For a moment he did not answer. Instead he knit his brows. And then he smiled.

"Really, Mr. Glace, that's a somewhat personal question and one which, as a rule, I should refuse to answer," he replied. "But, since you bring Inspector Johnson with you to sponsor your asking, I presume I can scarcely refuse. As a matter of fact, I did."

"And would it be presuming too far to inquire concerning its nature?" I continued my interrogation.

"What do you think about it?" he rejoined.

"Ordinarily," I said, "I'm afraid it would be presuming. But—"

"This is not an ordinary instance?" he took the words out of my mouth.

"Exactly," I assented.

"I assumed as much," he said and nodded. "But there is no real reason why I should not answer. The call

was merely a request from my fiancée asking me to meet her in the lounge of the Glenn Arms. That is all."

"You are engaged to Miss Opal Raleigh?" I queried as he paused.

"Tacitly." He nodded. "It hasn't been announced."

"And did you meet her?' I inquired.

His eyes bored straight into mine. They were darkly guarded. And suddenly his upper lip lifted, displaying his teeth in a soundless laugh. "See here, Mr. Glace," he returned, "I don't know what's back of all this, or how Miss Raleigh's actions or mine can concern you in the least. Why don't you ask the lady concerning her movements, if you're so infernally curious?"

"As a matter of fact, we have," I informed him bluntly and watched him frown, the corners of his lids go tense. But beyond such almost reflex reactions he gave no sign of the annoyance I was quite assured he felt.

"And didn't she tell you?" he asked in a voice so casual as to suggest a deliberate effort at casualness.

"No names were mentioned," I returned. "Miss Raleigh merely said she had expected to meet a friend at the hotel but had failed and left."

HE nodded. "And that, as it happens, is the truth. She called me at the Parkway and asked me to meet her. I agreed to do so. But I was in a game—you can confirm that if you like—and I finished the hand before I left. Then I drove down to the Glenn Arms in my car and failed to find her, and asked for her at the desk. Later I rang up her home and was informed that she was not well and had retired. That's a frank answer to your question, Mr. Glace, if brief. And in return I feel that since your visit appears to concern both Miss Raleigh and myself, I am entitled to an equal frankness. What's behind this? What's it all about? Have we come to a pitch of paternalistic regulation where the mere fact that a man endeavors to meet the woman he intends to marry in the lounge of a public hotel requires investigation?" His tone held a covert sneer.

And that tone appeared to ruffle Bryce. "It ain't just that," he rejoined before I had framed what I felt was a suitable response. "You could meet her any time or any place without our carin' whether you did or not, I reckon, if it wasn't for the fact that we've got plenty of reason for believin' that she called you at the Parkway from a room right there in the hotel—a room in which a woman was sittin'—dead."

In a flash the almost contemptuous smugness vanished from Hubert Mumm's face—gave way to what seemed little less than an instant consternation, before, by a palpable effort, he could control himself. And after that for possibly a dozen heart beats he sat staring dumbly across his desk, before his lips finally moved to frame a question:

"You mean that the call she put through to me has been—traced?"

"Uhuh," said Bryce.

"But—good God!" Mumm exclaimed in a tone of exasperation, "why assume that Miss Raleigh made them? I know what you mean, of course. I read an account of that woman's death in the papers. But what earthly reason have you for trying to connect her with the girl's—suicide? Why assume that the call I had at the Parkway came from that room?"

"Because," said Jim, "it did. At least the calls which we've traced from that room was for you at Monks Hall an' the Parkway Club. An' Miss Raleigh's already told us she was there to meet a friend who failed to show up, an' you've said she phoned to ask you to meet her an' was gone when you got there, an' them calls was both in a woman's voice."

"Just so," said Hubert Mumm as Bryce paused, and his face was dark,

his voice a resentful rasp. "From which it would appear that you were aware of practically everything you've asked before you came here."

Bryce nodded. "Just about."

"And you assume that Miss Raleigh was in—this woman's room?"

Johnson cleared his throat. "Assume is hardly the word," he said. "Bryce has left one thing out. Besides what he's said, we picked up her finger-prints on a telephone stand in that room yesterday afternoon."

"HER finger-prints?" Mumm's heavy hands gripped the edge of his desk as he leaned a trifle forward, staring straight into Johnson's face. "How in hell do you know they're hers?"

"Because they've been checked," said Johnson. "An' they match. Oh, she was there, Mumm. There ain't no question about it. The main question is whether you know anything about why she was there or not. You say you telephoned an' found out she wasn't well an' had gone to bed. I reckon that's natural enough, considerin' what had happened. But what did she tell you about it last night?"

"Last night?" Mumm repeated, glaring out of narrowed lids.

"Sure. Last night when you took her to dinner," Johnson stood his ground. "Didn't she tell you anything about it?"

"And what if she did?" Suddenly Hubert Mumm appeared to shake himself together, to regain quite amazingly, a measure of his poise. He lay back in his chair and actually laughed in Johnson's face.

"Do you imagine I'd tell you after what you've said? Haven't I told you Miss Raleigh and I are the same as engaged?

"Do you think you can come here and lead me into giving you information that would connect her with anything of that sort? If you do, you're on a dead card. The only thing that could make me do that would be a court of law, and I doubt like hell if that could. Maybe you represent the law, but I don't care a hoot what you represent. As it is, you know more about it than I do, and what you've said has been a most unpleasant surprise. But I've already told you what I know, and I've nothing more to add. And the only thing more I have to say to you before I see your back is—good morning! You came through the door behind you and I trust you can find your way out."

It was a rather surprising outburst, and yet after all, as I felt constrained to admit, it was natural enough. Presupposing Mumm's actual ignorance of the fact that Opal Raleigh had called him from Helen Hart's room two nights before, one might well assume that the information reaching him through such channels as it had, could hardly fail of producing exactly the effect it had apparently wrought.

It had been a surprise, a shock. And in view of the fact that he and the girl it affected held an understanding between them, he could scarcely have failed to react in exactly the way he had.

"We'll use the door, Mr, Mumm," I said. "Yet, I'm afraid you're taking the wrong attitude. Our desire in this matter is not to drag any one into a connection with this affair, unless deserved. But Miss Raleigh gave no intimation of her presence in Miss Hart's room when we saw her this morning at her father's house."

"Did you ask her about it?" he snapped.

"We did not." I shook my head. "And we hardly expected her to admit it unless the admission were—forced. But we fancied she might have told you about it, offered some explanation of her presence which might indicate what actually occurred."

For a moment he appeared to weigh my words. And then he shook his head. "Sorry, Glace, but as I've already

stated, you've told me things of which I had not the least intimation before you got here," he said.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TISSUE OF LIES.

"MUM'S still the word," Bryce made comment, once we were outside. "That bird's Mumm by both name and nature, an' his sweetie's the last. They useter say a woman couldn't keep a secret, but it looks like she'd managed to refrain from slippin' Hubert the info that she was in the Hart girl's room the other night. Well, where do we go from here?"

"I'm goin' to get a hook-up with the office an' see if that idea of havin' her house phone checked has done any good," Johnson growled. "Stick around till I get back."

He moved off and Bryce and I climbed into the car to wait. Jim produced one of his deadly appearing cigars and set it alight. He smoked and I watched the sidewalk crowd until Johnson returned.

"Stroller Building," he directed Larry as he took his seat.

"Any luck?" Jim asked.

"She called Lorne after we left there and told him we'd been to see her, and that she'd told us what she did. An' he tells her to 'stick to it,' an' he'll see her to-night." Johnson scowled. "Then Mumm rings her up the minute we get outside an' makes a date with her for lunch. He's goin' to shake her down, for a guess. An' we're goin' to see Lorne."

"Helen Hart's attorney," said Bryce. "What I'm askin' myself is why a columnist on a daily paper needed an attorney."

"Meanin' what?" Johnson demanded as the car nosed its way along the street.

"I dunno," said Jim. "I ask myself a lot of questions first an' last, but —you know the line I threw at that cabaret chick las' night, just before she bawled me out? If there should be anything to it. why, it would answer the other question, I reckon."

"Talk English," Johnson demanded bruskly.

"Blackmail," my partner told him. "If she was usin' her job on the *Record* as a blind or a means of gettin' dope she could use, or was pickin' it up from the girls like this Molly May, or just gettin' it anywhere she could— why, she'd need a mouthpiece to handle one end of it after she'd got it."

"Reg'lar gang, eh?" Johnson suggested and grinned. "Your idea bein' that the helpin' hand she was always supposed to be holdin' out to anybody in trouble was in reality bein' held out so it could be filled. Big boy, you got an imagination like a hophead. That's pretty fancy stuff. But it ain't so bad at that, if she'd ever had the same thought. It would be the easiest thing in the world to organize a bunch of these night club girls into a gang of scouts to tack on to any likely sucker and get him into a place where he'd be willin' to buy his way out."

"My idea," said Jim. "An' she'd need a lawyer if she was up to anything like that."

"A part of your idea bein' that Lorne was teamin' with her?" Johnson inquired. "There seems to be somethin' between him an' this Raleigh kid all right."

"Sure," Bryce agreed. "He tells her to stick to it till he sees her, an' Jeppy phones you she was seen talkin' to him at the hotel night before last, an' she tells us the Hart girl telephoned to her, though she don't say what about. But if them two was workin' any such racket, all that might be a part of it. Her old man ain't exactly what you'd call hard up, an' she's his only child. Say, that's a notion to think about."

"It sure is. But we'll do it some other time," Johnson assented as the car came again to a stop.

The entrance of the Stroller Building was vomiting an early luncheon crowd. We made our way against the stream, consulted the wall directory for Lorne's office and entered a cage.

We left it on the tenth floor, made our way along a tiled corridor and entered an office suite on whose door appeared the words "Richard Lorne, Attorney at Law."

IT was not much of a place. There was a reception room devoid of any attendant. And on one side of it was the door to a farther room through which I could see a blond man, in the late twenties as nearly as I could judge, seated before a book-and-paper-littered desk.

At the sound of our entrance he lifted his head and rose. "Good morning, gentlemen," he gave us greeting in a pleasantly modulated voice.

"Mornin', Lorne," Johnson returned his salutation with a casualness that suggested that the two men were known to one another at least by sight. "Busy?"

"Not too busy to talk with you, inspector," Dick Lorne confirmed their acquaintance and smiled. "Come in and get whatever brings you here off your chest."

We filed into the other room and Johnson introduced us to its occupant. "Listen, Lorne. I understand that you're Helen Hart's attorney," he said, as we took chairs.

"Was, and for that matter am yet, I suppose," Lorne assented without any hesitation which I could mark, though I did note an expression of instantly quickened interest about his mouth and his blue-gray eyes.

"How long'd you known her?" Johnson asked.

"About a year and a half," Lorne told him.

Bryce thrust his way in with a question before Johnson could ask another. "What need did that dame have for an attorney?"

"Not much, really. My fees weren't large, Mr. Bryce." Once more Lorne smiled. "But I did a few little things for her now and then, drew her will, and introduced her to the Bankers Trust, which will administer her estate. And sometimes she called on me for advice on some matter chiefly concerning some one she was trying to help. You know she interested herself deeply in trying to help a lot of the people who wrote to her through her work on the *Record*—chiefly girls."

"Uh-uh," Jim grunted.

"And, of course, since there seems to be no one else to do it, I have arranged for her burial," Lorne said.

"Speakin' of estates, did she have money?" Johnson asked.

"Not much," said Lorne. "A few thousand. What there is will go to a girls' home, The Pines, a home for friendless girls in trouble, to be exact. I know that because, as I just told you, I drew her will. It's in a vault drawer along with some other papers at the Bankers Trust, and I've just written a letter to The Pines notifying them of the bequest." He took up a typed sheet from his desk and held it toward the inspector in verification of his words.

Johnson took it and began to read it. And suddenly he lifted his eyes. "Then her name wasn't Hart, after all, eh?" he inquired.

"Her name was Hartwell. Helen Hart was merely the name under which she wrote," Lorne replied.

Johnson grunted his understanding, and gave the letter back. "By the way—you know Jake Raleigh's daughter, don't you?" he inquired.

"Opal Raleigh?" Lorne said quickly folding the letter and slipping it into an addressed envelope, the flap of which he moistened with his tongue and pressed into place. "Why, sure. I've known her for years."

"An'," Johnson said, "did you know that she an' H. B. Mumm, the jeweler, were engaged?"

Just what his object was in the ques-

tion I could not fathom. But whatever it was, insofar as I could see, it failed. Because Lorne flicked the sealed envelope onto his desk and smiled in what impressed me as a somewhat mechanical fashion as he answered: "Not until a couple of nights ago, inspector. I haven't seen much of her of late. But Opal's a jewel and Mumm a jeweler."

"You saw her a coupla nights ago, though?" said Bryce.

"Why, yes." Lorne gave him a glance.

"At the Glenn Arms?"

Lorne made no immediate response. He continued to eye Jim for a moment or two, then shifted his glance to Johnson. "I say, inspector—just what is your friend driving at?" he asked.

"NOTHING I don't want him to," Johnson told him. "An' he's asked it plain enough. Was Opal Raleigh at the Glenn Arms night before last or not? Be careful how you answer, because we know she was an' you saw her."

"Have I said I didn't?" For the first time a tinge of annoyance crept into the attorney's voice. "You're perfectly right about that. She was sitting on a divan in the lounge and spoke to me as I passed. I stopped and chatted with her a few minutes and—"

"Left in a taxi," said Bryce.

Attorney Lorne set his lips at the interruption and then he sighed. "I was not aware we had been so closely—shadowed. And I fail to see why we should have been, as yet," he rejoined. "But as a matter of fact, we did exactly that. Miss Raleigh was not feeling well and asked me to call a cab. And in view of the fact that she was an old friend, I rode home with her in it."

"An' did she tell you what took her to the hotel?" Johnson inquired.

"I didn't ask her," Lorne told him and frowned.

"Maybe not," Johnson agreed. "But you see we happen to know she was expectin' Mumm to meet her, an' I kinda thought she might have mentioned the fact of her bein' engaged to him at that time, seein' as you said you hadn't knowed about it until a coupla nights ago."

"I see," Lorne said and shrugged. "But see here, Johnson, what's back of all this? What difference can it make to you whether she was expecting Mumm to meet her there or not?"

"I reckon I'll answer that by askin' you somethin' else," Johnson rejoined as Lorne paused with knitted brows. "Did you or didn't you have a date with your client, Miss Hart, for that particular night?"

"Why, yes," Lorne replied without the least hesitation. "I was to meet her—"

"An' Molly May," Bryce again interrupted.

"Molly May?" the attorney repeated in a somewhat irascible voice.

"A dancin' girl from the Bohemian Club," Jim informed him.

Lorne shook his head. Puzzlement more than anything else characterized his expression, as far I could judge. "I don't know. That may have been her name," he said. "Miss Hart had merely asked me to meet some girl and go into certain matters which concerned her; see if we could straighten them out. I went to the Glenn Arms to keep that appointment, met Miss Raleigh and took her home. After that I returned to the hotel and discovered my client was—dead."

"An' on the way to her house, Miss Raleigh told you she was engaged to Mumm?" said Jim.

"I've already answered that," Lorne returned in a tone of irritation.

But if Bryce noted the latter fact he gave no sign. "I know you have," he agreed. "An' I'm wonderin' if at the same time she might not have told you that the reason she was so upset she couldn't wait for Mumm to meet her was because she'd been in this Hart girl's room?"

"Opal?" Dick Lorne demanded. And suddenly his voice, his very posture, was tense. I saw the fingers of his hands flex slowly, curl into his palms. "On—that night—do you mean?"

But Jim still ignored the effect his words were having upon the man. "Yep." He nodded. "Didn't she tell you?"

"No," said Lorne. And as he lied, his hands grew into fists which he hid in the side pockets of his coat.

For, thanks to the watch on the Raleigh house wire, the three of us knew that despite his apparent frankness during the preceding conversation, he was deliberately lying now. With the result that it made little difference to us as he went on:

"She didn't tell me anything of the sort. And I think she would have if she'd been there. You see, we're old friends. And—she did tell me about—Mumm. So you're wrong. You must be wrong. Now see here, what's the trouble with Helen Hart's death? What's the reason for trying to drag Opal into the thing? D'ye mean there's something wrong about it—that it isn't what it seemed? That it was—murder?"

As he spoke, his manner was one of a growing excitement, and at the last his voice was a trifle hoarse. But even so, his denial struck me as a bit too ready; facile enough to have been, in a measure, at least, thought out.

Consequently, I was not surprised when, rather than pressing the matter further, Johnson rose. "We don't know yet," he said. "But it won't be long now till we do. We was hopin' you might help, though if you don't know anything, why, of course, you can't. Still, if there should prove to have been something funny about it, we may come back for any help you can give."

"You'll be welcome to it. This is the first intimation I've had that Helen Hart's death wasn't the suicide the papers called it. But for God's sake, Johnson, keep Opal Raleigh's name out of the thing—keep it out if you can." As Bryce and I stood up, Lorne rose. There was acute trouble in his eyes and his face looked haggard and drawn.

CHAPTER IX.

THE VERDICT OF THE STARS.

"AN' mum's still the word," Bryce declared when we had found a little café and were seated about a table for a belated lunch. "Jake Raleigh's girl, Mumm, an' Lorne. Lorne lied at the last an' we know it, though he don't know we know it, of course. I been thinkin'. Maybe he saw the Raleigh girl before he was seen with her in the Glenn Arms lounge. Maybe they was both of them in Hart's room."

"What's that?" Johnson demanded sharply. And then he grinned. "Hell's bells, Jim, you oughta been in the cavalry the way you ride a thing once you get on."

"Uh-uh," Jim grunted. "But funny things happen, just the same. I admit I'm surprised Hart didn't leave more'n a few thousand, but I reckon she spent a lot as she went. Easy come, easy go, you know. An' if Lorne an' her were teamin' a hush money business, why maybe Hart pulls a bone. Maybe she gets Opal Raleigh up there an' Lorne finds she's the party to be shook down. He's sweet on her for a bet, an'—"

"But why Opal Raleigh?" Johnson growled.

"For the same reason as anybody else," Bryce told him. "Maybe not just her either. Maybe her an' Mumm. You know the May girl says they'd been playin' around these here now night clubs. Maybe the idea was to get her an' Mumm up there an' bring in Molly an' Lorne as a couple of deciding arguments—"

"An' so the Raleigh girl telephones Mumm to meet her after the Hart girl

is dead. An' then Lorne sneaks her out an' drives her home in a taxi. It won't wash, Jim. You're skiddin'. Put on your chains." Once more Johnson grinned.

"Well, anyway, the three of them are in it, somehow; an' Lorne lied," Bryce mumbled. "An' they all know a lot more about it than they've spilled."

"I'll admit that," Johnson conceded. "An' it's all I will admit. It ain't even proved that Hart didn't kill herself, yet. An' there's a lot easier explanation for both them birds shyin' at talkin' about Raleigh, than this bit of melodrama you suggest."

"Yeah? An' what is it?" Jim inquired.

"Why that they was merely tryin' to keep a kid they both knew from bein' mixed up in somethin' unpleasant," Johnson told him. "Use your brain more an' your imagination less."

"Chivalry, huh? Who's talkin' hokum now?" Jim jeered. "Now let me spill you a sob or two about that chivalry stuff. Maybe it was the berries in the days when the sheiks wore tin union suits an' rode a horse. But it begun to go out when they changed their iron pants for plus fours, an' took to drivin' around in the largest output of Detroit. Since women have got their rights, there's a lot of their former perquisites they've lost. An' when it comes to a possibility of bein' tagged in a murder mix-up, why, the French seem to have beat us to it when they pulled that stuff about every guy savin' himself."

"*Sauve qui peut?*" I said and laughed.

"Just about." Jim nodded. "Hubey Mumm may be a ladies' man all right. From the line of chatter that cabaret birdie pulled when Johnson mentioned his name to her last evenin', I reckon he is. But he ain't a lad with a lot of romantic notions in his bean, the way I make him."

"He's engaged to the Raleigh girl," Johnson said.

"Sure. Jake's got a lot of iron men," Bryce made cynical response.

"Oh, cut it out," I advised, and laughed again. They generally wrangled whenever they got together, over any aspect of a matter on which they disagreed. "Speakin' of Molly May, we don't want to forget that Dual told us to get that letter Hart wrote her making an appointment. Do you know how to reach her, Johnson, or do we have to wait until we can see her at the club?"

"I know where to find her an' I'll attend to gettin' the letter," the inspector assured me. "An' I reckon that just about covers what he told us to do before we see him to-night. Drop by the station about eight and we'll go up. And in the meantime, you might see if you can't induce this numbskull partner of yours to turn loose his blackmail hobby-horse."

The last was a final dig at Jim, of course. And I shook my head and smiled. "Instead, I'm going to take him over an' see Smithson," I said, before he could frame a suitable response.

THAT program we carried out. Leaving Johnson, we made our way to the *Record* office and into the presence of my old chief.

Having told him as briefly as I could what steps we had taken, I proceeded to cut the foundations out from under Jim's theory of blackmail, as much to my own surprise as to his. For during our conversation with Lorne, a remark of the lawyer had suggested a possibility to me, although it hinged upon a single word. He had said that while Hartwell had been his client's true surname, Hart had been the name under which she wrote.

Consequently I asked a question at the end of my report to Smithson:

"Did Miss Hart have any source of income outside what the *Record* paid her?"

"Huh?" My old chief grunted and a faint smile twitched his lips. "Well,

such is fame, I guess. What she got from us was only the short end of it. Don't you ever read anything outside the headlines and your balance at the bank? If you did, you'd know Helen Hart made the heavy end of her income out of writing."

"Writin'?" Bryce exploded. "What sort of writin'?"

"For the magazines," Smithson told him. "Stories, special articles—she's published a couple of books and she recently put a scenario or two across."

And there it was. I glanced at Jim and felt a desire to laugh. His expression was actually distressed. The thought occurred to me that his blackmail hobby-horse, as Johnson had dubbed his theory in regard to the dead girl, had bucked him off.

"You've been wondering about her income?" Smithson said.

"Uh-uh." Bryce found his voice. "An' she made it out of writin'? Well, for cryin' out loud. But she didn't leave much."

"Probably not," Smithson agreed. "She spent a lot. As I told Grace the other day, she was a type you don't often meet. I suppose you might call her an altruist. And like most altruists, she paid for her altruism through the nose. She was always digging up for the weak fish she tried to help. Call her a sucker if you like. But she took her work to heart—and made it her mission in life. And she got her kick out of it. Had a notion there was a lot of good in the most unexpected places. I don't know. Maybe she was right. Some of the stuff she's told me now and then would look like she was. You'll see Dual to-night?"

"Yes," I said and rose. "And we'll let you know what he says, of course."

"Wish you would." He nodded. "There's something infernally queer about the whole works—a dramatic element in her being found as she was, with that dog and a photograph. There's something there, Glace, but not on the surface; it's buried, deep. And I don't know of any one as well qualified as Dual to dig it up."

"Nor do I," I told him, turning away.

Jim and I made our way down to the street.

And we were over a block from the *Record* building before my partner spoke. "An altruist," he said then. "That's the sort of guy who's always tryin' to do somethin' for somebody besides himself. Writin' an' usin' her money to help a lot of fool kids out of trouble. An' I been tryin' to dirty her with this blackmail bunk. Well, I ain't no altruist. I reckon maybe I'm too hard-boiled; figure I'm too wise. Trouble is, these here now altruists is so rare you don't expect to find 'em. But if that girl didn't know there was cyanide in that glass when she drank it, then she was like other altruists—like Abe Lincoln, an'—Christ, an'—maybe some others. Why, dang it all, Gordon, if Smithson's right, she was just naturally—crucified."

I NODDED. My companion's face was troubled. One could see at a glance that what Smithson had said concerning the character of Helen Hart had affected that finer, higher side of Jim's nature which I myself had recognized and respected for years. Rough and ready, at times almost uncouth in his speech, there was really no finer specimen of man than James Bryce.

I respected his mood, and found myself thinking that if indeed a woman who, as it appeared, had spent both her time and money in helping others, had met with foul play in the end, then his description of her death as a crucifixion was a very apt choice of a word.

"If Smithson's right, Jim. And we'll know to-night," I said.

"Yep. We'll know to-night," he agreed.

And it was with a firm belief in Semi's ability to redeem his promise of

a definite opinion as to the nature of Helen Hart's death that we met Johnson that evening at the station, and left with him to keep our appointment with Dual.

As before, we found Semi beside his great desk on which his bronze Venus shed a golden light. As before, he was clad in his white-and-purple robes. But now the top of the desk was littered with many sheets of paper on which were cabalistic signs and symbols—the integers with which he made his computations, probing as deftly as a surgeon into the hidden secrets of human lives.

I had seen them many a time before when we had carried to him some puzzling matter in which we had asked his help. And so I recognized them now as evidence of his efforts since we had laid this latest problem before him, of his delving into the intangible, invisible, yet none the less real records of cause and effect.

For Semi Dual held that nothing happened by chance. To him each and every action was the direct result of influences unceasingly at work—of a constant interplay of electro-magnetic forces between the several planets which mankind denominates stars. He taught that as the planets themselves were held in their courses by this interplay of force, so, too, that selfsame force could not fail of an effect on mundane life from the cradle to the grave. He held, and I had seen him prove many a time, that given a time and the planetary positions of it, one could recognize influences at work and thereby predicate effects.

It was so, I knew, he would have approached the question of Helen Hart's death. Consequently, I viewed the evidence of his labors spread out before him, not in any sense with surprise, but with a decided interest.

Apparently noting my glance in their direction, he smiled.

"I have not been idle in your absence, my friends," he said. "You have, I trust, done what I advised and brought me the letter for which I asked."

"Oh, we've got the letter," Johnson returned, removing it from the inside pocket of his coat and laying it on the desk. "An' we've seen the parties you suggested. But it hasn't done much good. The minute we touched on the fact of the Raleigh girl's havin' been in the Hart girl's room, the lot of 'em refused to talk."

"As well they might," said Semi Dual. And all at once conviction, an absolute certainty of opinion, characterized his tones. "For while you have done my bidding, I, too, have worked. I have studied that pattern which the cosmos is ever weaving, the warp of which is Cause and the woof Effect. Insofar as I have as yet been able to determine the truth, it is this: despite any superficial seeming, despite any bizarre elements which may have been manifest, the death which the woman in question suffered was not of her design and was brought about by other than her own hands."

He paused and for a moment there was no sound in the room save the ticking of a great clock in the corner. In his white-and-purple robes, Dual at his great desk might have been a judge.

The thought occurred to me, and with it, the further thought that his verdict had been handed down. Yet not his verdict. Rather the verdict of those ceaseless, sweeping, unseen and seldom realized forces, by which we were each and all surrounded, in the midst of which we moved, and by which our movements were brought about.

The Pattern of the Cosmos, he had called it. And the term in that moment of his decision struck me as apt. Like shuttles, those forces were weaving, weaving the pattern which men called life. And so the verdict which the man at the desk had just voiced was not his verdict, but in very truth the verdict of the stars!

I glanced at Johnson and found him

scowling. I glanced at Bryce. He was breathing deeply with the stub of his cigar clamped between his teeth. And suddenly he broke the silence that had held us:

"Then it was murder?"

"In my estimation," Semi Dual replied.

CHAPTER X.

A NEW LIGHT.

HE took up and opened the letter Johnson had placed upon his desk. "Insofar as I can discover," he went on, as his eyes scanned its written lines, "Miss Hart was not of a suicidal type. Character, as you know, is mirrored in handwriting to an extent at times surprising. It should be interesting, therefore, to see whether this specimen of her chirography lends its support to my expressed opinion or not. And a glance is enough to show me that it does. It would even indicate to my mind that at the time death overtook her, she had no thought of it. Despondency due either to mental or physical conditions, or, as a rule, both precedes a suicide. Yet here we have nothing to hint at such a condition.

"This is the harmonious writing of a truly cultured person. And by culture I do not mean so much education as an innate quality of the soul. Here we find character in every line. To look at it without reading, this script is like an etching—a finished work of art. It is simple in outline, yet perfect; the writing of one in whom spiritual travail had burned away the dross. One might say that the writer had suffered until the meaningless in life had been purged away. There is a subtle something about it that speaks of the subjugation of the flesh—a soul that has fought and won. And such a soul never destroys its body, for such a soul is one that has conquered self, while the suicide is one in which self-concentration leads to a loss of balance and so to the self-destroying act.

"The writing is joined in places, in places detached. Herein is an indication not to be missed. The disjoined letters show her highly intuitive. Those that are joined show her as one endowed with a capacity for deep and logical thought. This is a peculiar combination in one person. Intuition and reason both highly developed together are seldom met. We may, I think, assume that her work on the *Record,* plus her own experience, whatever it may have been, had developed within her an ability to analyze a problem, and, having analyzed it, to act. Intuitively she would sense its values, and long training in making decisions for others would have developed her continuity of thought. She would appear to have been a character as beautiful as her writing, as healthy in mind and body as the swift, sure strokes of her pen."

For a moment he paused while he folded and laid aside the letter a hand now dead had written, then went on:

"And herein are sustained the results of my labors since last you sat here. For in the figure covering her death, which I have erected, Saturn and Mars in conjunction in the sign of Cancer, stand in opposition to the conjoined sun and moon. And the moon is this woman whom we consider—this fair Moon as the Oriental is so prone to call a perfect woman. Attacked by Mars and Saturn, she appears in my consideration of the tragic fate which overcame her, as the victim of a fiend."

He paused again and to me it seemed that his final words actually quivered through the tense quiet of the room.

And when, as it appeared, he had given them time to work their influence on us—to paint their mental picture in our minds—he went on again in his bell-like tones:

"For thus it is written and thus I translate it to you, that Saturn in Cancer shows her assailant to have been

of a covetous, jealous, sordid and stubborn nature, a contemner of women, malicious, a liar, self-centered and self-seeking, whose major interest in one of her sex would turn upon either self-advantage or the interest of the beast. And Mars in Cancer conjoined with Saturn makes him terrible indeed—a soul devoid of virtue, yet boastful, quarrelsome, prone to violence, a robber of property or life, one cruelly calculating and deliberate, who, being practically without conscience, would not hesitate to gain his ends by any wickedness.

"And these two evil symbols I find in the House of the Moon; for Cancer is her House and were she in it she might be strong. But in my figure I find her in Capricorn, the House of Saturn. Both she and Saturn are housed to their oppositional detriment. And here, my friends, some element as yet unknown would appear to creep in. For the Moon partakes of the nature of the planet to which conjoined and in my figure I find her conjoined to the Sun, the Ruler of All, the Law. Hence we may assume that the Moon in this is an agent of the Law, through whom, even though she herself is destroyed, Justice shall in the end be done."

"MEANIN' her death tipped over the beams—set things in motion, I reckon?" Bryce suddenly cut in.

"Thanks to the Sun," Dual returned.

"The Sun?" Bryce repeated vaguely.

"The Sun—the Law," Semi reaffirmed. "For he was conjoined with her; his influence was upon her. He was her friend. And though she has gone down to a bodily destruction, he stands still supreme. More, Venus in Virgo and Jupiter in Taurus are in trine to one another and in trine to the Sun and Moon, hence in friendly aspect toward both and to one another. And though in sextile to Mars and Saturn, they should prove less friendly to him than to the Sun, especially as Jupiter is in the House of Venus. From this I take it that Venus is far more inclined to Jupiter than to Mars and Saturn, and that we may look to them for some help, at least in the endeavor of the Sun toward bringing justice about. For"—his voice underwent a change, took on suddenly the timbre of one pronouncing an irrevocable sentence—"the opposition of Mars and Saturn to him shows their utter contempt for the laws of man or God, and such a one cannot long persist.

"Toward that end Uranus shall help us and Neptune, symbolic of fluidity, grace and motion, will give her aid; while Mercury, the Messenger and Accountant, shall keep the books of this sorry matter and set down their balance in the end. It is thus that I read so much of the riddle you have brought me, and I say to you that the woman who died the other night, went to her death as one whose every higher impulse was brutally betrayed. And while I shall act as Uranus in the future course of the matter, I feel that the part of Mercury must be yours, my friends."

"Messengers and bookkeepers, eh?" said Bryce.

"And have you not already essayed the part?" Dual returned. "And shall we not now examine and strike the balance of what you have done? Tell me concerning the interviews you have had with Miss Raleigh, with the jeweler Mumm and the attorney Lorne. Let us see wherein the threads of meaning, spun out of your conversations with them, run parallel and wherein they diverge.

"Therefore, speak!"

We complied with his request, described our interviews with Opal Raleigh, Mumm and Lorne, the jeweler's refusal to discuss the possibility of his fiancée's presence in the room of the murdered woman, Lorne's deliberate denial of knowledge we felt assured he possessed and his appeal to Johnson to keep her out of it. And at the last we

told him of the talk with Smithson, at which Johnson had not been present.

"Writin', eh? She made most of her jack out of writin'?" the inspector caught at the point and glanced triumphantly at Bryce.

Jim's face went slowly red. But he nodded. "Yep. As a bookkeeper I was 'way outa balance about that."

"You held a different theory?" Dual inquired.

"Yep." Jim told him briefly what it had been.

"And not impossible," Semi made comment, "had the woman's character been different. Yet not to be considered with a person of her type. Reverting to a consideration of Miss Raleigh's movements on the night in question, all things considered, we appear safe in assuming that she was actually in the room and her reticence in regard to that fact seems natural enough. Regardless of the exact nature of her connection with the problem which confronts us, we can only feel that her natural impulses would be to avoid its being discovered. For were her connection of a major degree, she would seek to escape the consequences of that connection. And were she no more than indirectly involved, then certainly she would feel that her own reputation and self-interest demanded that she conceal the fact of that connection, however slight. As for Mumm and Lorne: various influences may have inspired their attitude. The one is engaged to marry her, by his own admission. The other is her friend of years. And despite your coming to them, there has been no proof as yet advanced that Miss Hart's death was not suicide."

"I suggested that to Bryce," Johnson said. "They was simply shieldin' the girl."

"IT is a point to consider," Dual replied. And suddenly again his voice was stern, rang in accusing accents through the room. "But in reality the thing was murder. It was a deliberate, fiendishly merciless crime. For a man may kill in the heat of passion and in a measure find excuse. But in this instance the one who gave her to drink of a fatal draft, did so with prior knowledge, with thought-out purpose, as a thing preconsidered and planned. And in so doing he betrayed every accepted code of human life, and perverted to his own destructive object life's holiest emotion, the source of life itself: maternal love."

"Just how do you figure that out?" Johnson asked.

Dual turned his glance upon him. In the gray depths of his eyes it seemed to me that for just a moment there were tiny points of light.

"Have I not said already that the problem before us was one of a mother's love manifested in the last brief moments of life or of a mother's love betrayed?" he asked. "And did you not find her clasping to her dead breast a woolly dog?"

"The dog, huh?" Johnson repeated frowning. "Well, of course I figured it was her kid's. I've already told you that. But do you mean the kid had something to do with what happened?"

"In my estimation," Dual said slowly, "her love for him was the path along which she walked to her death."

"I don't get it, I guess," Johnson shook his head while I felt some inward tremor shake me at the suggestion of meaning as yet unexplained, wrapped in Semi Dual's words. For the man spoke often in riddles it was hard to read, yet which always held a subtle meaning, later to be revealed.

For though he read the stars and believed in their verdict wholly, yet there was nothing of the charlatan, the faddist, about the strange man we called our friend. He was one of the most deliberately practical individuals I have ever known, with a complete understanding of life values and facts.

Not once had I known him to demand credence for the results of his own astrologically derived knowledge,

without sustaining it by the "material" proof which he realized was so essential to the average man. So now, as Johnson confessed his own lack of understanding, Semi smiled faintly.

"Not yet," he said. "You shall in good time. For his act has placed the guilty beyond the pale of mercy, outlawed him in the eyes of God and man. And where shall the guilty hide when the Sun sends his justice-seeking finger into the darkness, to reveal him! Even now he walks as a prisoner in ball and chain. For the sins men do become a clog upon them, a never-ceasing drag, slowly increasing to work their undoing in the end. Such is the Law of Karma, my friends. No man lives to himself alone. We are but cells in the body of the Cosmos, and the Cosmos itself is the body of God. Hence, like the cells of our physical bodies, we of the cosmic body are bound together in a community of function and existence. And despite all other seeming, Opal Raleigh and the woman now dead were—friends."

"But hold on," Bryce exclaimed. "If that's right, then she sure held out on us this morning. She said she'd never met her in her life."

"Wherein," and again a faint smile twitched Semi's lips, "she may have spoken truth. Have you not said yourself that in your opinion she was in the room of this woman after Miss Hart was dead?"

"Uh?" Bryce gaped. There was something nagging at my brain, something vague, indefinite, which I could not bring to the surface, some faint stirring of understanding as Jim went on: "Then how in time could she and Hart—"

"I am speaking in astrological sense when I say 'friends,' my friend," Dual cut off his startled question. "For if Helen Hart appears as the Moon in my figure, as there is little doubt, since the Moon has gone down to destruction, then Venus is in trine to her and the Sun is in friendly aspect."

"Venus bein' Opal Raleigh at that rate," Bryce caught at the suggestion.

"EXACTLY," said Semi Dual. "Wherefore I think that once she understands the true nature of the thing into which she has been drawn, we may look for the apparent veil of secrecy which she and her associates have to-day maintained to be at least in some measure torn. Shall we put it to the test? You say that you have knowledge that this lawyer Lorne intends to call at her house this evening. Doubtless they will discuss this thing. Call her house and explain that you have knowledge that the death was murder—that you have proof she was in the room. Ask her to see you and go into the matter more fully with you. You, Gordon." He opened a door in one end of his desk and produced a telephone.

I took it and called the Raleigh number and asked for Miss Raleigh when my call was answered. And after a time her voice came back to me:

"Yes. This is Miss Raleigh speaking."

"Miss Raleigh," I said. "This is Mr. Glace, who called on you this morning about your presence the other night at the Glenn Arms. Miss Raleigh, knowledge has come into our possession indicating that Miss Hart's death was murder."

"Murder?" The word was a breath-caught whisper in my ear.

"Yes, Miss Raleigh," I answered its startled interrogation. "And more, Miss Raleigh, we have definite proof that at some time *after* her death, you were in her room. You left your finger-prints on the telephone stand at the time you telephoned Mr. Mumm. And so we're asking if you will see us again and explain insofar as you can what actually happened."

"Just a minute—can you wait—just a minute," she faltered.

"I'll wait," I agreed. "If the connection is broken, I'll call again."

I sat with the receiver to my ear. "She asked me to wait for her answer," I explained, and sat on.

The faint hum of the wire between me and that house into which I had thrown a verbal bomb, purred and whispered and crackled. My three companions made no sound save only that Bryce shifted in his chair and that after a time Johnson cleared his throat. Minutes passed. The great clock in the corner ticked them off. I fell to watching the slow sweep of its pendulum. To and fro, to and fro, marking the fall of the sands of what men call time.

And then far off, muted, I heard a footfall, the sound of some one speaking and a man's voice came on the line:

"Hello!"

"Yes—Glace speaking," I replied.

"This is J. J. Raleigh," the words came back to me sharply. "What's this about your having a notion that my girl's mixed up in this thing at the Glenn Arms?"

"Simply that we have evidence that she was in the room after the woman was dead and before her death was discovered," I returned.

For a moment Raleigh said nothing and then: "Where are you now?" he asked.

"At the Urania Building," I told him, scenting forthcoming action. "That's where we have our offices."

"Stay there until we can get there."

"Of course," I gave assent.

"All right. We're leaving for there now," he said.

The connection broke.

CHAPTER XI.

SEMI'S PSYCHOLOGY PROVES TRUE.

THE eyes of my three companions were on me as I hung up and returned the telephone to the cubby hole in the end of the desk.

"They're coming over to our office at once," I announced.

"They?" Johnson questioned. "You mean her an' Lorne?"

"No, she and her father," I told him. "He came on the wire at the last. That's why she asked me to wait, I guess. She told him what I'd said. We'll have to go down."

"An' tabulate a few more items," Bryce said and stood up. "Well, that's all right. It's in keepin' with our part. An' if they're comin' over here on the jump, we Mercuries had better grow wings on our feet. Come on, brother bookkeepers, shake a leg."

Johnson gained his feet. I followed suit.

But Semi stayed us briefly. "Before you leave, however, I would suggest that you contact this lawyer Lorne again in the light of what may transpire to-night, and that with or without him you arrange to inspect what papers she may have left in company with her will at the Bankers Trust. Now go and remember that Venus is friendly. Good night."

"Venus is friendly," Bryce said as we descended the stairs from the roof and rang for a cage. "Now what did he mean by that?"

"A tip, I think," I told him. "Meaning that we should handle Opal Raleigh with—tact."

"An' that ain't a bad tip, either," Johnson agreed. "Jake Raleigh's no small toad in this town's puddle."

"Big enough to be sort of interestin' even to an inspector of police, eh?" Bryce suggested, grinning.

"Yeah, bo," Johnson admitted without any hesitation. "An' he ain't the sort to lay down if he thinks any trouble is threatenin' his kid. By the same token, he's Irish."

"So'm I." Jim nodded. "A long way back. But speakin' of kids, what in time do you make out of Dual's sayin' this Hart girl's love for her youngster was the path along which she walked to her death? That's a hot line if you could make it out."

"Which I ain't even tryin' to, ex-

cept that it's mixed up some way with that darned dog she was holdin'," Johnson growled. "That's Dual's way, sayin' things like that. But he knows what he means whether we've got brains to see it or not. Let it go at that."

The cage came up. We left it on the seventh floor, unlocked our office door, and snapped on lights. After that we waited until a cage came up and stopped; footsteps clicked along the corridor and Jake Raleigh opened the door and permitted Dick Lorne and a white-faced girl to pass through it before he closed it behind his own back.

He was heavy-set, florid, above medium height, a man who had made his own way—made himself a power in politics and finance—with a blue eye and a fighting jaw, and hair whose crisp brownness the years had begun to touch with little streaks of frost.

"Hello, Johnson!" he said as his glance met the inspector's. "I reckon this wouldn't have been necessary if you'd come to me this morning instead of goin' to my house.

"Now, what's the idea of tryin' to mix my girl up in a murder case? How'd you know it was murder and not what the papers said?"

"We got our reasons for thinkin' it wasn't suicide, Mr. Raleigh," Johnson replied. And I saw he was ill at ease. "But that don't mean— What we're tryin' to get is information."

"Just a moment," I suggested, meeting Raleigh's eye and letting my glance turn from his face to that of the girl beside him and Dick Lorne. The latter's presence gave me some surprise, though I felt it might well be explained by the fact that he had been keeping the engagement we knew he had made with Opal Raleigh at the time I had telephoned the Raleigh house.

"Let us sit down before we go any further. I'm Glace, Mr. Raleigh. I had you on the telephone a bit ago; and this"—I turned to Jim—"is my partner, Mr. Bryce."

HE nodded as I paused. "Can't say I'm glad to meet you under the circumstances, Glace," he replied. "But since we're here, we're here—and we might as well thresh this out. Now, then, you were saying you had proof that my daughter had been in the room of a girl at the Glenn Arms *after* she died the other night, and that she left her finger-prints on a telephone stand in that room. Or that's what Opal says you said. How'd you know they were her finger-prints? What makes you sure?"

"Merely the fact that they match other prints known to be hers, Mr. Raleigh," I replied.

"Known to be? How known to be?" he demanded.

I explained about the menu card the manager of the café where she and Mumm had dined the night after the tragedy had given Johnson, and why we had desired it. And while I spoke I watched the face of the girl my words so nearly concerned.

And I saw startled comprehension light it, saw it become parted of lip, wide-eyed. Saw her bosom rise and fall quickly as she breathed. Too, I marked how a growing resentment made of her father's visage a lowering - eyed and jaw - thrust - forward thing.

And as I paused it was Johnson rather than me he addressed. "So you did that, did you?" he rasped. "You followed my daughter, trailed her, discussed her with a café manager, got him to trick her. You—you— Why, who do you think you are, to get away with that sort of stuff with my child? Don't you know I can have you broken—put you back to pounding pavements?"

"Oh, dad, be still!" Suddenly Opal Raleigh broke into the irate torrent of his words. "What else could he do, if he had reason to think it might

help him on the case? And if Miss Hart was murdered, it was his duty to do anything or everything that could help. So if he thought I was there, why shouldn't he try to prove it? And he was right. I was there, and I'm going to tell all about it. I owe it to her myself, I think. At least I'm going to tell the truth."

"You owe it to her—this Hart girl, you mean?" her father stammered. "See here, Opal, what are you talking about?"

"I don't know," she said. "Not really. But I think she meant to do me some sort of a service; that she thought she would be doing me a service of some sort. That's another reason why I feel sure it was murder, that she never killed herself.

"You see, she telephoned to me and asked me to come there to her rooms at the hotel. I asked her why, but she wouldn't tell me except to say that she absolutely must see me in private. So in the end I agreed to go there between half past seven and eight, and I went and rapped, and didn't get an answer. I tried the door, and it was unlocked. I looked into the room, and I could see her, though I didn't know her. I told the truth this morning when I said I'd never met her in my life. Because, you see, the first time I ever saw her to know her, she was dead. But when I looked through the door I could see her—a woman, that is—sitting in a chair beside a table. And I thought possibly she was asleep and hadn't heard my rap. So I went inside.

"I spoke to her, and she didn't answer. And then I saw—I saw she was sitting there, holding a toy dog in her arms. And on the table beside her was a photograph and a—a glass. I spoke to her again, and still she did not speak or move.

"And then—then I—I began to understand. So I touched her. She was still warm, but some way I knew she was dead. I couldn't feel her heart, and she didn't breathe. And I—I was frightened. I guess I lost my head. You see, it was so unexpected. It was a ghastly shock.

"There I was, alone in a hotel room with a dead woman holding a toy dog. And then I thought of Hubert, and I saw the telephone. So I called him, first at Monks Hall, where he lives, you know, and they told me he was at the Parkway Club. So I called him there and asked him to meet me downstairs.

"I suppose I did touch the telephone stand. I don't know. I was rattled. I hardly know what I thought. I imagine I had a crazy idea that if I could slip down and have him meet me, be seen meeting him, you know, it would —well—seem all right.

"Anyway, I did it, and he said he'd come over at once. Then I slipped out of the room and walked downstairs and sat down in the lounge; and Dick came along, and I asked him to send me home, and he came with me and went back. And that's all I know about it."

She paused and let her eyes turn from one of us to another and added, "It really *is* all," in a tone well-nigh as appealing as that of a troubled child.

"EXCEPT one thing, maybe," Raleigh suggested gruffly. "What did this Hart girl want to talk to you about?"

"I don't know, dad," she told him.

"But you said you thought she had it in her mind to help you." Her father fixed her with his eyes. "And at that rate you must have thought she was going to tell you something that concerned you. Well, what was it? You've gone too far now to balk at the rest. What could she have told you that she had to talk over with you in private?"

"Dad!" Opal Raleigh appeared to stiffen through all her slender length. "I've told you I don't know, and I don't! But somehow, the way she spoke, I fancied—I thought— Oh, I

can't explain it so you'd understand, I guess. You're so—so literal."

"But we do understand, Miss Raleigh, I think," I said. "You merely felt that what she had to say was something which in some way unknown to you might affect your personal interests. Isn't that the substance at least of what you would like to say?"

"Yes. That's just it." She gave me a grateful glance. "She just made me feel that she was doing it for me rather than herself. And I still think so."

"Without having any idea what it was?" Raleigh asked.

"I've already said so," she answered sharply. "Your question's in very bad taste."

Dick Lorne cleared his throat. "I hope you gentlemen will understand that in denying any knowledge of this matter this morning I was not striving to frustrate justice," he said. "In reality Miss Raleigh had told me what had happened; but as long as Miss Hart's death appeared to have been suicide, I could not see the need of dragging her accidental presence in that room into it. And I did not wish to say anything which might have such a result without having seen her first."

"We can quite understand that view of the matter," I said, and turned again to Opal Raleigh. "You had lunch with Mr. Mumm to-day, Miss Raleigh, did you not?"

"Well, by God—" Raleigh began.

"Oh, dad, please!" Opal again cut him off. "Yes, Mr. Glace. Mr. Mumm and I had lunch together and we discussed your visit to him. He was fearfully upset when he learned that you knew I had been in her room."

"He didn't know it before?" Bryce inquired in a seemingly casual tone.

Her eyes turned toward him. I saw her brows knit in a tiny frown before she answered: "Oh, yes, he did really. I—I told him where I was, when I called him at the club—from her room, I mean. But you mustn't blame him for acting the way he did this morning. I don't see how he could have done anything else.

"You see, we're practically engaged, and he meant to protect me if he could, even if I had acted like a fool. But I was so dreadfully upset by what had happened that I wasn't more than half responsible for what I did, I guess. That's why, when I saw Dick passing me in the lounge, I called him over, decided not to wait for Mr. Mumm. You see, I just wanted to get away from there."

"And you'd known Mr. Lorne a long time?" I suggested.

"Oh, Dick and I have known one another pretty nearly all our lives." She glanced at Lorne and suddenly she smiled. "But I shouldn't have run off the way I did. Mr. Mumm came over and couldn't find me, and asked all over for me, and they finally told him I'd left with some other man. And he telephoned the house, and they told him I'd gone to bed.

"I should have left word for him at least; but I didn't do it. I just wasn't quite myself. And when you came to the house this morning I didn't know what to say; so I said as little as I could.

"I telephoned Mr. Lorne after you were gone, and he said he'd see me to-night, and we'd talk it all over. That was before he knew you were going to call on him, of course."

"YOU knew he was Miss Hart's attorney?" I asked.

"Yes. He told me." She nodded.

"And while you were in her room you didn't see anything to indicate that any one else had been there, or was still there?"

"No." Again she shook her head. "But I didn't look around. All I seem to have seen clearly was her sitting there with that dog and—the telephone on the stand. I haven't been able to stop seeing it since. It—it made me

think of that poem, 'Little Boy Blue.' It's all about a little tin soldier and a little toy dog, you know—the playthings of a dead child. The boy in the photograph on the table beside her was holding the same dog in his arms. I —oh, maybe I shouldn't say this, because I don't know a thing about her, but I've been wondering if he might have been a Little Boy Blue too—if he might have been hers."

"He was," I told her. "Or at least we think so. In any case, she had had a child."

"And he's dead?" she questioned softly in a somewhat wistful voice.

"We don't know yet," I answered.

"He is," said Lorne. "The picture in question is that of Miss Hart's son. Its being on the table as it was has made me feel that her death was suicide. But if it was not—"

"It was framed," Bryce declared with a positive conviction. "It was staged. That was put there to make it look like suicide. An' whoever did that knew a lot about her and set the stage to look the way it did."

"But, how awful, to do a thing like that!" Opal Raleigh exclaimed.

"Uhuh," Bryce assented dryly. "But it's a sort of human trait, I guess, for folks to try an' cover their tracks."

"Oh!" Opal Raleigh bit her lips. A slow flush dyed her face and faded, leaving it once more wanly white, as Jim went on:

"Listen, Lorne. You was tellin' us this mornin' that Miss Hart had a safety box at the Bankers Trust. Any chance of our getting into the thing? We'd like to see what it contains. We are sure this thing was murder, but we'd like to know at least half as much as the guy what set that photograph on the table an' put that dog in her arms. An' there might be somethin' among her papers to shed a little light."

"Dick!" Opal Raleigh cried. "Oh, Dick, you can arrange it, can't you?"

"I think so," said Lorne. "At what time?"

"Any time after the vaults are open," Johnson returned.

"Then suppose I meet you at the Bankers Trust right after ten, if that meets with your convenience," Lorne suggested.

"O. K.," Johnson accepted. "We'll be there right after ten. Well, all right, then, I reckon that's all."

"Except that next time you want to know anything about me or mine, you come to me direct," Raleigh advised him as he rose.

"Don't mind him, inspector," Opal somewhat softened the effects of the words, however. "His bite isn't as bad as his growl."

"Well, gentlemen, my bite hasn't been found lacking in force yet," Raleigh countered. But as he spoke he grinned.

We bade them good night and saw them leave.

"And that's that," Johnson growled when they had gone. "And I reckon we know the part that little dame played in the thing at least. Not that it helps to any great extent."

"Yep. That's that," Bryce agreed. "Everything appears to be washed up. If her story's straight, all we get out of it we didn't have before is the fact that the Hart girl apparently made two dates for that evenin' instead of one, an' that everybody is sittin' pretty but us."

"Unless maybe it's Lorne," Johnson frowned.

"Huh?" Jim gave him a questioning glance. "What about him?"

"I don't know," Johnson said. "But he knew that photo was a picture of her kid, an' that the kid was dead.

"Somehow I got a notion that bird knows more about her than he's spilled. And I got another hunch that there's somethin' between him an' Jake Raleigh's daughter."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

Viva La Pay Day

By SEVEN ANDERTON

When the Federals matched the Central American rebels' chief weapon, it was up to three Yankee adventurers to save the day—and incidentally the pay roll!

"This ain't so good," growled Red Larrabee

THE three Americans serving with General Juan Banzilla's rebel army sat at breakfast. Their table was a flat rock, lying before their faded and much patched tent, pitched at the edge of a small natural clearing in the semitropical forest. The clearing was being used as a landing field for an old Curtiss scout plane, now moored to several driven stakes in the center of the field.

The Yankees assembled about their rock table were as sweet a trio of trouble-hunters as ever fought for the fun of fighting. Ace Faulkner, besides being the pilot of the Curtiss, was the acknowledged leader of the outfit.

He was a born adventurer. He had one of those lean, wiry and disease-proof bodies with which nature equips the men she creates to find pleasure in wandering far trails and enduring hardships. Faulkner's sandy, unkempt hair was coarse and very thick. Deep-set blue eyes looked from beneath his bushy brows. Tiny lines at the corners of his eyes and wide mouth told of laughter that came easily and often.

Faulkner's two buddies were Red Larrabee and Jonas Peters. Red Larrabee was a big, good-natured soldier of fortune. The map of Ireland was on his face and his hair was of the reddest that ever thatched human skull. He was always hungry and usually eating.

Jonas Peters was a grizzled ex-lumberjack. He was about forty, but his wandering life had given him the appearance of at least ten more years. He was one of those rare chaps who enjoy grumbling, but who grumble in such a manner that others can enjoy it also.

They looked like the rough-and-ready adventurers they were, as they sat at breakfast in the gray dawn. All wore clothing bought primarily for service and which had seen plenty.

"I reckon we'll have to take down this blasted tent," grumbled Jonas Peters. "We advance every day just enough to have to take the durned tent down and move it and put it up again."

"We are lucky that we ain't advancing in the other direction twice as fast," chuckled Red Larrabee. "What are you growling about?"

"I've drove tent stakes until my hands are sore and I've got a permanent hump in my back from pulling 'em up," answered Jonas.

"If all the tent stakes you have driven were laid end to end," grinned Red, "the line would be almost as long as the wail of woe we've listened to since you wandered into camp."

"Go to blazes!" said Jonas. "You—"

"Listen," interrupted Ace Faulkner, rising suddenly.

SILENCE fell over the group. To their listening ears came the faint but unmistakable sound of an airplane motor. Faulkner turned and started up the slope toward the rocky crest of a ridge that rose just east of their tent. The others followed.

Standing on the crest of the ridge the Americans watched a trim plane approaching from the southeast. Faulkner was observing the ship through a pair of glasses. Red Larrabee had rolled a tortilla into a cone and filled it with frijoles before leaving the table. He munched at this portable breakfast while he watched the plane speeding along against the eastern sky.

Others had heard the plane, and the ridge was swarming with ragged rebels. The plane began to circle and then disappeared below the treetops some two miles to the east. It had alighted in the Federal camp.

"Looks like you are going to have some competition, Ace," observed Red.

"Damn!" grumbled Jonas Peters. "Just when it had begun to look like we were in sight of pay day, Toreda gets a plane. If he's going to drop bombs on us, I hope he drops one on that confounded tent before we have to take it down again."

Just then a ragged messenger came running up to the group of Americans. He spoke to Faulkner in Spanish.

"General Banzilla wishes to speak with Señor Faulkner at once," he announced. "The general waits at his tent."

Faulkner followed the mesenger, and the others turned back toward their interrupted breakfast.

The long ridge upon which Banzilla's three thousand ragged rebels were entrenched was the first foothill of the towering peaks of the Central American Rockies, which loomed behind them.

The rebel chief was on the verge of victory. From the foot of the ridge now held by his army, level farm and timber land stretched ahead all the way to the ocean, twenty miles distant. More than two-thirds of the little Latin republic was now under Banzilla's rule, and the day seemed almost at hand when he would establish himself in the president's mansion at the capital.

The war had reached the stage where

deserters from the Federal forces were beginning to straggle into Banzilla's camp, seeking service and food under his banner. There could be no surer sign of approaching victory.

But a fly had appeared suddenly in the nectar of Banzilla's success. The rebel chieftain had watched with dismay while that plane had alighted in the camp of General Toreda, commander of the Federal forces.

There was a worried look in Banzilla's intense dark eyes as he sat over the remains of his breakfast and talked with Ace Faulkner. Banzilla was that rare combination, an idealist and a soldier. Educated in the United States, he spoke English as well, if not better, than Faulkner did. He was really fighting for the interests of his downtrodden people, and they were beginning to realize it.

"You say that plane is a good one?" Banzilla asked.

"It was a De Haviland," answered Ace. "I looked her over through my glasses and she appears shipshape. Her motor was working like a watch."

"Has more speed than your plane?"

"Easy."

There was silence while the brooding eyes of Banzilla looked hard into the steady blue ones.

"It would not be wise to fight that De Haviland in the air—you could not perhaps shoot it down?" Banzilla asked at last.

"The chance would be darned slim," admitted Ace. "I can try, of course."

"We could not shoot him down from the ground?" asked Banzilla.

"Not unless he comes down to where we can reach him with a machine gun," said Faulkner. "He will not be likely to do that."

"HE will drop bombs on us," brooded the rebel chief.

"Undoubtedly," nodded Ace.

"Is it not hell," asked Banzilla, "that those pigs should get a plane when the victory is within our grasp?"

"Fortunes of war," smiled Faulkner.

"What shall we do?" asked the chieftain.

Faulkner slowly rolled and lighted a cigarette.

"If you want my advice," said the Yankee, "I suggest that you move your men off this ridge and scatter 'em out, so there will be fewer of them messed up if that D. H. starts laying eggs in our neighborhood."

"A good idea," nodded Banzilla. "And then?"

"And then wait and see what happens while I try to dope something out," answered Ace. "I don't mind admitting that I have little desire to go up and mix with that baby, if he knows how to handle that D. H. at all. When I've had time to watch him in the air a little while, I may change my mind. I'm as keen about winding up this fuss as you are. It's been months since I have seen the color of gold."

Banzilla nodded gloomily. He realized keenly that only their patriotism and their faith in him had kept his soldiers fighting without pay for so long. During the past six months, since the captured territory behind his lines had begun to yield crops, the army had been well fed. Money, however, was out of the question.

"I know," said the rebel chief slowly. "But I have been fair. Every man who serves me knows that pay day must wait on victory. In the country behind us the women, children and old men have harvested and stored crops that must also wait on victory before they can be turned to gold. It is urgent that we win quickly, but now comes this doubly damned airplane to the camp of Toreda. We must do something."

"Right you are," nodded Faulkner. "And to begin with, you'd better scatter your men. Get 'em off this ridge. Scatter 'em good in the timber. Leave only machine guns on the ridge and have shelters of bowlders and rocks

built for them. While you are attending to that I'll go talk with Larrabee and Peters."

Faulkner walked away down the ridge and Banzilla moved to call a conference of his staff. The rebel leader had much faith in the judgment of the Yankee flyer. Faulkner had been through four years of the World War and was battle-wise.

Banzilla had found him in the capital more than a year before, looking for trouble and excitement. Learning that Ace was a flyer, Banzilla had put his cards on the table. The rebel chief was at that time in the early stages of his plot to head a rebellion.

Faulkner had listened and then returned to the States, where he invested his all in the old Curtiss. He flew it back to the little Latin republic at the appointed time and placed it at the disposal of Banzilla, who had promised him a neat profit on the plane when the rebels were victorious.

It was largely due to the plane that Banzilla had been able to push his way steadily down from his mountain stronghold to his present position within two days' march of the capital. The old Curtiss had been the deciding factor in battle after battle. The Federal army outnumbered the rebels two to one.

The Federals had artillery, while the rebels had only rifles and machine guns. But the Federals had no airplane, and Faulkner, circling over their position with the Curtiss loaded with bombs, demoralized their defense, forcing them to retreat before the relentlessly crowding rebels.

Between battles Faulkner flew the plane to Mexico, bringing back ammunition for the machine guns and rifles. Banzilla realized that Faulkner and the Curtiss equalled in value all the rest of his army.

Now the Federal forces had acquired a plane—and a newer and speedier plane than the old Curtiss. It was a worried rebel chief who set about preparing to defend himself against the air attack that was sure to come.

IT lacked an hour of noon when the D. H. appeared over the territory in which the rebels had sought cover. In the rocky and timbered expanse behind the ridge Banzilla's army was scattered wide, hidden beneath hastily constructed shelters. Nests of rock protected the machine guns scattered along the top of the ridge.

The enemy plane meant business. Flying between two and three thousand feet the D. H. scouted back and forth over the rebel position several times. Then hell broke loose!

Twenty-four bombs came raining down as the plane sped above the territory in which the rebels had taken refuge. When the enemy craft had banked over and headed back toward its base, a count revealed that its toll was eleven dead and seventeen wounded. Only the fact that the rebels had scattered had kept the list of casualties so small.

"This ain't so good," growled Red Larrabee as the Americans emerged from their hastily constructed shelter. "That buzzard certainly raised plenty of hell hereabouts."

"Did you notice how he handled that ship?" asked Ace. "That's no spiggoty pilot. He's a flyer. He's gone back for more eggs. I'd go up and give him a scrap, but the old Curtiss wouldn't have a chance. She's so near to falling apart that I've been flying her for the last month with one hand on the joystick and the other on the rip cord of my parachute."

"It's sure tough," grumbled Red. "I'd like to hit that buzzard with a cannon ball. He's liable to delay pay day for a long time."

"He intends to keep us holed up while Toreda's crew swarms over that ridge to give us fits," said Ace. "We've got to do something about it."

From where first aid was being administered to the wounded, General

Banzilla now came hurrying toward the Americans.

"This is maddening," cried the chief. "Can we not retaliate in some manner?"

"If I had the chance of a rabbit at a greyhound track," answered Ace, "I'd go up and have a try at him. As it is, I don't see how it would help any for me to commit suicide."

"Better hole up again," cried Red Larrabee, pointing to the east. "He's coming back."

All scuttled for cover. In five minutes the D. H. was again overhead. Twenty-four more bombs played havoc in the position occupied by the hiding rebels. Again the enemy ship wheeled back toward its base.

"That's enough of this," growled Ace Faulkner, crawling from the rock shelter.

"Look at the Curtiss!" cried Red in agonized tones.

A bomb had struck beside the anchored plane. What was left would never fly again.

"Damn," muttered Ace, "and our ammunition is low!"

The loss of the Curtiss as an ammunition carrier was a severe blow, even though it could not have been used in combat against the other ship.

Banzilla again came hurrying up, beside himself with impotent anger. In the six hours since breakfast time, Fate had dealt him a cruel blow. His army that had been so near victory was now in a half demoralized state. A few more strafings such as the two that had just passed would precipitate a panic among the ragged patriots. They hadn't the stuff in them to hold together under such odds.

"Mother of God!" cried the rebel chieftain, tears of rage in his eyes and a quiver in his voice. "Are we to be beaten by those pigs after all these months of winning?"

A bald-headed old Mexican in a greasy apron made of flour sacks came panting up to inform Banzilla that one of the bombs from the D. H. had landed squarely in the camp kitchen. The nearly finished dinner had been scattered to the four winds.

"Hell!" cried Larrabee. "That ought to be reported to this here League of Nations. It's an overt act —uncivilized warfare, that's what it is."

"Your belly needs a rest anyhow," said Jonas. "You've et extra meals until you're at least two months ahead of the rest of us. We're lucky we've still got our appetites."

"SEÑOR FAULKNER," entreated Banzilla. "What can we do now? Our plane is ruined."

Faulkner had been standing in silence with eyes fixed on a large flat rock that lay on the ground near by. It was oblong in shape, about twenty feet long, twelve feet wide and a little more than a foot thick. It was evidently a slab that had broken loose from the formation on the crest of the ridge and slid down with the erosion caused by heavy rains.

"I've got an idea," said Ace, turning to the raging Banzilla. "Call about twenty husky men over here quick."

In a few minutes the men the Yankee had asked for were at hand. Speaking in Spanish, Faulkner ordered them to stand the big rock on edge. It taxed the strength of as many men as could lay hold of the slab to accomplish the task, but they did it. When the stone was on edge and propped there with poles, Faulkner inspected the spot upon which it had lain. The soil was soft sandy loam washed down from the side of the ridge. Again the flyer spoke to Banzilla.

"Instruct your men to dig a pit six feet square and six feet deep in the center of the spot this stone covered," said Ace. "It must be finished before that plane comes back again. Have other men bring buckets and carry every bit of soil taken from the pit and

dump it in one of those holes yonder where bombs exploded. I want no one to suspect that the pit is there when the stone is dropped back in place."

Banzilla instructed the men and left them in charge of a sergeant. Then the rebel chief and the Americans moved away and began a conference.

"Here is what is happening," said Faulkner. "Toreda's troops are advancing while the plane keeps us driven to cover. When they are near enough the plane will pepper that ridge in an effort to put our machine guns out of business, and then the Federals will rush us. It will be a massacre, unless we do something to prevent it. We drove Toreda off that ridge yesterday, and he intends to take it back to-day. The best thing we can do is to let him have it."

"You mean we must retreat?" cried Banzilla.

"Yes," nodded Ace.

"*Dios!*" wailed the rebel chief. "That I should be forced to retreat before Toreda's swine!"

"Better armies than this have retreated," said Ace grimly. "Toreda has very neatly turned the tables on us. He now has a plane and we have none. Besides that, his artillery that I have been keeping muzzled can now get in its work. We've got to back up."

"I sure hate to be backing away from pay day," growled Red Larrabee.

"If we are to retreat, why do we dig this pit?" asked Banzilla.

"WHEN we see that plane coming back, Red and me are going to get in that pit," said Ace. "Then the rest of you see that the stone is dropped on it and the ground fixed so no one will suspect that we are under it. Then you, General, must order a retreat to that next ridge, two miles west. See that the men stay scattered while retreating. When the ridge is reached dig in and make a stand. Red and me will put that plane out of the game before morning."

"What's the idea of burying us under that stone?" asked Red.

"This natural clearing is the only landing spot for a plane in miles, except the one the Federals are now using," explained Ace. "When we retreat before their rush they will move up and camp here for the night. It will be too late to push any farther before to-morrow. They will use this landing field for their plane. We'll be in the pit under that rock and we'll have one of our big bombs with us. And we'll have our trench knives so we can dig out of our hole when things quiet down for the night. We will put on Federal uniforms from that bunch we stripped off those soldiers we buried the other day. We'll manage in some manner to get the bomb under that D. H., then we'll make a run for it. In Federal uniforms we'll have a good chance to escape."

Banzilla's eyes were glittering with delight. He flung his arms about Faulkner and hugged him joyously. Then he turned toward Red Larrabee, but Red backed hastily away.

"You will do that, my heroes?" cried the rebel leader. "You will blow up this so devilish plane? *Amor de Dios!* Victory shall be ours, and I will reward you with much gold."

"It's time to move, not talk," said Ace. "That D. H. will be coming back before we know it. Red, tear out and get two of the largest Federal uniforms you can find in that escort wagon, and hurry back here with them. Jonas, go and fetch one of those big bombs and a coil of fuse. I want to have a confab with General Banzilla before he starts his retreat."

The men hurried off on their errands and Faulkner drew Banzilla aside.

"May I suggest a move on your part to-night?" asked Ace.

"Suggest!" cried Banzilla, showing symptoms of again embracing the tall flyer. "*Amigo,* you may command! Remove that plane and you shall be secretary of—"

"Hold it," interrupted Ace. "I don't want to be secretary of anything. I'll be satisfied if I can hustle pay day along. What I want you to do is order that retreat as soon as Red and me are safe in that pit. Retreat to that next ridge and make a stand there until dark. As soon as it is good and dark move your troops back this way. Get within a mile of this spot, or a little nearer if possible. Then hold your army quiet until you hear an explosion. It will be our bomb under that D. H. It'll come some time between midnight and dawn if we are lucky. As soon as you hear the explosion, advance with everything you've got. Give 'em hell! Drive 'em back over this ridge! After we set off that bomb, Red and me will hunt cover—get back in our pit if we can—and wait until you have captured the ridge."

Banzilla was aquiver with delight.

"It shall be done, my hero," cried the general. "But remove that cursed plane and we shall crush Toreda's dogs before he can get another."

"You'd better," said Ace grimly.

Banzilla hurried toward his shelter, calling excitedly for his staff. The men, working like beavers, had the pit almost dug. Red and Jonas came hurrying up. Jonas carried a huge bomb made of a gallon tin can, in the center of which was a quart can stuffed with dynamite. The space between the two cans was packed with metal slugs and stones tamped with fine sand. About six inches of fuse protruded from one end. Jonas also carried a coil containing about ten feet more of fuse. Red carried two Federal uniforms.

THE shovelers were climbing out of the finished pit. Faulkner jumped down into it. He took the bomb and set it carefully in one corner of the pit. Red tossed down the uniforms.

"Got plenty of ammunition for your revolver, Red?" asked Faulkner.

"Belt's full," answered Red.

"Got your trench knife?"

"Yes."

"Matches?"

"Yes."

"Then hop down."

Red jumped into the pit. Banzilla came trotting up and smiled down at the two Yankees.

"That plane is coming again," he announced.

"Start your retreat," said Faulkner. "Remember our plan. Have some men drop this stone over this hole and smooth up around it before they leave, so that our hiding place will not be suspected."

At Banzilla's command a group of men approached and laid hold of the huge rock.

"See that they do a good job of smoothing up, Jonas," said Faulkner.

"Hadn't we better get a chisel and mark 'Rest in Peace' on this slab?" asked Jonas.

"Never mind," grinned Ace. "Guys who've been in a lot worse shape than Red and me have got out of worse places than this."

"Yeah? F'r instance?"

"Well, there was Jonah," chuckled Ace, squatting down beside Red as the huge slab fell into place.

At first the pit seemed darker than the inside of any whale. Then their eyes became accustomed to it and the two Yankees could see each other dimly. The faintest bit of light penetrated under the lid of their prison.

"Hell!" muttered Red. "We can't smoke in here."

"No," answered Ace. "And as soon as this bombing fit is over we must talk only in low whispers and be darned careful when we move."

It was but a few minutes later when the bombing began. The explosions came faintly to the ears of the two Yankees. The trembling of the ground was very slight.

"Just as I guessed," muttered Ace. "He's bombing the top of the ridge to clear it for Toreda's advance."

The buried pair fell silent, counting the explosions.

"Twenty-four," said Ace presently. "That's all. Now we must be quiet. Toreda's gang will be here soon."

Ten minutes later sounds that came faintly to the ears of the pair told them that the Federals had swarmed over the ridge.

"I'll bet Toreda's tickled pink," whispered Ace, his lips within an inch of Red's ear. "It's the first time he has regained any ground since this war started."

"Yeh," whispered Red. "Sounds like they are making camp up there."

"Sit still," answered Ace. "I'm going to dig our exit out nearly to the edge of the stone so we can hear what's going on a little better."

OPENING the blade of his trench knife, Faulkner felt for the wall and began digging well up against the rock roof. He held his hand to catch the loosened dirt and then placed it silently on the floor of the pit. After thirty minutes of stealthy work, he had dug a hole about three feet in circumference as far toward the edge of the rock as he felt was safe.

Faulkner wormed the upper half of his body into the tunnel he had dug and lay for some time listening. Then he again sought Red's ear.

"They are pitching Toreda's own tent right beside this rock," he breathed. "The old boy is directing the job himself. I heard them tell him of finding our wrecked plane. He seems in a merry mood. He gave orders that the wreck of the Curtiss be removed and the field cleared quickly, so the D. H. can land."

When Faulkner had backed out of the hole after a second trip, his voice was throbbing with excitement.

"That gang is plumb drunk with success," he breathed into Red's ear. "They are going to camp here for the night and lay plans for a further advance to-morrow. President Alvarado himself is to be here for the staff conference in an hour. Word of their victory was sent to the capital, and the old boy sent back word that he is coming to Toreda's headquarters immediately. They are having supper up there now. It'll be fun to listen in on their powwow."

"It would be more fun to swipe a plate full of their frijoles," whispered Red. "Why didn't we bring some grub into this hole? I'm as hungry as a she wolf with nine pups."

"Tough," answered Ace. "Sit tight and we'll eat later. I'm going back to my listening post."

Faulkner was lying in the tunnel and listening when President Alvarado arrived. The dictator was welcomed with a great hubbub. Ten minutes after the arrival of the despot, the conference was on in Toreda's tent. From the sound of the voices and the names he heard, Ace knew that there were at least a dozen officers present.

Alvarado heard the accounting of the day's activities with great glee. He was overjoyed when told that the Curtiss plane with which the rebels had harassed Toreda's forces had been wrecked. He complimented the pilot of the D. H. profusely and promised him rich reward. The pilot was addressed as Specht. He had a deep guttural voice and an accent which betrayed him a German.

The assembled staff listened to Specht's report of the position taken by the retreating rebels.

"They think it is all over but Banzilla's funeral," Ace whispered when he was again at Red's side. "They plan to move up before daylight to the foot of the ridge, on top of which they think Banzilla will be intrenched. Then this Specht, in the D. H., is to strafe the ridge at dawn and Toreda's army will charge up the hill right on the heels of the bombardment. Toreda's forces will move toward the ridge at three o'clock. They will run into Banzilla's troops about halfway there, unless we

can blow up that D. H. and start Banzilla's attack before Toreda gets his move started."

"How much time do you suppose we have?" asked Red.

"I heard Toreda say it was nine o'clock," answered Ace. "That gives us six hours. Sit still awhile. I want to think over what I heard."

PERHAPS a quarter of an hour passed in silence. Then Ace laid his hand on the arm of his red-haired buddy. Red leaned nearer.

"Listen," whispered Ace. "I got a plan."

For ten minutes Ace whispered into his buddy's ear. Then Red groped in the darkness for Faulkner's hand and shook it.

"Sure, and your name ought to have been Napoleon," whispered Red.

"Can you do your part?" breathed Ace.

"It's a damned sight easier than yours," came the whispered reply, "and I'll get to eat sooner."

"Sit tight," cautioned Faulkner, opening his trench knife as he turned again toward the partly dug exit.

Ten more minutes passed while Ace worked stealthily. Then he closed the knife, took his revolver in his hand and wiggled into the hole. It was not long until he returned to Red's side.

"All's quiet on the Potomac," he whispered. "The camp's asleep. I didn't even see a sentry. There isn't one close by, anyhow. It's moonlight, but the shadows are as black as coal. Our tunnel opens in the shadow of Toreda's tent. It's only a few yards from the mouth of the tunnel into the brush behind the tent. I can hear snoring in the tent. Be careful not to make a noise. Get Banzilla back onto that ridge and tell him my plan. Now crawl out and be on your way. I'll take the bomb and crawl into the exit as soon as you are outside. If anything goes wrong, fire two shots in quick succession. I'll get to the plane with this canned explosion, if it's the last thing I ever do."

"If I run into a sentry I'll eat him," muttered Red, groping for the exit.

When Red had gone, Faulkner found the bomb and pushed it ahead of him as he wiggled into the hole that led to the outside. Lying with head and shoulders out of the hole, Ace looked about, eyes and ears tensely alert.

Bathed in the brilliant light of the tropical moon, Toreda's camp slumbered peacefully. Two hundred yards away sat the trim D. H., almost on the spot where Faulkner's Curtiss had been wrecked. Lying about dying campfires, Toreda's men slept.

Five minutes passed. Ten. Fifteen. There was no sound. Drawing the bomb after him, Faulkner slid back into the chill, damp darkness of the pit. Red had made his departure from the camp in safety. Ace sat down for his long, lonely wait.

After what seemed to Faulkner like a week, sounds indicating that the camp was awakening reached his ears. Soon the night was alive with activity. A light showed under the wall of Toreda's tent. Officers and orderlies came and went. Faulkner waited with every nerve tense. What if some of that hostile crew saw the telltale hole under the edge of the rock? He gripped his revolver and prayed for luck. If only the Federal army would get away quickly!

Half an hour passed and the sounds began to diminish. The Federals were on their way for their early morning attempt to crush completely Banzilla's forces.

President Alvarado had spent the night in Toreda's tent. Faulkner heard a voice asking whether the president and the general would have some breakfast while they waited for dawn.

"No," answered Alvarado. "Let the kitchens advance with the rest of the troops. We will eat with our victorious army on the site from which we will soon drive Banzilla."

Soon quiet reigned in the clearing. The only sound was the voices of five men: President Alvarado, Toreda, Specht, the German pilot, and two others, in conference in the tent. Faulkner crawled into the tunnel to hear better, pushing the bomb ahead of him.

"THE plane is in readiness?" asked Toreda's voice.

"Yes," answered Specht. "The bombs are in place and all is ready."

"Good," answered Toreda. "It will be dawn within an hour. My brave soldiers will be in readiness at the foot of the ridge where those rebel pigs wait to be torn to pieces. After you have bombed the ridge you will fly over the scene until you see that our troops are in possession. You will then come back here and report, so that *el presidente* and the rest of us may join the victors at breakfast."

"I understand," said Specht.

Faulkner had crawled stealthily from the tunnel and now crept around to the front of the tent. He placed the bomb he carried on the ground and gripped his ugly Colt forty-five in his right hand. With his left he flung back the tent flap and stood facing the five startled occupants.

"Whoever moves, dies!" snapped Ace in Spanish.

The group sat as if frozen. Only one of the men had his back to the door. The rest stared in mingled fright and astonishment at the grim Yankee. The muzzle of the forty-five covered the startled quintet. They were seated about a small folding table upon which stood a bottle of liquor and glasses. An oil lantern hanging from the ridge pole lighted the tent. Faulkner stared at the features of the German pilot.

The German sat on the far side of the table, facing Ace, his hands out of sight below the table. Suddenly one of them flashed into view. It held an ugly Luger. There was hate in the German's eyes.

Faulkner's trigger finger contracted and the forty-five roared. So did the Luger, but it was a moment late. Its bullet struck the swarthy officer who sat with his back toward Ace. The Latin sprawled backward, clutching at the ragged hole in his breast.

Specht swayed, then slumped forward across the frail table, knocking the liquor bottle into the lap of President Alvarado. The German's hands clutched at the table top and then relaxed.

"Hands up—high!" ordered Ace.

The three who were still able obeyed. The president's face was a sickly yellow. Ace herded them from the tent after he had relieved them of weapons.

Dawn was creeping over the clearing. Not another soul besides Ace and his three prisoners was in sight. About fifty yards from Toreda's tent the D. H. stood poised for flight. The three prisoners stood silent, hands reaching high. Ace grinned at Toreda and Alvarado and spoke to the other officer.

"Do as I command, *hombre*," he snapped, "and I'll give you a chance to get away without any holes in your precious skin. How about it?"

The fellow's swarthy face was pale. "*Sí, sí*," he chattered. Ace tossed the man his trench knife.

"Cut all ropes off that tent," he commanded.

The swarthy officer got busy and soon stood before Ace holding a dozen lengths of tent rope.

"All right," snapped Faulkner. "Trot over there to the plane, all of you. *Pronto!*"

AS the sudden dawn of the tropics spread over the land, General Banzilla lay on his stomach behind a breastwork of rocks on top of a long ridge. Beside the rebel chief lay Red Larrabee and Jonas Peters.

Two miles to the east, against the roseate sky, a trim plane appeared above the tree tops and came toward

the ridge. There was a stir as the waiting group saw the D. H. rise.

"If that's Ace," said Red, "this here war's about over."

"And if it ain't Ace," answered Jonas, "I know damned well it's over."

Nearer and nearer came the speeding plane, the watchers on the ridge growing more and more anxious as it approached. Then something white fluttered from the plane and floated downward. It was the signal Faulkner and Larrabee had agreed upon.

"It's Ace," cried Red.

A sound that was like a sob came from the rebel chief. A moment later orders were being called softly along the ridge. Now the D. H. was above them. It swept along the length of the ridge and then turned and swept back. On its return bombs began to drop from the plane to make a little hell out of the forest just behind the ridge. Twelve of the death-laden objects dropped in quick succession. There were, however, no rebels where those deadly missiles fell.

Suddenly Federal soldiers swarmed from the timber half a mile below and came charging up the grassy but untimbered slope that led to its top. Cocksure, they plunged ahead, certain that all they had to do was massacre a demoralized band of rebels already torn to pieces by the bombs from the plane. They could see the plane turning back to drop its other twelve bombs to cover their charge up the hill—at least that is what they expected to happen.

Then that rocky crest suddenly blossomed with puffs of smoke! The angry rattle of machine guns mingled with the spiteful crack of high powered rifles. The Federal line wilted like grain before a sickle.

Down plunged twelve more bombs from the D. H., striking squarely on the charging Federal lines. For five minutes death swept that hillside, and then yelling rebels, led by the almost deliriously happy Banzilla, swarmed from cover and gave chase to the fleeing stragglers. Never was rout more complete.

Far overhead circled the D. H., following leisurely until the rebel army had returned to the site from which it had been driven on the previous day. Standing in the center of the clearing, Red Larrabee waved a signal that all was well.

The plane banked, circled twice and landed. Prone on its wings, lashed securely in place, lay two bound captives, General Toreda and President Alvarado. When they were dragged from the ship and recognized by Banzilla, speech failed the rebel chieftain.

Tears streamed down Banzilla's cheeks, and he sputtered sounds meant to indicate joy as he embraced everybody he could catch.

"The durn fool's got hysterics," said Jonas Peters.

"Hysterics, hell!" growled Red Larrabee, beside him. "He's got hydrophobia. He ought to be muzzled before he bites somebody."

LATE the following day, Banzilla, at the head of his tattered victors, marched into the capital. The little Latin city had surrendered joyfully. Well to the rear of the parade that marched through the bunting-decorated streets toward the president's mansion moved three grinning adventurers —Ace Faulkner and his buddies.

"This wasn't near as big a war as the one where we learned about 'em," grinned Red Larrabee. "But these spiggoties sure take it plenty serious."

"Hell!" growled Jonas Peters. "The fun's all over now. I don't see what they are celebrating. Listen to the durned fools. *Viva la libertad! Viva Banzilla!* You'd think that little brown runt won this war. Why ain't they hollerin' some viva's about Ace? Listen to 'em yell!"

"Viva la pay day sounds better to me," Ace Faulkner chuckled.

THE END.

The stallion rose and headed out into that swirling sea

The Saga of Silver Bend

Bushwhackers and loyal cowmen meet at last in a titanic struggle to determine whether Bell Holderness's gang or Randy Ross shall win the rangeland

By J. E. GRINSTEAD

Author of "Signed, 'Seada,'" etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

DEATH strikes at Railroad Ranch, located in the bottle-shaped loop the river makes at Silver Bend, when Asa Ross, son of old Railroad Ross, is shot down at a round-up. It is the outbreak of a long-dormant feud. He was killed by Bell Holderness's gang, who are chased into the woods by the Railroad punchers. One of the fugitives falls dead; it is Ben Tarleton, scapegrace son of the fiery Southerner, Judge Tarleton.

Randy Ross, Railroad's youngest and wildest son, had ducked out after the shooting, afraid to face the sight of death. Two punchers, Sankey, and Dolly—a round-faced, fearless little cowboy—set out for the town of Willow Mills, and get Randy out of the saloon. On their way back to the ranch, at the neck of the "bottle," they hear two shots—and come upon the dead bodies of Peyton Ross—the other brother—and a Railroad puncher.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for March 16.

Randy, unable to run away, faces his fear of death and conquers it. From then on, he and Dolly, who understood and helped him, are inseparable.

Judge Tarleton appears at Railroad Ranch, and sternly demands to know who assassinated Ben—for he was shot in the back, and no Tarleton, he says, ever ran from an enemy. Railroad thought Ben was shot in flight; and Tarleton calls them all murderers.

Randy and Dolly are riding some distance behind Judge Tarleton, on their way to the round-up grounds, when a bushwhacker from across the river shoots the judge, and takes a shot at them.

Dolly gets the man.

The judge manages to ride away: but he is sure he was ambushed by Railroad men, and his son Lav, with Bell Holderness and other Holderness men, kill two Railroad punchers and order two others, whom they stuck up, to tell Railroad to surrender Randy Ross and the murderer of Ben Tarleton, or prepare to be shot on sight.

Bell Holderness, crafty schemer who is plotting to get Tarleton's daughter Zella, and also Railroad Ranch, thinks his schemes are succeeding. But Randy and Dolly break up an ambush, and hang one man who was bushwhacking across the river. Later they catch Steve Holderness, who had shot Asa Ross, and string him up.

But Randy gets small pleasure from this sudden justice, for he is burning with jealousy and disappointment; Zella, temporarily deceived by Bell Holderness's story of the shootings, and thinking he was still the weak Randy of earlier days, has written him urging him to flee the country before the Tarleton boys get him for shooting the judge. Randy returns to Railroad Ranch and finds that Sanky and another puncher have captured "Bud" and "Turk", two Holderness gunmen who were present at the round-up affray. They have confessed that Steve shot Asa, and that Bell Holderness had shot Ben Tarleton in the back, to ally the Tarletons with them against the Railroad people.

CHAPTER IX.

BELL HOLDERNESS ASKS HIS QUESTION.

ADROITLY getting as many drinks into Lav as he would take, Bell Holderness kept building up his lie and practising it on Lav. By the time they went back to the Tarleton house at noon, he had about convinced Lav that it was his own and Cliff's duty, since Randy had shot their father, and old Railroad practically admitted killing Ben, to hunt the two up and kill them forthwith.

When they reached the house, they went in to see the judge. Cliff was in the room. Bell went over his plausible lie in detail. He knew he could find a man at the H Bar by which he could prove every statement he made, so he turned himself loose.

Judge Tarleton listened with knitted brows, and at times his face flushed with anger against the Ross family. He had been friendly with them, and had treated them as his equals, in spite of the fact that they were just rough cow people.

He could understand the animosity of the Holderness boys against the Rosses. It was common belief that Railroad had killed their father. He hadn't understood why they had waited so long before retaliating, but Bell explained that. Ross was rich, while they had always been poor. A thing like that was likely to get them into court, and without money, they'd be helpless. They had money, now. They had bided their time.

That last sentence undid all that Bell had done toward getting immediate action by the Tarletons.

"Well," said the judge, "if you boys could bide your time for twenty years, we can bide ours until I'm up and about again. We'll just stick to

what we decided on this morning. If the boys meet up with Railroad or Randy, things will have to take their course, but we won't press the matter, now, by hunting for them."

That was final. Bell bit his lip in chagrin, but he could go no farther in that direction without seeming overanxious. After all, he could dispose of Railroad and Randy. He had wanted the Tarletons to kill them, so he would have a hold on the family. Cursing the fate that kept the Tarleton boys from meeting Randy the day before, when they were in the killing mood, he turned his attention to another matter.

Bell knew of the attachment that had been between Zella and Randy. He knew that was broken, because her brothers had told him. Naturally, it would be, since she believed Randy was an assassin.

Bell was wise enough to know that a woman is more susceptible in grief than at any other time, and he determined to put his case to the test. Married to Zella, or even engaged to her, he would have far more strength with the Tarletons.

It was after noon, when he found Zella alone in the yard.

"Miss Zella," he said, "I told you this morning I had wanted for a long time to ask you a question. I'm going to ask it now. You don't have to be told that I love you, have loved you since you were a little girl. I now this is an unhappy time for you. It is that very thing that makes me want more than ever the right to protect you from as much unhappiness as possible. There is no telling where this trouble will end. More sorrow may come to you any day. You may even be left without a brother to protect you. They must inevitably meet Randy, and he is a swift and accurate shot. Won't you marry me, and give me the right to protect you?"

Zella was looking down, digging in the soft mold of the yard with the toe of her boot. She didn't look up, nor did she speak.

"Won't you answer my question?" pleaded Bell, in the tone that he knew so well how to use, so often had used.

She looked up at him, and there were tears in her eyes. They were tears for Randy Ross, but he mistook the cause of them.

"Not now," she said. "Some other time, perhaps."

"When?"

"When you have answered the question I asked you this morning."

THE sides of Bell's horse were bleeding when he reached Willow Mills. He understood Zella's tears now. Those tears were for Randy. Very well; if she wanted to weep for Randy, she would have cause. Randy Ross, sober, was a dangerous man. Let the Tarleton boys meet him when he was sober, and see what happened.

There would come a day when Bell would own Silver Bend. Randy and old Railroad would be dead. He'd be rich, and Zella would have cried away all the tears she had. He could wait. Just now, he had other things to attend to.

He didn't care if one or both of the Tarleton boys were killed. It would leave Zella that much more property when the judge was gone. The trouble was that their feet had got cold, and the immediate passing of Railroad and Randy was urgent. As long as they were alive, there was a chance that too much would be found out about the killing of Ben.

Bell entered the Cottonwood, and took a stiff drink. He needed a bracer. Too many of his plans had gone wrong that day. Bell Holderness had one friend who would stick by him to the end.

That was a hawk-nosed killer by the name of French Clauson. Bell had enough on Clauson to send him to the gallows a hundred times over.

Clauson was his ace in the hole. He never used him when he could avoid it, except as a spy on his own brothers, Steve and Sam, and on every one else about the H Bar. Now, he knew he could rely on French to dispose of Railroad and Randy. He could make him do it. He wished Clauson was there, but he had given strict orders for him to stay at the ranch and watch things.

Bell didn't want to go across the river, himself. He wanted to stay clear of that mess for two reasons. One was that he wanted to be able to say that he was pulled into the first quarrel by Steve, and had got out as soon as he could and stayed out. The other was that it was dangerous all around that neighborhood, and he wanted to live and enjoy the rewards of his scheming.

While these thoughts were in his mind, a rider dismounted at the door, dropped his reins, and came in. Bell could have hugged him. It was French Clauson himself!

Bell was glad to see his henchman. Glad for once that some one had disobeyed orders, though he knew that something serious had happened, or French Clauson wouldn't be there. They took a drink together and walked outside.

"Get your horse and ride back to the river with me," said Clauson. "I ain't got much business on this side, and I can't talk to you here."

They mounted and rode out of town. Bell knew Clauson had something to tell and he was seething with curiosity, but not a word did his henchman say until they were out on the wind-swept sand bar, where there was no possibility of being overheard, and where he could dash into the river and win the other side, if an officer sought him. And then:

"Hell's broke loose in Georgia," he declared, solemnly.

"What's happened. Out with it, dammit! You're as bad as Steve."

"Not quite that bad—yet," drawled French, with an odd expression in his eyes. "About noon to-day, Curly White and three of the other boys jumped a coupla tigers."

"Tigers? What do you mean?"

"Tigers. Curly come into the ranch alone. He said they run onto old Con Bates and Sankey on our side of the river. They had caught Turk and Bud some way, God knows how, and had their hands tied to their saddle horns, takin' 'em for a ride."

"No! I don't believe it!"

"I'm just tellin' you what Curly said. He said when the smoke cleared away he was the only one of his bunch left, and he done it a running."

"What did they do with Turk and Bud?"

"Took 'em on for the ride, I reckon." French was sardonic.

"Hell! They were with us that day at the round-up! If old Railroad gets a rope on their necks, those two may talk!"

"I know it, and that ain't all. Sam went across to Silver Bend with a gang, and got shot up."

"Steve told me about that."

"He didn't tell you Sam died at noon, did he?"

"No!"

"I thought not. Somebody hung Bill Hayden, and—"

"Steve told me about that."

"Oh, he did? Well, as I came into the bottom, on the other side of the river, I found Steve himself hanging to a limb, right over the road. Steve didn't tell you that, did he?"

"No! Damn your impudent, insolent soul, he didn't, but I'll tell you something!" Bell almost choked. He was incapable of feeling any human emotion except selfishness, greed, and lust, and the rage which now swept him like a storm. "You've accused me of sending you into hell on my business. I'm going to lead you into it now. Come on, damn you! It 'll take nerve to go where I'm going," and driv-

ing in his spurs, Bell led the way into the ford.

A LITTLE after nightfall that same evening, after Railroad had locked in his prisoners for the night, and Randy was long ago asleep, a voice from outside called softly through a crack in the log smokehouse:

"Walter!"

Turk sprang up from his blankets and rushed to the wall.

"Don't! For God's sake, Joe, don't call me by that name. You know what 'll happen to me if officers find out I'm on this side of the river. You know all about that mess down in Bosque County!"

"Yes, but I ain't as much interested in it as I am in this one that's going on here."

"You won't give me away, Joe?"

"That depends. I heard the tale you told Mr. Ross. Is it straight?"

"Yes, it's straight."

"You're going to tell the same tale if he calls on you again, no matter what happens, nor where you are when you tell it, or—"

"I'll tell it straight, Joe. You know I will."

"You bet I know you will. What are you doing tied up with the H Bar outfit, anyway?"

"Well, after I got into that trouble down in Bosque County, I dodged across the river. There's not much doing over there, and I had to eat. Bell Holderness told me he needed men. I didn't know what sort of job it was till the racket started at the round-up."

"Do you know what sort of job it is now?"

"I sure do. It's a straight-out murder job. They aim to kill all the Rosses, and kill 'em from the brush if they can. I refused to do any of the bushwhacking, and this morning Bud and me was fixing to make a sneak, when them two old fellows jumped us. They're a pair of cats I'll tell the world."

"Yes, and there's a few more kittens in the Railroad outfit. If he don't win like he thinks he will, what is Bell Holderness going to do?"

"Go crazy and bring a gang of killers over here. Burn the house and kill you fellows as you run out."

"Fine! When will he do that?"

"Any time he thinks he can't win any other way, and the way he has lost yesterday and to-day, that won't be long."

"Good! If you know anything else that might help the Railroad outfit, you better tell me. It might make it easier for you when the showdown comes."

"That's all I know, Joe. Since I refused to bushwhack, they wouldn't tell me anything."

"All right. Sweet dreams. If you happen to want me, you better call me Dolly. They'll hear you better," and Dolly headed for the corral.

A few minutes later he was on his horse, and headed for the prairie trail. Once again he was taking Randy's affairs into his own hands. Not altogether Randy's either. That pleading look in Zella's eyes had haunted him since the evening she had begged Sankey to save Randy.

Dolly was a Railroad puncher, and the neighborhood of the Tarleton plantation was unhealthy for such, but he was going to communicate with Zella, some way. He didn't believe the Tarletons, with the facts before them, would take sides against the Railroad. He had the facts, and he meant to deliver them where, if he was not mistaken, they would do most good.

WITH Zella Tarleton, to feel deeply was to act promptly. Soon after Bell Holderness left, she was in her room, writing another note to Randy. She knew she couldn't send it until about night, but she got it ready, and the tone of it was very different from the last one she had sent. The pity of it was that Randy would never see it, but she didn't know that.

Half a mile out on the prairie, Dolly met a horseman—or almost met him. The rider whirled out of the trail and set off across the open prairie. Dolly recognized him and gave chase. The race was short, and catching the other's bridle, Dolly jerked him to a stop.

"O-o-o-h! Lawdy! I's done kotch now!"

"Stop that noise!" commanded Dolly. "Where you heading for?"

"That ole Railroad, in the dark bottom! O-o-o-h!"

"Have you got a note for Mr. Randy?"

"Yassir, nossir. I—I mean I ain't."

"You can't lie to me."

"I didn' know that. If'n I can't lie to you, I mean I is got one."

"Now, you listen to me. If you go fooling around Mr. Randy with that note, he's going to hang you."

"But Miss Zella, she say, Pompey, she say, my life and Mr. Randy's life just plumb 'pend on him gettin' this note, immejit."

"Well, you can't take it to him."

"Says which? Whuffo' I can't?"

"Because I'll hang you if you try."

"Hoo! Po' nigger! Hangin' whichever way I jumps, and Miss Zella 'll sho' kill me if I don't jump. Deep water!"

"I'll stand between you and Miss Zella."

"Huh-uh! Man, you goin' be ruined if you do. Miss Zella is de sweetest and bes' woman in the worl', but when she do get riled—hunt cover!"

"Can you take me to Miss Zella without any one else knowing it?"

"Yassir, but you gwine know it, and me, too, when we gets there."

"I'll chance that. Come on."

"Bress God, I don't have to go thoo that ole dark bottom by my lonesome, anyway," Pompey consoled himself as he turned back into the trail and headed for the Tarleton place.

They entered the Tarleton plantation at the east side, and rode within a quarter of a mile of the house.

"Here's whar I turn this ole pony loose in the woods," declared Pompey. "Old judge and them boys ketches me hossbackin' around in de night, I sho' sees trouble. I ain't been nowhar but possum huntin' ef'n anybody asks me. Best you leave yo' bronc here, too."

Dolly tethered his horse where he could make a quick get-away, and followed Pompey silently. They entered a copse, a hundred yards from the house, and stopped. At the same moment an exceedingly large and exceedingly hoarse owl hooted, just once, right by Dolly's side.

"Dat ole owel better not have to hoot but once," chuckled Pompey, "less'n Mist' Lav come out here wid his shotgun."

The owl didn't have to hoot again. A few minutes later a light step approached the edge of the copse, and Pompey's name was called.

"Here I is, yit, Miss Zella."

"How did you get back so soon?"

"Miss Zella, I rode, and I had help."

"Did you bring a note from Randy?"

"No, ma'am, Miss Zella, I didn't. I got kotched."

"Caught? Who caught you?"

"A man."

"What man?"

"Miss Zella, I don't know what man, but he punches cows fo' de Railroad, he packs a gun, and he sho' knows how to talk rough to a nigger. Hoo-ooh! He say he wanted speech with you. He say Mist' Randy gwine hang me ef'n I tuk him dat note. He say he knows plenty he want to tell you."

"Was it Sankey?"

"No, ma'am, it warn't Mist' Sankey. I got the gemman right here in this ole plumb thicket, and—"

"MISS TARLETON," said Dolly, who was standing only a few feet away, "I guess I've taken right smart chances, coming here like this, but—"

"Who are you?"

"You wouldn't know me by name, but I was with Sankey that evening when you talked to him at the mouth of the lane."

"Oh, I see. Pompey, go halfway to the house and wait for me." And, when Pompey had gone: "Tell me, quick—did Randy send you to me?"

"No, ma'am, he didn't. I come on my own account. I've been riding with Randy since this mess come up, and I know a whole lot of things."

"Has he been hurt?"

"Yes, ma'am, he's hurt right bad."

"I knew he would be! Who—who hurt him?"

"You did!"

"I! How—"

"That note you sent him the other night. I don't know what was in it, but I know it changed him to the coldest, bitterest man I ever saw. He's bitter against the whole world, and bitterest against you."

"Oh, don't—don't tell me that!"

"I'm telling the truth. I'm trying to help, and I'm taking a chance on getting shot to do it. If your men folks catch me here, they'll shoot me. If Randy finds out I came, he'll shoot me like I was a dog."

"Why did you come, then?"

"To tell you that neither Randy, nor no other Ross, shot your father or your brother Ben. The man who shot your father is dead. The man who shot Ben is not dead, but I've got proof of it."

"Won't you tell this to my brothers and father?"

"I'd like to, but they'd shoot me on sight."

"No, no, no. They've been thinking things over. They'll listen. I'll make them listen. I'll go back to the house and talk to them. You get your horse, go out to the lane, and come up the front way. If there is a light in the southeast window, come on to the house. If there is not, don't come."

Dolly, loyal squire that he was, was getting into deeper water than he intended, but since he was in he would see the thing through. A few minutes later he stopped at the end of the short lane that led to the Tarleton house. He was looking through the avenue at the dark front of the old house, when a light flashed in the southeast window, wavered, then burned steadily.

"Dolly," he muttered under his breath, "here's where you take the longest chance of yo' young life. If you can't tell the truth, natural, and make it stick, you won't come back. Let's go."

He was met at the door by Zella, who took him into that southeast room. It was a big, old-fashioned parlor, stiff and conventional in its every aspect.

"They'll see you," she whispered. "I don't know what the outcome will be, but they'll hear what you have to say. Come on, you'll have to go into father's room. They're in there," she went on, with her hand on the knob of a door at the north side of the parlor.

CHAPTER X.

DOLLY TELLS THE TRUTH.

JUDGE TARLETON lay on his bed. Cliff sat beside him, facing the door, as Dolly entered. Lav, his dark brows drawn in a scowl, stood just back of Cliff's chair. This man was a Railroad rider. Old Railroad Ross had admitted some man of his outfit had killed Ben. It was well known that the men of the Railroad outfit stuck together as one man. This little red-haired, blue-eyed manikin was one of them, for all his boyish looks.

He might be the very man who had fired the fatal shot.

Zella started to introduce him, realized that she didn't know his name, and halted.

"Never mind the introduction," said the judge. "We know he belongs

to the Railroad outfit, and that's enough. What have you got to say for yourself, young man?"

Dolly saw that he was starting into this interview with a handicap. It was the handicap of b e i n g a Railroad puncher, but he kept his wits about him.

"You fellows think Randy shot the judge. I'm here to tell you that he didn't. The man who shot you, judge, was an H Bar man called Red. He's dead."

"How do you know he's dead?"

"I killed him about five minutes after he shot you."

"You killed him? You talk mighty cool about killing men."

"I am right cool about killing a man that lays in the brush and shoots innocent men like they were sheep-killing dogs."

"Huh! Well, I'm not hurt very bad. What my boys and me have against the Railroad outfit is the killing of my son Ben at the round-up."

"They didn't kill him."

"Didn't kill him! Why, Railroad Ross himself told me they did, and whatever else he is, Railroad is not a liar. We don't know a great deal about that fight that day, but we've got some friends, and they told us part of it. Enough to satisfy us that—"

"Beg pardon, sir, but did they tell you who killed Asa Ross, and what for?"

There was that question again.

"No!" thundered the judge. "We are not interested in that. If you came here to insinuate that Ben killed—"

"I didn't. I came here to get word to you that the Railroad outfit didn't kill Ben, and that Randy didn't shoot you. Instead of hunting Randy to kill him, you ought to be helping him against his enemies."

"Oh, Randy's begging for help, is he?" put in Lav.

Dolly turned his blue eyes on Lav, and for once the stalwart Tarleton, patrician though he was, quailed before a glance from a pair of baby-blue eyes.

Dolly was dangerously near an explosion, but he checked himself.

"No. Randy isn't asking for any more help than he's got. He don't need any more. He don't know I came here. I took a chance on getting killed to help you."

"Keep quiet, Lav," said the judge, as Lav opened his mouth to speak. "Now, young man, this farce has gone far enough. I gave my word to my daughter that you wouldn't be harmed if you came here. There is just one question that we want answered. Who killed Ben?"

The crisis had come. Dolly pulled h i m s e l f together. He was pitted against the champion liar and coldest schemer in the world, but he came up to the scratch.

"Bell Holderness."

"NO!" cried the three men together, while Zella, standing in the door, clenched her hands until the nails cut the flesh.

"You can't get away with that!" cried Lav. "Bell has been our friend all through this trouble, and still is. You can't stand here in this house and try to blacken the name of our friend."

White-faced, Lav took a step forward, with fists clenched. Dolly stood his ground, a narrow white line showing along the edge of his lips.

"Lav!" called the old judge. "My word is out that this boy won't be mistreated in my house. And after all, he's just a hired man, doing what he is told to do."

"A minute, judge," and Dolly's voice hummed with the tenseness of it. "I told you that nobody sent me here. I am just a hired man, but my word is as good as yours. Friend or no friend, Bell Holderness killed your son."

"Would you like to face Bell Holderness with that statement?" snapped Lav.

"Yes! I'd like to face him, but not alone, when he's got a gang of killers with him, like he had when he murdered Keech and Brazos."

The shot went home. To be classed as one of the H Bar gang was too much for Lav. He went white to his lips and recoiled a step. Dolly saw what was in his eyes. Lav was insulted, and to insult a Tarleton was to seek deadly danger. Dolly knew some sort of showdown was imminent.

He had taken a positive stand. He might not get shot there in the house, but Lav would meet him as soon as he got away from the premises. A tense moment followed Dolly's statement. A Tarleton had been charged by innuendo of being a member of a gang of cold killers.

Finally Lav spoke. "I guess you know what you've done, and there is only one way out of it. I'm not asking you to do that; I'm telling you that you have got to do it." Then turning to his brother: "Get your hat and gun, Cliff, and tell Pompey to bring our horses. We're going to take this fellow to Willow Mills and let him face Bell Holderness with this wild tale of his."

Cliff left the room, and Lav spoke again to Dolly: "You may sit down."

"No, thank you," said Dolly. "I shoot better standing!"

"Shoot better! What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that when folks don't trust me, I don't trust them. You been wanting to kill Randy Ross. You've got the killing idea in your head, and you'll sure kill somebody if you don't look out."

"Father! Lav!" cried Zella, speaking for the first time. "Can't you see this young man is telling you the truth!"

"I can see that he has insulted me, and tried to blacken the name of the best friend we have," snapped Lav, "and I'm going to give him a chance to square it."

"You're going to crowd Bell Holderness, and get killed yourself," Zella almost choked.

"No, I'm not," Lav snapped. "I won't get killed at all right now, for I'm not going to turn my back to this friend of yours and Randy's. I told you to stay out of this mess. Whenever a woman breaks into a thing of this kind, she only makes more trouble for everybody. You were told to give Randy Ross up and forget him."

Zella made no reply. And neither did Dolly. Anywhere else on earth but where they were Lav would have answered to Dolly at once for his insinuation that the little puncher would shoot him in the back if he had a chance. By the time the horses were ready Dolly had cooled a bit. They went out to mount, where Dolly had left his own horse.

"Now get this," said Lav. "We're going to Willow Mills, and you are going to face Bell Holderness. There is but one of you and two of us. If you start anything, you may get one of us, but the other will get you. If you want to take a chance on a trade like that, it's up to you."

DOLLY was in real danger now, and, as usual in such cases, he began to banter them. His mission had failed. He wanted to kill Lav Tarleton for his insults, but he mustn't do it. As far as the two to one odds were concerned, that troubled him not at all. He was sure he could outshoot the two of them, but he was there to help Randy and Zella.

If he shot one or both of the Tarleton boys, it would be believed that Randy had sent him to do it. Besides that, he had no ill will toward Cliff. That young man had spoken but a few words to him, and they had been courteous ones. Cliff and Zella were alike, and evidently favored their mother. Lav was like the judge, but lacked the discretion of the judge's years.

"Maybe you fellows better take my

gun," jeered Dolly. "You'll be safer, and I won't be afraid."

"We're safe enough," retorted Lav, "and you're safe enough with us, as long as you don't try to get too funny. You'll need your gun when you face Bell Holderness."

Dolly knew that was true. Unless he missed his guess, Bell knew enough by this time to make him desperate. Bell's only hope for safety lay in killing a few people, himself among others. These thoughts were in his mind as they stopped in front of the Cottonwood, dismounted, and went in. Two men, in chaps, spurs, and other garments of the range rider, were standing at the bar, drinking.

"Where's Bell?" Lav asked the bartender.

"I don't know. Him and French Clauson rode away from here together about night. I reckon they went to the H Bar."

"The H Bar! What business would Bell have there? He told me he had sold out all his interest over there and was not going back any more. Said he intended to build a home here at Willow Mills."

The bartender shrugged, and said nothing. He was trying to digest a message that had come to him over the grapevine a few minutes before. The man who had brought it stepped in the back door and slipped out again. Things were not going so well at the H Bar.

"'Scuse me, pardner," said one of the strangers. "If you mean Bell Holderness, I know where he is—or where he was about sundown. He was riding hell-for-leather for the H Bar, him and another fellow. Come take a drink, all you fellows," and the man threw a dollar on the bar. "Speakin' of the H Bar, they been having a party of some kind over there. We come from in on the Washita, and aimed to stay all night there, but it didn't look happy."

"What was the matter?" asked Lav.

"I don't know. There was about forty men there, some packin' one gun and some two, but nobody was talking. Some of 'em was diggin' holes in the ground, and four or five dead men lay in a wagon. It didn't look appetizing, nobody wanted to talk, we wasn't invited to stay, so we rode on."

"Was Bell there?"

"No, sir, he wasn't, but he was goin' there. We met him and the other fellow a mile this side of the H Bar, then about a mile the other side of the river we met Steve Holderness. He wasn't hurrying so much," and the man slowly poured another drink and swallowed it.

"DID you talk to Steve?" asked the barkeep, apparently to get away from talking about Bell.

"Why, no, we didn't," the stranger said grimly. "Steve wasn't talking, either. He was right in the middle of the road, but couldn't get his feet on the ground. Looked like somebody had hung him out to dry. Everybody on yan side of the river has been expecting the H Bar to be took to a cleaning, but we didn't hear of it until we got there."

"You don't speak very respectfully of the dead," said Lav.

"Respectfully, hell, pardner! Don't nobody speak very respectfully of the Holderness gang over on the other side, whether they're dead or alive. The decent ranches, farther out in the Indian country, are getting ready to go in together and clean 'em up. Looks like if you was a cowman you'd know that."

"I'm not a cowman," returned Lav with dignity. "And I don't live on the other side."

"Oh, thataway. Well, I ain't talkin' secrets. They's cowmen on this side of the river, and they know that the H Bar is nothing but a hangout for thieves and killers. It's a reg'lar vest-pocket hell, and it's got to be cleaned. Somebody, I don't know who, has

trimmed it some. They told us at the H Bar that Sam was dead. We saw Steve Holderness hanging up like a side of meat. That leaves only Bell to ramrod the outfit. I guess he was going home to lead his gang of killers against whoever it is that's riding them."

Dolly was very much awake now. What he had heard corroborated what the prisoner had told him at the crack in the smokehouse. The clans had gathered at the H Bar. Bell had seen the end of his plans unless he struck quickly. There was only one thing for him to do now, since so many of his plans had gone awry. That was to raid Silver Bend, kill Railroad and Randy, and as many more as he could, then let his killers scatter. With Steve dead there was no longer any one to hold lands in the Indian country. He had to act, and act with all possible speed.

Dolly had put all these things together in his mind as the stranger talked. He knew men, and he knew this stranger was telling the truth. He knew, too, that the man was not just an ordinary cow-puncher, for all he was clad like one.

"Say there's about forty at the H Bar?" he asked, as the man stopped talking and rolled a smoke.

"Yes, there was about that many in sight. Probably more scattered around. I knew some of 'em. Fellows there from several gangs. Some from Yellow Hills, some from the Arbuckle Mountains, and several other hangouts. Looked like a rustler's camp-meeting. Are you a cow hand?"

"Yes, sir. Name's Joe Runnels. Work for the Railroad outfit."

"Old Railroad Ross! You're working for a mighty square man. Thomas is my name, Alec Thomas. I run the T Stripe brand, in on the prairie between Red River and the Washita. I'm about an eighth Chickasaw, but nobody notices that, with these blue eyes of mine. Is it the Railroad that's working on the H Bar?"

"They been working on us some," replied Dolly cautiously.

"I see. Looks like you fellows been swapping work with 'em some. Take another drink, gents. We got to find a place to sleep."

As the men started out Thomas motioned Dolly to one side and whispered:

"I don't know who your friends are, but you better shake 'em and get back to the Railroad. Bell Holderness has got his gang bunched for something."

"That fellow's windy," sneered the bartender, as the two men went out and crossed to the little hotel.

"I know part of what he said is true," defended Dolly; and, turning to Lav: "Well, we ain't apt to see Bell to-night. What do you want to do?"

"I don't see anything we can do, except go back home."

"All right, let's ride."

WHEN they had almost reached the Tarleton house Dolly stopped them:

"Now see here, fellows. You talked pretty rough to me, but we'll forget that. You thought the Railroad outfit killed your brother. I've told you better, but you still don't believe it. You wouldn't believe Railroad, and you wouldn't believe Randy if he told you; but he'll never tell you anything. We can't see Bell Holderness, and he'd lie if we did see him. Anyway, I'd have killed him before he said anything, if we had met him. I can prove what I told you by witnesses that saw Bell shoot Ben in the back."

"Where are they?"

"Under lock and key, at the Railroad."

"We can't go there without—" and Lav stopped.

"Getting killed," Dolly finished for him. "Yes, you can. It takes some cold nerve, because the bottom is likely to be full of H Bar killers, but one of you can go there. There's just one man there that would hurt you, and he's asleep. That's Randy."

"Randy! Why would he hurt us?"

"Why wouldn't he? You've accused him of cold murder when he wasn't guilty. You've played in with the gang that murdered his brothers. You sent him word what would happen when you met him, and it 'll happen—to you! But Randy ain't slept none for three nights, and he's dead to the world. It's up to you now. Either come with me and get proof from those men, or else put up your guns and stay out of this mess. Make up your mind, for I can't wait. I got business to attend to."

"I'll go with you," said Cliff calmly.

"Let's ride, then."

"Wait a minute," Lav protested. "What 'll I tell father?"

"You ought to have more than you can tell him before morning, after what Thomas told you. You can tell him what Bell Holderness is, and ask why he hadn't found it out before now. You can tell him that what I told him was the truth, and Cliff will be back before morning, with proof of it. Dammit, tell anything. Tell him about the weather. Let's go, Cliff." And Dolly set spurs to his horse.

Perfect peace and quiet was over the Silver Bend, as they rode down from the prairie and took the trail to the Railroad. Dolly was wondering how long it would remain that way. They stopped at the corral. Dolly unsaddled his horse and turned it loose, then they stole through the darkness to the back of the log house where the prisoners were. A low call of his name brought Turk, or rather Walter, as Dolly knew him, to the wall.

"Now, tell this gentleman the story you told me about the killing of Ben Tarleton," said Dolly in a low tone.

Turk not only told it, but elaborated on it, and told it convincingly, averring again that he and his partner were making a sneak from the H Bar, because it was too tough, when they were caught.

"Satisfied now?" asked Dolly when they were back at the corral where Cliff had left his horse.

"Yes, more than satisfied. Zella told me some things that satisfied me that Bell was crooked and trying to play us for suckers, but I couldn't tell Lav and father. They won't reason in a case like this. They have to be shown. I came with you because I wanted to be able to show them."

"Good! Now, when you convince Lav and the judge, they are going to fly right around, like the arrow on the lightning rod when the wind changes. They'll want you and Lav to come romping down here to help Randy hang Bell Holderness. Don't do it. Some more water has got to run under the bridge before Randy is fit for you and Lav to meet. He may need help, but you can't help him now."

"Thank you," said Cliff, wringing Dolly's hand. "I won't come into Silver Bend unless I'm sure I can do some good." And he rode away into the night.

It was well after midnight, and Dolly was ready to call it a pretty full day. There was no sign of an attack on the ranch, and he needed sleep. He would have told Randy what he knew, or at least a part of it, but Randy needed sleep to put him in shape for what was likely to come on the morrow. A storm of disaster was brewing over Silver Bend that would have driven thoughts of sleep from Dolly's mind had he even dreamed of its terror.

CHAPTER XI.

THE STORM STRIKES SILVER BEND.

MORNING showed as peaceful a scene at Silver Bend as could have been found in all the long and winding reaches of that tawny river. The sun came up and gilded the silver of the young cottonwood trees. The dogwood was in bloom along with

many other shrubs and wild flowers. A hundred mingled scents of sweetness were in the warm, damp air.

A great peace was over the world, but it was the calm before such a storm as Silver Bend had never known in all the more than thirty years that old Railroad Ross had struggled there. The elements that were to battle in that bottle and concoct a mess "unfit for human consumption," as Sankey had said at the outset, were rapidly fermenting for the mixture.

When Cliff returned home he found his father, Lav and Zella waiting together in the judge's bedroom.

"Well, what did you find out?" asked Lav.

"Just what I expected to find; that the young fellow who was here told the truth. There is no doubt that Bell Holderness shot Ben in the back, in order to make us think the Railroad outfit did it, and draw us into the quarrel on the side of the H Bar."

"Did you see Randy?" asked Zella.

"No; I was afraid to see him."

"Afraid!" rumbled the judge. "No Tarleton ever was afraid of any man."

"It wasn't the man I was afraid of. It was the result of what we had done. Lav sent Randy word that we would kill him on sight. I know what I'd do, and you know what you'd do, if a man sent you such a message. I don't want to kill Randy Ross, and I don't want him to kill me. One or the other will happen if he meets any of us before he is satisfied that we have learned the truth and changed our attitude toward him."

"Why, nonsense!" growled the judge. "If this trouble between the Railroad and the H Bar goes on, Randy ought to be glad to have you two boys on his side of the fight."

"That's true enough, but we can't go to him now. Dolly says he's as bitter against us as he is against the H Bar. That we all look alike to him."

"Why, I don't understand that attitude," said the judge.

"I do," declared Zella. "I'm to blame for part of it. You can't go to Randy, but I can. I'll crawl on hands and knees to him and beg him to forget what has happened."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," snapped Lav imperiously. "I've told you to keep out of this. No Tarleton is going to beg anybody to do anything. Go to bed. We'll decide what to do."

Zella went to her room, but not to bed. Gray dawn found her sitting at the window, looking down the river toward Silver Bend, as if she hoped to see Randy and what was happening to him. If she had seen him at that moment, she would have seen him still asleep. At sunrise she did see her two brothers mount and ride away toward Willow Mills.

"Where are the boys going?" she asked her father.

"To hunt Bell Holderness. He is a double traitor. He not only murdered my son, but accepted my hospitality and claimed to be my friend afterward. It would be a disgrace if my sons didn't hunt him down, since I am crippled and can't go myself."

If Lav and Cliff were to shoot it out with Bell that day, they'd have to go much farther than Willow Mills. Indeed, they meant to go farther than that, if they didn't find Bell in his usual haunts.

Quite unintentionally they were putting themselves where they could not help Randy.

Failing to find Bell in the little town, they took the road north toward the H Bar. The river was low, and they took the shallow ford and crossed to the other side, hoping to meet Bell as he came to town.

No man should say they were afraid. They didn't know it, but there was nothing to be afraid of in that neighborhood, unless it were the grim fruit that still hung from a limb over the road.

At daylight, even as Zella sat look-

ing toward Silver Bend, Bell Holderness had left the H Bar with his men. Where they were going, the men didn't know, except that they were not going toward Willow Mills.

RANDY and his father finished breakfast and stepped out of the house to start the men on their day's work, when they met Dolly. "Mr. Ross, I got to talk to you and Randy some," Dolly remarked.

"What about?"

"Why, I went to Willow Mills last night, and—"

"Went to Willow Mills!" exclaimed Randy. "Didn't you know it was dangerous for any of our outfit to go there just now?"

"Yes, it was sorty shaky, but I found out something. Bell Holderness has gone back to the H Bar. He's got forty killers there with him. He knows Sam and Steve are dead, and he'll play his last card at once."

"What do you mean by his last card?" demanded Railroad.

"Why, he's got himself where he ain't safe as long as you and Randy are alive. He's desperate, at the last ditch, and he'll come here with his gang and kill you."

"How do you know all this?"

Dolly told him what Alec Thomas had said.

"I know Thomas," said Railroad. "He's a good, square man, and he knows the signs about such outfits as the H Bar. I never thought the Holderness boys would pull a thing like this, though. I knew it was a rough outfit, and I've heard some talk about 'em, but this is too rough."

"They're not the only rough ones," snapped Randy. "If they jump us in front, the Tarleton wing of their dirty outfit will stab us in the back."

"I don't think so," said Dolly.

Randy shot him a sharp glance, but said nothing.

"We'll keep the men all here at the ranch to-day, anyway," said Railroad. "I don't think they'll come across the river in the daytime, but our boys will need to be rested whenever they do come."

"I guess that's right," said Randy, thoughtfully. "No use in them riding the bend. They'll only get shot from the brush. Come on, Dolly. If they come into Silver Bend, they'll cross at the ford below the narrows. We'll go over there and watch."

Old Railroad stood watching them as they rode off. There went his last boy, riding into danger. It was the brave and manly thing to do, but he wished he could have gone himself, instead. Never had he seen such a change in any man as there had been in Randy, but he was too bitter, too venturesome. If the H Bar outfit did come that way, they'd get the boy sure.

"No work to-day, boys," Railroad told them. "Have the boys saddle and have their guns ready and loaded, but don't ride. Dolly says Bell Holderness is apt to come across, and jump us. He's got about forty killers. There's only twenty-two of us, without Dolly and Randy. They've gone to watch the ford. Don't any of the rest of you ride into the bottom. If they're in there, you'll just get shot from the brush, without having a chance. If they jump us here at the ranch, we'll have the advantage. Just get ready for anything that happens, but keep quiet."

Poor old Railroad. He had thought that battles of this sort were long past for him. He felt that this would be the last one if it came. He hoped it wouldn't come, but gamely oiled and loaded his guns. His old heart would beat rapidly for a moment, skip a beat, then slow down for a minute, keeping up an endless cycle of change in its working.

MEANTIME, Randy and Dolly had ridden on to the river and ensconced themselves in a thicket, where they could watch the ford without being seen. Randy had not

spoken since they left the ranch. Now he turned to Dolly and said:

"Where'd you go last night and what for?"

Dolly had been expecting that question, and dreading it. He was going to have to lie, or at least not tell all the truth, and he didn't like that sort of thing. He pulled himself together and plunged into the task.

"Why, I went to Willow Mills, like I told you."

"I know, but why? You didn't take a chance like that just for fun."

"No, I took it for you," and the earnestness of the little puncher's voice rang true. "I talked to that fellow Turk last night, and he told me what Bell would do in a showdown. I knew what we had done to the H Bar. I knew there was nobody but Bell left to ramrod the outfit. I wanted to know if Bell had gone to the H Bar, so I went to the Mills, and found out what I told you."

"All right. I never have caught you in a lie. I'll be sorry if Bell gets killed. I wanted him to marry Zella first."

"Randy, you oughtn't to be so bitter."

"Hell I oughtn't! Didn't she throw me cold? Hasn't Bell been there with her through all this mess? Ain't her brothers hunting me to kill me?"

Dolly wanted to tell him the Tarleton boys were no longer hunting him. He wanted to tell him that Zella was still true to him and suffering intensely for her part in the matter, but he didn't dare. Instead, he said:

"Randy, you're too hard on Miss Zella. I tell you she didn't understand—"

"And I want to tell you that she, or anybody else, will have one hell of a job making me understand that she didn't understand. I'm not a sucker any longer. Thanks to you, I'm a man now. I had to be mighty near killed to make me see sense. I had to lose about everything on earth that I loved, but thank God, the price shan't be paid in vain. I've still got my old daddy and mother, and I still have Silver Bend. It don't make much difference whether I come out of this mess alive or not, but if I do—"

Randy stopped. The thought was too bitter to express. It had to do with what he believed to be the unfaithfulness of Zella, and with his jealousy of Bell Holderness, which he refused to admit. At that moment, he thought there was no feeling in his heart for Zella, except to see her suffer in return for the pain she had given him.

Dolly offered no word. He was thinking again that he had tried to make a man, and made a monster. He had changed Randy from a shrinking boy to a fearless, even a desperate man. A man who could watch the quivering death throes of his enemies without a quiver. A man who could be a terrible enemy, even to a woman.

Looking down the river, as they watched the ford, Dolly was picturing in his mind the great bottle formed by Silver Bend. At the bottom of the bottle, and three miles north of the ranch house, the ground sloped up from the stream to a considerable height and formed a sort of plateau of a hundred yards in extent. There was no timber on it. The soil was loose sand.

In the middle of the plateau was a mound, on which grew an immense mustang grapevine. The vine was old and gnarled, supported by its own twisted stems, and a few stunted trees, it covered as much ground as a large house, and at a distance looked as much like a hay rick as anything else.

Dolly had eaten grapes at that vine many a time, squeezing the pulp from the grape into his mouth, without letting the skin, with its burning acid, touch his lips. He had no thought of any part that grapevine might play in the day's events. It was merely a vagary of his mind that it halted there a moment, in a mental journey from the bottom of the bottle to the ranch house.

The plateau, with its lone grapevine, was the sediment in the bottom of the bottle. To the south of the plateau, the ground sloped down sharply into a strip a quarter of a mile wide, filled with switch-cane and grass, with occasional trees in it. The strip was little higher than the river banks. Railroad Ross called it his winter horse pasture.

There was always green stuff there in the winter. It had not been burned over for several years, and was a mass of dead canes and grass, which protected the greenery under it in the winter. The swale ran across the bend from the river on the west to the river on the east. Beyond that, the ground rose sharply into thick timber that was on high ground and extended on to the prairie valley in which the ranch house stood.

DOLLY was trying to picture in his mind what might happen, and where it would most likely happen. He started when Randy said:

"Dolly, you've done a lot for me, but there's one more favor I want to ask. If the Holderness and Tarleton gang does come into Silver Bend, let me have Bell Holderness."

"All right," replied Dolly, absently. "They can come in most anywhere now. I never saw the river any lower. Listen! What's that?"

"Wind," replied Randy. "It's a spring norther. I noticed when it struck awhile ago."

They listened and the roaring increased.

"That ain't wind," said Dolly. "Look at the river!"

A wall of water ten feet high came rolling down the stream and thundered on by them.

"Huh! That closes the gate against the H Bar for awhile anyway," said Randy. "Most too early for a big head-rise, but that's big enough to stop them from crossing," and shaking his bridle reins, he led the way back toward the ranch.

They had almost reached the edge of the prairie at the round-up grounds, when Dolly said:

"I smell smoke! Looky how hazy it is," and then as they came out in the open: "Yonder it is! Somebody's fired the winter horse pasture. It 'll burn the ranch!"

Randy's jaws set with a click, as his spurs went in and he thundered away toward the ranch house, with Dolly at his side. The men were mounting as they rode up.

"Come on, fellows!" shouted Randy. "We've got 'em in the open now. They'll have to fight. They can't get back across the river."

"Hold the deal!" roared Railroad, who had mounted his horse and had forgotten he had a heart. "They've set a trap for you if you go in there. Plenty of time to fire against that and save the house, if we have to. Wait till they make a move."

There was no long wait. Bell Holderness had come across with his forty killers. He didn't know yet that his retreat had been cut off by the high water. In his desperation he had but one thought. He was going to get Randy and old Railroad Ross.

When no one came from the ranch to fight the fire, he pushed on at the head of thirty of his men, intent on cleaning up the Railroad and burning the house. All he wanted was the land. The burned house would cover his crime. As they came out on the prairie, Randy whirled his horse and Dolly whirled with him.

"Come on, boys!" called Railroad. "They're ridin' straight into hell!" and dashed for the fray.

The battle was fought in the open this time. The hired killers had to fight or run. The Railroad riders had scores to settle and needed no urging. Four of them went from their saddle at the first crash of battle, but they were being terribly avenged. A dozen riderless horses of the invaders dashed across the prairie.

Bell's forces broke and scattered. He, with French Clauson, had been in the lead. Bullets had fairly rained around them, but they escaped. At last, seeing the battle lost, they turned and started for the bottom of the bottle, with their pursuers almost on them, for Randy and Dolly were riding with bloody spurs to overtake them.

The horse pasture was no longer burning. Instead, Bell and Clauson splashed through water almost to their saddle girths. They knew what had happened, and that retreat was cut off, but they didn't dare try to go back the other way now.

Bell knew some of his gang had gone the other way. He didn't know how many, but he cursed himself for not following them. His only hope was that his pursuers would founder in that quarter-mile morass that he had just passed.

THEY didn't founder, but came doggedly on, though the water all but swam their horses the last few paces, and a strong current was setting across the bend.

"Now," said Randy, as they gained the plateau and their horses shook the water from their coats, "we'll have it out. Remember, you promised to let me have Bell. Let's go!"

Began then a battle to the death on that narrow plateau, which was now an island and gradually growing smaller.

Old Railroad and half a dozen of his men who had not been hurt in the battle came thundering down to the edge of the water, and stopped. They could see by the trees which they knew that they'd have to swim to reach the island. Across that strip of muddy water they could see the four men on the island. They watched, spellbound, as if they were looking at a play.

They heard the roar of shots, saw the island grow smaller and smaller, as the water rose around. They saw Randy's horse go down. Saw Randy rise on his elbow and fire at Bell, who was charging down on him. Saw Bell's horse fall, and saw him retreat to the other side of the little island, as Randy regained his feet and limped after him. A few yards away Dolly and Clauson met and shot it out. Both horses and both men went down.

Clauson lay still. Dolly struggled up, took a few steps toward Randy, and fell.

The final moment had come. With his back to the swirling water that had entrapped him, Bell made his last stand. He couldn't afford to miss this time. It was his last cartridge. He fired, but fired a second too late. Randy's bullet had found his heart, and Bell Holderness slipped into the swirling flood.

As if enraged at the pollution, the water, with a mighty surge, swept over the island, washing onto Dolly, who lay on the ground. Randy splashed to where the little puncher lay, and caught him up.

"Hit bad, Dolly?" he panted.

"No. Just in the leg, but we're going to get wet. I can't make it, but you got a chance. Swim for the tree."

"I won't leave you," declared Randy, splashing waist-deep toward the old grapevine.

Watching from the other side, Railroad and his men saw him gain the vine and push Dolly to safety, then, with the water already at his shoulders, pull himself up, and help Dolly to the highest point.

"Good God! Can't we do anything?" cried Railroad. "It 'll go over 'em in a few minutes!"

"These little broncs couldn't swim it," said old Con, and the others knew it was true.

"I'd give everything I got for one big horse," declared Railroad, in a frenzy of anxiety.

"There's a chance for a trade," growled Con, as a powerful yellow horse came storming through the bottom toward them. It was old Judge Tarleton's big claybank saddle horse, and Zella was bestride him. It was a

vicious brute of Arabian strain, deep-chested, and powerful of limb.

"Where's Randy?" she cried, as the horse skidded to a stop.

For answer they pointed to the grapevine and the two men clinging to the top of it.

"Let one of the boys have your horse," pleaded Railroad.

If she heard him, she didn't heed. In went her spurs. Open-mouthed, the great beast reared, lunged, and went out of sight in the water until only Zella's head and shoulders could be seen. He rose and headed out into that swirling sea.

Railroad Ross watched with his heart in his mouth, and choked, as he cried: "What a woman!"

THEY cheered as the great horse drifted against the up river side of the grapevine and stopped, but they couldn't hear what was being said, out there on that hopeless, swaying island, that was likely at any moment to uproot itself and float away.

"Take Dolly to a tree if you can," said Randy, grimly. "It won't make any difference about me."

"Oh, Randy!" cried Zella. "Please, please come on. There's a chance yet."

"No! We can't both go, and I won't leave Dolly."

"Go on, Randy, you damn fool!" stormed Dolly. "I don't count. Nobody 'll miss me."

"No! I tell you I won't leave you!"

The big horse could just keep its head out of water and stand on the ground. Soon it would be swimming where it stood.

"Come on then, Dolly!" called the girl. "I'll take you to a tree and come back for Randy. Jump!"

Pushed by Randy, Dolly scrambled behind the saddle. At the same instant, Zella sprang out of it and landed on the grapevine.

"Go on, Dolly," she cried, "and God help you to win through."

"Zella!" Randy cried. "Don't make it any harder for me. Get back in that saddle."

"Not without you!"

"Then go on. I'll try—"

"You first. Catch a stirrup."

"No. I'll hold to the horse's tail."

"Go ahead."

He dropped into the flood, and ran his fingers into the mass of hair that floated on the water, just as Zella dropped to the saddle, and set the horse swimming toward shore. They had won about fifty feet when the watchers on the shore saw the old grapevine loose its moorings and float away.

They saw the logs and trash that swept over the spot, as a boom of drift gave way somewhere above it, but in tense silence, they watched the yellow head of that matchless horse, as he battled on with his double load. They saw the two heads above the water, as the horse submerged, all but his head, from time to time. Randy, they couldn't see, but never in all his life had Randy Ross wanted so much to live.

"God! I can't stand this!" said Sankey, as he threw off his boots, chaps, and hat. "Tie your ropes to me! I'm going in there."

Half a minute later, old Sankey pushed his mount into the water. No one there knew that it was not to save Zella and Randy that he breasted the flood on a small horse. It was to save that little blue-eyed puncher that he loved like a brother.

The watchers saw him win slowly on into the current, as they paid out the rope. Almost he had reached the trio, when the yellow horse went down. It came up, and went down again, came up, and fought feebly on.

"Don't let 'em tangle in the rope!" roared Railroad.

Sankey quit his spent pony, and with the rope in his teeth, battled for the bobbing yellow head. He gained it, and both he and the head went under, it seemed like for ages. Then Sankey floated clear and raised a hand. Railroad had hold of the rope, the yellow

head was barely above the water. He felt a tug at the rope, as the gallant horse, spent to the last ounce of its strength, floated with the current.

"He made the rope fast to the bridle!" yelled Railroad. "Pull! Oh, damn you, pull!"

"Gimme the end of it," said old Con, and taking a half hitch on his saddle horn, set his horse to pulling.

A few minutes later, up to their armpits in the red water, Railroad and his men bore the rescued three to dry land. The great yellow horse scrambled out, stood for a moment quivering, and fell in his tracks, just as old Sankey gained the shore a hundred yards below them.

IT was late in the afternoon of the same day. The big yellow horse had revived, and had been taken to the Railroad pens, where he stood, gaunt and drawn, eating a light feed.

"He'll pull through now," opined Con, whose knowledge of horses was unquestioned.

"I hope he does," said Railroad. "He's worth about a million."

On the gallery of the old ranch house, where they had been together since they had reached the house and changed to dry clothing, sat Randy and Zella. Neither of them had spoken for a long time.

"How did you ever happen to be in the bend, and riding that horse?" asked Randy.

"Why, I— Some people don't believe it, but when a woman loves a man as I have loved you, she knows when he is in danger. Lav and Cliff went away this morning, to hunt for Bell, they said. Pompey went off somewhere, and there was no one about the place. I got the feeling that you were in danger. It grew into a fear that Bell would talk Lav and Cliff into coming here to kill you. I decided to come and warn you. When I got to the barn there was no horse except father's big saddle horse, that no one but himself ever tried to handle. I don't know how I managed to put saddle and bridle on it, for it bit at me, and snorted terribly. I fought it, and mounted it, then I came like the wind over the prairie road.

"As I came into the bottom, I met two men who seemed to be flying for their lives. They checked, and one of them called: 'Don't go in there, lady. Hell's raging down there,' and they went storming on. If it was hell, and you were there, it was where I wanted to be, so I came on, and—you know the rest."

"Yes, I know the rest, Zella, up to now; and I'll do my best to make the rest more happy for you from now on. I'll never give you up again," and he took her in his arms.

Out at the bunkshack, little Dolly was lying on a bunk, the doctor having dressed his wounds, along with those of several punchers who had been hurt in that first mad charge.

"What became of Turk and Bud?" he asked.

"Old man turned 'em loose," replied Sankey, who sat beside him. "Said Zella had proved what he wanted to prove by them, and that was that Zella and Randy would marry."

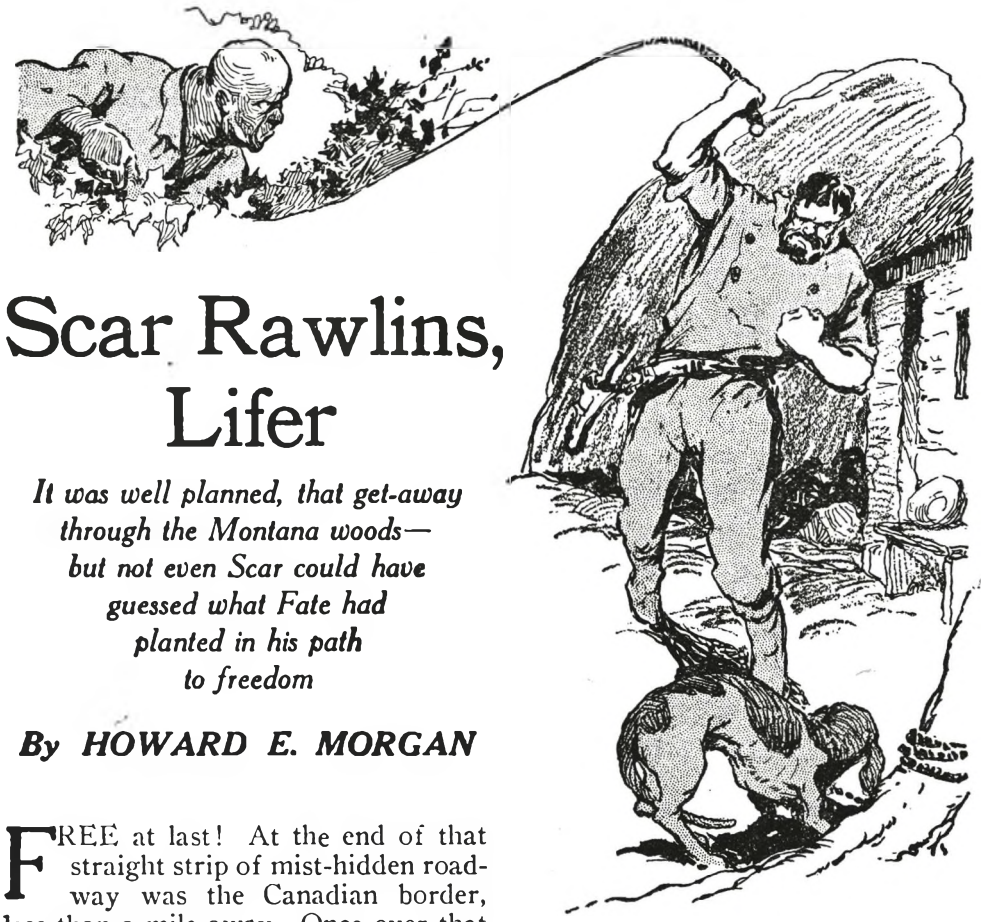
"Fine! Bully! I told you Randy was a thoroughbred, and all he needed was a little bustin'!"

"Yes," drawled Sankey, "but it took a woman to bust him. Lay down there and behave yourself. Randy has got him a side-partner now, and I'll need you as soon as you're able to ride."

"Workin' on the Railroad, workin' life away,
Workin' on the Railroad, for mighty little pay!"

"Shut up, Dolly, you make my head ache, and besides that you'll burst something, and start bleeding again."

THE END.



Scar Rawlins, Lifer

It was well planned, that get-away through the Montana woods— but not even Scar could have guessed what Fate had planted in his path to freedom

By HOWARD E. MORGAN

The first quick glance photographed a terrible picture on Scar Rawlins's mind

FREE at last! At the end of that straight strip of mist-hidden roadway was the Canadian border, less than a mile away. Once over that mythical line and he would be safe, for the time being at least.

Scar Rawlins breathed deeply of the sweet-scented early morning air. His stubble-covered cheeks, gray with prison pallor, took on a sudden flush of color. It had been a long chase and a hard one, but he had beaten them, outguessed them at every turn. During the night he had lost the main posse, somewhere back in the Montana hills.

They would be watching the main highways; he figured they'd never think of watching this grass-grown cartpath. Rawlins chuckled noisily, deep in his throat, and slowed his step to a rapid walk. He was glad, in a way, that there hadn't been a fight. The warden wasn't a bad feller.

The pleasant tinkle of running water sounded close at hand. It was a little stream, tumbling down over the rocks, thence under the roadway through a log walled tunnel. Rawlins moistened his dry lips, thirstily. But no, not yet. He shouldn't stop, yet. Just a few minutes now and he would be safe; time enough then to drink his fill.

Nevertheless, he stopped and eyed the liquid coolness, longingly. He remembered this stream now. It started from a spring up there on the shale wall. Once, as a kid, he had romped here with his dog.

The convict's stooped body suddenly jerked erect. Head on one side, he listened, tensely alert. A distant

thrumming sound, muffled by the early morning mists, came faintly to his straining ears. Horsemen, drawing near along the swamp road. He hadn't fooled them after all! He might have known. The warden was a wise one. And it was too late to run for it now; they were too close.

Choosing his steps with care, the man burrowed into the head-high underbrush and lay, panting, between two moss-covered logs. The clattering hoofbeats grew loud, then died away. Rawlins's pounding heart ticked off long minutes. Finally he scrambled to his knees, then to his feet. A twisted grin contorted the livid scar running from ear to chin tip across his whiskered cheek. Luck was still with him. The posse had turned off into one of the many log roads branching away from the swamp road. A smart one, that warden. They would be back onto the swamp road soon. He would have to shake a leg.

With one last appreciative glance at the tumbling stream he started away at a shuffling run along the dew-wet roadway. He'd beat them yet!

THE swamp road soon degenerated into twin ruts that twisted indolently aside for every stump and bowlder. Slipping, sliding, stumbling, Scar Rawlins ran on, breathing hard, his eyes fixed on a wide strip of pink skyline just ahead. There was a clearing there, he knew, and perhaps a cabin. In the old days there had been no cabin there. He was quite sure of that.

A thousand times, back there behind those gray stone walls, he had visualized every foot of this familiar ground.

It was not far from here that he had killed Joe LeMorde, or so they claimed. He had planned carefully his every move in this get-away. Even if there was a cabin in the clearing now, it was still so early that, chances were, the occupants would be asleep.

A series of staccato yelps suddenly sounded sharply above the pounding of his heart. A dog. There were more yelps and shrill, long drawn out, wailing cries. A dog in pain—caught in a trap, perhaps!

Scar Rawlins liked dogs; cared more for them than he did for most men, as a matter of fact. His stride lengthened. His tall, gray body, merging queerly with the shifting mists, topped the rise before the clearing at a swinging run.

Yes, there was a cabin there, right enough. And at the side of the cabin a man—and a dog.

That first quick glance photographed a terrible picture on Scar Rawlins's mind. The dog was a long-limbed, sad-eyed hound. Only a pup. A short length of a log chain, wrapped several times about a tree, held the squalling puppy close against the trunk. The man stood with his heel on the chain, a few feet from where it fastened about the dog's neck. The dog strained at the metal leash, its eyes bulging with terror. The man held a short-lashed snakeskin whip upraised in his right hand. He stood there, whip poised above his head, watching the shrinking dog. And as he watched, the man laughed.

"Yella dog. Coward. Make de big noise now. Maybe eet ees de las' chance you got. I would keel you, perhaps. Bah, such damfool dog!"

The whip fell with a hissing smack.

"You would make de face at me, eh? You would show de teeth? You would bite me, *hein?* One, two, t'ree time you bite me. But no more. By gar, I show you. Yah!"

Scar Rawlins could not hear what the dog-beater said. Perhaps it was well he could not.

The Canuck was a big man, black-whiskered, swart. The muscles rippled along his bare arm. The dog wailed piteously as the cruel lash again curled in the air.

Scar Rawlins, his ugly face hideous

with rage, stood as though rooted to his tracks.

His big hands opened and closed spasmodically. The cords in his neck stood out and pulsed rapidly in response to the killing rage that had set his heart to throbbing violently. And yet he hesitated.

Above the moaning cries of the dog, Rawlins's quick ears had caught the sound of shod hoofs on gravel. The posse had come back onto the swamp road. They were near at hand. Every instinct urged the convict to spring upon the dog beater—but an instant's delay now would mean certain capture. Lifelong imprisonment inside stone walls.

Then the whip descended once more, and Scar Rawlins hesitated no longer.

"Drop that whip, damn you!" he shouted.

The black-whiskered man whirled. His dark face grew livid as his eyes rested upon the convict. His yellow teeth gleamed through his bushy black beard and mustache. Scar Rawlins, fists clenched, approached purposefully; his thin lips were twitching and his pale eyes gleamed.

The dog-beater lifted the snakeskin whip menacingly, but Scar Rawlins continued to advance. The man brought the whip down, then, with all his strength, aiming at that grimacing, scarred face.

The lash curled with a sickening hiss about Scar Rawlins's face and shoulders. Then the whip was wrenched from the other's hands. A smashing blow caught the Canuck in the face. His black head snapped backward, and his big body jolted crashingly against the cabin wall. Mouthing broken teeth, he crawled to his knees.

Strong fingers fastened about the collar of his shirt and jerked him upright. Again and again, hammering blows struck him until that scarred face danced in a red mist before his swelling eyes. And when he raised both hands before his battered face, whining for mercy, Scar Rawlins laughed and picked up the whip.

IT was the beaten giant's shrill voice, screeching for mercy, that first attracted the posse. Then, when the cries had ceased, the sibilant swishing of the whip, as it curled about the man's big body, led them to the spot. They saw the Canuck's body sprawled, face down, on the ground, and they saw Scar Rawlins on his knees, fumbling with the clasp at the dog's neck.

"Pore feller," he was muttering. "Pore old feller."

Scar Rawlins's back was turned to the silent posse, apparently unaware as yet of their presence. Warden Murchison pawed at his grizzled mustache and shook his shaggy head understandingly. He was able to visualize almost exactly what had happened.

"Scar always did like dogs," he muttered. "Who's the feller on the ground there?" he queried in a whisper. There was a general shaking of heads. None of the posse recognized the prostrate figure.

"That cabin ain't been occupied for a year or more," one of them whispered.

Warden Murchison turned his rifle downward. Most of the men did the same. With his back still turned, Scar Rawlins was now fumbling over the half-conscious body.

Suddenly Scar sprang up, swung about in a half crouch. A gun, snatched from the fallen man's belt, unwaveringly indicated the warden's heart.

"Got you, warden," Scar grated. "Not a move or you're a goner. You know me."

Warden Murchison swallowed hard. His face paled. He was a good warden, was Steve Murchison, and no coward. He was not afraid now, but—

"Don't be a fool, Rawlins," he said calmly. "You can't get away with it. We have twenty men spread along the border watching for you. They—"

"You're lyin', warden," Scar Rawlins said. "No, maybe you ain't, at that," he amended. "You never lied to me yet. But I ain't goin' back to that—that place, alive. I'm servin' time for suthin' I don't know nothin' about. May as well do suthin' to get jugged for. Stand back there! Make a move and I'll shoot to kill. Stand back!"

Scar Rawlins, gun in hand, half turned as the beaten man behind him groaned noisily and rolled over on his back. Warden Murchison peered down into that battered face.

"Joe LeMorde!" he almost shouted.

"Joe LeMorde?" Scar Rawlins repeated. He stole a hasty look at the half-conscious beater of dogs. But there was a strong cast of doubt in Scar's eyes. Joe LeMorde was the man he was supposed to have killed, for whose murder he was serving a life sentence. Was this a trick of the warden's?

"No, you don't, warden," he said as Murchison advanced. "Tryin' to throw me off guard, eh? But I ain't as easy as all that. Joe LeMorde—"

"But it's the truth I tell you, Rawlins," Warden Murchison protested. "That man is Joe LeMorde. I knew him before. He was in the penitentiary for a year, for—"

SCAR RAWLINS was but vaguely aware that the warden was talking. His quick thoughts resurrected all he remembered of that unpleasant scene which had been enacted up here in these very hills fifteen years before, and as a result of which Scar Rawlins had been sentenced to imprisonment for life, for a crime he had not committed.

He had been only a kid then—a drunken, good-for-nothing hill-billy. He recalled the storm, a raging Montana blizzard. It was only the whisky that had kept him from freezing to death in that terrible storm. It is said that luck rides with drunkards and madmen, and luck had ridden with him that day, for a time, that is. He had become lost in his own hills, that was how drunk he was—he, Scar Rawlins, lost in those hills which he knew as he knew his own back yard. But he had not been particularly concerned about it. He was young and foolish and very drunk.

Finally, as the effects of the liquor were beginning to wear off, he had come upon a cabin. There was a man at that cabin, a French Canadian. He did not remember that man. Even now he could not recall the details of what went on in that cabin. He knew, merely, that he and the man had drunk out of a black bottle. Later there had been a disagreement of some sort, and they had come to blows.

It had been a terrible drunken fight, the other using a knife, while he himself had, as usual, fought with his fists. He had been badly cut up, but had finally succeeded in beating the Canuck. Then, weakened by the loss of blood from his many wounds, he had gone to sleep on the cabin floor.

Some time later he had struggled back to consciousness to find the man with whom he had fought lying unconscious, face down, in a pool of blood. He had been frightened then and had started out to look for help. But it was still storming, and he had soon become hopelessly lost. For three days and three nights he had wandered aimlessly through the hills. Then he had finally stumbled upon a trapper's cabin. Its occupant was away.

When the man returned a couple of days later, Scar Rawlins, raging with fever, was sprawled out on the cabin's single bunk in a stupor.

It was a month before he was able to leave the trapper's cabin. He journeyed to town then and told his story. He was immediately placed under arrest, for the bones of a man, picked clean by the wolves, had been found on the doorstep of Joe LeMorde's cabin.

That body was Joe LeMorde, or at least so half a dozen neighboring trappers swore.

But there evidently had been a mistake, for here was Joe LeMorde, the dog-beater, alive and well. And, as this knowledge impressed itself upon Scar Rawlins's vivid thoughts, he recalled a chapter out of that unpleasant past, which, up to the present moment, had been a blank: It was because of a dog that he had fought LeMorde in the cabin that day long years ago. The man's cruel treatment of his dog in the cabin that day had aroused Scar Rawlins's drunken fury. The fight had resulted. Yes, yes, he remembered now. Queer that he had never before been able to recall that.

"—and point that gun the other way, Scar," Murchison was saying. "It might go off."

Scar Rawlins came back to reality with a shudder, as though he had been douched with a pail of cold water. He lowered the gun in his rigid right hand obligingly. Joe LeMorde, groaning and whining, was being lifted to his feet.

"There's the man who has served fifteen years for your 'murder,'" Murchison accused LeMorde, pointing to Scar Rawlins. "Why did you do it, LeMorde? Why did you keep out of sight and let them sentence an innocent man?"

JOE LEMORDE'S one good eye rested briefly on Scar Rawlins's ugly face. His cheeks were a sickly gray, and a shudder twitched through his big body. Abruptly becoming very meek, he turned his back on the scowling, gray-faced convict and answered Warden Murchison's question civilly enough.

"He beat me," he explained, simply. "When I wake up, I pretty dam mad. I would keel him then. But he was gone. When the sheriff get him for my murder, I laugh. I go away far, far away. And I stay away. Two, t'ree year later I t'ink maybe dat *loup-garou* have suffer enough now. But den I am afraid to speak for fear maybe, eef he get out, he keel me."

Joe LeMorde shrugged expressively and stole a frightened glance over his shoulder at Scar Rawlins.

"Who was the dead man they found at your cabin?" Murchison asked.

Joe LeMorde's thick body stiffened. He looked hastily about as though contemplating flight. "I—I do not know," he stammered. "That feller, he die in my cabin. I put him outside. De wolves get him. That's all."

Warden Murchison spat elaborately into the sand at his feet. "Maybe so you're tellin' the truth," he said doubtfully. "But I'm taking you along with me, LeMorde. Your presence will clear Rawlins, of course. And I'm thinkin' you'll have to do a lot of explainin'—about that dead man."

When the posse started away a few minutes later, Scar Rawlins lagged behind. When he finally caught up with them he was leading Joe LeMorde's sand-colored hound dog. And there was something curiously resembling a smile on his scarred face.

"First time he's laughed in fifteen year," Warden Murchison said, and there was a world of sympathy contained in that simple sentence.

THE END.

The fantastic hooded figure began merging with the shadows

The Sea Girl

Deep in the mysterious chasms inside the earth, Jeff Grant and his allies battle the infernal foes of mankind as the threatened cataclysm comes ever nearer

By RAY CUMMINGS

Author of "A Brand New World," "Beyond the Stars," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

DURING 1990 and 1991, the sinking of ships and falling away of the ocean level confirm the claims of Dr. Plantet, oceanographer, that there are great subterranean caverns under the ocean floor, inhabited by races akin to humanity which are draining the oceans in an attack on the surface world.

Geoffry Grant, navigator, who is telling the story, and his chum, Arturo Plantet, the doctor's son, see a "mermaid" in a great metallic ball, deep in the ocean. Arturo finds her, on a Pacific island, and learns from "Nereid," as he names her, that one undersea race, the Gians, are moving upon Hawaii.

Dr. Plantet has invented the Dolphin, which can submerge to two thousand fathoms, and in it he, Arturo, Jeff, Polly—Arturo's sister—and Nereid spy on the undersea movement. Their light-bombs apparently disconcert the Gians.

After a period of peace, the oceans start sinking again. Jeff gets a telepathic message from Arturo, and flies to Nereid's island. There he finds her, Arturo, and Tad Megan, a friend of his who had been lost on one of the first

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sunken ships. In Nereid's craft they descend through locks in the ocean's floor, to the weird dark cavernous world that honeycombs the earth's surface.

Fen, Nereid's father, is leader of the fair-skinned Middge, the million workers of this underground world. The ruling class consists of some fifty thousand larger-bodied and gray-skinned Gians, ruled by the fiendishly cruel woman Rhana.

The Gians were planning the war on mankind, and the ocean flood which they are draining into the underground caverns will, the Middge fear, eventually drown them in the caverns, while the Gians escape for their war against the world.

Through the treachery of Bhool, an outcast Gian who is Fen's servant and Rhana's spy, Arturo and Jeff are captured and imprisoned in a dungeon in Rhana's castle. By strategy, and thanks to Jeff's height—for his six feet two towers over even Rhana, largest of the Gians—Jeff gets into the empress's throne room, and, after a terrific fight with the Gians there, escapes; but he is still in the mazes of the Castle, when he runs into something invisible and clutching.

Meantime Bhool, the traitor, is accompanying Fen, Tad, Nereid, and Entt—a young man of the Middge—to the Fire Caldron, the great volcano-heart where the Middge carry on their manufacturing. They are meeting to plan some way of overpowering the Gians and closing the water-gate through which the gray-skinned people are draining the oceans.

CHAPTER XVI.

UNMASKING THE TRAITOR.

AS Tad listened, standing on the caldron's rim, he heard yet another sound, unnatural and fearsome. It seemed to come through a rift in the side wall here—a cañon rift slashed like a huge black gash. A sound very far away, but gigantic; a dim, monstrous surge—the roar of tumbling water! He turned.

"Entt, what is that?"

Nereid answered him. "The water coming through the flood-gates."

Ah, and when, backed up with its pressure, or breaking through the walls, it reached here?

There was human activity here—sights and sound and movement. On the broad, nearer slope from this upper rim to the red level where the fire began, stone buildings were set in terraces. It was the main industrial village of the Middge. Great pipes led up, bringing the heat for power, to the factories, not active now. They stood with windows dark, their outlines edged with red.

But there was one large building, a mile away, with rows of lights. Figures moved about it, and the open rocky plateau beside it was busy with human activity.

This was the Middge scientific workshop. Nereid pointed it out. It was the laboratory and arsenal where the Middge were now assembling their equipment of war.

There was a broad, mile-long ledge, near at hand on the downward slope. It was thronged with Middge; several hundred young men seated in orderly array, and nearly as many young girls, like Nereid, of flowing robes and tawny hair. The pick of the youth of the Middge were here, small, slender, white-skinned, come here to be told what to do. There were older men moving around among them.

Tad was drawn away. Middge leaders came up to greet Fen—small men of middle age, alert, solemn. The party went down the slope, mingled with the crowd on the ledge. The *arras* were left at the summit, half-blinded by the glare, chained to the rocks.

Tad was there barely an hour. With inactivity came thoughts of Arturo and

me. He was increasingly worried—anxious to return. He sat with Nereid. She, too, was frightened over us. She still could not communicate with Arturo.

The Middge meeting proceeded. Fen took no part in it, but Tad noticed that many of the leaders conferred with him frequently. There were speeches made to the assembled youth. Plans were told, immediately to be put into execution.

The plans of men! How easy to make them, earnestly looking ahead to their fulfillment! How easy to look back, too late, and see the causes of their frustration!

There was one cause, here at Tad's elbow—Bhool, eagerly listening. Even then, it seemed to Tad strange that Bhool, a Gian, should be here. The Gians were never curious over the Middge industrial activity. No Gian ever came here. They bought or confiscated the Middge products, content to have them, incurious of their manufacture. Apathetic, ineffectual were the Gian men; and the ruling Gian women were unconcerned over industrial details. But Bhool now was admitted—Fen's personal servant, nothing was thought of him.

Plans. There was, in all the chaos, some good news. The exploring party had returned. It had found a new tunnel-passage and followed it for nearly three hundred miles, coming at last to rushing water in a chasm, barring the way. But the scientists in the party had estimated their position: above the floor of the ocean—within what we call a submerged mountain, perhaps. This subterranean river would recede. It was of different quality from ocean water. Its volume lessened while for a day they waited. With the ocean draining, this river would empty. A way of escape for the Middge people was here.

A hundred couriers were now dispatched everywhere throughout the abyss. Most of them were these active young girls, more expert riders of the *arras* than were the men. The Middge people, nearly a million of them, would be started presently, most of them on foot. A march of a few hundred miles—a migration upward to safety.

THE leaders needed Entt at once. He was to go to the tunnel entrance—two hours' ride from here on his *arras*. He would stay there for a time, helping to erect the light-beacons which were to guide the Middge people in finding the entrance. He did not want to go; he had hoped to stay with Nereid. He faced her, pathetically. At her gentle smile he turned away, spoke to Tad, and left. A bustling group of Middge leaders swallowed him up.

Within a few days, it was believed, all the Middge public would have departed. But the gates might break at any time. An attack now was to be made upon them. It was hoped that perhaps the departing Gians had already abandoned them.

There were weapons for a small army here in the Middge arsenal, but almost none were ready; all unassembled as yet, for this thing Rhana had done had come too unexpectedly. The weapons—all this equipment for war against the Gians—would be taken up through the passage, to be assembled later. Unless the gates could be closed now, this realm down here was doomed. The Middge would have to cast their lot above—

"But they may get the gates closed," Tad exclaimed.

"Then," said Nereid, "the people will be turned back. We like it here—you know that, Tad. Each to his own portion. The Creator intended it."

Some of the weapons were brought up for Fen's inspection. There was one device which strangely interested Tad. Equipment complete now, for four people. He gazed at it, listened to Nereid as she translated what the scientists were telling Fen about it.

Tad said suddenly, "Nereid, I want those. Can they spare them?"

"What for, Tad?"

"I don't know." He did not. It may have been a premonition, dawning, unformed plans in his mind. But he knew he wanted this equipment—more eagerly than he had ever wanted anything before.

Nereid told her father. There was much discussion. The other men came over; Tad pleaded earnestly.

He got the equipment. He sat beside it, puzzling, wondering what had prompted him to demand it. Bhool had gone a short distance away to another part of the ledge to see what was going on there. He came back. Tad concealed his possessions; he made Nereid sit with her robe over them. He roughly, angrily ordered Bhool to keep away. That, too, was a premonition.

It seemed to the impatient Tad an endless time before they were ready to start back. But it came at last. The Middge expedition was starting now for the flood-gates.

The ride back also seemed endless. Bhool was put with Fen; Nereid and Tad, still with the equipment concealed, rode together.

The open void of the main abyss held a confusion of activity now. The roads were crowded with Middge—the beginning of the retreat. Every house showed lights and hurried, panic-stricken movement. Overhead, an occasional huge aëro of Gians would pass, flying for the City of the Mound.

Tad was hoping that we would be at Fen's house. But we were not. The note was there, untouched. Tad went to his room, and hid the equipment. Bhool prepared food. Nereid was still trying to communicate with us. At this time, probably, I was still unconscious, and she could not reach Arturo with her thoughts. It may have been that his mind was too absorbed with our plight—I cannot say.

Fen had no plan to find us. But he said once, "They may be in the Castle—if it is success—the gate attack—I will have young men try to get in there—"

Tad recalls that from the adjoining room where Bhool was working a clang sounded as he dropped a metal platter.

THEY ate a brief meal. They were all exhausted. They would sleep for a few hours. Messengers would come to report the fate of the gate-house attack. If it failed, then Nereid would get together a few belongings. They would leave for the tunnel, join Entt and start upward, with hundreds of thousands of others, fleeing this doomed realm.

Nereid had other plans. She did not know just what, but she knew she would not leave Arturo. But she said nothing, nor did Tad. He was still puzzling, groping with half-formed ideas.

The house quieted. Tad was alone in his room. He lay down, trying to plan. It was coming to him. It was feasible. With this equipment he could get into the Castle. But how could he find us? How know even that we were there at all?

He would need Nereid. Let her sleep now for a few hours. And he needed the rest himself. He did not intend to sleep, but he drifted off, still vaguely planning.

Tad awakened suddenly, wide awake at once, with his mind clear. And like an inspiration he had the answer; as though in his sleep it had come to him, waking him up. That accursed Bhool! Tad saw it all now, clearly; the wonder of it was that he had not seen it before. Bhool in the garden—he had stayed always by me, edged me along. Rhana would want to see me; Bhool had displayed a great interest in me. Tad recalled a dozen suspicious things in Bhool's actions. And in the garden, when we had disappeared, Tad remembered now that Bhool was for a few moments missing also. And the fel-

low dropped a platter when he heard Fen say that we were probably in the Castle. Tad had gone into the kitchen and found Bhool in confusion.

It came like an inspiration. Bhool knew where we were. Well, if he did, Tad now proposed to get it out of him.

Tad crept from his room. The house was silent; Nereid and Fen were asleep. He went to Bhool's room. It was empty. But in a moment there was a step. Bhool came along the passage from the street door. He had in reality just been to the Castle, finding his opportunity now with the household asleep. He had seen us in our cell. Had told Rhana of the coming attack by the Middge on the gate-house; and she had sent him back to get further information.

Tad saw him coming along the passage, smirking to himself, satisfied with his accomplishment. No craven, cringing air about him when he was alone! That was a pose. But Tad leaped out upon him; jerked him roughly into the room. The cringing came to him; but it was not a pose this time—he was frightened, gray-white of face, chattering.

"M-master—what is it?"

TAD twisted him. "What became of Arturo and the big man, his friend?"

"M-master—"

"Tell me, you damned hangar-rat."

"Master—I don't know—what you talk—" He chattered off into his own language.

"Stop that! Talk English! Stand up here. I'm not hurting you!"

But Bhool's knees gave away. He groveled at Tad's feet.

"I want to know what you did with them. Where are they?"

"Them? Who?"

Tad shook him.

"M-master, you hurt—"

"Do I? Where are they? Where is Arturo?"

"I don't know." He took the cuff of Tad's hand on his face, cringing, but he mumbled, "I cannot tell—I know nothing—"

It was possible he did not, but Tad wasn't taking any chances.

"M-master! Oh, m a s t e r—y o u hurt—"

"Stop your screaming! If you wake any one up I'll kill you! Talk!"

It was exasperating.

"M-master—my w r i s t—i t w i l l break—"

Tad eased his twisting. "Will you talk?"

"N-no—oh, master!"

It brought Tad a sense of physical nausea, the fellow was so helpless, fragile—his wrist would crack. But Tad gritted his teeth and twisted.

"Tell me, damn you!"

"Master! Stop—" He screamed, "I'll tell you! Oh—stop!"

Tad relaxed. And Bhool told; with a burst, half incoherent he told it all.

"But if she knows. Master, if she knows, she will kill me!"

"I don't care what she does to you." Tad straightened, triumphant. That cell in which we were imprisoned—he could locate it. He had lived in the Castle, and knew its interior well.

"Stand up, you!" He jerked Bhool to his feet, dragged him out, then woke up Fen and Nereid, and told them.

"Here, you take him."

Fen was still confused. "But, Tad —tell me more of this. What did he—"

Tad told them it all. "Cursed traitor! By the code, he's done enough damage."

They barred him in a small windowless room. Tad explained his purpose. "Will you try it, Nereid?"

"Oh—" She was speechless with her eagerness.

They left Fen to guard Bhool. "We can do it in an hour," said Tad. "We'll be back, with Jeff and Arturo!"

They went to Tad's room. Both of them trembling with the haste and excitement of it, they got out the equipment they had brought from the fire

caldron. Within ten minutes they slipped like shadows from the house.

CHAPTER XVII.

PROWLING SHADOWS.

TAD and Nereid had found the apparatus easy to adjust. They tested it before they left Tad's room; it seemed to work perfectly. It consisted of a long robe of fabric, light as gossamer, dull, dead black. There were four of these robes. Nereid took the smallest. It enveloped her from head to foot; it swept the ground; its sleeves ended in black gloves; its hood covered her head. There was a mask-like flap for her face; small, transparent black panes for eyes; a clip against her nostrils to hold a breathing valve in place.

"All right, Nereid?"

"Yes."

Around her waist Tad adjusted a narrow black belt. It was a rope of interlaced, tiny black wires. A black curved box like a battery was fastened to the belt. Light in weight—all dead black. There were a dozen dangling black wires. Tad connected them at her shoulders, along her arms to the waist, down to the hem of the robe, and up to the crest of the hood. She stood, in the dim light of Tad's room, a black grotesque blob of shape against the wall. Fantastic, hooded little figure merging with the shadows. But she was plainly to be seen—the outlines of her, blotting out the table and the wall behind her. An inky silhouette.

She said: "I'll turn it on." Her gloved hand fumbled with the battery. The current went into the robe. It glowed luminous for a moment. The shape of her was there, shimmering like a silver ghost. Misty—a fog dissolving—gone! The table and the wall behind her showed clearly; there was nothing to be seen in front of them.

It was uncanny. Tad said sharply: "Nereid, you all right?"

"Yes, Tad."

Her voice, calm, from the empty air. Tad reached out his hand and, fumbling, came upon her. The robe was vaguely vibrating.

"It works, Nereid! I can't see you! Stand back, close against the wall."

He could faintly make out the distorted blur of her shape as she backed nearer the table and wall; the table outlines were distorted; the wall seemed to have a shadow on it.

"That's too close, Nereid. We must remember that — keep away from things."

There is one of these robes now in the Anglo-American Museum of Science, in London. Apparently it cannot be duplicated. But the fundamental principle of its operation is simple. The electrification of the fabric—vibrations of an unknown current akin to what we call electricity—set up in the air surrounding the robe, a magnetic field. As Nereid stood in the center of Tad's room, the light rays from the table and wall behind her were bent around this magnetic field so that their image was carried unbroken to Tad's sight. It was only when she stood too close to the wall that its light rays were blocked by the solidity of her.

The robe itself reflected no light rays. The color we call black is no color at all, but merely the absence of all colors—black, because it absorbs almost all the color-bearing light rays which strike it. There is, however, generally a glint, high lights and shadows. But this robe, with the current into it, reflected no light rays, no tiny glint from its folds.

And with these two principles, for practical purposes it was invisible. Nothing really eerie or uncanny. Solid science, strange but rational. The bending of light rays for a century has been observed and understood by our astronomers. Our sun itself has a similar magnetic field about it, bending the light rays from the distant stars

which in reality are behind the sun, but seem to be off to one side.

Tad was triumphant. Nereid helped him adjust his robe. He carried under it two others—for Arturo and me—carefully folded and tied around his body.

Nereid was a little doubtful and cautious. "We must remember what they told my father—in the real darkness we Middge, and the Gians, are keener of vision for very close objects."

They were both standing with the current turned on. Nereid put out a tentative hand. "Even in this light I can—I almost think I see you, Tad."

THEY started from the house, invisible shadows, walking quietly, hand in hand not to lose each other. The streets were in a confusion of excitement. Middge couriers had aroused the people to the necessity of leaving. The houses showed bustling, frantic activity. Middge families, with household treasures piled on their *arras,* were starting for the open country. The beginning of the flight. Men, women and children, with impedimenta that very soon would be discarded, plodding away. A long line of them, assembled in an open, parklike space, started marching off. There was another street, up which a line of Gians was headed for the fortress garden. The Middge avoided them. The Gians, intent upon their own activities, took no notice of any one.

Through it all Tad and Nereid moved unseen. There was no danger, save for a chance collision. They came to the garden. The lower windows of the Castle were barred; the upper ones were open. The garden was bustling with activity. A huge aërocar was being loaded.

Tad whispered: "The main door is open. That's the best way in."

Gians were passing in and out. Tad and Nereid cautiously mounted the steps. They kept near the edge. At the top a man suddenly came out; he nearly ran into them. Tad pulled Nereid hastily aside; they stood at the doorway, pressed against the wall. Tad clung to her; he could not see his outstretched arm; nor her. He whispered:

"Careful, Nereid; he nearly hit us."

In the doorway a group of Gian women were talking. One of them looked squarely at Tad. His heart leaped; but she idly looked away.

Nereid whispered: "Wait just a moment—I can hear them—"

They were talking of the Middge attack upon the gate-house. Gians had been sent to repulse it. That accursed Bhool!

One of the women spoke softly to her companions; abruptly they were all looking toward Tad and Nereid. Too close to the wall! He realized it. The women saw something—puzzling shadows.

"Nereid! Move!"

They moved soundlessly into the doorway. The women went on talking. Clinging together, the two slipped past.

They were in the Castle. A dim entryway. It was thronged with people. Nereid was frightened. It was difficult to avoid being run into—and to avoid getting too near anything.

"This way," Tad whispered. He drew her toward a side corridor. In a few minutes they would reach our cell.

Abruptly Nereid stopped.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Wait! Listen—"

He heard nothing but the babble of Gian voices. But Nereid's hearing was keener.

"Jeff," she whispered. "I hear his voice."

SHE led Tad across the room; they threaded their way, infinitely dangerous. They came to a broad doorway, its door ajar. They did not dare open it. They waited, crouching aside from the passing people. The door opened presently; a woman looked in for a moment.

"Nereid—now!"

They slid through the doorway. Tad saw me sitting beside Rhana, with three men guards standing over me!

There was no one else in the room. Tad and Nereid found a place to crouch. They listened to our talk, waited, hoping to find a way to get at me and help me escape. A sudden rush at these guards—

Tad had brought Nereid because if blank darkness were encountered in the Castle corridors underground, Nereid would be able to guide him. He was sorry now that he had brought her. Had he been alone—a leap on these guards; he and I fighting our way out—

But Arturo? Where was Arturo, since I was not in the cell, but up here?

Nereid, crouching silently, reached me with her thoughts, but she must have reached Rhana also. Nereid, intently thinking, had crept forward close to the table; Tad still clung to her. Rhana suddenly put out the lights. Tad was confused. He decided to make a sudden rush for me. He even brushed me with his robe, but Nereid pulled him away. Her mind, her whole heart now, instinctively was for Arturo.

And Tad agreed it was better. My thoughts had given Nereid the information she sought.

She and Tad moved swiftly for the door. It was partly open now; they slid through. They would get Arturo and come back for me.

In the dark corridors they moved more freely. They crossed the bridge, went down the incline, came to Arturo's cell. The route was what my thoughts of it had given them, for this was not the cell Bhool had described. Even in that he had lied to Tad.

The cell door could be opened from the corridor side. They found Arturo, and robed him like themselves.

They were ready. Nereid stood listening. From overhead came muffled sounds, cries, running feet.

They left the cell and crept back along the corridor. Tad was leading. At a sharp corner he ran full into me!

CHAPTER XVIII.

NEREID'S STRATEGY.

FOUR of us now, shadowed prowlers. It had taken them only a moment to get me into the robe and adjust its connections. Strange experience! I felt the tiny vibrations of the robe; it tingled my flesh. Through the dark panes of the goggles I could barely see the outlines of the dim corridor; but in a moment they seemed clearer. Empty corridor! It was so strange to hear the voices of others beside me—and yet not see them. To stretch out my hand, yet not see my arm. To touch, in a lighted corridor, something unseen.

"Who is that?"

"It's Tad—let go of me!"

As if in blank darkness, fumbling, he started. It was difficult for so many of us to keep together, so we went in pairs. Arturo and Nereid went ahead. Tad and I momentarily lost them. We came to the bridge and stopped.

"Where are they, Tad?"

They had agreed to wait here for us. We had passed no Gians as yet; there were none in sight here. Tad spoke softly:

"Arturo?"

Arturo's voice answered: "Yes—here—"

Nereid lifted the robe a trifle at her neck; a vague sheen of light was here now; I saw the patch of her skin, hovering in mid-air above the bridge rail ten feet away.

We joined them. I recalled that Rhana had closed every Castle door and window. In the silence under the bridge the running water sounded. I whispered:

"Could we get down there, Tad? Get out this way?"

"No."

Nereid's voice: "Only the dead, killed by Rhana, have gone down there."

We decided to try to locate an upper window that might be open. Nereid thought she could leap with safety that far; she was not sure.

We were soon among the Gians. The Castle was in a turmoil over my escape. And presently from the lower passages we heard shouts; Arturo's escape had been discovered.

We passed through many rooms. All the windows were barred. With all our strength we could not move them.

A dozen times we were nearly discovered. The Castle was being ransacked for Arturo and me.

We were passing through a small room. A Gian man came running from behind us. We did not hear him in time, and he ran solidly into us, and fell, shouting an alarm. Tad leaped on him.

I heard the gruesome splintering crack as Tad wrenched at his neck. The cries were silenced; Tad was shuddering as he rose.

Other Gians came running, but we avoided them easily. We came to the front main doorway, but found it closed. Gian women were on both sides of it, excitedly talking through the bars.

We were trapped. There was no way out. I told them how Rhana had stood at her table, closing the windows and doors. We decided to go there.

We got into the room. A dozen women were there; Rhana sat by the table. Nereid's voice said, at my ear:

"If we could get to the roof, Jeff, a ladder at the farther end leads to the ground."

But how could we get to the roof? From where we crouched I could see the steps leading upward—a seven-foot flight of stairs, but there was a grating, barring the top. The stairs were empty at the moment. And the roof up there seemed empty.

FREEDOM, beyond that grating. But how get past it? Rhana sat like a cool gray statue at the table; her hand rested beside the mechanism. Occasionally she would speak to one of the women, or issue some command.

Tad's voice came: "We'll creep over there, get up to her, make her open it. By Tophet, I'll make her!"

But if she did not do it at once, her cries would bring the whole Castle upon us. And even with momentary control of the mechanism, we did not know how to operate it for ourselves.

"Let's kill her and have done with it," Tad whispered. But that would not get us to the flood-gates.

Nereid's voice whispered: "I have a plan. I can talk like a woman of the Gians—let me try."

We crept across the room, up the empty staircase. At the top, near the grating, we paused. My heart was beating fast. It might work, or within an instant we might be discovered.

Tad murmured: "They'll see us here against the stairs."

But Nereid tried it. Her voice rang out, startlingly loud in the silence up here at the top of the stairs She spoke in her own language, imitating the Gian accent:

"Let me in, please!"

Rhana looked up, startled. Every woman in the room was staring at us.

"Let me in, please!"

Would they see us? They might have noticed the blur of us against the stairs near the top. But they did not. They were puzzled. Rhana spoke:

"Where are you?"

"Here, on the roof. Open, please, for an instant—you will want to hear my news."

The bars slid aside. We jammed our way out before they were fairly open. Freedom!

Rhana called, puzzled: "Come down then. Hurry!"

Some imp within Nereid must have prompted her. She called back sweetly:

"Thanks. You may close it now!"

We dashed across the empty roof, down the ladder, and safely threaded the turmoil of the garden, plunging into the dark city streets.

"WHY, there is Entt!"

Nereid saw him. We were almost to Fen's home. The street chanced to be deserted. Entt rounded a corner, riding his *arras*. We were visible now; there seemed no Gians in this part of the city; we had cut the current from our robes and thrown back the hoods for greater comfort.

"Oh, Entt!"

He pulled up and we crowded around him explaining what had happened. He was pleased; he smiled as he shook my hand. But he was very solemn.

Arturo and I were told by Tad where Entt had been. Arturo said:

"Are the people getting away safely?"

He nodded. The first of them were past the tunnel entrance; many were well on their way. But a million people could not be started on a march like that at once. It would take several days before they were all away. Much confusion had been reported. From the opposite surface across the abyss the Middge were being brought in aëros. But there was a shortage of cars. Many families were starting to march around, following the surface curve. It would take them too long; when cars were available, these Middge would have to be rounded up and brought across.

Entt was increasingly solemn. Nereid demanded: "What is it? Something is wrong?"

The Middge attack upon the gate-house had been defeated! The expedition had got close up to the gates. The place seemed abandoned by the Gians. And then an armed aëro had arrived from the City of the Mound. The Middge were caught by surprise by the counterattack. An utter rout; there were no more than twenty of the Middge band alive to struggle back to the tunnel, and the Gians remained in possession of the gates.

"Disaster," said Entt. "There is nothing for any of us but to escape."

"But there is!" I exclaimed. I outlined my plan. With these invisible suits two or three of us could get into the gate-house, even though it was held by the Gians. A desperate venture—suicide possibly. But if, before they found and killed us, we could get the huge gates closed and demolish the mechanism, it would be worth it.

Entt's eyes flashed. "I think I understand that mechanism. I will go with you."

I still held the small weapon I had seized from my Gian guard in Rhana's Castle room. It had been of no use to us in the Castle, since none of us knew how to fire it. The weapons of the Gians in this realm had been very closely held. Nereid had never even had such a weapon in her hand before. But Entt knew how to use it. He would show me. At the gate-house it would be of service.

We started again for Fen's home, walking, with Entt on the *arras* beside us. My plan was to leave Nereid with her father. They would get together what belongings they wanted and start for the tunnel and wait there at the entrance for the success or failure of our venture. If we were still alive, we would join them there.

We were three minutes, no more, reaching the house. My mind roved what lay ahead: The horrors here in this dark abyss, unseen by our great world spreading above. These escaping Gians—forty or fifty thousand of them, with all their equipment of war, passing upward through the locks into our falling ocean. This harried Middge people, unarmed, in panic, a million of them fleeing their doomed realm,

marching desperately into a tunnel that might lead them to safety.

That titanic surge of water, off there in the neighboring abyss of the monsters—coming down to mingle with the slumbering fires of the earth. Vast horrors impended for our upper world.

But the human mind individualizes. I chiefly felt, and considered, the personal danger to this little band of friends with whom my interest lay. And as we approached the silent doorway of Fen's home, the sense of impending tragedy—crowning horror—was strong upon me.

We entered. Nereid called: "Father—my father—we have come."

I heard Tad mutter: "I hope he's kept that fellow Bhool locked up."

We passed the silent rooms. "Father—father!"

A fear was creeping into Nereid's voice. We hastened, bursting into the main apartment.

Crowning horror!

The closet into which Bhool had been thrust and locked, stood open. There was food upon the table in the room. On the floor in a huddled heap lay old Fen. Gruesome, a red stain against his neck, a small, spreading pool of crimson on the floor; a broad knife-blade, bathed in crimson, lying here discarded by the murderer.

We stood stricken, staring, gasping. And then little Nereid flung herself down.

HE lived to open his eyes and see us. He seemed to recognize us. Arturo knelt with Nereid.

"Oh, Fen, what did you do? Where is Bhool? Did you let him out?"

Fen's words were faint. "Yes—he—was hungry—and then—he killed me."

A kindly act at the last, and the reward was death! Life can be so tragic, so cruel!

Fen lay very still, with eyes closed. But in a moment he opened them. He tried to focus them on Arturo. "You—will guard—my little daughter—"

He drew Nereid's head down to him. He seemed to sigh; and then he lay unbreathing. There was no sound but Nereid's sobbing.

Arturo stood before me. "I want to go with you, Jeff. You know that!"

"Yes. I know it." I smiled into his earnest, sorrowful eyes. "But three of us will be enough, Arturo. And Nereid needs you."

"I just wanted you to know I ought to go with you."

He turned away. We three were ready. Entt was equipped with his black robe. I carried my weapon. He had shown me how to advance the charge from its storage battery to the firing chamber; and how to fire it. An oblong thing of black metal the size of my hand, it discharged a stab of radiance with an effective range of perhaps a hundred feet. Or at fifty, with an altered form of its vibration, the radiance, like an electro-magnet, would seize an object, grip it, hold it.

"Is our *arras* ready, Entt?"

"Yes."

We had one giant *arras* which could carry all three of us. There was a small aërocar available at the tunnel-mouth—the tunnel into which the Middge people were retreating. Entt had left the aëro there.

Tad demanded: "You're sure it will be there?"

"Yes. It is hidden as I told you."

I stood again with Arturo. "You take Nereid and three *arras,* Arturo."

"Yes, Jeff." He was docile now. No more forcing of his own ideas. "We'll load one with our things, lead one, and ride the third."

"Exactly. And wait at the tunnel entrance. You'll find our *arras* there, where the aëro is now. Wait there, Arturo—we'll join you if we can. But not too long. Understand? If you know that the gates have broken and we have failed, ride on. Will you?"

He nodded. His eyes were full. "I

may not see you again, Jeff. Good-by."

I clapped his shoulder. "Good-by, Arturo. Good-by, Nereid."

We left them standing together gazing after us.

TO any one who cared to look, our giant *arras* was loping through the gloom unmounted. We clung to its long saddle, Entt in front, guiding it. We went in great bounding leaps, over the river-bridge, with the hot wind rushing past us. Tad's solid body before me was a vague black blur, and I could not see Entt at all. We took the road Tad had already traversed toward the fire caldron, but we soon swung aside.

We came at last to the tunnel-entrance. Activity here. Twin light-beacons mounted on the rocks marked it for the arriving Middge people. They were coming in groups; a throng of them surged in confusion at the broad entrance, passing the guards, starting on their long upward march.

We avoided attracting attention. No one heeded our wandering, seemingly unmounted *arras*. We found, beside one of the rocky walls of the entrance, the small cavelike recess where Entt had left his aërocar, and here we chained the *arras*.

In my heart was a prayer that within a few hours we would be safely back, with the flood-gates closed, and find Arturo and Nereid here waiting for us.

Tad was hopeful of it. "Those Gians won't stay in the gate-house. Why would they? The Middge attacked—they couldn't figure it would be anything but a last attempt, and they've defeated it. To stay there, with the gates likely to break any moment, that would be crazy!"

"The Gians are nearly all departed now," Entt agreed. "Our watchers say the last of them from this surface and the other are started for the locks."

"And if," Tad added, "Rhana did leave a few to guard the gates, they'd desert—wouldn't wait there for the flood to kill them. They're all cowards anyhow, unless they've got weapons and you haven't. Don't worry, we'll find the whole place deserted. It's exactly the time to strike at it now, at the last minute!"

It seemed logical reasoning. I could only hope it might prove true.

We climbed to the aërocar, where it rested on a rock ledge. It was no more than ten feet long—a narrow strip of gleaming metal. With the currents out of our robes, and hoods flung back, we lay upon the car. Entt was at the controls.

The car slowly lifted. We slid silently from the recess. The arriving Middge stared up at us. A guard up on the beacon platform challenged us. Entt called a signal, and he relaxed.

We rose and sped forward, gathering speed as we rushed into the darkness. Underneath I could see a long line of the arriving Middge families; but we soon were past them.

Flying low. Presently there were no houses, no signs of human life. A rocky, barren surface; sometimes a black area of squat forest trees; to the right I made out the outlines of a rocky wall which we were following. Then we turned toward it, into a mile wide passage. We seemed nearly always ascending; but of that I could not be sure.

The glaring white beacons along here, placed to blind and turn back the monsters, had been extinguished and broken by the Gians. It was a dark, sinister passage, turning, rising, dipping; narrowing almost to a small tunnel; or again opening into a great rocky amphitheater, with an extent I could not estimate.

Half an hour's flight. Tad and I saw almost nothing; but to Entt the way was clear.

I became aware that the air had changed. A fetid quality had come to it. The passage ceiling had lifted. We

were beyond the confines of the connecting passage. The abyss of the monsters lay before us!

CHAPTER XIX.

WITHIN THE GATE-HOUSE.

I COULD see still less now; and it was doubtless my very limitation of vision which added to the sense of fear and awe that surged at me. An abyss here, dark and soundless, the air was heavy, motionless, save as it moved past us with our forward flight. Air that now was foul as though heavy with the hot breath of the unseen monsters.

There was no visible ceiling, no walls. But, as though my pupils were expanding in this greater darkness, I saw presently a black surface beneath us: and in another moment saw that we were flying barely a hundred feet above it.

A level spread of silent water. There may have been a black luminosity to it; a phosphorescence, black, yet visible. I seemed, after another interval, to be staring over a great distance.

A silent sea lay spread here under us. A vast area of water lying here like a great black shroud. A scum seemed on its dead, unriffled surface. A silent sea, yet it breathed with a slow rise and fall, as though with labored breath it lay dying. A world apart.

I had thought our turgid ocean depths fearsome. But here was a new quality—a dark foul sullenness—this silent sea aloof, remote here in the bowels of our earth. I shuddered as I stared, for it seemed to me suddenly that only the dead should gaze upon such a place as this.

And yet I knew that there were living things here. Creatures alive, but only in that one thing akin to living humans. Monsters lurked here, foul spawn of things unnameable, of form and manner and horror beyond all conception of the human mind.

I looked away at last.

This soundless abyss! But presently I began to hear a murmur; a surge; a roar. The water roaring at the floodgates. And soon I saw that there was no longer water beneath us; a naked black rock surface.

Entt whispered suddenly. "Look—out there!"

Far away I saw a dull-red point of light. No! It was not far; a few hundred feet—a dull-red smoldering torch. It moved. A black shapeless blur seemed with it. A living creature slithering away on the rock surface? Formless, soundless. I was grateful for the concealing darkness. There are things which it is not good for human eyes to see—things that mark the mind with horror.

I did not want to see it, yet I stared. And with imagination beyond curbing, I futilely tried to supply a head out there on the black rocks, or a giant black body, or legs and a tail. They are all words with meaning to our human mind. But this was none of those. My imagination was blessedly futile!

For this thing, though perhaps it was partially visible, was beyond my conception. The eye—was it an eye? Or a fiery breath, congealed in the air? Or a heart—the essence of the thing's being—nakedly visible? The red glow mercifully vanished, with only a dim radiance remaining, lingering like an infernal wraith of something which had been there and now was gone.

We flew onward. The sound of the rushing water was monstrous ahead of us.

Entt said: "We will land here. If there are Gians, they must not see us coming."

We left the aëro in a recess at the summit of a small rise. Invisible again, we started forward on foot. What revulsion I had felt, flying in the air and gazing down to where monsters might lurk in the darkness, was intensified now. Here on the rocks, walking, seeing nothing, hearing only that mon-

strous torrent ahead, I felt my flesh creeping with horror. Why, any moment something unspeakable, lurking here, might spring upon us.

"KEEP hold of me, both of you," Entt whispered.

Silent shadows, we walked swiftly. The ground was rough, broken now into great crags among which we climbed, steadily ascending.

There was light ahead—a milk-white glow, faint as star-dust. And a jagged black wall, clifflike, rising into the void beyond my vision.

A few minutes of climbing, and the roar grew. It beat upon me deafeningly. It seemed for a moment to engulf all my senses. A titan roaring—this torrent of water. An infuriated titan—yet still in leash. The milk-white radiance broadened; beside us the rock wall now was close.

Entt stopped us. We stood at the summit of the rise up which we had come. Entt spoke, shouting at us now, for the blare of dashing water tore at his words and flung them away.

"There is the gate-house. I think there are no Gians here."

We followed his gestures with our gaze. I stood peering, holding my weapon in my hand.

From here a path led down the rocks to the right. A hundred feet away down there the cliff wall rose sheer, smooth and black. The path, from where we were standing, went down the declivity and came to a small door, a gateway in an artificial wall.

Beyond it, looking down upon the wall from this greater height, I could see a small inner courtyard, with the wall inclosing it, and another door. Beyond that, a narrow, precipitous flight of metal stairs, with a wall around the bottom of them, led upward a hundred feet. Up there, perched like some aerie against the cliff-face, was a small black building, the gate-house. It hung there, with a dim oval of radiance from within marking its window.

Tad shouted at my ear: "If those courtyard doors are open— Or we might climb the walls."

Those courtyard walls seemed no more than ten feet high. No Gians were here, and the whole place appeared deserted.

"Wait a moment," Entt cautioned. "If there is any one here, we'll see movement."

The little metal house up there on its perch seemed unoccupied. Its door was ajar, showing a slit of light, and the window on this side was open. The room within was lighted. Was any one there? We waited, closely watching, for any shadow of movement.

My attention wandered to the vaster scene spread before us. The milk-white radiance illumined the distance. Beyond the path and the small courtyards there was a sudden drop, a thousand feet perhaps—a void here, all at that lower level. The cliff wall, to which the gate-house clung, went down that thousand feet—and up out of sight overhead. And stretched off in the milky distance. Smooth, black and sheer.

But there were lines marking it into great rectangles; giant blocks of metal out of which it was built. Not a cliff, but a titanic dam! I could see only this end of it—twenty miles of it possibly. At about the level of the gate-house, the water was surging through it, in a tremendous horizontal g a s h. It stretched off and lost itself in the blur of distance. And through the gash the wall of water was arching out and falling a thousand feet.

Uncounted Niagaras! A million? I could fancy so. A million Niagaras, piled one upon the other for a thousand feet of height; laid end to end for hundreds of miles. An utterly inconceivable torrent, falling a thousand feet into a white sea of foam down below—a boiling, lashing sea hundreds of miles

wide, leaping and tumbling away into other cañons. White-lashed water, catching what little light was here, reflecting it as a milky radiance.

There was wind here, its roar mingling with the greater roar unnoticed. Wind whirling and plucking at us. Spray, even up here. Giant spirals of upflung mist. The salt tang of the sea-spume whipped and sucked and flung by the wind.

WE stood only a moment. No Gians were here. Why would there be? This water could not surge through that wall for very long without tearing it away. Inconceivable torrent! But it was a mere slit in the wall—the dribble of a child's spillway on the shore of a sea. Our great oceans were up there—pressing to get down. What Gian would stay here on guard, with all his fellows escaping to safety?

We crept cautiously down the path. The wind whirled us; the spray, suddenly leaping in some chance gust, drenched us. I clung to Tad. Entt I could not see. I felt a sudden mild electric shock from Tad's robe. He cried out involuntarily; became visible so that I saw him beside me. His hands tore at his hood; his startled white face appeared.

Then he grinned. "Ruined! It's off, Jeff. You can see me, can't you?"

The water had evidently short-circuited his robe. And in a moment mine went the same.

Entt cut out his current. We flung back our hoods and took off our gloves. The freedom of it was pleasant, but we were no longer invisible.

"What of it?" said Tad. "There isn't any one here."

We came to the low door in the first wall. It opened to our touch. The courtyard was empty.

I clutched my weapon, with its lever adjusted to give the stabbing flash. It seemed to aim readily, very much like an automatic. There was a reassuring security in the feel of it. At a hundred feet I could drill any one we might come upon.

There were inner doors to rooms in this courtyard wall. We crept upon them one by one; flung them open, tense to meet what might be within. All were empty. Small empty rooms, with evidence of the Gian garrison here hastily departed.

We passed the inner wall door. No one here. We climbed the long metal ladder up the cliff face to the gate-house.

I led, with Tad next. "Easy, Jeff! Hang on—don't get dizzy. By the infernal, what a place!"

The ladder seemed to sway under us. In spite of all my flying experience, I found myself clinging, with senses whirling for a moment. It seemed that ladder was a spider web hanging over the chaos of water. The white turmoil of spume engulfed us.

A slow, patient climb. We stood at last on a small metal grid, the platform at the top of the ladder. The gate-house door was ajar.

Tad gripped me as we braced ourselves in the wind. "You've kept the projector dry?"

"Yes." I had shielded it with a fold of my robe.

He gestured. "I'll shove the door, Jeff. We'll rush in together. Get back, Entt. Ready, Jeff?"

"No! Stoop here, on one side. I'll kick it open. We'll wait and see—"

With my foot I swung the door inward. We crouched to one side. Nothing came out, nor was there any sign of movement in there. Weapon ready, I advanced to where I could see all the room. A square metal apartment of perhaps twenty feet, it seemed to occupy the entire little house. One window was here beside the door, another window faced the maelstrom of the dam. A bunk, a few pieces of furniture.

A table near the farther window held a square metal tablet, no larger than my chest. The dim interior light shone on it; switches and wires; dials;

a glowing bowl of radiance, like the fluorescence of an atomic tube. The gate mechanism!

My heart pounded as I gazed at it. This little thing—diabolical! But Entt knew how to operate it. A minute now and we would start it closing the great gates.

We advanced into the room, cautiously, then with a rush. I whirled with my weapon ready. Tad stood alert, tense, his eyes roving every corner. Entt dashed for the mechanism, and hastily seated himself at the table.

THERE was a movement behind me! In the outer doorway stood Rhana! She flung off a long, wet cloak. "So? You did come?" She advanced a step and then leaped for Entt.

A panther's leap! I met it with the stabbing light of my weapon; caught the sheathlike shield of her body; struck her full. There was a flare—a wave of vibration came surging back at me.

She was unharmed. A glow was around her; it streamed like a mantle down from her headdress. Her leap carried her to Entt. He rose up, was caught half turning. And then he crumpled, slumped and fell at her feet.

Tad and I rushed at her. And I saw that Tad had staggered back; he fell, but he was alive, shouting: "Jeff! Look out—run!"

Rhana whirled at me. I fired again. The flash was reflected upward; the room ceiling reddened for an instant where it struck.

"Run, Jeff!"

Tad was on his knees. I leaped forward—and struck the radiance surrounding Rhana as though it were a solid wall. A wall of vibration. The flesh of my arm burned; my robe shriveled about me. I was dashed back and fell; my weapon clattered to the floor.

Rhana had ignored my attack. An instant only she stooped over the table, then she turned from the instruments. I caught a glimpse of her face. Her lips were parted in a mocking smile. She went past Tad and me before we could rise; she caught up her cloak, went through the doorway. The metal door closed upon us.

Failure! It pounded at my heart—failure now at the last!

I was striving to get up.

"Jeff—you all right?"

Tad got to his feet, wavering, almost falling again. I stood with him in a moment, stood shaking. My left arm hung limp and my legs were almost unable to hold me. The smell of burned flesh, noisome, was heavy about us. My arm was burned; Tad was scorched. Both our robes were shriveled and charred about us.

We lurched to where Entt lay huddled on the floor, then I pulled Tad away.

"Dead?" he asked.

I gasped. "Yes—don't look, Tad. His face—burned where she struck him—it's—too badly burned."

Thank God he was dead!

Failure! It pounded at us, beyond thought of Entt, or ourselves. These gates, this torrent!

The mechanism lay inert where Rhana had demolished it. But more than that—

"Jeff, listen! Good God!"

Monstrous roar and surge of the water. But there were other sounds in it now—a muffled rumbling, far away, a vague blended rumble, crashing, tearing, as of great mountains of rock split and torn and moved away. It was growing into a tumult—sweeping nearer, louder.

"Jeff!"

The window by the broken mechanism was closed; but its heavy pane was transparent. We could see the dam through it. A mile away, as we stared, a great segment of metal moved outward, broke and fell into the torrent. The dam was crumbling!

A snapping violet light, huge as a rainbow, was out there, darting along the wall as far as we could see into the distance—a powder train of light, laid by the Gians, which now Rhana had released. It ate and tore and ripped at the wall. Another segment crumbled and fell—a mountain of metal rock, instantly engulfed by the greater surge of water from behind it; engulfed and flung down and lost as though it were a pebble.

The seething white abyss was visibly higher now. In ten minutes more it would be up here to the gate-house level, its backed-up water surging into the dark realm of the monsters, surging everywhere.

"Tad—it's breaking!" Was that my voice, so calm in the midst of a cataclysm like this? "Breaking, Tad. We can't do anything about it. Just get out of here—"

His eyes were big, luminous as torches; his white face expressionless with the shock of it.

Failure!

"Yes, Jeff. We'd better get away."

The window near the broken mechanism was closed by its heavy thick pane. We found now that the other window was closed! And the door! We pulled at them. With all our shattered strength we tore at them. Futile! We were trapped. A metal cage, now, this little house clinging to the rocks, with the mounting torrent already risen almost to engulf it!

CHAPTER XX.

DOOMED REALM!

IT seemed for an instant that we had not the courage left to struggle. Yet even a rat within a cage plunged into water frantically fights to its last strength. We stood with full realization, apathetic; and then panic descended upon us. The instinct for self-preservation, overwhelming, driving us into unreasonable panic. We flung ourselves at the door; upon the thick windows we beat with bruised, futile fists.

This inconceivable torrent, rising. The windows were wet with the spray; as though a wave had struck us, solid water dashed against them and then receded. A white chaos out there, with the violet light leaping through it.

"Jeff! We can't—we can't get out! Jeff! Here—help me hit it! Let's try hitting it with the table—"

I stood, with some remnant of reason, striving to master the panic. So this was the end?

"Tad, for God's sake, stop! Don't waste time. Stop and think what's best to do. We've got to find a way out!" I held him, shook him. "We've got a few minutes—there must be some way!"

So this was the end of Tad Megan and Jeff Grant? Ah, there is a fate to guide us all in the making of our destiny. In stress, in crisis, in disaster—always some little thing.

My foot struck against the small projector lying on the floor. I stooped and seized it.

"Tad. This?" I moved about the room. With this stabbing, burning light, could we not blast or burn our way out through some vulnerable spot?

We were both suddenly calmer.

"Easy, Jeff, don't waste its charge. How many flashes has it got?"

"I don't know." The building shook under the blow of an upflung surge of solid spray. "We'll find some spot that might fuse easily."

The window facing the ladder platform—its thick pane seemed embedded in a casement like lead, a gray soft metal. I stood a foot from it and fired. The stab of light came back at me, the recoil like a blow, and burning. My hand and arm were seared. But a portion of the casement was gone. The wind from outside came through.

"It works, Jeff! Give it to me—I'll try one."

A dozen or more blasts of the projector, then it failed us, empty, its charge exhausted. I flung it away. But the bull's-eye pane was almost free. We raised the metal table, heaved it. The corner of it struck the pane; the whole thing fell outward. Wind and spume came beating madly through.

We climbed, and fell outward upon the platform. The roar was deafening. We crouched, clung and found the head of the ladder, then went down it.

There seemed still only spray at the bottom. In the white murk I saw the wet black ground, wet courtyard walls. The crest of a wave engulfed them. We clung to the bottom of the ladder. The water fell away.

We leaped, reached the ground, and ran, the spray following us down the declivity. The white abyss into which the water had been falling was nearly filled. I saw, as we turned and ran, the blurred vision of that gigantic crumbling dam. But even that would be very soon but a portion of the torrent.

THE aëro was still unharmed. It seemed, as we climbed to it and started it aloft, that a wall of water swept under us. The car bucked and whirled in the wind; the spray was like a torrential salt rain as we mounted through it.

We had to shout above the roar.

"You think you can guide us out, Tad?"

"Yes, I think so."

"We've got to get to the tunnel and find Arturo and Nereid."

The water raced us. We rose perhaps five hundred feet. This abyss of the monsters now was not silent, nor dark. Behind us we could hear the roar and lash of the water pouring in. The dark, dying sea was whipped into fury, and rising visibly. The turmoil of water was white now. The white radiance streamed from it. I saw, far overhead, a rocky ceiling. I looked back. The radiance showed the cliff-like wall back there, blurred by the white chaos; but I saw it crumbling.

We found the connecting passage leading out to the abyss of the Middge and Gians. The water had reached here—the first surge racing through here, a mile-wide subterranean torrent. We flew close over it. There was a place where the ceiling came down. We barely got through.

Racing, with the abyss behind us breaking under the pressure. Distant, muffled rumbling, horribly gigantic, behind us. There was a vague muffled explosion off somewhere—some fire-pit which the water had reached. The vibration of it—the suddenly increased air pressure—dashed our aëro into a wild upward leap, and then a drop. We barely recovered, and raced on.

The torrent here in the passage was eating at the walls. One of them broke through as we went by. A rock mass fell close behind us. The water backed against it; it broke sidewise in other places.

A chaos of falling rock was back there. The dammed-up water turned other ways, into other abysses—filled them, soon rose, pursuing us again.

"Where are we, Tad?"

I shouted it as we lay prone, clinging to the leaping little aëro.

"In the main abyss, I think. God, Jeff, look over there!"

We seemed rushing through the familiar abyss of the Mound City. But it was no longer familiar. I followed Tad's gaze, and saw a red glare in the distance.

"Is that the fire caldron?"

"I don't know—I think so—or was it the other way?"

The outlines of the abyss were changing; the walls breaking down; fire pits opening. For a time—how long I cannot say—we were lost. An hour perhaps? Or more?

We flew aimlessly, seeking the tunnel entrance. Did it still exist?

This doomed realm! There were

things Tad and I saw in that hour or more of flight which have marked us forever with horror, a myriad small fragmentary glimpses which were all our minds could grasp—tiny fragments of the whole which was beyond conception.

The distant red glare spread. We avoided it, flying the other way. Tad thought that the black wall off to our left held the tunnel mouth. But it began breaking, and a wall of water engulfed it.

The hot breath of the fires reached us, thickly sulphurous. We soon were gasping.

Everywhere the honeycomb was breaking down. Still distant—but the familiar conformations of the abyss were changing.

Lost. And then a new hope came to us. The surface beneath us showed clear in the red glare. Houses were here now, and a road.

"We've passed the tunnel," Tad shouted. "That's the road from the Mound—I know the way now!"

WE turned back and followed it. People were down there. Middge and loaded *arras*, running in panic.

A muffled explosion sounded through the mingled roar of water and falling rock. A hot sulphurous wave of gas came surging. It seemed to cling to to the surface—a black mist rolling, spreading. It engulfed the struggling line of Middge. Its tongues of flame licked at them. They wilted, shriveled. Human cries came up to us—shrill, tiny as shrieking insects. The gas-cloud hid them.

"Higher, Tad—we'll be—choked—"

We mounted. The air was pure here, wet with wind and the salt of the inrushing sea. A wall of water came tumbling, engulfing, lashing at the surface, then pounding off to some lower area. A monster—something still alive, struggling with instinct of fear—trumpeted with a strident, uncanny scream. The cry stopped in a moment as the thing was swept away.

This doomed realm!

"Tad, look! Is that the entrance?"

A rock wall still intact loomed ahead of us, and a tunnel mouth, blurred in the mingled spray and smoke. One small beacon light still remained, bleary, winking—vanishing.

We landed on the rock with a crash. Unhurt, we jumped from the aëro. Human figures lay here, twisted, huddled shapes. A few still tried to move.

We choked with the fumes. I passed a child—dead, clinging in death to its dead mother. A woman alone—gruesomely burned from some flaming tongue which had licked the rocks here. I stooped. No, it was not Nereid.

We thought we had come to the niche where Arturo and Nereid were to meet us. It was empty. We stumbled away.

In the tunnel mouth the air seemed momentarily better. A man struggled ahead of us, then fell, lay still. I stooped over him. No, not Arturo.

The tunnel rose steeply. For just a moment at a turn, we stood looking back. A muttering, screaming, hissing abyss of red glare—steam and smoke and mingled water and fire, breaking down all its distant walls, an inconceivable torrent, filling this abyss, smothering these fires, crushing these passages. Rushing thousands of miles—smashing and roaring to find new levels.

We rounded the corner—struggled and stumbled on upward through the dark tunnel.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE WHITE AËRO ATTACKS.

IT had been the night of August 15, 1991, when I stood at Park Circle 80, in New York, and saw the news bulletins that the tides again were falling. The days that followed were for our world the strangest, most fearsome

of its recorded history, comparable to nothing within our ken. Yet we know so little of the lifetime of our earth. A few centuries out of millions! We look at our maps; we say: "This is the land and this, the water. This is the way things are." We feel instinctively that it was always so. But it was not.

The events of August, September, and October of 1991 are history now. I cannot detail them; cannot crowd into a few paragraphs the chronicle of more than an infinitesimal fraction of what really occurred.

The tides, for a few days after August 15 were off a fathom or so each twenty-four hours. It brought, in all the interwoven affairs of our nations, a sudden stoppage of all human activity, a panicky confusion. But that was soon over. Human endeavor must go on; without it, we die. Transportation must proceed. Food must come daily to all the great population centers. Without transportation, in forty-eight hours New York City would be starving.

They say now that had 1991 not been the age of the air, the world could not have survived. Doubtless it is so. The oceans had come naturally into disuse, and air transportation, even over our great land areas, was already supreme.

Storms swept the world on August 16. Volcanic activity began. From every part of the earth's surface came reports of nature disturbed. The news tapes were crowded, and with the disorganization of industry, the newscasters proved inadequate. There were days when even government officials were scarcely aware of the terrible events transpiring.

Dr. Plantet was summoned to Washington. He found there a harassed government in utter chaos. A million abnormal things to be done at once—a million unprecedented problems requiring instant solution, with the safety of our people hanging in the balance. The panic must be allayed. All work, all human endeavor must cease, save those things which were vital.

Transportation of food loomed out of the chaos, most vital problem of all. Storms were wrecking the established air lines. But that supreme thing—food for our millions—must not be wrecked. Industry was at a standstill, but no one cared. The world's northern harvests were neglected; the southern countries stopped all thought of the spring planting. No one cared. That was the future. This was now, a vital crisis; a matter of days, or hours.

A passenger air-liner coming from London was wrecked in a hurricane which on August 17 swept the Northern Atlantic. The news was ignored—save that such futile transportation was commanded to discontinue.

There would be droughts in the future. If the oceans emptied, what of our rainfall? New desert areas would spring up, to alter all our agriculture. What of it? That was the future. This chaos was now. New supplies of fresh water would have to be found. The scientists thought so—but they weren't sure. No one knew anything or cared anything beyond this week, or next—to-day, and to-morrow.

Every government in the world was in a turmoil. And private endeavor was inadequate, futile; upon the governments alone lay the burden. Ah, in the serene times of normality, big business decries its government! But when trouble comes—business stands helpless and says: "Tell us what to do!"

IN the midst of the welter our war department faced the possibility of an enemy lurking in the ocean depths which the falling water was laying bare. Plans must be made—defense against an enemy inhuman, or at least so strange, so unknown that to plan intelligently to fight it seemed impossible. An army to equip—to fight whom? And where? And under what conditions? No one could say.

Polly remained at the Plantet home on the Maine coast, those days following August 15. The news-tape was in the instrument room; the radio-phones and mirrors were there to carry her with sound and vision to distant lands; the sky was overhead, and the falling sea lay before her. I fancy she saw as much of the whole as any one; her experience was typical.

She sat for hours in the instrument room with the maelstrom of recorded events surging around her. The mind dulls under such a plethora of impressions. Vast ocean currents appearing. A gigantic drift to the Pacific. Rushing ocean past all our Pacific islands and continental coasts. Storms, floods, disasters everywhere. Unusual volcanic and seismic activity. It soon began to have little meaning.

And soon, too, the reports grew vague. There was no one to measure the falling tides; no passing planes to sight many of the icebergs coming down with a rush from the polar regions; no one to record the water temperatures, to reveal the polar seas moving into the warm Pacific.

Polly was busy answering calls for her father; taking messages; fending them off; weeding them out and relaying them to Washington. But there were hours when she was free.

She sat often at the rocky beach, generally in the long evening and night hours. The sea lay before her; lapping at the rocks, far out and down the slope from where once had been a shore-front. A dark area out there, unnaturally low—the ocean lying with the starlight upon it. The rocky headlines of the coast stood with naked black roots exposed.

Polly says that she could notice the drift of the water, like a river slowly moving southward. And each night—each morning when she came out to stare at it—the water was lower, its shore edge farther out and farther down, more of the rocky slope laid bare. The coast headlands and outer rocks began to seem peaks upstanding from this new realm of land. Two rocks to the north, which once had been mere points above the water, now were joined down at their dark roots—twin spires at the top of a widening elevation of tumbled slimy rock.

The smell of the rotting sea had been heavy along the coast under the daylight sun; vaporous like a miasma rolled up from the exposed slopes. A mist clung heavy upon the water which only the sun at noon could dispel. A north wind, the night of the 18th, brought a clearer air. By midnight it was cold—as though this wind had come whirling from the Arctic. And with it fell a torrential downpour—tropical in force—cold enough to suggest that it might have snow coming behind it.

Polly stood on the upper balcony. Black downpour—driving wind. And overhead she noticed a heavy, luminous green murk. Nature was abnormal, disturbed everywhere. She went indoors.

The radio announcer was reeling off reports of the storm. South Greenland, Labrador, and all the north of Quebec Province were enveloped in a blizzard. There was a report that the water in Davis Strait was far colder than normal; an ice pack was coming down it, moving southward.

Polly sat for a time trying to envisage it all. And her thoughts turned to Arturo and me, and Nereid. She thought once that Nereid was speaking to her, but then it seemed only fancy.

THE storm was gone by morning. The day warmed again. The wind, unnaturally swinging, blew violently first one way, then another. The sea was lower; another ten feet down—its shore now, where at the seaweed rocky slope it pounded with spent waves from the storm, was another fifty feet away. The mist hung over it, swirled in the wind, and in the lulls gathered like a smoke pall.

The smell of the mist was heavy, noisome almost—rotting weed, barnacles, shell-fish, food of the sea, lying on the slimy rocks, rotting, stinking in the sun. The smell of ooze and seamud. A heavy dark murk began to hover always down there. The wind blew it away, but it gathered again. Once it came like a wave on the wind, rolling up the slope to this higher level where the Plantet house stood. Polly closed up the building until the outside air cleared.

The night of August 20-21 was still, soundless, save from far down where the ocean rollers were pounding. It was a heavy, oppressive night; dark, with sullen, green-black clouds. From the veranda there seemed to Polly only a dark void stretching out over the falling ocean, two hundred feet below her —a void of sullen black mist. A green-black murk hung down there with the water level hidden beneath it. The aspect of a vanished ocean had never been so obvious. Here on the Maine coast Polly stood gazing out toward Spain.

It came upon her then: she was standing upon a great height—our whole continental coast was the summit of a gigantic rise. Spain was off there beyond the horizon, standing similarly on a height. And between them was a dark void, an abyss filled now with noisome clouds. But when the clouds lifted?

Polly could envisage then the new lands rolling down there in the abyss between her and Spain. The lands of the depths. New mountains whose highest peaks were lower than her feet. New plains, new valleys—a whole new realm added to our world. Some day, when the air down there was purged and the ooze and mud and rotting sea-organisms were dried, and cleansed by the blessed sunlight, what fertile land would be given mankind! What mines of metal and precious stones might be found!

Villages would spring up. Agriculture, industry would begin down there. Our world of the earth's surface, suddenly made five times larger. The world of the Lowlands, added to the Highlands which were all we had before. She envisaged the Bermudas tiny mountain peaks towering alone out of the Lowlands toward the sky. And the Azores—and southward, all the little fairy mountain-tops which once we had called the islands of the Caribbean.

Fearsome, but romantic cataclysm to bring so suddenly this change!

That sullen night of August 20-21 passed, to Polly, without incident. But at dawn she was awakened; the newscaster's voice was blaring. She crowded, with the frightened servants of the household, before the sound-grid.

An earthquake had occurred somewhere under the Pacific Ocean. Two tidal waves had flung from it. The Asiatic and American coasts, even with the ocean level down two hundred feet, were inundated. Thousands dead and homeless. From the Pacific islands meager reports were coming. Many islands had been swept end to end by the wave. The great volcanos of the Hawaiians were in violent eruption. But in an hour's time they were quiet again.

The tidal waves dashed themselves out. Death and destruction raged for an hour over thousands of miles of seacoast.

An earthquake under the ocean; tidal waves spent and gone; volcanos active, then still. But down there underground, I had seen the cause of all this, had seen a realm and a nation doomed and destroyed.

Yet what I had seen was an infinitesimal part. Who can ever picture the smashing of those underground passages; the compression of steam and gases, ripping, tearing, heaving with one mighty lunge to rip the ocean bottom? An earthquake! Futile term! What have we who feel a trembling that shakes our buildings down, or

opens a few cracks in the surface, ever experienced of the reality beneath?

THAT night of August 20 a giant rift must have opened in the floor of the Pacific. Certain it is that from that moment the oceans receded with ever-increasing rapidity. A hundred feet down on the 21st, more than that the next day; an accelerating drop as the volume of water grew less. There was no one to measure, to do more than guess at it from circling, groping aircraft gazing down at the green-black mist-clouds which hung over the new Lowlands.

On the 21st of August, Dr. Plantet returned to Polly. They stayed there throughout August, September and well into October. Sixty days of world confusion. Ten years from now the chaotic events of those days may be sorted out for some patient chronicler to tell in a coherent fashion. I would not dare attempt it. But there were a few high lights which stand out clearly.

The rainfall was abnormal, gradually lessening. High winds were everywhere reported. Volcanic activity was spasmodic and there were no other earthquakes. As though nature wanted to help struggling, panic-stricken mankind, artesian wells and all sources of fresh water save rainfall, were abnormally bountiful. The climate was changing, on the whole, growing far colder—and this, they said, was only temporary; the Polar seas were moving down with the rush of all the oceans into the emptying Pacific Basin. The oceans, down in the murky depths, were surging like rivers. The roar of them down there against the rocks of their lowering shore-fronts was like a giant waterfall heard everywhere in the world.

The Lowlands were opening up, but great slow-moving cloud masses hung over them. The ocean surface down at the bottom was seldom seen. Heavy mists clung low—every day lower. Peaks began to show down in the abyss, new, sullen black mountain-tops, eroded into rounded domes, unreal to any earthly landscape. The mists clung to them like black veils.

The foul rotting smell of the vapors, when the wind brought them up, caused disease; but daily the menace visibly lessened.

The vapors clung low; soon they seldom rose from the distant, deepest Lowlands. They were not only low, but far away from our coast cities. The continental shelf was exposed for several hundred miles.

Of the new realm, little could be seen save the downward slopes and the distant domelike peaks.

During September the organized aircraft of several nations were regularly cruising over the Pacific Basin. The Lowlands of the Pacific, they now were being called. An enemy might be down there. The planes carried image-finders; the public at its mirrors, gazed upon the strange scene. The planes seldom flew lower than the former sea-level. Rolling dark, heavy clouds lay beneath them. Rounded peaks; eroded mountain ridges. And sometimes the sea would show. Broken now into bowl-like areas, which if they had not drained would have been new, small land-locked oceans. Giant waterfalls, tumbling over great ridges; wide, swift-flowing rivers, draining off to be dry valleys within a week.

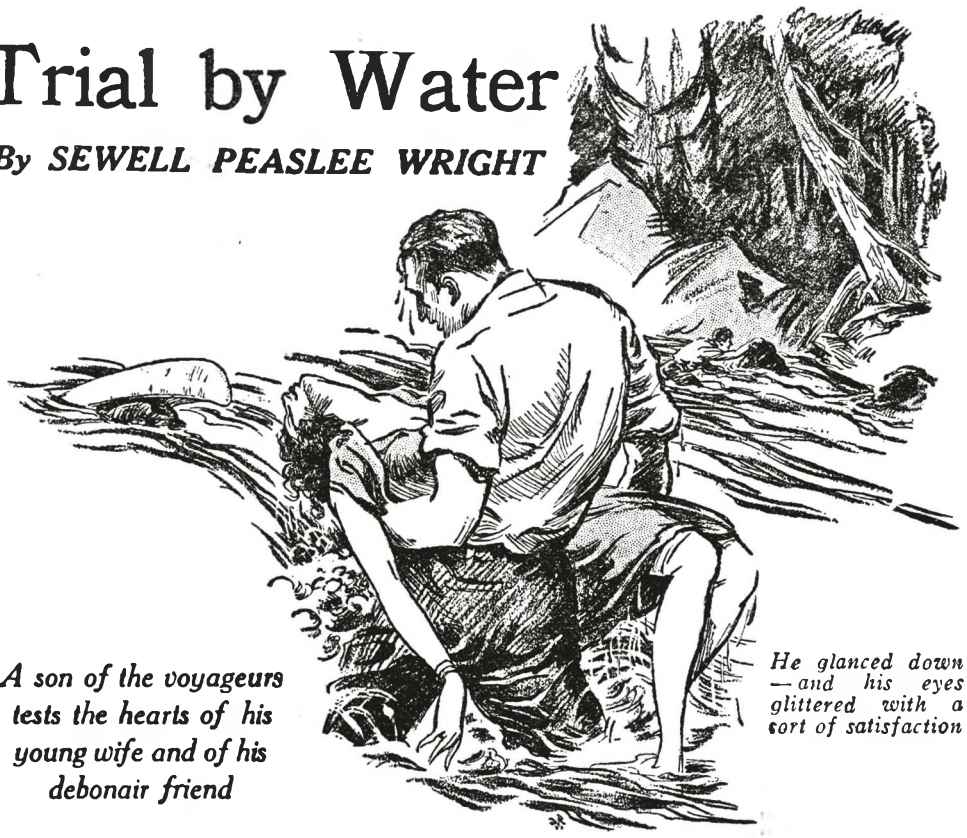
It was all so constantly changing. What an observer saw to-day, was unrecognizable to-morrow. There were many tales of dying things of the sea, lying trapped on the rocky slopes—dying, rotting. And occasionally a broken surface vessel of by-gone days, exposed in its grave as the water left it.

There was no sign of an enemy, until September 30th. And that day the civilized world of the Highlands rang with the news.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

Trial by Water

By SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT



A son of the voyageurs tests the hearts of his young wife and of his debonair friend

He glanced down — and his eyes glittered with a sort of satisfaction

JEAN BAPTISTE CHABRIER listened, with an odd gleam in his dark, quiet eyes, to the roaring of the rapids. A dangerous place, those rapids! Who knew better than Jean Baptiste, who for three years had made his home within the sound of Assin-nebah's voice? Assin-nebah — that was as the Crees said it; " rocky water " it meant in the English.

Chabrier's mild and thoughtful gaze rested upon the figure of the girl seated in the middle of the canoe. He could not see her face, for she was looking ahead, just as he was. There had been a time when she would have faced Jean Baptiste, her husband; but now she looked toward the man in the bow— big, blond, gay Les Walters, the sawyer.

For just an instant the odd gleam in Jean Baptiste's eyes flamed up angrily. In the previous spring he had invited Les, who had never killed a moose, to come up to his camp in the hunting season. Les had accepted, and now he was here. He had been here for ten days, or perhaps more. Jean Baptiste did not keep accurate check of the time. It seemed many days— too many days.

Jean Baptiste had seen what had happened, for his eyes were sharp with love. It was a fool who said that love is blind. Love lends a jealous keenness to the vision, and Jean Baptiste was very much in love with his pretty wife. That was why he knew that she was falling in love with Les Walters.

The big sawyer was everything that Jean Baptiste was not. Les was tall and blond and smiling, full of broad, quick jests and subtle flatterings. Jean Baptiste was small, for all his strength,

and dark and grave. He spoke softly and infrequently, and his adoration for Charlotte was in his heart and in his eyes, not upon his tongue.

Les was a novelty, and Charlotte was a woman. To Jean Baptiste, in whom stirred the romantic blood of the gay *voyageurs,* there was given a certain understanding of women. He knew their love of that which is new and different.

He had not blamed Charlotte. He had merely waited until he was sure she would be ready to decide between her husband and the other man; and now they were coming swiftly to the place where, ready or not, the woman must make her decision, instantly, once and for all.

The rapids were close ahead. The roar of the tortured waters filled the air. The high flung spray hung in swirling clouds of wind-whipped mist. Already the canoe was in the grip of the current. The water was black and waveless, and fretted with odd, ever changing cross currents and eddies. It writhed and twisted as if it knew and dreaded the granite-fanged monster that waited just ahead.

Les, in the bow, glanced back nervously. They had shot the rapids several times before, but the thunder of the angry waters still held a menace for the sawyer. Jean Baptiste smiled grimly and motioned briefly for Les to draw in his paddle. Then the little bushman stood up for an instant in the canoe and surveyed the stretch of raging water.

Kneeling, now, his paddle flashing in and out so rapidly that one could scarce have kept the tally of its stroking, Jean Baptiste shot the frail fabric into the foam-lashed torrent.

The fresh, cool tang of the spray stung his nostrils, and he filled his lungs with the exhilaration of it. A score of times he pitted his strength and the strength of his thin spruce blade against the angry might of the rapids, and a score of times he won.

Now he paddled as if the fiend was following him through this hell of waters. Now his paddle hung poised, every nerve and muscle of Jean Baptiste's body tense, his eyes sharp as hawk's eyes. Then the yellow blade flashed down again, and its cunning thrust won the canoe to safety past a dozen lurking dangers.

Spray splashed in over the bow. The canoe careened, twisted, poised, darted. It shot by hissing ledges, dipped as it went over miniature falls, swung around perilously with disaster threatening on every side, shot like an arrow down a straight stretch, and came at last to the rock-strewn, snag-guarded foot of the rapids.

Here the most dangerous places were passed. The banks of the stream were farther apart, the water ran deeper and more slowly. Jean Baptiste's eyes lit up suddenly, and he nodded to himself, as if in agreement with some inner thought. Yes, this was the place of the testing!

II.

JEAN BAPTISTE dug his paddle cunningly into the foaming water and darted the bow of his light craft between two big black rocks, against which the water leaped in boiling fury. Instantly the stern of the canoe was caught by the current and swung around sharply, so that the boat lay directly across the course of the stream. It brought up sharply against a snag, there was a slivery crash, Les Walters uttered a yell of terror, and the canoe rolled over, hurling the three of them into the icy, swirling current.

For a moment Jean Baptiste shot downstream under the water, like a diving otter, the bursting bubbles crackling in his ears. Then, with a shout, he came to the surface and flung the water from his hair and eyes.

He turned quickly and looked back. Into his dark eyes came a sudden look of pain—the hurt look of a dog punished for he knows not what.

Charlotte—she had not turned to Jean Baptiste, to her husband, in her extremity. No, she had looked to the sawyer. A woman's dependence upon a man, Jean Baptiste had figured out in his simple soul, is the sum of her love for him. In the bush country, a woman selects the man who can best protect her, who can provide most safely for her and for the children she expects to bear; and Charlotte had turned for protection, not to her husband, but to Les.

While Jean Baptiste watched, Charlotte reached up out of the swirling waters and seized the frantically struggling sawyer by his shoulders, calling out in a voice inarticulate with fear. Like a flash Les turned, struck her full in the face, and threw her from him. Then, scrambling madly, he made for the safety of the shore.

Charlotte cried aloud with the pain of the blow, and her mane of black hair, loosened and streaming in the water, mingled again with the current. Struggling, her dress impeding her movements, she came, floundering helplessly, toward her husband.

She saw him standing there, waist deep in the surging flood, leaning against its might, and she screamed to him in a voice shrill with terror; but Jean Baptiste's face hardened, and he watched her with eyes as cold as the wet, slippery rocks over which poured the merciless black waters.

Swiftly the churning water bore her toward the sucking whirlpools at the foot of the rapids. Just as she swept by the motionless figure of Jean Baptiste, her face emerged from the flood, and on her white cheek her husband saw a blood-washed scar—a tiny, curving cut made by the heavy seal ring the sawyer wore.

Just in time Jean Baptiste reached out. His strong fingers sank firmly through wet cloth and gripped like steel the wet and slippery flesh beneath. With one powerful motion of his body he swept his wife from the water, and against his breast. She lay there, gasping and whimpering like the puppies Jean Baptiste raised to be sledge dogs, while her husband, cautiously feeling his way on the treacherous bottom, struggled toward the shore.

From time to time he glanced down at the white, dripping face so close to his own, and his eyes glinted with a fierce satisfaction.

From the little cut on her face fresh blood welled up to make a crimson stain on the wet, pale face. Always there would be a scar there. Always, when she looked in a mirror, that reminder would be before her eyes. Jean Baptiste, who had a certain understanding of women as a heritage from his gay *voyageur* forbears, was content that it should be so.

There had been a testing—a greater testing than he had planned. It had been a testing of two souls, instead of but one; but that also was well.

THE END.

Florida's Natural Bridge

A SELDOM visited and almost unknown natural bridge spans the Chipola River in northwestern Florida. During the War of 1812, Jackson marched his troops across it without being aware of its existence, due to the inhabitants' desire to profit by ferrying travelers over the river. Jackson dispensed with guides, lost his way, and crossed the wide, rocky passage a few miles below the ferries, much to the chagrin of the waiting ferrymen.

George Parke.

Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

SEVEN ANDERTON

OUR newcomer this week is Seven Anderton, author of "Viva La Pay Day"—a yarn we think you will enjoy. Unless we're a lot mistaken, there is more than a little autobiography in it. There is another of Anderton's stories on the schedule for an early issue; and we are looking forward to lots more from him.

In response to our request he introduces himself:

I was born thirty-five years ago. (Poor, but honest, parents.) I came into the world on the prairies of Dawson County, Nebraska. Early in life I discovered that I had at least one quality in common with freight trains—they were always going somewhere, and so was I. Consequently I palled around with a lot of rolling stock.

Having acquired a habit of eating, I had to stop now and then and work. Wasn't particular as to the location or the nature of the job. As a boy I became a "devil" in a country print shop, so kept gravitating back into newspaper work. Between newspaper jobs, I was a sailor, miner, lumberjack, harvest hand and common tramp. Put in a few months under the banner of the late Francisco Villa, in Mexico, and then wandered for awhile in the rest of Latin America.

Returned to U. S. A. and newspaper work. Met a wonderful girl and fooled her. She married me, and I discovered that I couldn't enjoy myself while she was hungry. Decided to become a sober, industrious young man.

Alas! I found that it was too late to become young, but I sobered up and managed fairly well with the industrious part. A chap who had a grudge at magazine editors convinced me that I should write fiction. I tried it and became an addict.

Too bad! But it seems to be too late to do anything about it. Have a little daughter who still thinks her papa is a burglar, but fear I shall not be able to keep the truth from her much longer. She catches me at the typewriter every once in awhile.

There you are. If ARGOSY-ALLSTORY readers feel that they must know more of the sad details, I will answer all inquiries, provided stamps are inclosed.

SEVEN ANDERTON.

MORE applause for Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur's "He Rules Who Can":

So. Ozone Park, N. Y.

I think you publish the best story magazine in the U. S. A. The way it is constructed suits me to a "T." Don't change it whatever you do.

I started to read your magazine when I was fifteen years old, and am still at it now—eleven years later. I have just finished reading "He Rules Who Can," and it was a pip of a story. Give us some more like it. Also liked "The Silver Fang" and that unusual story, "A Brand New World." In fact, I like all the stories printed in the ARGOSY.

MAURICE M. ALBERGO.

Brooklyn, N. Y.

I surely enjoy your magazine very much. There is no other magazine which can compare with the ARGOSY. The story "He Rules Who Can" was sure a thriller. It was one of the best stories I've read in years. "The Sword of Vengeance" is another good one.

IRVING HERSHKOWITZ.

A CHICAGOAN rises to defend the fair name of his much-abused city—and incidentally, to say a few words on this much disputed Western question:

Chicago, Ill.

Just about three years of my eighteen drab and colorless ones have been brightened by ARGOSIES. I enjoy Fred MacIsaac's stories a great deal, especially his last masterpiece, "The Golden Burden."

I wonder whether MacIsaac's stories require New York as a background. Chicago would make an ideal setting for a mystery or a romantic novel. Some novice would spoil it, though, by injecting an army of gunmen, battalion of corrupted politicians and grafters and a few squads of beer runners for his plot. Some of your writers back East seem to write only from the Eastern standpoint, and when they do condescend to peek out of their thick shells to look West they see only an arid waste practically uninhabited except for a few rustlers, ranchmen, greasers, and the like.

Allow me to quote my own conception of an ARGOSY Western story: "There were only three bullets in the hero's trusty horse pistol, which he raised from a colt; then with unerring accuracy three shots rang out and, lo, behold, three rustlers bit the dust. One of

them was identified as the foreman, that villain who had evil designs on our Sal, the ranch owner's daughter." At this stage of the journey all the troubles are over—so it appears on the surface—and everything is settled, including the mortgage, and it's the wedding bells for our hero and Sal.

This type of story is a farce and is not in the least mirth-provoking to me nor to many of your regular ARGOSY readers. If we must have Westerns let the characters at least be human.

Allow them to be subject to selfishness, conceit, anger, and avarice as most of us mortals really are. Show the good points in the villain; point out the bad ones in the hero. I've read some mighty good Western stories in some of the issues of the ARGOSY, but they were modern, had conviction, and there was less gunplay. I would certainly enjoy reading other people's comment on this phase of the Western story.

I got a great deal of satisfaction out of "Tom, Dick and Harry," "The Seal of Satan," and the parts that I have read of "The Phantom in the Rainbow." I enjoy reading mystery, business, and stories of intrigue.

EDWARD KAFORA.

AND now a few words from the Land of Snow:

Lacombe, Alberta, Canada.

Many thanks for the splendid picture received safely. Pictures do not grow on the saskatoon bushes of this snowy land! Neither do the dollars wherewith to buy them. So we appreciate such drawings as you send all the more!

We like the ARGOSY as it is now. My husband was first attracted to your magazine when on the long train journey from St. John to Alberta as he returned from service in the late European unpleasantness. We have read it more or less regularly ever since.

In all that time the very best story you ever published was "The Ship of Ishtar," by A. Merritt. For sheer imagination, portrayal of emotion, knowledge of ancient peoples, and imagery of words, I have never read a story to equal it. I might add that I cut out and bound that story and often reread it.

Another outstanding story was "The Three Hostages," by John Buchan. To any reader who disdains your magazine as not sufficiently "highbrow" you could reply that one of your authors—Mr. Buchan himself—is a professor of Oxford University and one of the world's authorities on English language, literature and history.

Thank you for a splendidly readable magazine, in which not the least pleasing feature is the absence of those cluttering advertisements. You know them—just as the hero clasps the heroine to his manly bosom you turn the page to find the skin you love to touch, or "four out of five have it," and you spend the rest of the night vainly hunting the final chapter. Thank goodness ARGOSY is superior to all that! MRS. ELEANOR B. GILL.

MR. PRICE likes all kinds of fiction—but puts up a strong case for the "impossible" story:

Sullivan, Ill.

I have been reading your magazine for several years, in fact, I think it was about 1915 when I first started. At that time Terre Haute was my residence. While visiting a friend I picked up a copy and read enough of a story to make it imperative that I finish. I have been reading it since except for a short time when I could not get it.

There is not a single story that I could say that I disliked, although some are more interesting than others. Some do not like those impossible kind, but could not they be fact in the future? Jules Verne wrote impossible things for his time, but most of them are now facts. Take his "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea." At the time of writing that was wild imagination, but now we have a modified form of his submarine. Also we have a form of airplane whose principle is the same as that described in "Robur the Conqueror," by the same author. If these were impossible at that time, could not our stories of like nature be fact some time in the future? Science has just started to uncover nature's secrets. Interplanetary travel and subjects of same nature will be possible when we know how to use the laws of nature to better advantage. Also, stories of this type may stimulate some person's imagination to invent something that could be used by the world much better than now existing means.

I have no favorite authors. I read all. There is interest in every story for some one. Some have more ability to appreciate one type than others. This may be Western, mystery, detective, war or scientific. For myself it depends upon the mood at the time of reading.

Stories that I remember with special favor were "The Moon Pool," "A Brand New World," "The Phantom in the Rainbow," and "He Rules Who Can." "When Trails Were New" held my attention, for the company of militia that Abraham Lincoln had charge of was in the same regiment I am now connected with—One Hundred and Thirtieth Infantry, Illinois National Guard.

I say do not change your magazine. The issues of the company clerk and I serve the whole company. My order to the newsdealer—save me an ARGOSY—will stand as long as I can get them.

Carry on! HUBERT PRICE.

FROM China comes this letter—from a sailor who would like to hear from home once in awhile:

U. S. S. Panay.

Although I am twelve thousand miles from where ARGOSY is published, I am a steady reader. When the mail comes in we all stand by to receive our ARGOSY. I am in the Navy and have been here in China two years. I would like to exchange letters with some of

the ARGOSY readers. Remember, it only costs a two-cent stamp. R. L. LOUDERMILK,
U. S. S. Panay, care Postmaster, Seattle, Wash.

"MACISAAC and Wirt," says this reader naming his favorites. A new Wirt serial starts on May 4, and there are several of his crime novelettes on the way.

Maywood, Ill.

I have been a constant "never-miss-an-issue" reader of the ARGOSY for some few years, and am positive that my interest in the ARGOSY will not decrease in the future if you give us the brand of stories we have been receiving.

I am not a philanthropist, but am sure if you would increase the price of your magazine and added a little to it, you would have quite a few additional readers. It seems to be the idea among a certain class of people that a magazine for ten cents would necessarily have to be "trash."

Just a few words as to my favorite authors. Messrs. MacIsaac and Wirt head them all. Hulbert Footner runs a close second. At times some of your other contributors would rank first, but for an average run of stories pick the ones mentioned.

Yours for an ever prospering ARGOSY,
CHARLES O. AUSLANDER.

AND a few more cheers for Slater LaMaster:

New York, N. Y.

Allow me to congratulate you! Slater LaMaster's story, "The Phantom in the Rainbow," certainly was clever. Where he gets his fantastic ideas from is a wonder to me.

His "Luckett of the Moon" in your magazine was original, too.

Have been reading your magazine for my own pleasure as well as my patients'—for I am an R. N.—and enjoy all of your stories; but please let's have some more of Mr. LaMaster's stories.

NINA L. BENTON, R. N.

Jacksonville, Fla.

"The Phantom in the Rainbow," by Slater LaMaster, had me all worked up and wondering more than any other story I ever read. It was one continual surprise and pleasure, and I don't see how any one could have known the ending. The truth is, I think what held my interest so steadfastly in reading it was that I didn't see how it could be ended any way sensibly. It was terrific there toward the close, and I was afraid it would fall flat with some hocus explanation like "The Return of George Washington" did. The great worth of this serial is that it didn't. The ending was as plain and as capable of being understood as life itself. You may get complaints on this serial because it is above the average of the stories you run and very frankly written so far as sex is concerned, but please do not discourage an author like that. Give us more of his work and old ARGOSY will step out in new "Thousand League Boots."

A. D. DEMING.

London, England.

Having been a reader of the ARGOSY for quite some time and appreciated so much the delightful stories you publish, I feel that I would like to congratulate you on your choice of authors.

One of your latest writers, Slater LaMaster, I have particularly enjoyed and am looking forward to another of his interesting and original tales in future. J. CAMMER.

"DRUMS OF PEACE" brought this reader to the ARGOSY fold:

Detroit, Mich.

I started reading ARGOSY last July by a very fortunate accident. I was working in a drug store and I happened to see a magazine laying open. I walked over to it and started reading a story. It was "Drums of Peace," and I have been a steady reader ever since.

Since I started reading some of the best stories have been "Drums of Peace," "Hawaiian Heels," "Sea Marauders," "Thirty Years Late," "He Rules Who Can," "The Black Ace," and "Buccaneers of the Air."

The real purpose of this letter is to compliment J. Allan Dunn's latest novelette, "Whirlwind Walsh." It is a good action story in the true sense of the word.

Yours for ARGOSY as it is,
PAUL F. SCHILLING.

Looking Ahead!

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The ISSUE OF APRIL 6th

The complete novelette will be

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APRIL 20th—CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER and FRED MacISAAC

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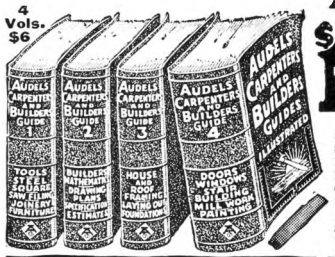

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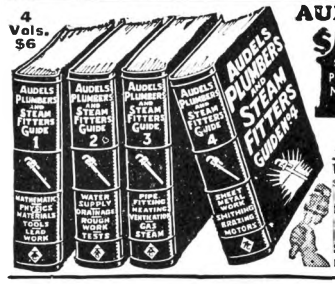

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