ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

The Bronze Hand

by Carolyn Wells

Mystery at Sea

— ALSO —

Stan Willis, Cowboy

by

George M. Johnson

Complete

10¢ PER COPY OCTOBER 31 BY THE YEAR $4.00

Statement of the ownership, management, etc., of THE ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WLEKLY, published weekly at New York, N. Y., for October 1st, 1925. Required by the Act of Congress of August 24th, 1912.

State of NEW YORK } s.s. :
County of NEW YORK }

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared WM. T. DEWART, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publishers of THE ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24th, 1912, embodied in section 443, Postal Laws and Regulations. To wit:

That the names and addresses of the Publisher, Editor, and Business Manager are:

Publishers—**The Frank A. Munsey Company,** 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

Editor—**Matthew White, Jr.,** 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

Business Manager—**Wm. T. Dewart,** 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

That the Owners are: (If a corporation give its name and the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of the total amount of stock.)

The Frank A. Munsey Company, 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

Frank A. Munsey, 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders, owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are:

There are no bonds, mortgages, or other securities against **The Frank A. Munsey Company.**

That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

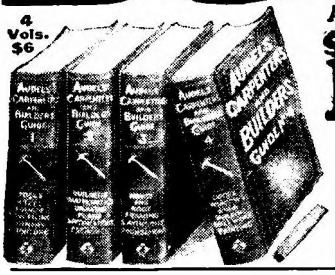
WM. T. DEWART, Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1925.

{ SEAL }

A. V. KASS, Notary Public.
New York County, No. 34.
New York Register No. 6060.
Term expires March 30th, 1926.

BUILDERS TRADE GUIDES



AUDELS CARPENTERS AND BUILDERS GUIDES—4 VOLS. $6

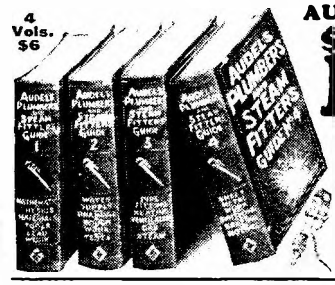
$1 PER MO.

Inside Information for Carpenters, Builders, Joiners, Building Mechanics—all Woodworkers. **1600 pages; 3700 diagrams; flexible; pocket size.** Short-cut instructions, new methods, ideas, solutions, plans, systems—money saving suggestions. An easy progressive course for the apprentice. A practical daily helper and Quick Reference for the master worker. A Helping Hand to Easier and Better Work and Better Pay. To get this aid for yourself, simply fill in and mail the FREE COUPON below.

INSIDE TRADE INFORMATION ON:

How to use steel square; How to file and set saws; How to build furniture; How to use miter box; How to use chalk line; How to use rules; How to make joints; Carpenters' arithmetic; Mensuration problems; Estimating strength of timbers; How to set girders and sills; How to frame houses and roofs; How to estimate costs; How to build houses, barns, garages, bungalows, etc.; How to read and draw plans; Drawing up specifications; How to excavate; How to use settings 12, 13 and 17 on the steel square; How to build hoists and scaffolds—skylights; How to build stairs; How to put on interior trim; How to hang doors; How to lath—lay floors; How to paint.

"Audels Guides worth four times their price—handy too as I carry them in pocket for reference." **W. J. Bates, Knoxville, Pa.**



AUDELS PLUMBERS AND STEAMFITTERS GUIDES—4 VOLS. $6

$1 PER MO.

A new set—just out! A practical, illustrated, Reference Library and Study-Course for Master Plumbers, Journeymen and Apprentice Steamfitters, Gas Fitters and Helpers, Sheet Metal Workers, Draughtsmen, Master Builders, Engineers and all Building Trade Students. **1670 pages; 3642 diagrams; flexible; pocket size.** Guides explain all the principles, advances and short cuts of the Plumbing and Heating trade. Contains instructions on how to figure and estimate jobs. Use FREE COUPON below to examine, without obligation, this valuable work.

INSIDE TRADE INFORMATION ON:

Soldering, tinning. Joint wiping, bending, beating. Pipe—iron—steel, threading. Mathematics, tables, physics. Materials—iron, steel, copper, brass, lead, tin, antimony. Sheet metal—galvanized—plate. Sanitation, syphonage, tanks. Drainage, sewage, purification. Fixtures—bath—kitchen. Pipe fittings, soil pipe, tools. Laying out work. Roughing. Screwed fittings, flanges, joints. Pipe bending, examples. Elbows. Heating, ventilation, refrigeration. Water supply, mains, wells, tanks. Gas-fittings. Underwriters. Sheet metal work, problems, methods. Brazing, heating, lead burning. Welding, various welds, methods. Blacksmithing, forges, tools.

"Audels Guides are practical, easy to understand, reliable. Cover the field in plain language." **W. F. Arminger, Annapolis, Md.**

AUDELS MASONS AND BUILDERS GUIDES—4 VOLS. $6

$1 PER MO.

A new, complete, illustrated trade reference library, for Bricklayers, Cement Workers, Plasterers, Tile Setters and Stone Masons, including a practical outline of Steel Construction. **1100 pages; 2067 diagrams; flexible; pocket size.** A practical Trade Assistant, explaining modern methods of masonry construction. Easy to understand and apply. A reliable and authentic reference work and study-course for Master Journeyman and Young Mechanic. Use FREE COUPON below and find out for yourself, without obligation, whether this set will benefit you.

INSIDE TRADE INFORMATION ON:

Bricklaying, tools, materials; Brick designs, patterns, bonds; Setting frames and foundations; Mortars, scaffolds, estimating; Mortars and mortar mixing; Tile setting, mosaic, hollow tile; Straight edge test, troweling; How to figure brick work; Safe loads, piers, chimneys; Boiler settings, anchors, fire stops; Labor tables; Concrete, forms; How to figure concrete work; Stucco—on old and new buildings; Plastering—wood lath—metal; Plasterers agreement; Plastering on various surfaces; Stonemasonry; Cutting, finishing, estimating stone; Derricks, rigging; Steel construction; Fireproof; How to read blue prints.

"Audels Masons Guides are the best books on the subject. Have had brick 12 years and can thoroughly judge." **H. A. Sonnett, Corliss, Pa.**

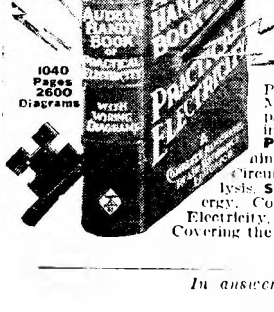
PRACTICAL ELECTRICITY — 1 VOL. $4

$1 PER MO.

Audels Handy Book of Practical Electricity is a simplified Ready Reference and Study Course in one pocket size, leather bound volume—for Electricians, Professional Electricians and Students. **1040 pages; 2600 diagrams; flexible red leather bound.** A reliable authority and handy helper for every electrical worker. It contains important and valuable wiring diagrams, calculations, machine sketches, helps on maintenance and repair. Use this FREE COUPON today and find out, without obligation, how this handy book will help you in your daily work.

Complete in one handy, red leather bound volume

1040 Pages 2600 Diagrams



INSIDE TRADE INFORMATION ON:

Electro-Therapeutics, X-Rays, Shocks, Welding, Brazing, **Radio** Hook-ups, Motion Pictures, Telephone, Telegraph, Cranes, Bells, Elevators, Pumps, Tools, Ship Drive, Railways, Vehicles, Automobile Electric Systems, Ignition, Generation, Lighting, Plant Management, Power Plans, **Armature Winding,** Repairing, A. C. Motors and Apparatus, D. C. Motors and Apparatus, Alternator Construction, Dynamos, Wiring Diagrams, Sign Flashers, Cable Splicing, **Power Wiring,** Outside Wiring, Switches, Lightning, Rectifiers, Converters, Transformers, Fuses, Circuit Breakers, Rheostats, Electro Plating, Electrolysis, **Storage Batteries,** Magnetism, Electrical Energy, Conductors, Insulators, Static, Dynamic, Radio Electricity, Applications, Ready Reference and Index Covering the entire field of Modern Electricity.

Learn More and You Will Earn More!

Know your job and you'll never be without one. The **skilled** man is always in demand. Knowledge is power. Learn your trade thoroughly by easy reading. This coupon is your opportunity for advancement and better pay. You risk nothing in sending for Audels Guides for *free examination.* Send it NOW!

FREE EXAMINATION COUPON

THEO. AUDEL & CO.,
65 W. 23 ST., NEW YORK CITY

Please mail me for **free examination** the books marked (X) below. If I find them satisfactory, I agree to mail $1 in 7 days, on each set ordered, and to further mail $1 monthly on each set until I have paid the purchase price.

☐ **4 CARPENTERS GUIDES $6**	☐ **4 PLUMBERS GUIDES $6**
☐ **4 MASONS GUIDES $6**	☐ **1 ELECTRICIANS HANDY BOOK $4**

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

OCCUPATION .....

EMPLOYED BY 10-F-68

In answering this advertisement it is desirable that you mention this magazine.

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXII CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER 31, 1925 NUMBER 6

FOUR CONTINUED STORIES

NOVELETTE AND SHORT STORIES

POETRY

It is not given to every man to be a six-gun hero, to view the painted desert at dawn, and to see the flamboyant sun sink behind towering mountains. Every woman cannot be a heroine, although courage is the common heritage of her sex.

But all our readers may thrill to the romance of a splendid Western story.

Come! Ride on

THE STARLIT TRAIL

By KENNETH PERKINS

First of six installments next week.

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

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

Single copies, 10 cents. By the year, $4.00 in United States, its dependencies, Mexico and Cuba; $6.00 to Canada, and $7.00 to Foreign Countries. Remittances should be made by check, express money order or postal money order. Currency should not be sent unless registered

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY. COPYRIGHT, 1925

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

Joke All You Want About This New Way To Be Popular —

But Read What Albert Mead and Thousands of Former Wall Flowers Say About It!

By Albert Mead

I USED to think a fellow was crazy to try a stunt like this. It seemed positively ridiculous to think that anyone could become popular by learning to dance. And what's more, I couldn't believe that learning to dance by mail was possible—especially in a case like mine where I didn't know one step from another!

So every time I saw an advertisement like this, I just laughed. And I took great delight in poking fun at some of my friends who were taking this new course.

But it wasn't long before I saw that the joke was on me. Slowly my friends seemed to be drifting away from me. They were always "going to a party"—always having "barrels of fun." I was left out of the fun. Even the girls with whom I used to be so chummy, began to pass me by.

Well, I'm only human after all. So, the next time I saw an ad of Arthur Murray's, the famous dancing authority, in a magazine I gave it a chance. I read it through and when I saw that I didn't have to buy anything—that I could learn all about the short-cut to popularity from a Free 32-page book, I mailed the coupon.

And that started it. The illustrated free book that came by return mail was so convincing and the free test lesson was so simple that I felt sorry to have hesitated all these months. I eagerly sent for Mr. Murray's complete course.

A Great Surprise

And I received the greatest surprise of my life the day the lessons arrived. I opened the first page—and right then and there—before I was really aware of what I was doing—I was actually doing one of the steps. In a few minutes I had mastered that step. It was real fun to follow the simple diagrams and instructions.

The following few evenings I was mastering the Waltz, the Fox Trot, and other delightful new steps. It seemed so easy—so perfectly natural. And the remarkable thing about it is that I needed no music or partner. It seemed as if Mr. Murray himself were standing by my side gently directing, gently pointing out the right way or the wrong way to dance. And before I realized it, I was practically through with the course. I could hardly wait for a chance to dance at a real "affair."

My big chance came the following Saturday night. It was the annual class re-union dance. All my former class-mates and their "best" girls were present. Jeanne was my partner.

The music started. I rose with a thrill. Jeanne was wonderfully light and easy to lead. We glided across the floor like professional dancers.

The band played. I led Jeanne gracefully around the room, interpreting the dance like an expert, keeping perfect harmony with the music.

The "old gang" stared at us in amazement. They couldn't believe their eyes! The transformation was too sudden for them. I laughed to myself and Jeanne's smile of understanding thrilled me.

When the music stopped we found ourselves in the midst of a group of smiling, friendly, admiring faces. It was a complete triumph. And to think that just a few weeks before I couldn't dance a step!

FREE 32-Page Booklet and Test Lesson

You too, can quickly learn dancing at home, without music and without a partner through Arthur Murray's remarkable new method.

Send to-day for Mr. Murray's wonderful free 32-page book and the free Test Lesson which shows how easy his method is. You'll enjoy the booklet immensely because it tells all about Mr. Murray himself, how he became private instructor to the "400," how he devised his easy home-study dances, how he taught over 250,000 people to dance by mail, and particularly how he can teach you to become a graceful, versatile, popular dancer in a few enjoyable evenings. And the free Test Lesson will amaze you!

Get this free book and read it carefully. Send for your copy now. Mail the coupon at once. Please enclose 10c to cover postage and printing. Arthur Murray, Studio 545, 801 Madison Ave., N. Y.

ARTHUR MURRAY, Studio 545, 801 Madison Ave., New York City

Please send me a free copy of your 32-page book on dancing. Also your free Test Lesson. I enclose 10c to cover cost of postage and printing.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....*State*.....

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXII SATURDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1925 NUMBER 6

The Bronze Hand

By CAROLYN WELLS

Author of "More Lives Than One," "The Green Stain," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE PINNACLE.

ONCE upon a time there were four men—all bad. That is, they were each bad, but none was entirely bad. Nobody is.

The four were closely associated in their interests and were of varying types and varying degrees of badness.

One was the Catspaw; one was the Brutal Ruffian; one was the Arch Villain behind it all; and one was the Judas Iscariot, who carried the bag, and who betrayed the whole gang.

The good in each was more or less discernible. One was awfully kind to his mother, who never had heard of his badness, and wouldn't believe it if she had. One was generous minded and lavish of gifts; no one ever appealed to him for material help in vain. One was champion of the downtrodden, and always sided with and assisted the under dog in any fight. And one—well, he made it a point of honor always to return a borrowed book. Perhaps his good trait was the most unusual of all.

One was an engaging looking chap, with deep set eyes and an irradiating smile. One was plain, but of a strong-featured, although

immobile, countenance that betokened an indomitable will. One was of fine, ascetic features, which belied his real nature, and served as a mask. And one was of nondescript appearance, as most men are.

One had been a fairly well known football player. One had been a civil engineer, and was still civil. One was secretly superstitious. And one was addicted to crossword puzzles, bridge, chess and detective stories, which addictions usually flock together.

The four men figure in this story, also some other men and a few women, who will appear in due course.

Many years ago Kipling wrote:

"The Liner she's a Lady, an' she never looks nor 'eeds." And perhaps the most patrician lady that ever rode the waves was the liner, Pinnacle, as she left her New York wharf one summer afternoon, bound for Liverpool.

Without looking or 'eeding, she steamed majestically down the lane of the Hudson, and out to sea.

Many of her passengers, after screeching themselves hoarse with their good-byes to friends on the pier, stayed on deck to watch the fading away of the skyscrapers along the Manhattan skyline.

The Pinnacle, as befitted her name, was the last word in steamships. She was, in truth, the very lap of luxury, and the first cabin passengers, as they crossed her gangplank, represented, perhaps, enough gold to sink the ship.

As was also fitting, nature had provided a perfect day for the sailing. Although it was the first day of July, June seemed still to linger, and the blue of sea and sky was gilded by a summer sun, which obligingly tempered its rays by disappearing now and then, behind puffy white clouds.

A delicious breeze added itself to the weather record, and, as an old poet has it:

"All things were teeming with life and with light."

After the Liberty statue had been passed, the deck steward was made suddenly busy explaining why he had assigned to insistent passengers chairs that had been long ago engaged by others.

But the deck steward was a pleasant sort who had a beaming smile and a placating way with him that let him get by with most of his concessions to bribery and corruption.

By tea time everybody's chair was labeled and most of the privileged sex had gone to their cabins, to examine their flowers and gifts, while the men looked up acquaintances and proffered cigars.

But the call of the tea brought many out to their deck chairs and traveling companions gossiped and compared notes.

"Cox is on board," said Amy Camper to her husband, as she balanced a tray on her knees and poured tea into two cups.

"Yes, I saw him. Oscar is in fine fettle."

"Always is. He seems to be alone."

"I believe he has a secretary or satellite of some sort. I shan't trouble him, anyway. I say, Amy; Lily Gibbs is with us."

"Oh, Lord! Can I never escape that woman? Well, she'll attach herself to Oscar Cox's train as soon as may be."

"She'll do that. Has, in fact—or, at least, her deck chair is directly in front of his. Look."

Amy Camper dutifully looked, and saw Oscar Cox, the mining magnate, in a chair in the back row of all, while the sprightly Miss Gibbs was in the next row ahead.

It was Saturday afternoon, and after their tea all felt relaxed and affable, and the seated ones watched the walkers as they strode by, and in return the walkers discussed their indolent neighbors.

Two men paced round and round the deck.

They were Pollard Nash and Harold Mallory, and they had known each other just twenty minutes.

Somebody had told one of them to look up the other, and the result was an immediate and mutual liking.

"I wonder who that girl is," said Nash, as they passed a pensive figure in quiet, smart garb, who was looking out to sea.

"That's the fourth girl you've wondered about," remarked Mallory. "You're a bit of a wonderer, Nash."

"Yes, I'm always at it. Born wondering, I think. But that girl puts it over all the rest. Princess in disguise, I take it."

"Not very well disguised, then, for she has all the aloofness and disdain commonly ascribed to royalty."

"Well, we can't find out until we can manage to get a proper introduction. That's the worst of these smashing big boats. Everybody is *Noli me tangere*. I like the old-fashioned little tubs, where you can scrape acquaintance if you want to."

"They're more sociable. But I like better the reserve and exclusiveness of these. Who wants all sorts of people bumping into one, with rowdy greetings and all that?"

"Hello, there's Cox, the mining man. Know him?"

"No, do you?"

"I don't. But I shall before long. He's a chap I'd like to talk to."

"Why don't you just tell him so? He's looking bored and probably lonely."

"He'd pitch me overboard."

"Maybe not. I dare you to try it. I'll stand by, to catch you as you go over the rail."

Egged on by Mallory's chaff, Nash paused near the chair of the millionaire.

"Mr. Cox, isn't it?" he said, in careless, affable tone.

"Yes," said Oscar Cox. "Are we acquainted?"

"Will be, in a minute," said the imperturbable Nash. "I'm Pollard Nash, and this is my new found friend, Mallory. You see, Mr. Cox, I could get dozens of people on board to introduce us—but, what's the use?"

Nash was the sort of blue-eyed person whom it is almost impossible to treat coolly. His manner radiated cordiality of a pleasant, disinterested kind and nine men out of ten would have been amiably disposed toward him.

Moreover, Oscar Cox was in the best of humors. He had recently achieved something he inordinately desired, he was off for a long holiday, and he had left behind all his business cares and anxieties. His last few weeks had been strenuous, even dangerous, but they were past, and now, at sea, with every dispute settled, every quandary straightened out, and every danger passed, the great man was at peace with himself mentally, morally and physically.

This explained why he chuckled amusedly at Nash's boldness, instead of swearing at him to get out.

"That's so," he returned, smiling at the two men in front of him. "Let's go to the smoking room, and see what we can do in the way of cementing an acquaintance—perhaps, a friendship."

As he arose from his chair, he proved to be younger than they had thought him. For his white hair was misleading. As a matter of fact, Oscar Cox was just fifty, and his whole physique denoted that age, but his white hair, although abundant and crisply curly, made him seem older.

He was enormously wealthy, and though there were those who whispered "profiteer," yet his friends, and he had many, rated him as merely a shrewd and clever business promoter.

His manners were charming except it suited his purpose to turn ugly, and in that rôle, too, he was well versed.

His clothes were irreproachable and his whole air that of a man who was at home in any situation.

The short conversation among the three had been avidly listened to by the lady who sat in front of Cox, the quick-witted and busy-minded Miss Gibbs.

"Come back soon, Mr. Cox," she called out, and he returned to her merely a smiling nod.

"Damned nuisance," he remarked, as they stepped into the companionway. "Some women ought to be thrown overboard."

"She seems objectionable," said Mallory, who had noted the eager face of the spinster. "But there are delightful looking people on board, quite a few I'd like to know."

"Easily managed," Cox assured him. "What I can't arrange for you, the captain will. But I'll put you in with a few. The Campers are good sports—young married people, and they'll know everybody inside of twenty-four hours. Be at the dance in the lounge to-night, and they'll do the rest."

"We'll surely be there," Nash declared. "Traveling alone, Mr. Cox?"

"Yes; except for my guardian angel, a

freak who looks after my belongings. Name of Hudder, and stupider than his name. You chaps alone?"

"Yep," responded Mallory. "I'm on a short but well earned vacation, and my new-found friend here is on a longer one, but not so well earned."

"A lot you know about it," Nash smiled. "But as half an hour ago you didn't know me at all, I'll admit that you read me fairly well."

"I do. I'll bet your intimates call you Polly."

"That, of course," Cox put in. How could they help it? A man named Pollard invites that nickname. What's yours, Mr. Mallory?"

"Hal Mall, as naturally as Polly's. And I know yours, sir. You're Octopus Oscar."

"Yes, but thank goodness the adjective refers to material wealth, and not to any traits of my character."

"I can well believe that," and Mallory smiled quickly.

For whatever were Oscar Cox's faults or virtues, he was far removed from the type of financier known as a bloodsucker or money-spinner.

Straightforward, almost blunt in his speech, abrupt in his statements, and positive in his decisions, Oscar Cox was never guilty of soft soap or palaver.

And he was a good story-teller, a quick, graphic talker whose tales had point, pith and brevity.

As the talk drifted to far-off countries, he told of the brave exploits of his nephew and namesake.

"Young Oscar Cox," he said, "is fearless and often foolishly daring. He's hunting big game now, in South America somewhere. That is, if the big game hasn't hunted him. He's on a pretty stiff expedition, and I hope to goodness he'll get home alive."

Further details of the youth's intrepidity were related, and all were amazed when the first bugle call warned of the approaching dinner hour.

Polly Nash and Hal Mall secured a table to themselves in the elaborate restaurant, and were not surprised to see Cox alone at a table across the room.

And as they gazed with interest at the incoming stream of passengers, they observed some few they already knew, and many others they would like to know.

"Good dancer, are you, Hal?" Nash inquired.

"Best in the world."

"Except myself. Bridge shark?"

"Not in the first rank, but a sound, reliable game."

"Good. I see us the life and soul of the party after a day or two. Lots of pretty girls about, but not so very many captivating young men."

"I'm keen for the outdoors. Deck sports mean more to me than saloon jazz. I say, there's the goggle-eyed spinster. Rather more odious in evening togs, isn't she?"

"Well, yes," and Nash looked critically at the complacent Miss Gibbs, resplendent in a black chiffon wisp, precariously held up by a string of jet beads over one shoulder. "But, I think, Mall, I don't disdain the lady. She looks to me brainy, perceptive and responsive."

"Some diagnosis at a first glance! All right, you can have her. Me for the mysterious princess. She's a dazzling dream to-night."

Nash turned quickly to see the girl he had noticed on deck coming into the room alone.

Although very young, not more than twenty-one, he judged, she had poise and *savoir faire* that a real princess might have envied. But it was the self respect and self reliance of an American girl, a girl brought up in the best of American ways and means.

She wore a frock of pale flowered chiffon, daintily short, and around her pleasantly rounded neck was a string of beautiful pearls, her only ornament.

It was a contrast to the jingling beads and multiple bracelets of most of the women present, but the gown bespoke Paris, and the pearls announced themselves as real, while the face of the girl herself was so naïvely pleased and so frankly entertained by the scene before her, that she easily held all eyes.

With no trace of self-consciousness, she walked part way across the room and,

pausing at a small table, spoke a few words to the hovering head waiter.

Obsequiously he placed her chair, and flourished about his necessary duties.

Polly Nash gazed in silent admiration.

Then, for he was a devotee of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas, he quoted:

"The maid was Beauty's fairest Queen,
With golden tresses,
Like a real princess's."

"They're not golden," Mallory corrected him.

"Well, they're a goldy-brown, a sort of burnished gold—tarnished gold, old gold, if you like. Anyway, they look gold to me."

"You're infatuated; adoration at first sight."

"Yes, as the moth for the star. You're infatuated, too. Only you think it's wiser not to show it."

"What I like best about her, is her air of enjoyment. She seems not to feel her loneliness, she's all wrapped up in interest in her surroundings. Why do you suppose she's alone?"

"Duenna seasick, probably. I wonder who she is."

"We'll find out this evening. I shall dance with her first. The captain will smooth the way for me."

"All right," Nash's gaze had wandered and his attention, too. "By Jove, Mallory, there's Trent—Max Trent!"

"Who's he?" A celebrity?"

"Not ostensibly. But he's one of the finest writers in the world. He writes detective stories, but he writes literature, too."

"You mean his stories are literature? That's gilding refined gold and painting the lily. A good detective yarn doesn't need to be literature. In fact, fine writing detracts from its strength."

"Who's talking about fine writing? His books are top of the heap—"

"The detective story heap? Not much of an eminence."

"Oh, all right. That's the way everybody talks who doesn't care for sleuth stories. I'd rather meet that man than all your dancing princesses or oily magnates!"

"Well, you'll probably be able to manage it. The captain can surely compass that."

"Maybe and maybe not. Authors are an exclusive bunch."

Dinner over, nearly everybody sauntered across to the spacious and spectacular saloon, where a fine orchestra was already gladdening the ears of music lovers.

The middle of the great room was a dancing floor, while round the borders were tables and chairs for those who wanted them.

Soon it was like an informal At Home dance. Introductions, if deserved, were readily obtained. Acquaintances were made and the correctly garbed men and beautifully gowned women filled the dance floor with a brilliant, swaying, smiling crowd, that made a fascinating picture for the onlookers.

Pollard Nash achieved his heart's desire with no trouble at all. For when the captain presented him to the author, Max Trent, that genius received the stranger most affably and seemed all for a chat.

Mallory, though, was not so successful. With all the good will in the world, Captain Van Winkle was not able to bring about an introduction to the princesslike girl.

"She is a Miss Forman," the captain said. "She is traveling alone, and desires to make no acquaintances, except such as she may choose for herself."

"Who is she?" asked the disappointed Mallory. "Why is she alone?"

"Mercy on us, man, I don't know! She confided to me nothing, except her passport information. But she is, I should say, quite able to take care of herself. If not, she'll have me to look after her. Though, I've seen no necessity as yet."

"Oh, all right. Well, introduce me to the siren in black, over there, will you? Perhaps she'll dance with me."

The captain stared at him.

"You go in for extremes, don't you?" he said, smiling. "Miss Forman is easily the ship's beauty, while Miss Gibbs—"

"Yes, she looks like a cook," said Mallory, pleasantly, "but she's my choice."

He didn't elucidate further that he had a notion Miss Gibbs was the sort to know

everybody on board in the shortest possible time. And that with her as a friend at court, he might reach the princess later on.

Lily Gibbs smiled with pleasure at the advent of this most presentable young man, and in a flutter of flattered delight she danced with him.

They circled the dance floor, and *en route* he gained much gossipy information concerning the passengers.

Miss Gibbs had industriously made hay during the few hours of sunshine already elapsed, and she was more than willing to retail her knowledge.

And later, as they discussed some light refreshment, they indulged in a veritable orgy of tattle and speculation about everybody on board.

"The Campers are a good sort," the oracle revealed. "Owen is athletic and all that, but he has brains, too. Amy is a dear, but she bosses him terribly. She's five years older than he is—but they're happy enough, as things go. That man who just passed is Sherman Mason, a New York clubman."

"That his wife with him?"

"Oh, my no! He's a bachelor, and scorns women, except to flirt with now and then. He loves dancing."

Impatient of these descriptions of people who didn't interest him, Mallory took a plunge.

"Who's the quiet little girl sitting over by the blue curtained alcove?"

Miss Gibbs gave him a quick glance.

"Got around to it, have you? I knew you were dying to ask that."

"Why not? She's one of the prettiest girls on board."

"Oh, do you think so? Why, these two coming toward us now can beat her all to pieces for looks!"

The girls mentioned were of a dashing type, and wore stunning dance frocks of ultra fashion and bizarre design.

"Of course," he returned smiling, "if you admire that style, you wouldn't care for the demure little piece."

"She isn't so terribly demure. That's Maisie Forman, and she's as independent as they come. She won't meet anybody except those she picks out herself." Miss Gibbs looked a little chagrined. "She hasn't picked me out."

"Nor me," and Mallory smiled in sympathy. "Let's make a bargain. If either of us should get to know her, agree to present the other. How's that?"

"A little one-sided"—but Miss Gibbs didn't say which side she meant. "However, I'll agree to that," and she gave her hand on it.

"Good hunting?" Hal Mallory asked of Pollard Nash, as they ran across each other in the smoking room just before turning in.

"Fine," Nash replied. "Had a long hobnob with Trent. He's great! Then Cox joined us, and he told stories and Trent did, too, and soon there was a whole peanut gallery listening in. What's your report?"

"Failure. That is, so far. I may meet her later on, but it's a bit doubtful."

"Who? Meet whom?"

"Why, the princess we saw in the dining room. By the way, her name is Forman—Maisie Forman."

"Well, why didn't you get to know her?"

"She's too exclusive. But I learned about her from the Gibbs charmer."

"Oh, yes, the woman with her eye on Cox. By the way, Mallory, Cox told some more yarns about his nephew, the one named after him, you know. And he made him out a financier in Chicago!"

"Well?"

"Well, don't you remember, this afternoon, he said the chap was a big game hunter and was now in South America."

"But a business man can hunt game in his off hours."

"I know, but Octopus Oscar made it out to-night, that his namesake nephew is even now on his job in Chicago. Devotes his whole life and energy to it, and is rapidly becoming a power in the stock market out West."

"Cox is nutty, I expect—"

"No, anything but that What did Miss Gibbs say about him?"

"Nothing. We scarcely mentioned him. But I tell you, that little dame has the low-down on everybody on this tub. She

dances as if she had her rubbers on, but she's nobody's fool!"

"No?"

"No."

CHAPTER II.

THE PASSENGERS.

SUNDAY morning is Sunday morning the world over.

Whatever the situation, wherever the locality, whoever the people, Sunday morning has an atmosphere all its own, inevitable and unmistakable.

Entirely unsectarian, it is no respecter of persons, and every one must feel its influence to a greater or less degree.

But it is not unpleasant. It is rather like a benediction, with its calm, peaceful outward effects and its undercurrents of cleanliness and Godliness.

And Sunday morning on the Pinnacle was rather like that Lotus land some poet wrote about, where it is always Saturday afternoon. The sunshine was gently golden, the air downy soft and the blue waves were miniature mountains that skipped like little lambs.

The imminence of bouillon and sandwiches, like a magnet, drew to the deck hungry passengers who had eaten nothing since breakfast.

They came, not single spies, but in battalions, well-dressed, well-groomed, well-mannered, and in a more or less audibly happy frame of mind.

Lily Gibbs was early in her chair, alive and alert to catch any sidelights on her neighbors.

The neighbors, mostly wrapped up in their own affairs and their own companions, bustled about her, unseeing, as the far flung line of rugs and pillows settled into place.

Mallory and Nash were doing their daily hundred rounds of the deck, pausing often to pass the time of Sunday morning.

Earlier, they had gone into conference with Garson, the deck steward, with the result that they now boasted chairs right in the heart of things. That is, in the immediate vicinity of the chairs of Oscar Cox and several other men of financial importance, the Campers, and others of social weight and a sprinkling of the sublimely important younger generation.

Two of these latter pounced on the young men, as they came toward their chairs, and claimed them for their very own.

"You can be Gladys's sheik, Mr. Mallory," Sally Barnes twinkled at him, "and Mr. Nash shall be mine. Now, be nice and possessive, won't you?"

The two men spoke this language fluently, and responded in kind as they took the chairs the girls ordained.

The quartet had met before, and failing to make any headway in getting acquainted with the exclusive Miss Forman, Mallory had advised attaching themselves to these pretty little flappers.

The flappers' mothers sat near by, smiling indulgently at the foolishness of their adored offspring.

Then Oscar Cox appeared on deck.

The audience didn't arise, but they paid him the homage of turning sidewise in their chairs and craning their necks and staring hard as he made his triumphal entry.

Arrayed in white and looking more like a yachtsman on his own craft than a mere passenger, he was followed by a queer looking little man, who had factotum written large all over him.

Unheeding all else, he bore down on Cox's chair, spread a rug, propelled his master into it, folded it over his legs with the deft speed of an envelope machine, and then, from a bag he carried, whisked out a leather pillow, some magazines, a pair of blue spectacles and a field glass.

He hung the bag on the chair arm, and after a few whispered words and a nod from Cox, he folded his wings like an Arab and silently disappeared.

"How thrilling!" exclaimed Sally Barnes, "Mr. Cox has a minion, a henchman, a—"

"A vassal, a serf at his side," supplemented Mallory. "Well, he's a big man, you know—a man of affairs."

"Love affairs?" asked Gladys, hopefully.

"I don't know about that. I only know

him superficially as yet. But I'll find out for you—"

"I'll tell her," broke in Cox himself, who was well within earshot. "Yes, little girl, I'm keen on love affairs. Any takers?"

Cox had a way with him, and his speech brought only beaming smiles from the watchful mothers of the girls.

"Don't believe my white hair," Cox went on, gayly. "It turned white in a single night, once when I was frightened 'most to death. Why, I have a nephew, my namesake, by the way, who is years younger than I am, and looks older. But then, he's a parson—a clergyman in Boston."

"I thought he was in South America," Nash said, suddenly.

"My nephew, Oscar Cox? I tell you he's a Unitarian minister, in Boston. Been there, in the same church, five or six years. His people love him. I'm not crazy about the lad myself. He's too mild for my liking. But he found Hudder for me—so I owe him a debt of gratitude. Notice Hudder? My all round caretaker? Queer looking, but capable—oh, one hundred per cent capable."

"Fascinating devil," commented Sally Barnes, casually. "Is he a foreigner?"

"Well, he had some Spanish and Italian forbears. But I'm often uncertain whether he's a devil or a *dummkopf*. He has traits of both. I never budge without him, he's as necessary as a toothbrush. Well, who's for shuffleboard or quoits, or what have you, on the sport deck?"

Kicking away Hudder's careful foldings, Cox jumped to his feet. In a moment, the watchful satellite was at his side, moving an empty chair or two, easing his master out into the open, and gathering up the fallen magazines.

Impatiently shaking off the hovering helper, Cox picked up a crowd of young people with his eyes, and strode off along the deck.

Pausing to look back for the others, he stood with his back against the rail, his big, well-cut face complacent and proud; his sharp gray eyes darting here and there in general anticipation.

About two rows back, Maisie Forman was lying in her chair, while beside her Max Trent sat upright, eagerly talking on some engrossing subject.

The all-seeing eyes of Octopus Oscar took them in and then darted on to their neighbors, much as a jerky searchlight pursues its course.

"Isn't he astonishing!" murmured Maisie, as the magnate passed on, and his merry train came trooping after.

"Yes," and Trent smiled. "He looks like an event all ready to occur."

"Or," he added, "like a spider with a lot of flies."

"Why, you don't know anything bad about him, do you?" the girl asked.

"No, I don't know him at all, do you?"

"Mercy, no. And I don't want to."

"Of course you don't. I dare say he's all right, as such men go. But he's very much of the earth, earthy. When I say I don't know him at all, I mean—er—personally. I met him with a crowd last night, and he's a good mixer. He made friends right and left."

"Never mind him," and the girl turned her amber eyes on him. They were amber in this light, but sometimes they turned to beryl and topaz and all those shades that old-fashioned people used to call hazel.

Anyhow, they were enchanting eyes, and Trent looked into them soberly as he resumed their broken-off talk.

The princess, as Nash had dubbed her, was not so upstage with people if she liked them. But traveling alone, as she was, she must needs watch her step and, although the captain would put her in touch with any one she wanted, so far she had deigned to smile only on Max Trent, the story writer.

She found him interesting and entertaining, and although she purposed soon to make some pleasant woman acquaintances, she had so far delayed it.

"Yes," Trent picked up his interrupted tale, "I thought it would be of use to me in my detective stories, and so I took it up. Oh, I know it is quite the thing to guy a correspondence course in anything. But I guy the guys that guy it. I master it; it doesn't master me. And you'd be surprised, not only have I learned enough

from it to write my yarns more convincingly and correctly, but I've become really interested in detection as a game."

"What! You want to be a detective?"

"I don't want to be one—I *am* one. I didn't go far to do it. It was greatness thrust upon me. I just couldn't help it. You see, with the bits I picked out of that correspondence course, and my natural bent for all that sort of thing, I just *am* a detective."

"And are you going to take—what do you call 'em?—cases?"

"Oh, Lord, no! I'm not going to practice. But it's fine for my books. Don't you see, I can write better detective stories if I am a detective."

"Yes, I suppose so." She lowered her voice. "Who is this bearing down upon us? He looks as if he meant to speak to us."

She judged correctly, and in another moment the passer-by had paused.

"Good morning, Mr. Trent," he said, in a quiet, pleasant way, "Sunday is a day when everybody ought to feel generous-minded and charitable and love their neighbors as themselves. So may I flock with you people a little bit?"

His manner and speech disarmed Miss Forman's suddenly roused antagonism and she smiled such a welcome that Trent introduced the stranger at once.

"Mr. Mason," he said, "Mr. Sherman Mason, of New York."

Trent's inflections gave Mr. Mason a standing at once, and Maisie extracted a hand from the fluttering scarf ends she was holding, and gave it to him in greeting.

He sat on the extended front of Trent's chair, and the talk naturally drifted to books.

"Along came Ruth," called out a gay and cheery voice, and Miss Gibbs, all uninvited, joined the group.

"I've been looking for you, Mr. Mason," she chided, "you promised to take me to walk the deck this morning."

Had Sherman Mason voiced his thoughts, he would have said he'd rather take her to walk the plank, but he merely bowed and smiled and observed that the morning was not over yet.

"No," agreed Lily Gibbs, "and I'm glad of your defection since it gives me opportunity to meet the charming Miss Forman. May I introduce myself? I'm Lily Gibbs—Silly Lily some folks call me!" she giggled appropriately. "Oh, I foresee we shall be *such* friends!"

She hunted out the girl's hand from the enveloping chiffon folds of the futile scarf, and enthusiastically clasped it in both her own. "Dear Miss Forman, how glad I am to call you friend!"

"Thank you," said Maisie, and although her voice was sweet, something about it made Miss Gibbs drop the hand she held, and sit up straighter.

Sherman Mason, seeing it all, smilingly threw himself into the breach and arose, saying, "Come, Miss Gibbs, or we shan't have any sort of tramp before lunch time."

The two went off, and Trent looked whimsically at the frowning girl before him.

"*I* couldn't help it," he said, defensively. "Detectives spot criminals, but they can't prevent crime."

Maisie rippled a little laugh.

"Of course you couldn't help it. I can't expect to be shielded from the great army of the sociably inclined. And don't think me a stuck-up, please. I'm not, really, only—alone as I am—"

"How do you happen to be alone?" said Trent, quietly, with an earnest interest that robbed his query of rudeness.

"Why, it—it just happened, that I have to cross alone. When I arrive on the Liverpool dock I shall be properly cared for."

She looked out to sea as she spoke, and her reply seemed to be more to herself than to her companion.

"Please don't think I meant to be intrusive," he begged, and she said, quickly:

"Oh, no, I didn't. It's all right. It doesn't matter. I ought to have brought a maid, you see—but, I didn't. I'll attach myself to some dear old lady, or a nice young matron, and then I'll be all right."

"You're all right, anyway," Trent told her; "as right as rain! Captain Van Winkle will find a chaperone for you, if you really want one. But why not live up to your privileges as a free young American girl, and shift for yourself?"

"Perhaps I shall." Miss Forman still showed that preoccupied air, and Trent was not surprised when she picked up her books and things and left him with a smiling but dignified "good morning."

The rollicking crowd came back from their deck games, and Trent quickly immersed himself in a book and drew his cap down over his eyes.

From beneath its brim, he could see Oscar Cox pass, surrounded by laughing girls and their attendant swains.

He heard Cox saying "—and before I leave this ship, I'll tell you something that will knock you silly with astonishment! By Gad, I will!"

He laughed his big, booming chuckle that was infectious if unconventional.

Cox made friends right and left. And though for the moment he was the midst of a crowd of shrieking, giggling youngsters, he was quite as much at home with their dancing mothers, or with their wise, shrewd, businesslike fathers.

The man had one life motto: Get what you want.

And now, after furious struggles, he had got what he wanted, and until a time should come when he wanted something else, he was contentedly happy.

By some strange freak of nature, Sunday morning always flies by on the wings of the wind, but Sunday afternoon, except for lovers, invariably drags.

There were no lovers, that any one knew of, on board the Pinnacle, and so Sunday afternoon was a week long.

Maisie Forman stuck to her cabin, because she didn't want to be bothered with intrusive strangers.

Max Trent stuck to his, because he feared if he went to his deck chair, Miss Forman would think him a nuisance.

The flapper girls huddled in one or other of their cabins, comparing notes of conquest, and their adoring swains forgathered in the smoking room and pretended they were men.

Miss Gibbs wandered about to no purpose, and the big financial magnates got together and talked business.

Oscar Cox, being the biggest and wisest, said the least.

Sherman Mason and Owen Camper, only a shade less influential in the busy marts, were nearly as silent.

Hal Mallory and Pollard Nash, scorning the younger crowd, heard with only a half interest the guarded opinions and canny advices of the powers of finance, and tried to urge Cox into a mood for telling funny stories.

But he was disinclined, and even made no reference to his somewhat versatile namesake nephew.

Yet, a little later, as the talk somehow drifted to superstition and the power of a curse and all that, Cox suddenly waked up.

"Nobody but a fool believes in the supernatural," he said, dogmatically "and only a half-wit believes in curses or charms against evil. But I will say that nearly everybody has just one little pet foolishness of that sort. Why, I know a man who goes back home if he sees a black cat on his way to business!"

"Didn't know black cats went to business," put in the irrepressible Mallory.

"That will be about all from you, Hal Mall," and Cox scowled in mock severity. "And my wife—dead these many years—" his voice softened, "if she put on any garment wrong side out by chance, she would not turn it, because that meant bad luck. Nor would she let me. On two occasions I went to my office with one sock wrong side out!"

"And yet you say you're not superstitious!" Mason exclaimed.

"That isn't superstition—that's marital devotion," Cox returned. "But as I said, everybody has one little pet foible of his own, and I have mine, though it isn't a fear to set right a shirt put on wrong side out."

"What is it?" asked one or two, interestedly.

"Hudder," Cox said, and although he scarcely raised his voice a note, it was a summons, and the queer little valet entered the room.

"Get the Hand from my box, and bring it here."

Noiselessly the creature went away. His soundless, slow shuffle easily could be describable by the word "crept."

"Ugh!" Nash said, involuntarily, "that

fellow gives me the creeps! How can you stand him around?"

"Habit," and Cox smiled; nothing ever seemed to annoy him. "Hudder isn't much to look at, I'll admit, but he's a wonder at taking care of me. And of my things. He's valet, secretary, nurse and orderly, all in one."

The fellow returned then, and handing something to Cox, silently departed.

"This," and Cox laid the object on the table, "is my hoodoo and my mascot. If I have a small, pet bit of superstition, there it is."

They all looked at it, and saw a bronze hand. A man's hand, nearly life size, and of wonderful workmanship. It was a strong, diabolically strong, hand, its fingers spread apart, yet partly clenched as if to clutch an enemy in a death grip. The hand was lean and sinewy; muscular, not bony, and imbued with the effect of strength and power seldom seen even in a living hand.

Yet withal, there was beauty in the design, genius in the workmanship.

And with a quick appreciation of this, Pollard Nash said, impulsively: "I bet that's a Rodin!"

Cox flashed him a glance of approval.

"Right, my boy," he said; "but it's only a copy. However, it's a faithful copy, and few could distinguish it from the original. Yes, a copy of one of Rodin's finest studies. Look at the marvelous detail. This bronze thing has real muscles, real veins—by golly, I'll bet it has a nervous system!"

Cox's face was lighted up with enthusiasm, and Nash was only second in admiration. To most of the others it was merely a good-looking bronze hand, few understood its great art.

"Well," Cox went on, "that hand is my luck. But whether good or bad luck, I don't know. I always keep it by me, and so far it hasn't gone back on me. I've snatched all I've wanted along life's pathway, and if the grip of those bronze fingers portend anything, they mean that what I've got I'll keep."

Cox's voice was somber, now, deep as with strong emotion, yet ringing and vibrant as he brought out the last words.

Mallory lifted the hand a little gingerly.

"Some heavy," he said, slightly surprised at its weight.

"Yes, solid bronze is heavy. But I lug it around with me, because—well, that's my little foolishness."

"It's worth while, as a work of art," Nash said, and one or two others nodded assent. "And it's very beautiful."

"No," said Owen Camper, "it's fine, and I dare say valuable, but I don't agree that it's beautiful."

"Not pleasing to the untrained eye, perhaps," Nash returned, "but beautiful in its perfect naturalness and gripping effect of strength and—"

"Oh, it has a gripping effect, all right," laughed Hal. "I wouldn't care to have it grip me! I say, Mr. Cox, if you had two of them, they'd make a wonderful pair of book-ends!"

Oscar Cox gave him a look of mild reproach, but the undismayed wag went on to say, "However, having but one, you'll have to use it as a doorstop. Fine for that, just heavy enough."

"Shut up, Hal," Nash said; "do you want them all to think you run a gift shop when you're at home?"

The turned tables warded off the annoyance beginning to show in Cox's eyes. It was plain to be seen he was sensitive about his odd treasure, whether superstitious or not.

For a long time Polly Nash played with the bronze. He patted and stroked it. He gripped his own hand to the same position. He scrutinized the bronze palm, saying: "A palmist could read these lines."

At last he gave it back to Cox, who turned it over to the hovering Hudder, and then all broke loose with their waiting questions.

"Where did he get it?" "Who made it?" "Why did he think it either lucky or unlucky?" "What was its history?"

"One at a time," Oscar Cox begged, smiling.

"My nephew made it for me. He's a young chap—my namesake by the way—and he's an art student in Paris. At least, he has been a student, now he's a sculptor. He got a chance, somehow, to copy the Rodin and I was so anxious to have it, he

gave it to me. I made it up to him, of course, and I was delighted to have it."

"Why?"

"Just foolishness!" Cox laughed aloud. "I told you that in the first place, you remember. I think it brings me good luck—but—"

"But it may go back on you," suggested Camper. In that case, would you pitch it overboard?"

"Only if I were sure that the ill luck came through the direct instrumentality of the bronze hand," and Cox looked serious.

"But how do you know your good luck has come through its direct instrumentality?"

"I don't," and Cox beamed his sunniest smile. "But I like to think so. That's part of the foolishness!"

"Speaking of hands," said Mallory, "how about a game of bridge?"

A quartette was easily collected, and they went off to the card room.

Others drifted away, until only Cox and Polly Nash were left of the original group.

"And you cart that heavy thing all about?" Nash said, musingly.

"Yes—you see, it wouldn't be a bad weapon, in case of need,"

"That's so, too. Why are the fingers half clenched, that way? Was the original part of the whole figure?"

"That I don't know. My nephew never told me. But the fingers aren't clenched—or half clenched, they're clutching. Clutching at something—"

"Gold?" said Nash, his imagination stirred by Cox's intensity.

"Maybe—I don't know. Perhaps gold—perhaps love—perhaps hate—revenge!"

Nash looked up quickly, saw the twinkle in Cox's eyes and realized he was spoofing.

Nash laughed, too, a bit relieved at the snap of the tension.

"How little we know each other," he said; "I never should have dreamed you had that sort of thing in your makeup, Mr. Cox."

"No, most of our makeup doesn't show on the outside—unlike the ladies," he added with a laugh.

And this effectually put an end to any further serious conversation, for Oscar Cox betook himself off, chuckling at his own jest, and Polly Nash felt an immediate need for gay companionship.

CHAPTER III.

THE YOUNGER GENERATION.

MONDAY was another beautiful *dolce far niente* day.

The portion of the deck where Oscar Cox had his chair, back against the side of the ship, and where many of his friends and acquaintances surrounded him, was the chief center of interest, and was a sort of headquarters for planning entertainments and diversions.

The young women adored Cox, and many scheming mothers had brilliant if vague hopes for the future.

Unstinting in his interest, advice and financial help when required, Oscar Cox, although a hard headed business man, was soft hearted where the feminine element was concerned.

The flappers hung on his deck chair, they flattered him and jollied him, until, when he tired of the game, he would brush them all away like a swarm of flies and forbid them to come near him until summoned.

Whereupon, they would run off, laughing, to the very young gentlemen whom they thought it funny to call sheiks, though some grouchy, middle-aged people called them deck lizards.

Nash and Mallory were too old to be classed in this lot, both being beyond thirty, but they enjoyed the youngsters' fun, and were good sports.

Especially did they make themselves useful when an elaborate game was being arranged.

And to-day one was in process of unfolding.

"It's too wonderful, my darlings!" Sally Barnes cried, as she ran to meet the pair on the deck, and taking an arm of each hurried them over to a chattering crowd by the rail.

"A treasure hunt!" Gladys Parker cried, "think of it! We can go poking into everybody's staterooms and into the captain's chiffonier and into Miss Gibbs's trunk!"

"Not in my stateroom!" Mallory declared.

"Oh, pooh! Hal Mall, there'd be nothing interesting in yours! Bet you haven't a single thrill in your whole luggage! But fancy Mrs. Camper's, now!"

"Why especially Mrs. Camper?"

"Oh, she's so mysterious—so—so exciting, you know. They say—"

"Oh, you gossips!" Nash cried, impatiently. "Never mind that, tell me more about your game."

"Well, we have to get a treasure first, a prize, you know—something awfully worthwhile—two of them, in fact, one for men and one for wimmens. I—I dare to venture to hope that maybe, perhaps Mr. Cox will give us those—one of them anyway. Well, then—oh, gosh, there's Dolly!" and the speaker ran away to greet a friend.

"I'll tell you," another girl began. "You know a treasure hunt. You go to one place, and that sends you to another, and so on, all over the ship."

"But you'll have to get permission to snoop into people's staterooms—"

"Oh, yes, of course. That's one of the things you're to do. Everybody must help some. Of course, we can't barge into a lady's cabin if she doesn't know we're coming. A man wouldn't mind it so much. Well, all those things have to be looked after. We're waiting for Mr. Cox, to see what he'll give us for the treasure. Oh, here he comes! My gladsome boy, good morning! Are you all-set for a touch? I warn you, we're out for b'ar! We want—"

"Clear out with you! I don't care what you want—you won't get it from me! I'm all full of grouch, and if you come near, I'll bite you!"

Oscar Cox's tone was only mock ferocious, yet there was no twinkle in his eye, and the young people sensed at once that he was really out of sorts.

They realized it was unwise to push him at the moment, and they fell back vanquished, but very far from subdued.

"Leave him lay," Sally advised, sagaciously. "He'll come out of it all right. Let's plan the thing all the same. We can get the hunt all fixed up and then the Octopus will only have to provide the treasure."

"I say," put in Gladys, "do you suppose Miss Stuckup Forman will let us hunt in her room? I'd love to get a snoop in there."

"What do you think, Mr. Nash? You know her, don't you?"

"I've met her, but I can't answer for her amiability in this matter. Why not ask her?"

Maisie's chair, with Trent's now next to it, was half a deck length away and the wild horde ran there half scared, half pleased, at the idea of making their request.

"Oh, please, Miss Forman," cried Sally Barnes, who was a natural born spokesman, "please say yes—won't you? You see, it's for the benefit of the sick babies in the third class, and we want it to be a success, and if you'll say yes, lots of other people will tag along—see?"

Maisie roused herself and sat upright.

Although only two or three years older than these rollicking girls, she seemed immeasurably their senior, and her calm dignity made them appear hoydenish and rude.

But, greatly to Trent's surprise, she received them with the most charming of smiles, drew Sally down to her chair beside her, and said:

"Tell me all about it. I'd love to help the sick babies."

Sally gazed at her, enthralled. Suddenly she acquired a new enthusiasm.

"Oh, Miss Forman!" she cried, "I care for you! Aren't you a winner! And oh, these things!"

She ran her finger-tips admiringly over Maisie's chic little hat, and her smart sports *ensemble,* and picking up her vanity case, proceeded, as she talked, to rummage therein.

"It's a treasure hunt," she began to explain—"oh, tell her about it, girls, I want to play wiv dese!"

She drew out the exquisite appointments for facial improvement, and gazed enraptured, at a gold mounted lipstick.

"Yes, tell me," and Maisie smiled at the others, the while she unostentatiously drew her belongings from Sally's ubiquitous fingers, and shut them back in her bag, of which she retained possession.

Sally gazed at her a moment, then picked

up the hem of her skirt and kissed it. After which, Sally, the invincible, now the devoted slave of Maisie Forman, returned to the babbling chorus.

"You know treasure hunts, Miss Forman, don't you?"

"Yes, of course," and Maisie smiled encouragingly. "But only in cities, or across country—"

"All the same," one of the very young men struck in now. He simply had to. "We think we can stage one on the Pinnacle. We haven't asked the captain yet, but he's pulp in the girls' hands, and"—with sudden inspiration—"perhaps you'd put in a word for us, Miss Forman."

"But I thought it was all arranged for," and Maisie smiled inquiringly.

"Y-yes, all but getting the captain's consent—"

"And Mr. Cox's gift—"

"And seeing about going in people's staterooms—"

"Yes," Sally declared, "it's all arranged, except a few trifling details of that sort. Now, Miss Forman, can we—may we hunt in your cabin?"

"My Heavens, no! What an idea! I'll do my part some other way."

"Oh, it'll be such a card for us, if you give your permission. Then, nobody would refuse."

"Do you—you can't possibly mean to let you rummage through my belongings—"

"Oh, lock up anything you don't want us to see. All your petting notes and suitors' pictures. All your booze and dope—"

"All your transformations and—"

But Maisie was helpless with laughter. She was unfamiliar with this particular type of free and easy patter, and the breezy, giggling girls, and the would-be blasé boys, seemed to her like an act from a play.

Maisie Forman had no mother, and her tired business man of a father had brought her up conventionally and a bit ignorantly. Jonathan Forman adored his daughter, and had given her luxuries and advantages to the best of his knowledge and belief, but now, alone in the world, for the moment, and eagerly interested in all she saw and heard, Maisie was finding out how little she knew of mundane conditions, after all.

Not that she wanted to belong to this noisy, boisterous herd, but she wanted to see them, to watch them. She was beginning to feel that her exclusiveness was perhaps a mistake. That she could enjoy herself better by mixing to a degree, at least, with these people who had so startled her at first.

"I'll tell you," she said at last as she gained more definite ideas as to their wants, "I'll help you. And if it's necessary for you to invade my room, you may. We'll see about that later. But what else can I so? Subscribe to the buying of the treasure? Take tickets for the hunt? What?"

"Well, you see, Miss Forman, we plan to get Mr. Cox to give us the treasure. But he's in a heluva grouch this morning, and we don't dast tackle him. How would it be if you asked him?"

"I? Ask Mr. Cox! Why, I don't even know him."

"Oh, that doesn't matter. Maybe Mr. Trent would ask him. He knows him."

Trent had been an interested listener, but had so far said little.

"Not I," he declared positively. "There's nobody so appropriate for that errand as you youngsters yourselves. Wait till he's in his usual sunny mood—not long, probably—and then approach him with your usual tact and delicacy—"

"You're making fun of us—" and Sally Barnes somehow managed to bring two big tears to her dancing eyes. It was a trick of hers.

"What else are you good for?" asked Trent, with a wondering stare, as he drew out a big folded handkerchief and offered it with a flourish for the absorption of the tears.

"I say," piped up a good-looking boy, "the old Octopus is looking over here, and scowling like a pickaxe!"

"Jealous, probably," said Nash, with a glance across the deck. "He thinks you've deserted him."

Sally jumped up and ran over to Cox's chair.

"I say," she cried, bearding the lion in his den, "Miss Forman over there wants to speak to you."

"To me?" returned Cox, in amazement.

"Yes," Sally lied on, "she sent me to tell you—to ask you if you'd please step over there a minute."

"Certainly," said the mining man, still looking credulously at Sally. "Are you sure Miss Forman sent for me? We're—we're not acquainted."

"I'll introduce you, come ahead!" Sally fairly tugged at his coat, for her courage was weakening, and she was about ready to back out.

Oscar Cox strode along the deck, and joined the rollicking group.

"Miss Forman," he said, "Miss Barnes tells me you do me the honor to wish to speak to me."

Maisie Forman looked at him, a blank expression on her lovely face.

"I?" she said. "You?" Her air became haughty. All the *camaraderie* she had shown the young people vanished, and she was again the princess in disguise, and not much disguised at that.

Then she turned to the culprit, now shaking with laughter.

"Sally," she said, "why did you tell that naughty story? And just when I was beginning to like you!"

Trent picked up the situation.

"Mr. Cox," he said, "these children are full of the old Nick to-day. Miss Forman didn't send for you; Miss Parker made that up. But may I present you? Miss Forman, this is Mr. Cox, whom I trust I may call a friend of mine. Mr. Cox, Miss Forman—also my friend."

"Then, now, we're all friends," cried Sally, gayly, "and the goose hangs high!"

But a constraint had fallen on the more serious-minded ones of the group.

Maisie kept her aloof, exclusive air, which Trent began to suspect she used toward all but her near friends, and youngsters.

Oscar Cox, himself, seemed uncertain whether to join the gayety of the flappers, or adopt a dignity to match Miss Forman's.

Mallory and Nash were interested in the whole episode, while the young people, trusting to their safety in numbers, began to clamor for a treasure for the treasure hunt.

"And Miss Forman has promised to help you, has she?" Cox said, at last. "Well, then, I'll help, too. Now here's my proposition. If Miss Forman asks me for it, prettily, I'll give the thing to her, and she can give it to the hunt club, or whatever you call yourselves."

"Hoo-ray!" started the cheer leader, Sally, and the deck rang with their gratitude.

"But you haven't got it yet," Cox warned them, smilingly. "Will Miss Forman ask for it?"

"Yes, indeed," Maisie returned, growing a little flushed as all eyes rested on her. "Of course, I will. My dear Mr. Cox, please give these young people the treasure they want for their game called treasure hunt. Please give it to them at my request, and for the benefit of the poor little sick babies on board. Please do."

The words were sincere, although the tone was playful, rather than beseeching. Maisie had managed to make it seem a plea, yet with an undercurrent that gave a sense of organized charity and entirely eliminated the personal equation.

Oscar Cox looked at her, with a glance that saw right through her pretense and accepted her words at their true worth.

Yet he laughed genially, and told the eager crowd at his side that they should surely have their treasure, as soon as he could manage to find or procure something appropriate.

"We want to have the hunt to-morrow," they told him. "To-morrow afternoon. It's Fourth of July, and we're going to celebrate from morning till night."

"I'm trying to persuade Puppy Abercrombie, to climb up with a Star Spangled Banner and put it in place of the English flag," announced a blue-eyed baby doll, in a shrill, piping shreik.

"Now, don't be silly," said Cox, a little sternly. "You kids are so nice when you are just funny without being vulgar. Don't disturb any flags, you'll have enough Hail Columbia without. The captain is going to give you glorious decorations for luncheon and all that. Don't repay him by any annoyance."

"No, sir," said one, demurely, and the rest repeated it like so many parrots.

Laughing both at them and with them,

Cox went off and they followed like the children following the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

"I can't quite get that man," said Nash, who, with Hal Mallory had stayed behind, and basked in the warmth of Miss Forman's suddenly displayed cordiality. "He's a great financier, yet he never talks business. He's a good deal of a sportsman, I've heard, yet he never plays games with any one but the youngsters. He's said to be fond of ladies' society, yet he never speaks to a lady—older than those flappers, and he treats them like children, he isn't really interested in them."

"It seemed to me," Maisie said, "his interest was really fatherly, or like a rich bachelor uncle. Is he a bachelor?"

"No, a widower," Nash told her. "He has the queerest sort of an orderly or valet, or something. I'm not crazy about this plan of invading people's staterooms."

"They won't," said Trent. "Except where they're urgently invited. Captain Van Winkle won't allow any annoying intrusions—of that I'm sure. And there are lots of places for the hunt. I dare say it'll be rather fun."

"If Cox has a guiding hand, the whole game will be all right," Mallory put in. "I don't altogether like that man, yet I know he has excellent ideas of the eternal fitness of things. And the kids will obey him."

"Why does he seem to be of such importance?" Maisie asked. "I hear much about him, and little of the other influential men on board. There are a lot, aren't there?"

"Heaps," said Mallory. "Why, Owen Camper and Mr. Mason, and Mr. Grell and —oh, lots of Wall Street men are in the smoking room every night. But they, most of them, have wives and families along. I fancy Cox is a bit of a gay dog."

"If you mean inclined to gay company or gay doings, I haven't seen anything of it," Nash objected. "Except for playing with those children, he keeps mostly to rather grave and sober company."

"He danced with Miss Gibbs—" Trent offered.

"Then it was because he couldn't help himself!" said Nash, so fervently that Maisie laughed outright.

She had a gay, ringing little laugh, and the three men within hearing distance promptly fell more deeply in love than ever.

After tea, Miss Gibbs was moved to read palms.

This was a hobby of hers, and she used it to decided advantage in the matter of attracting people to her side.

The young people soon tired of it, as they knew the lingo by heart. But Oscar Cox surprised the palmist by asking her to read a hand for him.

She lavishly consented, and Cox produced from his deck bag the bronze hand.

"What a beauty," exclaimed Miss Gibbs, who knew all about art, although she didn't know what she liked.

"Yes, a fine piece of work. What do you make of it by means of palmistry?"

Though the bronze fingers were bent over at the second joints, the palm of the hand was freely exposed.

"You don't think I can really see anything in it?" Lily Gibbs said, looking at him.

"Why not? If the palm is as true as the whole hand, why shouldn't it tell something?"

"Very well," and she scrutinized the bronze thoughtfully.

"It is contradictory," she said at last. "I get nothing sure, nothing really indicative." Then, noting the disappointment on Cox's face, she quickly proceeded to call on her inventive imagination.

"It is the hand of a criminal," she said suddenly, careless of the truth. "The lines show evil—deep evil."

But although she was fibbing, it was not evident. Lily Gibbs was too clever for that.

"There is," she went on soberly, "another influence at work, a better part of the man's nature, that strives against the deep-rooted villainy, but it is a hopeless struggle. Whoever was the model for this bronze hand was a wicked, a diabolically wicked, man. That's all I can say. Do you know anything about the original?"

"No; don't know for sure that there was

one. Maybe the hand is idealized or assembled from several models."

"Maybe," agreed Lily. "But, Mr. Cox, aside from the matter of palmistry, I—well, you see, I am a little—a tiny bit—clairvoyant."

"Are you?" The tone showed interest. "Well?"

"I see things—not apparent to others—I see things of the future—omens, augurs—circling wings—"

"In connection with this hand?" Cox was superstitious, after all?"

"Yes; I see harm coming to you—to your own well-being, your own safety."

"What sort of harm?"

"That I don't know, but deep wrong—irremediable disaster."

"Oh, come now, Miss Gibbs"—and Hal Mallory's gay voice proved that he had overheard her chatter— "don't scare the poor man out of his wits."

"But it's all true," said Lily Gibbs, a little sulkily. "I can't help it if I have second sight."

"Second fiddlesticks!" snorted Mallory, who was furiously down on all sorts of charlatanry.

"Oh, very well," and Miss Gibbs walked off in the state of mind commonly known as high dudgeon.

"Now you've made an enemy!" exclaimed Cox.

"I don't care. Why do you encourage her in that rubbish?"

"Maybe it isn't rubbish—maybe it's revelation."

"Maybe you're the whole Pentateuch and the Apocrypha thrown in! I'd rather listen to the flappers' babble than to the Gibbs' bunkum. Come along, and I'll feed you a cocktail to brush the cobwebs out of your brain."

It was after dinner that night that Maisie Forman, for the first time on board, consented to dance.

Max Trent had urged her again and again, only to be refused; but at last he sensed that she was wavering slightly in her decision, and he renewed his appeals.

"Oh, well, yes, then," she said, with a smile that was half a sigh. "I do love to dance—I will, just once."

"Once at a time is enough," he laughed as they went on the floor.

The music was perfect, so was the dancing space; not too crowded, cool and pleasant. And, as Maisie at once discovered, they suited each other exactly. She could remember no other partner she had ever had whose ways so pleased her. She caught herself up quickly. Was she losing her heart to Trent?

Nonsense! Just because she liked to dance with a man who knew the art, must she suspect herself of falling in love with him?"

But when the dance was finished she looked white and tired.

"What's the matter?" asked Trent, aghast. "That little spin couldn't have done you up like this! Are you ill, Miss Forman?"

"No—no, thank you; I'm all—all right. But, if you please, I'll go at once to my room. Good night, Mr. Trent—and thank you. Please—please do not go with me. Just put me in the elevator."

Trent obeyed, and, greatly mystified, went out on deck to think it over. He chose an upper deck, and sat there alone for a long time. He had much to think about, and he didn't want to dance any more that night.

At last, after perhaps two hours, he saw a woman's figure wrapped in a long cape come out on the deck where he sat. He was in a dark corner, and although she glanced around, he knew she didn't see him.

With a slow but firm and steady step she went to the rail and looked over the side of the boat.

She stood motionless for a few moments, then with a quick movement climbed up on the rail, holding to the upright post. Horror-stricken almost beyond power to move, Trent nevertheless managed to get out of the chair and spring across the deck to her. He clutched her, bodily, just as she moved to jump.

Another second would have been too late. Indeed, it was all he could do to overcome the momentum she had already given her lithe limbs.

He set her down on the deck with a jerk and looked into her face. It was Maisie Forman!

CHAPTER IV.

THE FOURTH OF JULY.

MAX TRENT sat long in his cabin, that night, wondering why Maisie Forman had tried to jump overboard. Save as a conventional human responsibility, it was none of his business. And, naturally, he had done his duty. He had seen her danger, rescued her from it, and then, though he had accompanied her to the short corridor which led to her own stateroom, neither had spoken a word.

She had hurried down the corridor, opened her door and vanished, and he had sought his own room at once. He was shocked, horrified, moved to pity, suspicious—lots of things—but, most of all, curious.

Why? Why would that lovely girl wish to throw away a young life, just commencing, with beauty, charm, power, riches—all at her command?

He knew almost no detail of her circumstances, for their talk, when together, had been almost entirely of impersonal matters. Indeed, he realized now that he had told her much more of himself that she had confided to him of her own life.

Not yet had she told him why she was traveling alone.

There was ever an air of reserve about her—reserve so great as to amount to mystery. Yet, hers was no morbid temperament or disposition.

Why, then, why—of all things—want to drown herself?

A momentary thought came, that it was a staged scene; that she knew he was there, and wanted to create a sensation.

But it did not ring true. She did not—could not—know he was there. And, too, she never glanced toward him. She had walked slowly but steadily straight to the rail and stepped up on it.

God! He could feel the thrill of it yet! The split second that enabled him to get a grip on those already tensed muscles.

She was not out of her mind. She was not walking in her sleep.

Of those two things he was positive. Then why—why?

But, strangely, he also felt certain she would not repeat her attempt, probably never would. He could feel her shudder of frightened relief as she found herself saved, almost as by a miracle.

Trent was not in love with Maisie Forman. He admired her charm, her well-informed mind, and her ready flashes of humor.

He was lazily getting acquainted and enjoying the process. And now, this! What did it portend? What would she say or do the next morning? Why did she do it?

But it was not his business, and he thriftily reached for a notebook to set down, in the way authors love to do, a few jottings of the affair; so illegible, usually, or so abbreviated, as to be of small use, if any.

Trent was a good-looking chap, but wholly without personal vanity. His dark hair was longish and curlyish on top, but severely cut into place. His chin and muscles were strong—so was his will and, he chose to think, his personality. His nose formed a perfect angle of forty-five degrees, with base, altitude and hypothenuse all complete.

His greatest charm lay in his eyes. Not only that they were good eyes, of a deep-colored, deep-set blue, but he had a trick of looking up under his long lashes that was very fetching. He had acquired this habit, a schoolboy affectation, purposely. But it had now become natural, and he often found it useful in the matter of invitation or persuasion.

At thirty Trent was experienced enough to be a bit cynical. Eight or ten years ago the event he had just lived through would have roused different feelings within him. Just now, his one thought was a wish that the morning would come so he could read the next chapter of Maisie Forman's story. And when the morning came and the time was ripe he went on deck with the same anticipation he would have felt on entering a theater.

Miss Forman was already there, snug-

ly wrapped in her rug, for although it would be hot later, the morning of Independence Day was fresh and cool.

Their chairs had chanced to be adjoining ones, and as they had become acquainted both felt glad that chance had favored them.

Trent slipped into his place after a mere smiling "Good morning," and, settling back, with an opened book, left the handling of the situation to the girl.

But Maisie said no word. She looked out to sea, her own calm apparently equaling that of the expanse of glassy water before them.

She sat motionless, no nervousness showing in her quiet hands or expressionless face.

After a few furtive glances Trent felt he might risk a bit of speech.

"What you need is a life insurance policy," he said in a light voice.

To his surprise, Maisie smiled, almost laughed. Perhaps the tension had been pleasantly if suddenly broken.

"I had something just as good," she returned, and flashed him a glance that contained a world of unspoken thanks.

"I'm glad you're duly grateful," Trent said, answering her look as well as her words. "But it was a narrow squeak."

"Yes. How did you happen to be there?"

"I'd been there a long time. It's a favorite corner of mine. And Fate ordained it, of course."

"Oh, of course—in the sense that Fate ordains everything."

"Yes, and we can't circumvent her. Although you tried your prettiest. Why did you do it?"

"Nice of you to call it a pretty attempt. Did I look picturesque or like a movie heroine?"

"Both. But, as I said, why did you do it?"

"Just to make a scene," she said lightly. "I knew you would catch me—"

"Don't tell fibs. You had no idea I was there. You were fully determined to jump. I barely caught you in time. In fact, I was so nearly paralyzed at the sight I could scarcely move at all."

"I suppose I ought to be grateful to you—"

"You are. And you're going to prove that gratitude by promising not to attempt it again. For the next time I might not be there."

"No, I'd see to that!"

Trent was shocked at the bitterness in her tone.

But he did not take it upon himself to admonish her further. "I suppose you feel," he said, "that you have the right—"

"Of course I have. Every one has a right to end a life that is unbearable. And, 'Over the fence is out.'"

"What—what?" came a low but audible voice, as Oscar Cox paused in front of them. "Miss Forman going to drown herself?"

Both Trent and Maisie were astonished that this man could have heard their conversation or part of it. For they had been speaking almost in whispers. Truly, he had phenomenal hearing or a chance puff of wind had blown the sound to him.

"Not much!" Trent declared. "We're playing a Fourth of July parlor-game. We guess what is the most unlikely thing another could do. That was my guess for her."

"And a poor guess," Maisie declared. "If I want to jump overboard I have a right to, haven't I, Mr. Cox?"

"Most assuredly," he returned heartily. "And I believe you will. Why, if I thought you wouldn't, I'd put you over myself—that is, if you really want to go over. Do you?"

"Yes," said Maisie, and she flashed a mutinous look at Cox, for neither she nor Trent liked his style of kidding.

But the subject was dropped as some young people came along with flags and streamers of red, white and blue, and with various noise-making and ear-splitting instruments of torture.

"We're the gems of the ocean," announced Sally Barnes, "and that dear darling duck of a captain has given us a table to ourselves for luncheon, and we're going to make noise enough to be heard in New York, Chicago, and points west! Let's bedeck Mr. Cox—"

And from all hands darted streamers of red, white and blue paper ribbon that enveloped him as in a great meshed net. With a few flings of his big arms he extricated himself, and, producing some paper ribbons from his own pockets, so tied and bound Sally that she could scarcely move.

"No," he said to their insistent pleas—"no, I won't sit at your silly table with you! I always lunch on deck, and I propose to do so to-day. But after luncheon I'll help you with your—what do you call it? Treasure hunt?"

Trent and Miss Forman also declined a somewhat perfunctory invitation to sit at the table of the noisy celebrants of their country's independence, and the laughing crowd ran away, dragging the not unwilling Cox with them.

"Queer man," Trent said, looking after him. "How dared he banter you like that?"

"I think he's impulsive," she returned, uninterestedly, "and says whatever pops into his head. Let's cut out people, including ourselves, and talk about books or something."

Obediently and gracefully Trent turned the subject to a discussion of a recent novel and they chatted in desultory fashion until the first bugle for luncheon sounded.

"I'm going inside now," Trent said, gathering his books together. "Can I help you?"

"No, thanks. I shall stay here until I go down to the dining room. I suppose everybody will go down to-day."

"Yes—all good Americans, anyway. There are special decorations and dishes and—"

"And speeches?"

"Probably. I don't know. Are you patriotic enough to stand those?"

"Patriotic enough for anything," Maisie returned, smiling as Trent swung off up the deck.

But her smile faded at once, and she sat motionless, staring out over the sparkling, glittering acres.

Occupants of the chairs near hers arose and went inside. Strains of national airs came from the orchestra. Shouts and screams of young America were heard from all directions, concentrating finally, as the crowd fell into line on the stairs in a sort of impromptu parade.

Very few remained on deck. Maisie could see one or two quite distant from her either way. Also, she could glimpse Oscar Cox in his chair, back against the side of the ship and just beneath a window that opened into the library lounge.

She saw the queer-looking servant of Cox come to him, presumably to get his order for food, and she thought what a strange specimen of humanity the valet was.

The noise inside grew louder. The orchestra struck the first notes of "The Star-Spangled Banner," and the wave of song spread over the ship from stem to stern. In tune or out, patriot or foreigner, everybody seemed to sing.

The mass of people swayed and sung down the stairs and entered the dining rooms to find an exhibition of hearty good will and friendliness to the American nation.

Even after all were seated at their tables, rattles, popguns and shrill whistles made a terrible discord, but it was laughingly forgiven by the good-natured crowd.

Captain Van Winkle, who was not only the devoted friend and slave of the young people, but a genial man in all respects, beamed round on his cargo of human beings with the benign smile of the father of his ship if not of his country.

And it was just as he was about to take his first spoonful of *potage à l'Americaine*, brewed by a French *chef* on an English liner, that the deck steward came to him and whispered a word in his ear.

Quietly laying down his spoon, the captain quickly but unhurriedly left the table. Once outside the dining room, however, he went upstairs two at a time, scorning the elevators in his haste.

"Get Bowers," he flung over his shoulder to Garson, and strode on. The captain reached the deck where Oscar Cox was wont to sit and where he usually ate his luncheon.

Already a few curious ones had gathered, but, unnoting them, the captain went to Cox's chair and paused, horror-stricken at the scene.

On the floor, with its dishes more or less overturned, was the lunch tray, where the waiter had let it half slide, half drop, from his nerveless fingers.

On the chair was the body of Cox, indubitably dead, indubitably murdered, and murdered in such horrible fashion as to defy description.

What arm of power, of anger, of passion, had dealt such blows on the head and face of the victim that the sight was enough to make a strong man turn away? Who could have crept up on Oscar Cox and killed him as a caveman might kill? What did it mean—this fearful thing, happening in an atmosphere of holiday pleasure, on a broad, peaceful deck, in the bright sunlight of a summer day?

A smothered exclamation at his side brought Captain Van Winkle out of his momentary daze, and he turned to see Bowers, the ship's doctor.

The doctor, too, was shocked almost to helplessness, but his professional instinct and experience pulled him together and stimulated him to action.

"Murder," he said, speaking almost casually now. "Oscar Cox, of all men! Where is the weapon? Good God—there it is!"

He pointed to the floor, under the next chair, and there, crimsoned with the blood of the victim, lay a bronze hand—a horrible, sinister hand, whose clutching fingers, still dripping red, bore mute witness to their own deed.

Although strong-hearted and stanch-souled, Captain Van Winkle was of sensitive nerves, and this further sight of atrocity made him cover his eyes for an instant. Then in another second his orders came fast and sure.

"Take charge here, Bowers. Cover the body. Let no one see it. Garson, rope off the deck to here—no, to here. You, waiter, pick up the tray and things and take them to the kitchen. And, hark—not a word of this to any one until you've leave. Understand?"

The waiter understood, for the captain's eyes and glance were even more imperative than his words, and menace is a universal language.

At that moment Hudder appeared. He was carrying a small tray with a bottle and glass.

His small dark eyes took in the scene. Captain Van Winkle watched him closely, but all he saw was the meticulous behavior of the perfect servant.

Hudder set his tray down carefully on a near-by chair, without disarranging its contents. His face was white, but its vacant, wooden expression showed no sign of change.

He had not been able to see Cox, for the body was being covered, and the doctor and steward with their helpers were grouped about it.

"My master is hurt?" Hudder said gravely; and Captain Van Winkle could read nothing from his look or speech.

"Yes—very badly hurt. Hopelessly hurt."

"He is dead," Hudder said, not with an interrogative inflection, but as one stating a fact.

"Yes, he is dead."

"By the hand?"

"Yes, by that hand! Look here, my man, what do you know of the hand? Of your master generally? But of course you know more of him than any one else on board. Come to my office with me and answer a few questions. Now. Stand by, Bowers. This is serious trouble."

Captain Van Winkle, although not a young man, was far from old, and though well versed in the lore of his calling and familiar with many if not most of its exigencies and contingencies, he was only academically aware of the procedure expected of him in the case of murder on the high seas.

To be sure, it was not yet proved to be murder, but neither doctor nor captain could imagine any theory of accident that would account for the conditions found.

And so the captain's thoughts were racing in a dozen directions at once as he conducted the imperturbable Hudder to his own private room and interviewed him.

But rankling underneath in the captain's mind was a sense of the injustice of fate. Here he was, past master in the ways and means of his chosen career, one of the best-known and best-liked captains on the line,

a man who had always been able to meet any situation, to deal with any emergency that had arisen.

And now, flung at him was this horrible affair—a thing which, as he was just beginning to realize, would stamp him and his boat with a stigma, a memory, that would always cling to and sully her fair fame.

For a thing like this to happen on the Pinnacle! It was inconceivable, incredible! None of his brother captains had ever been called to meet such a crisis as this!

Good-natured always, this was an unsupportable thing. Unreasonably and unreasoningly he vented his anger on the waiting Hudder.

Nor could he have found a better for the purpose. The valet of Oscar Cox was, it seemed to Van Winkle, a foreigner, of some Latin country.

Hudder declared himself of English birth but having lived most of his life in America.

This, the captain thought to himself, mattered little. It was information of Cox he was after.

But questions were hard to frame. Of good education, not unread, and possessed of quick and wise powers of judgment, Peter Van Winkle was all at sea when it came to what suddenly loomed up before him as detective work.

Although not addicted to them, he occasionally read detective stories and, mildly interested, marveled at the strange gift known as detective instinct.

That, he had long ago concluded, he did not possess, and he had never for a moment supposed a time would ever come for him to exercise it.

Yet, here was the time.

Captain he could be. Judge and jury he could be. Executioner he could be, if he felt the need.

But detective he could not be—at least, not to the extent of his own conception of what it meant.

Yet, surely—he brought his troubled thoughts back to Hudder—surely he could ask this man a few straightforward questions about his dead master. So the following dialogue ensued:

"Where did Mr. Cox live?"

"In New York City, sir."

"Had he a family?"

"No, sir. Mr. Cox was a widower for fifteen years or thereabouts."

"His business?"

"That I can't rightly tell you, sir. Mr. Cox had many interests, and big ones. But such matters are above my head."

Hudder, though he showed a face of wood, had sharp, bright, restless eyes that darted suddenly from beneath their lids and then as quickly ran back to cover. He was not a man that inspired confidence. Van Winkle, who considered himself, and rightly, a fair judge of men, quickly decided that Hudder was one who would rather lie than tell the truth.

The little man had a bullet-shaped head, covered with stiff, intractable black hair. When speaking earnestly, which he seldom did, he thrust his head forward with an insistent air. But for the most part he sat back in his chair, held his head farther back still, and spoke in monotones.

"At least you know whether he was a butcher or baker or candlestick maker."

Van Winkle's irritation had its root in his own inability to carry on the interview properly, rather than Hudder's.

"Oh, he was in finance—high finance, I think they call it. Mr. Cox was a promoter and a director and an adviser and an investor—and all things like that."

"Connected with any special company?" The captain's familiarity with high finance was also limited.

"Well, sir, there is the Apollonia Mining Company—that's the only one I can call by name."

"Never heard of it. Mr. Cox lived alone, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where?"

"Big bachelor apartment, sir, in one of those new Fifth Avenue buildings."

"Servants?"

"Six, sir, counting me and his chauffeur."

"No relatives—in other houses?"

"I think not. I never heard of any."

"Born in New York?"

"I'm not sure, but I think not."

"Well, who were his friends? Surely he had some of those?"

"Oh, yes, sir—lots of them. His parties were noted, sir—small but noted—and—"

"Noted? For what?"

"For their beauty and luxury. Yes, sir, everything of the best and in the best taste. That was Mr. Cox's motto."

"Was he a good man?"

"Was he what, sir?"

"You heard me. A good man. Was Oscar Cox a good man?"

"I'm sure I don't know that," and Hudder sighed.

"You don't know! Of course you know! Tell me."

"Well, then, I'll say he was. He gave quite a bit in charities. He gave all his help fine presents at Christmas and Fourth of July. He never went to church—that I know of. But, yes, sir—I call that a good man. Don't you?"

"Not necessarily. Now, see here—as his valet you know a lot about his life. You must! Had he enemies?"

"None that I know of." Hudder sat well back in his chair.

"Women friends?"

"He had ladies at his parties."

"Not at his house at other times?"

"Not that I know of." Still farther back Hudder sat.

"Are you remembered in his will?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"Bah, get out!" and the exasperated captain flung wide his door.

"Yes, sir," said Hudder, and went.

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERY.

DR. BOWERS, realizing the importance of doing all he could to keep the details of the tragedy from the passengers, made a thorough examination of conditions and then ordered the body of Oscar Cox removed to his stateroom.

It was fortunate that, as luncheon was in progress, and a special luncheon at that, very few passengers were on deck, and it was not long before stewards had cleaned up everything to its usual immaculate state.

Cox's deck chair was removed and its neighbors pushed along to form an unbroken line, so that by the time luncheon was over, no visible sign remained to tell of the tragedy.

The news had, of course, leaked out and seeped among the stewards, and somehow to the ears of the passengers.

And so, gradually, a hush had stolen over the merriment in the dining rooms and one after another asked the reason.

Then, one after another, groups left their tables and went up on deck.

Miss Lily Gibbs and the Campers, whose chairs stood near the place Cox had occupied, looked curiously about as they approached the spot.

"His chair's gone," Miss Gibbs cried. "It must be true!"

"Of course, it's true," Owen Camper returned. "I had it from the purser. Cox was killed—shot, I believe."

"No, not shot—stabbed," said a passing stranger, who paused to talk. The occasion made possible conversations that would not have been thought of otherwise.

Wild stories rumored themselves about and still wilder theories. Many declared that they knew the true facts of the case, although their statements were diametrically opposed to one another.

Many who had chairs in the vicinity shunned them, but curiosity drew others, who sank into the vacated chairs and waited eagerly for news.

The young people were shocked and thrilled by the tragedy, but were far more disturbed at the spoiling of their holiday.

They grouped themselves as far as possible from the scene of interest and tried to go on with their gayety, but it was a dismal failure.

"I do think it's too bad," Sally Barnes sobbed, "if there had to be an awful thing happen on this ship, why couldn't it wait till to-morrow?"

And with the thoughtlessness of youth, the rest of them echoed her wail. Max Trent, having heard the news, made it a point to be in his chair, when Miss Forman came to hers. He didn't know whether

she would be deeply affected, as so many of the women were, even though they were not acquainted with the dead man, or whether she would only feel impersonally the tragic horror of the crime.

But her chair remained vacant all the afternoon. Trent hoped that tea time would bring her out, but she did not appear.

The writer of detective stories lay back in his own chair, talking with no one, joining none of the groups of excited talkers.

Here was a detective story with no detective. What the exact procedure would be, he didn't know, but was intensely interested to learn. Not from the chatterers, however. The passing bits of conversation that came to his ears, proved that those who made the most positive statements, knew the least about the facts. He wanted information from some of the officers and that, he knew, couldn't be obtained until later.

"Come on down to the smoking room for a gabfest," said Pollard Nash, approaching.

Trent hesitated, for he wanted to talk to Miss Forman, should she come out on deck. But Nash insisted, and he went along.

The men in the smoking room, for the most part, talked in guarded terms of the event. Some few were blatant and self-assertive, but they were snubbed into comparative silence by the more conservative.

Those who had known Oscar Cox were the ones who were listened to with deference, and yet they had little to tell.

A man named Allen was speaking, as Nash and Trent went in, and he was saying:

"—And that's all I know of Oscar Cox. To sum up, he was a rich man, who said little about business. As I chance to know, he put over big deals and represented large interests, without publicity."

"Anything wrong about him?" asked a shrewd-looking man named Craig.

"Not that I know of," Allen responded, promptly. "I never heard a breath against his integrity."

Trent looked sharply at the speaker. To him the voice sounded as if Allen made a mental reservation. But, he thought, he might have imagined that.

"You knew him, Mr. Mason?" he said, turning to Sherman Mason, whom he had known and liked for some days.

"Yes, Mr. Trent. And I have had business dealings with him, though not any of great importance. But like Mr. Allen, I can say I have never heard anything that impugned the reputation of Oscar Cox."

"Why the discussion?" asked Nash, who wondered. "Why this necessity for guaranteeing Mr. Cox's honor?"

"Idle questions have been asked," John Allen said, a little severely.

"Who killed him?" said Nash, suddenly, "and what with?"

This question, hitherto unvoiced by the conventionally tongue-tied ones, opened up a perfect Babel of statements, opinions and assumptions, so confusing and contradictory that Nash subsided into silence, watching and listening in the full indulgence of his irrepressible curiosity.

And Max Trent, also curious, listened too, with deepest interest and attention.

None seemed to know the instrument of death, but all were ready to detail the peculiar heinousness and brutality of the crime.

"Butchered—that's what he was, butchered," declared Henry Craig, with that relish of the gruesome inherent in some natures. "Why, if a lion had clawed him, he couldn't have been worse."

"Oh, I say, Craig," broke in Sherman Mason, "spare us a recital of the horrors! What I'm interested in is the identity of the criminal. Who could have done it? Cox seemed a likable sort. Always kind and jolly with the young people, and all that."

"And how was it done?" added Allen. "I mean, how could any one find opportunity to commit such a crime without being seen?"

"The decks were all pretty much empty," Craig asserted. "The Fourth of July luncheon, you know, took people down to the dining rooms who usually lunched outside. Pity Cox hadn't gone down."

"That crime was the result of deep premeditation," Allen observed. "If the mur-

derer hadn't pulled it off when he did, he would have managed it later. I'm of the opinion Cox was doomed before ever he set foot on board."

Pollard Nash said nothing, but he listened intently, and one thing that grounded itself in his intelligence was that Mr. Allen seemed to know a lot about it all.

And just then a steward came to Nash and in low tones asked him to come, at the captain's bidding, to his office.

Without a word, Nash left the room, his hopes high that he might be asked to help investigate the matter. Nor was he doomed to disappointment.

The captain, looking dejected and despairing, greeted him with a nod, and offered a seat. In the room were also the first officer and the doctor.

"We're up against it, Mr. Nash," the captain said. "As you know, of course, I have full power on my ship, I am the sole authority and all that. But how can I punish a malefactor if I don't know who he is? And detective work, even in its most amateur form is out of my line. But I've heard you're interested in it, and more or less experienced."

"Interested, yes, captain, but experienced, no," said Nash, seriously, as Captain Van Winkle paused. "But if I can help in any way—"

"I hope you can—I hope you can," the captain repeated, looking at Nash. "I don't mean regular Scotland Yard work, that will come after we land, but if you could do the investigating that is, I believe, considered so necessary to be accomplished at the very first—in fact, Mr. Nash, what I want of you is a sort of first aid.

"Your trained eye will doubtless see things that are not discernible to me or to my officers. None of us has any talent of this sort, and I'm sure it is a talent. Will you help me out?"

"To the best and farthest extent of my ability, captain," cried Pollard Nash, enthusiastically. "I'm glad to look into it all, for it is most mysterious and desperately interesting. Shall I have full swing, within reason, of course, and shall I report directly to you?"

"Report to me, yes. As to full swing—does that entail inconvenience to passengers?"

"That remains to be seen." Nash spoke gravely. "You realize, of course, captain, that if this murder—it *is* murder?" he looked at the captain and at the doctor, who both nodded: "That this murder must have been committed by some one on board. Then, if clues, whether true or false, point toward an individual, they must be followed down, even at the cost of inconvenience or even offense to that individual or his companions. You see?"

"Yes. But before making individual investigations, confer with me."

"That, of course. Now, tell me, do you know what weapon was used?"

"We do," and the captain nodded at the doctor.

Whereupon Dr. Bowers, removed a cloth from as terrible looking an object as Pollard Nash had ever looked upon.

It was the bronze hand—the awful, clutching, clawing hand of bronze that Oscar Cox had exhibited one day in the smoking room, and had descanted on to an interested group of listeners.

"The bronze hand!" and Nash recoiled from the sight.

For it was still bedaubed with blood, now partly dried and encrusted, but which gave it a far more horrible and ghastly look than the mere cruelty of the grasping bronze.

"You've seen it before?" the captain asked.

"Oh, yes. Cox showed it to a lot of us. He called it both his mascot and his hoodoo."

"What did he mean by that?"

"I'm not quite sure, but he seemed to attach a supernatural significance to the thing, though at the same time, he hooted at such magic."

"It was his property, then?"

"Oh, yes. And a valuable bit, I think." Nash shuddered as he glanced again at the awful object. "It's enormously heavy, you know."

"Yes. It made a diabolical instrument of death. It was found on the floor near the dead man. I had Garson pick it up

with tongs—I know enough to look out for finger-prints."

"Good!" cried Nash, "are there any on it?"

"That we haven't investigated as yet. Perhaps you'll look after that?"

But Nash was already scrutinizing the bronze.

"I think there is none," he said, regretfully. "But, of course, the demon mind that contrived and carried out this crime was too wise to leave finger-prints. We could scarcely expect it."

"Then you think it was a preconceived deed, and not a sudden passionate anger, on the part of some—servant, say,—or steward?"

"It's too soon to decide that, captain. As you know, the first thing to do is to question everybody who can by any possibility tell us anything worth hearing. But before that, may I see the body?"

"Certainly. It is in Mr. Cox's own stateroom."

"And the disposal of it?

"I shall have it embalmed—we have facilities on board—and take it on to Liverpool. There my resposibility for it will end, for the authorities will take it over. But it is my duty to do all I can here and now to learn the identity of the criminal. That is where I ask your help. You will—er—of course, be duly—"

"Never mind that part, captain. If I succeed in finding the villain it will be time enough to talk about remuneration. Just give me a free hand, under your approval, and let me do what I can, in my own way."

Captain Van Winkle, reader of men, liked the attitude of this young amateur detective. Not cocky and self-assured as a professional might be, not full of bumptious enthusiasm as a beginner sometimes is; but sane, rational and moderately hopeful, Nash inspired confidence and hope in the heart of the harassed captain of the Pinnacle.

Dr. Bowers led the way to the locked stateroom of the late Oscar Cox and opened the door to Nash.

As the two men entered, Hudder appeared, apparently from nowhere, and begged that he might go in, too.

"Certainly," said Nash, in answer to the doctor's inquiring glance. "Why not?"

So the three men went in, and Nash bolted the door.

But when Bowers turned down the covering sheet, one glance was enough for Pollard Nash. Too much, indeed. He turned away hastily, and went to the open porthole.

"My God, man!" he cried, "only that devilish bronze hand could have compassed such a death as that! Only a Bengal tiger could compete with it! I had but a momentary glance, yet I took it all in. It is eternally photographed on my brain. I never need look again. I have seen the body!"

He sank into an armchair, for Oscar Cox's stateroom was one of the best on the boat, and buried his face in his hands.

"Give me a minute," he said, "just a minute. There, I'm all right now."

The noiseless and ubiquitous Hudder offered him a glass of water from the private bathroom adjoining, and inquired solicitously if he would have some spirits in it.

"No," said Nash, staring at this man, who was usurping the prerogatives of a host. "No, Hudder. Stand still, I want to talk to you."

Hudder stood still, and at attention, while Nash fairly fired questions at him.

"Where was Mr. Cox bound for?"

"London."

"On what errand?"

"Business—so far as I know."

"But you don't think it was entirely or only business!" Nash was intuitive.

"I don't. But I know nothing."

"Were you to go with him wherever he went?"

"Wherever he went?"

"Yes, wherever he went. Or, were you to return to America after the ocean trip was finished?"

Hudder stared.

"I supposed I was to go wherever Mr. Cox went. I heard nothing to make me think otherwise."

For some reason Hudder chose not to use his "sir" with the young man.

Nash neither noticed nor cared for the omission.

"Why do you think there was something other than business in Mr. Cox's plans abroad?"

Now there was something compelling in Nash's manner. An urge, an impetus to talk. Had he been called upon to explain it, he would have said that his own eagerness, his insistence on a reply, brought forth the reply even against the will of the speaker.

And so, Hudder, almost involuntarily, expanded a little.

"I don't exactly know, but there was a kind of suppressed excitement, a smothered anticipation in my master's manner at times, that I can explain in no other way, except that he looked forward to some pleasure or some honor to be given him in London."

"You are an educated man, Hudder. You have a vocabulary."

As this called for no direct response it received none.

Dr. Bowers, deeply interested, sat on the edge of his chair, taking it all in. So this was the way detectives worked! H'm.

"Did Mr. Cox expect to be killed by that bronze hand?" Nash returned to his volleying system.

"Oh, no, sir!"

"Why did he carry it about with him?"

"I only know that he was fond of it, always had it by him, and said it would be a means of defense against burglars or marauders."

"I see. And it proved a means of attack instead of defense. How did the murderer get it, Hudder?"

"I've no idea, sir. Mr. Cox always kept it lying on his dresser, or on his night table."

"I see. And it was in place this morning—do you know?"

"I think so, sir." Hudder began to realize Nash's worth. "But I'm so accustomed to the sight of it, it might have been missing and I would not notice it."

"I know what you mean. The things we always see about us, seem to be there whether we see them or not."

Dr. Bowers laughed. "Your statement is not much more lucid than Hudder's, Mr. Nash. "But I think I see what you both mean."

"Of course you do," Nash returned, "and that is, that any one could have stepped in and taken the bronze hand. The door was not kept locked, was it, Hudder?"

"No, sir, Mr. Cox never locked his stateroom door. His valuables were in his trunk;" Hudder nodded toward a large trunk in the corner of the room, "except what he had put in the purser's safe."

"Yes. As I say, any one could step in and pick up the hand, pocket it, and pass on without causing comment, even if seen."

"But who did?" asked the doctor.

"That's our problem. But a preliminary is to see how it could be done and we've at least seen how the weapon could have been obtained. It may be it wasn't done that way, at all. Maybe Mr. Cox gave the hand or lent it to some one he knew. Or it may be he had it with him on deck, showing it, say, to somebody. But the hand was here within the last day or two, eh, Hudder?"

"Oh, yes, certainly. And I'm pretty sure it was here this morning."

"Call the room steward."

The response to this was the appearance of a big, stolid-looking fellow named Andrews.

He declared that he was certain the bronze hand was on Mr. Cox's table when he had done up the room that morning.

He remembered it especially, wondering why the gentleman should want such a fearsome looking thing about.

"Did you think it fearsome, Andrews, even before it was used to harm Mr. Cox?"

"I did, sir. It was an evil-looking hand. A hand that meant trouble."

"Imaginative nature," Nash murmured. "When were you in here, Andrews?"

"About ten or eleven o'clock. I go my rounds then. Mr. Cox generally is out of his room by ten."

"Did you see him this morning?"

"Yes, sir. I always bring him coffee at eight."

"He seemed just as usual?"

"Just exactly, sir. Gay like, because he said it was his country's birthday. And he gave me a pound."

"You noticed nothing different from his usual manner?" and Nash turned to Hudder.

"Nothing at all. He gave me a gift, too. He always does on the Fourth of July."

"I see. That will do, Andrews, you may go, for the present. I'll see you again. Now, Hudder, what men on board did Mr. Cox know best?"

"I don't know."

"I think you do. At least, to some extent. And let me tell you right now, Hudder, you're in a peculiar position. You're the only man on this boat who knew Mr. Cox intimately. I mean in a personal—a very personal way. So you will be questioned a great deal, both on board and after we arrive in Liverpool. If you'll take my advice, you'll tell a perfectly true story and stick straight to it. You can be a lot of help to us, or you can be a hindrance. And I warn you, if you choose the latter rôle, you'll find yourself in deep waters. Understand?"

It was plain to be seen that Hudder did understand, but he merely drew his head back in that peculiar way he had and said, stiffly:

"Yes, sir."

"All right, I'm glad you do. Now, then, what men on this boat sometimes came into this room—into Mr. Cox's stateroom?"

"How can I tell that? I was not here when my master had guests."

"What men came into this room?" repeated Nash, and again his power of compelling a reply showed its force.

"Mr. Craig," Hudder said reluctantly.

"Go on."

"And Mr. Allen and Mr. Camper. I don't remember of any more."

"Very well, if you really don't. But don't hold back any names, as you value your own well-being."

"And Mr. Trent and Mr. Mallory and yourself," Hudder brought out with a jerk, as if emptying a pitcher of its last drop.

Nash laughed.

"Mallory and I were here once," he said to Bowers. "And I think Trent perhaps once or twice. I think I can eliminate the three of us from any list of suspects. Any more, Hudder?"

"Not that I know of. Mr. Cox may have had others that I didn't see."

Nash nodded, sure now that Hudder was telling all he knew on this subject.

"Next thing," he said, with a serious glance at Dr. Bowers, "is the matter of Mr. Cox's private papers. It is necessary that they be gone through, and if the captain hasn't time, I suppose he will deputize you or the first officer to help me. I shouldn't like to take the responsibility alone. Hudder, where are Mr. Cox's papers?"

"Papers?"

"I'll throw a bootjack at you if you don't stop that parrot repetition of my words! I hate it! Yes, papers—see! papers. Where are Mr. Cox's personal and private papers, and don't you dare say 'papers' again!"

"In his trunk, sir," and Hudder was again the wooden, impassive servant.

"Oh, they are. Which compartment?"

"Here," and Hudder went to the trunk. He approached it on tiptoe, as if afraid of a reprimand from the still, covered shape on the bed.

"There is a drawer, you see, that has been fitted with a lock. The—what you want, sir, is in there."

"Yes, and where is the key?"

"In—in Mr. Cox's pocket, sir."

"Get it out."

But this was too much. Hudder bolted from the room.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Stan Willis, Cowboy

By GEORGE M. JOHNSON

Author of "Fenced Water," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CHAPTER I.

FAMILY PRIDE.

DOROTHY HUNTER entered the living room of the ranch house, where her father sat at his desk writing.

"While you're about it, dad, let me have a check for two sixty-five," said she. "My wardrobe's pretty seedy, and I've just filled out an order blank. The sooner I get it off the sooner those glad rags will arrive. Goodness knows they'll be as welcome as rain in a dry spell."

Sherwood Hunter glanced up from his work in surprise.

"You mean you want two hundred and sixty-five dollars for clothes, Dorothy?" he demanded.

"Yes, please," and the girl smiled sweetly at him.

"I'm sorry, my dear, but it is utterly impossible. I haven't that much money in the bank."

It was Dorothy's turn to be surprised.

"But I thought you got a check for that last shipment of steers a week or so ago," she faltered.

"I did. But the money is practically all gone."

"I don't see how that can be. Between three and four thousand dollars, wasn't it?" Her pretty face wrinkled in a puzzled scowl.

"There were a number of uses for that money," Sherwood Hunter explained defensively. "The cowboys had eight months' pay due them, and certain other pressing matters required settlement."

He broke off, not going into details. Dorothy's lips set in a firm, hard line. When she spoke her voice was harsh.

"And without doubt a couple of thousand or so went to square some more of Jack's gambling losses."

Sherwood Hunter looked silently at her, his very silence an admission that her accusation was true.

"A fine state of affairs, isn't it, dad!" she said icily. "There seems no limit to Jack's drawing account for clothes, gambling bills, or what-not, while I can help myself to what's left—and the pickings are pretty thin when he's through. Aren't men the lucky dogs, though?"

"I can't blame you for feeling bitter," Hunter sighed. "Yet you don't wholly appreciate the situation. Jack's obligations were debts of honor which had to be paid. Our family escutcheon has never before been stained by the blemish of dishonorable dealings. Surely you would wish it to remain clean."

"By all means!" though the girl's voice was scornful. "Debts of honor, as you term them, should naturally have precedence over a woman's instinctive love for pretty clothes." Slowly her fingers tore to shreds the mail order blank in her hands. "But it strikes me that Jack might show a trace of responsibility concerning this famous name he bears. I'm slightly weary of paying for his numerous flings. That's what it amounts to, isn't it?"

"You mustn't be too hard on poor Jack," her father protested. "The boy has many splendid qualities, though I admit his mania for gambling distresses me. Still he is not entirely to blame. Your grandfather fought the same curse all his life. The thing skipped one generation, passing me by, only to settle with double force on your unfortunate brother. I feel it more than you suspect, Dorothy."

Hunter's face saddened, as he remained silent for the space of some seconds.

"It grieves me to refuse you money, my dear," he went on. "Do you suppose for an instant that my love for you is less than for your brother, however I may seem to favor him. You can't be so unjust, Dorothy.

"I know I am not blameless. Years ago I should have been more strict with Jack, but I dared not risk it; many a blooded, high-strung colt has been ruined in that way. Now, I fear, it is too late."

Sherwood Hunter's voice quivered as he spoke; his head slumped forward in dejection and discouragement.

A quick spasm of tenderness shot through Dorothy. She was shocked at the sudden realization that her father was an old, old man, and drew near to him, gently stroking his gray hair.

"Poor dad!" she whispered. "I understand. Forgive me for being nasty."

At this moment a step sounded without the room, and Jack Hunter strode blithely in. He was a handsome sort of chap, though a certain lack of strength in the set of his chin detracted in some measure from his appearance.

He was immaculately dressed in cowboy trappings, every item of the best quality obtainable, from the silk handkerchief knotted about his neck to the embossed, high-heeled boots of soft russet leather which adorned his aristocratic feet. The ensemble was, on the whole, quite striking—and well Jack knew it.

"Ah—a touching tableau!" he exclaimed jauntily, as he spotted the silent pair.

Dorothy's clear gaze swept her brother contemptuously.

"That remark is brutal and ungentlemanly, Jack," she told him. "It was uncalled for. Really."

"Can it, sis!" he exclaimed. Then to his father, "I'm riding into town, colonel. What's the chance for a touch this morning?"

"I can't spare a cent, Jack. Dorothy needed money for new clothes, and I had to refuse her. You'll have to get along without it this time."

"As you say, sir," Jack retorted indifferently. "But I can't see that you need any new duds, sis," he added after a frank inspection. "You look all right to me."

"Indeed!" Dorothy flared. "You seem to think that you're the only member of the family who has occasion to imitate the lilies of the field. You—the Beau Brummel of the Range!"

Jack rolled himself a cigarette, lighted it, and nonchalantly filled his lungs with smoke which he slowly exhaled.

"Not my fault if I beat you to the exchequer while the beating is good," he drawled. "You ought to be wise by this time. I am!"

"I certainly should be wise, as you so elegantly express it!" the girl cried tensely. "Wise that you are an undutiful, selfish cad, who is willing enough to break his father's heart in the gratification of his own unwholesome desires."

Jack's face flushed with anger, while Sherwood Hunter plucked at the girl's arm.

"Please, Dorothy!" he whispered. "For my sake!"

"Aren't we a fine family!" she cried, struggling against the tears that threatened to fill her eyes to overflowing. "Our vaunted ancestors must be proud—if they can see us now! Let's hope they can't."

"Dorothy!" her father implored, an agony of pain in his voice.

"All right, dad. I'm sorry. But sometimes I just have to break out—or go mad. What in the world are we coming to?"

"No call for heroics as I can see," her brother grumbled testily. "Everything sails on all right until you hop off in a spasm and stir up a hornets' nest."

"Your sister is quite right, Jack," Sherwood Hunter spoke up unexpectedly. "We must come to a definite understanding, as we should have long ago. I shall have to demand a pledge from you."

"What you getting at?" Jack demanded, a trifle uneasily.

"This gambling for big stakes must cease—absolutely; as long as you have no money to pay your losses. I don't say you must stop gambling, though I should be gratified if you did. You are too old for me to order about in that way, and I readily concede any gentleman a right to gamble within his means. But when I have to cripple my business and deprive your sister of the little luxuries she justly craves in order to square your gambling losses at Belle Fourche, it is high time to call a halt.

"Now to the point. Promise me that you will never again risk money not your own."

"All right," Jack grunted ungraciously. "I promise."

"On your sacred honor. Repeat those words, Jack," the old man insisted, glancing shrewdly at his boy from under bushy eyebrows.

"On my sacred honor I promise," Jack responded, looking Sherwood Hunter squarely in the eye.

"Thank you, Jack. It is hardly necessary for me to remind you that no Hunter ever yet broke such a promise."

"You don't need to rub it in, sir," Jack muttered in a disgruntled tone.

"Of course I don't! Forgive me, my boy."

The thud of hoof beats on the sunbaked clay outside came as an interruption to this scene. Jack glanced through a window.

"It's Ashland," he told them. Not hard to guess whom he's come to see," and the young man sent a meaning look at his sister. "Big Tim himself."

"Hello, the house!" a hearty voice boomed. Hunter stepped to the open window.

"Good morning, Mr. Ashland," he called. "Come right in."

"Morning, Miss Dorothy! Howdy, gents!" the newcomer breezily shouted.

Ashland was a big man, with a dominating personality that seemed to fill to overflowing any room which he entered. He did not affect cowboy regalia, dressing himself in the more formal style of frontier garb.

"It's too fine a morning to be indoors," Ashland went on, speaking more particularly to Dorothy. "That last rain has stirred up things on the range in great shape; flowers sprouting everywhere. I want to tell you it's right pretty. And I was thinking you might be induced to take a little ride with me. How about it, Miss Dorothy?"

She hesitated for the merest fraction of a second. Then—

"Why, yes, Mr. Ashland, I'll be glad to go. It will take me only a few minutes to get ready."

After the girl had left, an awkward air of restraint fell on the three men. Ashland was the first to break its spell.

"I reckon you'll be entering one or two events in the rodeo next week," he said to Jack.

"I'm in on the steer roping anyway," Jack replied. "Don't know about the other events. I haven't a pony fast enough for the races, and I'm not quite good enough at broncho peeling to stand a chance there. Going into that might ruin my show for the roping."

"True enough," Ashland assented absently, his eyes on the door through which Dorothy would reappear. "A wise hunch to keep out of the broncho riding."

Conversation thereupon languished, each of the men secretly relieved when Dorothy's arrival put an end to the strain. She wore a riding suit of olive khaki which showed off to advantage the lithe grace of her slim figure. Ashland's eyes glowed in ill-concealed admiration as he surveyed her.

"My word, Miss Dorothy," he exclaimed. "You'd make a peach of a cowgirl. Right out of a picture."

She dropped him a mocking curtsy.

"Thanks, so much, for your kind words! Don't you think I ought to enter the rodeo?"

"You'd knock 'em cold," Ashland assured her. "Not another girl would have a chance."

"Others would probably not agree with you. However, I have no desire to enter. Jack will have to represent the family."

The two left the room together, leaving Jack and his father alone.

"Big Tim seems badly smitten with the charms of my fair young sister," Jack remarked flippantly. "The family sure is slipping—when the owner of Belle Fourche's most prosperous joint can aspire to connect himself with it. I'm surprised that you countenance such doings, dad. Things wouldn't go like this—back in Kentucky."

Sherwood Hunter glanced disapprovingly at the young man, who had spoken in his characteristic devil-may-care tone.

"A question of this sort deserves more serious consideration than you give it, Jack. I should certainly prefer Dorothy to marry a man of a different profession, and yet Ashland is at heart a gentleman. He is highly thought of in the community, and it is said that his games are fairly run. After all we are not living in the East, and it is unjust to judge Ashland by Eastern standards. In some respects he would make your sister an ideal husband; he is generous and affectionate in disposition, and would do all in his power to make her happy."

Jack smiled wryly at his father's words.

"Not to mention the all-important fact that he is well heeled with the mazuma, while our poor old Circle Star Ranch is perilously close to its last legs. Some of Ashland's money would be a godsend, and no mistake. Well, if you and Dot can stand it, there's no occasion for me to kick."

Meanwhile Dorothy and Ashland were sending their ponies out over the flower-studded range in a brisk gallop. A becoming flush of color glowed in the girl's cheeks and her eyes sparkled with delight as she eagerly drank in the fresh, clean atmosphere.

She was passionately fond of horseback riding. Already the disagreeable scene at the ranch house was forgotten in the enjoyment of the moment. Ashland studied her covertly.

"Isn't it beautiful!" Dorothy cried impulsively, as their animals slowed down to a walk. "There's something about spring on the open range that gets into my blood. If we could only have the flowers all summer! What a pity they have to die so quickly!"

"It is too bad," Ashland assented. "But a true Westerner loves the open range at all times—summer or winter, spring or fall. Each season has its own charm."

For a moment they were silent; as the horses again broke into a trot.

"I was glad to hear you're not planning to take part in the rodeo," Ashland remarked.

"Why? What difference would it make to you?"

"Well, I don't like to see a nice girl go in for such things. I know some do, but I think it's bound to have a coarsening influence. Rodeo stunts are properly a man's job. But you will be among the spectators, of course?"

"Oh, yes, I'll be there, taking it all in. Jack is expecting to win first prize in the roping contest."

"Let's hope he has good luck. Now as to the dance the last night. It will not be

at all what a person might expect. None of the regular dance hall girls will be there, and the committee in charge aim to keep it altogether respectable. May I have the pleasure of your company, Miss Dorothy? I'd regard it as an honor."

"I hadn't planned to go," she told him, "but from what you say I imagine it will be all right. Yes, you may take me."

"Thank you," he retorted.

A little farther on:

"I wonder if I might talk seriously with you, Miss Dorothy?"

She flashed him a searching look before replying. Instinctively Dorothy knew where such a talk must trend; the thought was not appealing to her.

"I'd rather you wouldn't, Mr. Ashland."

"You can't discourage me so easily, Dorothy." This was the first time he had ventured to drop the "Miss" in addressing her. "You must know how I feel towards you. Will you marry me? A simple yes from your lips would make me the happiest man in the world."

She blushed in unhappy embarrassment.

"I'm sorry. What you wish is impossible."

"Nothing is impossible!" He bent close to her, impetuous in his ardor. Dorothy's eyes dropped before his gaze. "What objections have you to me?" Ashland insisted.

She hesitated, loath to say what was in her mind.

"My feelings are beyond the pin feather stage," he reminded her. "You may as well be frank."

"I suppose that's best," and Dorothy mustered up a feeble little smile. "But really you should know my reasons. Isn't it enough that Jack is breaking dad's heart and making my life one of misery through frequenting your place at Belle Fourche? We can't afford to lose the money he is throwing away."

"Jack has lost rather heavily," he admitted. "I've been sorry to see it. But what do you expect of me? Jack's a grown man. Shall I refuse to admit him within my doors?"

"He would resent that. The result could only be to make matters worse."

"Just what I think. Now if I were a member of a family—your husband—would not friendly advice, put to Jack in a diplomatic way, stand a good chance of being taken? A better chance, that is, than coming from an outsider?"

Dorothy remained silent, staring out across the rolling plains.

"I see you agree with me. Why not consider my offer from the viewpoint of your brother's welfare—and your father's. He thinks the world of Jack, and I know he does not disapprove, not altogether, at least, of me."

"It is impossible," the girl repeated, her voice hardly audible.

"Why impossible?"

"I don't love you."

"That's a small detail." Ashland swept it aside as of scanty importance. "Perhaps you don't love me now, but love would come later. I'd be so good to you that you couldn't help loving me."

Dorothy shuddered at the picture his words stirred up in her mind.

"Mr. Ashland," she said tonelessly, "I have not been entirely frank with you. Your profession—the way your money has come—is an impassable barrier between us. After what I've said to Jack and dad about his gambling, I couldn't hold up my head before them if I married you."

Ashland sought to speak, but she hurried impulsively on:

"We had a scene only this morning, just before you came."

"I thought something had happened," Ashland muttered, half to himself. "Listen, Dorothy; I'm simply mad about you. There is nothing I wouldn't do; no sacrifices I would balk at—to win you. I'll sell out my business; invest in cattle, and run a gambling house no longer. What do you say to that?"

She shook her head miserably.

"I can't. Please don't urge me further."

"But if I did all that to please you—Wouldn't there be a chance of your learning to care for me—some time?"

"All your wealth has come through the wretchedness of others. Think of the wives and sisters who have suffered—as I have suffered; and poor old dad, as well—be-

cause of the money that has gone into your pockets. Gambling money is stained with sordid misery, blood money. I couldn't touch any of it!"

"You are unreasonable, it seems to me," Ashland said coldly. "But I refuse to give up hope. Isn't there anything I can do for you—to show my sincerity?"

"Surely I haven't the right to ask favors—after saying all these horrible things about your business."

"Then there is something I can do!" Ashland cried eagerly. "I knew there must be. What is it, Dorothy? Tell me."

"Jack promised dad this morning, on his sacred honor, never to gamble again beyond his means of paying. I ought not to tell you this, I know."

"Why not?" Ashland demanded practically. "Go on, my dear."

A flicker of resentment gleamed momentarily in Dorothy's clear eyes at his term of endearment, but she uttered no protest.

"As you may know, dad is childishly proud of the family name and family honor. A generation ago we amounted to something back in Kentucky. Times have sadly changed."

Ashland nodded sympathetically.

"Well, I fear Jack will not keep that promise, and I know that if he fails it will be poor dad's death blow. The knowledge that his only son, the boy who means everything to him, had sunk so far from the lofty ideals he and his ancestors have always cherished would surely kill him."

"And what can I do about it?"

"Couldn't you use your influence with Jack, as far as possible? Don't let him gamble on credit. And if he does lose heavily, please, for my sake, help prevent dad's hearing of it. I am thinking of him—not Jack. Poor dad is getting old; I didn't realize how he had failed till this morning. He must be spared at any cost the agony that, I'm afraid, Jack is destined to cause him."

Her words *at any cost* flared through Ashland's brain in letters of fire. *At any cost!*

"And what do I get in return?"

Dorothy faced him with blazing eyes.

"You begged a chance to do something for me. I didn't know you were bargain hunting!"

"Forgive me. I didn't mean it as you understood. I'll gladly do all I can to help you and your father. But may I not claim the privilege of your friendship? I ask no more than that; will hold you to no more."

"Yes," Dorothy answered softly, "you may have my friendship—and my undying gratitude."

CHAPTER II.

AN EVENING AT BELLE FOURCHE.

BIG Tim Ashland sat in his office, a small portion walled off from the corner of the main gambling room of his establishment. Along the edge of this room extended the bar, a number of attendants busy behind it, for the evening was well along and business was rushing.

Poker, roulette, Mexican monte, faro, and other games of chance flourished, every table occupied by men who were lured on by the hope of easy money—the fascination of something for nothing, a fortune on the turn of a card or the uncertain peregrinations of a tiny steel ball. The subdued hum of voices filled the room, with the ceaseless tinkle of glasses at the bar and the click of coins or poker chips. The floor above served as a dance hall, where an automatic piano was grinding out tinpanny ragtime to the accompaniment of shuffling feet.

A saturnine smile played on the features of Big Tim as he gazed forth from his shelter on this scene of bustling activity. His glance fell on the roulette wheel, over which Jack Hunter was eagerly bending, while the croupier chanted in monotonous repetition,

"Round and round the little ball goes;
Where she'll stop nobody knows."

Yet absolute adherence to truth and candor forces from us the statement that the croupier's song stood in need of revision; *he*, at least, knew where the little ball would stop. In fact, its movements were wholly within his control.

He watched it with the tolerant indifference of some all-powerful god who

eyes the whirling progress through space of a pygmy world, serene in the knowledge that a crook of his finger could send it crashing to destruction.

Ashland caught the eye of Gus Benton, his right hand man, manager of the gambling hall. He motioned the latter to approach.

"Shut the door, Gus," was Big Tim's curt command as Benton obeyed the summons. In a lower voice Ashland demanded; "How's Jack Hunter making out?"

"Two or three hundred dollars ahead." Benton told him.

Ashland scowled.

"Slip the word to Stormy French to bear down hard on him. I want Jack cleaned out—in short order."

"All right, chief," and Gus Benton rose to depart; Big Tim detained him by an imperious gesture.

"Wait! I'm not through with you."

Ashland stared silently and speculatively at his manager; his firm white teeth bit the end from a cigar, the mate of which he tossed over to Benton.

"I'm going to trust you quite some bit, Gus," he said presently.

"That's all right, chief. I reckon I'm trustworthy."

"I reckon you are," Ashland dryly assented. "You wouldn't be holding down the job you've got if I suspected otherwise. It don't pay any one in my hire to be anything but trustworthy. Now I've some special work laid out for you, Gus, which you're to play close to your chest. Judgment and brains are required, and I'm paying you the compliment of assuming you've been endowed with a fair share of each. If you ain't got 'em, both of us are out of luck.

"Now here's the layout.

"As soon as Jack Hunter goes broke at the roulette wheel, I want you to make up to him. Sympathize with the poor unfortunate cuss. Give him a couple drinks on the house. Tell the kid that his luck's due to change; that he's plumb crazy to quit. He may insist that he's through, but don't let him get away. Slip him another brace of drinks instead. Next I want you to stake him to a thousand dollars. Here's the money," and Big Tim passed over to Benton a collection of gold coins.

"Force the change on him. Tell him he can pay you back after he's made a killing. You can pretend to be sore at me if that seems a good line to follow, and at the same time well disposed towards him. I don't think you'll have much trouble making him fall for the play. Use your own judgment in the kind of bait you tie on the hook; but get the sucker."

"And of course he loses the cash right away," Benton put in understandingly.

"Of course!" Ashland assented, the saturnine gleam again showing in his eyes. "Only I don't want him to lose it too quick. Have Stormy kid him along; give him a run for the money.

"The next step—later on; after a decent interval—is for you to get scared. Tell Hunter that the thousand dollars didn't belong to you but to the house, and that you've suddenly learned that I'm going to check up on your accounts. You've got to be paid back—immediately."

"I gotcha, chief."

"Jack won't be able to pay you, and so you tell him to get the cash from his dad—as he's done before. Lay it on pretty thick. There you'll have him, because I happen to know he's just promised the old gent that he's off gambling when he can't make good his losses on the spot. Solemnly sworn to on the sacred though somewhat moth-eaten honor of the Hunter tribe," and Big Tim smiled mirthlessly. "Jack will be in hot water if his dad finds out; that's something I'm pretty sure of.

"So when young Hunter refuses to touch his dad—as he will refuse," Ashland resumed meditatively, "your play is to look worried. You're in a hell of a fix. You've just got to have that money to protect yourself. See? And you drop a hint that you may have to approach Colonel Hunter on your own account. When Jack begins to get desperate you can ease up on him a trifle and say that perhaps you can cover the business for a time, but you've positively got to have the coin by ten days from to-night. Just what happens ten days from to-night, Gus?"

Benton swiftly reflected.

"The last day of the rodeo," he replied. "In the evening is the big dance."

"Correct. And late that evening Jack Hunter will crack my safe, to get the money to pay you."

Benton showed no surprise; merely asking,

"Do I arrange for that too, chief?"

"Yes, indirectly. Hoke Channing will put the proposition up to Jack. I've got the hooks in Channing, because you and I know that he shot the deputy two months ago.

"The sheriff would be right glad to learn who killed that man of his, and you can assure Hoke that he will get the information if the play doesn't go through according to schedule. I'll leave three thousand or so in the safe that night and forget to whirl the dial. Hoke can throw a bluff about knowing the combination and open the door himself. Then that young fool Hunter won't get suspicious over the easy time they have getting to the cash box."

Ashland paused to take a reflective drag at his Havana.

"The gold coins planted there will all be marked," he resumed. "Hunter will pay you the thousand, and when you turn it over to me to square our accounts, I'll naturally spot the stuff as stolen. I accuse you of the theft—this is all part of the game, you understand, Gus—and you tell me where the money came from. Which gives me the strangle hold I want on Jack Hunter."

Gus Benton regarded his employer in undisguised admiration.

"That's some play you've worked up," he ejaculated. "I'll sure hand it to you, chief. You'll have Jack Hunter where the hair is short."

"Oh, I'm not especially interested in young Hunter," Ashland said carelessly. "He's merely a means to an end. I'm looking further, as it happens."

Gus Benton's eyebrows lifted expressively.

"The plot thickens!" he exclaimed. "I wondered what it was all leading up to, but now I get you. All's fair in love and war, eh, chief? Well, the best of luck to you!"

"It depends mainly on you, Gus," Ashland said seriously. "If you follow the lead I've given the thing can't fail. Run through the synopsis, just to make sure you've got everything straight."

Benton did so.

"Keno!" Ashland approved. "You're letter perfect. Now, let's see how good an actor you are, Gus. Hop to it. Oh, by the way," as Benton started to leave—"I overlooked mentioning one important detail. If things break right, you'll receive a couple of thousand for yourself as a sort of bonus."

"Now, that's mighty fine of you, chief!" Gus exclaimed in deep gratification.

"Not at all. I always believe in paying well for services that deserve good pay. On your way, Gus—and be discreet. You know!"

"Right!" Benton said meaningly; and he was gone.

Ashland leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling through the haze of smoke from his cigar.

"So you're too good to marry a gambler, are you, Miss Dorothy?" he mused vindictively. "Accuse me of bargain hunting, did you? Some high-toned notions in that pretty little head of yours, strikes me. That is something we'll have to see about. You tipped your hand when you told me about Jack's promise—and how old Colonel Hunter must be saved from knowing that the family honor had been trailed in the dust. *At any cost*, too. If merely a broken promise might kill the old gentleman, what will happen to him when he learns that the pride of his heart has not only broken a sacred promise, but is also in line for a stretch in the hoosegow after being convicted of safe breaking?

"But of course he will never learn the horrid facts about his son. Miss Dorothy, like an affectionate, dutiful daughter, will see her way clear to spare him that knowledge—at my price; namely and to wit, uniting herself to me in the holy bonds of matrimony.

"I don't say I'd rather do it this way, but she showed clear enough that my

chances are zero otherwise. She forced my hand, and I'd be a fool not to take full advantage of the opportunity. As Gus so aptly expressed it, 'All's fair in love and war.'

"Now we'll sit tight and see how the game breaks."

CHAPTER III.

MEET STAN WILLIS!

DOWN from the hills came a rider, body swaying to the rhythmic lope of his horse with a careless, graceful ease born of a lifetime spent in the saddle. All roads led to Belle Fourche, and the widely advertised rodeo, planned as an added attraction to the three-day meeting of the Stock Growers' Association. It was one of these roads our rider followed.

Others drifted along in the same general direction over many trails: cow-punchers from ranches far and near, knights of the lariat, lords of the unfenced range, eager for what pleasures the frontier town might throw their way.

Some there were who betook themselves to Belle Fourche solely from selfish motives: purveyors of dubious amusements, gamblers, gun-slingers, painted women; in short, all the riffraff who fattened like vultures at the expense of the cowboys, ever heedless where their hard-earned money went.

But he is worthy of more than a passing glance, this rider of ours. Any man might well have envied him his splendid physique, developed from clean living and hard riding over rolling plain and through the mountain parks. And a woman could excusably have envied him that clear, untroubled blue of his eyes.

Blue they were with the matchless tint of a cloudless sky mirrored in the placid surface of Cañon Lake, up in the hills Yet there was nothing effeminate in the glance that came from those smiling eyes; on occasion you might see their color change to a slaty, steel-like gray, cold as an iceberg, twin points of light that glittered balefully and flashed a danger signal to all who were wise enough to heed.

The rider's equipment comprised the conventional trappings of a cow-puncher, from broad-rimmed Stetson to jingling spurs—with of course the inevitable six-gun slung low on his right thigh, and cartridge-studded belt.

Such was Stan Willis—a typical cowboy in many respects, and yet no ordinary wrangler; in all the country that stretched between White River and the Grand you could not have found his equal.

Stan Willis shook his bridle reins happily; well-earned rest and relaxation lay ahead; behind was the toil and hardship of a good job well done. And as he rode Stan lifted his voice, caroling stray snatches of the old trail ballad whose plaintive melody has escorted countless steers northward in the bygone days of the big cattle drives:

"Whoopee-ti-yi-yo, roll along, little dogies;
It's your misfortune and none of my own.
Whoopee-ti-yi-yo, roll along, little dogies;
For you know that Wyoming will be your new home."

The lid was off at Belle Fourche, everything wide open and running full blast in honor of the visitors. It was a case of pay your money and take your choice, with a subtle emphasis on the first portion of that free-and-easy ruling.

Willis lounged against the bar at Big Tim's place, fingers toying with a glass of liquor, which now and then he sampled meditatively, as though he enjoyed it. Stan always drank in moderation, prolonging the satisfaction to be derived from the stinging taste of the whisky; he was not the sort who gulped the stuff down, one glass quickly following another, for the sake of the eventual kick. Drinking to excess is likely to prove dangerous—at a time when each man carries his own safeguard in the leather holster on his hip.

So, Stan drank—and took in the scenes about him. In particular he was observing a two-handed game of stud at a table near by. It seemed no different from any of the numerous games run by the house, and to Stan's shrewd eye it was wholly obvious that the house employee was as crooked as a dog's hind leg. It was also equally ap-

parent that the other player, a pleasant-appearing puncher of about Willis's age, was not unaware of the fact.

Stan's curiosity was mildly intrigued as to what the outcome might be. He felt drawn toward this other cowboy, who impressed Stan as being well able to look after his own interests, and the onlooker had placed a small mental bet with himself that at the final showdown the dishonest gambler would find his hands more than full.

The dénouement arrived with startling suddenness. It was the gambler's deal, and he had given three cards to each, all but the first two, of course, face up. Stan had caught a glimpse of the professional's hole card, the ace of spades. The first bets were heavy. The seventh card went to the cowboy, eighth to the dealer; but Stan's practiced eye did not miss the lightning finger work which slipped that eighth pasteboard from the bottom of the deck.

It was the ace of diamonds. The movement was so deftly done than not one man in a hundred would have perceived it, even if forewarned. But one other besides Stan had taken in the crooked play—the cowboy.

He half rose from his chair with a savage growl, at which the gambler's arm snapped back toward his weapon, thereby signing his own death warrant, for his opponent drew and fired from the hip in a single motion.

With the startling crash of the Colt the room was in instant uproar. Gus Benton was standing near Willis, and in a second had his gun bent on the cow-puncher at the card table.

But even as Benton's finger was about to press the trigger of his gun he felt the muzzle of a pistol jabbed violently into his ribs.

"Easy, hombre!" Stan purred softly. "I'm backing this lad's play, and I've got you coppered—see?"

Gus hesitated, endeavoring without much success to face the uncompromising stare which Stan Willis fixed on him, painfully conscious that his own life was pawn to the cowboy's.

The latter took in the tableau with a grin of comprehension, acknowledging Stan's services by a nod of thanks.

Big Tim Ashland came hurrying up, face growing black with anger as he saw the situation which had developed.

"What's the trouble, Gus?" he snapped.

"This fellow here"—and Gus indicated the cowboy still uselessly covered by his pistol—"shoots Buck down in cold blood, and when I start to salivate him on general principles for the murder I find a gun punched into my floating kidneys."

"What 'd you shoot Buck for?" Ashland demanded of the killer.

"He was cheating," came the reply, an ugly glint in the speaker's eyes.

"That's a damned lie!" Benton exploded. "Buck never cheated anybody in a game of cards. I was standing right here, chief, and I saw it all."

"Of course it's a lie," Ashland savagely agreed. Then he added to the watchful Stan Willis, the muzzle of whose pistol had not wavered from Gus Benton's middle: "What license you got to bust in here?"

"The only license I need I'm holding in my right hand," Stan told him coldly. "I busted in to help out a chap that seemed slated for a raw deal. Furthermore it gives me great pleasure to inform you that this tin-horn lying here asked for what he got. He *was* cheating; also, he made the first pass toward a gun. If the rider your man tried to salivate hadn't beaten him on the draw the killing would have been the other way. What you planning to do about it? Your turn to play, hombre."

For an instant Big Tim was at a loss, for the problem was one that had to be handled carefully, and the fact that the sympathies of most of the bystanders were apparently with Stan and the cowboy was an added complication.

Ashland didn't know Stan Willis, but he was a good judge of character, intuitively recognizing that this strange puncher with the cocked Colt in his hand was more dangerous than a bomb with its time-fuse sputtering.

Big Tim didn't mind bloodshed or killings especially—when they were at the expense of the other side rather than of his own.

"Here comes the sheriff!" some one called loudly.

Ashland's face cleared, evidence that he welcomed this way out of the difficulty.

"Sheriff Gorham 'll take care of you two birds," said he. "You both need a lesson. Can't blow in here and run the town just because we've put welcome on the doormat."

Stan Willis said nothing.

Sheriff Tom Gorham, a lean-jawed man of middle age or a trifle past, strode briskly forward, thumbs hooked in his pistol belt. The sheriff was the possessor of a pair of keen, shrewd eyes that saw much—without seeming to see.

Respectfully the crowd parted to let him through.

"What's all the ruckus about, Tim?" he demanded, glance straying from one to another of the silent group.

Ashland volubly explained how the trouble arose, emphasizing the unprovoked nature of the killing.

"You see it?" the sheriff asked him pointedly.

"Why, no, Tom—not exactly," Ashland confessed.

"Then step down and let some one who did do the talking. I'm after facts, not your impressions. Anybody see the whole play?"

"I did, sheriff!" Gus exclaimed eagerly.

"Me, too," added Stan Willis.

"All right," the sheriff addressed Benton. "We'll hear you first."

Benton's description tallied closely with his employer's.

"What this man says correct?" Gorham then asked of Stan.

"I wouldn't say so," Stan retorted coolly. "You can see the card layout on the table. The dealer has an ace in the hole, and this other fellow—I never saw him before—has a king in the hole and one showing. He bet a lot on that second king. Dealer helped himself to a second ace from the bottom of the deck, and the other man spotted the dirty work and raised a yelp. The dealer started for his forked lightning, but he was too slow a heap. They was no murder done, sheriff, but they would have been murder done if I hadn't stopped this hombre's gun play," and Stan nodded grimly toward Gus Benton.

"It's all a lie, sheriff!" Benton frothed.

"Stop it, Gus!" the sheriff ordered brusquely.

Ashland here reëntered the conversation.

"You don't want to bank too heavy on what some wandering, no-'count dogie wrangler says, sheriff," was his bland remark.

Gorham's searching eyes rested on Stan reflectively.

"Seems like I've seen you somewheres before," he mused. "What's your name, cowboy?"

"Stan Willis."

Figuratively speaking, the sheriff pricked up his ears in sudden interest.

"What was your dad's name, son?"

"Bob Willis."

"Humph! Owner of the—"

"Bar Circle Bar, up north in the Short Pine Hills," Stan prompted him.

"By gum!" the sheriff grunted delightedly. "Can you beat that? Why, son, your dad and me were mighty good friends back in the early days. I saw you once with Bob up in the Deadwood, when you were nothing but a little shaver knee-high to a grasshopper. Well, well—old Bob Willis's boy, eh?"

Big Tim Ashland flashed a significant glance at his manager, a warning that they must shift their sails to meet the changing winds.

"I'm taking young Willis's say-so on this affair, Ashland," the sheriff said. "It 'pears to me likely that his eyes was a little sharper than Gus Benton's. It ain't as if he was a stranger, either, with no one to vouch for him. I know his breed. A Willis couldn't lie, not even if he tried."

For a second Gus Benton lost his self-control.

"Meaning that I'm lying when I say Buck wasn't cheating, do you?" he snarled.

"Shut up, you fool!" Ashland hissed fiercely in his ear.

"Why, you can take it that way, if it 'll make you feel right happy and contented, Gus," Gorham told him mildly. "Though

I wasn't meaning to insinuate that in so many words. What I had in mind was that likely you was mistaken. You can take your pick."

"Chances are Gus was mistaken," Ashland put in smoothly, his fingers savagely gripping Benton's arm. He raised his voice so that the curious crowd might hear. "Buck may not have been playing a straight game. He wasn't with the house any more; this game he was running on his own, so I don't know about his methods and am not responsible for what he did or didn't do. If he was cheating—and I'll have to admit now that it looks that way—I can only say he got what he deserved."

Half an hour later Big Tim was closeted with his right-hand man.

"You didn't show the judgment of a sage hen, Gus," was his comment. "I was a lot disappointed in you when you busted open at the sheriff. Everything went O. K. up to the point where Gorham staged his reunion with that damned young puncher. Right away it was your cue to shift, because a blind man could see how the sheriff was going to play the hand. Instead, you have to fly off your noodle. Isn't it about time you learned which side your bread's buttered on, Gus?"

"I'm darned sorry I acted the fool that way, chief," Benton muttered abjectly. "But that wild young gun-slinging wrangler sure did irritate me. I'm yearning to step on him."

"He's enough to irritate anybody," Ashland assented. "Sometimes it pays to wait, however, and collect on your irritated feelings when the collecting's a sight safer. Well, no matter. Everybody slips once in awhile, and I'm not holding it against you, Gus. Now, what's the latest in that other matter? Jack falling for the play like I planned?"

Benton chuckled.

"He ain't *falling*, chief," he grinned; "the poor fool's *fallen* so far already he can't fall any farther." Then Benton's face abruptly sobered. "There's only one possible hitch that I can see."

"A hitch!" Ashland exclaimed. "I thought everything was covered."

"You must have forgot that thousand-dollar prize for the steer roping the last day," Benton reminded him. "Jack's counting on winning it and paying me back with the purse. If he does, your juicy little scheme is shot plumb full of holes. Why, they ain't anything left to it."

Ashland swore viciously.

"I did overlook that side bet, Gus. And Jack's no slouch with his rope, either. He's got an even chance to come through."

"Just what I've been thinking. So I've fixed it with Hoke Channing not to approach him with the safe-cracking proposition till after the steer contest is over. If Jack loses he'll be so desperate that Hoke won't have no trouble at all in lining him up for any sort of game."

"That's the way to plan it," Ashland agreed. "Come to think of it, Gus, I don't believe we need to worry over the chances Jack has to win. I've just placed Willis now, and if my dope on him is correct he'll be sure to enter the roping—and he's about the best roper in all Dakota. By gad, it's a good thing for us the sheriff didn't throw him in the lockup. Why, that puncher is likely to be our salvation. Don't forget you lose that promised bonus if the scheme falls flat."

"That's all well enough, chief," Benton grumbled; "but I'm telling you this: After the rodeo's over and Stan Willis has done our work for us, there's one fool cowboy that don't go riding gayly out of town. His initials are S. W. He stays here, planted under five feet of Belle Fourche prairie sod. Nobody can pull what he did on me to-night and get away with it."

"Go as far as you like, Gus," Ashland told him pleasantly. "I won't lift a finger to stop you. But if you want a word of advice—as one man to another—watch your step. I sized young Willis up pretty closely this evening, and I'm willing to pass you my deductions for what they're worth. Don't let that puncher fool you; he'll bear watching, Stan Willis will. I figure him for a gun artist."

"He can't hang the Indian sign on me," Benton muttered darkly. "When it comes to flipping the little old Colt I don't figure I need give that wrangler odds, chief."

"Suit yourself, Gus," Big Tim rejoined indifferently. "It's your funeral — not mine."

"*His* funeral, you mean, chief," Benton corrected him.

CHAPTER IV.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

AS the days drifted on it required no gift of second sight to perceive that all was not well with Jack Hunter. Dorothy noticed the change in her brother at once, though Colonel Hunter seemed blind to it.

Jack appeared nervous, distraught, a somber hint of trouble lurking in his gray eyes. At first Dorothy made no mention of it, asked no questions, but finally came to the point of voicing some of the unpleasant doubts in her mind.

"What's wrong, Jack?" she inquired gently.

"Nothing's wrong," he muttered, avoiding his sister's level gaze. "I'm all right."

"I know better. And furthermore, if it's anything dad ought not to know you're in a fair way to betray yourself. You've been going about with a hang-dog expression that should make a blind man suspect you. Even dear old dad, in the blindness of his affectionate trust, can't be fooled forever. Buck up, Jack! Pull yourself together. And you might as well tell me about it."

"Well,—since you must know—" Jack muttered, "I'm in the hole again—to the tune of a thousand dollars."

Dot's eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, Jack! After what you promised dad only a week ago!"

In spite of her anticipation that the promise might not be held sacred, Dorothy was shocked beyond measure by her brother's confession. Mingled with this feeling was resentment at Ashland, who had appeared so insistent that he be allowed to aid her.

The promise regarding Jack and the latter's gambling had seemingly meant little to him. But Dorothy was anxious to be just. After all it was easily possible that Ashland had known nothing of the affair. Her face reflected a mixture of concern and open condemnation.

"How could you do it, Jack? she sighed.

"Don't be too hard on me, sis!" he protested. Gone was all Jack's debonair nonchalance, his jaunty attitude of complacent, satisfied self-esteem. There was left merely a miserable, unhappy boy, who stared guiltily at his sister.

"I feel bad enough now," he went on. "Nothing you can say would make me regret it more. I don't know what to do!"

"How did it happen, Jack?"

"I don't know." There was mingled desperation and defiance in his manner. "It was the booze, I guess—three or four drinks too many. Luck was with me at first and I won a few hundred dollars on the roulette wheel; but then lost all I had. I quit playing, according to my promise, but a fellow stood treat at the bar and wound up by offering me a loan. Before God, Dorothy, I don't know why I took it —except for the whisky. I've got till next Saturday night to raise the money."

Jack's voice broke in the bitterness of his despondency.

"Dad mustn't know!" he muttered. "Whatever happens, dad mustn't know It would kill him."

A flood of sympathy poured through Dorothy's heart as she realized the agony of spirit her brother was suffering. At the moment she easily forgot his selfish, thoughtless acts of the past. Her heart bled for him; she was conscious of the mother instinct to soothe and comfort this brother of hers, who in his sister's mind was still a little boy. Younger by a year, Dorothy was in some respects far older than Jack.

"Poor Jack!" she whispered. "Poor dear!" and her cool hand gently caressed his feverish head. Then she became instantly practical again.

"Of course it must be kept from dad," she assured him. "Have you any chance of getting the thousand dollars?"

"One chance—the roping contest. If I can pull down the big money on the final day of the rodeo everything's all right. But the pick of Dakota riders will be after that

same thousand. I don't dare count on it, though that's my only hope."

"Who loaned you the money, Jack?"

"A chap named Gus Benton."

The name, as it chanced, meant nothing to Dorothy; she had never been interested in Ashland's business, and naturally was unfamiliar with his various associates and employees.

"But I don't understand it, Jack. Why should he lend you money? Surely you didn't ask for it."

"Of course not. But you see Benton's always seemed like a decent guy, and after I'd lost my winnings at the wheel he happened to start talking with me. We had a couple or so drinks together, and then he says I'm foolish to quit when the luck's bound to swing my way if I keep on. He'd been drinking too, and likely that's what made him so generous.

"Anyway we have another drink, and pretty soon I find myself with a thousand dollars of his money. I go back to the roulette wheel—and in a couple hours I'm broke again. It was the booze that put a crimp in my brain. I'd never have played that way cold sober."

"Why must you pay it back at once—so soon?" The whole thing seemed incomprehensible to Dorothy, yet her suspicions were not aroused.

"Why, it appears this lad is in a jam himself; he's got to have the cash—and when he loaned me the money I suppose he figured that dad was good for it in case I lost. So he says he'll have to get it from dad. He won't believe me when I tell him dad hasn't anything right now. I stalled him off as long as I could, but this week's the limit. He'll go after the money himself—and then it's all off."

"Does Mr. Ashland know about it?" Dorothy asked.

Jack shot a startled glance at her.

"No; he wasn't anywhere around; at least I didn't see him all evening. Why are you dragging in his name, Dot?"

"I'm going to the rodeo dance with him. I thought that in case you lost in the roping contest I might be able to use my influence with Mr. Ashland to straighten this up."

"Not that way, Dot!" he gasped. "You mustn't marry Ashland. I'll not have it. Dad thinks he's a gentleman, but I know he's a skunk."

Jack's better nature was cropping to the surface in the mental agony born of his trouble; the true blue blood of his race was showing itself, tardily, to be sure, but showing itself none the less.

Dorothy smiled at him affectionately.

"I'm glad to hear you talk that way, Jack. However, you needn't worry. Nothing of the sort is in my mind. But I have promised Mr. Ashland my friendship, and I believe he may be able to help us. He is very influential in Belle Fourche, you know."

"You're a brick, sis!" Jack muttered gratefully. "And I've been just what you called me last week—a worthless cad."

Dorothy impulsively put her hand on his mouth.

"Don't repeat such things, Jack! I'm ashamed I ever said it. It wasn't true."

"It was true enough," Jack insisted gloomily. "I deserved all you said—and more. God, what a blind, stupid, rotten fool I've been! But I've learned my lesson. If it only isn't too late!"

Dorothy's pensive glance, warm with sympathy and understanding, dwelt for an instant on her repentant brother. This last blow, the sudden realization of what might result from his folly, had indeed made a great change for the better in Jack Hunter. For Jack was not wholly selfish nor wholly a weakling; and now the scales had dropped from his eyes. He could see his past in a new light; could judge himself as another would judge—impartially, ruthlessly.

"I've learned my lesson," he humbly repeated. "All I'm asking is another chance."

"I know you have, Jack," Dorothy told him. "And I don't believe it's too late. It's never too late to start in all over again, even though there may be scars from the mistakes we've made. And the second time we can profit by those mistakes—if we will."

"You're a wonderful sister for a chap to have, Dorothy," Jack said brokenly;

"better than I deserve," and he turned away, so that she might not see the tears in his eyes.

CHAPTER V.

THE END OF THE RODEO.

THE big noise of the Belle Fourche rodeo was the final day and its main event was the steer roping contest, an affair more typically Western even than an exhibition of the professional broncho peeler's art.

The breaking of horses to saddle and bridle is by no means confined to the range country, nor is the bucking proclivity a characteristic of the broncho breed alone. While other countries may boast their superb horsemen, adept in curbing the wildest of unbroken mounts, the steer roping contest is definitely of the West.

In itself the proposition is simple. A steer, fresh from the range, is prodded into a gallop. At the signal—usually a pistol fired into the air—the rider starts, time being taken from the gun shot. His task is to overtake the brute, rope, throw, and finally hog-tie it; that is, lash the animal's four feet firmly together by a short length of rope, carried for convenience loosely fastened about the contestant's waist.

Forty seconds is not unusual for the entire performance, and many a rider has shaded that figure materially. The stunt is one requiring a strong, steady hand; a quick, shrewd eye, and nerves of iron.

For the present occasion the committee in charge had decided to limit the entry field to riders of recognized skill; otherwise the generous purse offered would have attracted so many as to draw the event out to tedious length. Accordingly only those who had displayed real class in the first two days roping were eligible—class in this case being forty seconds or better, each rider allowed but a single chance to do his stuff. A score or more came through the preliminary trials, Jack Hunter and Stan Willis among them.

Dorothy's attention had early been drawn towards Willis, whom she had never seen before. She found herself unaccountably attracted to this strange cow-puncher of the sunny face and smiling blue eyes. There was a smooth, effortless efficiency about his riding; about his management of the whirling coils of rope, that won her ungrudging admiration. He sat in the saddle with a lithe grace that stamped him as a past-master of his craft. She knew that many expert judges had already picked him as logical winner.

Dorothy made no attempt to conceal the interest she felt in this likable cowboy, and with a sudden pang the girl realized that she was on the point of chosing him as her favorite, forgetful that Jack must win the thousand dollars; that her father's happiness and her own peace of mind required him to win.

And yet, somehow, in spite of all these considerations, vitally important though they were, Dorothy could not quite come to the extreme of hoping for Stan's defeat. Bitterly she blamed herself for what she conceived to be disloyalty, but the feeling persisted. If only Jack and this other puncher could both win! Which was hardly possible, to say the least.

Finals in the roping contest were scheduled for afternoon, the conclusion of the program of outdoor sports. At last the time arrived, Dorothy still uncertain, torn between duty to her brother and that vague, intangible feeling towards the stranger.

A pistol cracked for the opening—and there sounded the swift pounding of hoofs as a mounted puncher darted after his lumbering victim, rope spiraling above his head, while a chorus of yells and cheers of encouragement greeted him.

Suddenly the rope left his hand, uncoiling through the air like the rapier stroke of a rattler, to settle full over the branching horns of the steer. Instantly the knowing little cow pony checked himself, rearing back, forefeet braced to withstand the shock. There was a vicious thud as the steer lunged against the taut lariat, and then the animal crashed to the ground in a cloud of dust.

Instantly the rider leaped from his saddle, running towards the prostrate, struggling steer, whipping free the rope

from about his waist as he ran. Every second counted. Meanwhile his faithful assistant did his share in keeping a watchful eye on the steer, ever pulling tight the lariat. A few quick turns of rope—in spite of danger from thrashing legs and flying hoofs of the powerful, maddened brute—and the animal was effectively hog-tied, the rider's uplifted arm signaling that his work was done.

Time keepers checked their stop watches at this signal, and then the judges inspected the job, which had to be well done indeed to pass their keen scrutiny. Thirty-six seconds—and the spectators applauded generously: especially a group of cowboys belonging to the same outfit as the contestant. Their approval was vociferous, as thirty-six seconds might easily prove the high-water mark of that day.

Others quickly followed, the event being run off with a notable lack of tiresome waits. Fresh steers, herded by expert wranglers, were kept in readiness, the same animal never being used more than once.

All the riders did well, closely crowding the figure set up by that first contestant, though not quite equaling it.

"That thirty-six seconds is worth a thousand dollars," one grizzled cattleman remarked to a neighbor, but the latter shook his head in disagreement.

"Sid Peters's mark will look sick within a half-hour," he stated positively. "They's at least two boys to be heard from that will bust it. I'm suspecting that one of 'em will bust it wide open. You ever see Stan Willis ride?"

A shout interrupted the conversation. The mark had just been lowered to 35 seconds.

"That one of your men?" the first cattleman inquired.

"Nope! My money's on Stan Willis. I'll give you odds of three to two that he does better'n thirty-five."

"Say about three hundred to my two hundred?"

"You're on!" And a third party was quickly pressed into service as temporary custodian of the five hundred dollars stake money.

Jack Hunter's turn came next. He was popular, and there was no doubt that many hoped for his success.

Jack appeared nervous and uncertain as he rode his pony up to the starting point, but that nervousness disappeared with the crack of the signaling pistol. Off he dashed, determined to cut a second or two from the unusually fine performance of the preceding rider.

Straight and true sped the uncoiling lariat, settling around the steer's neck; the mad rush of the frightened, confused animal abruptly terminated, and an instant later Jack was upon it, twisting up his rope and knotting it tight with desperate haste.

The watches indicated thirty-three and one-fifth seconds, a wild yell saluting the announcement that all previous records for the rodeo were broken.

Jack Hunter accepted these plaudits with a pleased grin.

"That's one of my two men," the giver of odds announced coolly. "The other's to be heard from yet."

"You'll lose your bet," the grizzled cattleman informed him. "That performance wins the prize. Ain't Willis nor nobody else can beat it to-day."

"I ain't saying a word. Just you wait. That's all. Wait till you see Stan Willis in action."

The next three or four contestants stirred up no particular interest; they were good men, but not a person present in the mob of spectators expected any of them to better Jack's figure—nor did they.

There was a sudden stir as Stan Willis rode forward to take his turn at the game. He was in a way a dark horse, though with something of a reputation preceding his appearance. Few there had seen him ride before the rodeo, but the few who knew him were not hesitant in expressing their confidence.

"Go on, you Stan!" whooped a lean, bronzed cowpuncher in battered, weather-beaten chaps. "Ride 'er, cowboy! Show 'em the brand of ring-tailed, double-action, tail-twisting snorters we raise up in the Short Pine Hills. *Yi! yi! yip!*" and the enthusiastic wrangler's shrill yell rang

out a challenge to all comers to try to beat any rider from the Short Pine Hills.

Dorothy Hunter hardly dared breathe as she watched. The girl knew she should pray that her brother's record withstand all attack; yet there was something so appealing in the friendly smile which lurked in Stan Willis's eyes; they met hers fleetingly as she leaned forward in eagerness.

For a second or two Dorothy imagined that the puncher's smile broadened, as though picking her out from all the other girls who likewise regarded him in frank interest and admiration. Then Stan glanced away, his face sober, settling down to the task before him.

The pistol cracked, and Stan's matchless pony leaped into motion without touch of spur, the snappiest, speediest getaway the rodeo had yet seen.

"Watch this!" hissed the odds-giver. "It's going to be good, I'm telling you. Willis won't go for the steer's neck like the others. He'll rope 'im by the fore feet."

"And miss, if he tries it!" the old-timer grunted.

"Humph! That lad don't miss with rope or gun. He ain't ever learned how."

As he spoke the rope left Stan's grasp, not spiraling through the air in the style approved by his antagonists—but rippling along close to the ground, with all the sinuous grace of a serpent. Squarely through the noose plunged the front feet of the steer. The pony slid on his haunches, fore feet stiff, while Stan leaped clear even before the steer was thrown.

Into the rising dust cloud stirred up by the steer's collapse he dashed. The hog-tying was simple, for two of the brute's feet were already snared. A couple of deft turns with the rope in his hands—a knot snapped tight—and up shot Stan's right arm, to be greeted by a gasp of unbelieving wonder from the spectators.

"You win!" the old cattleman muttered. "No need for any timing on that job. I never see anything quite so speedy in my life."

"Thirty seconds flat!" came the time keepers' announcement, which surprised no one, as all were still held under the spell of Stan's wonderful achievement.

"What did I tell you?" howled his follower boisterously. "That's the kind we raise up in the Short Pine Mills!

"We're wild and woolly and full of fleas;
And hard to curry below the knees.
And we do exactly as we damned please—
Up in the Short Pine Hills!

"We ride 'em hard, and we like 'em tough;
Our motto's, 'Cowboy, treat 'em rough!'
We never know when we've had enough—
Up in the Short Pine Hills!"

In the boundless exuberance of his enthusiasm the Short Pine Hills booster emptied his six-gun in the air. Others followed his example, with whoops and pistol shots until the wind-up of the rodeo developed into a near-riot.

The quaint notion of the high-spirited celebrators seemed to be that Stan Willis had won the big money anyway, and that accordingly they might as well clean things up in a blaze of glory.

After some delay a measure of order was secured, and the few remaining contestants given a chance to shoot at the record, although nobody especially cared whether they tried or not. Presently the last rope was thrown; the last sweating steer hog-tied, and Belle Fourche's rodeo passed into history.

Stan Willis was formally awarded the purse, being paid for his time at the rate of two thousand dollars per minute; even a Rockeller or a Vanderbilt could hardly ask more.

Dorothy's face was flushed as she took in the scene which followed Stan's victory. She noticed that Willis had glanced once or twice in her direction, though he had not stared at her in a conspicuous or offensive fashion.

In the thrill of the contest she almost forgot Jack—and what this defeat must mean to him. Now he appeared before her, very disconsolate indeed. She looked at him, eyes full of sympathy for his disappointment.

"Poor Jack!" she murmured. "I'm sorry!"

"Gosh, but that bird could ride!" he said. "I can't crab him and I haven't any alibi. He's a better man than I am."

Above the confused sound of the crowd milling about them resounded the triumphant song:

"We drink our licker strong and raw;
We pick our teeth with a cross-cut saw,
And comb our hair with a grizzly's jaw—
Up in the Short Pine Hills!

"If you're fair to us, you'll find us mild,
Though our natural instincts are rough and wild,
And we sure are hell when we get riled—
Up in the Short Pine Hills!"

Big Tim Ashland drew near the two as they stood together in a somewhat embarrassed silence. He smiled as the riotous words of the singer smote their ears.

"This chap Willis has put the Short Pine Hills on the map to a fare-ye-well, hasn't he, Miss Dorothy?" was his greeting. "That was a wonderful exhibition of riding. You did mighty well too, Jack. Tough luck! We were all sorry to see you lose."

Jack mumbled an inaudible something and turned away.

"Excuse me, just a minute," Dorothy murmured in apology to Ashland, and hurried after her brother.

"Where are you going, Jack? she demanded breathlessly.

"No place special," he retorted; his voice was spiritless.

"Remember what I told you," the girl whispered. "To-night I'll see what can be done. Don't give up hope, Jack. You'll pull through yet."

"I don't want you to do anything, Dot," he told her, with a trace of returning animation. "That would give Ashland a claim on you, and he's the sort to work any claim for all it's worth. I wish you wouldn't go to this dance with him."

"Will you take me, Jack?"

"I can't," he muttered uneasily.

"I must go with him anyway," Dorothy said. "I told him I would, and he has a right to expect it. Promise me you won't do anything reckless to-night, Jack," she earnestly implored. "I can handle Ashland."

But Jack slipped away into the crowd without replying. Slowly the girl returned to Big Tim, troublesome thoughts crowding her brain.

"Haven't forgotten the dance, have you, Miss Dorothy?" he demanded jovially.

"No," she rejoined; "I haven't forgotten."

"Where you staying in town?" he asked.

"With a friend—Grace Ryder. I was to meet her here after the roping was over. There she comes now."

Ashland removed his hat as the second girl approached, greeting her with his customary suave politeness.

"Now if you two young ladies will excuse me," he said after a moment of talk regarding the recent exhibition, "I'll leave you in each other's society. Might add that I envy you both, and should like to inflict my company on you. Unfortunately I have certain matters of business to look after.

"Shall I pick you up at Miss Ryder's home at about nine this evening, or a little before, Miss Dorothy?" he added.

"I'll be ready by then," she assured him, and Ashland departed.

He went straight to his headquarters, where Benton met him.

"I see Stan Willis came through," said Gus.

"I'll say he did! We sure owe that wrangler a lot.

Benton scowled.

"I owe him a lot. And believe me, chief, I'm going to collect the debt with interest!"

"All right, Gus," Ashland retorted indifferently. Then—"How are things fixed? Wires laid for the big show?"

"Everything's set, chief. Hoke Channing understands his play and is likely gunning for Jack Hunter by now. I told him that the inner door to the office would be kept closed and the outer left unlocked, you of course being over at the dance. As soon as the job's done I'll send some one to tip you. It won't be long after that when Jack Hunter will come around to pay me back the thousand."

"Fine, Gus!" Ashland approved, rubbing his hands together in keen satisfaction. "The way we've got her lined up the thing will run smooth as clockwork."

"If it don't, it won't be my fault, chief," Gus Benton assured him.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RODEO DANCE.

AFTER Ashland left them the two girls strolled slowly away from the scene of the roping contest. Grace Ryder shot a keenly suspicious glance at her companion.

"Tired, Dot?"

"Oh, I don't know," Dorothy rejoined wearily. "Perhaps I am a little fagged. Why? Do I look like the wreck of a misspent life?"

Miss Ryder again surveyed Dorothy, registering scanty approval.

"There are big black rings under your eyes, and all in all any one might suspect you'd just been drawn through a knothole," was her frank reply. "You don't seem very enthusiastic about friend Tim, my dear."

"I'm not, to tell the plain, unvarnished truth; and I've no great urge to go with him to-night. But it was a promise—and all I can do is see it through."

"Don't you wish the good looking cowboy who beat Jack in the roping was taking you? Oh, I'm not blind, Dottie. I saw you looking at him a while ago, and your eyes were shining, too. I'll bet my new blue silk dress that Big Tim would give thousands—if you'd only look at him that way."

"It's not likely I'd go anywhere with Mr. Willis," Dorothy said primly. "He'd have to ask me first, wouldn't he? Why, I don't even know him."

"A little matter like that *could* be arranged, you know."

"Why discuss it? Besides I've got to be especially nice to Mr. Ashland this evening. Jack's in some sort of a mess, and I'm planning to pull a few wires in his behalf."

"You want to look your best, if that's the case," Miss Ryder declared sagely. "And I intend to do my share to help you. What you need right now, Dot, is a good sleep. I'm going to take you home with me and put you to bed. I won't let you crawl out till eight. That will give you time enough to get ready for the festivities."

"You're a peach, Grace!" Dorothy exclaimed gratefully. "That sounds like a million dollars to me. I am tired."

"Come along then. And remember this, Dot: you've got to do just what I tell you. I'm the boss from now on."

When Big Tim Ashland arrived at the Ryder home that evening he found no occasion to feel dissatisfied with the lady of his choice. That three hour sleep had made a new person of Dorothy, and furthermore Grace had shown marvelous skill in her beauty treatment.

In short, Dorothy was ravishing, and Ashland was conscious of a quickening of his heart beats as he looked at her.

Ashland had gone to considerable pains in his own personal preparations, though with a lack of foresight wholly unusual in the man he had imbibed more hard liquor than he really needed. Ashland was not exactly "lickered up," to employ the frontier term, but he was perilously near to that condition. As yet, however, it was not at all apparent.

A hired carriage took them to the hall, where an orchestra imported for the occasion was already sending forth the enticing strains of a waltz. The rodeo dance, quite different in character from the boisterous, hardly respectable affairs of the typical frontier saloons, was on in full swing.

Dorothy enjoyed dancing, and had made up her mind to get what pleasure she could out of the evening, thrusting into the back of her mind the unpleasant thoughts of Jack's trouble. Before the party broke up she intended to sound Ashland out.

But the girl planned to play her cards carefully, wishing to get her escort into a mood of mellow generosity which would make him eager to do any favor she might ask. And Dorothy, swallowing her pride, was determined to be quite remorseless in her demands. She had a feeling that if Jack could only be pulled through this crisis the future might be depended on to take care of itself.

Accordingly she exerted herself in a

whole-hearted effort to please Ashland, deferring prettily to him, flattering his self-esteem, and so on. This rôle of a seductive siren was new and distasteful to Dorothy, but for her brother's sake she did not falter.

The scheme might easily have worked out perfectly—as far as Dorothy could see, that is—save for one distressing fact. Ashland's brain was so inflamed by liquor as to render him unable to perceive in this merely a harmless sort of flirtation.

Dorothy was presently alarmed to see that he was taking her much too seriously; that he was even going so far as to assume that she was becoming smitten with his manly attributes. Too late she woke up to the fellow's true condition.

The evening was rather hot, and the air of the crowded hall became stiflingly close. At Ashland's suggestion they had stepped out for a breathing spell, a proposal Dorothy welcomed as she hoped her escort might benefit from it. Big Tim was steady enough on his feet; it was only his brain which seemed affected by the whisky.

Together they strolled a short distance from the hall, and then Dorothy paused for an instant, admiring the splendor of a glorious full moon poised in the cloudless sky above. To the south lay a dark mass of jagged mountains, melting into the hazy dimness of distance—the famous Black Hills of South Dakota, their nearer ridges sharp-cut in the moonlight.

To the north extended a section of choppy bad land topography, merging into rolling grass covered plains that stretched onward to the Short Pine Hills, far away. A delicious, indescribable thrill played through Dorothy's heart as she recalled that up there was the country of the mysterious cowboy whose attractive personality had so captivated her at the rodeo.

Big Tim, beside her, uttered a sudden, inarticulate sound, and then his arms swept impetuously about Dorothy, straining her slim figure to him, his full, sensuous lips pressed tightly against hers.

Dorothy was for the instant so overcome with astonishment that she could only gasp, helpless in his embrace. Desperately she pushed against his broad chest, almost crushed by the steel-like bands around her. "You—you—beast!" she ejaculated passionately.

A brisk step sounded near at hand, followed by a solid thud—as a knotted fist whizzed by her shoulder, to impinge solidly on the point of Big Tim's jaw. Down went the demoralized gambler, as a steer when it plunges against the tautening lariat.

Dorothy turned—to find herself looking into the smiling blue eyes of Stan Willis. Somehow she was not surprised; it seemed the most natural thing in the world that he should be on hand, when she was in such dire need of a protector.

Big Tim glanced sullenly up at them from the ground, rubbing his jaw where the cowboy's blow had landed.

"On your way, hombre!" Willis snapped. "I judge the young lady here don't need you any more. Hipper along. Savvy?"

There was something in the vibrant timbre of Stan's voice; something in the harsh glint of his eyes as they rested contemptuously on the prostrate man, that effectively cowed Big Tim.

He made no effort to reach for the gun he carried; merely struggled unaided to his feet and stumbled off through the moonlight, muttering vindictive imprecations. Apparently no one had seen the episode save the three principals.

"Will you be so good as to come with me, please, ma'am?" Stan Willis said in a respectful tone.

Without replying, wondering as to his intentions, Dorothy silently obeyed.

Stan conducted her towards the front of the hall, beckoning to a man who stood negligently at the doorway with several others. The man, who now approached them in response to Stan's summons, was the sheriff of Belle Fourche.

"Sheriff," said Willis, "I'd be obliged if you'd make me acquainted with this young lady. We met just now, informal, sort of, and I'd sure appreciate having you do the customary honors."

Gorham swept off his Stetson while Stan was speaking.

"Miss Hunter," said he with a flourish,

"I'd like for you to meet up with Mr. Stan Willis. Stan, shake hands with Miss Dorothy Hunter."

Dorothy suppressed a violent desire to giggle as they solemnly clasped hands.

"You likely saw Stan do his stuff this afternoon," the sheriff rambled chattily on. "His dad and me was pals years ago, and I'd never ask a better friend than Bob Willis. And I want to say this much more, Miss Dorothy, and it's saying a heap. Stan's even a better man, I judge every way you take him, than his dad was. Not having ever known Bob Willis, you probably ain't in a position to appreciate how big a compliment I'm paying his boy."

"You want to discount what the sheriff says a pile, Miss Dorothy," Stan grinned. "I ain't half as bad as he paints me."

"But I've heard that you men up in the Short Pine Hills are rather a rugged lot," she laughed, smiling mischievously up into Stan's face. "How about that funny cowboy at the roping this afternoon—and his wild song? Dear me, but you Short Pine Hills riders must be terrible men!" She pretended to shiver in mock dread.

"Do I look so terrible?" he countered, returning the smile—and a little added for good measure.

"I'll refer that question to Mr. Ashland," she told him with a demure curl of the lips.

Sheriff Gorham glanced from one to the other curiously. .

"What's happened?" he demanded. "You get in a jam with Big Tim, Stan?"

"Nothing at all," the cow-puncher retorted carelessly, and Dorothy appreciated the delicacy which turned aside the sheriff's embarrassing—to her, at least—query. She had forgotten Gorham's presence, or she would not have replied to Stan so unguardedly.

At this moment the music sounded from within. Stan's eyes met hers, voicing an unspoken request. She nodded a gracious assent, and they went in to the dance floor, where Stan proved himself as adept on his feet as on the back of his plunging pony.

This unceremonious change in cavaliers proved wholly agreeable to Dorothy Hunter. She was fairly good at reading character, and perceived in Stan Willis everything that Big Tim Ashland lacked. This cowboy might perhaps be a shade less polished in superficial matters than the gambler, but he was more considerate toward her than Ashland at his best.

And in addition, of vast importance, one could read the true manhood gleaming forth through the clear, serene glance of those fearless blue eyes that smiled at her in a ceaselessly bubbling fountain of good nature.

Ashland had in the meanwhile returned to his gambling establishment in a furious rage. Gus Benton was surprised to see him, and also not a little astonished to note a sizable lump on the jaw of his estimable employer. But Gus Benton was wise enough to ask no questions.

"That safe breaking act been pulled yet?" Ashland demanded.

"Why, no, chief!" Gus replied in astonishment at the inquiry. "It's 'way too early to expect 'em. Hoke didn't want to do it too soon for fear of being caught by some straggler. Moon's pretty bright to-night, you know."

"All right," Ashland grunted. For a moment he hesitated, sizing up his right hand man. "Gus," he presently went on, "other matters have developed since I saw you last. I recall you mentioned something about salivating that damned Stan Willis. You still feel inclined that way?"

"I sure do, chief," Gus declared blackly. Meaningly he tapped the butt of his pistol, sheathed below the hip. "They's a blue pill in that gun that'll take up permanent headquarters in Stan Willis before morning."

"Good! I'm backing the play. And when you turn that trick there's another two thousand waiting for you. Get me?"

Benton's lips curled back in a sneer.

"You might as well count out the coin, chief. I'll sure be around to collect it later."

Big Tim Ashland was not a trouble seeker; that is, he never felt any desire for trouble to bother him personally, and for the present entertained no wish to try conclusions further with a chap of Stan's caliber. Ashland was good at planning, but he always preferred to let another carry on the

plan—and incidentally assume such risks as went with it.

Stan and Dorothy had danced several times, and between whiles talked, constantly becoming better acquainted.

"You any relative of that chap in the roping this afternoon?" Stan at length inquired. "I'm just waking up that I heard somebody call him Hunter."

"He's my brother," Dorothy replied.

"Why, now, I'm all cut up about this, ma'am!" Stan exclaimed reproachfully. "You were likely hoping him to win, and he would have won, too, if I hadn't butted in. I wish I'd known he was your brother. I sure would have stayed out of that show."

"But that's foolish talk, Stan!" Their growing acquaintance had already reached the first name stage—at the urgent request of the cowboy, who was certainly not in the least bashful. "I wouldn't want Jack to win—if there was a better man around." She blushed, adding, "I was half-way wanting you to beat them all, which was really wrong of me, as I should have had my fingers crossed for Jack."

A shade of anxiety flickered over Dorothy's pretty face. This mention of Jack had brought back with full force the trouble which threatened him. And now her plan of engaging the sympathies and help of Ashland had foundered.

Suddenly she felt drawn and tired, as if the exuberance which had kept her going up to now had drained away without warning. Willis watched her narrowly, in shrewd understanding. They were sitting side by side, in a corner of the hall.

"You're in some sort of trouble, Dorothy," he told her, and the girl, aghast that she had so far betrayed herself, at once forced a false animation.

"But I'm not!" she cried. "I've been having a glorious time here—with you."

"Mebby you were; anyway I'm hoping so—up to when I mentioned your brother. Then things were different, sudden like. Your face showed it. The trouble's about him. Can't fool me. I *know*."

Dorothy regarded him anxiously, questioningly; almost frightened at the unerring accuracy with which Stan had gone to the heart of the difficulty. Abruptly she was conscious of a well-nigh uncontrollable longing to confide in him; his smile was so friendly, so reassuring.

"Can't you tell me about it, Dorothy?" he begged.

His eagerness to help her was unmistakable. Yet he was practically a stranger, a man whom she had never laid eyes on up to that week. So she reflected, while Stan's eyes rested on her face, as though reading her inmost thought.

"But why should I bother you—a stranger—with my troubles?" Dorothy murmured.

"But I don't want to be a stranger, Dorothy. Why, come right down to it I ain't a stranger at all. Seems right now like I'd known you forever. Don't you feel that way about me—a little, anyhow?"

"I—I guess I do, Stan," she whispered shyly. "You've been so kind to me tonight."

"Then why not give me a chance to help you?"

Still Dorothy hesitated, unable to overcome the natural hesitation that seemed to hold back the flood of words which threatened to pour forth from her lips, like water on the spillway of a dam.

"Is that skunk I hit tied up in it in any way?" Stan insisted.

"Not directly," Dorothy replied, looking down at the floor, while her fingers twisted nervously in her lap. "Only I was hoping—that—perhaps Mr. Ashland might be able to help me. I *am* in trouble, Stan; rather my brother Jack is."

Stan shook his head in disapproval.

"You wouldn't want the kind of help Ashland could give you, Dorothy. Now you might as well tell me the rest, the whole plot. I'll not let you alone in peace until you do."

And so, at last, Dorothy told her story.

"Um! Gus Benton, eh?" Stan mused. "Didn't Jack tell you that Benton's the manager of Ashland's place? Why, I ain't over much acquainted in Belle Fourche, but it didn't take me long to find out that Gus is the little Mr. Fix-it for Big Tim. He does Ashland's dirty work for pay, Tim being too yellow and too much of a coward to risk his own hide."

She raised startled eyes to his.

"Jack never mentioned that. I don't know why, either. You don't think—" Dorothy paused, terrified at the sinister possibilities looming up behind the unexpected connection thus disclosed between Gus Benton and Ashland.

"I don't know what to think. Not quite yet, that is. Only I know Ashland's roulette wheel is crooked. You seen your brother lately?"

"No. Have you seen him, Stan?" By now Dorothy was desperately frightened—at what she hardly knew.

"When I ate supper Jack was in the restaurant, and with him was a fellow called Hoke Channing. Hoke's no gentleman."

"But what can we do?" Her hand rested tremblingly on Stan's arm. "Can't you do something, Stan? Something to save Jack from this terrible unknown danger that threatens him?"

"I reckon I can, Dorothy. Anyway I'm going to try mighty hard. You know I'll do all I can, don't you?"

Her troubled eyes looked straight into his, behind the trouble glowing an abiding trust and confidence.

"Yes, Stan," the girl whispered softly. "I know you will. And I know you can save him. No one else will even try."

"I've got to hustle out and locate Jack," Stan declared. "But I'm bothered about you. Hadn't I better take you where you're staying first?"

"No," was her emphatic reply. "That would only waste precious time. I'll wait for you at the hall. Some of my friends are here, and I'll be all right. But come back as soon as you can, won't you, because I'll be waiting—and so desperately anxious for news. I know it will be good news. But hurry, won't you, Stan?"

"Sure, I'll hurry," he told her. "Don't make yourself sick worrying. Everything's coming out all right in the end. That's a solemn promise I'm making you, Dorothy. Good-by."

"Good-by, Stan," she murmured; and with that he was gone, swiftly striding from the hall, Dorothy's wistful, sober glance following him as he disappeared.

Acquaintances presently joined the girl, for Dorothy Hunter was never destined to blossom long as a wall flower, and she managed to force a counterfeit zest in the gayety about her. The slow minutes dragged relentlessly on, though while Dorothy's slim feet mechanically followed the rhythm of the music she hardly heard the steady monologue of her attentive cavalier, a chap who prided himself on being able to get off quite a line. He would not have been greatly flattered, that ambitious cowpuncher, had he known how little a place he held in the thoughts of the pretty girl at his side.

After some time a pistol shot sounded—two shots in fact, so close together as to merge almost into a single report—vague, muffled in the distance. Involuntarily Dorothy shuddered, glancing fearfully into the eyes of the man with whom she danced.

"What was that, Larry?" Her face had suddenly taken on a sickly, grayish pallor.

"Only some half drunk riders celebrating," was his careless response. "Nothing to bother about. Some music they got here to-night, ain't it?"

An icy hand seemed clutching at Dorothy's heart. Stray revolver shots were common enough at a time like this, but now she could perceive a horrible significance about these particular shots. Guns barking from an innocent desire to let off steam would not come so close together; and there would be more scattering reports, strung along, one after another.

There was something ominous, terrifying, about these two businesslike shots off in the distance, and Dorothy found herself engulfed by a feeling of dread, a fear akin to certainty that the shots were in some mysterious way linked with her fate. Of a sudden the girl's feet became as two leaden weights, chaining her fast to the polished floor. In her weakness she trembled violently, almost falling.

"I'm so tired!" she gasped, clinging to her companion for support. "Can't we sit down for a moment, Larry, please?"

Deeply solicitous, the attentive Larry obediently escorted her to a chair.

And now, strangely enough, the burden of anxiety in Dorothy's heart seemed to center more about Stan, of the clear blue eyes, than about her brother Jack. She re-

alized that he had gained a bitter, relentless foe when he antagonized Big Tim Ashland by coming to her defense.

What was Ashland planning? What would he do? In her terror Dorothy let her imagination run wild, picturing all sorts of horrible things. She felt like a murderer for sending Stan out to face dangers all the more to be dreaded because of their vagueness.

CHAPTER VII.

NEMESIS—AND GUS BENTON.

GRIM thoughts were in Stan Willis's mind as he hurried from the dance hall.

"Ashland's back of all this dirty game," he told himself savagely. "I can see that dead easy. And something mighty dirty is hitting the trail ahead. That's plain, too, only I didn't want to tell Dorothy too much, or I'd have her scared to death. Poor little kid! It was Big Tim who put Gus up to staking Jack that thousand. A hell of a fine way to act after he'd promised Dorothy to look after her brother! Anybody that knows Benton would know the play didn't start with him. That guy's no Santa Claus. He's not in the habit of lending folks money in thousand-dollar lots—not in a million years. And of course Jack loses the stake right back to Ashland by way of the crooked roulette wheel.

"I got it straight this far. The rest mebby ain't so easy, only it's clear that if I don't locate young Hunter pronto they's going to be a whole lot of hell popping. Anything that Hoke Channing gets himself into is bound to be rotten, and I'd say casual that he's no fit chap for any decent person to ride herd with.

"Jack probably ain't so bad at heart. He couldn't be—with a sister like he's got. Most likely he's made a sort of damned fool of himself—plenty fellows do, now and then—and now the poor devil's plumb wild, ready to fall for any sort of play that promises to pull him out of the mess. Gosh—I sure got to find him in one heck of a hurry!"

Stan first directed his steps toward Ashland's gambling establishment, in the vague hope that Jack Hunter might be there. He stood at the door without entering, while his keen eyes roved about the room, taking in the various tables and gambling devices. No sign of Jack.

From the floor above came the discordant notes of the automatic piano, quite in contrast to the smooth, melodious strains of the orchestra back at the other dance.

"Ain't likely he'll be up there," Stan muttered uncertainly. "But I'd best make a clean sweep as I go. Won't do any harm to take a look."

Jack Hunter, it speedily developed was not to be found up on the dance floor, and Stan was at once on his way again. Other resorts besides Ashland's — some semi-respectable, some frankly quite the reverse —were running wide open, and all were well patronized. Stan hastily went the rounds, but failed to locate the man he sought.

He ran into one or two acquaintances, and cautiously sounded them out for news of Jack Hunter, with no success. At last one cowboy gave him the first tangible clew.

"Sure, I saw Jack. He was sitting at a table over to Ike's. Looking kind of burned up, he was."

"Anybody with him?" Stan snapped.

"Yes, that poor skate, Hoke Channing. The two of 'em had their heads together over a bottle."

"How long ago was it?"

"Mebby fifteen minutes; mebby a mite longer. Don't tear your shirt, Stan!" as Willis turned on his heel. "Come on over to the bar and h'ist a couple on me. Seems like that stunt you pulled this afternoon ought to be worth a celebration. Huh? Well, I'll be dag-goned!" and the speaker stared in open-mouthed, aggrieved astonishment, for Stan was already headed toward the door.

He hurried around to Ike's, taking the chance that on his previous visit to that place he had overlooked Jack Hunter in the crowd. This time Stan made a thorough canvass, not giving up his search until assured that Jack was no longer about the premises.

His casual inquiries elicited the information that young Hunter had indeed been there, but no one seemed to know just when he left or where he had gone.

Baffled, a little discouraged, Stan himself departed.

"This ain't any way to live up to that promise you made," he scornfully muttered. "Shake your legs, cowboy! You got to come through to-night, or you'll never have the nerve to face Dorothy Hunter again. And I'm telling you that young lady's sure worth knowing. She's just about the nicest, sweetest, prettiest girl between the two oceans.

Considering the number of strangers in town, the moonlit street was strangely deserted, explanation of which lay in the fact that everybody was hard at work indoors on this last night of the big time, seeking that type of diversion which best suited him.

Stan's boot heels rang hollowly on the board sidewalk as he moved forward, pondering over the best thing to do. Then his reverie received a rude interruption as a man abruptly stepped from a doorway, facing him.

The moonbeams shone with a sinister glitter on the long, blue barrel of a Colt, leveled full at Stan's breast.

"*Keep your fists away from your gun!*" a hoarse voice commanded.

Gus Benton had seen Stan Willis in the entrance to Ashland's some little time before, and Gus had at once put two and two together, correctly arriving at the result of that problem in simple addition. His employer's sudden attack of the lumpy jaw, together with the two thousand dollars placed on Willis's head, provided a starting point for a series of intriguing reflections.

Benton perceived that Stan was looking for some one, probably Jack Hunter, and this suspicion was confirmed when Gus cautiously trailed Stan in his wanderings. Anticipating which route Willis would be likely to follow on leaving Ike's, Gus had thoughtfully awaited him in the seclusion afforded by the doorway of a deserted store. When Stan came along, he stepped forth, gun ready, thus taking his victim wholly by surprise.

"Oh, it's you, eh, Gus?" Stan exclaimed as he looked appreciatively down the muzzle of Benton's pistol.

"You bet it's me!" was the forceful if ungrammatical reply. "And I'm telling you to kiss yourself good-by. This here's the end of the trail for you, cowboy. They ain't anybody can jab the business end of a gun into my ribs like you done the other night—and live to brag about it."

Now, as it chanced, Gus Benton possessed one fatal weakness—an overpowering liking for the sound of his own voice. His proper move in this case, dictated by a shrewd foresight and the elementary principles of sound military strategy, would have been to let his pistol do the talking—and then himself fade silently and speedily from the scene.

But Gus could not deny himself the agreeable satisfaction of informing Stan exactly who was about to kill him and why. Gus Benton simply had to do a little gloating.

Therefore he began telling Stan certain unpleasant and highly uncomplimentary things about the cowboy himself, touching lightly upon his ancestors, both recent and remote, in the process. If a respectful and considerate silence is the mark of a good listener, Stan Willis certainly qualified, the while he took in Gus Benton's fervent peroration.

"And I'm going to drag down two thousand dollars for salivating you," Benton concluded triumphantly. "Big Tim figures the job is worth that much to him."

Then suddenly, as he reached the most interesting part, Gus perceived that Stan's attention was wandering. Stan no longer looked directly at him, but at some object to his rear.

A pleased smile, clearly perceptible in the moonlight, broke out on the cowboy's face. At the same instant a slight noise sounded in back of Benton, who became vaguely uneasy; his finger trembled on the trigger, but he could not quite bring himself to the point of shooting.

"Why, sheriff!" Stan cried out in a gratified tone; "I sure am glad to see you! You straggled along here right in the nick of time. I—"

Benton could stand the strain not another second, for his mental reactions were not too subtle. Involuntarily he half turned to look back, his pistol muzzle wavering a trifle from Stan's chest. The street behind him was empty!

Frantically Gus Benton's finger snapped shut on the trigger of his gun, but he was too slow—by perhaps a single second. His brain caught no trace of the lightning swift pass of Stan's hand, yet for one startled instant the flash of Stan's Colt blinded his eyes and its report crashed harshly against his eardrums.

Then these sensations culminated in one terrific, paralyzing shock—and Gus Benton knew no more.

Stan stood staring down at the body, grimly watchful; but there was no need to investigate the result of his shot.

"The durned skunk near got me," Stan reflected as he unobtrusively departed. "Good thing that dog ran out from the alley when he did. Made just enough noise to help carry along my bluff. Now where in hell can Jack Hunter be? I've sure got to locate him, and that's flat."

The unmistakable connection between Ashland, Gus Benton, and Dorothy's brother drew Stan resistlessly toward the gambler's headquarters.

"Seems like whatever breaks has to be tied up some way with that there joint," was the thought in Stan Willis's mind. "I'll sneak back there and do a little scouting around."

In a few minutes he reached the place, but, instead of entering, slipped quietly around toward the rear, keeping well in the shadow of the building, where the moonlight would be less likely to betray his presence to some chance passer-by. A door led from outside into Ashland's private office, and Stan arrived in time to see two figures stealthily enter. One he recognized as Jack Hunter; the other he did not see distinctly, but assumed it to be Hoke Channing.

"Hum, and what ho!" the amateur sleuth reflected, deeply gratified by his discovery. "I got it all now, or most of it, anyway. Ashland's arranged to have Jack crack his safe to pay back Benton that thousand. Then he's got Jack sewed up tighter 'n a new shoe. Looks like to-night is my lucky night."

Quietly Stan crept along toward the door, where he crouched in watchful waiting. The sound of revelry in the gambling house came plainly to his ears, but the office was deathly still.

"Naturally, Ashland would have it all fixed so they wouldn't be disturbed," Stan grunted to himself. "Now, when those birds come out I'll give 'em a surprise party."

He drew his Colt, reversing the weapon, holding it by the barrel. Thus it made a wonderfully effective club.

The door opened slowly, and Hunter's head peered cautiously out, while Stan shrunk still deeper within the enveloping shadows.

"All clear, Hoke!" he heard Jack whisper, and the two slipped through the doorway, Hunter in the lead.

A second later the butt of Stan's heavy pistol crashed down on the skull of the unsuspicious Hoke, who slumped to the ground without uttering a sound. Like a flash Stan again reversed his gun, its muzzle covering Jack. Stan was afraid to take a chance otherwise, lest in the demoralization of his surprise and terror Dorothy's foolish young brother might start some gun play—and so ruin everything.

"Take it easy, Jack!" he grunted. "I'm your friend, even if it don't look that way. Your sister shot the whole works to me."

Jack only stared in dumb astonishment, saying nothing.

"Put that money you stole back in the safe. Quick!"

Jack's irresolute glance wandered from the gun in Stan's hand to the door of Ashland's office and back again.

"I can't put it back," he muttered at length. "Why, I've got to have this thousand. That's all I took. Channing's got the rest."

"Put it back!" Willis insisted.

"I've got to pay it to Gus Benton," Jack protested. The young fellow was in a sort of stupor, produced partly by the whisky he had drunk and partly by the excitement and danger of his desperate undertaking.

He showed no surprise that Willis seemed to know all about his private affairs. "If I don't pay Benton, he'll ruin me."

"And if you do pay him, Ashland will more than ruin you—and your sister to boot!" Stan snapped grimly. "But it's all right, boy. You don't need to pay Gus Benton—not ever. I shot him less than five minutes ago."

"You shot Benton?"

Jack's jaw dropped open in utter bewilderment.

"Sure—after he'd tried to salivate me first."

Quickly Stan bent over the unconscious Hoke, recovering a solid bag of gold pieces. "Give me that thousand you took!" he demanded, and, still in a daze, Jack handed it over.

Stan slipped into the dark office and was on the point of replacing the money in the rifled safe, but thought better of it. Ashland's desk was there, the bottom drawer open, stuffed with a collection of loose papers. Under these papers Stan thrust the gold, and then he rejoined Jack outside.

No indication came from the gambling hall to make Stan fear that his part in the play had been detected.

"Your sister's waiting at the dance hall," he told Hunter. "We'll go and tell her everything's all right now."

Waiting only to drag the body of Channing out of sight within the shadows where he himself had lurked, Stan seized Jack Hunter by the arm, leading him toward the hall.

"You've got a mighty fine sister," he said.

The shock of his unexpected deliverance was beginning to have a decidedly sobering effect on Jack. His brain cleared rapidly.

"I'll tell the world!" he agreed. Half shyly he glanced in admiration at the man beside him. "But you're no slouch yourself," Jack added warmly. "You've done a lot for us to-night, though I haven't got all the details yet. Anyway, Dot and I'll never forget it."

With no further delay they returned to the hall, where the dance was still in progress. Stan cast an eager glance about the room, seeking Dorothy; she was not dancing, nor could he see her seated anywhere. Puzzled, vaguely worried, he looked questioningly at Jack.

"She's gone home with some friend," the latter said. "Pretty late now. Dot was to spend the night at Grace Ryder's. Probably they've gone home together."

"No, that's not it," said Stan thickly. "She told me she'd wait here for me. Something's wrong, Jack. Mebby—" He broke off, approaching a man whom he knew.

"Seen anything of Miss Dorothy Hunter lately?" Stan inquired.

"Miss Hunter? Let me see— Why, yes, I saw her. Awhile ago Tim Ashland came in and talked to her a minute over by the door. Then they went out. I ain't seen her or him since."

Stan looked at Jack, his eyes narrowing to mere slits.

"Ashland again!" he grunted savagely. "The skunk's trying to jam his play through after all. We've got to work fast to save your sister!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WOLF SNARLS.

BIG TIM gnawed his finger nails impatiently while waiting till the development of the safe robbery should clear the decks for further action. Aimlessly he strolled about his gambling establishment, watching the players.

Gus Benton had slipped off without telling Ashland of his objective. As time dragged on Big Tim's impatience increased. Finally he came to an abrupt resolve.

"They's no need to wait," he told himself. "The play can't fail now, and I may as well go ahead with my stuff. By gad, I'll wind it up to-night. Yes, sir, before morning Miss Dorothy Hunter's going to change her name to Mrs. Timothy Ashland! She'll be damned willing to do it, too, after I've told her a few pointed facts!"

His breath came faster as he thought of the girl, beautiful in the simple evening gown of white she had worn.

"She'll be mine—to-night!" he repeated. "Even if I have to drag the justice out of bed to splice us."

Whereupon Ashland left his place of business.

In the meantime Dorothy's anxiety had not lessened as Stan Willis failed to reappear. The sound of those two pistol shots assumed a greater and more threatening significance in her mind. It seemed that Stan must have found Jack by this time—if he were still alive to search for him.

Her momentary physical weakness had in some degree passed, and the girl went on with the dancing, though she made little effort to pretend an enjoyment in it. Her eyes were constantly on the front of the hall, where she hoped Stan would show himself.

Presently she saw Ashland standing there. His glance caught hers, and he nodded almost imperceptibly, signaling her to approach. It was not characteristic of Ashland that he should summon her thus, rather than come to her. With a premonition of impending disaster gripping her, Dorothy left her seat, joining Ashland near the entrance.

Silently her eyes questioned his hot, flushed face.

Ashland's first words were a muttered apology for his boorish conduct earlier in the evening.

"I'm sorry for what happened, Dorothy. I wasn't quite myself."

She cast this aside as of little moment now.

"Is that all you had to tell me?"

"Well, no," he hesitated. "I'm sorry to say your brother's in trouble. He needs you—pretty bad."

"What do you mean?" she cried.

"Don't speak so loud," Ashland whispered uneasily. "It's best for others not to know. Come outside where I can tell you about it," and he slipped his hand within her arm, drawing her outdoors.

"What's happened to Jack?" Dorothy asked, when they were a few paces from the dance hall.

"Well, Jack's got into an ugly mess—and the poor chap was shot. Fact is, he was trying to hold up a cowboy that had won a pile gambling. Seems that Jack was tangled up in a jam where he had to have money; he tried to collect it by the holdup route, and he picked a bad man to tackle."

"Is he hurt seriously?" the girl gasped, not greatly surprised at the news. The fear had been in her heart that her brother Jack would resort to some such desperate measures.

"Not but what he'll pull through, I think. I came along just in time to help him, but too late to stop his foolish attempt. I remembered how I'd promised you to look out for him, so I had him taken to my rooms. He's there now, and wants to see his sister; he's half delirious, calling all the time for Dorothy. I managed to quiet him down by saying I'd hustle right out and get you."

"Do you know why Jack needed money?" Dorothy demanded coldly.

"Why, no; he didn't mention that. Just mumbled something about having to raise a thousand dollars."

"He lost the thousand—another man's money—over your roulette wheel. It would seem that you might have stopped that, after what you promised me, if you really cared to. And especially since the man who loaned the money is your manager. Isn't this recalling of the promise now a trifle tardy, Mr. Ashland?"

His features registered profound chagrin. "Why, all you say is news to me. I never dreamed Jack had got in deep that way. This could have been fixed up quietly if Jack had only come to me, instead of trying to pull some rough stuff. You see, I'm not on hand at the place all the time, and Jack must have had his run of hard luck when I was off somewhere."

This explanation seemed not unreasonable; in fact, it was about the way Dorothy had thought the affair took place. She was still ready to believe in Ashland's sincerity.

"Jack said you didn't know about it," she conceded, her voice dull with the agony within. "Take me to him, please."

No thought of personal danger entered the girl's mind as she permitted Ashland

to escort her away. She realized but one thing—that Jack was hurt, in trouble, that he needed her. The mysterious pistol shots now seemed to be explained, but Dorothy's anxiety regarding Stan's prolonged absence did not decrease. Yet her immediate concern was for Jack.

Ashland lived in a bachelor suite, his rooms furnished in greater luxury than one might expect in a frontier town. They were on the second floor of a low building, above a store. Dorothy perceived a light as they approached.

Her first intimation that all was not right came when Ashland deliberately locked the door after they had entered, removing the key and placing it in his pocket.

"What does that mean?" Dorothy cried suspiciously.

She darted a glance of interrogation about the room, seeking some evidence of her brother. The door to the bedchamber stood open; obviously it was empty. Nowhere was anything to indicate the presence of a desperately wounded man.

"What about Jack?" Dorothy exclaimed. "Where's my brother?"

Ashland faced her coolly.

"Don't get excited, Miss Dorothy," said he. "I'm not going to harm you. To tell the truth I don't know exactly where Jack is right now."

"Then you lied to me!" she cried, eyes flashing dangerously. "Let me go at once. Immediately! Do you hear? I refuse to stay here a minute with you!" The trim heel of her dancing slipper came down on the floor in an angry stamp. "You are insulting! But it is no more than I should expect of you—after what happened once before this evening."

"Now don't fly off the handle," he told the girl soothingly. "I have a few things to say to you, and then I'll willingly let you go—if you wish it. But I'm inclined to think you'll stay."

He paused to light a cigar, eying his captive with an expression that Dorothy found disquieting to the last degree. About it was an air of poorly concealed triumph, not lacking an evil suggestion of proprietorship.

Ashland had never regarded her just that way before—as though the curtain to the man's soul had been drawn aside. Instinctively she prepared herself for bad news, and clenched her fingers until the knuckles gleamed white through the pink skin, nerving herself for the ordeal.

"What I said about Jack was partly true and partly false," Ashland told her. "He is unhurt—but he has committed a robbery. In order to pay back the thousand dollars he owed, Jack has stolen from my safe. He will be arrested by Sheriff Gorham and thrown into jail within an hour—as soon, in fact, as I notify the sheriff that the crime has been committed."

"Oh!" Dorothy gasped, as the full realization of what had happened swept over her. She had no thought of questioning the truth of Ashland's statement, feeling herself hopelessly entangled in the web of circumstance.

"The question is," Ashland went on, "whether you wish me to notify the sheriff. It is entirely up to you."

His implication was unmistakable.

"You—mean—that—I—must—" The words were forced from her reluctant lips. Dorothy stopped speaking, unable to go on.

"You likely understand. Naturally I wouldn't be keen to have a member of my own family arrested and publicly disgraced. So— Well, what about it? What do you say, Miss Dorothy?"

"I won't!" Again she defiantly stamped a slim, satin-clad foot. "I'll die before marrying you." Tensely she glared at him, face white, eyes dilated with horror and repugnance.

"It would be tough sledding for a young chap like Jack to go to prison," Ashland went on reflectively, "and that's where he's headed. Also it would be a hard blow on his dad. I always had the notion that Mr. Hunter carried his feeling of family pride to something of an extreme. Just about kill the old gentleman, wouldn't it, to learn that his boy was locked up in jail?"

Dorothy was by now quite cool, having learned the worst; nothing more could possibly happen. Her contemptuous glance slowly traveled the length of Ashland's body, from head to foot. He stirred uneasily, finding it difficult to face her gaze.

"And poor dad thinks you are a gentleman!" Then she laughed mirthlessly. "A gentleman!"

"You mustn't think too harshly of me, Dorothy!" he cried in a belated effort to make himself appear in a less unfavorable light. "I don't want you to believe I preferred this way or deliberately chose it. It was only because I loved you so much. You wouldn't have me otherwise, and so I was forced to take what measures were available. You know all is fair in love and war."

Dorothy said nothing, her steady, unsmiling glance still boring into him, as though penetrating the depths of the man's evil, scheming brain. She laughed again—such a laugh as no young girl should ever have occasion to utter.

"You may feel a little put out now at me," he went on, "but I reckon that'll pass in time. You'll marry me—of course."

"What choice have I? I must marry you, I suppose—and I wish you joy of your bargain!"

"We'll have the ceremony right away—to-night!" he exclaimed eagerly. "You're all dressed up pretty. I'll go out and rout out the justice."

"You are merciless, aren't you?" came through Dorothy's set lips. "I fancy there's no use of my asking a—brief, perhaps—postponement? A chance to accustom myself to the notion of becoming your personal property?"

"Why, no," he replied. "I'm not very keen for any delay, Dorothy. I love you so much I'm bound to have you for my own to-night. Besides, Jack's got to be either a free man or wind up in jail—to-night."

"I see," she responded. "Very well. Go on about your preparations."

Wearily she sank into a chair, her fingers drumming nervously on its broad, polished arm. Ashland surveyed her dubiously.

"Will you wait here while I go after the justice of the peace?" he demanded.

"Yes, I'll wait."

The beast in Ashland flashed momentarily to the surface; he showed his teeth in a wolf-like snarl.

"Mind, now, no tricks while I'm gone. If you don't play the game I'll carry through what I said about Jack. He broke that solemn promise made to his dad about gambling and then dipped into my safe to get square. If you fail me, he goes to jail and your father gets the whole story."

"Have no fears," Dorothy told him drearily. "I can't do anything. What a trusting little fool I was to imagine you would help me! To dream that any good could come from you!"

"I'll be back in a few minutes," Ashland said, and with a final appraising glance at the girl he departed.

The door was left unlocked—Dorothy was actually free to go, if she chose. But Ashland had judged her shrewdly; he knew that she was ready to make the sacrifice, though in his own fatuous self-esteem he had little idea of how vast a sacrifice it was.

When Big Tim returned the justice was with him. Dorothy still sat in the big armchair, staring straight ahead with a stony expression on her face.

CHAPTER IX.

STAN CALLS A BLUFF.

JACK HUNTER'S bloodshot eyes looked a frightened question at Stan, when the former learned that Dorothy had left the dance hall in company with Ashland.

"What's to be done?" he muttered hopelessly.

"A lot!" was Stan's grim assurance. "Now where would he likely take her?"

"She'd never go to his rooms with him," Jack asserted positively. "But I can't think of any other place he'd have in mind."

"That's it," Stan yelped excitedly. "That's where he's taken her. You know where the skunk holes up?"

"But I tell you my sister would never do that!" Jack persisted. "He didn't come in here and drag her off by force. She went willingly, and Dorothy's not the kind to go to any man's room, especially this time of night."

"Of course she ain't," Stan agreed. "But we don't know what lies the polecat told her. Can't you see? He's planning to use this jam you got in as a club to force her

into marrying him. He don't know Benton's dead, and that the money wasn't stolen after all. And Dorothy don't know everything's all jake again. Boy, we got to hump ourselves, or the damage will be done. Where does he live?"

"Come on!" Jack cried. "I'll show you!" and he started off running, Stan Willis at his heels. They had not far to go.

"There's the place; where the light is!" and Jack pointed toward Ashland's quarters. "Some one's up there now."

"Listen," Stan whispered swiftly. "I can handle this end of it all right alone. While I start things you hustle back to the dance hall and get Sheriff Gorham. He's the best friend I got in town. They's liable to be some shooting before I'm through, and I may need a man like Gorham to back my play. If he ain't at the dance hall he won't be far away. You find him, savvy?"

"Don't you need me here?" Jack asked doubtfully.

"Not a-tall. You beat it for the sheriff."

Quickly Stan rushed up the stairs. Voices sounded faintly from within the room, and he noiselessly turned the knob of the door, which proved to be locked. Without hesitation Stan stepped back six feet, and then lunged a shoulder forward against the door, backed by the full force of his muscular body.

There was a crash of splintered wood and twisted metal hinges- and he shot like a catapult through the wreckage, gun in hand. The marriage ceremony was on the point of beginning, as was wholly apparent to Stan Willis.

"And we'll stop this little party right here!" he announced emphatically, a pistol twirling in his expert grasp.

But there was no condemnation in the look he bestowed on the slim, white-faced girl. Stan understood; his eyes told her that.

Dorothy turned toward him, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Oh, Stan!" she sobbed. "You're too late! I must marry him now. It's to save Jack. You understand, don't you, Stan? I wouldn't marry him if I didn't have to."

"You don't have to marry him, Dorothy; not while I'm here to prevent it. Things are going to be almighty hot for the bridegroom if you do," and the twirling pistol muzzle suddenly centered full on Big Tim's chest.

The gambler's face paled a trifle, but he stood his ground, feeling that all the winning cards were in his own hand. He had only to play them.

"Get out of here!" he snarled.

"I'll sure be right glad to," Stan echoed cordially. "The air about you irritates my delicate nose, and I have to favor it. Come on, Dorothy."

"But I can't!" she wailed miserably. "Don't you see, Stan? I've got to do it to save poor Jack—and dad."

"Save 'em from what?" Stan inquired mildly.

"Jack from prison—dad from a broken heart. That's what forces me to do it, Stan." Her voice was dead, her spirit crushed.

"But it seems like they's some little mistake here," Stan went on in his soft, mild drawl. "Jack ain't got to go to prison. Jack hasn't done a thing out of the way. He's free, white, and twenty-one—or thereabouts. And he don't owe any man in the world a cent."

"He robbed my safe to-night!" Ashland growled. "Your game is up, cowboy. On your way. Miss Dorothy is becoming my wife of her own will and accord."

"No, she ain't!" Stan corrected him. "She ain't becoming your wife on those or any other considerations, to-night or any other time. I'm cherishing the hope that she may become mine—in the due course of events—but I ain't holding any club over her, forcing her against her own sweet will. You ain't going to either not while Stan Willis has a gun to roll on you—and I'm getting ready to start her rolling any minute. Look out, hombre, or you'll get me mad.

"Perhaps you didn't hear Gus Benton's dead!" he added succinctly.

That *was* a blow.

"Benton dead!" The words were uttered in a hoarse croak; for the first time a gleam of hesitation, of doubt, of fear, showed in Ashland's eyes. The man's huge bulk

seemed to shrink visibly, as he stared at Stan Willis.

"Sure he's deader'n Julius Cæsar—and your rotten frame-up is shot so full of holes a body could use it for a sieve. If you don't believe me, trot back to your crooked gambling joint and take a look in the bottom drawer of your desk. Your safe ain't robbed, and Jack Hunter's in no trouble; none whatever. About the only trouble hanging around here is likely to slump down on you. Man, but it's one horrible temptation to let daylight stream through you. I ain't sure I can hold out."

Dorothy's eyes, big with the dawning of a rich new hope, dwelt searchingly on Stan.

"Is it all true, Stan?" she breathed, slowly coming over toward him. "Did you do all that for me?"

His blue eyes smiled down into hers.

"Why, sure it's all true, Dorothy," he replied. "Only I didn't do so much; not half what I'd be proud to do for you."

Heedless of the scowling glance of Ashland and the curious gaze of the justice, Stan looked tenderly into the girl's face.

"And now is what I said about you and me true, Dorothy?" he whispered. "Do you reckon you could stand a rough-neck from the Short Pine Hills for a husband? We got a hard-boiled reputation, you know, up in the Short Pine Hills. But mebbe you could tone me down a bit."

"Why, Stan!" Dorothy reproved him, resting her head against his breast with a happy little sigh of contentment. "I wouldn't want to tone you down. You're just perfect as you are!"

THE END

ʊ ʊ ʊ

"ANOTHER FLIER CRASHES"

LO, again one falls and dies
From the bleak, uncharted skies.
Lo, again a pilot's spilled
From his cloudland craft, and killed
In a burst of flame and glory
That becomes a first-page story.

Always some young blade and bold
With a courage calm and cold;
Always one who knew this truth:
That, as many another youth,
He was flirting with such doom
Every time he took a "zoom."

Still no dearth of new-fledged men
Who will take the air again;
Who espouse the flying game
With no hope of wealth or fame—
Issuing with every breath
Proud indifference to death.

Shame to such as you and I
Groveling in fear—to—die!
"Reckless"—say so if you will.
Better that than fear's dank chill
Which, our heritage from birth,
Makes us cling to solid earth.

Strickland Gillilan.

The Jungle Call

By CORALIE STANTON and HEATH HOSKEN

Authors of "The Great Outlaw," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

PAUL CAMERON, known as Bwana Buffalo, big game hunter, explorer and naturalist, is in Equatorial Africa after elephants. His companions are Robert Grant, a wiry little Scotchman, and Dr. Luke Merridew, who claims to be English. Claudia Scott, who has just buried her father and her brother in the wilderness, totters into camp with five exhausted native porters. The girl is a courageous, understanding man's woman; and Cameron, Grant, and Merridew admire her, each in his own degree. Cameron goes to confer with Sir Carl Ploerel, wealthy archæologist, who has offered to finance the excavation of certain African ruins. He unexpectedly finds the beautiful Lady Mary Stour, a guest of Sir Carl's sister. Seven years before this, Cameron had carried on a desperate flirtation with the titled lady while she was a married woman. She now is a widow and expects him to marry her. Back in the wilderness, Dr. Merridew turns drunkard and annoys Claudia Scott with his extravagant protestations of love. Cameron returns to his camp, and on a moonlit, mystic eve he finds that Claudia is more to him than any Lady Mary. Mr. and Mrs. Donald, missionaries, with whom Claudia expected to live, have mysteriously disappeared.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE OTHER DEAR CHARMER.

ALL that night Bwana Buffalo wrestled with himself in turmoil and agony of spirit.

Now, he was fiercely glad that he had told Claudia of his love and made himself sure of her; and then, again, he was cast into the depths and reviled himself for being false to his own sense of honor.

He was afraid, far more afraid than he had ever been in a tight corner faced by a charging lion. The fear in his heart was fear of himself, half of it, and the other and more dreadful half was fear of losing Claudia.

He called on his common sense at last,

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for October 24.

in revolt against the fear that consumed him.

He must make a clean breast of it to Mary. He must write and tell her all that was in his heart, how he had made a mistake, how his feelings for her had changed with the passage of the years, how he had found the one woman he wanted for his wife.

Mary would not want a man who loved another woman for her husband. Of course, she would not. It was all due to his weakness. He ought to have told her the truth that night on the balcony at Entebbe. He was a coward. He had pretended he still loved her to make things easy.

But he was in honor bound. He thrust the thought away impatiently. It was a fallacy. It was not honorable to marry a woman one did not love. But, when one had loved her once and would have given the whole round world to be able to marry her? One could not help one's feelings changing. No, but when one had compromised that woman's good name in the eyes of the world?

So went the intolerable merry-go-round of his thoughts.

In the end he temporized with his conscience. He would write to Mary and put the case before her. Anyhow, it would be some months before he would see her again. He could not doubt what she would say. Complete frankness would bring him his release.

And Claudia! What was he going to say to her?

Here his reasoning powers failed him. He couldn't think any more. He must just wait for the opportunity, for the inspiration.

He saw himself suddenly in the rôle of a traitor. He couldn't ask her to marry him. As they stood there, between the moon and the clouds, all facts had seemed unnecessary.

There was the one great fact: they loved each other. He had said: "You are mine." And Claudia had said: "I am yours" That was all. They had parted.

She had gone to her tent. He had had a look round the camp and turned in, after a talk with the other men of going down to the lake after black rhino when Ploerel had arrived.

It had all been perfect and complete. But when next they met, what would Claudia expect? And how could he fulfill her expectations? A man can't tell an unmarried woman that he loves her and leave it at that.

Here was a woman alone in the wilds, under his protection, a woman with no man belonging to her. If the Donalds came back to the mission, she would stay on and he would see her every day. But if they did not come back, she would go back to the coast, back to England. And what could he say before she went?

The dawn found him running away from all these questions. He took a couple of boys with him before the rest of the camp was stirring, and left a message that he had gone to make a final examination of the site he had chosen for Sir Carl Ploerel and his party, about a half mile away. He allowed no doubts about his leadership of the expedition and had no intention of abrogating any of his rights and powers. If Ploerel chose to come and spend his money, that was his own lookout.

Thus he tried to put away the haunting image of Claudia by plunging into his work, as man has done since the world began.

Claudia did not sleep until nearly dawn. Then she sank into a dreamless slumber, and awoke with that strangely exalted feeling that something wonderful had happened, although at first she could not remember what.

Then realization came, and with it a warm glow of the sudden knowledge of the meaning of life.

Paul Cameron lover her. What else so mighty, so grand, so unbelievable could happen to her in all her life? Those weeks of journeying together, that growing comradeship—it was only the beginning. They were to be together for life.

Her pulses leaped at the thought of meeting him, and it was with a sharp feeling of disappointment that she heard he had left the camp.

Merridew was her informant. They had

breakfast together, and the big doctor's brown eyes gleamed so strangely at her through his glasses that she hurried through her meal and got up, saying she must go to her tent and write letters home. There were no post houses in that almost unknown country, and a runner had to make the long trek to railhead more than two hundred miles.

Merridew arose, too, and his bulk cast a big shadow before her, as he accompanied her outside the tent.

"I never have the chance to talk to you alone," he said, his oily voice low.

"You are always so busy, Dr. Merridew," she answered. "Are you going down to the excavations now?"

"Yes. But do sit down for a few minutes and smoke a cigarette with me. Oh, I forgot, you don't smoke! It is one of your many charms, Miss Scott. But let me smoke one.

"You've no idea how it would help me—just a little chat with you. I am going through one of my bad times." And he heaved a deep sigh, as he took tobacco from his pouch and rolled it deftly into the thin rice paper with his big fat hands.

What could Claudia do? It seemed unkind to refuse. The man had a tragic fate to contend with, and the other men had told her that they believed her presence kept him to a certain extent from his habits of intemperance. She was sorry for him. Of course, she was. But that something she did not understand about him interfered with her ruling passion for helping people.

He smiled at her with that disturbing vacancy, as she sat down in a camp chair, and he stretched his great form on the rock beside her.

"Nobody has ever made me realize the hopelessness of my condition as you have, Miss Scott," he said. "I love you. I love you passionately—"

"Dr. Merridew, you are outrageous!" Claudia half arose from her chair.

"No, no, listen!" he said, and there was such persuasion in his voice that she sat down again against her will. "I know it's quite hopeless. I know I can ask nothing of you. I am a miserable man, doomed to loneliness all my life.

"But you might give me your pity. It cannot hurt you. You are gifted with the greatest gifts of woman—sympathy, fascination, not of the senses but of the heart and mind and soul.

"Knowing you has shown me more than anything else what I have lost through the fatal mistake of my youth. Without you I should be down in the lowest depths now. I was getting down into those depths when we left Uganda.

"Without you life would have no meaning for me at all. The sun would not shine; the lake down there would not be blue; nothing would matter. I ask nothing. I know I have no right to ask anything. Only a little kindness. And you have no right to refuse me that." He looked up into her face with ardent brown eyes.

"Dr. Merridew, I should be only too glad to help you, if I could," Claudia said in perturbation. "But I cannot listen if you talk like this."

"You are sorry for me, then? Say that you sympathize with my misery." His voice was insistent, disquieting in its velvety richness. His olive-skinned face, with the broad cheeks, his full red lips and shining teeth, his whole strong, clamorous personality filled the girl with only one desire, to get away from his vicinity.

"Of course, I am sorry for you, Dr. Merridew," she said.

"It is all I ask—your beautiful pity," he said. Before she could prevent him he had seized her hand, and the hot, moist clasp of his fat fingers made her feel somewhat sick. Before he could raise it to his lips she had snatched it way, and was up and out of his reach.

She was herself again, the girl who scolded the natives with ironic tongue, who treated their sores, who mended the white men's clothes, and did her day's march like a man.

"Dr. Merridew," she said coolly, "if you want my sympathy and help, you must deserve them. And don't you think they are waiting for you down at the excavations? Mr. Grant must be there all alone."

He went without a word, lurching away with that curious walk that she had discovered did not depend on his sobriety.

It was to be a strange morning for Claudia. She wrote her letters, and then took her sketching block and started a water color of the view from a particular point of the camp down on to the excavations and the glimpse of the lake, that she had promised Cameron to do.

As she worked, her heart sang the song of love given and taken, and she forgot the doctor and his unpleasant appeal.

She was absorbed when Grant returned from the excavations and came and stood behind her.

"What is there you can't do, Miss Scott?" asked his dry voice.

"Heaps and heaps of things," she answered, with her most friendly smile. "What do you think of it?"

"Got life," he said. "It's Africa."

"One of the Africas," she remarked. "There are lots."

"Yes, but they're all the same. It's Africa. It grips you. It gets hold of you. You can't leave it."

"I know." Her voice sank. "I shall be dreadfully sorry to go. There's no news of the Donalds, is there?"

"Not yet. But you can't leave Africa for good, you know. Nobody can."

In her heart she knew he was right. Besides, why should she leave Africa after last night? Paul Cameron loved her. If he loved her, he must want her with him. So she could stay. It was all that mattered.

"Why must you go?" Grant asked.

She was forced to answer conventionally.

"I can't stay here if the Donalds don't come back."

"Why can't you? Look here, Miss Scott, do you think you could bring yourself to marry me?"

Claudia gasped, and her brush shook a splash of crimson lake right across the lava streams in the foreground of her sketch.

"Mr. Grant!"

"I mean it," said Bobbie. He might have been giving an order for stores, or directions to his gun bearer by the tone of his voice, but there was a desperately anxious look in his little crumpled hard-bitten face. "I'm not a chap who can talk, but you're the only woman I've ever wanted for my wife."

"Oh, Mr. Grant, I'm so sorry," said Claudia.

"Is there no hope for me, then?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Don't you even like me?"

"Indeed I do. Ever so much. I thought we'd become great friends."

"That's not the way I feel, Miss Scott. Are you quite sure?"

"Yes. Oh, please, Mr. Grant, do believe me—I hadn't an idea."

"I'm sure you hadn't. I'm not a man to show my feelings. But I'll never change. You'll be the only one. Couldn't you give me any hope, Miss Scott?"

She shook her head. He had seen nothing, then. His close friendship with Cameron hadn't made him sense what was in his friend's heart. She felt guilty at not telling him, but then she had nothing to tell. Not yet.

"I'll not give up hope, all the same," said Bobbie, with his quiet native obstinacy, "unless there's some other man."

Claudia said nothing, and in just the same tone as he had asked her to marry him, Grant began to talk about the expected arrival of Ploerel's *safari*.

Cameron came up to the camp just before luncheon. Claudia's easel was still in position, but she had gone to tidy up and to put her feminine touches to the table in the mess tent.

When she came out, she found Cameron standing behind her sketch. There were boys about, but neither Grant nor Merridew, and the look that passed between the two gave their—"Good morning!" a sound as of ringing bells. It was natural for him to take her hand in greeting, but he held it so that she flushed and a mist came into her eyes. Happiness was pain; pain was happiness.

"I have thought of you every minute," he whispered. "Have you thought of me?"

"Of course," she whispered back.

"It has been like a year since last night," he went on. "Do you love me still?"

She couldn't speak, but smiled.

"It wasn't a dream, then? Claudia, say it again!"

"I love you," she breathed.

"And life is good?"

"Much too good to be true."

Cameron laughed, and for a second he gripped her shoulder with a fierce possessive touch that went through her like a flame. But he did not kiss her, although the boys had vanished and they were alone.

Just as they were finishing luncheon the news came that Ploerel's *safari* was in sight. They all went out to greet the invading army, which wound down from the mission station on to their rocky table-land. Stringing out, it looked never ending; loaded porters first, with the native *askari* (soldiers) at their head; then horses, then more natives, and then a bunch of *machilas,* each hammock borne by four boys.

Cameron and his party went up to meet them. They signed to the natives to halt, as the path to their camp led down behind Cameron's. Then, going forward, in about ten minutes they came up with the white folk.

"By gad!" exclaimed Grant. "Two women! Has Ploerel gone off his head?"

Cameron leading, they still went forward, and the sound of English voices greeted them.

Claudia fell behind. For no reason she felt herself an interloper.

The cries of "Hullo!" and "How do you do?" and "Here we are!" reached Cameron's ears as if from some immense distance.

Sir Carl was walking toward them, and a young Englishman, and two women—the small, bent-shouldered figure of Sir Carl's sister, and—looking as if she had just walked out of Burberry's, with a green veil floating over her lovely face—the graceful, incredibly youthful figure of Mary Stour.

CHAPTER IX.

IN EXPIATION.

"FOR the Lord's sake, two women!" repeated Grant under his breath in a tone of consternation so comic that Cameron could not help smiling, in spite of his own indignant anger. "The man must needs bring his harem! Keeping up Oriental magnificence with a vengeance! This puts the lid on it, Paul!"

"The little woman is his sister," Cameron informed him.

"And the other? Is she a film star? Looks like one. Do you know her, too?"

"Yes. She is Lady Stour."

The name meant nothing to Grant. He had come into Cameron's life after that feverish and pulsating period. But his friend's tone did. There was some smothered feeling in it that roused his quick Scotch suspicions.

"For goodness' sake, don't tell me you're in this!" he snapped. "Did you know they were coming?"

"Of course not," said Cameron shortly. "Shut up, Bobbie! Don't behave like an ass! I don't suppose they are going to stay."

Inwardly he was raging with the impotent fury of the man in chains. Mary had followed him here. She had undertaken that enormous trek, she who was laid up after going down to Monte Carlo on the train *de luxe.*

So determined was she to see him again, not to let him escape her. It ought to have touched him; it was a proof of indescribable devotion.

But it did the contrary; it hardened him into stone. It filled him with bitter resentment. She had come to spoil his work here, to make everything impossible. He raged against Ploerel, too. What did he mean by it? He had said himself that they didn't want any women.

Sir Carl was muffled up in spite of the heat; Miss Ploerel was an early Victorian figure of a traveler in a little bonnet and a long dust coat, with a canvas satchel slung across one shoulder and hanging at the side. Lady Stour, as Grant suggested, looked uncommonly as if she were acting in a film production in Hollywood.

The introductions were quickly made. Cameron was conscious only of Mary's eyes, red-brown, seeking response in his to their passionate greeting. Then he was conscious of her little nose lifting, and the little ping coming into her sweet, thrilling voice as Claudia was made known to her.

"How d'ye do?" she said, with the characteristic little careless toss of her head. "Quite a surprise to find another woman here. Are you an explorer, too?"

With those few words from the great lady, so sure of herself, so delicately offensive, Claudia ought to have been thoroughly put in her place. But she answered with a frank explanation of her presence and an amused look in her serious hazel eyes.

Sir Carl's secretary, Mark Glamorgan, was the other European—a tall, clean-limbed, athletic-looking young man of about thirty, whose firm handshake Claudia returned, feeling she was going to like him because he had such jolly frank gray eyes.

She found herself walking beside Sir Carl down to the mess tent in their camp, and he was deeply interested in the disappearance of the Donalds.

"But of course we must find them, these good missionaries," he said. "We must certainly find them, or news of them, before we think of getting to work. It may be a tragedy. I sincerely hope not."

Claudia did not know what to make of him. Another personality, not disturbing, as Merridew's had now become, but equally puzzling at the first glance. Such contradictions, the beak nose and the beautifully cut, almost feminine, mouth, the small ingratiating voice, and the powerful forehead and dominant cheek bones. Cameron had called him old, but he did not look it. His face was so unlined; it almost looked like a dead person who had been embalmed. She had seen one during her hospital training. His hair and mustache might be dyed that stark black, of course.

He was courtesy itself, and explained about his two women companions.

"It's a good thing my sister came, as you are here, Miss Cameron. A very awkward position for a young lady. But you look plucky and sensible, and you couldn't be in better hands than Cameron's. A wonderful fellow—the whitest man I've ever met.

"My sister came because of Lady Stour. She was bent on it, and my sister is devoted to her and indulges her every whim." He laughed, as if much amused. "Lady Stour is a very old friend of Cameron's, you know."

"Oh," said Claudia, experiencing a pang that she knew to be ridiculous. Why shouldn't Lady Stour be an old friend of Cameron's?

"They say they're going to stay for a bit," Ploerel went on, with a chuckle. "But I don't expect they'll stick it long. However, I've brought everything for their comfort."

The dazzling beauty of that unexpected apparition had put Claudia a little off her balance. Their wonderful camp life was going to be spoiled. She felt disgusted and annoyed.

Not only Cameron's beloved presence would have to be shared with this woman who had hailed him so intimately as "My Paul," but the comradeship with Bobbie Grant would not be the same. Even the doctor seemed an old friend, and these people were intruders.

Miss Ploerel, meanwhile, was tripping along with birdlike steps beside Merridew, holding his bulky arm. The secretary and Grant had branched off with the *safari* toward the site that Cameron had pointed out. He was escorting Lady Stour, and they brought up the rear.

Her green veil thrown back, Mary was gazing around her as if enraptured; but her eyes always came back to Cameron's face.

"Paul, you're not angry with me, are you? Do tell me! I simply couldn't help myself when Miss Ploerel gave me the chance. I was eating my heart out after you left Entebbe. Only that one short talk after all those years!

"Somehow you don't seem awfully pleased to see me. I won't stay long. I won't get in your way—I promise. But I just had to be near you again for a little while when I had the chance."

"I think you are wonderfully plucky," he said. "It's a tremendous journey."

"But you haven't said you are glad to see me, Paul."

"Of course I am, Mary."

"Then I'm perfectly happy, my Paul." She smiled at him, radiant, girlish, with her provoking little dimple.

He smiled back, struggling with an immense depression; and her voice changed to its tinny note.

"Who is this Miss—What's-her-name—Paul? How weird you should have picked her up! You never told me about her at Entebbe."

"Didn't I?" he asked rather weakly. "I expect the surprise of seeing you put it out of my mind."

Try as he would, he could not get the right note into his voice. He told her Claudia's story in a few words.

"Dear me, how tiresome for you, my poor Paul! It must have bored you to death. And she's so very unattractive. Do let's hope these stupid missionaries will be found. I do think they are so silly trying to make good savages into bad Christians. That's what everybody in Africa says they do."

The glib, banal saying irritated the man. He shuddered inwardly when she called him "My Paul." What was he to do? Yesterday life had been a dream; to-day it was a devastating reality.

They were descending a series of rude steps cut out of the rock. As if to balance herself, Lady Stour laid her hand lightly on Cameron's arm. She leaned nearer to him.

"Paul, I have told them—Sir Carl and his sister."

"Told them what?" he asked.

"About us. You don't mind, do you? I'm so proud and happy. I want every one to know—I mean every one who can be trusted not to gossip. Don't you agree, Paul?"

"Oh, yes—of course."

"Miss Ploerel is staying in Africa," went on the voice that he had once adored and that now ruffled his every nerve. "She has asked me to stay on with her after we leave here, until you have finished your work. Isn't it too sweet of her? I do think she's a darling, coming all this way on my account.

"She is all sympathy, Paul. She understands the bitterness of our separation. I have told her everything—more than to Sir Carl, of course. All about Lionel's awful behavior, and your wonderful loyalty."

The man's heart sank and sank.

What was there for him to do? What was his plan of telling Mary the truth, of stating his case, of throwing himself on her mercy?

Childish folly! Would he find any mercy in those red-brown eyes that sought his face every moment with a look that frightened him? Any mercy when he told her that he loved another woman and wanted her to set him free?

> The sin that ye do by two and two
> Ye must pay for one by one.

He was bound fast. The Ploerels knew. No doubt she had written home to her friends—"those one could trust not to gossip." She had the right. There was only one possible thing for him to do. It was he who had played the coward and the cad when he told Claudia that he loved her and accepted her love in return. "You are mine"—his words came back to him—"I will never let you go."

Sheer insanity! The madness of the one great passion that makes men blind and deaf and lost to reason, honor and duty. And not only madness, but sheer wickedness, the betrayal of a girl who was in his charge and who trusted him.

Such men as he have a genius for self-castigation and self-torture. He heard not a word more of Mary's warm and intimate talk until they reached the tent, and then he turned to her and said in an almost ridiculously conventional way: "Isn't it a lovely day? Don't you think the view from here, with the glimpses of the lake, is quite wonderful?"

CHAPTER X.

SURRENDER.

CAMERON accompanied Ploerel's party down to the site of their camp when they had drunk coffee in the mess tent. Claudia did not go, although Sir Carl invited her in a way that showed he was interested in her and wanted her to come.

Something in Lady Stour's manner made her uncomfortable, although nothing could

be more honeyed than Mary's words. Her first touch of hauteur quickly vanished, the ping went out of her voice. But, all the same, Claudia stayed behind.

Grant and Cameron came up the track together, as the sun was setting over a range of mountains west of the lake, making the whole landscape burn orange and henna for a space before it faded in a quiet gray.

"Paul," said Grant, "I wanted to tell you. I asked Miss Scott to marry me, and she refused."

"You did!" retorted his friend, and added for something to say: "It was rotten bad luck for you, old man."

"Rotten." Grant's voice was incapable of emotion. "I wondered if you—between pals, you know, you might say—if you had, well, the same kind of feeling for her. Of course, I shouldn't stand a chance. And I thought I'd noticed something. If I'm wrong I shall try my luck again. She's not the kind of girl one gives up."

Cameron gave a sort of low growl for an answer.

"You might tell me, Paul!" persisted Grant.

"My good man, I've nothing to tell."

Another lie, another base blank betrayal of the greatest thing that had come into his life.

Bobbie knew when his friend was not disposed for confidences.

"I say," he went on, "Merridew's been at it again. I meant to tell you this morning; but Ploerel and Co., put it out of my mind. He's finished every drop of whisky I've put out. I can't think when he did it. I haven't noticed him being drunk."

"He's getting seasoned," said Cameron grimly. "It doesn't show so much. Have you got the rest locked up?"

"Yes, and the brandy and gin. But, of course, I must leave some out, and he has to have some for medicine."

"How much was out?"

"Three bottles. You haven't touched any, and I've only had one peg since we've been here."

"Pretty stiff in less than three days."

"I wish he'd never come along. It's disgusting having to keep a watch."

"It can't be helped now. And he's very useful. Without him we should have lost a dozen boys from Wadelai here."

"Not half so useful as Miss Scott," grumbled Grant. "She puts heart into everybody—a lot better than any medicine."

They glowered at each other. They were both disgruntled; and unreasonably. Particularly about the arrival of Ploerel & Co; Grant because Cameron had allowed Ploerel to come, and Cameron because Grant had persuaded him in the Uganda camp that the millionaire would be useful.

"Merridew's down at the excavations, isn't he?" Cameron asked.

"Yes. He's taken them up with a vengeance. This morning he discovered a series of big caves right at the far end. He lowered himself down a hole you wouldn't think big enough for a cat and climbed up again on the rope.

"It's amazing how he can climb and jump and balance himself on almost nothing—such a huge chap; and tottering on his pins from drink, I thought he'd break his neck this morning. Shouldn't be any too sorry if he did. I don't like the fellow being here."

"Don't be an ass, Bobbie! You're awfully nervy!"

"I tell you I don't like him being here. I'm not nervy, I'm a Celt, and I see things you don't see. He's no good to us."

Grant shut his little traplike mouth. A less imaginative or occult person to look at could not be imagined, and his friend, in his own ruling way, being taken up with other things and very sore in spirit, was inclined to laugh him to scorn.

Claudia did not see Cameron alone again that day.

After the evening meal, Sir Carl came up alone, escorted by boys bearing lanterns, like a bunch of fireflies, and sat with the other three men far into the night, making plans first for a search party to be sent out after the Donalds and then for work to be started on the excavations.

The girl excused herself early and went to her tent.

She slept badly. A sense of oppression

was upon her. The world had been so wonderful. What had changed it? In her snatches of dream-ridden slumber Merridew obtruded himself. She woke up at last, panic-stricken, found the dawn was breaking, and dressed and went out into the camp.

Attracted by agonizing cries at the far end, she went to investigate and found one of the gun bearers ill-treating a porter by twisting sharp sticks into the holes of the lobes of his ears, and she read the man a lecture while the victim ran howling away.

Then she found herself face to face with Cameron, who had also heard the cries.

His quick glad smile at sight of her was like a draught of wine. Alone, up there, with the sun still far below the great volcano, all the atmosphere danced and quivered, only waiting for his first shafts to quicken into pure gold. The lake lay dreamy, like a cold turquoise. Claudia's heart beat to the mighty rhythmic song that it had just learned.

Cameron parleyed with the native and she strolled away.

He overtook her a few moments later.

"How does one know when to punish and when not to?" he asked.

She stiffened at his words, at his tone; he spoke the jargon of pure conventionality.

"Why?" she asked, puzzled and hurt beyond words.

"It was just a matter of discipline. The gun-bearer was in the right. The boy had been pilfering our stores."

"Yes. But do you approve of torture?" Her voice was cold now. An intolerable weight dragged her spirit down. Something had happened to him.

Since yesterday, since the arrival of Sir Carl and his party, since the arrival of that audaciously lovely woman who called him "my Paul."

"I don't approve of torture, but it is a necessary part of life. If nobody else tortures us, we torture ourselves. We devise tortures for ourselves when we are blind and we have to carry them out when our eyes are open."

She gazed at him, wide-eyed. The bitterness in his voice was like a blow.

He gave a low laugh and caught her in his arms. Just as the sun's first brilliant sword-thrust clove the still grey sky above the great volcano, his lips met hers, and he kissed her with the passion and fury and terror of a condemned man taking a last farewell.

When he released her, she trembled too much to speak. But she collected herself, and said tenderly:

"You have a black mood on you. I expect all men have black moods. But I am going to help you to get over them. I won't let you have any black moods. I love you and you love me. I am going to keep you always happy."

And she put her arms round his neck and kissed him. That kiss bound him with a spell such as he had never known before. No enchantress, no houri, no Aspasia or Helen of Troy had such power as this freckled-faced girl with the steadfast hazel eyes and the reposeful, managing mouth and the chesnut hair.

It must have been the appeal of sex, of course, although she showed no outward sign of it, but it was more than that, the appeal of all the forces that make up sex at its very highest, the appeal of fundamental and yet perfected womanhood. A rare call in this world, and nothing lacking in it.

If any ashes of Cameron's passion for Mary Stour had remained, Claudia's kiss scattered them to the four winds and the past was annihilated in his heart for ever.

But he had to pay, all the same.

Silently he gazed at her, vowing eternal fidelity; but words would not come.

For Claudia the world was wonderful again. Cameron loved her. The knowledge was all-sufficing. It filled her being so that there was no room for wonder that he had not asked her to marry him.

CHAPTER XI.

SINISTER CAVES.

CAMERON took Ploerel's secretary, Mark Glamorgan, and some of Ploerel's boys as well as a dozen of their own, and the *askari*, armed with rifles, and set out to search for the Donalds.

By this time the blood-stained knife found in the mission house had taken on a sinister meaning. If there had been foul play, the assailants had carried off their victims. If they were beyond help, at least their bodies must be found.

Most significant was the concerted ignorance of all the villagers. It was inconceivable that nobody should know anything, not even the day when Mr. and Mrs. Donald disappeared. Besides, there were the servants and the small hospital staff, all natives.

Of course, there was the possibility that something had happened to call the Donalds away; but in that case they must have notified the neighborhood, and certainly they would have left some one in charge. As it was, the house had obviously been abandoned all of a sudden.

Further search had proved that everything was in its place. All the Donalds' clothes and personal belongings were in cupboards and drawers. Letters and papers and books, all were untouched. The bedrooms showed that the mysterious exodus had been made in the night; the beds had been slept in.

In the hospital, furnished only with crude necessaries, one bed had apparently been occupied. The native boys' huts were cleared of everything.

It looked bad. The mystery had to be solved at once. No one could put heart into anything until the fate of the devoted couple was ascertained.

Claudia did not see Cameron alone before the *safari* left. She joined in the general farewells and good wishes. Just as he went, he turned and looked at her, and she was chilled and frightened by what she saw in his eyes.

She could not understand it. In all his ways he was so strong, such a born leader of men. She could not imagine him a prey to black moods like the one she had seen that morning as the sun rose. And the look that he gave her was one of dark despair.

Merridew urged her to come down to the excavations with himself and Grant, and, because she was so uneasy and the fate of the Donalds was so disturbing, she went.

It was the first time she had been down. It was little more than a half mile by the stony path down by the rocks in the clefts of which some low thorn scrub managed to exist. Here were no trees or flowers—all was a bare wilderness down to the rich green belt on the shore of the lake.

The site of the buried remains was like any other such site to the uninitiated, a series of uninteresting-looking mounds through which the lava streams twisted. But Merridew had the gift of making them live again, and he conducted the girl to various spots, while Grant went about supervising the gangs of boys already at work under native overseers.

Strange stones Claudia saw, a pavement dug out, with rude patterns of colored cement, hard as iron. And the structure that was supposed to be a temple—she had to crawl on her hands and knees under a cave-like entrance, and then found herself in an enclosed place with high walls and the dazzling blue sky as a roof. Strange stones, indeed, carved with incomprehensible signs, having no relation to nature or to any humanity known to-day.

And then Merridew showed her the entrance to his famous caves, and here the work was concentrated for the time being. A hole that led to them was being enlarged.

Sir Carl had brought a complete electrical plant, and drills and boring machinery were to be installed. A white engineer and two assistants were following with another *safari* from railhead.

There was sufficient water power to be obtained from a stream, an off-shoot of the river that left the lake, and that had made itself a gulflike channel through the maze of lava streams. Ploerel was determined that the buried remains of Titinti should make a stir in the world.

Merridew was very voluble about these caves. He explained that when the accumulations of rock and lava were broken down, and a certain amount of daylight available at the entrance, they would be able to explore them for miles and miles. He himself had traversed three with his electric torch, and the third had seemed as big as the Crystal Palace.

"I shall ask you to come with me, Miss Scott," he said. "I shall lead you through

them all—I don't know how many there are, but I shall lead you to the farthermost. The farthermost of all. I shall look forward to that day."

Claudia felt a strong repulsion. She looked at the great bulk of the man, at his thick red lips, and the brown eyes, so intensely vital, bulging behind the convex glasses.

She could not have expressed it clearly, but it seemed to her that the words he had just spoken were conveyed to her senses by some medium other than speech. It was an eerie experience. She turned quickly and said she wanted to see what Mr. Grant was doing.

In a short time she left them and climbed up the stony path back to the camp alone.

She felt very low, but she took herself severely to task. Why was she so ungrateful? She had every reason to glory in life. Paul Cameron loved her and she loved him.

And the magical sun of Africa warmed her blood.

CHAPTER XII.

HANDS OFF!

CLAUDIA lunched alone.

Afterward she collected some garments to be mended. Grant wore his socks full of holes in a day.

Merridew, on the contrary, never seemed to need her services, although she had proffered them. She could not help being glad, feeling sure that her strange shrinking from him would extend to his clothes. She constantly took herself to task about this distaste.

He was the man most in need of help, and she could not give him any. She tried to tell herself that it was his declaration of love that had frightened her, but that did not quite account for it, as she well knew.

Contrary to her usual practical intentness on any task she set herself, she did not get to work on her mending at once. She lay back in her chair and gave herself up to contemplation of her newfound happiness. With Cameron away, she realized it more potently.

He loved her. This many-gifted man, this mighty hunter, this big, noble, frank personality had chosen her as his mate. Hesitancies and questions vanished as she recalled his words, his clasp, his kiss. He would come back and life would become fuller, quicker, more dangerous.

Danger attracted Claudia, although she never sought it. Her father and brother had lived dangerously both in the cause of science and humanity.

She heard native voices break the burning silence of the camp. Nearly all their own boys were down at the excavations. She looked up and saw a *machila* being borne in by four porters. As they came near she saw that it might be described as a *machila de luxe,* being lined with downy satin pillows, and that it contained the Marchioness of Stour.

As Mary alighted, Claudia arose and stood still. Lady Stour came forward. She was dressed almost exactly like Claudia—but oh, how different the cut and fashioning of her white coat and skirt! And how did she manage to wear the hard sun helmet so that it actually enhanced the loveliness of her face under the floating green veil?

Gay, audacious was her face, ravishing her smile, showing her very small, perfectly even, and slightly pointed teeth.

She held out her hand cordially, with the little upward toss of her dark head that always accompanied a greeting.

"I am so glad to find you, Miss Scott. How perfectly horrid you must have thought me yesterday! I've been worrying about it ever since. Of course, I ought to have suggested to Miss Ploerel at once that you should come and stay with us. Leaving you alone with three men—it was quite unpardonable, and you will try to forgive me, won't you?"

"There is nothing to forgive, Lady Stour," Claudia answered. "I am a hardened traveler and I am used to being with men, and nobody could have been kinder than Mr. Cameron and his friends."

"But, of course you must come over to our camp. Miss Ploerel is having a tent got ready. We couldn't think of leaving you here. A young, unmarried woman! We shouldn't have a moment's peace."

Claudia's eyebrows went up ever so slightly at the exaggerated words. There was a touch of dryness in her voice.

"I assure you I am quite all right. And it would hardly be worth while my changing my quarters, because, if my friends the Donalds do not come back, if anything has happened to them, I don't suppose I shall be staying here."

"Oh, but how could you get back?" cried Lady Stour. "You will surely have to stay until Miss Ploerel and I go back. We are not going to let the men get tired of us, I assure you.

"We know they imagine they are here to work very hard grubbing about these old stones. They are quite certain they are going to make the world sit up, the delightful, silly creatures!

"I really must insist on your coming to us, Miss Scott. You surely see for yourself that it's the only thing to do now we are here. All three men are strangers to you."

Cameron a perfect stranger! Claudia's heart beat fast, but she answered evenly:

"I will decide to-morrow, Lady Stour, thank you. Perhaps Mr. Cameron will bring news of the Donalds before to-night."

"May I sit down a few minutes, Miss Scott?" asked Mary. The ping was very noticeable in her voice. "This dry heat is killing. Does it never rain here?"

"They say hardly ever," Claudia answered politely. "I find it easier to bear than the swamps myself. You don't get the awful insects."

"You have traveled a great deal, I suppose, Miss Scott?" Mary asked, sinking into the camp chair. "That's what makes you so independent and unconventional. It must be very jolly to be like that—in a way."

Her voice was a masterpiece of delicate disparagement. "And, of course, I am sure the men have been charming to you. I think the doctor man is delightful, and little Grant quite too quaint, and, of course, Paul Cameron I have known for years.

"I think I ought to tell you, Miss Scott, we are a great deal more than friends. My life has been a tragedy for the last seven years. Paul and I are all the world to each other.

"My husband—he is dead now, but I can't help saying that he behaved with great cruelty. He refused to set me free, and I was kept in the most unhappy bondage until six months ago.

"All this time Paul and I have lived with no thought but for each other. We have been true lovers in the face of everything.

"I am sure you will sympathize with us, Miss Scott. They all say you are so kind, and you look it."

"I had no idea," said Claudia in a low voice.

"No, of course not. Paul is not the man to talk about such things to strangers. But I am sure he will be glad that I have told you. Now, you see, we can make up for the past at last. We can show the world how real our love has been. We shall marry as soon as possible—in another six months."

In six months Cameron would marry Lady Stour. They were old lovers. Lady Stour gloried in it. They had been everything to each other, she said, but her husband would not set her free so that she could marry Cameron seven years ago.

This information filtered slowly into Claudia's mind. She was not the kind to whom shocks are tempered by a blankness amounting to temporary insensibility. She took it in word for word in all its meaning.

Although Cameron might love her now, he was tied to this woman. And he had loved this woman first. He had loved her when it was guilt to love her.

Profound disillusionment settled on her like a dead weight. The hours of rapture had been so brief. She had never even fancied herself in love before, as most girls do. Father and brother had made up her world.

Brought up very much out of the world, the constant companion since childhood of a man without a scrap of materialism in his composition, wrapped up in his naturalistic researches and observations and practicing the simple virtues and holding the great ideals of the early Christians, she was peculiarly susceptible to the horror of realizing that this first man who had come into her life as a lover was a breaker of the law of God.

That was the greatest shock; not that he had told her of his love for her when he must have known that Lady Stour was tree. She could not but believe in his love. There was no doubting it. Her heart and his were one.

She did not blame him for telling her. He could not help himself. But this knowledge had the effect of turning her love into a sin. She would have to root it out of her being. She would have to go away to forget.

Mary's vivacious, red-brown eyes fastened on Claudia's face, could learn little of what was going on within her. Lady Stour guessed something, scented something—a too great interest on this plain girl's part in the man who had acted as a *preux chevalier* toward her.

It was only natural. There were not many Paul Camerons in the world. Mary knew of a number of women who had been hopelessly in love with him. Demonstrably, he had not returned their feelings.

He had been true to her and to their immortal love. It was a matter of habit with her to think and speak of their love as immortal. She had waited through these abominable years, behaving with the most perfect discretion, never allowing a glance to stray toward a man, meeting Cameron in all perhaps six times, sure of him always, loving him as passionately as ever, but too much of the world worldly to give up her fortune and position and defy the conventions with him without any prospect of marriage.

And now she had her reward. Stour, cynical to the last, had died deriding her; but he had had the decency to leave her a good deal of his money. They had never had any children, and the heir, a young and distant cousin, was already her slave, and urged her to continue to use houses and cars and servants as if they were her own.

She was rich and free after years spent in chains, and she was not going to have any plain, freckle-faced girl playing at platonic friendship with the man who was hers by every right. She was most certainly not going to allow her to share his camp life, a thing that she herself could not do.

She was disgusted at the girl's effrontery.

So sophisticated herself, so careful of the world's opinion, she could not understand the perfect candor that sees no evil where no evil is.

"I feel so relieved now that I have told you," she said in her sweetest voice. "And now you will see, won't you, that you really must come over to our camp, because, as Paul's future wife, it is only right that I should look after you. In spite of your wonderful pluck, your position must have been very trying."

"I assure you I haven't thought about it, Lady Stour," Claudia answered, outwardly calm. "It has seemed quite natural."

Indeed, it had seemed the most natural thing on earth since her dramatic meeting with the two white men under the flaring torches in the Uganda forest.

Just then there was a great commotion and three boys ran up to where the two women were sitting. One of them was yelling his head off, and it was seen that three of his fingers were badly cut and the top of one was almost severed. His hand was streaming with blood.

Mary Stour gave a little shriek. Claudia jumped up, excused herself, and went off with the boys, admonishing the victim in her fluent Swahili for his unpardonable carelessness and also lack of courage. A white boy, she assured him, would not make a sound under such circumstances.

When she came back, having attended to the wounds, Lady Stour was still there.

"You are truly wonderful, Miss Scott," she said. "I can't bear the sight of blood."

"Then I'm afraid you won't care for Africa," Claudia answered, with her sunny smile. "They are always hurting themselves."

"I do think you are wonderful," Mary repeated, but her expression rather suggested: "How horrid and unwomanly!"

She arose and made a sign to her *machila* bearers.

"Well, when can we send over for your things?" she asked, holding out her hand after she had unfurled her green sunshade.

"I will make up my mind to-morrow, thank you," Claudia repeated, uninfluenced by the sudden glitter in the red-brown eyes. Everything depends on the news of the

Donalds. It is very kind of you to have come over."

Lady Stour departed, making the girl thoroughly aware of her displeasure. Claudia sat down and took up her mending, forcing herself to contemplate calmly her own false position and trying to make up her mind what to do.

The neat darns in Bobbie Grant's socks showed no sign that the woman who made them was also occupied in burying all hopes of earthly happiness.

CHAPTER XIII.

A BITTER PILL.

THE dawn had broken in a saffron glow, with strange and almost sinister greenish vapors rising from the lake, when Cameron returned, walking beside an improvised *machila* in which lay a man who looked nigh unto death.

Claudia, Grant and Merridew hastened out of their tents at the approach of the *safari*.

"Mr. Donald," said Claudia under her breath. "Oh, how ill he looks!"

For the moment there was no thought of anything else but the tottering, white-bearded figure that was helped out of the hammock by Cameron and Sir Carl's secretary.

Merridew went forward and he and Cameron exchanged a few words. He then helped to take the missionary into Cameron's tent.

Cameron came up to Claudia and Grant.

"He is very much shaken," he said in quick explanation. "Almost off his head in a vacant way, poor fellow. It is mental. There is nothing physically the matter, except lack of food and exposure."

"But where is Mrs. Donald?" Claudia asked in a whisper.

"That's it—that's the matter with him. He doesn't know where his wife is. We found him in a rough hut in the desert on the other side of the volcano. A chief put us on to the trail.

"When we reached him, he could talk, though he was on the point of exhaustion. They were kidnaped—he and his wife and their two chief boys—after a struggle in the mission house. They were carried away in *machilas* and unable to help themselves.

"His bearers let him drop and he fell on his head and was stunned and unconscious for a time. When he came to, he found himself in the desert alone. He hadn't an idea what had become of Mrs. Donald.

"Soon after we found him, he seemed to collapse into this vacancy of mind. I suppose it was reaction. He hadn't had anything to eat for days and would undoubtedly have died."

"Some one will have to answer for this," said Grant grimly.

"Yes. But our first object is to find Mrs. Donald. I have left Mongo and a dozen boys and the *askari*. I can trust Mongo. He is going to follow up a very slender clew suggested by a native woman who crept into our camp at night.

"There is a wild warrior tribe three or four days' marches away in the desert. The idea is that Mrs. Donald is a prisoner and being held for ransom."

Grant gave a low growl, and Claudia felt cold.

"I shall go back as soon as I have settled Donald," Cameron said. "But I want more stores."

It was a silent and depressed party that sat down to breakfast. Mr. Donald was asleep. Merridew's hands shook, and the two men exchanged glances as they observed his flushed face. Mark Glamorgan had gone down to Sir Carl's camp.

Claudia did not once look directly at Cameron. She was glad that he was entirely taken up with the search for Mrs. Donald.

They discussed the possible reason for the outrage, but could arrive at no conclusion. The warrior tribe the native woman had spoken of was unknown to Cameron. They might be on the trek, several of the tribes being semi-nomadic.

What grudge could they possibly have had against the missionary and his doctor wife? It was one of the many mysteries of Africa.

Then there was the question of what was to be done about Mr. Donald. Merridew said he ought to be taken to the mission

house, where there was a proper bed. He was in no state for the discomforts of camp life. Claudia quietly solved that problem.

"I will look after Mr. Donald at the mission house," she said. "I should like to. I will take my five boys—I shan't need any more. Ululi's quite a good cook. And we shall be near the camp."

Grant protested that it might not be safe. The mission was a mile and a half away, and now that this kidnaping had occurred five boys wouldn't be enough protection.

"I am not a bit afraid," was Claudia's cheerful reply. "Mr. Donald is an old friend of my father's. I should like to look after him and help him. And I am a nurse, you know."

"And something of a doctor, and a bit of a witch, too."

It was Merridew who spoke, his speech a trifle thick, his smile more curiously vacant than usual. Cameron's brows drew together in a thunderous look, and Grant flashed the doctor a glance of dry disgust.

Anyhow, it was settled. Claudia had her way. She was intensely relieved. It would put an end to all talk about her going over to Sir Carl's camp. Mr. Donald was old enough to be her father. She looked forward to the task of nursing him back to health. And when Mrs. Donald was found —and she assuredly must be found—she would take up her life with them as she had meant to do.

She took her five boys with stores up to the mission house during the morning and busied herself in making things as comfortable as possible. There was one nice room with many books and some comfortable furniture made out of native wood by native labor.

There were old prints on the walls and some brilliant water color sketches of the Rudolf country by Mrs. Donald. There was the Donalds' bedroom and another small room for Claudia, of Spartan simplicity but containing all that she required. She made beds and had a fire lighted in the kitchen and allotted the boys their quarters in the *boma* outside.

In the afternoon Mr. Donald was brought up, Merridew and Grant in attendance. Cameron sent a message of regret, but he was too busy getting stores together in order to resume his search.

Merridew was obviously not sober, and Grant was forced to speak to Claudia about his condition.

"I cannot let him come up here alone, Miss Scott. He's the most infernal nuisance. We shall have to get rid of him. He's got at the spirit cases again—brandy this time. I had to take the remnants of the whiskey into my own tent."

"I'm so sorry," said Claudia. "It must be a great worry to you; but we must try to make allowances for him. I don't expect Mr. Donald will need medical attendance. I feel sure I understand enough to look after him."

"I do hope we may come up and see you sometimes," said Bobbie, eagerly.

"Of course," laughed Claudia. "And I shall come down and visit you. But there won't be much doing," she added, becoming grave again, "until Mrs. Donald has been found and Mr. Donald is quite well again."

Mr. Donald was as easy to manage as a child. Body and brain were quiescent, owing to exhaustion. Anxiety for his wife was mercifully dulled. But on one point he was obstinate. He wanted to see Cameron. He repeated this request several times during the evening.

Before she settled him for the night Claudia found his temperature had risen, and she gave him the bromide Merridew had left with her for that eventuality. His last words were that he wanted to see Cameron. She answered that it was too late, but perhaps Mr. Cameron could manage to come up in the morning.

She hoped he would forget it. She did not want to see Cameron until she had had more time to school herself. He must have seen Lady Stour by now. What was there now to be said between them? He would have to explain. She would have to listen. The force of lifelong habit had enabled her to face this crisis practically; but all the same, something that had been wonderful and strong and pure lay about her in ugly

ruins. For the first time she had lost faith.

But in the morning Mr. Donald was more insistent about seeing Cameron than ever. It was evident that his was the last face he remembered before his collapse. He became fretful. When she explained that Mr. Cameron was very busy, his mild gray eyes grew angry, as if she were trying to thwart him out of spite.

She had to give in, fearing a further rise in his temperature. She sent a note down to the camp, hoping that Cameron would already have started off.

But about noon she saw him coming.

She met him at the open door of Mr. Donald's room, merely saying that she was sorry to disturb him, but the patient had wanted so urgently to see him. And was there any news?

No. there was no news. He was starting off with his *safari* on the trail of Mongo that afternoon.

He went into Mr. Donald's room, and she shut the door.

Half an hour later he came into the living room, where she was dusting the books.

" Poor Donald had to be told the truth," he said gravely. " He was worrying himself to death inside. He remembered I had something to do with what had happened to him. I hope it was for the best. I told him."

" I feel sure it was for the best, if he could stand it," Claudia said. " Is he any worse?"

" I don't think so. In fact, he took it very bravely. He feels sure that I shall find Mrs. Donald."

" He has faith," said Claudia.

Cameron came up to her and took the book she was dusting out of her hand.

" Faith and truth—those are two great words," he said, his eyes compelling her to return their dark gaze.

" Yes," she answered.

" Let there be faith and truth between you and me. I have seen Lady Stour. She said she had told you the truth about herself and me."

" Yes."

" Courage is also a great word. I failed in courage. I did not tell you myself."

" No."

" I am sure you cannot forgive me."

" It seems so—unlike you," she said slowly.

" You know that I love you as you love me," he said. " That is the reason. Love makes cowards of us."

" It ought not to."

" It will not of you because you have faith and are rooted in goodness. But I am different. May I speak?"

She nodded.

" I knew when I left for Entebbe that you were the one woman in my life, Claudia. I did not realize it, but I knew it. I had not seen Lady Stour for a long time. When I tell you the truth you will think I am a miserable being. When I did see Lady Stour I knew that my love for her was dead."

Claudia encouraged him by neither look nor word.

" Do you want the truth, or do you not?" he asked her.

" I suppose it is best," she said.

" Well, then, here is the truth. You will despise and hate me for it, as I despise and hate myself. But it is the truth. I knew I did not want to marry Lady Stour now that she was free. This was at Ploerel's house in Entebbe. I did not realize then that I loved you. But I did realize that my love for her was dead."

" She said that you had been everything to each other, and that her husband would not set her free so that you could marry." Claudia's voice was level and firm.

" That is true."

" Do you want to tell me any more?"

" It's not the slightest use, but I do. I suppose it's selfishness. I am hoping against hope that you may understand me. My meeting with Lady Stour was a shock. I left Entebbe pledged to her—as I had been for the last seven years.

" When I got back to our camp I met you again, and during the trek here I got to know you. That was to love you. I began to make excuses for myself, to talk myself into all sorts of subterfuges and lies—yes, lies, I suppose you will call them. The truth was there all the time: the truth was that I loved you.

"I thought I would tell Lady Stour that I no longer cared for her. I thought I would tell her that I loved you, and I told myself that she would not want to marry me, knowing that I loved another woman. That was after I had told you that I loved you that night in the camp here. But I am afraid I knew I was lying to myself all the time.

"Anyway, I know it now. I felt at the time that common sense would bring me out of the difficulty. You know what I mean by common sense—the fact that Lady Stour would not want to marry a man who no longer loved her."

"Yes." Claudia's voice was non-committal.

"But it was a mistake." Cameron's voice was dreary. "Lady Stour does want to marry me. She has told the Ploerels all about it; she has written to friends in England; she has told you."

"Yes."

"I suppose you cannot understand."

"Yes," said Claudia firmly. "I do understand that you are going to marry Lady Stour."

"But there is something that you do not understand?"

"Yes. That you could imagine for a moment you were not going to marry Lady Stour."

He looked at her, painfully aware that this meant much more than he thought; aware that she suffered because he had loved Mary Stour; aware that she held him responsible because he had loved Mary Stour; aware that he had smirched some fine and glorious thing in her because he had loved Mary Stour.

Aware, in short, that he was weighed in the balance and found wanting. No pleasurable discovery to Bwana Buffalo, that in the ripeness of his powerful manhood he had lost the one woman because of a seven years' old passion that was now dust and ashes in his mouth.

Not only lost her in the sense that she could not be his wife, but lost her love and her respect. Claudia was no actress. If she seemed utterly cold toward him, it was because at the moment love without respect appeared to her an impossibility. He had failed to answer to her ideal. He was not the man she had believed him to be. She was cold to her very soul, watching the eclipse of the glory that had illumined her life for a few brief hours.

Cameron looked at her with desperation, but without any appeal.

"Of course, you are right," he said. "It was madness to imagine such a thing. I have no excuse. It was unforgivable of me to tell you of my love."

"You have not told Lady Stour?" she asked, hesitating.

"No. What good would it do?" He laughed bitterly. "It was made clear to me that she would still want to marry me, if she knew my feelings for her had changed. She may have guessed, though. Otherwise, why should she have told you the precious story?"

"You are unfair to her," said Claudia reprovingly.

He laughed still more bitterly.

"Oh, don't read me a lecture! I couldn't stand that. I am off to-day, thank goodness! If I don't come back, you will know why."

"It is wicked to talk like that," she said. "It is like willfully running into debt and then refusing to pay."

"Are you going to cut me dead?" he asked, with a reckless note in his voice.

"Of course not. But I don't think we ought to see each other very much—not yet."

"You don't propose to run away from my contaminating presence?"

"Do not talk so foolishly, please. I feel I have work to do here. When Mrs. Donald comes back, she will need my help."

"How can you take it like this?" he cried angrily. "I thought you loved me."

"It is wrong for us to speak of love now," she said simply. "You must know that."

"Wrong! Wrong! You could never have loved me. You can't know what love is! You must have water in your veins."

"It can do no good," said Claudia, with a faint smile at his violence. "It can only hurt us both. I think you ought to go now. I must get Mr. Donald something to eat."

"Will you say good-by to me?"

He held out his hand.

She placed hers in it. There they stood for a long moment. Then he made a gesture as if to clasp her in his arms, but her steadfast hazel eyes forbade him, and he dropped her hand and turned away.

He went down the path at a breakneck pace. On the surface his mind seethed with rage and revolt, but beneath was a deep wonder that almost amounted to worship—wonder at the revelation, vouchsafed to him in these days of frivolity and license, of a perfectly pure, candid and fearless woman's soul.

He knew that she had set him high as a true knight. And she had found him but a sorry and cowardly knave, a thief in another man's house and worse than that, a thief who would gladly have thrown away the thing he had once prized enough to steal.

A bitter pill for Bwana Buffalo to swallow.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GREATER COURAGE.

THREE days passed uneventfully. In the afternoon of the fourth Claudia spied a little procession coming up the path. It was composed of Cameron and Grant and a native boy.

She went to meet them in the doorway. The two white men looked grave and anxious.

The native, who turned out to be Mongo, seemed to be bursting with pride. He was a very dressy person, and, besides a pair of ancient khaki shorts, he wore yards of brass wire coiled tightly round his neck and arms, a necklace of cartridge cases, and a cigarette tin stuck into the enormous distended lobe of each ear.

"We come on a most distressing errand," said Cameron.

"We are at our wits' end," supplemented Grant in his dry way.

"What is it?" Claudia asked, astonished. "Can I be of any help?"

"It almost seems as if you alone can be of any help," said Cameron. "Mrs. Donald has been found."

"Oh, how splendid! Do go and tell Mr. Donald at once!"

"We would rather have a few words with you first," said Cameron. "Mongo has come back with the news. Mrs. Donald is not with us, but we know where she is. She is in the hands of the tribe we told you about.

"Mongo had a meeting and a parley with the chief, who came out a day's march to see him. It seems that the tribe has some curious customs and an extraordinary respect for women as luck bringers.

"They sent one of their people to this mission hospital last year. He was sent back cured of his particular form of disease, but died shortly afterward. This caused the witch doctor of the tribe to lay a curse on the hospital.

"Just lately they have been observing one of their feasts, and one of the most famous Laibons of the neighborhood attended and brought with him an extraordinarily powerful Juju. This Juju demanded the sacrifice of Mr. and Mrs. Donald.

"The tribe came and kidnaped them, but abandoned Mr. Donald on the way at the behest of the Juju. Mrs. Donald was carried into the desert, and since she has been their prisoner, two members of the tribe have died.

"Mongo threatened the white man's revenge and an army of *askari*, which did not frighten the chief at all. He says Mrs. Donald will be sacrificed unless the Juju is obeyed.

"And the Juju has declared that the other white woman who was in the mission hospital in the spring of last year must go alone to their camp and attended only by native boys, and, if after she has been there a week there are no more deaths, Mrs. Donald may accompany her back to her people.

"But if this white woman does not go and the white men send *askari* with fire sticks (rifles), then at the first whisper of their approach, Mrs. Donald will be sacrificed. Mongo brought the *askari* back with him, wisely, I suppose."

"And I am the white woman!" exclaimed Claudia, her face lighting up with understanding.

"Was it in the spring of last year that you were there?"

"Yes, of course, it was. And I remember this particular native. They said he came from a little known tribe. He was a huge fellow, nearly seven feet high."

She looked into the men's grim, strained faces.

"Of course, it's preposterous," said Grant. "But we're in a devil of a hole. Mongo thinks they will be as good—or as bad as their word. It's driving us crazy."

"But why?" asked Claudia. "Of course, I will go."

"It's impossible," said Cameron. "We couldn't let you."

"And why not? I'm not afraid."

Her frank cheerfulness reduced both men to despair.

"We had to tell you. We knew you wouldn't like us to keep it from you," said Cameron.

"But of course not. I am ready to start at once. Some one will have to come and look after Mr. Donald. Or I should think he would be well enough in a day or two for you to take him to the camp."

"You can't go," said Cameron in a muffled voice. "I can't let you."

"Why are you so worried?" she asked simply. "I have been in many queer places in Africa. I am not afraid."

"By gad, you're grand!" said Bobbie helplessly.

Cameron's face was gray; his eyes had no fire in them. He spoke in a dull monotone.

"The thing is that if they mean what they say, the whole army in Africa couldn't save Mrs. Donald."

"The natives nearly always keep their word," Claudia said. "Nothing will happen to me."

"But if any of the tribe should die after you get there?"

"They won't," Claudia assured him, with a bright smile.

She felt an uplifting of her spirit. Here was something to do—and at the very time she most needed it.

"And now do go and tell Mr. Donald about it!" she said. "Not about my going. That might worry him. But that Mrs. Donald has been found and will soon be with us again. You can make up some story after I have gone."

The two men looked at each other. Grant went into the house. Cameron dismissed Mongo, who strutted off proud as a peacock after telling Claudia that the tribe considered her "good white Laibon" and Mrs. Donald "bad white Laibon."

"We shall never understand the natives," Claudia said to Cameron.

He looked at her, his eyes dark with anguish.

"I can't bear it," he said in the dull voice of a man suffering defeat. "Death would be easy. But to wait here—and do nothing. In pity, tell me that you love me!"

Claudia looked at him with simple faith. The moment was too solemn for anything but the truth.

"I love you," she said. "And I shall be safe."

She had courage enough for an army, but anything may happen in Africa.

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE TOILS.

COMING up from the excavations one afternoon to the camp, deserted by all but the cook and his assistant, Cameron found Lady Stour dismounting from a beautiful chestnut Arab, with two boys, also on horseback, as escort.

The intense heat of the day was over. That is to say, what would have seemed like a furnace in Europe was becoming at least bearable after the intolerable conditions of the middle of the day. Then men, white and native, and animals, all went flop with one accord.

Work was out of the question. To eat was a burden. The mess tins they used down at the excavation burned their fingers. The ground baked their limbs as they lay down and tried to sleep. Sudden dust storms would come up, blinding and choking them, and then whirling away over the great volcano into the desert.

Cameron looked physically and mentally weary, and had his old air, strongly petu-

lant, of having to bear something unbearable. He smiled, as he raised his helmet in greeting, but without his usual infectious spontaneity.

"Oh, this heat!" cried Lady Stour, flicking the quivering, gold-powdered atmosphere with a native fly-switch from Zanzibar, with a handle of crushed turquoise and a loop of gold wire threaded through pearls.

"You don't look as if it troubled you much," Cameron said.

Indeed, she did not. Slim as a wand in her riding clothes, breeches of suède and coat of Shantung, with trim, spurred boots and leggings of pale tan, and the inevitable green veil floating over her sun helmet, she showed no signs of distress. The great heat made her strange velvet-smooth skin show more cream than chocolate, and the red of her lips was more vivid and the sparkle of her eyes accentuated. And those eyes searched the man's face with the look that he had come to fear.

"You didn't come down to dinner last night, Paul." Her voice was all sweetness.

"I couldn't, Mary. Didn't the others explain? I had to send off some runners."

"Yes, after that wretched girl! What a bother she is causing! I hardly ever see you, Paul. I don't know what is the good of my being here."

The man certainly did not, but he could not say so. Each day he was more tormented by the knowledge that she was there, expecting to see him, expecting him to tell her that he loved her, to dilate on their future happiness.

There were minor worries to disturb him, as well as the lack of news from Claudia, who had now been absent for close on three weeks in her search for Mrs. Donald. It was not long enough to be actually disquieting under the circumstances, the condition having been that she was to stay in the camp for a week before Mrs. Donald was allowed to accompany her back to the mission; but every hour she was away was an eon of torture to the man who loved her.

There was Merridew, who was becoming more of a worry every day, having during the last two weeks finished nearly all the brandy and, when what remained was locked away in Grant's tent, having been found dead drunk on some form of alcohol that was a mystery to the other two until they discovered that he had been abstracting methylated spirit from the stores.

This was a danger not only to himself but to the whole camp, because in that barren land it was often impossible to find wood to burn, and when they went on *safari* for meat for the boys, their very lives might at some time depend on the spirit kettle. Near at hand was only one tribe that possessed cattle and sheep to any extent, and already they had bought up so many head that the chief was refusing to sell any more.

And then there was the drought. The April rains had failed altogether that year, as well as the year before. It was now the end of October, and not a single drop of water had fallen.

On the top of this came a catastrophic happening not many days ago. The expedition had been assured of sufficient water not only for their own personal needs but for the machinery Sir Carl was setting up by the deep channel, amounting to a young cañon, that the off-stream of a river issuing out of the lake had made for itself through a gulf in the lava stream.

But some internal upheaval, inexplicable in its suddeness, had riven the rock, and the bulk of the water had disappeared into the bowels of the earth. As motive power it was now useless; the engineers feared it would be impossible to dam the channels that remained, mere trickles among the lava.

Without rain these must dry up, and the river, too, and the only water available would be from the lake, bad enough to collect by hand labor for the needs of the camp, out of the question for driving machinery. Already the lack of water was being felt by Sir Carl's horses, and the natives with their cattle were moving down to the lake.

To this Lady Stour referred, as she went on, her voice sharp with complaint.

"It's positively ridiculous to stay here, Paul. It seems we may die of thirst."

"Hardly, Mary, with the lake down there."

"But it would mean all day getting

water pretty well, and where would your work be? And they say the water isn't drinkable. I think Sir Carl is mad to have come here. With all his money he ought to have taken proper precautions."

Cameron laughed rather grimly.

"With all his money, Mary, Sir Carl isn't a Moses who can make water gush out of the rock!"

"Anyway, it's hopeless. And the heat—eighty-five in the shade, and the awful dried up feeling. Miss Ploerel even is beginning to say that it's no place for women."

"I don't think it is," said Cameron.

"What about this Scott girl, then?" she cried.

"Miss Scott is different."

"Different! How is she different!"

He did not recognize the danger signal in her voice.

"Miss Scott has been used to Africa all her life. And she has come here to work."

"I see. You think I ought to go back."

"I do, Mary. I think you are taking unnecessary risks."

"The same risks as you are. Don't you think it unkind to stay here? After all I have gone through, don't you think you owe me something?"

"I thought it was agreed I should come on this expedition. You said you wanted me to. I could hardly get out of it now."

"You don't love me, Paul," she said. Her little nose was screwed up, and she dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief.

The man was silent for a moment; then he said with a patience that cost him all his will power:

"Mary, you are unreasonable. We agreed that we could not marry for six months. What do you want me to do?"

"You could come to England."

"And kick my heels in drawing-rooms while people gossiped about us!"

"No, my Paul, I'm silly." She smiled enchantingly. "But that is because I love you so. I know your heart is in this. And you must stay. But do try and be with me a little more."

"You won't come down to the excavations."

"I hate them. They're so messy. But you might dine with us every night, dear."

"I'm always dog-tired."

She made an expressive little grimace, cajoling and yet cruel, with the subtle cruelty of well-realized power.

"As if I could imagine myself tired when I could be with you!"

"Mary," he said, half exasperated, "this is work I am doing. If I went away, I should let these people down."

Before she could reply a boy came panting up the path and ran to Cameron, bursting into vociferous chatter that Lady Stour did not understand.

She saw Cameron's face change under what she knew to be a blow. The boy talked on and on, waving his arms, his great blue-black mouth opening wide, his eyes nearly starting out of his head.

Cameron's face grew gray and old.

"What is it?" she asked sharply.

Cameron dismissed the boy to the kitchen to get some food.

"It is bad news," he said.

"Of that Scott girl!" Her voice was still sharper.

"Yes. This boy comes from Mongo, the head boy who was with Miss Scott when she left here. Mongo is ill in the hut in the desert where we found Mr. Donald. He has been wounded. He says he has got as far as there and can go no further, and will die unless we rescue him. Miss Scott and Mrs. Donald are in danger. The tribe has trekked away north with them."

"But how ridiculous!" said Lady Stour. "They had masses of boys and Sir Carl's horses, besides the *machilas* and any amount of stores and things to give the natives. What on earth could have happened to them?"

"Things to give the natives don't always do the trick," said Cameron harshly. "And Miss Scott wouldn't go armed."

"You'll have to send after her," said Mary. "What a frightful nuisance! It means more boys just when you want them most. I really don't think it's a country for women."

Cameron said nothing. He was looking out toward the great volcano, with its mighty precipices black and threatening in the evening light: he was looking beyond the volcano toward the unknown desert, un-

administered country, where white women in distress would find no white hand to help them.

"Paul," said Lady Stour, laying her hand on his arm, "you will come down to dinner to-night, won't you?"

He hardly seemed to hear her. She repeated the invitation. He answered violently.

"Dinner! How can you think of such a thing! I must get off at once and search for Mrs. Donald and Miss Scott."

"Paul! You can't go yourself!"

"Of course I am going." He spoke as to a child.

"Paul, you can't be so unkind! What should I do? Don't you owe me something? Haven't I suffered enough? Why can't Mr. Grant go?"

"Grant doesn't know any native languages," said Cameron, holding himself on an iron rein.

"Then Dr. Merridew—why can't he go?"

"No." It came out like a pistol shot.

"Paul!" she queried, with a softly bewildered look out of her lovely brown eyes. "Why do you speak as if you hated Dr. Merridew? I think he is so nice. I think you and Mr. Grant are awfully unfair to him."

"I can't explain, Mary," said Cameron, this time with grim finality, "but Merridew is not going to find Mrs. Donald and Miss Scott."

"Then you insist on going?"

"I do."

"I shall not be able to bear it," she said. And, with the fatal error of her kind, she added, with the ping in her voice: "Paul, what are Miss Scott and Mrs. Donald to you? Don't you love me? Can you make me so utterly miserable?"

"They are two Englishwomen in the hands of savages," he answered brutally. "That is surely enough—even for you."

She sighed and tears rolled gently down her cheeks. But she said no word. Cameron helped her to mount and watched her, as she rode down the path, calling out a farewell to her in a voice full of false notes, made up as it was of broken heartstrings.

Two hours later a boy brought him this letter from Mary Stour:

MY PAUL:

Forgive me for loving you too much. I expect I was horrid. Of course, I know your great faith, and love will make up for all my little silly smallness. I love and trust you. That is enough.

Miss Ploerel and I have been talking things over, and we have decided to go back to Entebbe and on to Zanzibar and wait for you and Sir Carl there. So I shall not see you again until your work is done.

I hope you will find Mrs. Donald and Miss Scott and bring them back safely. I am not really so horrid as I seem, but when I am with you I only want one thing—your love, your love. MARY.

And, naturally enough, although much relieved, Bwana Buffalo felt himself a beast.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

ʊ ʊ ʊ

WOULD YOU?

IF you were a zephyr and I were a rose
Beside some cottage door,
Would you know me while in thick hedgerows
Grew a thousand roses more?

If I were a daisy and you were the sun,
Unfurling the dawn's sweet light,
Would you kiss me, and me alone,
When my sisters were all in sight?

If I were a clover and you were a bee,
Out seeking for honeydew,
Would you seek me when over the lea
Myriads beckoned to you?

J. W. Walsh.

The Right Pig

By JOHN D. SWAIN

SALVATORE ARPEGGIO, owner and *chef* of the Leaning Tower of Pisa Restaurant, stared gloomily at the framed portraits on the walls of its single small room, now quite empty save for himself and half a dozen small tables covered with patched but clean cloths.

From left to right there were pictures of the King and Queen of Italy, His Holiness the Pope, Mussolini, Christopher Columbus, President Coolidge, and Tommasso Gennaro, a heavyweight wrestler. The latter, stripped to the waist, his cannon-ball head in profile, was regarding his own abnormal biceps with a look of almost religious ecstasy.

The others were posed full face and officially garbed, and the artist had succeeded in making them look quite surprisingly alike. President Coolidge was distinctly Sicilian in type, while in Italy's monarch an unsuspected Yankee strain had cropped out.

To this distinguished group had this very day been added another and less artistic countenance, donated by Patrolman Duffy. It was a crude cut of a bandit who was badly wanted by Duffy and his fifteen hundred brother officers, for a series of brutal holdups of women out in a semirespectable apartment house district in the Back Bay. A reward of one thousand dollars was offered for the capture of " Jimmy the Pig " with numerous other and less descriptive aliases.

The porcine features of the malefactor were, Salvatore felt, an insult to the illustrious ones which epitomized his patriotic, religious, and educational views. But what to do? Duffy had brought this atrocity in, had with his own broad thumb pinned it to the wall next to the rapt Gennaro, Italy's peerless wrestler. To tear it down would not be the act of a prudent man.

Salvatore gloomily scanned the little, lashless eyes, the broad snout and thick neck of Jimmy the Pig, and his surprising ears. To these the Italian's fine black eyes

returned again and again. How could a man with ears like that hope to conceal his identity?

They were big—those ears—and without lobes; criminal ears, as the great Lombroso could have told you. But what set them apart from all well regulated ears was that they stood out at right angles from the head, like those of a wombat.

They were ailerons, mudguards, windshields—anything you like but respectable ears. Alone of all Jimmy's features, these did cruel injustice to the pig he otherwise so strikingly resembled.

Salvatore Arpeggio turned from this unwelcome addition to his gallery to rest his eyes by letting them roam about the other and more comforting adornments of the little room.

Walls, floor and ceiling were of unstained wood, like those of the old-time shore cottage; and yet the place was both cozy and appetizing. Just above reach of the heads of the tallest customers, from hooks in the ceiling hung strings of pearly garlic faintly tinged with amethyst, of brilliant red peppers, mottled sausages, Caciacavallo cheeses shaped like Indian clubs.

The door to the tiny kitchen was never closed; and through it might be glimpsed the vivid green of fresh salad vegetables. It was a place of enticing smells, provocative of hunger, which Salvatore was well qualified to appease.

Had he not learned his art in old Pisa, within sight of the very leaning tower whose name he had commemorated in this his little restaurant in America, now his own country? Did he not know the secret of preparing Scallopina à la Marsala, Risotto Milanaise, Ravioli Genoise—fat little nests of paste stuffed with forcemeat—and of Minestrone soup, and a score of sauces for macaroni; above all, of the gorgeous and tempestuous spaghetti in the mode of Vesuvius?

He did; and much besides. But—to what purpose?

Standing in his doorway Salvatore could count no less than six restaurants; and just out of sight around the corners or tucked away in narrow alleys of this the heart of the North End were twice as many more. The Capri, Green Grotto, Star of Venice, Pompeii, Little Flower of Tuscany—all doing a flourishing business and all patronized largely by the rich Americans, Harvard students and their ladies, business men from down town, sightseers. And what did they eat? Spaghetti—always spaghetti—and chicken and lobsters, prepared by Italian cobblers and pushcart vendors who had taken to cooking because there was more money in it, and without any proper training such as he, Salvatore, had undergone over a long period of years from dishwasher up to head *chef*.

These Americans—what cared they for the subtle refinements of the Italian cuisine? They came here for a good time, for noise and laughter and local color, indifferent food and dubious cocktails. Not for the good, sour red wine fermented from the grapes of Concord and Lexington—truly a patriotic beverage and comforting to the stomach—but the outlawed liquors he, Salvatore, as a good American citizen, held in abhorrence.

Looking out on the teeming quarter, pride sang in his heart. Not a score of paces away stood a tall iron marker bearing a name in gold letters: Allessandro Romano Square. Over it hung a withered wreath of flowers placed there by the Legion post not ten days ago.

The place was not really a square at all; only an irregular tangle where five grimy streets flowed into one another. Here little Sandro had played as an urchin—just as fifty of them were screaming and playing now, beneath Salvatore's eye. And from here, tidy in the khaki of his country, the boy had bade a gay farewell to his friends and neighbors.

Mouths that had berated him for boyish pranks uttered tremulous cheers as he turned at the street corner to wave farewell. Eyes that had flashed resentfully at his mischievous tricks wept rivulets of tears. Now he was a name, an historic figure—his body, with medals for valor strung across his torn breast—lying overseas in France.

Salvatore's heart sang as he contemplated the memorial to little Sandro Romano. And there was more—much more.

Was it not an Italian, the great Cristoforo Colombo, who had found America in the first place? Every year, on Columbus Day, a deputation from the North End rode in automobiles to old Louisburg Square to lay a wreath of shiny metal flowers at the feet of the little granite statue—the oldest in Boston, one heard. Salvatore's pretty daughter Lucrezia—had she not won the prize at the Paul Revere School for the best essay on the great George Washington, patron of cherries?

This very region—so foreign, so Italian—was none the less steeped in the traditions of America. Almost opposite the Leaning Tower of Pisa stood an old, lopsided brick building whose brass-knockered door and many-paned windows were of a venerable age. To it all day long in the warm weather came a procession of great rubberneck busses, blue, white, maroon, filled with loyal Americans from the far West and South; for in this carefully restored barracks, once a tavern, General George Washington and his staff had dined.

What did he then eat? None could tell. Nor whether it sat well upon his august stomach; nor how much, if anything, his tips had been. But all day long a stream of tourists flowed in through the wide doorway and each paid twenty-five cents on entering.

Truly a mine of silver! Salvatore often counted the visitors for an hour or so. Were they, these loyal ones, to enter his hospitable restaurant and spend but ten cents each, he would be a rich man! Why should they pay money to see where another ate so long ago, rather than enjoy Salvatore's delicious *antipasta?* They were droll—these compatriots of his! Droll but not profitable.

The Square of Allessandro Romano glowed brilliantly in the sunshine. The gayly colored cakes in the *pasticceria* opposite wilted and ran in little gummy rivulets.

As far as the eye could see on both sides of the street were pushcarts and stands. At the end of the square bareheaded, bright-shawled women passed in and out of the old Church of St. Francis of Assissi. A ramshackle hurdy-gurdy incongruously ground out "All Alone," and children danced about it. All was life and animation—all except the empty refectory of the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

Oh, he had his clients, naturally. One must live! But they were people of his own race, frugal, eating to live rather than living to eat, like the rich Americans. For them he skillfully shaved thin slices of *mortadella* with his keen, long-bladed knife, lifted salty anchovies from their tub to the cool leaf of a lettuce beside ripe olives and luscious little artichokes; ladled out steaming messes of macaroni served with old, smoky Provolone cheese and a cup of thick black coffee. Dimes, nickels, pennies even: thus it came in, a steady but thin stream which left him little above his bare necessities, helped though he was by his thrifty wife, Olga Maria.

But a more grievous canker gnawed at Salvatore's heart core. It was this: he should by rights be one of the effulgent planets of the silver screen. Illustrious as is the art of the *chef,* truly as he revered it, he should have thrilled the multitudes through their eyes rather than their stomachs.

Did he not have everything? The dramatic instinct of the Latin, the powerful, supple body, the flashing eye, the gestures, the nobility of feature? Why, then, he asked himself and any listener who chanced to be about, why should Salvatore Arpeggio slice the fragrant *mortadella* and compose the illustrious sauce of Vesuvius for a mere pittance, while his compatriot Urgo Navarrino awoke salvos of applause and earned his thousand dollars for each working day, and rode in a great chariot of aluminum and brass?

Could this Navarrino do anything that he, Salvatore, could not do better? This matter of throwing the knife, now. With ecstasy the audiences of sacred eggplants greeted the star as, a Spanish toreador, he hurled his stiletto into the quivering heart of his rival.

A-ah! but did he so? Nay; it was but a trick of the camera, an instrument more deceitful than a woman. For Navarrino held his knife wrong; no Italian nor Spanish gentleman ever grasped it thus. And he

threw it as one throws a ripe fig at a prowling cur.

Yet it was made to seem that what could not be, was; that a blade so clumsily cast nevertheless could find its target.

Salvatore was gifted with the knife. He needed no lying camera to help him. *Ecco!* One should behold, then. He passed on into the clean little kitchen and from its rack took a long knife, its blade worn thin by years of sharpening. Its hilt was of two strips of walnut clamped together and through the steel with brass screws. Its metal was of the best; flexible, needle pointed, razor edged.

Out into the dining room with it, he took his stand at one end by the ice-water tank, his eyes fixed upon the ugly features of Jimmy the Pig across the room.

Gracefully he stood, as a great actor should. He held the knife by its extreme point between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, over his right shoulder. Thumb and finger of the other hand lightly but firmly prisoned the haft.

A flick of the right wrist—a sudden release of the left—the blade whirled end over end as it passed through the air, and behold, Jimmy the Pig was impaled through his fat throat!

Salvatore bowed to imaginary plaudits. His strong white teeth flashed in his brown face. "I thanka you all," he smiled, throwing wide his hands in a gesture of urbanity and grace.

Could Navarrino have done that with a knife? He could not; though the lying lens could seem to make him do so, and the fool Americans—yes, even the Italians who should have known better—would cheer madly.

Why, then, was Salvatore barred from the screen? *Miseracordia!* there one touched upon tragedy.

The smallpox had pitted his face like something plastic subjected to a violent hailstorm. Oh, he had offered himself at the great studios! But the answer had been: "You will not screen." Truly the answer of turnips; for if the marvelous camera can make Navarrino do that which he does not, can it not then give to Salvatore's pitted cheek the smooth perfection nature intended it to have? Body of Bacchus! but yes.

The Dr. Cesare di San Martino entered at this moment, his intelligent eyes lighting up as they beheld the still quivering blade in the paper throat of Jimmy the Pig. He smiled.

"*Ebbene!* A great surgeon was lost when thy steady hand took to slicing Salami, my friend."

Salvatore, not without some stout tugging, plucked the deeply embedded steel from the pine wall.

"*Come state, signore!* May thy belly never be cold. But, say rather that a great actor like Navarrino was lost. Did I not know him? Was he not, like myself, of Pisa? His father a *facchino*—a porter—and Ugo a wild lad who broke the hearts of half the girls in the city and the windows of half the shops. And now, illustrious surgeon, *ecco!* he is become American meelionaire—and I, Salvatore, am a cook."

"But yet a great cook, my good friend. Condescend to prepare for me a *tagliarini*—and bring plenty of the grated cheese of Parma."

II.

With the coming of dusk the Leaning Tower began to fill up with its regular patrons. Onesimo Fruttore, the lawyer, drifted in, to stand for some time in meditation before the placard bearing the cut of Jimmy the Pig.

He indulged himself in a day dream wherein he first won the thousand dollar reward by turning the criminal over to the authorities, and then, as his counsel obtained a verdict of acquittal and received another thousand from the grateful client. With a sigh he turned away, found his usual chair and ordered his frugal supper.

Nicola Malatesta—the restaurant's richest patron—entered noisily. He imported monkeys for hand-organ grinders. A few unmarried laborers, and a family party of five, these about filled the little room to capacity.

With each arrival Salvatore stuck his head through the kitchen doorway to exchange friendly greetings. And now came his daughter Lucrezia, to wait on table.

Whereupon her father uttered a piercing cry of pride and joy, wiped his hands upon his apron and rushed out to greet her as if she had been found after many years.

Always it was so; the patrons expected it, beamed upon the reunited pair, separated lo! these three hours.

"A-ah! Lucrezia! *Bellissima!*"

Salvatore seized her, lifted her high in air for all to admire. She was a pretty child, demure, self-possessed, with tiny gold hoops in her ears.

It was as he set her down that he noticed a new guest who had slunk quietly into the room and seated himself with the wall at his back. Indeed, his shoulders quite concealed the placard of Jimmy the Pig. Salvatore bade Lucrezia hurry to take the stranger's order, while he returned to his kitchen, a slight frown on his brow.

Who then was this newcomer? His face was oddly familiar—yet Salvatore, who was not given to forgetting faces, was sure that he had never met the fellow.

He was not Italian, and he was not of gentle birth. A "rougha-neck," he guessed as he lifted the cover from a steaming pot.

It had been a scorching day, and with the going of the sun there was little relief. A breathless evening, with the men in the Leaning Tower eating in their shirt-sleeves, and pausing often to mop streaming brows with their napkins.

There was a constant traffic between tables and ice-water tank. It was as Salvatore stood for an instant in the kitchen doorway to snatch a breath of the humid air that circulated there, that his eyes beheld a strange, an incredible phenomena that caused his jaw to drop, while swiftly and involuntarily he crossed himself.

This is what he saw, gazing idly at the American stranger, who was now eating a bowl of soup as noisily as his neighbors.

His rather large ears were. Salvatore had noted, laid very flat against his head; but now, first one and then the other opened out like an umbrella, and stood forth at right angles! The trick of a clown, a thing to amuse a bambino! And then—devastatingly the truth crashed upon his brain. Seen thus, the man stood unmasked—revealed—

"*Ecco!* It ees Jimmy the Peeg!" he yelled.

With Salvatore's words the stranger rose all in a piece, his back against the wall while his right hand sought a hip pocket.

Fate had given him a dirty deal! He had curbed those telltale ears by fastening them down with gobs of wax; but who could have forseen a record-shattering spell of weather, with the thermometer climbing many degrees higher than it had ever gone within his memory? The wax had softened, had run; and it was then that his treacherous ears had flanged out to betray him. His one thought now was to shoot his way clear to the street.

But Salvatore, after that one passionate cry, wasted no time. Even as Jimmy the Pig reached for his gat, Salvatore reached for his trusty sausage knife.

So many, many times had he rehearsed the gesture that now, with lives at stake, he beat the gunman to the draw. Through the air, whirling end over end past the nose of the doctor Cesare di San Martino, over the curly pate of little Giambattista Antonelli, the inexorable knife spanned the width of the room to pierce the left ear of the bandit and pin it to the wall.

Jimmy the Pig arrested his right hand, raised it to grasp the hilt of the knife. Twice he tugged in vain; too deeply had the steel bitten into the soft wood. Before he could wrench at it again, he was smothered in a torrent of Italians, freed, disarmed, borne to the floor. In the doorway appeared Patrolman Duffy.

Ten minutes later when the police van bore Jimmy the Pig away through a mob of many hundreds, the prisoner unconsciously clutched in one hand a card that had been thrust into it. It read:

ONESIMO FRUTTORE, L.L.B.
Attorney and Counselor at Law
Notary Public **Mortgages**

III.

No longer do the rubber-neck buses ignore the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Drawing

up before the old tavern where George Washington once ate they first pay their respects to it, and then turn to the other side of the street.

"In this restaurant," they megaphone: "the desp'rit bandit Jimmy the Pig was took single-handed by the brave proprietor, who nailed him to the wall by t'rowin' a sti-letto t'rough one ear. Youse can see the mark on the walls 'round by blood stains!"

A goodly proportion of Middle West schoolmistresses and visiting clergymen prefer to see where the right pig was had by the ear than to inspect a room in which the Father of their Country once took a hasty snack.

Most of the thousand dollar reward was seized upon by thrifty Olga Maria, and is drawing interest in a sound bank. Patronage has increased; and of the old clients, nearly all are more prosperous.

But there remained to Salvatore one final triumph, one eternal thrill to mark his career with the white stone of fame. That it came all unheralded but added to its zest.

Behold then, on a golden autumnal evening, a great turmoil in the narrow street as a giant sport-roadster cautiously felt its way through a mob of children.

"Navarrino! Ugo! Ooray!!" The words penetrated to the little kitchen where Salvatore was slicing *mortadella* for the antipasta. Not, truly, with the famous knife which had speared the ear of Jimmy the Pig. That hallowed weapon was now fastened to the wall where all might behold it, but none capture it for a souvenir. As the word "Navarrino" came to him, that hated name which represented a triumph that should have been his, he dropped his knife with an imprecation.

"*Basta!* It is enough that I should read it in every journal, without having it dinned into my ears!"

Ugo Navarrino, bland, immaculate, a snakewood stick in one gloved hand, was entering as Salvatore reached the door. He smiled charmingly.

"Pardon; have I the honor to address Signor Arpeggio?"

"Signor, you have. Of a verity, do I not behold my great fellow Pisan, Ugo Navarrino?"

For reply the great one threw an arm about Salvatore's shoulder, leaned forward and kissed him on both cheeks.

"It is to do honor to a hero of my own beloved Pisa that I come here to-night! And to behold with my own eyes the mark made by the knife he throws with such deadly skill."

Wild cheers from the milling urchins clustered about the door and windows. Navarrino thrust a hand into trousers pocket, and hurled a fistful of coins far across the way to the very doors of George Washington's favorite eating joint. In the ensuing respite, he entered the Leaning Tower.

The knife was duly inspected, and the gash on the wall. "And all these other marks that I see? Do they also represent bloody captures, my friend?"

Salvatore outthrust deprecatory hands. "Ah—those! It is where I practice, many, many hours."

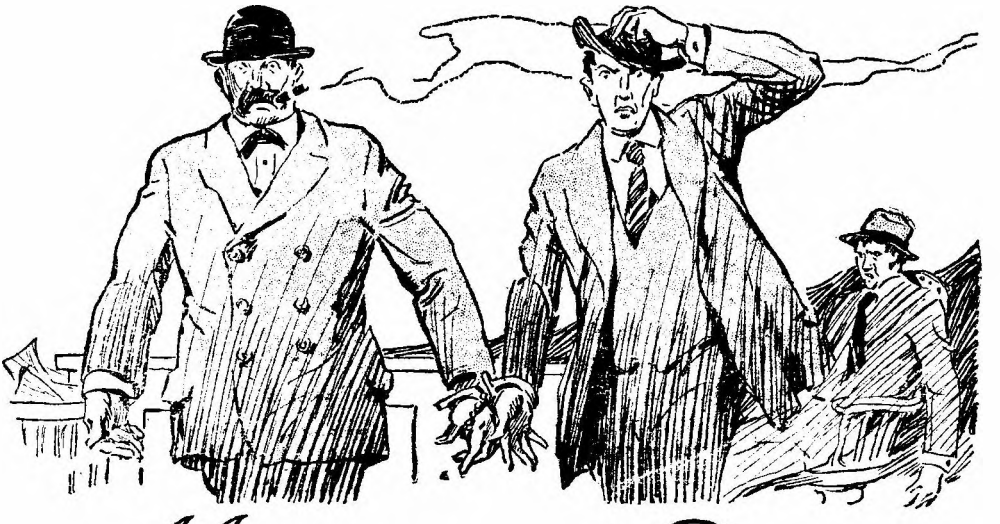
Navarrino bowed. "I hope to arrange for some lessons from you. I am a very indifferent marksman; unworthy of my reputation. Shall it not be possible for you to help me?"

Salvatore's face empurpled. The veins in his forehead threatened to burst. Before he could answer, the star's eyes had caught sight of the little Lucrezia who, a fresh apron over her school dress, stood timidly apart.

"But who then is this wonderful child? A-ah! But I am the stupid one. Do I not descry in her lovely face the nobility of feature, the eloquent eyes of my friend? I cannot be mistaken!"

Nor was he; and when, half an hour later Ugo Navarrino fought his way across the sidewalk to his roadster, he left behind him an apoplectic father, a delirious daughter. For it was arranged that she should appear in the great feature picture "Agnes of Sorrento," and go with her mother to Italy for location, in a luxurious stateroom to themselves, and with a maid to wait upon them.

THE END



Mix and Serve

By EDGAR FRANKLIN

Author of "A Noise in Newboro," "Where Was I?" etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I and II.

HENRY WELLS has a misunderstanding with his fiancée and his resultant gloom impels him to attend a studio party, although he is not socially inclined. Stannard, his partner, is jubilant, as he believes that at last Henry is starting to mix with the socially elect of Burnstown and that this will mean a larger clientele for Stannard & Wells, who are already on the verge of putting over a mammoth realty deal contingent on the sale of a certain property. Things do not turn out well at the party, however. The well-intentioned Henry offends women he had planned to flatter. Stannard himself becomes jealous of his sweetheart and blackens the eye of a sheik who has been too attentive to her. Henry, a teetotaler, drinks freely of the harmless looking punch and soon gets into further difficulties, the while he feels more confident than he has ever felt. He defends the belligerency of his partner, and when the party ends in a free-for-all fight it is generally interpreted that Henry was at the bottom of the affair. Employees leave the firm, the bank calls in demand notes, and on all sides, the innocent Henry is regarded as a hard-drinking, riotous young man. His mixing has proved a boomerang.

CHAPTER XI.

HEAVY RAINS.

THESE two had been friends for years and years. Also, Henry was by nature the most sympathetic soul imaginable. So the most logical thing, seemingly, would have been for him to step hurriedly to the suffering George's side and throw a kindly arm about his shoulders—but this was no morning for logical things.

Henry, therefore, stood rooted for half a minute. He squinted hard at the incredible figure of his genial friend, which was now actually shaking the desk with its sorrow—yes, it was happening! Henry glanced about the office, in search of a possible explanation of this horrid demonstration. There was none at all; and abruptly, over Henry's own countenance, there swept a wave of vinegar sourness!

"All right—I guess so!" he said briefly. "I'll drop in and see you again some time when you feel better, George. Bye bye."

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for October 17.

He walked out. Rather glassy of eye, he trudged down the stairs and into the sunny street; he sighed, then, and made for the Stannard & Wells office.

As to what might ail George, he did not know and he could not guess and he had not even the slightest inclination to try guessing.

There were many things about which Henry Wells was curious this morning, but the private sorrows of other people were not on the list. And this one of George's seemed to be a regular old-fashioned holy terror of a sorrow, anyway, and not at all the sort of thing into which one should pry.

Some few steps, though, and Henry slowed his pace. Maybe someone had died. No, that wasn't it; despite his sunny disposition and all, George was actually a rather forlorn and lonely soul, without a close relative in the world. Furthermore, to take a long shot, this tremendous grief seemed somehow connected with himself, which was the most natural thing possible on this enchanted day and—oh, Henry didn't give a rap about it, one way or the other! He hurried on.

It was queer, though, that he couldn't look at anybody this morning without breaking their hearts! John had wept for him first—and then Ida—and then Gower and now George! Maybe there was something strange about him. Something occult and inexplicable. But for George's complete collapse, this would have been a fool idea; but such things happen!

Henry slowed once more and fixed his presumably evil eye upon a policeman, more than half expecting the officer to burst into a torrent of tears. The policeman, however, caught the eye and looked Henry up and down, with more pointed inquiry as the seconds passed. Henry hurried on.

And here was the office, and Henry entered, not with quite his usual springy tread. Aha! And Ida hadn't left yet, had she? Ida was hammering away on her typewriter and toward her junior employer she shot just one glance of pure malevolence—or so Henry interpreted the glance. Well, they'd see about *that!*

He passed the young woman with the briefest, stiffest nod; he scowled at Lew Todd's desk—Lew, the bear for work! the mainstay of the office in rush times! Lew's desk was deserted and inexplicably neat, without a single paper on its shiny top where usually there was a mighty litter. Yes, sir, with plenty of business to be looked after, only the elderly, spare Mr. Tibbins, bookkeeper, was on the job this morning! Mr. Wells's lips tightened as he attained the private office.

John Stannard was back. He had resumed his pose of gloom: yet since Henry's last view he had somehow added to the pose, accumulating atmosphere and effect. It was almost as if a black cloud surrounded John now.

"Where's Lew?" the junior partner asked abruptly.

"What? Gone!"

"Where?"

"Gone to Donaldson!" Mr. Stannard snapped.

"Permanently?"

"Until Donaldson fires him!"

Henry sat down and shook his head.

"That's too bad!" he muttered.

"It is. And it's your fault!"

"Rot!" said Henry.

"Rot?" boomed from John. "You—you, who had to make love to Donaldson's kid wife! *You* call it rot?"

Mr. Stannard's eye blazed. Henry sat up. There was some warmth in his own eye.

"If I made a mistake, it isn't the first mistake that's been made in the world. You've made a few yourself," he said crisply. "I fired Ida before I went out. What's she doing here?"

Thrice was it necessary for John Stannard to gulp at the emotional something in his throat before he could speak.

"Yes, I know damn well you fired Ida—or tried to fire her!" he cried. "Now listen!"

"I—"

"Hereafter, you keep your dirty little fingers and your dirty little tongue away from Ida and her affairs! Get that? You've nothing to do or say about Ida or her work here! Get *that?*"

"Oh, I get the drift of it," Henry sneered and seemed quite unimpressed. "But it happens that I own half this firm and that

I have something to say about the employees, so—"

"Own half, do you?" Mr. Stannard interrupted, with a hollow, awful laugh. "Half of *what?*"

"Eh?"

"Half of nothing! We're ruined!" the senior partner explained further.

"Aha!" said Henry. "When did that happen?"

"I took up those notes! I wiped out our firm account and my personal account, doing it! I dug into my personal reserve and left four thousand dollars worth of Liberty Bonds as security for the balance, and that comes darn near finishing the reserve! This firm hasn't enough actual cash to buy the skin of a raw potato! We're ruined!"

He groaned, terribly. He shook his head. Henry merely elevated his eyebrows.

"You talk like an ass!" he said pleasantly. "We plunged too heavily on that Dolan property, of course, sure thing or no sure thing. That was *your* idea. I said at the time, if you remember, that it was going to be a trifle embarrassing if something unexpected happened before we cleaned up. Apparently, it has happened. But we're not ruined. The First National isn't the last place on earth where we can borrow money."

"Isn't it?" demanded Mr. Stannard. "Well, with *you* in the firm, it is! Yes! You've wrecked this concern, Wells! You've disgraced us so completely that—"

"What are you talking about now?" Henry asked wearily.

"Oh, we've been hearing quite a lot about you, since you went out the last time! We—" Here Mr. Stannard broke off and faced about, meeting Henry's eye in a hard and unfriendly way. Obviously, Mr. Stannard was about to get down to real business! "You and I are going to have that heart to heart talk now!"

"I'll say we are!" Henry agreed. "And for a beginning, drop the stuff about my disgracing the firm."

"Drop it? When you—"

Here he halted once more, for Ida had entered. Ida's small and attractive nose was pointing almost at the ceiling. She quite ignored John, albeit a wide, inane smile came suddenly to him; she passed to Henry and laid a typewritten slip on his desk.

"Miss Miriam Benton called up while you were out," she explained. "She wants you to go see her as soon as possible. There's the memo!"

And she faced about and departed. Then a wide and equally inane smile came to Henry's lips. Once he glanced at his partner, who was regaining his savage scowl; then he arose.

"Keep it till later. Maybe you'll be able to think up some nastier way of putting it!" he said, cheerfully. "I'm going uptown for a while."

"Sit down there and—"

"No, Johnny," smiled Henry. "I'm going to talk to the only real girl in the world. She wants to do some more apol—well, I'm going to see her, anyhow."

"Your place is here!" Mr. Stannard shouted.

"Keep it dusted for me till I get back to occupy it!" the junior partner said airily.

And he was gone, covering the outer office with great strides, bounding out to the street and aboard a passing car, that the happy little trip might be lessened by some seven or eight minutes.

Because Henry understood the nature of that summons. Let the rest of them be what they might, Miriam Benton was a girl of serious mind in some ways, at all events Henry was her life, just as she was Henry's life; she had wounded Henry and; after due meditation, had concluded that insufficient balm had been placed upon the wound. So now she was about to apply a little more balm and, to tell the truth, Henry was all ready for the process! There had been something very feverish and unwholesome about most of this morning and the thought of looking at Miriam was like the thought of hiding in a particularly happy and peaceful home for a brief rest.

Thus, even again, do we see Henry at the little house on Norton Street, entering the little parlor, relaxed, thrilled in the very anticipation of the steps that would come running downstairs in a moment.

In point of fact, however, they came from somewhere in the rear. Henry bounced

forward—and stopped short. And exactly why, he could not have told, save that something in Miriam's eye had done the trick! It was not an angry Miriam this time; distinctly, it was not a demonstratively affectionate Miriam, either. Rather was it a sort of neutral being, indicating by cool eyes alone the impenetrable and invisible wall which surrounded her.

"Well, for the love of Mike, what's wrong *now?*" Henry gasped.

Miriam smiled flittingly.

"I asked you to come at once. I'm sorry, of course, Henry, but I—I had to know. Will you sit down?"

"No! Not unless you drop this—this—whatever this new one is, and come sit on my lap like a sane—"

"Thank you—*no!*" said Miss Benton's measured voice. "Henry, I want to ask you a question or two. You don't mind?"

"I don't!" Henry said, somewhat weakly, and sat down. "Shoot!"

"Why didn't you tell me you took Mrs. Clay home last night?"

"Why borrow trouble?" Henry sighed. "It was something I couldn't avoid."

"Really?"

"I swear it!"

"Well, Henry, two girls who were at that party have gone to the trouble of calling me up since you were here."

"Bless them! What lies have they been telling you?"

"None, I'm afraid. You got home at five this morning?"

"About twenty minutes after, judge."

"But you left the party with Mrs. Clay a few minutes after midnight!"

A chill ran through Henry Wells.

"Er—yes. That's true," was the highly unreassuring thing he said.

Miss Benton stiffened, in the visible effort at self control; she winked very rapidly for a second or two.

"You took her—right home?"

"I did! And—"

"And you left her house a little after five this morning! You sneaked out the back door!" shot from Miss Benton.

An instant, Henry Wells reeled in his chair. Then his voice came. a thick wild sound.

"All right! I knew it! I felt it! I wouldn't let myself believe it. I wouldn't even let myself think it, but—*you take milk from Doty the milkman!*"

He sat back, shaking.

"The emotion isn't impressive, Henry," she said. "Yes, I believe that Doty told our Margaret and Margaret told Aunt Sarah and aunt felt it her duty to tell me—for which I'm grateful, of course. Doty said that you pretended not to recognize him and—"

"Damn Doty!" shouted Henry Wells and crossed the room so suddenly that Miss Benton shrank back. "When I'm through with the rest of it, I'll catch that old nanny-goat and make him eat his white whiskers! But never mind that just now; *now* you listen to me.

"I took her home—yes! And I went in and helped her lock the front door and that's how I happened to go out the back door, which I did inside of five minutes, Miriam. And then I hit the grape arbor in the dark and just about wrecked my knee! Here!" Henry gasped, and tugged at his trouser's leg. "Look at it—or what's left of it! Blast propriety! *Look at it,* I tell you! D'ye think I put on that square foot of bruises for fun? Good enough, then! The thing hurt so like blazes that I stretched out on the bench to rest it before I could go on—and I was so tired that I went sound asleep, Miriam, and I never opened an eye until five this morning! And that's the truth—it's the *truth,* so help me—"

"Henry! Henry!" Miss Benton protested.

Yet the invisible wall about her was disintegrating. Looking at Henry in that slightly startling moment, it would have been sheer impossibility not to know that he spoke the truth.

"Well, Henry," Miss Benton began uncertainly, albeit the smile would not be wholly repressed, "won't you please make that poor leg a little more respectable before aunt happens along and faints? Poor knee!"

"Never—never mind about the knee. Honey!" Henry cried brokenly. "*Do you believe me?*"

Miss Benton looked up steadily at Henry.

"Yes, dear, I believe you," her quiet voice said. "But you should have told me."

"Well, I've told you now, anyway!" cried Henry Wells and—oh, yes, they were in tight embrace again by this time, of course.

So passed one celestial minute.

"Henry!" Miriam breathed.

"Dearest?" breathed Henry.

"I'm—I'm not jealous. Really I'm not. But you won't—I mean, you won't see any more of her than you have to?"

"I will not!"

"I mean—just in the office, on business, Henry? Nowhere else?"

"Most emphatically, nowhere else!" the junior partner cried out with great fervor. "Lord! You don't think I go trotting around with her or any other woman, do you?"

"I know you don't. I only meant—"

"Then, darling, trust me just a little bit, won't you?"

"Oh, my dearest!" cried Miriam, with considerable feeling of her own, "I do trust you! If I couldn't trust you with my very soul, I'd die!"

Her lips met the lips of Henry Wells.

So passed another minute, even more celestial in character, wherein presumably Miriam's soul linked arms with Henry's soul and the interesting pair of souls then soared to rose-tinted altitudes far above the ordinary mortal ken.

Somewhere at the rear of the house, the telephone rang. There was a pause, in which distant feet shuffled, in which Henry and Miriam came nearer to earth once more and listened.

"Miss—Meereum!" called Margaret's voice.

When light little feet had taken her away from him for a moment, Henry Wells sat down suddenly and mopped his brow.

Doty, by thunder! Why—why—well, it was fact, of course; Doty the milkman had seen him leave the back gate of the old Ferris place. The odd feature was that—having thought hardly at all of just that period—Henry had not even considered the possibility of watchful eyes, out there.

There was a vague impression of clinking glass and of a milk-wagon, to be sure, but the neighborhood had otherwise been quieter than any graveyard; and Henry, at the time, had been greatly occupied with a stiff and painful knee and with the longing to get home and between the sheets for an hour or two. Why, even when he had been ejected in such summary fashion by Mrs. Broughton, he had assumed merely that the bedeviled Doty had seen him stealing into the house!

Whereas, Mr. Doty not only had seen him leave the back gate but he had, apparently, abandoned the milk business and taken up the profession of town crier. Cold little beads came out on Henry's forehead. A number of misty but highly disquieting suspicions flitted into his brain, a number of unpleasant possibilities, if the old fool meant to spread the news all over Burnstown! Miriam understood, of course, because Miriam knew him. How about the rest of the world, always so delightfully ready to put the worst possible construction upon a circumstance of this kind?

He sighed shudderingly as he caught the sound of Miriam's returning steps; he'd have to consult Miriam, whose brain was ten thousand times as good as his own, and decide what was best to do in a case like—Henry, quite involuntarily, started entirely out of his chair.

Because Miriam had returned!

The exquisite, normal flush had graced her cheeks when she left to answer the telephone; now these cheeks were pallid. Her beautiful eyes had been soft and caressing when last Henry saw them; now they were wide and half incredulous and terrified! They rested upon Henry Wells exactly as if he were some loathsome thing, which of course he was not.

"Oh!" Miriam said, with great difficulty. "That was Mollie—it was Mollie Gray!"

"What's the matter with her?" Henry gasped, as he hurried forward. "Has she been in a smash or is somebody—"

"No!—no!" Miss Benton cried, and thrust out both hands as she shrank away from Henry. "Please! She lives—Mollie lives—there! At the Inn!

"Well?"

"And you—you are registered there, with that woman!" Miss Benton choked further, although in a ghastly, sickening sort of way, she was regaining some control of herself. "*Openly!*"

"Why—why, that's a lie!" Henry cried. "That—"

"No, it isn't, because Mollie doesn't lie. And it would be senseless to lie about this. She looked for herself, before telling me. She said that the Clay woman's name is on the last line of one page and that yours is on the top line of the next and—"

"Well, very likely it is; I don't know whether it is or not!" the junior partner broke in hotly. "I didn't look back through their infernal register before I signed my name! Why should I?"

Miss Benton's lips curled very unpleasantly.

"You didn't even know that she was staying there—did you?" she asked.

"Of course I knew it! She's there till Saturday. Her family's away and she's afraid to stay in that big house alone."

"Obviously!" Miss Benton laughed.

"Miriam! That's not worthy of—"

"And apparently she's also afraid to stay at the Inn alone!" Miss Benton cried, and her eyes blazed for an instant.

Henry Wells, wild-eyed, sought refuge in a rather forlorn and shaky dignity.

"When you are calmer, Miriam, we will discuss this absurdity," he said.

"Absurdity? Do you dare imply that it isn't *so?*"

"Distinctly, in the sense that you—"

"And, as soon as you—you arrived at the Inn, you had breakfast with her! Do you deny that?"

"I—well, no. No, I don't deny that I had breakfast with her. I *did* have breakfast with her, if it comes to that," Henry admitted, with not so much dignity. "But—"

Miss Benton's anger had passed. She seemed chilled now, numbed.

"Why, you must simply have *raced* from me to *her!*" she murmured. "I'm a fool, I know. I—I've loved you so that I've let you lie to me and deceive me, even when my own eyes told me that you were lying. But I couldn't have believed that—quite. She was waiting for you in the dining-room! She—"

"No!" Henry protested. "I—"

"Please! Waiting for you and overjoyed to see you! Why, you must have been away from here at least an hour—liar!" this strange, new Miriam breathed, and took one step farther back from Henry. "And then you laughed and talked and whispered and held hands, until the whole dining-room was watching you! You sat there for hours, until everyone else was gone!"

"Now, Miriam—" Henry cried desperately.

"Oh, I'm so ashamed—so humiliated!" the unfortunate girl murmured on. "Go, now!"

"I refuse to go until I've explained—"

"There is nothing that needs explaining now," said Miriam. "There is nothing and never can be anything that—"

Something snapped! Miss Benton turned away suddenly and dropped into one of the big chairs. Her hands covered her lovely face.

And she sobbed! It was no sound such as Henry Wells had ever heard before; it was a low, awful moaning which, although hardly audible, set his skin to crawling in a chilly, sickening way and his scalp to prickling—a sound which fairly stopped Henry's heart and gave him the distinct impression that the blood in his veins had turned to ice water. All of which was no cause for wonder, to be sure, since this was unquestionably the sound of a breaking heart.

"Oh, honey—" Henry began thickly.

"Go!"

"No, sir! I won't do that until—"

"What? What? Yes, you will! You'll go! You'll go now!" the girl cried quite amazingly and was suddenly upon her feet, trembling. "Don't try to touch me! Don't come near me! I loathe you! I—I—will you go now?" Miss Benton concluded, with the most peculiar quaver.

"Why—yes, I'll go!" Henry stammered. "But I'll come back when—"

"I shall not be here when you come back. *GO!*"

This time she pointed at the door; and her flaming eyes were no less than tremendous and her bosom heaved alarmingly. Into the rather overheated and befuddled consciousness of Henry Wells, there stole a gleaming, clean-cut suspicion that this time his romance was over in good earnest and that there was really nothing at all that he could do about the matter!

He was not afraid of Miriam, be it said; that would have been a trifle too ridiculous; but undeniably appearances were against him and departure at just this point did seem to be the politic thing. In fact, it seemed to be the only thing. In further fact, departing was the very thing that Henry Wells was doing at this moment!

Just how he had reached the outer hall he did not know, but he had acquired his hat with one hand and the other was on the door-knob. Looking back, he observed that Miriam had collapsed again into her chair and was sobbing with considerable violence—and then the door closed, with Henry on the far side. He had indeed gone.

He kept on going, too, like a man in a nightmare, eyes blank, step shuffling. He turned the Norton Street corner and headed blindly downtown. He was going back to the office now—or was he? He thought perhaps—

"There you are!" said the low voice of Mr. Arthur Gower!

Henry awoke suddenly and stared. Mr. Gower, obviously come from nowhere, all in a second, seemed to have been drawn through the traditional knot-hole somewhere along the trip! His eyes were sad and sunken and ringed; there was an unwholesome tinge to his skin and his lips seemed parched.

"Halt!" said he, in weak, poor imitation of his usual gaiety. "I've been waiting for you. They said you were up here." He sighed heavily. "Well, you started something by getting soused last night, didn't you?"

"I never—"

"Henry! Henry! I, too, had some of that punch," Mr. Gower protested. "I was mortal thirsty, my boy, and later in the evening I absorbed just nine cups of that mess, under the impression that it was fruit juices and water and fit for any Sunday School gathering. It wasn't, Henry! I found out shortly that it was liquified TNT, done up by a private formula Wallace brought from abroad and—well, this isn't getting down to business, is it? We've been looking for you."

"We?"

"Gloria and I, Henry. She would hold private speech with you!"

"Well, I wouldn't—"

"That makes little or no difference, old chap. When a gentleman has started such a scandal as you have started—"

"Let me tell you about that!" Henry broke in, unsteadily. "That's an absolute, vile—"

"I don't want to hear a word, Henry. If you say it's a lie, it's a lie. The subject is closed. Only you owe something to Gloria. You do, you know."

He sighed again and closed his eyes and removed his hat for a moment. Henry also sighed and leaned against the fence.

"All right. Where is she?"

Arthur nodded up the shady side-street.

"Shunning the public, just now," he said. "The old Ames villa, Henry, three blocks along—the one we've been trying to rent for years. Gigantic lilac bushes along the drive, shutting it off from the world. Gloria ran her car up in there while I went scouting for you, and there I have no doubt you will find her still!"

"Come on!" Henry said drearily.

"*I?*" mused Mr. Gower, and cast an eye at the approaching electric car and shook his head. "No, I think I'd better get downtown and go to work again," he concluded, and stepped out and held up his hand.

So Henry shook his head and trudged away; and the head sank lower and lower. All this Miriam misery apart, Henry had been cursed from birth with an extremely tender conscience and divers fixed ideas of rectitude. Apparently, without ever having realized the fact, he had been intoxicated! Apparently, too, he had become involved in matters rather worse than that. Perhaps burning shame did not quite consume Henry Wells as he approached the

old Ames mansion, but it certainly singed his edges!

However, there is always a bright spot; there was one here and Henry smiled sadly as it occurred to him. Gloria at least would not weep! Of all, people in Burnstown this rather terrible day, Gloria, eternally brilliant and sparkling, could be counted on not to weep. And that was a lot! That gave at least a fighting chance to intelligent discussion; and through intelligent discussion one may accomplish almost anything!

Henry, then, straightened up as he passed into the sweet-smelling lilac forest and even tried to smile—and then, almost at once, slowed and listened.

That nameless, gasping sound, that choking whimpering little whine, so like the cry of a badly wounded animal! He ceased trying to smile and stared ahead; and there, surely enough, was little Gloria Clay in her car, arms folded on the steering wheel, shining black head upon the arms.

Yes, Gloria, too, was weeping!

CHAPTER XII.

SINKING DEEPER.

HENRY WELLS paused—stared—turned limp—shuddered—glanced back toward the street and even faced about; and then Henry sighed and kept on again, toward the car. At the crunching of his step Mrs. Clay sat up suddenly and whisked about to face him, dabbing her lovely eyes and tucking away the little handkerchief. At least, she could finish her crying at short notice.

A little flutter of astonishment passed through Henry's tired brain. It was a brain very much in the habit of making and retaining a single fixed impression of any given individual—of George Dingman smiling, of John about to frown, of Ida about to simper. In the case of Mrs. Clay, the impression included a hint of languishing at one's approach and a decidedly dangerous upward glance. Well, there was nothing languishing about Gloria now and her big eyes were flashing straight at him.

"Arthur found you?" she asked.

"He did."

"Did he tell you what some beast is circulating this morning, about me?"

"Why—he—no, but—"

"Then I'll tell you, in so many words!" Gloria interrupted, fiercely. "They are saying that—that you left my house at five o'clock this morning and—why, Henry! I didn't know you could blush like that!"

"Well—I—"

"Who started that? Someone who hates you or someone who hates me?"

"I'm not sure. I—"

"You've heard it, too?"

"Yes!"

Now Mrs. Clay was far, far from tears. Her fine little nails drummed on the wheel and sparks spattered from the eyes that considered Henry.

"The man doesn't matter, in a case of this kind," she submitted from thin lips. "It's something of a joke and it's forgiven automatically. But the woman's side of it is rather horrible!"

"I—yes, I know," Henry agreed.

"And do you know what Kester did?" Gloria exploded.

"No."

"He put me out of his horrible little Inn, quarter of an hour after you'd left, Henry! There's my grip in the back."

"He—he—" Henry gasped.

"And do you know what *I'm* going to do?" Mrs. Clay asked further, and the sparks became a continuous shower.

"No," Henry said thinly. "No."

"I'm going to start a damages suit against him that will put the last napkin in his place under the red flag, before I've finished! And I'm going to start a slander suit against every man, woman and child in Burnstown who has spoken one word of that nasty lie! I will, if it takes my last penny and chokes the courts for ten years!" Gloria cried, with perfectly justified fury. "And you'll have to help me!"

"Gloria, anything that I can do, you know how mighty well I will do," Henry said wretchedly.

Gloria was calmer once more. She even smiled, very faintly.

"Well, it's about as distasteful a mess as a girl could get into; but with vindication

as certain as it is here, it isn't a life and death matter, I suppose. I'm helpless, of course. I was all alone in the house. But all we shall have to prove, I should think, is that you were home and in bed."

"Um—yes!" Henry said brilliantly.

"Jump in, Henry," said Mrs. Clay. "We'll go see your boarding-house lady and make sure that she remembers your coming in. Then we'll go down to Fox & Fox and have them start the legal end."

Henry, however, stood rooted, looking past Mrs. Clay.

"Well, not yet," he mumbled. "Er—Gloria—the fact is that I *did* go out your back gate about five this morning."

"*What?*" cried Gloria.

"Yes, I—that is, I went to sleep in your grape arbor and never woke up until after—"

"Henry, *is—that the truth?*" Gloria gasped.

"Why, of course it's the truth. I—"

"And some one saw you? Of course, some one did. Some one always does!" Mrs. Clay cried brokenly, and her cheeks were white and the hand which gripped the wheel was trembling.

"But still I—"

"And with *that* on your conscience, you made matters worse by coming to the Inn for breakfast and sitting with me for two hours, in a town that's worse for gossip than any little village? You dared—"

"I tell you, it wasn't on my conscience," Henry insisted quite violently. "There—there wasn't anything to be on my conscience. I hurt my leg and I had to sit down, and I went to sleep. I give you my word of honor, it never occurred to me that any one was watching. Your neighborhood is like a graveyard at that hour."

The pallid Mrs. Clay gazed hard at him

"Upon my soul, Henry, I believe it never did occur to you," she murmured, and then in the oddest way her lovely features seemed to harden. Her lips trembled for an instant, but she shut them tight.

Her eyes were moist again, also, but this moisture she winked away swiftly. "Well, if that's what you did, that's what you did. There's no help for it," she added grimly. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I'll tell the truth and stick to it."

"Oh—ridiculous!" Mrs. Clay said disgustedly.

"Well, then, if—if I can think up the right lie—"

Mrs. Clay seemed not even to be listening. Both hands on the wheel now, she stared ahead darkly, biting her lips. Color surged to her cheeks; she was winking rapidly once more. Half unconsciously, she pressed the button and started her motor. Then, so suddenly that he started, she whirled on Henry.

"No, don't!" she flared. "You've done damage enough as it is! Or if you do, by some happy accident, find the proper lie, don't tell any one before you've consulted me. And do that by telephone; don't come to the house."

"I—wasn't coming," Henry assured her swiftly.

Mrs. Clay laughed strangely, mirthlessly, and glanced up and down Henry.

"I can't offer you a ride anywhere," she said as the car began to roll.

"I wouldn't go if you did," Henry said readily. "But if you'll—"

"Oh!" was all that came back to Henry.

Many long seconds young Mr. Wells merely stood and nodded senselessly. Then to some extent he recovered himself, and walked drearily down the curved drive of the old place, on his way, even again, to the office of Stannard & Wells.

He had done it! By the curiously remote process of sampling Wallace Gower's punch and later colliding with a wooden slat, he had contrived to besmirch the good name of one of the loveliest young women alive—a girl who, at her very worst, had been born something of a flirt.

Well, then? How does one undo these things? Henry was unable to find the answer immediately. Not less than half a dozen similar cases danced happily into his mind—cases where innocent people had been ruined forever by circumstantial evidence of far less substance than in this unfortunate instance. He would have to sit down somewhere and think. He himself no longer mattered; Gloria would have to be saved and vindicated. It was likely to take some thought.

And here was the familiar old office just ahead. Henry entered and looked down the line of peculiarly empty desks. Miss Dickey, the head stenographer—where was she? He recalled now that he hadn't seen her this morning, either. No, there was just Ida and old Mr. Tibbins; and as he passed Mr. Tibbins, the bookkeeper stirred restlessly and glanced at him and down at his books again. The books, by the way, were all closed.

John Stannard paused in the process of walking the floor and favored Henry with an evil smile.

"Ah, partner!" he said sweetly. "With us again for a few moments?"

"Aha," said Henry.

He moved on to his desk.

John stopped before him, hands behind his back.

"There's your bag, Henry—beside the desk!"

"How'd that get here?"

"It was sent down from the inn. You didn't mention that you were stopping at the inn, by the way. Yes, a bellhop brought it down a little while ago, and he brought a message with it: Mr. Kester regretted that he had forgotten that your room was reserved and that there wasn't another in the house. In other words, kicked out!"

"Apparently," sighed Henry.

A yank, and a chair was before him, with John in the chair.

"Now," said the senior partner, "we'll have that heart-to-heart talk! Wells, all else apart, the things I've heard about you this morning— What is it, Mr. Tibbins?"

The elderly bookkeeper cleared his throat. "I can come in later, if you gentlemen are busy now."

"No, indeed. What is it?"

"Well, it's just this, Mr. Stannard," said the bookkeeper, and cleared his throat again. "Something I've been thinking about some little while, and—er—this is a good time to bring it up, I guess. I think I'm leaving."

"What makes you think that?" John demanded.

"Well, the fact of the matter is, sir, that there's a good deal of gossip going around to-day about the firm. No, no! I know there isn't a word of truth in any of it. But I call to mind the big scandal Donaldson had some years ago, if you remember—about women and crooked practices in the offices, and all those things that go together—and I know what harm that did to the few that stuck to the firm. They've always been regarded as being the same stripe as Donaldson himself and—"

"Good-by, Tibbins!" John said briefly.

"Well, so long as—"

"Good-by, Tibbins," the senior partner repeated, and waved a large hand toward the door. "We're in conference here."

"Good-by," Mr. Tibbins said sourly.

"And there," John pursued, with the same deadly sweetness, as the door closed, "goes the best real estate bookkeeper in Burnstown. *Your* work!"

"It's nothing—"

"Oh, yes, it is!" the senior partner interrupted fiercely. "I've never seen nasty rumors travel as these about you have traveled. I can't understand it. It's as if men were parading the streets with billboards on 'em. And it's probably because they're not rumors, but simple truth. You've smeared this outfit with shame until it can never—"

"Rot!" yelled Henry Wells.

"Hah! That's the best you can do in the way of a defense, is it? You've disgraced—"

He stopped short. The door of the private office had opened with no warning knock. He relaxed, then, for it was only Arthur Gower, still badly battered, but still smiling faintly.

"Hello, firm," said he. "I see you've fired Tibbins! It's beginning to look lonesome out there."

"Umum," said John.

"And the little Dickey girl's quit, too, so she tells me," sighed Arthur, and selected the most comfortable chair and lighted a cigarette. "Met her just now; said she wouldn't work for a firm like this."

"I thought she'd just gone—" John beban dizzily.

"Well, she just has!" Mr. Gower chuckled, and considered his outstretched legs. "And that's not the worst of it, by any means. The real disaster is about to fall on the firm and crush it. *I've* quit!"

"You?"

"Yep. No help for it. You see, Wallace spent half an hour this morning blaming me for everything that happened to his party. Then he switched around and put some of the blame on Hank here; pretty soon he had it all on Hank, and he seemed to feel that my working for you was plain treason, no more, no less. He ordered me to resign!"

"And because you are ordered—" John began again.

"Well, Johnny," Mr. Gower said hastily, "our Wallace has darned near two hundred thousand dollars, and I'm his only close relative. Oh, this 'll all blow over some time, and I'll be back, if you want me, but for the present I've got to vanish. What are you going to do about Gloria, Henry?"

"What can I do?"

"Is it really so that you left there at five this morning?"

"Listen!" cried Henry Wells as he tugged up his trouser leg.

So Arthur listened, as, for the matter of that, did John Stannard; and it may be said to their joint credit that they listened almost respectfully, and gravely examined the only evidence Henry had to offer. Having listened, John sat back with a grunt, but Arthur smiled pensively.

"Oh, there's some way of fixing that," he muttered.

"What way?"

"Simplest thing in the world, Henry; just prove that the truth's a lie and couldn't possibly have happened," Arthur grinned. "Only trick is to put it over so that it 'll stick."

"Bosh!"

"Far from it," said Arthur Gower, almost contemptuously. "And something like that 'll simply have to be done here, for the sake of all hands. Let me go apart and ponder this; I'll find the way! And I'd better get out of here while I'm finding it," he added, rising hastily. "I'm kind of jumpy this morning; I almost expect to see Wally's sweet face pop up in that window, all ready to disinherit me. Good-by and good luck!"

Nor did Mr. Gower hesitate about his going; he went, and when he had been gone for possibly thirty seconds Ida Mears entered.

Ida seemed quite confused.

"Has *he* resigned, too?" she demanded.

"He has," said John.

"But—but—that means that everybody has gone!" Ida cried. "I'm all alone, out there!"

Mr. Stannard merely shrugged his shoulders and smiled Ida's particular smile.

"Well, I guess there's nothing around this shop that you can't handle," said he bravely. "If there is, I'm right here. Whatever else happens, I'll be here!"

"And I am, too, for that matter," the junior partner suggested gently, when they were alone.

"Yes, but you're not going to be so very long," Stannard corrected.

"Eh?"

The senior partner folded his arms and sat back, his cold, hard eyes fixed upon Henry with undiluted condemnation. A man strongly conscious of his own virtue and impeccability can do this sort of thing rather well, and John was strongly conscious.

"Wells," he said steadily, "I couldn't have believed it possible for one man to tear a firm to pieces, as you've torn this one, in so short a time."

"But I haven't, I tell you!" Henry cried. "Don't even *you* believe me?"

"Oh—yes, I suppose I do; I'll have to say I do, anyway," Mr. Stannard replied gracefully. "That's not the point; the point is this: I don't know whether there's anything left of this firm to build, or whether I can manage to build it. But I *do* know that I can't carry a man who is a permanent disgrace!"

"But—"

"Let me say what I have to say. You know me pretty well. I don't preach, Wells. I don't go around caring for my fellow man's morals. But I *do* look after my own mighty carefully, and I always have. And any man who is as closely associated with me as you are has to live up to *my* standard or get out!" John said, and nodded savage emphasis, too.

"Oh, I know just how this sounds to

you, but it's what I mean and I don't know any other way of putting it. I mean that the standard of this firm has to be my standard of living—and you've dropped so far below it that—that—why, dammit! you might as well have had yourself pinched and thrown into jail as do what you've done!" Mr. Stannard ended, spitefully. "It wouldn't have hurt the firm much more!"

"Aha?" sighed Henry. "Well, I know you're a pure and exalted soul and—"

"Well, I am and I'm not ashamed of it!" Mr. Stannard shouted. "And if you—"

This heart to heart talk seemed doomed to interruption. The door of the private office had opened again, had closed again; and with them now was a tall, heavily-built man, large-featured, keen-eyed, who wore a black cigar in the corner of his mouth and a derby hat rather far back on his head.

This stranger walked directly to Henry.

"John Stannard?" he queried.

"Right over there," Henry sighed.

The stranger nodded. He seemed, in some indescribable way, to grow more alert, too. He glanced at the door and then placed himself in a direct line between it and the senior partner.

"I'm Kelly—headquarters," he stated.

"Headquarters of what?" John asked sourly.

"Police headquarters," the visitor explained, and rolled the cigar to the other corner of his mouth as he fumbled in an inner pocket. "Got a warrant for your arrest, Stannard."

"For my what?" the senior partner gasped.

"I said, I got a warrant for your arrest—assault with intent to kill."

"You've got the wrong man," John grunted.

"Oh, I guess not," the stranger smiled, frigidly. "You're the Stannard of Stannard & Wells?"

"Certainly, but—"

"This is from Judge Stevens's court—complainant's Daniel Patterson—assault committed last night."

John Stannard went white; then John went purple, as the saying is. In his temples, in his neck, veins swelled somewhat strangely.

"Did that—that dirty little rat dare—" he roared.

"There! There! Yelling ain't goin' to help you," the visitor warned. "Gitcher hat, buddy."

"Do you mean—to tell me that—you think you're going to take me to jail?" cried the pure and exalted soul.

"Say, I don't think anything about it. I'm goin' to take you!" said the other, and his tone grew much more business-like.

A little space, John Stannard merely stood, hands clenched and snorting, while Mr. Kelly's unkind eyes narrowed. Then John relaxed, with a grim and evil smile.

"All right!" said he. "We'll go and settle this, quick! And then I'll start an action against Patterson for—"

"Well, hold on! Hold on!" the detective said. "One second! Gimme that right wrist!"

He held forth a pair of handcuffs, invitingly open. Mr. Stannard, however furiously, laughed outright.

"Put those back in your pocket," he said. "I won't try to escape!"

"Well, that's very kind of you and I'm much obliged, but still and all, I guess we'll slip 'em on," the detective said dryly. "Gimme that wrist!"

"Say, you go to—" John began, injudiciously.

And there was a swift movement on Mr. Kelly's part and a light click—and a thrust forward of his own left arm and another click. Mr. Stannard and the law seemed fastened together quite securely; and if the law only smiled boredly Mr. Stannard now contrived to master his recent anger in the most successful way. In fact, he turned pale.

"Oh, I say! This is all nonsense," he submitted, most gently. "I'm not a criminal. I'm a responsible business man, and I can't afford to be walked through the streets like this."

"You'd orter thought of that sooner," Mr. Kelly smiled.

"Yes, but—but—Kelly, you won't lose anything by being decent. Not to mince

matters, how much will it cost me to have you unlock that cuff?"

The detective sighed lightly, patiently, and shook his head.

"You've got me wrong, mister. I could make more trouble for you, for tryin' to corrupt an honest officer like this—but let that pass. I tell you, brother; something confidential. I got special orders to bring you in handcuffed and no other way."

"Orders from whom?"

"The old man, so—"

A sudden, dreadful light came to Mr. Stannard's countenance. His burning eyes turned on Henry.

"Hah! I've got *you* to thank for that, I think! That's Jim Bentick's work! Kelly! Did that order come from Bentick?"

The detective grinned faintly, closed his right hand, considered the nails and shrugged.

"Couldn't say, I'm sure," he murmured. "However, this ain't getting you into the cooler. C'm on!"

He gave a jerk and Mr. Stannard started quite suddenly for the door—Henry Wells was human. Or perhaps he had suffered too much these last hours. Or possibly the very recent strictures of Mr. Stannard had cut in more deeply than that gentleman had realized—Henry Wells, at any rate, stepped hurriedly to the side of the pair.

"Er—excuse me, Mr. Kelly," he said gently, "but will Mr. Stannard have to serve a term in prison now?"

"The way it looks, he stands a good chance of doin' a stretch—yes."

"About how much of a stretch?"

"No telling," Kelly said impatiently. "Depends on how the trial comes out, of course. He might be acquitted. He might get a couple of years—or ten years. I understand this Patterson guy has around twenty witnesses that seen the assault committed."

Henry shook his head, clucked with his tongue, gazed sadly at his friend.

"Well, for the sake of the firm, it's too bad you had to get into this," he sighed. "I'm not criticizing you, of course. I don't go around caring for my fellow man's morals. But, John, I *do* look after my own mighty—"

"Oh, you go to—" Mr. Stannard began, in a frightful roar.

This time he finished the remark, too.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ONLY WAY.

"CURSING your partner ain't going to help you none," Mr. Kelly submitted, "and I ain't got all day to spend here. Come on, buddy!"

"Well, can we—can we take a taxi?" John asked hoarsely.

Mr. Kelly shrugged.

"We can if you pay for it, I guess," he muttered. "Nothing was said about that!"

"Then—then there's a stand just outside, you know, and—" John mouthed bewilderedly.

He was moving again now, largely because with Mr. Kelly's bulk in motion he had no choice about moving. Young Mr. Wells, whose present expression lacked only the halo, stood in the door of the private office and watched the astounding progress.

There would be a scene, of course, when Ida noted what was happening and—ah, yes, here was the scene, even now! Ida was out from behind her desk, staring terrifiedly, to some extent grasping the situation.

Now Ida had raced forward with a small, thin scream and thrown her arms about the neck of Mr. Stannard, and she was chattering crazily and clinging fast to him—and a sufficiently shameful scene it was, Henry reflected, this of the discredited senior partner and a mere female employee. And Mr. Kelly was acting up to the best traditions now, was he not?

Gently but relentlessly, Mr. Kelly was disentangling Ida from the person of his prisoner; he was speaking firmly to her and he seemed to be making an impression, for Ida was shrinking against her desk as John moved away and called back over his shoulder:

"Don't even think twice about it! I'll be back inside of fifteen minutes and—"

Henry waited for the street crowd that must gather. It did not gather. As if the thing had been arranged in advance, the

last of the taxi line drew up just before the door and John Stannard dived headlong into it, dragging Mr. Kelly after. There was a final glimpse of Mr. Kelly, head out of window, directing the driver. That was all.

Ida, gasping absurdly, one hand on her desk, the other clasping her temple, watched the sad departure—choked audibly—and finally swayed about to face Henry.

"He—he's arrested!" she said brightly.

"Aha," grunted Henry Wells.

"And you—*you*, his friend and his partner, let that man take him!" Ida said, shrilly, for she was ever a girl of logical and lucid mind. "Now you're standing there, doing nothing about it!"

"What can I do about it?"

"Get him out of his trouble, of course! Go after him at once and furnish bail for him—call up his influential friends!"

"Oh—let him call up his own influential friends," Henry sighed.

"You'll do nothing at all?"

"Nothing at all," Henry echoed drearily.

Quarter of a minute, Ida devoted to emotional panting; then:

"Oh, you—you're everything they say you are!" she screamed, and tottered into her chair and covered her eyes.

"Like enough," Henry grunted, as he turned away.

Now she was sobbing. At least, Henry assumed that she was sobbing; through partition and closed door some sort of racket was floating which suggested the kind of grief to which he was becoming quite habituated; but he could not see nor was he sufficiently interested to rise and look.

Because the time had come now for Henry Wells to sit alone and think of the havoc he seemed to have wrought and of the best and simplest means by which some kind of amends might be made.

Or did such means exist at all? Could he go back and eradicate the lunacy of last night's party? He could explain to the various aggrieved ones, to be sure; yet there was something so hopeless about that idea that Henry discarded it.

Could he go back and blot out that unfortunate appearance through Gloria's arbor gate, a little after dawn? Decidedly, he could not. Could he wipe out that unfortunate hour or so wherein he had seemed to confirm so much by breakfasting with Gloria, by deciding to live at the same inn? As decidedly, he could not.

Well?—And again: well?

Henry—and this may have been just another proof that he was wholly abandoned—selected one of John Stannard's best cigars, thrust a handful more into his pocket and went on with his thinking.

There was always the possibility of flight, of course, and a permanent disappearance from Burnstown and all its concerns. At first glance, this appeared cowardly. Was it, in actual fact? By remaining, to the best of his present vision, he could benefit nobody; and, so far as that went, whether he departed now or next week, he had no intention of gnawing out his heart by remaining where he might see Miriam at any moment.

By leaving, he would at least remove a presence which, after more than twenty-five years of utter harmlessness, seemed suddenly to have turned into a high explosive, wrecking everything and everybody within range, leaving only misery and destruction in its wake.

This was the phase he was wholly unable to understand, but it was cold, hard fact nevertheless. Henry smoked on, until at last the cigar burned his lips and was cast away. Then Henry sat up and looked at his watch, incredulously; listened to its ticking and looked again; and although ages seemed to have passed since that same timepiece had informed him that it was nearly five in the morning, the thing now advised him that it lacked twenty minutes of one in the afternoon!

And at one the through, all-Pullman paused at Burnstown.

Abruptly, Henry Wells nodded. His decision was made. He rose—he sat down again, gazing at the telephone. He glanced about the office; then, with a peculiar little whine of pain, he snatched the telephone and called for a number and—

"*Miriam!*" cried Henry Wells.

"Oh! Is it—"

"Yes, it's Henry, and please don't hang up for a minute. I want to say something."

"There is nothing that you can say," responded a dead voice.

"Yes, there is, and you'll be glad to hear it, Miriam. I'm going away!" Henry said bitterly.

"Going where?"

"New York, for a beginning. After that, I don't know. But before I do go I want to say just once more that I'm innocent, Miriam, no matter how things look. I'm absolutely innocent and I love just you and I'll go on loving you till the day I die and—and—good bye!"

There was a tiny pause.

"Good bye!" the too even voice said, and there was a click.

So that was over and if, deep down somewhere, Henry had been cherishing a shamefaced little hope that Miriam would bid him stay, he might now drop that hope into the discard, along with everything else desirable.

He laughed wearily and examined his cash capital. It was distinctly limited! He dragged open the private office safe and extracted the cash drawer. Well, there was three hundred! He halved it and pocketed the little roll of bills. He looked about for the very last time. Then, with a mighty effort, Henry Wells squared his shoulders, picked up his bag and passed through the door.

"Where are you—going?" Ida managed, drying the last of her tears.

"Out," said Henry.

"Well, when are you coming back?"

"When you see me again, I guess," the junior partner responded.

"Yes, but I've got to tell John something, when he asks about you?"

Henry raised his brows.

"I don't see why," he said mildly. "Unless bail's pretty cheap these days I imagine it'll be some time before John's around here asking any more questions."

One very curious thing which impressed him as he hurried down Main Street was that the vast majority of Burnstown's thirty-odd thousands were going about their own concerns just as briskly and absorbedly as usual. Subconsciously, he had rather been expecting to find them all about in little groups, whispering and snickering and pointing at Henry Wells as he passed.

Perhaps he had expected, also, to find crowds about the newspaper bulletin-boards, drinking in the very latest details of the scandal. Well, the Star's board was perfectly blank, which was not unusual; and the Gazette's board held only a weather report and the news of a mine disaster; and the Times-Chronicle offered for public inspection only the news of a motor smash and a Balkan crisis—although the Times-Chronicle had steered very clear of scandal of any sort ever since the courts had directed it to offer sixty thousand dollars worth of apology for a certain story.

But it was mighty queer that there was so little—no, it was not, either! The whole truth was that Henry had been magnifying tremendously the importance to the community of his own troubles; and as a fitting start for the barren new life ahead, it would be well to regain some ideas of proportion. It was almost a normal, if rather listless, Henry that bought a ticket to New York and stepped to the platform just as the train began its ten-minute Burnstown stop.

He approached the Pullman conductor and found that official's eye hard and accusing.

"They said in the office the train was sold out," Henry sighed. "I thought maybe—"

"You go sit in the smoker here in car D," the conductor said briefly, "and I'll see what I can do when we pull out, sir."

So Henry mounted the steps and entered the smoking compartment which mercifully was quite deserted; and there he lit another of John's cigars and gazed darkly out of the window. He was young; whatever the circumstances, there should have been at least a tiny hint of adventurous thrill in this performance of abandoning his whole life, his whole past, everything. Well, there was not. There was only a numb, awful headache which seemed to extend from his heels to his crown; and this ache had nothing to do with Burnstown or the business or boyhood memories or with anything on earth save Miriam Benton.

He was going away from Miriam, forever. There would be plenty of other girls, of course, unless some merciful accident cut short his career; but there would never be another Miriam. Henry kept on staring at the empty opposite seat and shivered. He knew, oddly enough, that the worst of the realization was not yet upon him; that would come when he found himself absolutely alone in some strange place, with not even one familiar face within hundreds of miles; that would come and haunt him through dreary nights in some dreary boarding-house. Yes, that would come when—Henry stared out of the window suddenly.

If one has particular cause to know and to remember, there is about the squeal of any given set of automobile brakes something as distinctly individual as about the voice of a friend. And if Miram Benton's shabby little coupe had not stopped somewhere in the neighborhood just then, Henry was willing to—oh, piffle! Henry leaned back with a groan. There, in all probability, was another thing that would happen to him fifty times a day in a big city; he'd hear Miriam stopping her car and whirl around to look and then find himself sick with a senseless disappointment, as he was at this minute.

His gloomy gaze roved toward the platform again—roved and stopped short, with a jar so violent that it was almost a physical shock—and Henry's eyes popped open and so did his mouth. Hatless, flushed, adorable, Miriam Benton was standing on that platform and looking straight at him! Not the sobbing, wounded, outraged girl he remembered with such a pang, but a Miriam with the same old smile!

An age or two, Henry failed to breathe.

Then, like a man coming out of unconsciousness, he noted that not only was Miriam smiling at him, but she was also beckoning. Now, turning toward the front of the train, she took a step or two and glanced back to see if Henry were still in his window—and he was, at that instant, but he wasn't going to be there long!

Grip and all forgotten, Henry Wells had shot out of his seat, had shot through the little green curtain so wildly that he just missed plunging through the window beyond, had collided with one porter and two stout passengers and spent an eternity flattened against the window, waiting for them to squeeze past—and now, freed at last, had plunged to the platform of the car and down the steps.

Because the world was all right again! The good old world was all right again! Miriam had relented, for the great light of understanding had come to her. *Now* it was only a matter of taking Miriam in his arms, with all the populace to see, and then to ride back uptown with her and begin straightening out a tangle which—it was Henry's honest belief as he leaped down the steps—would not take one hour to set right.

And within perhaps three seconds, this belief was weakening again. For, even in the tiny interval of his leaving the car, something had happened! At first, Henry Wells's somewhat bewildered brain declined to grasp at all that anything had happened, since the thing itself was pure impossibility. He hurried forward, arms outstretched; and then he paused, gaping, gulping ridiculously; because, impossible or not, Miriam Benton was backing away from him, horror in her eye, arms thrown out to fend him off!

Yes, it—it was *so!* She was doing it! She was making her eyes blaze exactly as they had blazed at his last dismissal!

"Go back!" she cried, so strangely that several people turned to stare.

"Well, didn't you—didn't you beckon me to—" Henry faltered.

Miss Benton's laugh was no less than hideous.

"Yes, I—oh, I'm such a fool! Such an utter fool! I'm not even decently half-witted or—go back on your train!"

"I'm hanged if I will!" Henry said weakly. "You were all right two minutes ago and—"

One bound took Miss Benton to him.

"Henry Wells!" she hissed. "If you ever dare speak to me again or write me—if you ever dare even think of me, I'll—go back on your train! Go back, I tell you! If you don't, I'll call help and have you thrown back!"

This astonishing speech ended in a hysterical little squeak that might presage almost anything, were the squeaker to be

prodded just the least little bit more. So much, fortunately, Henry sensed; and in any case the grinning conductor seemed to be urging him aboard—and the train seemed to be moving and—yes, it was moving and Henry Wells was tottering back to his smoking compartment.

He arrived dizzily in his corner. He puffed absurdly for a time. For the moment, he was unable to make anything of it. She had been herself, out on the platform; to that he could have sworn—absolutely her sweet self. And in the seconds it had taken to reach her side, she was—why, she was crazier than ever! And that was it, too! That must be it! Miriam was neither more nor less than insane.

And if she was, the responsibility was his own. Henry groaned, head in hands. Yes, it was his if—although she couldn't be; he had known the family all his life and there had never been a suspicion of mental disease, but—well, if he was responsible, then—but he couldn't be, because—

The human brain is a wonderfully resilient thing; ten minutes at most and Henry Wells was able to lean back and gaze more or less intelligently out of the window. They were clear of Burnstown now; they had all but passed through that rather forlorn community known as Wyldewoode, several miles beyond. A little while now and they'd slow down for the big bridge—and after that, sixty miles an hour and away forever.

Henry looked around irritably. The conductor was taking his own time in finding him a chair, apparently. Now and then, it is well to get out and do a little personal hunting where chairs are concerned. Henry picked up his grip and left the smoking compartment, steadied himself, stepped into the body of the car and sent his dull gaze in search of empty chairs.

Well, there was nobody in the second one and no baggage around it. Henry sat down, all but brushing the girl in the first chair, who was leaning over her grip. The girl sat up with a jerk and—

"G-g-gloria!" gasped Henry Wells.

"You—followed me?" Gloria asked, fiercely.

"Gloria, you—"

"Yes, I ran. I don't know whether I'm glad or ashamed, but I—I couldn't stay and face it! It was cowardly, but—Henry, you know the Parkers are sitting at the other end of this car and staring at us, don't you?"

"No!" choked Henry.

"Yes, and the Richs' daughters are with them, and they're all looking now." Her color was rising fast now. "Oh, it was beastly of you to do that! They used to like me. Sallie Rich told me on the platform that she didn't believe a word that was being said about me, and even Mr. Parker said he thought all hands had better suspend judgment till I'd sued a few people and been cleared. *Now* you've settled everything in their minds!"

"Gloria, if I could—if I could—"

Gloria was looking straight at him now, more strangely, it seemed to Henry, than any woman ever had looked at him before. A nameless something was dancing, far in the depths of her wonderful eyes.

"Henry," the girl said, in a very queer little voice, "tell me something: are you in love with me?"

"Why—why, Gloria—" Henry gasped.

"Because, if you are," the young woman pursued swiftly, "I'd almost—almost—no, I wouldn't, either, because that would be a flat confession." The dancing something in her eye vanished completely; her flush mounted again. "No! No matter what you think or what you feel, it—it was indecent of you to follow me here! It was shameful and—"

But at last the power of motion had returned to Henry Wells.

"Gloria—pardon me!" he managed to choke out, seizing his grip. "Seat—some other car—or else—"

He staggered on, straight to the little passageway, straight toward the platform.

For he understood now: Gloria, sitting in her chair, had been clearly visible through the window, as Miriam had taken that fatal one or two steps forward; and Miriam had seen her and drawn her own conclusions. Oh, yes—whatever good its plainness might do—that was all quite plain now.

And Henry of the whirling head under-

stood even more than this: *again* there had been one single, solitary spot in the entire universe where he should not have been—and in the deftest way he had contrived to be there!

Maybe it was just his own stupidity—or accident—or even fate. Maybe an actual, literal curse had descended on him. But whatever the evil force might be, he was all through trying to combat it with mild measures. Out of this specific little misfortune there was a simple and direct way; this way Henry meant to take.

That the way might have consequences was merely incidental. Young Mr. Wells, out on the platform of the chair-car, opened the door without one second's hesitation and hooked it back. He tugged at the trap and hooked that up into place as well. He nodded gloomy satisfaction at the ease with which this had been acocmplished and, gripping his valise firmly, descended to the lowest step.

And then, although the train was moving briskly, Henry merely faced forward—and leaped into space!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BACK TRAIL.

LOGICALLY, our next view of Henry Wells should reveal him in humble attitude before St. Peter.

That he was headed for some such destination became Henry's sudden but very profound conviction during that infinitesimal fragment of time immediately following his impulsive step into space. For the millionth time, he had erred! Aye, there had been a wrong thing to do and, in his expert way, he had selected this thing and had done it; but there might be some small consolation in the thought that this was almost certainly the very last time he would do any wrong thing.

Since he seemed destined to hurtle thus indefinitely, it might also be well to—here Henry's whole collection of impressions changed suddenly and his mind passed to more material things. The earth itself, you see, had arisen and had smitten him!

Although not so very viciously, he concluded hazily, after another small fragment of time. To be sure, several billions of bright stars had flashed before him and he understood that in some way his right shoulder had been driven straight across his body and through his left shoulder; and something was pounding, again and again, on his head. But, even so, young Mr. Wells understood also that he was still alive and rolling and rolling and rolling on something fairly soft; and now, at about the fiftieth revolution, the rolling process was slowing down.

And it had stopped and Henry Wells, gasping, blinded, threshed about crazily for a moment or two, mastered and calmed himself and then sat up and brushed clay from his eyes. Over there, the rear end of the train was bowling merrily away. Just here—well, he seemed to be entirely alone in a vast field which very recently had been broken up and turned over by a plough or a cultivator or some similarly benevolent implement.

Not a soul was visible, to know concern about his plight, although that was rather immaterial, because he seemed actually to be uninjured!

His right shoulder ached and was decidedly tender to the touch; there were a number of minor spots on his anatomy which might show bruises later on; but his arms worked nicely and so did his legs and when finally Henry stood erect nothing gave way with a sickening crunch — and over there, as previously noted, the train was rolling away and away and taking beautiful Gloria along with it; and with each succeeding second this appealed more strongly to Henry as perhaps the most important consideration in the whole world!

As to just what one did next, having survived an experience of this kind, Henry was not altogether clear.

Always the soul of neatness, however, he brushed off as much soil as possible with his hands and then, locating and opening his grip, found the stiff clothes brush, removed his coat and made a very commendable job. His collar had suffered; he changed that too; and with these details out of the way there seemed nothing to do but find his way back to Burnstown.

Oh, he was going back to Burnstown! Hope, an unreasoning quantity at the very best, was kindling once more in the breast of Henry Wells. Not that he could convince Miriam of the truth without hours and hours of the most patient explanation, but with Gloria definitely out of the way, he'd convince her sooner or later!

At the far side of this vast field was a dirt road, with a shabby farmhouse well up it in one direction and State road much nearer in the other. Henry chose the State road and, all things notwithstanding, reached it humming gaily. From far, far away, with just barest audibility, came the toot-toot-toot of the train, whistling as it always did when across the long bridge. And that was the end of beautiful Gloria Clay!

"Going Burnstown way?" inquired the hearty, florid man in the heavy gray roadster, after a glance at Henry.

Not very much later, since his outward bound journey had been of almost no mileage, they rolled into the foot of Main Street and Henry, espying Beefsteak Phil's restaurant—where nobody who is anybody ever goes, but where one can steal in furtively and enjoy the best steak within many miles of Burnstown—Henry insisted that the hearty man have luncheon with him.

He was a tonic, too. He sold buttons and trimmings and carried a side-line of wash-silks; he had a stock of so-called funny stories; he had a nice-looking wife and three nice-looking children, back in Altoona, and he carried snapshots of them in his shiny wallet and exhibited these at the slightest provocation. But mainly he was human and abundantly genial, and in the hour or more that they were together he failed to accuse Henry of a single heinous crime; when they left Beefsteak Phil's, Henry had regained almost his normal supply of self-respect and the hope in his bosom was fairly throbbing.

The hearty man delivered Henry at the very door of Stannard & Wells, cocked an expert eye at the window, opined that they ought to have a vase or a couple of insurance signs or something in there, to sort of dress it up, shook hands twice with young Mr. Wells and then drove on his way, to sell more buttons and trimmings.

Henry, with quite the old swing, stepped into his empty and echoing business home, glanced silent inquiry at Ida, who glanced icily back at him, and kept on to the private office. All alone in there, the rest of the world might go to blazes! Henry meant to shrink into himself and so to formulate the most daintily adroit method of approaching Miriam Benton. He wanted, primarily, to—

"Oh, hello, John!" he said in a rather blank voice.

"You take long enough for lunch," observed the senior partner, glancing up with an unfriendly scowl.

"I am an epicure," Henry smiled. "Er—pardon me, but I thought you were in jail?"

"I'm out now."

"You beat the jailer to death, I take it, and then bit out the bars, one by one?"

Mr. Stannard's big bulk sat up with a considerable jerk. For no earthly reason, he hurled the half-finished cigar out of the back window with a vicious swing and then endeavored—and quite unsuccessfully this time—to blast Henry Wells with his hard, hot eye.

"I still had three thousand dollars worth of Liberty Bonds in my reserve!" he rasped.

"Lucky dog!" smiled the revived Henry, as he kindled a cigar of his own.

"And they let me send down to the bank for them and now they're in the Court House safe—cash bail!"

"And the trial—when is that?" Henry murmured, with polite interest.

"Never, I guess!" Mr. Stannard snapped. "I 'phoned Fox & Fox as soon as I got to the damned station house and Jim himself came over. He said he'd fix it with Patterson—and he said more: he said I'd been framed!"

Henry shrugged maddeningly.

"Oh—everybody says that when they're pinched," he muttered.

"*What?*"

"Johnny, I hate to say it, of course," the junior partner pursued unsmilingly, "but it looks pretty bad for the firm to have

you dragged out of here in chains. Yes, sir, it looks *bad*! Now, myself, John, I don't go around caring for the other fellow's morals, but I must say that any man who's as closely associated with me as you are has to live up to *my* standard or get out! I'm not boasting or sticking myself up on a pedestal, but I will say that they've never had to handcuff me or—"

"That's enough!" Mr. Stannard roared.

"So that you get the point, I suppose it is," sighed Henry, "but—"

"I was framed—I've got that straight now!—and Bentick was the one who framed me; and he did that for sheer spite against this firm. And you were the one who offended Jim Bentick, you runt!"

"On the other hand, I wasn't the one who ruined Danny Patterson's eye, Johnny—and that's what they pinched you for."

"All right! But—"

"Wait!" Henry grinned. "All I'm getting at is this: maybe you're not as near being a saint as you think you are, either. Maybe, Johnny, you're not a darned bit better than I am! Suppose we admit that and shake hands, and then get to work finding out what's best to do here."

"I admit nothing of the sort!" Mr. Stannard shouted—for he was in a remarkably irritated state. "*I* haven't disgraced this firm! *You* have! You've—"

"Hush, spotless!" Henry said warningly. "Someone's coming!"

The senior partner turned his glowering countenance toward the door—and grunted, then, for it was only Hackett, of the title insurance company. A fat, boisterous man, this Hackett, coarse in manner, coarse in humor, with noisy clothes and a right eye given to winking wickedly. Breezily as ever, he waved a hand at the partners and opened his brief-case.

"There's your three policies," said he. "Carpen—T. D. Brown—and the Acme Corporation one, Johnny. Look 'em over?"

"They're all right?" Mr. Stannard snapped.

"They are," said Mr. Hackett, and seated himself jauntily on the side of John's desk and winked at him. "Well, well! Back on the job to-day, hey?"

"What?"

"Ha! ha!" said Mr. Hackett. And he added: "Ho! ho! ho!"

"What the hell's the joke?" asked the senior partner, in the most discourteous way.

"Oho? *You* don't know, hey?" chuckled the visitor.

"I do not!"

"Well, if you don't, I dunno who should! Haw! haw! haw!"

Now he slapped Mr. Stannard on the shoulder and laughed mightily.

"Oh, Johnny!" he said, reprovingly. "Oh, baby! Oh, boy!"

"Say, if you're talking about the things Wells has been doing to this firm, I don't appreciate the fun!"

Mr. Hackett sobered somewhat and turned and winked at Henry.

"Yeh, I've been hearing rumors about that, too," he said. "You started something last night? What was it? Some scrap?"

"It was some scrap, I guess; I didn't stay for the finish," said Henry.

"Aha? You'll have to tell me about that later," Mr. Hackett said and again bestowed his full attention upon John. "But *you*—"

"Hackett! I'm tired to-day and fussy and cranky as the very devil!" John broke in, acidly. "Most of the time I'm a hail fellow well met and all that stuff, and you know it. But not to-day! So whatever this joke may be, you go on enjoying it by yourself—and don't slam the door when you go out!"

"Oho!" said Mr. Hackett, without moving; and since he was one of those big souls whom it is almost impossible to offend, he was not offended. "Well, Johnny, if you really feel like that about it, I'd be the last one in the world to—who's this? Oh, hello, Art!"

He waved a pudgy hand at the entering Mr. Gower.

The partners, too, looked up with more than a little interest, for not only was it their impression that Mr. Gower had disappeared for an indefinite period, but now that he had returned it was visibly with a definite purpose.

He was not his usual smiling, light-

minded self at all. He was a frowning and earnest man; he glanced at Henry and at John, but then he looked steadily at Mr. Hackett and spoke.

"It's all right!" he stated.

"Fine!" chuckled Mr. Hackett. "What is?"

"Why, there's been a lot of nasty gossip about Henry to-day, you know—and it was all a lie. But it's all right now. I've found four fellows who saw us over there together last night, Hank!"

"Oh?" said Henry.

"You see," Arthur went on explaining to Mr. Hackett, "the three of us—Henry and John and I—left my cousin's party pretty early. It was too early to go home, in fact; and we didn't know just what to do and we were all hungry. So at last we decided to hop into my car and shoot over to Catesville—United States Hotel, you know—and see if they still had some of the Wednesday night fish supper left over."

He paused just an instant to glance at John Stannard, who had started in the queerest way and, in the selfsame instant, had recovered himself. So brief, so flitting, was this, that it came to Henry only as the suspicion of a possible happening.

"Nothing in the world like that fish supper of theirs!" the wholly mendacious Arthur pursued, enthusiastically. "So we went and got some, and by the time we'd finished it was so late that we decided to sleep over there and come back this morning—I guess it was about seven when we hit Burnstown again. Anyhow, what I wanted was to find someone who had seen us there and put the eternal kibosh on all this gossip about Henry, and I've found 'em!"

He nodded in the same earnest, satisfied way. Henry also nodded. It was a lie, of course, but it was a simple lie and an excellent alibi; and if Arthur had mustered four cronies to support it, Doty, the milkman, was as good as licked!

Only what was the matter with Hackett? He was chuckling and rocking in silent mirth just now. And with John? John, biting his lips, was turning white—and the stare he was directing at Arthur Gower was no less than the stare of a demon!

"You needn't have gone hunting, Art!" Hackett said, merrily.

"Huh?" said Arthur.

"Why didn't you come to *me*? Didn't you see me there, too?"

"Er—er—no! Were you there?"

"I certainly was! Pete Hammond and I drove all the way in from Brandon last night and we stopped off at the old U. S. for some of the fish, too!" Mr. Hackett went on. "I didn't see you, Artie, and I didn't see Hank, for the matter of that. But I sure saw Johnny! Hey, Johnny?"

"Urrrrr!" was the best Mr. Stannard seemed able to do at the moment.

"And Johnny and—well, let's say, just Johnny—made believe he didn't see me, too!" cried the plump visitor and drove a thick thumb into John's ribs. "Oh, Johnny! Oh, tut, tut, tut!"

Now Mr. Stannard was on his feet.

"I—I wasn't—say, how dare you—" he stuttered, in the silliest way.

"Oh, well, now, look here, Johnny!" Hackett cried softly and, in an instant, became quite grave. "You don't think for a second *I'd* ever say a word, outside, I mean? Why, my Lord! A man's affairs are his affairs, business or personal; that's what I always say and I live up to it. So far as *me* ever letting a word slip, I'm just the same as dead! Only this is all in the family, you know. That is, Hank and Art were in the party, too, even if I didn't see 'em—"

"Well, see that you never—" John gasped.

"Well, *sure*!" Mr. Hackett cried. "I never will—I'd never think of it, old man! Why—why—gosh! You'd ought to know me better'n that, Johnny. I'm no angel myself, maybe, but I'd hand anybody a bust in the jaw that started talking about me."

He looked at the others. He seemed puzzled. Mr. Gower, apparently, had become petrified and, consequently, speechless. Henry was frowning. But steam seemed to be coming from John's eyes. It may have appeared to Mr. Hackett almost as if he were unwelcome; at all events, he puffed once or twice, essayed a sickly grin and arose.

"Well, I—ah—gotta be running along!" he stated. "You be easy, Johnny. You fellows, too, for that matter. *I'll* never say a word!"

And so he waved a hand and took his overfed presence away from there; and when the street door had closed after him, two pairs of eyes fastened quite curiously on Mr. Stannard—but Mr. Stannard seemed to see only the one pair, which belonged to Arthur Gower, and toward these he all but leaped.

"You—you—you damned idiot!" he gasped. "What have you done now?"

"Well, that's what I'm trying to figure out myself," Arthur said hurriedly. "What *have* I done?"

"With the whole of America to pick from—if you had to lie to save Henry!—you land on the one place—the United States Hotel in Catesville!—the one—the one—"

"Well, how did I know you were there? I supposed you were home in bed! I thought I'd make it convincing by saying that all three of us went over, and I got four of the boys and coached them and—"

John had gripped himself. He returned to his chair, shuddering.

"I wasn't there!" he said thickly. "He—he must have seen somebody that looked like me!"

"Well, if you weren't," Mr. Gower said mildly, "why all the recent excitement, Johnny?"

"There was no excitement," John said, thickly.

"Excuse me, I thought there was," murmured Arthur, with a rather bewildered glance at Henry. "I was trying to help, you know. I've spent a couple of hours getting this thing thought out and all framed up. I thought I'd done a good job!"

"You did!" Mr. Stannard exploded. "You did a wonderful job, you boneheaded clown!"

"Well, all right!" cried Mr. Grower. "If you weren't there, what are you getting mad about *now?* I only—"

"Say! I thought you'd resigned?" the senior partner snarled.

Some seconds Arthur devoted to glaring at his old friend; his temper was rising quite rapidly.

"All right! I *have* resigned, then!" he cried suddenly. "You can both go to thunder, d'ye hear? I'm done trying to help you out of your—well, I won't say it! But you can get out of your own messes in your own way. *Good-by!*"

If Mr. Hackett had not slammed the door, Arthur Gower did. He even slammed the outer door.

The senior partner, eyes closed, head resting on his clenched hand, groaned aloud. The junior partner sat back and crossed his legs and considered his associate with some interest.

"Well?" he queried.

"Well, what?"

"You'd best give me the right of this thing, here in private?"

"What is there that I'm forced to tell *you,* I'd like to know?" Mr. Stannard asked viciously.

"Nothing at all, unless you choose to tell me, of course," Henry replied, with some warmth. "Only you've been doing a good deal of posing and blatting around here, about what a model of purity and righteousness you are, John. If the truth is anything that *can* be told comfortably, it might be a lot better to tell me than to have me begin guessing."

"Well, about the time you begin guessing, you'll get all of what I started to give Dan Patterson!" said the senior partner. "Get that?"

Henry Wells shrugged his shoulders and smiled faintly.

"I hear a lot of noise, at least," said he. "That sort of noise is usually made to cover up something. Now I'm not preaching, John, but it happens that I *am* innocent and I'm getting a little bit tired of hearing you howl to the skies about virtue and then having people like Hackett come in here and—well, what is it, Ida?"

"J-John!" Ida breathed, from the doorway.

"Er—yes? Yes?" said the senior partner.

"C-c-come here, J-John!" the young woman whimpered, and tears stole down her cheeks and she stepped back, out of

Henry's sight. "I want to—to speak to you!"

Then she sobbed aloud! Mr. Stannard bounced out of his chair and to her side, closing the door tightly after him. And Henry Wells shook his really amazed head and tilted back. There were, of course, certain clearly-defined thoughts which simply refused to be thrust back. They were, in fact, so clearly defined that they made a complete and decidedly unpleasant picture. And that gulping of Ida's out there laid on the last needed touch!

But—oh, it was all nonsense! That was all it was—nonsense! Henry himself had had a taste of circumstantial evidence this day; instead of sitting here and wondering how he could have been so mistaken in his partner, he ought to be up and out and defending him! Because, you know, the poor, sanctified old cuss wasn't at all that sort! Of all the men Henry knew, John Stannard was really one of the extremely limited number who—

"—and if he really did see us—" Ida sobbed out, distinctly.

Henry's teeth shut with a click. After that one, there really seemed to be no further use in sitting here and growing angry at the way John had been slandered! No, if Henry had been the victim of circumstances, John was the victim of solid, hard fact; and circumstances, properly attacked, can be driven to cover on the run, while facts have the most inconvenient way of standing their ground forever.

So if the firm of Stannard & Wells were to be ruined by the personal performance of its members, honors promised to be quite evenly divided. Henry smiled bitterly at his partner as the latter returned.

Mr. Stannard walked directly to Henry. "There's one thing I want to say to you," he snapped. "Hereafter your affairs are your affairs; mine are mine. I'll ask no questions about yours; see that you ask none about mine."

"There's nothing I have to ask," sighed Henry.

"Well, if—" Mr. Stannard began, and bit off the rest of the sentence.

He wheeled about and returned to his desk. He jerked open a drawer and brought forth a bulky little ledger. This he opened, turning the pages slowly. One who knew him would have known that John was trying to assume a natural expression.

"Powers's lease expires on the fifteenth," he said. "Write him a note about that; he hasn't renewed yet."

"Say are you—*are you trying to resume business?*" Henry gasped.

"I have resumed it," Mr. Stannard said curtly. "Mrs. Clay pay her June rent yet?"

"If she hasn't, she's not going to."

"What! Why not?"

"She's gone!" said Henry.

"Gone where?"

"She didn't tell me. But she left on the one o'clock train, and I think that she has gone for good."

The senior partner sat back and scowled quite after the old manner.

"Without notifying this office!" he snapped. "Did she leave a caretaker?"

"No," Henry assumed.

"Did she leave the keys here?"

"No."

"Well, can you beat it?" Mr. Stannard exclaimed, and pondered for a moment. "Better get out there and look over the house, Henry. Make sure everything's locked tight; probably half the windows are unfastened, and old Finch 'll hold us responsible. Take the bunch of skeleton keys with you. Take the car; I don't want it."

He turned another page, and Henry, after a last stare, a last shake of his head, arose and picked the bunch of skeleton keys from the rack on the wall. After all, although it might cost him a chill or two, a trip to Gloria's late residence was better than an afternoon here.

It was quiet and lonely out there, and Henry wanted very much a quiet place in which to think out the newer aspect of things in general.

Although there wasn't so very much food for speculation on John's end of it; the way poor little Ida dropped her eyes when he passed told the entire story. So that he'd better devote his meditation to his own case. Henry's spirits rose as he drove smartly up Main Street and headed out toward the old Finch place.

Now, of course, with a real able-bodied scandal hovering over the ill-starred firm, the partnership would have to be dissolved. It didn't matter so very much; he was young, and, although he had been born and reared here, he was not passionately attached to Burnstown. And, for another important point, Miriam had frequently expressed a willingness to live somewhere else—in a town that was just a little larger and a little livelier—after they were married.

Because they really were going to be married, you know. With Gloria herself out of the proposition, winning Miriam back was going to be only a matter of time and tact. He'd prove his case, too, in the soundest fashion. There must be ways for an innocent man to do that, and Fox & Fox would know the ways. He'd see Fox & Fox the very first thing in the morning. It was remarkable, how different things seemed with Gloria out of the way.

The house looked pretty deserted, didn't it? Henry considered it with a grin. He'd go in and make sure that everything was fast, and then he'd go out in the grape arbor to do his thinking. Hair of the dog that bit you, and all that sort of thing.

This conceit pleased Henry vastly. He laughed aloud as he mounted the steps, rousing elusive echoes about the abandoned homestead. He chuckled richly as he fitted a promising-looking skeleton key to the front door and turned the lock over at the very first attempt.

This door gave directly into the big living room of the old Ferris place; and, having thrust it open with a gay little push, Henry chuckled again and walked into the living room.

But at the second stride something happened to Henry's chuckle. It faltered, became wheezy for the fraction of one second, and then died out in an extremely peculiar gurgle; and since nothing ever happens without a cause, there was an excellent reason for this gurgle.

Most of it was furnished by Gloria herself. Although Henry knew quite well that the house was entirely empty and that Gloria was nearly one hundred miles away by this time, nevertheless Gloria, in her pretty, simple afternoon gown, was sitting beside a little tea-table not fifteen feet from himself.

And at the opposite side of this table sat none other than young Jeanne Dayton, Gloria's very particular friend; and beside Jeanne sat Jeanne's own chilly, thin, sharp-eyed mother.

All three of these ladies held teacups; a waferlike sandwich was poised in Jeanne's other hand. All three of them stared straight at Henry Wells. Oddly enough, it was Jeanne's chilly, sharp-eyed mother—and as a rule, too, she was the very perfection of tight-lipped and tactful good manners—who broke the silence.

"He—*he came in with his own key!*" this lady exclaimed.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

ʊ ʊ ʊ

THE LOW, CHEERFUL VALLEY

THERE'S the low, cheerful valley that wanders away
Through the heart of the strenuous hills;
Where the happy thought blooms and the sweet waters play
And the perfume of leisure distills.

Oh, the eager mind soars and the eager feet spur
The rough, rocky summits to know.
The straight, rugged paths and the far peaks allure
And the heart with high hope beats aglow.

But when weary—how sweet to descend and delay
By the paths of the sweet water rills,
To the low, cheerful valley that wanders away
Through the heart of the strenuous hills.

Charles Poole Cleaves.

Young Eben's Private War

By H. M. HAMILTON

EBEN GALT, known throughout Las Animas County as "Young Eben," to distinguish him from his father, stood in the doorway looking with narrowed blue eyes at a puff of dust that kept rising rapidly and settling gradually, just below the shoulder of the hill, a mile away.

"Prob'ly Tim," he mused, "and ridin' as if Old Nick was after him! Wonder what's his hurry?"

"What say, boy?" quavered an old voice from within.

That was "Old Eben," once a mighty man; now, since his stroke, a trembling, white-haired patriarch who never moved from his wheel-chair except to be lifted into bed.

Characteristically, Young Eben did not bother to reply. He was not unkind in his dealings with his father; he was simply indifferent. His idea was, if a man was weak or old or sick he was done for. Might made right. His huge frame filled the door: he had to bend his head of sun-bleached curly hair, and his broad shoulders, lumpy with muscle, brushed the doorjambs.

He scowled as he saw Tim Hennesy, on a sweat-streaked roan pony, racing up the narrow lane between waving fields of gray-green alfalfa, whose pale flowers were dust-colored and dim.

"Tearin' down here, after me tellin' him to stay up by the dam an' watch the irrigation."

"What is it, boy?" repeated Old Eben.

"Nothin', dad," Eben said, turning his head impatiently. "Well?" as Tim, who was foreman of Eben's place, dismounted like an avalanche and stopped short. "What's the idea of the *Paul Revere?* When I told you to stay up by the dam, did you think I meant you to come back

here an' pick flowers by the doorstep—or what? Somethin' scare you?"

His drawled words were edged with malicious irony. Tim, who was lean and sallow and unshaven, answered excitedly.

"Boss," he began, "you know that fellow Glover that took over the Three Circle Ranch over beyant Otter Crick—him an' his bunch of greasers?"

"No," said Eben tartly, "I don't know him. I've heard of him. Why?"

"Well, they was about thirty or forty of his cattle in your alfalfa this afternoon, that's all. I got a couple of the boys to drive 'em out. But I thought you'd better know about it. You let that feller feed his cattle on your crops an' I don't see no sense in my 'tendin' the irrigation at all. He hasn't much grass over t' his side of Otter Crick, so he lets 'em rove. Want me to go over an' talk to him?"

Eben's face had turned a dull brick-red at this recital. He seemed about to choke. But he waved Tim away.

"You go back to where I told you to stay. I'll talk to Glover myself."

He turned and strode into the house. He took down his hat from its peg.

"Goin' over to see that man at Three Circle," he said to his father. "Goin' to tell him to keep his cows outa my alfalfa, or I'll shore handle him rough. I ain't raisin' feed f'r another man's cattle—no, sir!"

"How'd they get in?" quavered the old man.

"How'd I know? Across Otter Crick, I s'pose. It ain't my business to bother about that—it's his business to keep 'em out. I'll tell him so, too!"

"'F you hadn't taken out the water from Otter Crick up 't the dam, they couldn't 've crossed," said Old Eben. "Some your fault, too, boy. Don't go stirrin' up too much ruckus. Just reason with him."

But Eben had already gone out, furious as a charging bull. He saddled a horse and started down toward Otter Creek at a gallop. He was angry, and anger in him was a burning flame. He'd show the fellow!

There was only a trickle of water in the creek, which, before Eben had built his dam, was a good-sized stream. Eben rode through the shallows and struck out with the butt of his quirt at a half dozen cows that stood with their hoofs in the muddy water. Of course, he had no right to do this, for the Three Circle Ranch came down to the water's edge. But Eben was in the frame of mind that does not consider trifles.

These were probably the same cattle that had foraged in his alfalfa! It gave him a savage delight to see them stumbling away from him in fright and bewilderment. Just as Eben reached the grass bank on the farther side he heard a calm voice. A small, black-eyed man was sitting on the bank, watching Eben closely. He said:

"Them's my cattle; this my land, too. What you after, anyhow?"

Eben was startled, but, if anything, angrier than ever. He rode over toward the man, who did not move, but watched him closely.

"You Amos Glover?" Eben demanded roughly.

"You're right with one guess," was the answer. "Who the devil are you?"

Eben was thinking: "Why, I could break this poor critter in two with my bare fists!" Aloud he said:

"I'm Eben Galt. You know of me, I guess. I own that alfalfa over there; an' if these cattle belong to you, I want you to keep 'em out of my fields. Understand me?"

With a steady hand Amos Glover lit a cigarette. "Sure I understand you. But you're talkin' through your hat. Who says I got to keep my cows outa your place?"

"I say it!" Eben's reply was like a bellow of rage. "If you don't, I'll have the law on you; an' if that don't help, then I'll half kill you, you poor dried-up splinter, you!"

His eyes were ablaze. He resented the man's cool impudence, and would have liked nothing better than an excuse for trouble—though, as he said to himself: "There's no honor in man-handlin' a shrimp like that!"

Carelessly, Amos Glover reached back of him and picked up a small rifle that had been lying in the grass. He took it across his knee lovingly.

"Stranger," he drawled, "you ain't got

no call to git het up n'r nothin'. Hard words don't break my bones. Moreover, admittin' they was a few Three Circle cows in your field, who's to blame? Otter Crick here was a nateral bound'ry fence till you built your dam up yon an' shut off the water. Ef you don't want my cattle in your place, build a fence—or let the water run in the crick the way God meant it to. I ain't concernin' myself none about your alfalfa. But you come a foot nearer an' I'll shoot you in self-defense—an' the law'll back me up. I don't aim to let no man come on my ground 'n tell me my duty. Get the idea?"

For one wild moment Eben was tempted to charge his horse against this miserable creature who dared to defy him—gun or no gun. But Amos Glover held his rifle easily, with not even the shadow of fear in his sharp black eyes. Eben jerked back his horse.

"You got a gun," he said shortly. "An' you're on your own ground. All right. But listen to me—I'll get you! No man ever defied me to my face an' got away with it. From now on, look out!"

Amos Glover grinned. Then from his pocket he took a little nickeled whistle and blew on it. There was a thud of distant hoof-beats; then, at different points along the grassy bank four dark-skinned Mexicans drew rein. A fifth rode headlong over the bank and drew his pony back on his haunches beside Eben.

"Pablo," said Amos Glover easily, "meet Mr. Galt. He's a neighbor of mine, an' he vows he's goin' to 'get' me. Take a good look at him. Pablo's my foreman," he added, to Eben. "You boys stand by your boss?"

Pablo was a young man, bronzed and keen-eyed and handsome, with saddle and mountings of silver, and bright-colored attire that revealed the dandy. He was tall, rather slight of build, but wiry and muscular. He smiled, showing white teeth.

"You bet!" He rode up close to Eben, looking into his face with his insolently beautiful eyes. "You touch my boss—trouble! *Sabe?*"

"I'll get your boss, you dirty greaser—don't worry about that!" snarled Eben. "An' if you an' your sneakin' friends try to annoy me, I'll—"

Pablo had ridden close. He let his hand creep to a holster that hung from a loose belt alongside his velvet-trousered leg.

"Dirty greaser — me?" he spluttered. "You talk so to a gentleman? I put a bullet—"

"Cut it out!" snapped Amos Glover. "No gentleman draws a gun on an unarmed man. Besides, Pablo, you know you *are* a greaser. But not a dirty one. Pablo is a nice, clean greaser, Mr. Galt. An' he's quick on the draw. Better think twice before you start anything with him."

Eben did not answer. He turned his horse and splashed back to the other side of the stream; then he rode up the bank and started off homeward. He thought he heard laughter behind him. He was boiling with rage. He was seeing red.

"I'll show him!" he muttered. "I'll go down to Springtown an' swear out a warrant before Squire Prouty. If that fails, I'll handle him myself. Nobody ever pulled a gun on me an' laughed—an' got away with it. That's goin' a little too far!"

Arriving home, he told the story to his father, who shook his head.

"You shut off the water, boy," Old Eben said, sighing. "He's in the right about that. There never was need of a fence along Otter Crick in my time. Cattle couldn't cross. If anybody ought to put up a fence, it is you. Don't go makin' a fool of yourself, boy. You'll be sorry."

"To-morrow I'm going down to Squire Prouty's an' swear out a warrant again' him," said Eben. "'F the squire don't see my side of the argument, then I'll go f'r the man myself. I ain't afraid of his greasers!"

That night brought no release from his angry thoughts. Early the next morning Eben saddled his horse for the twenty-mile ride down to Springtown.

His jaw was set grimly. Not even the pure sunlight and the sweet pure air of the Colorado uplands could soothe his hot anger.

The country sloped downhill before him, mile on mile of sandy earth, tufted with

coarse grass and small bushes. and a bare track that served for a road. At last, deep in its valley, he saw the roofs and spires of Springtown, fresh and green and lovely in its bower of trees.

He rode into town, passing Agate Bill's place with no more than a wave of his hand at its portly proprietor, and drawing rein at Squire Prouty's.

"You see, squire," he explained, "that alfalfa costs me money to irrigate. I ain't keepin' it f'r the refreshment of some other man's cattle. Besides, he pulled a gun on me when I went to argue about it. I want him arrested an' fined."

"Where was he at when he pulled the gun?" asked the squire.

"Sittin' on the bank of Otter Crick," said Eben.

"On his own side?"

Eben nodded.

"An' you threatened him?"

Eben started to get red in the face.

"I shore did. I told him—"

"An' as I understand it," resumed the squire, "the cattle never came across till you built your dam an' diverted most of the water. That so?"

Eben was mopping his head.

"I reckon it's so. But I want justice, an' if I don't get it here—"

"Hold on a minute!" said the squire, looking over his spectacles. "I guess I c'n 'tend to the justice part of it. An' 's far's I c'n see, you got the wrong on your side, any way you look at it. If any fencin's to be done, you'll have to do it. Otter Crick's a natural barrier, an' it never needed no fences till you took away the water in it. Another thing, Eben—you better cut out that loose talk. I don't want to put you under bond to keep the peace, but if I hear of any more trouble up your way, that's just what I'll do. Now you go home—an' forget it."

Eben was still at the boiling-point when he reached Agate Bill's place. It was a combination of dry goods store, drug store, hardware store, soft drink palace—and, if you knew Bill, old-fashioned bar.

Agate Bill wore black mustaches of the general shape of the horns of short-horned cattle. He was large and fat and genial, but he had had a past. His name was derived from a glass eye of a peculiarly veined and spotted appearance, which substituted for a natural organ which had—tradition said—been removed by a bad man from Texas. Upon seeing Eben he smiled amiably.

"Hardware, calico—or plain red-eye?" he inquired. "I got some pretty good stuff back of the counter—just in from across the river at El Paso."

"Gimme a good gun—a forty-five," said Eben. "An' about six boxes of cartridges."

"Must be goin' to do quite some shootin'," commented Bill. "Ain't got no grudge ag'in' anybody, have you?"

"Will you show a gun as I asked you to?" snarled Eben. "I don't see as I have to give account of my doin's to you or any one else."

Agate Bill's one good eye stared. His smile faded.

"Son," he remarked coldly, "you may be under the impression you're talkin' to one of your ranch-hands. But you ain't. This here sovereign State of Colorado is gettin' pretty inquisitive about the sale of guns. You come in here r'arin' mad, askin' me fur a gun, and snappin' my head off if I ask you a few necessary questions. Them methods 'll do all right out on your papa's ranch, mebbe, but not here. Agate Bill has been through a lot of experiences, an' ain't scared none of young fellers he's seen grow up from babies. Why, I sold your papa the first clothes you ever wore. Want me to describe 'em fur you in detail?"

There was a subdued snicker from some benches in the back of the store. For the first time Eben realized that he and the storekeeper were not alone. He felt himself shamed and humiliated.

"Now, Bill," he pleaded, "I didn't mean to rile you none. I came in here for a gun to shoot prairie-dogs with, an' for protection generally."

Agate Bill looked unconvinced. "I c'n sell you a rat-pizen that's equally good f'r prairie-dogs. 'N what protection does a strappin' big lad like you need? Answer me that."

"Give me a drink," said Eben. "Boys, have a drink?"

Three or four men shambled up. Agate Bill, his smile once more in evidence, officiated blandly. Eben was thoroughly enraged—but he was sensible enough to be aware that he would have to cajole Bill to get that gun. He needed it. The fiery liquor coursed through his veins.

"I ain't got no enemies, Bill," he said cunningly. "I don't need to lay for a man's long's I got these fists, do I?"

"Wait a minute, boys," broke out Bill, suddenly alert and crafty. "There's a customer, an' I don't know him. Be ready to pour what's in your glasses on the floor if I give you the sign."

"I'm needin' a couple new bits, an' mebbe a saddle," said a voice Eben knew.

He wheeled. Amos Glover had not seen him; he was examining some harness that hung from the ceiling.

"My chance!" thought Eben, somewhat exultantly.

He took a couple of steps over toward the little man. Then he checked himself. He saw that Bill's place would not do for the scene of trouble. Bill himself might take a hand—and Bill always had a gun ready for emergencies.

Besides, if he—Eben—could show Bill that there was no hard feeling between Amos and himself, Bill might let him have the gun. Eben called out genially:

"Hello, neighbor! Come an' have a drink with us!"

Amos Glover looked up sidewise sharply. His black eyes sparkled.

"I don't drink," he said dryly.

"Nonsense!" cried Eben. "Bill, give Mr. Glover a drink!"

Agate Bill came around the counter. "Friend of yours? Neighbor? Thought mebbe you was a prohibition officer. But it's all right. Name your poison."

Amos Glover was looking toward the bar with a peculiar expression. He had gone pale.

"I tell you I don't drink," he repeated. "I ain't touched the stuff f'r five years."

But he moistened his lips with his tongue, eying the bottle.

"Come on," said Eben, catching him by the collar. "Come over here an' have a drink—on me."

The little man twisted himself free with a snarl. "Leggo of me! You was goin' to get me yesterday—think I'm goin' to drink with you to-day? Not if I know it! I tell you I'm not a drinkin' man—"

"So?" muttered Agate Bill. "You did want that gun f'r somethin', after all—besides prairie-dogs! Thought you was foolin' me, Eben!"

All of Eben's rage broke forth. "Yes—this little rat says I've got to fence up against his cattle—an' he threatened me with a rifle yesterday! Now he won't drink with me! I'll show him!"

He caught Amos and dragged him to the bar.

"Give him a drink!" he commanded. "An' you—you runt—'re goin' to drink it—Hear me?"

"Easy Eben," said Bill. "You're doin' things you'll be ashamed of."

"Never mind that!" shrilled Amos. "I'll drink—an' pay for it myself! I ain't a drinkin' man, but if you've got the stuff—"

He threw down a silver dollar, then drained the glass. "Another!" he said. "I got money. Let me have a couple of quarts of that, will you? Wrap it up."

He seemed galvanized into a sort of rage. He glared at Eben—then with a surprising quickness walked up to him and snapped his fingers in Eben's face. "Think I'm skeered! I ain't skeered of anything on two legs. Hit me if you dare, you bully!"

It was like a small dog defying a mastiff. Eben himself couldn't help laughing. But there was a menace in his mirth.

"Look out!" he sneered. "You ain't got your bunch of greasers along! If you fool with me you'll get broken in two. So keep off!"

For reply Amos Glover blew a shrill blast on his whistle. "Ain't I got 'em along?" he jeered. "You touch me an' see!"

Eben was breathing deeply, slowly. He was trying to hold himself in. The loafers had stepped back. Agate Bill was motionless, watchful.

"You're afraid!" said Glover. "You dassn't—"

"Come here," said Eben, "till I spank you!"

He wound his big hand inside Amos's

collar. The little man sprang at him, snarling, clawing, biting. Suddenly there was rush of feet, and Eben found himself caught from behind and held.

Slowly, and in spite of his struggles, he was forced to the floor. The dark, handsome, evil face of Pablo grinned down into his.

"So? You pick on my boss, *senor*?" he sneered "You do not know we fight for 'im—no? Juan—Pedro—you two fellows take the boss out an' put 'im on 'is 'orse."

Eben was flat on the floor. Three men held him there till Amos Glover, who was cursing and struggling, trying to get back at Eben, was led out. One of the men took the bottles of liquor out after him.

"Boys—" said Pablo—"you got your guns? All right—Mister, you do not follow us—*sabe?* Much trouble if you do—*Adios!*"

They were gone, and a clattering of hoofs marked their departure.

Eben got up ponderously. Agate Bill went across to the other counter.

"Here's your gun, son," he said. "That wa'n't no way to treat a white man. Get 'em—understand? I'm with you from now on."

Eben's thoughts were in a whirl. He rode home. He felt half-dazed. Surges of rage came over him. He had the impulse to ride direct to Three Circles and defy the whole six of them. But that would be madness. He had to think—

"What's wrong, boy?" asked Old Eben, as he looked into Eben's darkly scowling face. "You in trouble?"

"Dad," said Eben slowly, "I'm goin' to go over an' get that man Glover first—an' his dirty greasers afterward. They rolled me on the floor down at Agate Bill's. It's my life or theirs. Understand me?"

Old Eben's lips were set in a tight line across his white face.

"Boy," he said after a pause, "you're all I got. An' I'm half dead. But I was a man like you—once. I understand. But make me two promises, will you?"

"All right, dad," said Eben, with sudden humility. "What are they?"

"Cut out the boozin'—an' go after 'em like a fox. You can't be no good if you drink—an' you can't fight six men all at once. Is it a promise?"

Eben put his hand—immense, powerful, with a giant's strength in it—over his father's bony fingers. Slowly, solemnly he answered: "It's a promise, dad."

"Boy—" The old man's head dropped. "I couldn't live—alone. Don't let 'em get you. The bullet that kills you kills me too!"

II.

THAT night Eben conferred with Tim Hennesy. They agreed upon a campaign. Eben wasn't going to use Tim in the fighting. It wasn't Tim's private war; it was his own. But he could use Tim as a scout.

"You watch 'em from Pinnacle with the glasses, Tim," he said. "You can see the house clear from there. When you see the five men ride out for the day, wave your handkerchief. I'll be watchin' you."

"But what's your idea, boss? Get 'em one at a time?"

"That's it. Glover first—then that pretty-faced one—then the rest. I'll hide my horse at the crick, and sneak up on the house. I c'n take care of myself all right, when I get there!"

The next day it rained, and a mist hung over the hills. Eben chafed under the delay, but there was no help for it. Tim couldn't see the Three Circle ranch-house from Pinnacle—and Eben couldn't see Tim. So the day passed without incident.

"Just as well," thought Eben. "They won't be so watchful to-morrow."

The next day was gloomy and overcast, but the mists had risen. Tim went up to Pinnacle—a ridge that ran out to the north, and jutted to a sharp point above Otter Creek. Tim was behind some bushes, so that he could not be seen from Glover's place, but Eben could see him clearly silhouetted against the sky. He waited patiently.

It was about noon when Tim waved his handkerchief. Eben had his horse saddled. He galloped down to the creek crossing. There he tied his horse.

There was a good bit of underbrush. Eben carried his gun on a loose belt alongside his hip. He was watchful. He didn't

want any of the greasers to see him, and spread the alarm of his coming.

It seemed good fortune that a light rain started at about this time—and the mists had fallen again. The day was dark and gloomy. Eben felt the gloom around him as a cloak, concealing him.

He reached open ground at a point about fifty yards from the Three Circle ranch. The house had a deserted look. The blinds were down. Eben walked directly across the cluttered yard. At the door he paused, then cautiously tried the knob. The place was locked.

"Open!" he cried, thumping on the door. "Let me in!"

His gun was in his hand, ready for the door to open. But though he heard quick footsteps, the door did not open.

"I'll break the door down if you don't open it!" he thundered. "I'm going to meet you on even terms this time—you little rat!"

There was no reply. Eben saw an ax standing against a pile of firewood close by. He stepped back warily, and caught it up, swinging it easily in one hand. His gun was ready in the other.

"Here goes!" he said fiercely, and swung the ax.

The first blow splintered the boards near the lock. Eben stood at one side, so as not to be in the line of fire. Then he swung again and again. A moment later, the door, a wreck, swung wide.

"Come out!" said Eben. "If you don't—"

Something rustled softly. Eben lifted his gun. He saw a moving figure in the dimness of the room. He pointed his weapon at it.

"Oh" cried a voice that made Eben draw back as if stung. "Won't you go away? What do you want? Don't you know he's suffering?"

It was a woman's voice.

Something frightening came over Eben. He dropped his ax, and his gun dangled loosely in his hands. He felt weak, as if he couldn't stand.

"Ma'am?" he murmured.

She stood in front of him, in the opening left by the ruined door. She was certainly not more than eighteen, and she had blue eyes—eyes that were troubled, but that had not even the faintest shadow of fear in them.

She was tall and straight and graceful, with just a little color in her pale cheeks. Eben wished that the ground might open up for him mercifully, and engulf him.

"I didn't exactly realize, ma'am," he began, and then stopped.

"No, you didn't realize!" she said, her eyes suddenly blazing. "He hadn't touched liquor for five years till yesterday—and then you made him drink! You—*devil!* He drank all that night, and all yesterday—and now he's raving! Then you—you come around here, and—and break things, and—"

Her lips trembled: she was trying hard not to cry, but failing.

"Your—your father, miss?" he asked softly.

"No, my uncle. But he has always been good to me. Drink was his only failing—and he kept away from it, and then you—you—"

"Can't I help you, miss?" Eben went on in a humble, weak voice. "I didn't go to—"

"Yes," she said sharply. "You can help me. You can help me by going home and staying there, and never letting me see your face again! If Pablo were here you wouldn't have come in the first place. You're afraid of Pablo. He's brave—not sneaking and cowardly as you are! You've hurt us enough; he wouldn't be out of his head now—if it hadn't been for you!" She stamped her foot impatiently. "Will you go? If you don't I'll blow the whistle. Pablo will hear it, and—"

Eben lifted his shamed head. "Yes, miss," he said sadly. "I'll go."

But after a few steps he turned, looked at her and said:

"If you should want a friend—"

"Are you going?" she asked coldly.

"Yes'm," said Eben. And he went.

As he untied his horse he shook his head sadly. "Busted her door—got him drinkin'—started a fool quarrel with him in the first place without no reason. Giddap, Bess!"

He was calling himself brutal names all the way home. But—every now and then he let the horse take its own gait, while he mused. Beautiful! And plucky! If only—

"Shucks!" he said to himself sadly. "No use. I plumb queered myself once an' for all. I reckon she thinks Pablo's just about the finest—"

When he reached the house Tim was waiting. "Do any good?" he asked.

"Worst ever!" growled Eben. "What're you starin' at, you idiot?"

"You look sort of—flabbergasted," said Tim. "Didn't kill him, did you?"

"Look here!" exploded Eben. "If you find any of them Three Circle cows in my alfalfa—you let 'em be! The war's over—'s far's I'm concerned. Understand? What're you gapin' at? Go on an' tend to your work!"

Tim moved disconsolately away. Eben flinched before his father's sad gaze. "Well, son?" asked the old man. "Did you get your man?"

"Dad," said Eben soberly, sadly, "it's all off. I didn't do nothin' but get a woman riled—the prettiest, sweetest, bravest—"

Old Eben nodded. "They all are, till you know 'em!" he said cynically. "His daughter?"

"Niece," said Eben. His face was the picture of hopelessness. "She just called me names till I was glad to sneak away—feelin' about two inches high. An' her pretty as a magazine-cover— Say, dad, how can I square myself?"

His father meditated. "Might take her some candy, or somethin'. I done that when I courted your ma. It worked."

"Huh!" said Eben pessimistically. "'F I'd go within a hundred yards of the house again she'd be pointin' me out to Pablo to shoot at. She ain't in no frame of mind f'r candy. No sir! Told me to get out an' stay out! Called me a sneakin' coward. She don't favor me much; I can see that."

"Mebbe she was thinkin' different," commented Old Eben pensively. "Women is funny. I remember your ma discouraged me quite some when I came a-courtin' her. But she said afterward she always liked me. You're not a bad lookin' boy, neither. You kinda take after me. I expect mebbe things will turn out all right. Give 'em time."

Eben was encouraged. But as days and weeks wore on, a feeling of melancholy came over him. He had seen the girl several times at a distance—always in Pablo's company. Pablo had said something to her and had laughed. Eben would have liked to wring Pablo's neck.

But even that spirit of revenge died away. The girl just naturally despised him—no getting away from that! He didn't blame her, either! She did right!

"Son," said Old Eben one day, "you look peaked. You don't eat your meals. You shore ain't goin' to fret about a girl that won't look at you, are you? Why don't you go over to her house an' talk to her? Nobody'll shoot at you."

Eben brightened. It was better than mooning around, thinking of her. He made a trip down to Springtown and bought some candy of Agate Bill.

"How'd your war come out?" asked Bill. "I didn't hear of no shootin'."

"Shootin'?" repeated Eben, in pretended surprise. "I wasn't goin' to shoot nobody. You must 'a' been thinkin' of somebody else."

Agate Bill winked his artificial eye. It was a meaningful wink.

"I guess I was," he said. "This candy—I expect it's for your papa. It couldn't be for nobody else, could it?"

"Go to blazes!" retorted Eben promptly. "Who'd it be for?"

"I dunno," said Bill. But he followed Eben out. "I'd keep away from that Glover place," he added confidentially. "Queer doin's there. I been hearin' rumors—"

"You mean about—*her?*" burst out Eben angrily. "If people dare to talk about that girl—"

"You mean that niece of Amos's—Betty Glover?" asked Bill. "No, I ain't meanin' her. I guess she's all right—though that greaser Pablo is boastin' around he's goin' to marry her! But I don't know nothin' about that. All I say is, Three Circle's gettin' a bad name—other ways. I wouldn't want a nice boy to mix in with that gang—a kid like you, Eben, that I sold his first baby-clothes to his papa—"

"Bill," cut in Eben, "if you mention them baby-clothes again I'm goin' to spank you, big as you are. There's just some things a fellow can't stand."

But he was a little uneasy, riding up to Three Circle that night. It was dark. He forded the creek. Ahead he saw a blazing wood fire, and several shapes moving backward and forward.

Suddenly a horse shot past the firelight. Something that bellowed was being dragged at the end of a rope. That struck Eben as queer. What was any one brandin' for—after dark, in that secluded spot? But it was surely a branding.

He could hear the snorting and grunting of the animal; the sizzle of a hot iron as it burned through the hair; the moaning of a dumb creature in fright and pain. The branders worked slowly. At last the animal was freed.

Eben crouched as near as he dared. He heard a laugh, then Pablo's voice:

"One more Three Circle beef—yes? That Double C is easy to brand over. 'Ow many that make to-day, Juan? Seven? Good! To-morrow we try to do better. All right, boys!"

One of the Mexicans had covered the fire with dirt. The whole group then mounted their ponies and cantered off. Eben shook his head doubtfully. There *was* something queer at Three Circle!

The changing of brands was, as any one who knows anything about cattle is aware, the one crime which usually brought swift and sure punishment—when it was found out.

The branding of calves by their proper owners usually took place in spring, and in full daylight. The round-up was a public affair. Occasionally, of course, an unbranded animal, a maverick, was caught and branded by its finder without formality.

But Pablo's last remark had made it apparent that this was not a maverick branding. It was plain cattle-rustling—the changing of one brand—a double C, into the three-circle brand which gave Amos Glover's ranch its name.

The two C's could be made circles—another circle added—and there were the three circles! Eben threw the box of candy into a deep pool at the creek. Then he rode home. His thoughts were somber ones.

Of course, as he told himself, he might have expected as much of Amos Glover. He didn't do the rough work himself. He didn't have to. His five Mexicans could attend to it for him.

"It ain't him I'm thinkin' of," he mused. "It's her. Betty—that's her name—Betty Glover! Pretty name, too. I'd hate like the dickens to see him strung up—an' her left alone there! Though prob'ly she's goin' to marry that handsome greaser—the dirty cur!"

He said nothing to his father, but for the next week or so he was full of gloomy thoughts. Tim Hennesy came to him once.

"Boss," he began, "I hear there's talk of dirty work over at the Three Circle. A lot of people think that Glover fellow has his men out rustlin' and changin' brands. Think there's anything to it?"

"No," said Eben, without raising his eyes, "I don't. It ain't reasonable. Nobody c'n get away with that. Amos is too foxy for it."

"He's foxy, all right. But I think he's drinkin' a good bit, too. That Pablo of his gets whisky from Bill every few days. Bill says Pablo don't buy nothin' but whisky an' candy an' rat-pizen. Says the place is rat-infested. Ho! Bet Amos is seein' snakes ruther'n rats! Wonder what Pablo's buying candy for? He must have a sweet tooth."

"Tim," said Eben, "you're a plumb idiot. I wish you'd keep what you hear to yourself. Shootin' off your trap don't do you n'r anybody any good."

"Mebbe so," agreed Tim meekly. "But Doc Hodge says if any more of his Double C cattle is found with the C's made into O's an' another O added, the Three Circle's goin' to be made the scene of a nice sociable rope-party. That's all I got to say, boss."

III.

EBEN did not confide his thoughts to Old Eben. But he grew morose and sullen. He was torn in two directions. Like any other man in the cattle country, Eben hated rust-

lers as he hated rattlesnakes. He thought that hanging was too good for such people.

Moreover, he knew from the evidence of his own eyes that Pablo and the other Mexicans were misbranding cattle—and that Amos Glover, as the owner of the Three Circle ranch, was profiting by such branding. It was incredible that he didn't know about it and encouraged it.

His men were not likely to risk their own necks by branding cattle for their employer, unless he was rewarding them richly for it. The case against Amos was complete.

"But—durn it!—I can't have 'em lynchin' *her* uncle!" groaned Eben. "It ain't that I got any love for him—but *she* has! He's all she's got to depend on. O' course, she hates me like pizen, an' she's goin' to marry that good-lookin' devil of a cattle-thief—but just the same, I got to stand by her, if the time ever comes!"

It didn't seem likely that the time would come—but it did, and most unexpectedly. It was in October, when the whole country was brown and dull, and a heavy frost lay on the ground in the mornings, to be gone by noon. It was late in the afternoon of one such day, chilly and sad, that seven or eight men rode up to Eben's gate. He recognized Doc Hodge, of the Double C; Agate Bill, Joe Foster, a ranchman known to Eben only as Kansas—and several more. They were all, except Bill, reputable cattle-owners. They had rifles in their hands, and Agate Bill had a coil of fresh new rope on the horn of his saddle.

"Eben!" called Doc Hodge, who was really a doctor, in addition to being a rich cattle-owner.

Eben came out.

"Better come along with us."

Eben squared his shoulders. "Where you goin'?" he asked briefly.

"Three Circle. Hemp party. I figger if we go there about sundown we ought to find all six of 'em together."

"What for?" asked Eben. But he knew the answer. Doc Hodge grinned grimly.

"I been missin' a good many cattle," he said. "Double C's not hard to change into Three Circle—an' I've found some of mine in his herd with fresh marks on 'em. Joe here, with his O Bar O, discovered some of his. Kansas's brand was too hard for 'em, so they burned it off altogether, an' put on another. We ain't makin' no mistake, Eben. It's clumsy work—an' crooked work—an' there's only one way to stop it. Better come along; you don't like that bunch any better'n we do, I guess. We sorta need you. More the merrier!"

"Ride on slow," said Eben after a pause. "'Tain't dark yet, anyhow. I got a couple of things to 'tend to, but I'll catch up. Take your time, boys."

They nodded and cantered off. Eben went into the house. His face was white. He strapped on his belt, and clicked his revolver before filling the chambers. His father's eyes watched him.

"Goin' somewhere, boy?"

"Goin' to look after *her*, dad. 'F I don't come back—God bless you!"

"Whatever it is," said Old Eben," you act like a Galt. I ain't afraid you'll disgrace the name, son. But—come back if you can!"

Eben was on his horse, dashing down the hill at breakneck speed. He did not follow the Otter Creek road, however, which he knew the party would choose. Instead, he crossed the creek and rode directly to the Three Circle ranch.

He was not even thinking of consequences. He had only one thought in mind. He saw that there was a new door, in place of the one he had broken. A light shone inside. He opened the door.

"You?" Betty Glover rose from the table, where she had been sitting reading. She was lovelier even than he had remembered her, but her eyes were stern. "I told you to keep away from here, Mr. Galt, didn't I?"

"Never mind that!" he said quickly. "I came here lickety-split to warn you—there's a posse comin' here to hang your uncle! If you want to get him out, now's your chance!"

"Hang him?" He saw that she was trembling. "But what for?"

"Cattle-stealing. But don't stop to argue. I've done what I could. If he's here—get him out! His life won't be worth a plugged nickel if they get him—nor your friend's either!"

"My friend?" she echoed.

"Yes—the greaser you're goin' to marry. *Will* you stop arguin' an' get busy?"

He spoke impatiently, but his heart was sore for her misery. She sat down blankly, and stared at him.

"I can't get Uncle Amos away. He's sick—I think he's dying. He has been that way for weeks. He's got to have whisky to keep him alive. I don't fight against it now. What's the use? But—cattle stealing? He couldn't! He's honest as daylight—a little peppery in temper—but—a thief? Oh no, no!"

"I'm sorry," said Eben gravely. "But they won't stop to argue. We must carry him somewhere so they can't find him. Where is he?"

She opened the door of an inner room. On the bed lay Amos Glover, but so wasted that only his glittering black eyes were left as reminders of the fiery little man he had been. He looked at Eben in wonder.

"You c'n lick me now, I expect," he said weakly. "But if I was well you couldn't—"

"How can we carry him?" asked Eben.

The girl shook her head.

"I don't know. I'm afraid—oh!"

It was only because he thought she was going to faint that he held out his arms. She did not resist; she just hid her head on his broad shoulder. Suddenly there was the sound of horses' hoofs outside.

"You stay here!" said Eben, with grim tenderness. "I'll see they don't get you—unless they shoot me first."

"No!" she implored. "Don't! You mustn't—I've been so cruel to you! But I didn't mean to! I always liked—"

"That's all I need to make me put up a fight!" he said exultantly. "An' if they get me, Betty—please remember I did it for you!"

The joy of battle was in his heart. His huge body ached for combat. He went out into the other room and stood in the open door.

"Come on!" he taunted. "Come on—you cowards—after a dyin' man! Shoot me if you want to—but I'll get some of you anyway!"

He pulled the door shut after him and waited on the step. His revolver was pointed straight at the foremost rider.

"Stop right where you are!" he shouted. "I hate to drill you boys, but I've got six bullets—and I'll get most of you anyhow! You skulkin' cowards—comin' to hang a man that's just about dead now! Come on if you dare!"

"That you, Eben?" came Agate Bill's injured voice. "What you doin' here? We was waitin' f'r you—"

"An' I'm waitin' for you now!" retorted Eben. "This is my own private war—Here—stop where you are, Doc! I hate to plug you first, but—"

"For the Lord's sake!" implored Doc Hodge. "We got 'em—got 'em all! Don't do what you'll be sorry for, Eben. Everything's fixed up. We know what the answer is—now."

"Well, come on in, Doc," said Eben, still suspicious. "The rest of you fellows c'n wait till Doc explains. This looks funny to me."

Doc Hodge promptly dismounted, and entered. At the same moment Betty Glover opened the door of the inner room. Her face was as white as paper.

"Are you all right, Eb—Mr. Galt?" she asked tremulously.

"Everything's all right, miss," said Doc Hodge. "We found the five greasers down along the crick near the dam. They were brandin' one of my steers."

"How's that?" came Amos Glover's weak voice. "My boys misbrandin'? Why, what for? I don't allow nothin' like that. I give you my word—"

"Now, that's all right, Amos," said Doc Hodge. "We got the truth out of 'em finally. Maybe we wouldn't have, if that fellow Juan hadn't peached. You see, they were doin' it f'r Pablo. Puttin' Three Circles on every beef they could get their dirty hands on."

"But say!" Amos had lifted himself weakly up on one elbow. "Three Circles is my brand. What was they brandin' your cattle with my brand for? Why, that makes me out a thief too! An' I never stole nothin' from nobody!"

"Now if you'll just lay down, Amos," said Doc soothingly, "I'll explain. This

here Pablo engineered it all. Juan told us what Pablo told them. Pablo was goin' to marry the ranch, an' get rid of you, Amos—"

"Marry the ranch?" broke in Betty. "Do you mean—marry *me*?"

"So he figgered, miss," said Doc. "Didn't you encourage him?"

"Not if he were the last man on earth!" she snapped. "I did let him ride out with me a few times—so Eben—I mean Mr. Galt—might see us—Oh, I know it was foolish! But I wanted to make Eben jealous—"

"You shore did that," said Eben. "But I guess—"

"Look here," complained Amos. "You say he was goin' to get rid of *me*? Why, Pablo's done his best while I been sick. He went to see a doctor down in Springtown, an' the doctor said I had to have whisky to keep me goin'. So Pablo's been givin' me the whisky—an' some medicine the doctor gave him in it—"

Doc Hodge picked up a glass that stood on the table.

"Arsenic, I should say," he said dryly. "Amos, this fellow Pablo's been slowly poisonin' you—thinkin' he'd get rid of you first, and then marry the girl. No wonder he wanted to get all the cattle he could! And no wonder he was buyin' rat poison down at Agate Bill's!"

"You mean," said Amos, "I ain't just sick—I'm poisoned? Will I get well?"

"If you leave the whisky alone, you will," said Doc grimly.

"I'll leave it alone all right!" retorted Amos. "I did for five years—an' if I don't have to have it under my nose, I ain't likely to be tempted none."

"The boys is mighty quiet," said Doc. "I expect maybe they've got business somewhere or other. Guess I'll join 'em. So long, Amos. Good night, miss. 'Night, Eben."

"I guess—" and Eben twirled his hat awkwardly—"that I'd best be goin', too. I've done all I came for."

Betty followed him out to the other room, and closed the door behind her. Her eyes were shining.

"You did this for me!" she said. "Why?"

"Why—I reckoned—" Eben lowered his eyes in confusion. "I reckoned when I heard of this, that I had to come over, sort of, an' look after you—just because I broke your door, and acted mean—"

"You did it for me!" she cried. She was smiling and blushing all at once. Suddenly she threw her arms around him and kissed him. "That's to thank you, Eben. Come over some time soon, will you?"

Eben looked for her, but she had run into the other room. He smiled happily, then he went out like a man in a dream, and rode home.

Old Eben was waiting. His sad eyes lighted.

"How's the war, boy?" he asked.

"All over." Eben smiled a smile of unutterable inward joy. "Yes, dad—all over—an' I won! Guess I'll go to bed. I'm kinda tired."

Old Eben—perhaps remembering his youth—smiled too. "Night—dear boy!" he murmured.

THE END

WOMAN

THEY talk about a woman's sphere,
As though it had a limit;
There's not a place in earth or heaven,
There's not a task to mankind given,
There's not a blessing or a woe,
There's not a life or death or birth,
That has a feather's weight of worth
Without a woman in it.

Where Some Men Are Men

By GEORGE F. WORTS

Author of "Out Where the Worst Begins," etc.

CHAPTER XLII.

DEATH OF LOVE.

WHEN the hammer of the automatic, whose warm muzzle was pressed against her temple, only clicked, Patricia screamed. She cast the pistol down and looked up fearfully at Snacker, who came a step nearer and grinned.

She shrank back, numb with fear, and glanced hastily about her. There was no one now to whom she could turn. Pa Jarvis, Nettie, Henry, Jack the Jumper, Loupo the Wolf, Hamilton Clay Abney, and Cockeye were dead—all dead! Even now their bodies were growing stiff.

One-Shot Snacker looked admiringly down into her terror-stricken face.

"Great, gal—great!" he cried. "Ya pulled off the best stunt jest now that anybody has done all mornin'! I hand it to ya! Fer a moment I thought ya meant it. Gal, yo're a born actress!"

"W-*what!*" Patricia gasped, rising to her knees.

The lean, red-headed man did not heed her. He had turned about and faced the bunk house.

"Hey, Gordy!" he yelled. "Ain't ya finished takin' notes of it yet? Hurry on out. These boys don't want to lay around yere in this broilin' sun all mornin'."

To Patricia's amazement, her lover, Gordon Manville Stackhouse, at that moment emerged from the bunk house. In one hand he carried a pad, in the other a silver pencil. He was making notes as he walked toward her. And his air was calm, unruffled but eager.

He grinned. "Just a moment, Red, until I jot down that last bit of Miss Gailen's. Oh, but it's been great!"

"Ya liked it, boy?"

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for October 3

"Red, I got enough material out of this fight to fill a dozen novels. I will use it as the basis of a great historical novel of the old West. The fight of the jumpers was great. The suspense duel was bully. The snake duel was immense. And the way you handled the whole thing was perfect. Wonderful! It's great! It's big!"

Patricia arose furiously to her feet. "Do you mean to say—" she began gaspingly, and stopped.

All about No Man's Land the dead were coming to life. Henry and Nettie sprang to their feet; then Pa Jarvis crawled slowly erect, brushing himself off as he arose. Loupo the Wolf stirred, rolled over, and sat up.

Hamilton Clay Abney yawned and stood. Jack the Jumper leaped nimbly to his feet. Old Man Gimish, Slim Wheemer, the man in the red undershirt, Cowhorn Lenkmarble, and Cockeye sprang or crawled to their feet, according to their natures.

Gordon Manville Stackhouse, stuffing pad and pencil into a hip pocket, strode to Patricia's side. Affectionately he attempted to embrace her.

"Don't you dare touch me!" she cried, backing away from him.

"Why, darling!" he murmured, surprise and hurt in his great black eyes.

"Don't you ever dare call me that again," she snapped.

"But—sweetheart!"

"I hate you! I loathe you! I detest you!"

He stared at her in bewilderment.

"What in the name of Heaven have I done, Patricia?"

"You've tricked me—you've fooled me," she panted; "you've deliberately made a laughing-stock of me! And I'll never speak to you again! You—you beast!"

"But, Patricia," he said anxiously, "I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about. You don't mean you thought all of this was *real!* Why, you can't mean *that*, dear!"

She eyed him with smoldering dislike, her feelings divided between cold suspicion and hot resentment.

"Of course I thought it was real!"

"But I wrote you!"

"You didn't!"

"I did. And you saw Snacker's letter to Pa Jarvis—didn't you?"

"I saw nothing. You—you didn't write me!"

But she was watching Pa Jarvis. The political leader of Horseblanket was walking toward the gully where the horses were picketed, and there was in his bearing a casualness, an air of nonchalance.

"Pa Jarvis, come back here!"

"I got to go see them hosses is all right, gal," he said in a complaining tone.

He quickened his pace.

"Get him!" Patricia snapped.

CHAPTER XLIII.

PATRICIA'S REVENGE.

ONE-SHOT SNACKER bounded after him. Pa broke into a run, but Snacker was the faster. He gained on Pa until he could have reached out and grasped him by the shoulders. This he did not do. Instead, he inserted one foot between Pa's twinkling legs and tripped him.

The fall nearly stunned Pa Jarvis. He arose, permitted Snacker to take his arm, and came limping back.

"What did that note say?" Patricia asked her former fiancé.

"I can repeat it almost word for word," he replied eagerly. "It started: 'My darling: I have met the enemy, and they are mine. Am having a fine time; wish you were here.' Then I went on to tell about the sham battle, and to be careful and not expose yourself, because the wads from blank cartridges are sometimes dangerous. And at the end I said—"

"Never mind what you said at the end," Patricia stopped him coldly. "What happened to that note?"

"I give it to Slim Wheemer with another one from Snacker for this old reprobate here."

Patricia turned to the trembling old man. "Pa, what became of that note?"

"Why, gal, I don't recollect gettin' any—"

"Slim!" Snacker snapped. "Come

yere." And when Slim, grinning shyly, came over: "Slim, did ya give them two notes to Pa Jarvis or did ya lose one? Speak the truth, Slim."

Slim flushed darkly. "Does that ole rattlesnake dast say I didn't give him both them notes?"

"I must 'a' mislaid that one," Pa muttered. "Ya see, folks, they was so much excitement a-goin' on last night that I must 'a' got all rattled. I'm jest an old man, anyhow, and—"

"That's enough of that line," Patricia cut him off. "You weren't rattled at all. You were the most cold-blooded grafter I've ever seen in operation. You read that note and either threw it away or destroyed it, didn't you?"

"Gal, ef ya'll jest be reasonable—" Pa quavered.

"Why didn't you deliver it to me?"

"I jest got through sayin'—"

Patricia whipped about angrily to the novelist.

"Mr. Stackhouse, I'm not forgiving you. I'll never forgive you. And that is all I have to say to you. But this old scoundrel must be summarily dealt with. He must be punished according to the laws that you men of the West have provided for such cases.

"He has deceived me and lied to me and tricked me from the moment I stepped off the train in Horseblanket. To tell the truth is alien to his evil nature. He is a scoundrel, a liar and a grafter. He is an unprincipled rogue. Even if he is eighty years old, I demand that he be punished."

"I'll punish him fer ya, ma'am—gladly," Snacker broke in.

"Thank you, Mr. Snacker. You are the first real man I have so far met in the West. There is at least no deception in your methods. They've been telling me the most horrible things about you—the most dastardly things!"

"Who has?" Snacker inquired.

"Pa Jarvis, chiefly."

"Oh, gal," the old man groaned, "that was a fatal error. Ya spoke my death sentence when ya said that."

"What has he been a-sayin'?" Snacker demanded.

"He said that you torture your victims. He said that you've placed an old sheep herder on a red-hot stove and held him there while he screamed with agony; and that you've poured molten lead into another man's ears; and that you suspended another from the limb of a tree by his big toe; and that you placed a man who was suffering from nervous prostration in a locked room with a rattlesnake; and—and—"

"Well, ma'am," Snacker interrupted, "all them incidents, except fer a few triflin' details, is true. I do torture my victims, ma'am. As a boy I started out to build up th' reputation o' bein' a bad man, and I ain't left a stone unturned. All my life I've done lived up t' that boyhood resolution. I do torture my victims, ma'am; and I torture 'em somethin' turrible."

Pa moaned.

Patricia turned to him and examined him with narrowed eyes.

"Mr. Snacker," she said crisply, "I wish you'd demonstrate what you mean. I should like to see this old leech punished suitably—in return for the suffering he has subjected me to. He told me last night he had received an insulting note from you, challenging the men of Horseblanket to a pistol fight. Then he had the effrontery to charge me the outrageous sum of twenty-one hundred dollars for the fighting he and his gang were to do."

"Ya—ya weren't goin' to fight *me*, ma'am!" Snacker gasped.

"I was—and I still intend to. Your turn will come later. First, Pa Jarvis must be punished for the agony he's made me suffer."

"Yes, ma'am. And ya want me t' do th' torturin'?"

"I do!"

"Now, lemme think." Snacker ran his fingers through his thick thatch of red hair, and his pale-blue eyes became dreamy with thoughts. "They should be a lot o' good idees in th' back o' my head, ma'am. Slim, you got any good idees this mornin'?"

Slim puckered his brows. "Well, we was goin' t' make that feller f'm the Circle-Q outfit eat a four-quart bucket o' dry sand,

boss—as a starter. He got away f'm us—remember? Whut's th' matter with that idee?"

"Too soft," Snacker said scornfully. "We got t' think up somethin' good fer Pa Jarvis. He's been a pest t' th' community too long. We got a dozen gredges scored up ag'in' him." He slapped his knee.

"I got it, ma'am! They's a valley near here that's jest a-crawlin' with big red ants—th' stingin' kind. We'll strip his clothes offen him and smear him all over with sorghum molasses and tie him up to a tree and let those hungry ants make a meal offen him."

"That would be excellent," Patricia agreed. "Would his death be long-drawn and exquisitely painful?"

"Ma'am," the red-headed man said earnestly, "exquisite ain't no name fer how painful it 'd be!"

"Not me," Pa whimpered. "Ain't you young folks got no pity on a pore, helpless old man? Gal, don't tell me ya've got a heart o' stone. A purty, sweet gal like you. Why, ma'am, I'm goin' on ninety! C'd ya ever fergive yoreself—"

"Let's get this onder way," Slim Wheemer broke in. "Jest t' make things interestin', boss, will ya give me yore permission t' soak his beard with coal oil and tech a match to it?"

"Shore!" Snacker turned to Patricia. "Ya see, ma'am, in spite o' my reputation, I always aims to give my boys all the leetle pleasures I kin. Shore, Slim—go git the coal-oil can and do it now."

"But before you boys start your rough play," Patricia said, "I must insist that my pistol be returned to me and the money he practically stole. Pa, give me the weapon you removed from my holster when the battle started and all the money you've swindled from me."

"Not much; he don't tech no gun!" Slim snapped, and reached into Pa's hip pocket. One hand returned with Patricia's pistol, which she dropped into her holster; the other, with a wad of yellow bills, which Patricia stuffed into her bosom.

"Grab him, Slim!"

But Pa had darted aside. At first he ran not much faster than a hunted deer, but soon he was really running. With beard and hair blowing upward and backward in the gale of his own creating, he covered the ground in leaps and bounds, dwindling so rapidly in size that a motion-picture camera, had it been focused upon him, would have registered little more than a bounding, shrinking dot.

One-Shot Snacker gazed at Patricia questioningly.

"Ya was only jokin', wasn't ya, gal?"

"Of course I was only joking! I would not harm a hair of his rascally old head for all the money in the world."

Snacker's gaze became admiring.

"Yo're a gal after my own heart, and Dirty Water County c'n be thankful t' ya fer riddin' it of a pest and a nuisance. Pa Jarvis has been a blight on this county fer y'ars."

Patricia was astonished.

"What makes you think he won't be a pest any longer?"

"Gal, old man Jarvis ain't never took th' time, in spite of his eighty-odd y'ars, t' develop a sense of humor applied t' hisself. A thing is always funny when th' other feller is th' goat. He prob'ly thought it was a real good joke t' bring a pore leetle kid like you out yere and not tell ya we was only goin' to fight a sham battle.

"Twenty-four hours f'm now, if ya have time to think of it, ya can depend on it that Pa'll still be travelin—jest as fast as he's a-travelin' now. That old man is so scairt his body and soul is a-hangin' together by a hair. Ya'll never see *him* again."

One-Shot Snacker had called the turn with an expert's precision. Late that day Pa was still traveling—traveling light and fast.

Reaching the gully where the horses had been left, he had selected the surest and fleetest. He paused in Horseblanket only for his hidden hoard and a few of the barest necessities.

Late in the afternoon, saddle-sore and dusty, he drew rein before a ranch house in a valley many miles to the west. The rancher was sitting at a window, smoking his pipe after his day's work.

He looked out, saw Pa, and called softly

over his shoulder to his wife: "Lock up th' silverware, ma; here comes that Pa Jarvis!"

CHAPTER XLIV.

INTO THE BAD LANDS.

PA JARVIS was not the only one to retire from the field of battle soon after the smoke had cleared. Henry followed him closely, but Henry's departure was distinguished by considerably more finesse and dignity. His was not the flight of the pursued hare or the hunted deer.

Henry's escape was more in keeping with the habits of the coyote. He slunk. He dodged from bowlder to bowlder, crouching down occasionally and scuttling after the manner of the crab when he believed that his progress was unobserved.

Nettie appeared to be engaged in admiring the scenery. At all events, her profile was toward him, and not once during his maneuvers did she seem cognizant of his escape. She continued, so far as appearances went, to gaze at some fixed point on the hillside with a raptness and a fixity alien to her nature.

And Nettie, it was true, was not a scenery lover. Nor was she paying the slightest heed to the scenery. From the tail of her eye she was watching every move Henry made, and the heart in her breast beat with slow and painful dreariness; for he was breaking his oath again; Henry was violating the solemn compact he had made, in writing, whereby she was to receive six months of his loyalty and industry.

The pain in her heart became almost unbearable; but she would not chase Henry. He could go—he could go away forever.

"I never want to see him again," she told herself, and was unaware that the words were uttered aloud.

Cockeye, who was standing near, turned to her.

"C'n I go fetch him fer ya, Net?"

"No," she said dully, "let him go. I don't want to see him any more. He's broke his solemn vow."

"Aw, he ain't wuth botherin' with," Cockeye snorted.

Nettie momentarily bristled at this slight on the character of her darling; but she realized that what Cockeye had said, which was the opinion of the community, was nothing but the truth. Henry was nothing but a lowdown bum. He was a citified sissy. He was a lazy loafer.

But—oh, he was so beautiful! And she loved him so! The only man she had known whom she could ever care for was a coward and a weakling, She could have forgiven that.

Indeed, she had been forgiving that from the first moment she met Henry; but what hurt her more than words could express was Henry's indifference to her. Her adoration met with nothing but cool and studied disdain.

She was building the fires of love at an altar from which the god had flown! How devoted she would have been! What a loving wife she would have made Henry!

"It seems to me," Cockeye broke into her reverie, "that you and me, Net, ought t' begin patchin' up our diff'rences?"

"Whut d'ya mean?" Nettie snapped, instantly alert.

"Well, I'm fond of ya, gal, and now that Pa has gone, who's a-goin t' look after ya? Whut ya need now is a strong, able-bodied man about th' place. Who's goin' t' do th' cooking at th' Waldorf Astoria and look after th' guests while yo're out a-prospectin' now that Pa's done gone?"

"Nobuddy," Nettie sighed.

"Why not me, Net?" he presented his case eagerly. "I c'n cook right peart. I'm a real nifty hash-slinger. It works right in with my job with th' railroad."

"Whut in Sam Hill do you think yo're drivin' at, Cockeye?" Nettie demanded.

He looked injured and surprised. "Why, Net, I'm only suggestin' an alliance betwixt you and me, gal."

Nettie turned to face him squarely. "I reckon my ears ain't deliverin' t' me all whut's goin' on, Cockeye," she said. "Jest let me hear some more t' make sure."

He grinned bashfully.

"Why, Net, I'm only tellin' ya how much I admire ya."

"I thought mebbe ya was makin' me a business proposition."

"Ya know how fond I've always been of ya, Nettie. Ever since ya was a leetle gal I've always thought ya was the sweetest, purtiest thing whut ever growed. Lately, since ya've growed up, you know how I've felt.

"Thar's somethin' 'bout ya, Net, that makes my old heart go a-thumpin' every time I look yore way. Yore purty golden hair and yore purty yellow eyes and yore elegant figger are enough to make a man fergit hisself. Whut I'm gittin' at, gal, is that I want ya sh'd tie up with me fer life. I want ya fer my wife. Do ya say yes, gal?" he pleaded humbly but eagerly.

"Cockeye," Nettie replied quietly, "ef it wa'nt fer th' way ya said that I shore would smack ya a purty one."

Cockeye backed away delicately. "Why, Nettie! Whut you mean by that kinda talk?"

"I mean that my purty golden hair and my yeller eyes—and my eyes ain't yeller, by th' way, they're amber—and my elegant figger, as you call it, wasn't enough to keep yore eyes on them features when that gal over thar come t' Hossblanket!"

"But Nettie—"

"Ya lost ya chanst that night, Cockeye. I'll admit I was studyin' right serious on you and Jack and Loupo, tryin' to make up my mind which of th' three of ya I'd take; but when that Gailen hussy come t' Hossblanket and I seen whut kind of fools men kin make o' theirselves, you three boys jest nachally wrote yore names on th' blacklist."

"But that ain't skassly fair, Net. She was a stranger t' town, and we jest set out t' let her see th't Hossblanket was a-doin' her share in upholdin' the repytation o' Western horsepitality. That's all we was doin', honey."

"And you shore was a-doin' yore share, Cockeye; and I'll ask ya to kindly omit th' honeys. I ain't never goin' t' be any man's honey—never!" The amber eyes were misted with tears; and Nettie resolutely blinked them away. "Men ain't wuth th' land they take—even when ya bury 'em," she said passionately. "I'll never git married t' no man. Now leave me be."

"Aw, now, Net—"

"Beat it, yo' cockeyed hillbilly, before I bust ya a good one on yore nose!"

Cockeye nimbly betook himself to friendlier quarters.

Her heart continued to throb with the exquisite agony of disappointment. After all the pains she'd taken, trying to make him like her even a little bit, Henry had fled at the first ripe opportunity. Well, let him go! He was more beautiful than most men, but there was in him the worthlessness that was common to all.

Wretchedly she observed Henry's retreat. He was vanishing into the gully where the horses were grazing. A few minutes later she saw the claybank emerge and ascend the slope.

Nettie stirred uneasily. Henry was not heading toward the trail that would take him back to Horseblanket; he was not heading anywhere, that is, not from Nettie's experienced point of view.

The course he was taking would soon land him in the area behind the X-Arrow-Z ranch, a tangle of gullys, gulches, ravines, buttes, and hills which twisted so that some all but turned back on themselves. The region was as they say, bad land—a hundred square mile patch of it; and if Henry once found his way into the bad land, the chances were all in favor of his never finding his way out again.

Nettie waited only long enough to make sure that the bad land was indeed his destination, then she went down to the gully with her bobbed golden hair standing straight out behind. It did not occur to her that Henry deserved to be lost in the bad land for his treatment of her; that he deserved an open grave in a nameless region for violating his oath to her; that he should have been tossed away to provide luncheon for the vultures for his eagerness in breaking the bond he had signed.

All that occurred to Nettie as she hastened to where the horses were, was that the man she adored was heading toward an inescapable doom. There were treacherous cliffs and precipices and quicksand bogs in the bad lands, and his inexperience might easily lead him to a swift and horrid death.

When Nettie reached the horses, Henry was no longer within sight, but she followed

his trail easily. He had not been traveling fast; the marks of the claybank's hoofs showed that; and she spurred her pinto on.

Henry's long start carried him well into the twisted hills before she caught sight of him. He was descending the side of a hill when, reaching the crest of it, she saw him; and Henry was goading his mount up the opposite side when he chanced to turn about and discover that he was pursued.

Henry lifted his fist and shook it.

"It won't do you any good to follow me!" he shouted. "I'm going away from here and I'm never coming back!"

"But where yo're a-goin' is jest plain nothin'!" she yelled in answer. "Where yo're a-goin' ain't takin' ya any place!"

"That's just where I want to go!" was his reply. "No place is better than Horseblanket. I'm through with Horseblanket, canned hash and prospecting. Good-by! You can shoot me if you want to, but you'll never make me pan another ounce of gravel! I'm through!"

And the claybank disappeared.

"Yo're headin' fer shore death, Hennery!" she cried, but Henry was no longer in hearing distance. The claybank had reached the hilltop and gone on.

Every foot, as they penetrated this torn and twisted section, became more precarious. Lizards and snakes scuttled out from underfoot as Nettie forged on. It was unlikely that civilized man had ever entered this part of the bad land before.

Cowmen who lost cattle here permitted them to linger; life was too precious for the risk required to go in and get them. Among the Sioux who in older days had swarmed these hills, traditions existed of ghostly happenings, of Indians who strayed this way and never again were seen.

If the man on the claybank had been any other man alive, Nettie would have turned back without an instant's hesitation. But the protective instinct was strong within her. The man of her dreams, even if he spurned her love, was in danger of losing his worthless life in some horrible accident.

She would attempt to save Henry for the continued futility of his existence even at the cost of her own worthwhile one. Viciously she jabbed spurs into the faithful little pinto.

Wilder and wilder grew the land that they were entering. Bottomless cliffs hovered at every hand; mountain torrents roared through black and slimy gulches. Even the bowlders lying about had a different character; they were of fantastic patterns with ugly sharp edges upon which a fall meant instant death.

Once she saw Henry fall from his horse. He lay, apparently unconscious, for a moment, then scrambled up, remounted and drove on. He would not heed her calls. He rode as if the devil were at his heels. And Nettie with her hair flying in a short golden banner behind her, rode like the very devil to save him.

In the end, the accident she had been fearing, happened. The space between them had been shortened. Henry was driving the claybank at a mad gallop; and suddenly the world had come to an end. Landscape, save for a distant hill, ceased.

The claybank drove his forelegs into earth almost up to the knees with the mountain bred horse's keenly developed instinct for the preservation of life; and Henry left the saddle in a graceful, unimpeded flight.

When Nettie reached the edge of the drop he was still falling, revolving slowly through the air, his big black sombrero sailing down along the wind.

Below her a cliff stretched sheerly for perhaps forty feet; below that the vertical declivity became a long easy slope extending downward into a cañon for five hundred feet or more.

Henry's fall was eased by a scraggly bush that grew at the point where cliff and incline met. He dropped squarely upon the stiff and springy branches and was thrust violently into the air, as if the bush spurned any contact with him. It was all that saved his worthless life, however.

He came down on his face, sprawling, and slid down the incline at incredible speed, digging a clean groove in the soft gravel as he went. Nettie waited until the descent was over. Henry was halted by a slight irregularity in the gravel slope at the very brink of a little mountain stream

which, from where Nettie stood, resembled a shining ribbon of silver.

She hastened along the edge of the cliff until she found a safe place to crawl down to the incline. Then she slid down this to Henry's side.

He was sitting up, his great brown eyes dazed and bewildered.

"Henry," Nettie gasped, "is anything broke?"

Henry's only answer was to spit out gravel. He came tremblingly to his feet. Nettie helped him up the gravel slope to his horse.

"I'm losin' patience with ya, Henry," she said. "This is th' last time ya're goin' to play tricks on me. Ontil yore hundred and eighty four days are up, ya're goin' prospectin' with me."

"You aren't going to make me work today!" he wailed.

"We're goin' back t' th' Bluebird fer breakfast," Nettie grimly replied. "And after breakfast we're goin' to git th' pan. I'm through foolin' with ya, Henry. Th' next time ya run away, I'm goin' t' shoot!"

CHAPTER XLV.

RIGHTS AND WRONGS.

AFTER the abrupt departure of Pa Jarvis and Henry and Nettie, One-Shot Snacker courteously made the suggestion that they remove themselves to the camp for breakfast. The novelist detained Patricia until the others had gone on.

In the brightening light of the new day Patricia looked tired and wan and, when her face was in repose, slightly haggard. There were discolorations under her violet-blue eyes, and she was pale. She looked whipped, but she was not in the business of accepting defeat—yet.

Gordon Manville Stackhouse watched her anxiously but hopefully. It had been a hard night for him, too. He had been playing poker with his hosts with hardly an interruption for thirty hours; spades, hearts, diamonds and clubs still danced before his eyes.

Patricia was furious, but women and their foibles were an open book to him. Girls without spirit he abhorred; and he knew that, given a little time to smolder and smoke and fume, Patricia would see everything in his light.

"Now," he said firmly, "I want to know what the trouble is."

Patricia clenched her fists, then let them relax. "I'll tell you," she said. "When I discovered, night before last, that you had gone to the mine to defend the rights of a wronged woman—and to secure local color and things for your novels—I was nearly frantic. All that night I lay awake worrying over what might have happened to you.

"I loved you. I loved you more than I had believed it was possible ever to love any man. When your pony came galloping back—I nearly went wild.

"And that night, when I didn't receive your note, and Pa Jarvis did, I fell in readily with the plan to finance an expedition to go up here and rescue you. The mine squatters were no longer an issue. I loved you, and I would have lost my life in getting you out of Snacker's clutches.

"I thought I was risking my life in being so near that fight. I thought I was under fire every instant of the time. And I thought you were being tortured!"

"Pardon me just a moment, Patricia," he said, and, removing notebook and pencil from his pocket, jotted something down.

"Please go on." He restored the utensils of his craft to his pocket.

Patricia glared at him, bit her lip, hesitated, and grimly resumed.

"When the fight was over, after I thought I had risked my life to save you—out of that bunkhouse you walked with notebook in one hand and pencil in the other and a beaming smile on your face—and you wonder why I hate you!"

"Good Lord, Patricia, I've been so full of that fight and all the material it has given me—"

"Yes, haven't you?" she interrupted icily. "That little bit of mine at the end, when I put the pistol to my head and pulled the trigger, not dreaming it wasn't loaded—that *was* a rich little bit, wasn't it?"

"It was great!" he agreed enthusiastically. "Just what I needed!"

"You aren't paying any attention to me!" she gasped.

"Indeed I am! What's the rest?" he said eagerly.

She glared at him and gritted her teeth.

"You, the forceful young novelist, come to the raw Western town of Horseblanket to secure material for some new novels," she panted. "Everything is grist to your mill! You're as transparent as water! I know just how your mind was working. Perhaps I might fit into one of them as an ingenue type, or a soubrette, or whatever you call 'em.

"And you take me out into the dusk beside the tinkling mountain stream and succeed in obtaining some snappy he-and-she dialogue! That's what you did! Then you take her into your strong arms and—and—"

"I swear to you, Patricia—"

"—And after that scene has been nicely worked out for you, you mount a horse and go galloping through lovely moonlit woods and valleys to have some more worked out for you. The romance of helping a pretty lady in distress entered somewhat into your calculations; but, still, that was grist to the mill, too. Then this ingenue you have discovered comes galloping to your rescue with an armed force—and rescues you from the villain. Great stuff! Big stuff!"

"Yes!" he cried enthusiastically. "I understand now what you're driving at. It *is* big stuff! It *is* great! Darling, you're going to marry one of the greatest novelists in America! What you say is true.

"In the few days I've been here I have secured the data for five of the greatest Western novels ever written. They're going to knock my public cold. I predict a sale of at least one million copies of each. As for my other rights, just wait until you see the editors fighting for them!

"The motion picture producers are going to go mad when they hear of the material I have. Magazine editors will come to me on their knees, pleading for the serial rights. I confidently predict the greatest foreign sale of any novels yet written in America.

"Within the year, 'Patty of the Last Frontier,' as I have decided to call my great historical Western novel, will be translated into Chinese, Portuguese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, Greek, Arabic, Ethiopian, Esperanto and Papiamento! In this gold mine," he concluded sentimentally, "I have indeed found our gold mine!"

Patricia eyed him thoughtfully.

"I suspected it shortly after I met you," she said, "but I wasn't sure of it until now."

"I knew you'd be sure, sooner or later, dearest," he declared.

Patricia clenched her fists again, then clamped her lips shut and walked unsteadily away from him.

She entered the mess-shack.

CHAPTER XLVI.

NO GOLD?

THE three bad men were placed at a large table of planks with Slim Wheemer, Hamilton Clay Abney, Cowhorn Lenkmarble and the man in the red woolen undershirt. Old man Gimish was busy with breakfast preparations.

A smaller table, covered with oilcloth, was already occupied by One-Shot Snacker. He gazed at Patricia commiseratingly.

"Have you leetle love-birds been quarrelin'?"

Patricia seated herself and forebore replying. She did not even glance at the novelist when he sat down beside her.

"Seems to me, gal, it would be only fair t' th' boy t' wait 'til ya'd cooled off a leetle," Snacker said earnestly. "He ain't done nothin' since he's been yere savin' t' rave about ya, ma'am."

"So far," she said icily, "no one has made the slightest attempt at explaining anything. The few bits of information I've gleaned have been like extracting teeth."

Gordon smiled. Realization that the only true romance of his life was on the rocks and fast breaking up might have disheartened a man who did not know women so well; to Gordon Manville Stackhouse, Patricia's peculiar attitude only lent a little zest to their romance.

"Let me explain, Patricia."

"Supposing Mr. Snacker makes the attempt. After to-day," she said crisply, "if I have anything to do about it, I will never see you again—Mr. Stackhouse!"

He smiled understandingly. "Oh, go on and call me Gordon."

"Gal, yo're doin' th' boy an injustice," Snacker said with a warmth of tone that was neither indignant nor irritable and yet partook a little of each. "He comes up yere to this mine to drive me and me pals out at th' point of a gun—or t' shoot us in our tracks."

"And he stayed and had a lovely time!" she cried. "While I—I suffered and worried myself distracted."

"Ya're missin' th' p'int, gal. Th' p'int is, he did come up with the avowed detarmination t' captcher me and me pals. Jest because he fell down on th' job ain't no fault o' his'n. Th' boy did his best; and ef he was the kind o' lad ya seem to think he is, he wouldn't be a-settin' yere alive and whole this minnit."

Patricia was staring at him. "Just what do you mean by that?"

"I'll get back to that directly," Snacker answered in a leisurely tone. He hitched forward, and his cold blue eyes flicked over her face like the tails of whips. "Let me tell ya somethin', gal. Let me tell ya how Gordy happened in yere. Yestiddy mornin', jest about th' time o' day all you folks cut loose with them blank cattridges this mornin', Gordy came a-slidin' down that hill yonder, both guns out, intendin' t' cut loose on th' fust head whut bobbed up.

"It jest chanced that I was out takin' a leetle stroll before turnin' in. We'd been a-playin' cyards all night, and I was out fer a breath o' air, *sabe?* I seen Gordy yere tie his hoss to th' cottonwood up yonder, and I follered him down, wonderin' whut th' Sam Hill he was up to.

"I thought th' pore lad was sick. I swear I did, ma'am—seein' him a-slidin' down that hill on his belly in sech a curious fashion. And when I got up behind him, where he was a-layin' behind a big rock, his face was in his hands, and he was sort of tremblin'. Oh, 't wasn't fear, ma'am. 'T was buck fever. The bravest men gits buck fever when they're studyin' on shootin' down a man for the first few times.

"Well, he looked around and see me a-standin' there behind him, and the pore lad jest up and fainted dead away. Ya was sort o' su'prised t' see me standin' thar, wasn't ya, son?"

"Slightly," Gordon murmured.

"So I yelled fer Slim, and we toted him down th' hill t' th' bunkhouse. We pried open his mouth and sloshed some whisky around in it; and when he come to, he made a grab fer his gats! Well, I'd set 'em on th' table yonder, so's they wouldn't weigh so heavy on him—still thinkin' he was jest some sick lad that'd strayed into our camp after bein' lost in the bad lands, mebbe.

"But he wasn't sick. No, ma'am. Not a-tall. He begun a-tellin us jest whut he thought of us, me in particler, and I'll swear t' ya, ma'am, no man ain't ever talked to me th' way he did yesterday mornin' and lived t' tell about it!"

"Why didn't you torture him?" Patricia inquired disappointedly.

The bad man looked at her with amazement.

"Torture this yere boy?" he cried. "Why, ma'am I loved this lad on sight. Besides which, I don't never torture brave men. Show me a man who has left my hands branded, mutilated and deformed, and I'll show ya a coward! No brave man who passes through my hands, ma'am, is harmed by so much as a leetle hair! No, ma'am. That's my code and I've stuck to it through thick and thin.

"This boy yere I welcomed to my camp as a brother. I would give the shirt off my back to this boy, gal. There was nothin' in my camp too good fer him, and that goes fer any camp I'm ever in! No man who comes sneakin' into the camp o' One-Shot Snacker to kill him has a grain o' yeller in him. This yere boy is a hero—the most heroic boy I ever knew. That's puttin' it strong, but I mean it, gal."

"Well, what happened?" Patricia said impatiently.

"Whut happened? Jest as soon as th' boy found he was among friends and could talk freely, he told us his story; he told us

about you, ma'am, and he told us whut he was a-doin' out yere in th' great unspoiled West. So we been a-helpin' him t' th' best of our ability—givin' him dope fer his novels. It was my idee thet we git up this sham battle—t' let th' boy see jest how th' battles o' th' old days was pulled off, includin' all the trick dools whut was ever fought on plain and mountain.

"I reckon we showed him everything on th' list—dool f'm two hosses, dool in th' sagebrush, th' s'pense dool, th' snake dool, the jumpin' and th' runnin' dools and th' old elk-and-bush trick that th' Indians was so fond of.

"Yes, ma'am; I worked that fight out down t' th' last detail, and when it was all doped out I copied off th' program and sent it down t' Pa Jarvis, never dreamin' he'd take sech base advantage of a innocent leetle gal like you. Where the slip-up came was when Slim delivered the note fer you to Pa Jarvis."

"Let me ask you a question, Mr. Snacker."

"Oh, go on and call me Red, ma'am."

"How much did Mr. Gordon pay you for staging this sham battle?"

Red Snacker was horrified. "Why, not a red penny, gal. Th' very idee! Me take money f'm this lad?"

"Well," she said grimly, "it cost me enough. I've paid out a lot of cash to get into this mine—to place myself in a position where I could order you off my property!"

The red-haired giant gasped and blinked his pale blue eyes at her.

"Shore enough?"

She nodded firmly.

"Five thousand bucks jest to git to where ya c'd have a private word with me, gal?"

"Yes, Mr. Snacker."

"Holy mackerel, gal, whut a pity! Whut a pity! Why didn't ya jest drop me a line—a picture postal?"

"My lawyers did write you—after trying in vain to get some report from you on the production of the mine."

"But I don't never make reports, honey. I ain't th' reportin' kind. And I jest hate correspondence somethin' turrible. I'm a turrible letter writer."

"The last letter my lawyers wrote you," Patricia went on crisply, "required no reply. It was an order for you to get off my premises."

"But, honey, look yere: I don't never pay attention to whut lawyers tell me. They're sech hawg-tied liars, th' hull kit'n kaboodle of 'em, that I jest don't notice they exist."

"Your answer to my lawyers' order was insulting, Mr. Snacker. You told them to —to go to hell!"

Red Snacker banged his fist on the oilcloth.

"Shore, I did, honey! I tell ya, I won't take orders f'm no lawyer livin'. Why didn't ya write me yoreself? One word f'm you and I'd a been outa this propetty inside o' thutty minutes! Now, whut in Sam Hill d'ya know about that? Gordy, ain't that funny? Don't it jest make ya split yore sides a-laughin'? Ain't it th' roarin'est, comicalest thing ya ever heard?"

Gordon nodded and chuckled.

"Why, gal, ef I had th' slightest idee ya wanted t' see yore mine I'd 'a' hired a automobile out o' my own pusonal funds and toted ya out yere in th' style a leetle queen like you deserves! And ya spent five thousand bucks t' see me! Gordy, ain't that rich?"

"I don't think it's funny in the least," Patricia said coldly.

"Of course ya don't, gal. When ya come right down to it, th' joke's on both of us, ain't it? Well, we live an' learn, don't we? Haw-haw-haw! Excuse me, ma'am, but it jest reached my funny bone! Haw-haw-haw! I got sort of a twisted sense o' humor, I guess, ma'am; and I'll be all right and normal agin in jest a minnit. Haw-haw-haw!"

He became purple. He banged the table. He strangled.

"Please excuse me, honey, fer laughin' out loud in church, so t' speak, but they's somethin' so—so quaint and onusual in th' idee of a sweet, purty, brave leetle gal like you fust sendin' a man up t' shoot me, then hirin' a hull dawggoned expydition t' come up and wipe out me and me pals, when we c'd of done th' hull thing as nice and friendly as pie.

" And goin' t' all this trouble and spendin' all that good money t' drive me out of a gold mine that ain't had a speck or sparkle o' gold in it fer five y'ars and over!"

CHAPTER XLVII.

A QUESTION OF ESCORT.

PATRICIA sprang up from her chair with a faint scream, her lips drooping, her eyes staring, her face pale as death.

" No gold!" she wailed.

" Why, no, gal, this yere propetty was milked dry long ago!"

" But it was sold to my father as a producing mine!"

" Shore, gal! It was a perducin' mine. It's still a perducin' mine. It c'n perduce skipfull after skipfull o' nice clean dirt. Yore pappy was a sucker, ma'am; that explains why he got th' Bluebird. It ain't a Bluebird now, though, honey, it's a Lulubird."

" Kindly stop calling me honey!"

Red Snacker looked surprised. " All right, ma'am, I didn't aim t' git familiar, but yo're so young and fresh and purty and all. I reckon I done fergot m'self. 'Twon't happen again, Miss Gailen, ma'am."

Patricia had settled back into her chair, her expression one of hope forgotten and desolation triumphant.

" Can you tell me how he happened to be swindled, Mr. Snacker? You were here at the time the deal was put through, I understand."

" Shore, I c'n give ya all th' details, ma'am. I was th' majority owner of th' Bluebird stock, ma'am and when she went dry, we jest salted her in th' good old time-honored way, and dumped it off on th' fust sucker we c'd grab.

" Yore pappy jest happened t' be passin' through, visitin' some friends on a ranch back in th' hills a way, and he happened to be hooked. They was nothin' deliberate about it, ma'am, I promise ya on my word of honor. It jest happened that yore pappy come along and took th' bait.

" We didn't keer who took it, Miss Gailen, ma'am, and that's th' gospel truth. We didn't have a thing ag'in' yore daddy."

" Who were the other stockholders?" she said weakly.

" Oh, th' stock was all close held, ma'am. I held sixty per cent, and the rest was spread out among old man Gimish, Slim Wheemer and Cowhorn Lenkmarble."

Patricia glared at each of the offenders in turn, then fixed her blazing violet eyes on the ringleader.

" Well, why," she panted, furious, " didn't you get out after my father had bought? There is a mystery here, and I insist on having it explained. Moreover, I'll have you four criminals put in jail if it isn't a satisfactory one!"

" Miss Gailen, ma'am, please don't lose yore temper," Snacker put in in a hurt voice. " Next thing ya'll be sayin' we been stickin' on yore pappy's propetty, secretly minin' gold and dividin' it among ourselves. I wouldn't like ya t' say that, Miss Gailen, ma'am, because it ain't th' truth."

Patricia stared at the man who would dare take the words out of her mouth and give them such a sinister twist. Why! The brute was threatening her!

She proceeded with what calmness she could assume.

" Will you kindly explain to me, then, why you and your—your cronies have occupied my property for so many years, and why you are defending it so aggressively against invasion—or intrusion?"

" Ma'am," the giant said with deep surprise, " have I shore enough got that repytation?"

" You have—certainly! It's a tradition in Horseblanket that you permit no one to visit the mine; every one in the countryside is afraid to come near here. You must know that."

" We-l-l, since ya speak of it, ma'am, I'll own up that I have sent rumors o' that nature circulatin' around some. It ain't that I don't welcome guests with open arms, ma'am; it's jest that I hate t' have company linger too long. Food costs money, ma'am, and so many o' th' folks whut might drop in ain't poker players. We play cyards yere day in and day out, and it handicaps us some t' have visitors who don't like th' game. Does that answer yore question, Miss Gailen, ma'am?"

"It does not," Patricia replied curtly. "You are evading the issue. I asked you why you were squatting on my property years after you had sold out to my father and should have moved on."

Red Snacker looked uneasy.

"Well, ma'am we made a dicker with yore pappy t' stay in yere and work th' mine fer him."

"On salaries?" she snapped.

"Hell, no—pardon me—ma'am. I mean, sartainly not! We made a dicker with him t' work th' Bluebird on a percentage basis."

"Knowing there was no gold in it?"

"Yo're drivin' me t' th' wall now, ma'am!"

"I know it, Mr. Snacker. Was there any other provision?"

"Ma'am," he cried, "ya hit the nail square on th' head! There was jest that and nothin' else but—pervision. We got our pervisions free and we was to git a percentage of all the gold we mined."

"Go on," she said.

"Ma'am, excuse me fer bein' so familiar and pussonal and all, but I wish t' say right out loud that yo're too bright and quick fer me. Ayop, we was to git pervisions free gratis, and I played safe, ma'am. Knowin' yore father might send out a qualified minin' engineer t' see just how much gold they was in this hole in th' ground, I ordered pervisions aplenty. I reckon I ordered enough t' last us four boys nigh onto five y'ars. And it's jest about down t' the last boxful o' cans, ma'am. We been subsistin' on odds and ends fer th' past month. We've jest saved out a few cans o' tidbits fer sech a festal occasion as this."

"That's why you disliked visitors."

"That's why, ma'am. Ya've banged th' nail on th' head again once more, ma'am."

"In other words," Patricia said wearily, "I've hired lawyers, I've hired heroes, I've hired expeditions, I've spent well over five thousand dollars, all told, just for the pleasure of finding out that my father once presented you with enough groceries to enable you to live for five years on a worthless mining property."

Red Snacker banged the table again.

"Miss Gailen, ma'am, excuse me agin, but ya sartainly have a neat way of expressin' yoreself. Dawggone neat! You and Gordy yere sartainly make a quick-thinkin' couple. Gordy is quick on th' snappy come-back, but I swear yo're a second or two quicker! Now ain't it a shame you two young folks had to go and quarrel!"

"We won't go into that matter again," Patricia stated coldly.

She arose and gazed wearily about the room.

"I think I'll be starting back," she said. "I wonder if any of these men are going soon. I don't know the way."

Gordon had risen also. He came around and bent over her with a tender smile.

"I'll go with you, Patricia," he said.

She gave him a scathing glance and walked unsteadily to Loupo the Wolf, who was enjoying a cigarette.

"Loupo," she said wearily, "I must get back to Horseblanket as soon as possible. You'll go with me, won't you?"

Loupo frowned and banged the table indignantly.

"Ma'am, I'm plumb broken up and racked to pieces, but I jest cain't avail m'self of that privilege. Nothin' 'd suit me more th'n t' escort a leetle lady like you back t' town, but I cain't. I've done gave my word of honor—"

"Cockeye," she said, interrupting him, "will you ride back to Horseblanket with me? I'm anxious to start East as soon as possible, and I don't know the trail to town."

Cockeye bared his teeth with dismay.

"Ma'am, I've jest now given my solemn word I won't stir f'm this spot ontil moon-up t'-night. I shore do grieve t' disappoint ya, ma'am, but—"

"Jack," she called to the Jumper, who was gazing steadfastly in another direction. He jumped and turned.

"May-y-y-um?"

"Will you ride into Horseblanket with me—now? I must leave at once. I don't know the way."

Jack the Jumper snapped his fingers angrily.

"Good gracious, ma'am. ef ya'd only spoke up ten seconds earlier. I jest give my religious oath I'd stay up yere till

night. I'm plum' sorry t' disapp'int ya, Miss Gailen, ma'am, but—"

Patricia gripped the edge of the table with trembling fingers. She was white with rage. She shook. But in a low, steady voice she asked:

"Is there any man in this room who will escort me to Horseblanket?"

Her eyes swept over the roomful of men, and of them all but one spoke up.

"I will—gladly, Patricia," said Gordon Manville Stackhouse.

Still she ignored the courteous novelist.

"Mr. Abney?"

"Ma'am, I'm racked with sorrow, but—"

"Mr. Wheemer?"

"Cain't to-day, ma'am."

"Mr.—I mean you—the gentleman in the red woolen."

"Sorry, gal!"

"Mr. Snacker?"

The red-haired giant eyed her gloomily. "Jest how many escorts back to Horseblanket in broad daylight, where ya ain't goin' t' meet a solitary livin' soul, do ya reckon ya need, ma'am?" he drawled.

"Won't you go?"

"Nope. Th' cream o' th' lot has done offered his suvvices ma'am. I don't reckon he needs much assistance. Ef I was a gal, seems to me I'd feel right safe and jest a leetle bit proud, mebbe, to have fer an escort th' man whut's done offered himself now three times."

Her pride would not permit a step backward now. She had, she knew, been skillfully and cruelly trapped by this cold-eyed, red-headed brute. With no more than a headshake or a lift of an eyebrow he had instructed this roomful of men, and they dared not defy him.

All of the men in the mess shack were looking at her expectantly. She stamped her foot. Her eyes filled with hot tears.

"I hate you!" she cried. "There isn't a man among you—not one! I came to Dirty Water County believing I'd find men who were brave and honest. You're all yellow, and you're all crooks! This is the country where men are men! Look at the lot of you! I wish you could see yourselves! Even this novelist is a better man than you are. Where men are men!" She laughed wildly.

"You're afraid to use anything but blank cartridges! If this is the West give me Forty-Second Street and Broadway! I'd like to see you fight once—a real fight. You don't dare fight. You're afraid to fight. You're yellow."

Somewhere in the mess shack some one giggled.

"Who was that?" Patricia snapped. Silence answered her. She whipped out her pistol.

"Hands up!" she snapped. "Everybody!" All over the mess shack hands promptly arose.

"You think you can make fun of me, do you? Cockeye—Loupo—Jack the Jumper—Ham Abney—stand up, you grafters, and come here!"

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE FIGHT

THE lawyer and the three railroad bad men sprang up and moved in unison toward her.

"Shell out!"

"Whut d'ya mean, ma'am?" Cockeye inquired plaintively.

"The money I paid you for coming up here to fight Snacker!"

"But, ma'am, you promised—"

"Give me my money!"

The lawyer and the desperate trio started counting out to her, from healthy rolls, the money she had paid them.

"We got a right, ain't we, Miss Gailen, ma'am, t' deduct th' commission Pa Jarvis took f'm us, ain't we?" Mr. Abney whined. "He done took thutty-three and a thud per cent. That leaves us owin' you jest two hundred each, don't it? Seems to me that's legal and statutory."

Patricia nodded. "Yes, I collected from Pa Jarvis. I want just two hundred from each of you."

"C'n we put our hands down now, ma'am?"

Patricia pocketed their money. "Not yet. Snacker?"

"Yes ma'am. Whut c'n I do fer ya,

ma'am?" Snacker came eagerly forward, a light of fear in his pale-blue eyes. "C'n I escort ya back t' Hossblanket, Miss Gailen? Ef yo're set on goin', I'll gladly—"

"I've changed my mind," she stopped him. "Before leaving this mine I'm going to have a thorough accounting from you. You are going to pay me exactly what my father paid you for this mine, and exactly what he paid for the groceries you, Old Man Gimish, Cowhorn Lenkmarble, and Slim Wheemer have eaten in the last few years.

"The figures, as I recall them, are thirty thousand dollars for the mine, and, roughly, four thousand for provisions. I'll add an even thousand for interest. I want thirty-five thousand dollars from you, and I want it quick."

"But, ma'am—"

One-Shot Snacker cringed as the pistol was leveled steadily at a spot midway between his frightened blue eyes.

"Where is it?" she snapped.

"It—it's sewed up in a mattress out in th' bunk house, ma'am."

"We'll all go," Patricia said. "I know I don't dare trust one of you out of my sight. File out—hands up!"

Mr. Abney, the three bad men, and Snacker and his gang filed out into the warm sunshine with hands obediently elevated above their heads. Patricia herded them all into the bunk house.

All but the cow-puncher in the red woolen undershirt. He was the last to leave the mess shack, and for a moment Patricia's eyes were not upon him. Sand flew from under his eager feet. In three strides he reached the protection of the pump house. When next seen he was a bright dot of red moving rapidly among the cottonwoods at the top of the hill.

One-Shot Snacker removed from his hip pocket an evil-looking knife, with which he slit along the seam of a mattress. The edges of pads of yellow bank notes were revealed. The pads were tied with twine; some were in amounts of ten thousand dollars, others of five thousand dollars. Snacker gave Patricia three ten-thousand-dollar pads and one five-thousand-dollar pad. There were many left.

She passed them over to Gordon Manville Stackhouse.

"I don't trust you," she said; "but you are at least from the East, where *some* men are men. Keep this money for me until we return to Horseblanket, and defend it with your life."

"Yes, Patricia," he grinned.

"And now," said Patricia, "you can all put your hands down. And Snacker, if you don't mind, I'd like to sample some of the delicacies you've been saving for such a festal occasion as this. I am hungry. What have you?"

One-Shot Snacker looked relieved.

"Ma'am, we have one can and one bottle each of almost everything. Gimish, where are ya?"

The faint voice of old man Gimish floated to them from an adjoinin' shed, the cook shack.

"I'm a-boilin' th' coffee."

"Come yere!"

The old man came at a trot.

"Miss Gailen wants somethin' t' eat, and she wants it pronto. Whut we got left?"

Old man Gimish looked surprised.

"Why, Red, we ain't got nothin' left but them three cans o' spinach."

"Where's them anchovies I was a-savin'?" Snacker roared.

"I don't know whut yo're talkin' about, Red."

"Them anchovies! They was in a bottle with ridges around it. Where are they?"

"Them? Why, Cowhorn Lenkmarble et them, Red."

"I ain't never et any anchovy in my life!" Cowhorn Lenkmarble cried indignantly. "I don't even know whut they look like."

"He's lyin'!" old man Gimish squealed. "I seen him take out th' bottle and pry off th' lid. And he et 'em—one by one. I seen him!"

Light dawned in Cowhorn Lenkmarble's stolid face.

"Oh, you mean them fish all curled up like a tape. Shore, I et them."

"Oh, ya did, did ya?" Snacker roared. "Them was my anchovies. I was a-savin' them. Take that, ya low-down kitchen thief!"

And he kicked Cowhorn Lenkmarble savagely in the shins.

Cowhorn Lenkmarble howled with pain. He dropped to his hands and knees and bit Snacker in the calf of his right leg.

Snacker kicked him in the ribs.

"Gentlemen!" Patricia cried.

"Remember," the novelist shouted, "there's a lady present."

Cowhorn Lenkmarble sprang up and kicked Snacker in the stomach.

"Gentlemen!" Patricia wailed. "Let's not quarrel any more. There's really nothing to fight about, is there? What if the anchovies are gone? I don't care for anchovies, anyway—not for breakfast certainly. There must be plenty of other things."

Snacker brushed himself off. "Yes, ma'am; our larder ain't well stocked, but whut's in it is the best the land has t' offer. Gimish, trot out them two cans of caviar."

"They ain't any caviar," the old man snarled. "Slim Wheemer et them night before last."

Snacker wheeled on Slim Wheemer.

"You et them caviars, did ya? Ya knew I was savin' them!"

Slim Wheemer looked at him incredulously.

"Why, Red Snacker! How c'n ya lie thataway? Ya know dumb well ya et one o' them cans yoreself and half o' that package o' afternoon tea biscuits!"

Red Snacker picked up an empty five-gallon kerosene can that stood near by. The can left his hand and collided with Slim Wheemer's dodging head. He staggered back, then leaped through the air, fastening his teeth in Snacker's nose. Kicking and scratching, the two men went down.

"Don't you Western men ever fight with your fists?" Patricia cried. "Stop it this instant! Gordon, stop them! Why! They fight just like dogs!"

Growling, cursing, scratching, biting and kicking, the two men rolled over and over. Cowhorn Lenkmarble, stepping out of their way, tripped and fell on top. He was immediately drawn into the fray. Snacker squirmed away, apparently leaving Lenkmarble and Wheemer to finish the fight; but he returned with a heavy camp stool. He brought it crashing down on the back of Cowhorn Lenkmarble's head; and when Slim Wheemer, suddenly released, sprang up, one leg of the stool caught him likewise on the base of the brain.

Cowhorn Lenkmarble, groaning, tried to rise; but Snacker kicked him in the stomach, and the man with the queer-shaped ears fell groaning back.

"I'll teach ya to eat my anchovies and my caviars and my afternoon tea biscuits!" he snarled; but Patricia restrained him.

Holding him by the arm, she pleaded with him to cease.

"Quarreling isn't going to get us anywhere," she reasoned. "Let's have a little conference, boys—a peace conference," she suggested brightly. "Come on, Cowhorn. Come on, Slim. Mr. Abney, won't you preside at the conference?"

The lawyer looked puzzled.

"That sort o' jurisprudence is sorta outa my line, ma'am; but I'll gladly give ya whut legal advice I kin. Th' statutory evidence in th' case makes it appear that the party of th' fust part, hereinafter designated as One-Shot Snacker, percipitated th' embroilment by callin' the parties of the second and thud part, namely Slim Wheemer and Cowhorn Lenkmarble, sundry foul and insultin' terms, whereinafter and in due consideration of throwin', hurlin' and otherwise assaultin' th' parties of th' second and thud part, th' defendant admits to defaultin' and abscondin' with one tin o' caviars and half of a box, carton, or cardboard container o' afternoon tea biscuits; and hereinwhereother the party o' th' second and thud part—"

"That's a whoppin' lie, Ham Abney!" Snacker exclaimed. "Ya're jest entanglin' me in a net o' legal lies. I'll teach ya—ya hoss-thief!" And he kicked the lawyer brutally in the side. Ham Abney went down gasping.

Cowhorn Lenkmarble and Slim Wheemer arose unsteadily and stood swaying in the morning breeze.

"His hair ain't red any more'n mine is," Cowhorn growled. "It used to be jest th' color o' mine. 'Tain't red at all."

"Whut's that?" Snacker snarled.

Cowhorn glared at him defiantly.

Slim Wheemer edged closer. Old man Gimish returned from the cook shack with a large cast-iron skillet.

"I say yore hair ain't nachally red," Cowhorn stated.

"So do I!" Slim Wheemer put in.

"Me too!" piped in the old man.

"I'll second that," Ham Abney said weakly from the earth.

"What do they mean?" Patricia asked bewilderedly of the novelist.

But his gaze was as blank as her own, if not blanker.

"He uses henna on it!" Slim Wheemer shouted.

"Ya lie!" Snacker roared.

"Yes, ma'am," Old man Gimish agreed, "his hair used to be jest the dirty, rat color o' Cowhorn Lenkmarble's. He puts henna on it. I've saw him."

"Ya lie!" Snacker roared.

Old man Gimish hit him with the cast-iron frying pan. It was a clean blow. The iron rang clear and loud upon Snacker's falsely red skull.

Then Slim Wheemer kicked Snacker's feet out from under him, and as Snacker went down Cowhorn Lenkmarble kicked him between the shoulder blades and, as he fell, Hamilton Clay Abney seized his nearest arm and sank his teeth in the wrist.

The skillet hit him again as he rose with a roar. And presently the five men were on the ground in a tangled, cursing, kicking, scratching, biting heap.

"Gordon, stop them!" Patricia screamed. "They'll kill each other!"

"Ma'am," Cockeye broke in, "ya wanted t' see a real fight between real Westerners, and now yo're a-seein' one. The man o' the West don't fight, heh? Jest watch! Let the boys be. Give them room. Let th' best man—"

The rest of his speech was drowned out by a howl of agony. Red Snacker had fastened his teeth in Cowhorn Lenkmarble's left ear; Cowhorn had inserted both forefingers in Slim Wheemer's left eye and was endeavoring to pry it out; Slim Wheemer, lying on his side, was methodically kicking old man Gimish in the face; old man Gimish was gouging Abney's neck with his finger nails, and the lawyer, completing the vicious circle, sank his teeth deeper into Snacker's wrist.

"Gentlemen, stop it!" Patricia wailed. "What difference does it make whether his hair is hennaed or not? Stop this brutal fighting. Gordon, throw a bucket of water on them."

But Gordon did not hear. With notebook and silver pencil out, he was rapidly taking notes, glancing at the writhing tangle of fighting men from time to time, his eyes sparkling with the excitement of the scrap.

"Loupo!" Patricia shrilled. "Bring a bucket of water!"

Loupo the Wolf hesitated but a moment, then trotted away. He returned quickly with a large bucket brimming with spring water. This he threw in a silvery splash upon the contestants.

The fight stopped instantly.

"Now, please," said Patricia, "let's not quarrel or fight any more. Or, if we must fight, let's find something worth while to fight over—not such trivial things as anchovies, caviar, afternoon tea biscuits and whether or not Snacker's hair is hennaed."

The men who had been engaged in combat looked repentant.

"Let's all go into the mess-shack," Patricia suggested, "and have a nice quiet little talk while Mr. Gimish gets us some coffee. A good hot drink of coffee will make us all feel better, I'm sure. We'll all be friends, won't we? Now, Mr. Abney, let's have a conference and let's be perfectly fair."

The lawyer nursed his bruished neck with tender fingers.

"Yes, ma'am, I'll gladly preside at yore peace conference. I reckon they ain't much doubt remainin' as t' who is th' guilty party now. Whereinbefore One-Shot Snacker did croolly hit, bite, scratch, gouge, kick and otherwise did commit assault upon the parties of th' second, thud, fo'th and fifth parts, and referrin' to th' former perceedin's, provin' beyond peradventure of a doubt that that ornery, low-down claim jumper puts henna and other chemicals on his hair—"

"He uses them clay-packs on his face, too," Slim Wheemer muttered.

"Oh, don't be silly, Slim," Patricia reproved him.

"I've saw him, too," old man Gimish spoke up. "He goes off in th' woods t' smear stuff on his face t' take th' wrinkles out."

"Who does?" the novelist inquired.

"Snacker!" the three miners chorused.

"Ya lie!" Snacker roared. "All three o' ya! I dast any of ya t' say that t' my face!"

Hamilton Clay Abney, who had sidled behind him, seized his neck in his hands and began to strangle him. Cowhorn Lenk-marble picked up the galvanized water pail and brought it down, not on Snacker's head as planned, but on old man Gimish's, who had crept up to kick Snacker in the shins while he was helpless in Mr. Abney's stranglehold.

The five men went down again with Snacker on the bottom. Howling with pain, kicking, biting and scratching, as before, they were still fighting, despite Patricia's cries to stop, when a thin man in the dress of an Easterner rode down the hillside on a bay horse and dismounted.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE SHAMBLES.

THE three railroad bad men sprang toward him with exclamations of dismay.

"Good Gawd! It's th' boss!" Loupo cried.

"It's Mr. Ott!" Cockeye groaned.

Jack the Jumper, who was a Westerner of few words, said nothing.

J. Eustace Ott, press agent, or publicity representative, of the Pacific and Western, got down stiffly from the horse and approached his three employees. He was pale with fury; his thin lips were compressed in a fine white line.

"The station agent told me you were here," he got out, angrily. "You lazy hounds!"

"But Mr. Ott—" Loupo began placatingly.

"I'll show you how men of the West deal with deserters!" Mr. Ott snarled. "I'm a Westerner myself. I was born and raised in Reno, Nevada. Take that, you hound!" With a gesture almost too quick for the eye to follow, he placed his foot upon Loupo's chest and pushed. Loupo went sprawling backward to the ground.

"Th' Yeller Flier went through!" Cockeye guessed.

"They got th' wash-out fixed!" Jack the Jumper gasped.

"Yes!" snarled the publicity representative. "It went through—and not one of you was on the job! The Flier pulled in to Horseblanket; and—where were you? Here I've been paying you high wages for three years, and the first chance you get, you desert your posts! I'll show you what I do to employees of mine who don't know what gratitude is."

And before the eye could follow him, Mr. Ott had picked up a stick of cordwood lying handy and brought it down with a resounding crack on Cockeye's head. Cockeye staggered away, but came back at a run. He bit the press agent's hand.

Mr. Ott kicked him in the ribs, and gave his attention to Jack the Jumper. But Jack did not wait. In the opportunity given him by Cockeye's intervention, he sped for cover. The nearest haven was a prospect hole perhaps seventy feet deep over which a windlass was rigged. The bucket was at the surface.

Without hesitating, Jack jumped into the bucket, and the bucket dropped out of sight, the rope on the windlass rapidly unreeling, the handle of the apparatus flying around and around.

Mr. Ott seized the handle in one of its revolutions, and brought the descending bucket to a stop. He cranked it vigorously. The bucket presently arose to the surface, spinning around and around. The press agent kicked Jack the Jumper as his head spun about, but in the excitement of the moment he released the handle and the bucket disappeared again into the earth. Again he cranked it to the surface, and this time as it arose a volley of rocks, which Jack the Jumper had picked from the sides of the hole, was ejected at him.

The press agent released the handle again. When the bucket was nearly at the bottom of the hole, he put on the brake. Then he looked about him. The skillet and the empty five-gallon kerosene can were convenient. These he hurled down the hole; and he followed them with sticks of wood and rocks.

Then he pulled the bucket to the surface again.

"Let me explain, Mr. Ott," Jack pleaded. He climbed out, and Loupo and Cockeye, who also had been trying to explain, became silent.

"I'm faithful, Mr. Ott," Jack whimpered. "They ain't a day but whut I've been to the depot doin' my duty. I'm faithful, but them two ain't!"

"Who says I ain't faithful?" Loupo snarled. "I'm the only man on yore payroll in Hossblanket who knows whut faithful means, Mr. Ott. Cockeye and Jack go a-sneakin' off every chance they git!"

"Ya're a liar!" Cockeye roared. He kicked Loupo in the stomach. Loupo groaned, and as he did so Jack the Jumper threw himself upon him, clawing at his neck, kicking as he came. Cockeye, observing that Mr. Ott was watching the fight, hastily secured a rock from the ground and threw it.

The rock hit Mr. Ott in the small of the back. When the press agent turned Cockeye pointed dumbly toward One-Shot Snacker who had succeeded in breaking away from Mr. Abney, Cowhorn Lenkmarble, Slim Wheemer and old man Gimish and was facing in Mr. Ott's direction.

The press agent flew at him. Snacker met him halfway, and the two men went down, snarling, kicking and biting.

Patricia ran to the writhing heap on the ground where Cockeye, Loupo the Wolf and Jack the Jumper were now entangled.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" she wailed. "Stop fighting this instant! Do use a little common sense! Gordon, please make them stop!"

The novelist came trotting over. He was filling his notebook rapidly. And he was deaf to her pleas.

Both he and Patricia stepped out of the way as the two knots of snarling, biting, scratching men rolled closer and closer together. Presently the two knots were one. Elbows, knees, fingernails and teeth were flying.

Patricia sagged limply against the side of the cook-shack.

"What can we do?" she wailed.

"Let them fight," the novelist said crisply. "It's wonderful copy. It's great. It's big."

"My opinion of you has gone up," Patricia said grudgingly.

"Why, dearest?" he said absently, flipping over a page.

"Because you haven't lowered yourself by—" A howl from the pack at their feet drowned the remainder of her sentence.

The novelist was grinning. "I've thought of the most subtly amusing line," he chuckled. "I intend to use it, too. 'Out in the great open spaces where men fight like dogs!'"

A man suddenly extricated himself from the scratching, cursing, kicking, biting pack at their feet. His face was bloody; his clothing was torn and dusty; his eyes were bloodshot. It was J. Eustace Ott.

And as he came staggering toward them, Nettie and Henry arrived and dismounted. Henry ran to the novelist, but J. Eustace Ott pushed him aside and confronted Gordon Manville Stackhouse wrathfully.

"You better take that back, you typebar killer!" the press agent shouted. "That quotation is: 'Out in the Great Open Spaces Where Men Are Men!'"

"Where are they?" Patricia cried scornfully.

"I said dogs, and I stick to dogs," the novelist snapped.

Mr. Ott launched a kick at him, but Henry, full of bitterness toward the great open spaces and particularly toward any man who went so far as to boast about them, savagely seized Mr. Ott's foot and brought the press agent cursing to the ground. He sprang up and launched a kick at Henry, and Henry, putting all of his might into one blow, hit the press agent with his fists squarely on the chin. This time Mr. Ott went down insensible.

Surprised by what he had done, Henry

stepped backward. His retreat brought him within reach of one waving leg in the pile of snarling, biting, scratching and kicking men on the ground. He was drawn into that melee as meat is drawn into a grinder. For a moment his voice was lifted in a cry of pain and suffering; then he was ejected on the other side with two teeth missing, one ear torn, his clothing in ribbons.

He staggered dazedly toward the claybank and mounted.

"Where are you going?" Nettie cried.

"To Baffin Bay," Henry mumbled, and, for five minutes or more, rode his horse round and round in a circle.

Nettie raced into the cook-shack.

Snacker wriggled free and sprang up. He addressed himself to the novelist.

"Whut ya said about th' men o' th' West yo're a goin' t' eat!" he snarled. "Take that!"

The kick he aimed at Gordon Manville Stackhouse went wild. Before he could recover, the novelist punched him in the wind, and Snacker reeled backwards and was absorbed once again by the fighting men.

Nettie returned from the cook-shack. She carried in her hands a kettle of boiling coffee. With the shrill battle-cry, the "Yippee—yowee!" of the cow-country, she tossed the scalding brown contents of the pot upon the various contenders.

A scream from eight throats filled the limpid, sunlit mountain air. The fighting ceased.

CHAPTER L.

"LOVE WILL FIND A WAY."

THE ride back to Horseblanket was achieved for the most part in silence. Mr. Abney led the procession. Mr. Ott and his disgraced employees rode in smoldering silence. Nettie rode beside Henry from force of habit, but her affection for him was tottering.

Patricia rode with Gordon Manville Stackhouse, but he was too absorbed in his notebook to pay attention to her. She was trying to make it easy for him to apologize, so that she could forgive him graciously; but the novelist-adventurer evidently did not care whether she forgave him or not.

From time to time a delighted smile animated his lips; and his eyes would glow. Then he would stop his horse and make other entries in his notebook. Occasionally he would mutter, without relevance to anything that had recently been said, "It's great! It's big!"

So delighted was he throughout that ride that Patricia could only gaze at him with wonder. When the cavalcade trotted into the yard behind the Waldorf Astoria, the novelist became cognizant, for the first time, of Patricia's presence. With a gesture of his hand, as if he were clearing from his mind the shining cobwebs of enrapturing thoughts, he turned to her.

"Darling, I should like very much, if you don't mind, to use your room—the Mark Twain room for a few minutes. I have some very important telegrams to send. Have you a camera? I must get a camera."

"Yes," Patricia said. "I have a camera."

"That's fine. Splendid! Now, let me see. There was one more thing. Where is Hamilton Clay Abney?"

Mr. Abney, battle scarred and weary, came forward.

"Are you, by any chance, a justice of the peace, Mr. Abney?"

"I shore am," said Mr. Abney.

"Then let's get all these things under way. Mr. Abney—Patricia—come upstairs with me, please."

Mr. Abney and Patricia dazedly followed the energetic young novelist up to the Mark Twain room.

"Please take all that junk off that little table, darling," Gordon Manville Stackhouse directed, when the three of them were in the room.

Patricia started to protest, but ended by removing the articles which he had designated as junk to the bed; and the novelist carried the table to the window. Then he went into his own room, and returned immediate with a pad of telegraph blanks and another pad of pale blue paper.

"Where is the camera?" he asked.

"Here," said Patricia.

"Has it a film?"

"Yes, Gordon."

The novelist sat down at the little table, then sprang up and went to the mirror above the dresser. He rumpled his hair carefully, studied the effect critically, and rumpled it again. He tilted his head.

"That will do nicely, I think." He nodded with a satisfied smile and returned to the little table, where he sat down.

He arranged the pad of blue paper, and bent over it with a dreamy look in his eyes and a pencil in his hand.

"This pose will be splendid," he said. "Will you kindly take my picture, Patricia? Hurry, darling; there is so much to do."

In a state of mind that resembled a trance, Patricia adjusted the camera's shutter and took a short time-exposure of the famous young novelist. To be on the safe side, she took several more.

"My public," he explained, "will be greatly disappointed if they don't have some snapshots of me in the West. Now, let's go downstairs and take a few more of me mounted and fondling my horse."

They went downstairs and, when the pictures were taken, returned to the Mark Twain room.

"What did you want me fur?" Mr. Abney inquired in a somewhat resentful tone.

Gordon Manville Stackhouse waved a pencil at him for silence. He was rapidly writing a telegram. It was to his literary agent, in New York, and was as follows:

Urgent! Make arrangements for disposal of first and second American serial rights, Canadian rights, British rights, French rights, and all other foreign rights not forgetting the Scandinavian in my great historical Western novel, "Patty of the Last Frontier," also book rights and dramatic rights. Will attend to picture rights myself. Tell publishers that owing to recent developments it will be possible for me to make this novel and four other novels mentioned in previous telegram either tragedies or comedies. Find what the market is calling for, and let me know without delay. Get busy! STACKHOUSE.

He next wrote telegrams to some of America's leading motion picture producers and directors. The first was to David Wark Griffith. It read:

Have secured material for a smashing Western story, laid in the old frontier days, and entitled "Patty of the Last Frontier." Greater than "Birth of a Nation" or "America." In fact, it combines the best features of all three. Chuck full of realism, romance, heart throbs, high grade comedy and pathos. Meet me Hotel St. Francis, San Francisco, 10 A.M., Wednesday, to close deal and sign contracts. My name must appear on all printed matter in type as large as yours and star's. STACKHOUSE.

The next telegram was addressed to Adolph Zukor, president of Famous Players-Lasky. It ran:

Have secured material for a smashing Western drama, laid in the old frontier days, and entitled, "Where Men are Men." Full of action, thrills, realism, tragedy and comedy. Will make "The Covered Wagon" resemble a child's express cart. Meet me Hotel St. Francis, San Francisco, twelve o'clock Wednesday to close deal and sign contracts.

STACKHOUSE.

Another telegram was written to Carl Laemmle. It said:

Have secured material for a smashing Western romance, laid in the old frontier days, and entitled, "Mary Jane of the Toopaloosa Range." After hearing this story from my lips, you will put "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" on the shelf. It is a knockout. Meet me Hotel St. Francis, San Francisco, 2 P.M. Wednesday to close deal and sign contracts. STACKHOUSE.

A fourth telegram was indited to William Fox. It read:

I can deliver in ten days script of striking Western story, laid in the old frontier days, and entitled "Annie of Wildcat Dam." After hearing my synopsis of this story you will be willing to spend a million at least on production. Will be sensation of century in screen circles. Meet me Hotel St. Francis 4 P.M. Wednesday to close deal and sign contracts. STACKHOUSE.

Still another telegram was composed for Samuel Goldwyn. It stated:

Here's some big, good news for you, Sam. I have secured material for a knockout frontier story entitled, "When Happiness Came

to Bluebird." Gold mine stuff. New angles. Tremendous drama, pathos, and fine, new, clean-cut comedy. It will be the biggest box office attraction of the year. Meet me Hotel St. Francis, San Francisco, 6 P.M. Wednesday to close deal and sign contracts.

STACKHOUSE.

The novelist thumbed through the telegrams, then clapped his hands to his forehead in dismay.

"Good God!" he exclaimed.

Patricia hovered over him anxiously.

"What's the matter?"

"I've forgotten the First National Exhibitors!" he groaned. "What shall I do? I haven't enough stories to go around!"

Patricia frowningly read the telegrams. Suddenly her violet-blue eyes brightened.

"Why not a ranching story?" she cried. "With what you have learned of the West, you can certainly work up a ranching story."

The novelist waved a hand for silence. He clasped his head and thought.

"Let me think," he muttered. "Let me think, darling."

He uttered a cry of relief, and, picking up his pencil, dashed off a telegram to the First National Exhibitors' Association.

Here is a chance to give the members of your association something they have long looked for—a smashing Western drama of old frontier days entitled, "Sally of Cactus Valley." Full of romance, action, thrills and heart throbs. Delighted if your president will have dinner with me and my wife Hotel St. Francis, San Francisco, 8 P.M. Wednesday to discuss terms. STACKHOUSE.

The energetic novelist waved the yellow sheet to Patricia. She read it and became pale.

"Your wife!" she gasped. "I didn't know you had a wife!"

"You are my wife," said the amazing young novelist.

He drew her firmly upon his lap and kissed her. Patricia sprang up indignantly. "I am not your wife!" she blazed.

"I spoke five minutes ahead of schedule!" the novelist exclaimed. "Mr. Abney, I'm ready for you now. You say you are a justice of the peace?"

Mr. Abney dazedly nodded.

"Wait a minute!" Gordon Manville Stackhouse sprang up, left the room, and returned with a prayer hook. He opened it at the marriage service and thrust it into the hands of the bewildered Mr. Abney. Then he went to the window. The heads of Cockeye and Loupo were visible.

"Cockeye—Loupo," he called down. "Come here, please, hurry!"

And when the two bad men entered the Mark Twain room, the novelist seized Patricia's hand.

"Now, Mr. Abney, let's hurry and get this ceremony over with."

"But I don't want to marry you!" Patricia wailed.

He gazed at her with astonishment.

"My dear girl," he said, "I don't know what you're talking about. Make it snappy, Mr. Abney. We've got to get out of here on the Flyer. A day's delay in my schedule would ruin my plans."

Mr. Abney began jerkily to read the service. In a mental haze, Patricia heard herself responding affirmatively to tremendous inquiries.

"Yes," she said faintly, and again, several times, "I do."

"I pronounce you," said Mr. Abney presently in a thin, nervous voice, "man and wife."

"Kiss your husband and get your stuff packed on the jump!" the venturesome young novelist said briskly.

"But I'm not—" she began, gasping. "You're not my—why, it's absolutely illegal. I didn't want— Why! I haven't yet forgiven you for—"

He took her firmly in his arms and silenced her protestations with a kiss.

"You love me, darling," said Gordon.

"Oh!" she gasped.

"Now, get packed," he said briskly. "Abney, is ten dollars all right? Trot along with Cockeye and Loupo, fill in a marriage license blank, and have Cockeye and Loupo sign it as witnesses. Then bring it to me.

"Loupo, when you have signed the license, take these telegrams over to the station. Tell the agent I'll pay him when I stop in for the tickets. They must go off immediately.

"Have him reserve a drawing-room on

the Flyer and make out tickets for San Francisco for Mrs. Stackhouse and myself. Hurry!"

The three men hastened from the room.

The brilliant young novelist gathered up his notebook and pencils. He started from the room. Patricia flew to him.

"Darling!" she whispered.

He kissed her.

"You are sorry for being so thoughtless and everything."

"Yes, dearest."

"Am I the most wonderful girl in the world?"

"I'll say so!"

"Am I different from any girl you ever knew?"

"Oh, quite, quite."

"Has life become cleaner and finer and more beautiful since I entered yours?"

"Absolutely!"

"Has it taken on new values?"

"Yes, darling."

She frowned prettily. "Let me think. Oh. Do you feel that we were brought together by a destiny from which there was utterly no escape?"

"Exactly!"

"And do you think I am an ennobling influence?"

"Well," he said, "I expect to write bigger and better novels from now on. You saw those telegrams. Judge for yourself."

She hugged him and laid her cheek with a happy sigh on his lapel.

"Are you going to be good and kind and gentle and sweet to your little wife?"

His kiss was a devout promise. For a time Patricia was silent. Then, wistfully:

"Love did find a way, didn't it?"

"Yes, dearest," he said dreamily, and suddenly released her. He removed notebook and silver pencil from his pocket.

"That's a beautiful thought!" he exclaimed, and made an entry in the notebook. "There's something almost holy about it, dear. I can use it. I can always find a place somewhere in my novels for ideas that are new and different and beautiful. 'Love finds a way!'" he said reverently.

He slapped his leg. "It's great. It's big! It's beautiful! 'Love finds a way!' what was it you said, darling 'Love *did* find a way?' That's a very neat variation of it. Sweetheart, before I start packing, put your soft, warm arms around my neck just once more and kiss me again."

He kissed her fervently, lingeringly, tingling to the freshness of her virginal young lips, his veins burning with the ecstasy of her.

"My husband!" Patricia whispered.

CHAPTER LI.

HENRY'S FINAL FAREWELL.

WHILE the lovers' lips lingered in that long, almost religious kiss, the black sheep of the Gailen family was engaged in an affair no less ecstatic though slightly less ennobling.

Henry was engaged in a game of chance with Jack the Jumper, Loupo the Wolf and Cockeye in a cozy recess between two piles of oiled railroad ties behind the depot. Reduced to desperate measures, he had fallen into an old sin and dragged the three bad men in with him.

The game was stud poker, and the most inept observer would have admitted that Henry was an artist with cards. He dealt them with a facility and grace that might have aroused suspicion in a critical eye, especially when that facility and grace were noted in connection with the lack of all moral values in Henry's weak face.

When Cockeye and Loupo had signed the marriage licences as witnesses and delivered the telegrams to the station agent, Henry had suggested a "little game of poker to while the time away." And in their present state of mind, the bad men welcomed the diversion.

J. Eustace Ott had reinstated them, after a long, heated argument, as the railroad bad men of Horseblanket; and the ebullient relief in their minds required an outlet. Henry graciously provided it for them. And in the snug secrecy of the little space between the neat piles of spare ties, the game began and shortly ended.

Henry had once been given a piece of valuable advice from a confidence man whom he had met in his travels. The con-

fidence man had informed him that, contrary to the popular impression, no confidence man ever let a sucker win, even to "string him along."

"Start milking him when he comes through the gates," said the confidence man, "and don't stop milking until he's a husk."

It took Henry a little more than a half hour to acquire the three bad men's bankrolls. When he withdrew, he was comfortably independent. He would be able to travel to the west coast in style. He whistled as he returned to the Waldorf Astoria.

He found Nettie in the kitchen, eating lunch. She frowned when he briskly opened the screen door and let himself in. He was grinning. His eyes were bright, his face radiant.

"Well," said Nettie, "I've decided to wait till to-morrow to start work. We'll git started, though, bright and early, Hennery; and f'm now on, we're a-goin' t' pan twelve hours a day."

"Kid," said Henry cheerfully, "you go pick yourself another victim. I'm through. I'm going where the West ends, not where it begins. The open spaces have given me a pain in the seat of my digestion."

Nettie sprang up from the table.

"You're going to stay here and prospect until yore six months is up, Hennery!" Her right hand was resting meaningly near her pistol butt.

"Go ahead and shoot," Henry invited her. "I'd rather be shot than stay in this dump another hour. I'm booked on the Flier. Now, let's get down to business. I sold my soul to you for six months for a hundred and eighty five bucks. Now, I'm buying it back.

"I've been here less than a week, and a hundred and eighty five bones at six per cent for a week is about twenty three cents. But I'm no piker. Here's the hundred and eighty five and here's the interest—two bits! That makes me a free man. I hope there ain't any hard feelings, Net."

A mistiness gathered in Nettie's amber eyes as she gathered up the bills and the silver coin.

"I'm gettin' jest whut I deserved," she burst out feelingly. "A Western gal ain't got a chance with one of you slick Eastern men. You can put it all over us Westerners any time you feel like it. Go on and hit the trail, Hennery; jest lookin' at ya makes me feel kinda nauseated."

Henry backed to the screen door, grinning.

"Well, kid, I wish you all the luck in the world!" he said cheerily. "Pan hard. There's gold in them hills, Net, and don't let anybody tell you different! So long, Net! Sorry you haven't got time to kiss me good-by."

Whistlingly, he went; and Nettie returned to her cold canned hash in dismal silence.

CHAPTER LII.

ADIOS, DEAR HORSEBLANKET!

THE Yellow Flier pulled in on time that afternoon; and when it paused for a drink of mountain water before dashing on in pursuit of the setting sun, four passengers climbed aboard—Gordon Manville Stackhouse, the famous young novelist; his blushing bride; J. Eustace Ott, the press agent of the P. & W., and Henry.

But the occupants of the long line of Pullmans were unaware that their numbers were added to. When the Flier paused at the Horseblanket depot, the harsh sounds of conflict disturbed the stillness of the hot desert air.

Three men were fighting on the platform. They were unmistakably bad men. Ferocity of character was stamped so plainly on their faces that only the most untutored Easterner could have mistaken their calling.

And not only in their cruel, sunbaked countenances, caked as they were with the blood of some earlier combat, were revealed those traits which have written, upon the manuscript of the West, those chapters dealing with black deeds and violence. The three were actually fighting—snarling, biting, scratching and kicking one another with a venom that was unmistakably and altogether real.

The fireman of the Flier leaned heavily

on his shovel and permitted the perspiration to stream down his coal-blackened face as he watched the conflict.

"Bill," he said to the engineer, "for the fust time since I been on this run them three walkin' advertisements fer th' Western department of th' mail order catalog are earnin' their keep. Jest lissen to 'em, Bill!"

The three desperadoes were entangled in what appeared to be an inextricable knot. Cockeye had sunk his teeth in Loupo's ear; Loupo had inserted both thumbs in Jack the Jumper's eyes, and Jack was methodically kicking Cockeye in the stomach with his knee. All three were snarling and cursing. Occasionally a howl of pain rose from the trio.

"We've waited five minutes overtime already," said the engineer regretfully, as he consulted his watch. He jerked the whistle cord. The mogul shrieked happily and started for California.

From Rattlesnake, the next station down the line, J. Eustace Ott sent the following telegram to the three bad men:

> It was impossible to decide which of you deserves the solid silver cuff-links. Your performance exceeded any previous effort I have seen. Your boss congratulates you on the new enthusiasm you have injected into your work.—OTT.

Patricia and her husband had found the observation platform deserted because of the heat of the desert gale. It was really cooler in the cars, but the newlyweds did not mind the heat. On the observation platform they were alone; and here they seated themselves and held hands in blissful silence while the valley of the Blue River was unreeled below them.

It was while the Flier was crawling away from Horseblanket, with the paint-blistered clapboards of that famous old town still in sight, that Patricia once again demonstrated how helpful she was destined to be as the wife of this rising young novelist.

Tears momentarily dimmed her eyes as the town that had been, in its heyday, the toughest place between Denver's dead-line and the Barbary Coast was shut off from their view by a rising green hill.

"Adios—dear Horseblanket!" she murmured.

In a twinkling, her talented husband's notebook and silver pencil were out.

"What a beautiful closing sentence for any one of my six new novels!" he exclaimed. "'Adios — dear Horseblanket!' It's great! It's big! It has pathos and there's something so fine and not a little sublime about it!

"Adios—dear Horseblanket!" he repeated tenderly. "Were it not for thee, would we have met in this life?"

"Oh, darling," his wife wailed, "don't even think of such a dreadful possibility! Kiss me again, Gordon."

Taking her little white face into his big brown hands, he kissed her again—and again.

THE END

REVIVIFICATION

LOVE came, and was consumed
In fire of wonder;
And lo! What time it raged.
Rolled far-off thunder.

Now is a marvel flamed
In lightning flashes;
Love rises Phœnixlike
From its own ashes!

H. Thompson Rich.

EVOLUTION OF A STICK

THE man strolls down the forest path,
And in his hand a stick he hath,
A stick of oak
From thicket broke:
With playful stroke,
As in a joke,
He sweeps a wide, encircling swath—
Reflectively—You understand
He has a shopping tour on hand.

Then, through the Pleiocene swamp,
He peers to see what there might romp—
A sabertooth,
Or bear, uncouth,
Or wolf, forsooth,
That he could sleuth:
So promenades he on in pomp,
And looks things over, here and there,
Deciding what he wants to wear.

The man strolls down the avenue,
And in his hand a stick swings true,
A stick of white
Fine wood, so light
A baby might
In mild delight
Besport it with a playful coo.
Engrossed he is—You understand
He has a shopping tour on hand.

Then, in the windows with their freight
Of styles the London Strands dictate,
He peers at hats
And gay cravats,
At natty spats
And this and thats
Which might his fancy captivate—
He looks things over, here and there,
Deciding what he wants to wear.

ENVOI

I wonder, as he twirls it, if he knows
That useless stick once furnished him with clothes!

Beatrice Ashton Vandegrift.

Dragon Dance

By PAUL DERESCO AUGSBURG

SULLIVAN ALLEY is the least pretentious street in Chinatown. Narrow and secretive, it is all but lost up there on the hillside which San Francisco's Orientals have taken for their own. Indeed, it is hardly worth seeking; for once you blunder upon it, you have only a hundred feet, more or less, of indifferent thoroughfare. Then Sullivan Alley definitely gives up the ghost, butting its head smack against a high board fence which rises, Joffrelike, to say, "Thou shalt not pass!"

Still it's not a bad alley while it lasts, and Mr. Sullivan, for whom it was no doubt named, should have no particular cause to feel ashamed.

Chief among its adornments was Mary Pickford Kwong, who lived in a little room whose single window opened almost on a height with the fence top. The name, save for that final Kwong, had been of her own selection. It was requisitioned to take the place of Sarah, which her white mother had given her, and of Loy, which her Chinese father had called her. Both parents were now dead, leaving their half-caste daughter to carry on under whatever name she might fancy.

Now, Mary Pickford Kwong was of the east westly. She had China's midnight hair and peculiar slanting eyes, with a dash of its unflinching stoicism to aid in struggling against an unequal world. But there her eastern heritage ended.

Mary's heart was strictly Occidental, as you have doubtless guessed from the inverted order of her name. Furthermore, she was a good four inches taller than the average Chinese girl, and the slender impertinence of her nose must have been a source of never-ending chagrin to Father Kwong's ancestors in their tombs beyond the sea. As for Mary's bobbed hair and short skirts and jazz songs and slang, they were but added reminders of the Caucasian taint in her hopeless blood.

Still, she had more looks per facial square inch than any two singsong girls in

all of Chinatown, and many a yellow citizen coveted Mary for his home. There was the promise of unwonted delights in her white, rounded arms and voluptuous grace, of un-Mongolian passion in the warmth of her painted lips. Without her mother's outspoken ways it is doubtful if Mary Pickford Kwong could have survived the crafty advances of her suitors.

"Aw, chase yourself; this is my busy day!" Such was the manner in which she repulsed them. "How do you get that way, huh? You got one sweetie already; and besides, what this mamma craves is a blond."

At which Hop Sing Lung or Lai Ping or the plump but moneyed Yee Lim Too would look puzzled, shake a jade-and-platinum bangle in a last enticing effort before her eyes, and then shuffle disconsolately away.

One of Mary's aspiring lovers was no less formidable a Chinaman than Wo Sang, the Suey Sen highbinder of fearful reputation. Normally his coarse, cruel nature would not tolerate for a moment such high-handed ways on the part of a dame in Mary's defenseless position. Only one thing kept him from seizing her as his own, and that was the lovely half-caste's friendship with Sergeant Timothy McAlear.

For the last six months McAlear had been detailed to the Chinatown squad. He was custodian of the Orientals' peace, the foe of tong wars and forbidden chuck-aluck, the American shepherd of a people whose ways would never be more than a half-revealed mystery to him.

Night after night his confident, sturdy young figure might be seen prowling through the streets and alleys of his district. Often he stopped to engage some yellow friend in affable conversation and learn the latest gossip of the quarter. Sometimes he vanished for minutes on end while he explored a narrow hallway for signs of lawlessness or trouble. Always he wore citizens' clothes, but in Chinatown his business was as well known as though he stalked its byways in full uniform of blue.

Mary Pickford Kwong cherished a secret desire for the handsome sergeant. She liked his open smile, his thick light hair, the easy self-assurance in his bearing, the sunny good nature of his conversation. In appearance he compared favorably, she thought, with her masculine favorites of the movie screen; nor was Mary unappreciative of the truth that one sergeant in the district is worth two in the celluloid. She had, as she herself would have styled it, a heavy crush on one McAlear.

They became good friends. As often as twice a week the sergeant would encounter Mary starting for work, and would walk with her the scant two blocks to the telephone exchange. It never occurred to Mary that this might be a part of his job, for a switchboard operator is likely to pick up various vagrant items that a police detective would be glad to know.

In San Francisco the telephone company has a separate exchange for its fifteen hundred Oriental subscribers, and the connections are completed by quick-witted little Chinese ladies who can handle a customer in English, Cantonese, or what have you. Mary Pickford Kwong worked on the night shift.

II.

One evening, as she came out of Sullivan Alley, she saw McAlear talking earnestly to Wo Sang. His left hand rested on the highbinder's shoulder, and the forefinger of the other was waggling in front of Wo's nose by way of emphasizing the sergeant's forceful utterance.

". . . And if anybody starts anything, you're the first guy I'm going to get—see? I'll throw you into the boob so fast you'll think an earthquake hit you; and I don't mean maybe."

Mary overheard the words and halted. It was a soul-satisfying moment, one which she appreciated to the full. To see this cherished hero of her hopes thus lay down the law to the man whom she most despised in all the world—that was a thrill unsurpassed on any screen. Ah, look how Wo cringed before his cold, calm eyes. Hear the bullying highbinder stammer in apologetic protest! Mary could not forebear a triumphant interruption.

"Give him an earful, sergeant!" she giggled, glancing mockingly at the sullen Chi-

naman. "Wo's a bad egg, if you let him tell it. Ain't you, Wo?"

"Hello, there, Mary. Wait a second; I'm going your way." McAlear gave the highbinder a final admonishing glance and set off down the sloping sidewalk. "By George, you're getting better-looking every day," he said lightly, surveying Mary with smiling eyes. "What did you do—have your hair cut different? Looks nifty; nothing else but."

"Aw, go on! You're kidding!"

"No, I ain't. I'll bet you could get a movie job in a minute if you tried."

"I bet you could, too," countered Mary, just like that. "You'd look swell in the pitchers, sergeant; and I bet all the stars 'd fall for you, too."

The tone of her voice was so fervent that McAlear glanced quickly at his companion. What he saw made him catch his breath in sudden, embarrassed surprise. There had been plenty of harmless Irish banter in the sergeant's daily life, but never anything like this.

Stammering a bit, he changed the conversation around to Chinamen and other less dangerous matters. After all, that was what he walked with Mary for.

"Just heard that the Suey Sens were getting up on their ears again; so I told Wo Sang I'd make him responsible if anything happened." McAlear lowered his voice. "Know anything since I saw you last?"

"Nothing—except they're talking about having the dragon dance for New Year's."

"Yeh? I've heard of those things, but never saw one. Supposed to keep away the bad luck, ain't they?"

"Something like that," sniffed Mary, while the Western blood in her rose in a shameful blush for the ways of the superstitious East. "I can't keep track of *all* these funny chink notions, can I?"

That was her attitude toward the customs of her father's people. Consequently there were some hours of harrowing bitterness in the days of Mary Pickford Kwong.

At such times it seemed too cruel a handicap, this mingling in one person of the yellow race and the white. The East wanted her because of her beauty and coveted passion, but it despised her none the less for her taint of Occidental blood. The West—toward which Mary yearned with all the ardor of a despairing love—would have none of her because she was half Chinese. It seemed a hopeless mix-up—and yet the sergeant thought she was pretty.

It was a comforting thing to remember. Occasionally, as she plugged the flashing switchboard, Mary allowed herself to build a small dream castle on the basis of his remarks.

Why not? The sergeant approved her looks, and he seemed to like her company. Besides, Mary was not without her modern accomplishments. She could carry on as sprightly a conversation as McAlear himself. The snappiest American stenographer in Montgomery Street dressed no more modishly than Mary. She kept apace with all the latest songs and dances. Why, really she was, to all intents and purposes, a woman of the West.

And so the pendulum of the half-caste's mood swung from hope to despair, then back to hope again. It was hovering about midway on the night when Mary, returning to Sullivan's Alley after her evening's work, found Sergeant McAlear descending the steps from the floor above.

"Oh, hello," she whispered. "What you doing?"

"Thought I saw Wo Sang sneak in here. Guess I was wrong, though."

They were standing under the gas jet, and its weak yellow light wavered unsteadily upon her upraised face. Her eyes shone; the faint perfume of her came to McAlear like the teasing incense of musk. Mary's lips quivered as she moved a half step nearer. She was so close to him now that he could almost feel the soft rise and fall of her breasts.

How pretty she looked, how alluring! The sergeant felt the spell of her narrow, slanting eyes, so filled with the mystery and magic of the unfathomable East. Her breath was warm on his cheek.

Not a word did Mary speak, but her lips puckered and made the barest hint of a movement toward his own. Then one hand touched the sergeant's arm. It might as well have been a hidden spring, for that

slight pressure of Mary's fingers destroyed his last remaining restraint. In a second his arms were about her and Mary was sobbing as she clung to him in joyful ecstasy.

III.

McAlear did not see her again for four nights. He avoided meeting her because he felt troubled and just a little bit ashamed. The intensity of the beautiful half-caste girl fairly frightened him. Her impulsiveness, the unchecked fire of her, was something new and terrifying to the young sergeant.

There had been nothing subtle or gently seductive about Mary She had burst upon him like a flame which had smoldered far too long already. Her emotional frankness, untouched by any insinuating wiles, would let her be nothing short of obvious. Mary had, so to speak, flung her heart on the table with the same fierce desire that a gambler throws his final golden eagle.

Now, McAlear was an honest mortal, and he did not want Mary to think he loved her. On the other hand he was distressingly soft hearted, and he did not want to hurt her feelings. It was a mean situation, any way he looked at it.

"Can't tell about a girl like that," he mumbled as he toiled up Sacramento Street. "Being half chink, there's no knowing how she's got me figured. They see things different, maybe."

McAlear paused to regard a shuffling yellow man with suspicious eyes.

"Now, an all-white girl would see this right. She'd know damned well she'd vamped me, and—well, there's limits to what *any* guy can stand, that's all."

The detective turned into Grant Avenue. It was the Chinese New Year, and this Broadway of San Francisco's Orientals was athrong with a bustling holiday crowd. Curious white folk mingled with brightly clad Chinese who had come to town for their annual celebration. The atmosphere seemed clogged with noise and lights, colors and flags, as Chinatown's whining flutes and sputtering firecrackers tuned up for an evening of riotous carnival.

At the corner of Grant and Commercial Street the detective encountered his partner, Sergeant Osterman.

"They're going to parade, all right," observed the latter.

"Yeh, so I hear. The captain said to let 'em go ahead. It makes a hit with the tourists."

"Well, it don't bother me any," grinned Osterman. "Say, keep your eye open for dips. Think I saw Sollie Henbrook awhile back, but I lost him in the crowd."

They parted, and McAlear drifted with the jostling sidewalk throng. Chinese lanterns swayed above him; the laughter and half-sung sentences of the Orientals sounded pleasantly in his ears.

One of them called to him, "*Gong hai*, sergeant!" and he waved a hand in a jaunty, good-natured response. A curbstone merchant, standing in the gutter behind an array of lily plants, lichee nuts, and preserved ginger, pressed a cigar into his hand as he sauntered past. Two firecrackers burst almost between his legs, and McAlear crooked his finger at the grinning little Celestial who had thrown them.

Then, from up near Washington Street, sounded the crash and clamor of a band. Three huge lanterns, bobbing from the ends of three bamboo poles, were just turning into Grant Avenue. They were followed by a long, writhing monster whose hideous face was a marvel of red and green canvas, waving horsehair and staring eyes.

Trailing behind the dragon's head came its many-colored body, supported by ten or a dozen crouching Chinamen. Only their legs were visible as they trotted with their burdens, winding from curb to curb in the wake of that terrifying head.

The brass gongs banged and the flutes shrieked like pain-racked demons, while thousands watched the age-old symbol of ancient China coil its way through the street to banish whatever wicked devils the exorcising fireworks may have missed. Spectators looked on from balconies, windows, sidewalks—staring Occidentals and festive Chinese, packed side by side to see this pageant pass.

The monster crossed the cable tracks at Clay Street. It was just a block away from where Sergeant McAlear had taken his

stand, when four shots sounded sharply above the clamor of the band. There was an outburst of shrieks; the spectators fell back in panic-stricken confusion; the dragon buckled and seemed almost on the point of breaking.

McAlear sprinted down the middle of the street. Shoving and pushing, he forced his way through the crowd which had gathered about a man lying motionless at the curb. Sergeant Osterman was already bending over him, examining a wound which scarcely had bled at all.

"By Heaven, Tim, he's dead," exclaimed the detective as he spied his partner. "Call the wagon while I—" Osterman halted and looked up at the gaping crowd. "Who fired those shots? Who saw this happen—huh?"

"The dragon done it," answered a newsboy. His eyes were popping and his breath came so fast that he could scarcely speak. "I seen it all. I was standing right here. I seen the whole thing."

"Well, *who* did it?"

"Somebody in the dragon. It was a chink, but I don't know which. I just seen him poke the gun out the side. Then *bang, bang, bang*—and I couldn't see nothing at all."

"The kid's right," declared another spectator, crowding forward as he spoke. "It was a Chinaman walking along about the middle of the dragon. There was a hole slashed in the side, and he was peeking through. I noticed it just before he started firing."

Osterman leaped up to arrest the Chinese who had carried the monster, but half of them had fled in the turmoil which followed the shooting. The rest were staring in utter bewilderment, with the canvas folds of the dragon lying lifeless at their feet.

"You come with me, every yellow one of you!" ordered Osterman, but under his breath he added a hopeless suffix: "Ain't a bit of use in the world—only it'll show I'm on the job."

McAlear's partner knew whereof he spoke. He had been on the Chinatown squad for three years, and in that time he had grown wise in the ways of the transplanted East. His accumulated experiences, boiled to an essence of concentrated wisdom, might be expressed in a dozen or less words: *Chinese murders aren't made for white folks to solve.*

There were no two ways about it. The yellow men, like the Sicilians of Chicago and New York, were a law unto themselves. Not that they shrugged sullen shoulders, like those close-mouthed Latins, at the thundered questions of the police. Rather, they smiled blandly back in childlike innocence, which amounts in the end to practically the same.

Then, when exasperated detectives were shaking their heads and calling it a day, the fires of vengeance would flare up in the sudden flame of highbinders' gats or the flash of tong-bought knives. Who did it? Ask Confucius or the Ahkoond of Swat, but don't waste your breath inquiring around the crowded and uninformative acres of Chinatown.

Normally, then, the detectives would have made an earnest, though brief, effort to solve the dragon killing, and then would have resumed the even tenor of their routine. Only one difficulty stood before them, and that was the color of the victim's skin. Channing Tompkinson, the dead man, had been distressingly white.

Furthermore, his name was not unknown in the commercial and political life of San Francisco. A prosperous produce merchant and former county supervisor, Tompkinson had held membership in half a dozen well known clubs and civic organizations. He was a close friend of the mayor and the cousin of a State harbor commissioner. In short, his murder—even under less exotic conditions—would have been something of a sensation.

An intensive inquisition of the dragon-bearers did little to help matters. From them the police learned that just as the devil-devouring monster started out on its tour of Chinatown's streets, two men had ducked under its obscuring canvas sides and insisted upon helping to carry it.

Who were they? No one claimed to know. Why were they allowed to stay? Well, one does not quarrel on New Year, for that would bring bad luck and much unhappiness, while the next twelve moons

were passing through their phases. And there you are!

IV.

It was two nights after the murder that Sergeant McAlear met Mary Pickford Kwong in Washington Street. His brow was troubled, and not without reason. The mayor, impatient to avenge his friend's death under the respectable auspices of the law, had put his chief of police on the pan for not arresting the killer; and the chief had forthwith threatened the Chinatown squad. It was the normal procedure, but none the less unpleasant for an earnest young detective named McAlear.

Mary smiled as she touched his sleeve.

"Can't even see me any more!" she said reproachfully.

"Oh, hullo." McAlear felt his face rapidly growing red. "Where've you been the last few days, Mary? Haven't seen you since—"

"Since that night," she murmured, finishing the sentence which he had abandoned in such confusion. The smile left her face and her dark eyes anxiously searched the detective's. "Guess you didn't want to see me, eh? You been staying away from me on purpose."

McAlear saw the pleading hope in those eyes and his Irish heart was touched. Poor little kid, it was plain that she'd been suffering; and the sergeant could not bear to hurt her more. He tried to laugh away her fears.

"Now, that's the bunk, Mary, and you know it. This murder, you see; it's got me all upset. The chief's hollering because we haven't arrested the guy yet; and you know how much chance I got of getting him. Honest, it's—"

"And you *do* like me a little bit?" she interrupted him.

"Of course I do, Mary. Say, you're one of the swellest girls I know."

"*One* of them!"

"You know what I mean. I—I think a lot of you. You're a real friend, Mary—a real friend."

"Oh." Two tears stood in the girl's eyes and she looked quickly away from him.

A slipper-footed Oriental was passing by, a teakwood tray resting on his head. Standing before a near-by doorway were two middle aged women clad in the loose-hung trousers of the east. Somewhere a tune was being played—not the catchy, pulsing jazz that Mary loved, but the weird wailing and banging which had been sweet music to her yellow father's ears. They were all about her, the reminders of Mary's unwilling kinship with the East.

When she looked again at McAlear she was trying to smile. Her face seemed pale, and there was something like a tremulous sigh before she spoke; but Mary made the words sound almost cheerful.

"Haven't had any luck with the murder, eh, sergeant?"

"Not a bit," he replied quickly, relieved that the conversation was finally becoming impersonal. "I guess I've talked to every highbinder and tong man in the district, but the more I try the less I know. A nice reward's been offered, too."

There was a note of wistfulness in his voice which Mary did not fail to catch. A far-away expression had come into his eyes, the expression of a dreamer who is seeing the vision which so long has beckoned him on.

How wonderfully boyish he looked now, this copper who played in the game with crooks and crime! Mary yearned just to pet him as she would a child.

"Reward?" she repeated. "How much?"

"Thousand dollars. That's what I'd get if I solved this murder—and there'd be a good boost for a lieutenancy, besides. One thousand dollars!"

"What would you do with it?" she asked softly, so as not to disturb his dream.

"There's plenty to do with it. Especially the furniture; I could get all of the furniture and still have—"

"Oh!" Her sharp exclamation broke the spell, and Sergeant McAlear was back in Chinatown once more. "You're going to be married!" she added accusingly.

The detective blushed as he nodded his head. Before his eyes was unfolding the swift pantomime of tragedy in the changing expression of a girl's wan face.

For an instant Mary looked as though some one had slapped her. Then, as she

understood, her dark eyes seemed to fill with the fine, hurt pain of utter despair. In a second that, too, had passed, and the sergeant saw in them the same look of stoical resignation which he had seen in so many Oriental women since first he came to Chinatown.

The fire of the West had suddenly burned out in the lovely half caste girl, and for the first time in her eighteen years of life Mary was the daughter of father.

A brass gong sounded from some tong house over the way. In the next block the bell of a cable car jangled noisily for the crossing. Again the gong called, and as its brazen summons reverberated through the air a *yu yin* added its strident voice in a squeaking threnody. The bell answered faintly, for the Occidental cable car was slipping down the hill and far away.

"What's her name?" asked Mary very quietly.

"Kitty."

"Kitty! It's an awful cute name. Is she—is she blond?"

"No." McAlear grinned a bit feebly. "A red head."

"Oh!"

V.

MARY left him a moment later. Glancing at her wrist watch, she said she would have to run, and straightway she was gone.

The detective stood irresolute, kicking his toe against a lamp-post as he looked after her lithe young figure hurrying down the street. His eyes lighted in admiration, for there was no denying that Mary was exquisitely, gracefully formed. More so than Kitty, the sergeant conceded in a moment of generous impartiality.

He released a long breath of relief and resumed his walk up the hill to Stockton Street. There was a Chinese printer upon whom he built high hopes; but after an exasperating half hour, during which McAlear wheedled and the Celestial smiled in bland and continuous apology, he left more discouraged than before.

McAlear was getting used to disappointments now. The veteran Osterman had been right: so long as Chinamen are Chinamen and talk the outlandish language which they do, just so long will it be useless for ordinary Irishmen or Swedes to try catching them up at the gentle game of homicide.

Osterman was cheerfully ready for the sacrifice, which he predicted would take the form of a summary transfer to South San Francisco. Osterman was something of a philosopher.

"You're just wasting your time, Tim," he told McAlear the following afternoon. "Take it easy for a change. Tompkinson belonged to the wrong ticket, anyway; and us Democrats gotta stick together."

But McAlear, still thinking of Kitty and the furniture, continued to comb the district for a sign. He found none that day nor the next. Furthermore, he no longer had any hope of finding one. He felt thoroughly dejected—so sick of his job that he envied even the early rising milkmen their worriless occupation.

This was his state of mind when Mary Pickford Kwong passed him in Grant Avenue on her way to work. She seemed subdued and unwontedly reserved as she approached him, but the instant she saw the sergeant her eyes became soft and wistful.

She was laughing lightly now, and her voice sounded rather too loud as she gave him a bantering greeting. But in the midst of it she dropped to a sudden hurried whisper, and he caught the words: ". . . my place after work . . . something to tell you."

Her eyes spoke a silent warning; then, with an ostentatious wave of her hand and a good-by thrown carelessly over her shoulder, she continued upon her way.

And so for a second time McAlear met Mary in the hallway, where the gaslight casts its wavering shadows. He was waiting there when she crossed the threshold from Sullivan Alley and came slowly up the stairs.

There was a listlessness in her manner that was new to McAlear. Her shoulders drooped, her hands hung at her sides. A flickering smile crossed her face and was gone like the flash of a swallow's wings in the sunlight. Though her cheeks were a pallid white, Mary looked more like a Chinese girl than ever before. It was the

vivaciousness of her features which had made her seem like a full-blooded woman of the West.

McAlear saw that now; but mostly he saw, with a twinge of dismay, the contrast between the pathetic little girl who stood here before him and the radiant beauty who had kissed him less than a week before. Six nights—and yet look at her!

"I've got your reward," she whispered, peering timidly up at him.

"You've got *what?*"

"The men that shot Tompkinson." She placed a finger to her lips and drew closer. "Listen: Chow Lup and Gim Soon—you know them?"

"Sure. Suey Sen highbinders—pals of Wo Sang."

Mary nodded gravely.

"One of them did it; I couldn't find out which. Both were dancing with the dragon, and one of them fired. I think it was Chow, because Gim's known to like the knife."

"We'll easy find out, once I get 'em locked in separate rooms." McAlear's eyes sparkled with the anticipation of his triumph. "Wonder why they killed him?"

"Gambling; they owed him a lot for fan tan." Her voice became heavy and listless. "That's about all I know, I guess."

McAlear's throat began to hurt him. Pangs of conscience gripped his heart as he looked down at the forlorn little half-caste who had been so lovely, so filled with the joy of living. He took her hand in his.

"Mary, you're a peach."

"Sh-h! It's my wedding present to you and your red-headed Kitty. For the furniture," she added as her eyes filled with sudden tears.

"Mary!"

"Not so loud! You must go before they get wise. Hurry and—" She looked up pleadingly. "Please, will you kiss me good-by?"

He did; and in that moment a wonderful change took place. The color returned to her cheeks; her eyes sparkled with all the luster of their old-time fire; and she hung in his arms, a lovely, alluring, passionate creature of life and love.

It was thus—still all aglow, there beneath the gaslight—that McAlear saw her when he turned to wave his hand from the foot of the narrow stairs.

VI.

Concerning the arrest of Chow Lup and Gim Soon there is little that need be said. In no way did it differ from thousands of other such police transactions throughout a law-governed nation. Sergeant McAlear knew where to find the two highbinders, and he knew how to dominate while his finger held to the trigger.

Somewhere a clock was striking two as he marched his yellow prisoners across Portsmouth Square to the Hall of Justice. It had yet to strike four when Captain Lanrahan stepped from an upstairs room, smilingly wiped the blood from his knuckles, and announced to the police reporters waiting in the corridor:

"Well, he finally found his tongue. Gim Soon worked the gun, but they'll both hang for it. And the one thousand dollars' reward money will be divided between Joe Hollingsworth, of the Hollingsworth Furniture Company, and Father Mulryan, of St. Patrick's Parish. Tim, here, sure is a devil with the ladies."

Sergeant McAlear winced. The good natured banter hurt him, and as soon as he could get away he hurried up Washington Street from headquarters. Sudden misgivings were torturing the detective's mind; a belated instinct warned him that something had happened.

He turned into Sullivan Alley and groped for his flash light. The cramped little areaway—barely more than a concrete walk between two window and door studded walls—was filled with the unrelieved shadows of night. Not a single lamp burned there to guide a returning Celestial's feet.

The circle of McAlear's flash light caught the momentary glitter of a rat's eyes before it scuttled behind a grating. Then its yellow beams outlined the boards of that fence which marks the end of Sullivan Alley's modest hopes and humble fears.

The lamp turned in McAlear's hand, while its shaft of light described a swift arc upward. And thus it was that the ser-

geant discovered Mary Pickford Kwong. Limp and lifeless, the little half-caste daughter of the ancient East and the gay young West was hanging beside the fence. The rope stretched through the open window into the room which had been her orphan home.

McAlear, his eyes streaming tears, his heart choking with remorse, rushed down the hill to summon an ambulance. He said it was a suicide, and not until the sun began slanting its first beams over the tops of the high Sierras did he learn that Mary had been murdered. The coroner's physician made the discovery as soon as he began his examination.

This report, corroborated by three pieces of white paper found under the dead girl's waist, started a man hunt which did not end until three weeks later, when McAlear came upon Wo Sang across the Mexican border and dragged him back to die with Chow and Gim on the San Quentin gallows.

The three papers were in an envelope bearing a San Francisco postmark twenty-four hours earlier than Mary's death. Inscribed in Chinese on each was a sort of ominous proverb.

The first said: "An excess of talk is, like the song of the swan, the sign of approaching death."

The second: "Let the tongue be judicious, and wealth will vie with honor in the house of the wise."

And the third: "Vengeance may not be lost by flight or hiding, for death follows even to the uttermost ends of the earth."

THE END

ʊ ʊ ʊ

ON THE MESA TRAIL

OH, a white, white horse for a red-haired lass,
And a pinto for her cowboy lover,
A winding trail through the upland grass,
And a blue, blue sky above her!

A wistful look in her eyes of brown—
She's a little love tune humming—
From over the hills where the sun goes down,
There's a far faint dust-cloud coming.

Oh, the mesa trail, like a long gray rope,
Pulls out of the dust-puff a rider
On a painted horse at a swift, lean lope,
Till he draws quick rein beside her.

His face sunbrowned and his eyes are blue,
His smile like the dawn rays dancing—
Her heart beats faster—his does, too—
Her cheek is a rose entrancing.

The blue sky smiles to behold this sight
(Where the pinto-rider came and found her):
A sun-gold girl on a horse moon-white,
With a cowboy's arms around her!

S. Omar Barker.

HEINZ

OVEN BAKED BEANS

Only heating is required for this delicious, wholesome dish, welcome at any meal.

Delicious, because they have that rich nutty flavor that only baking can bring out, and Heinz Beans are baked thoroughly in real dry heat ovens.

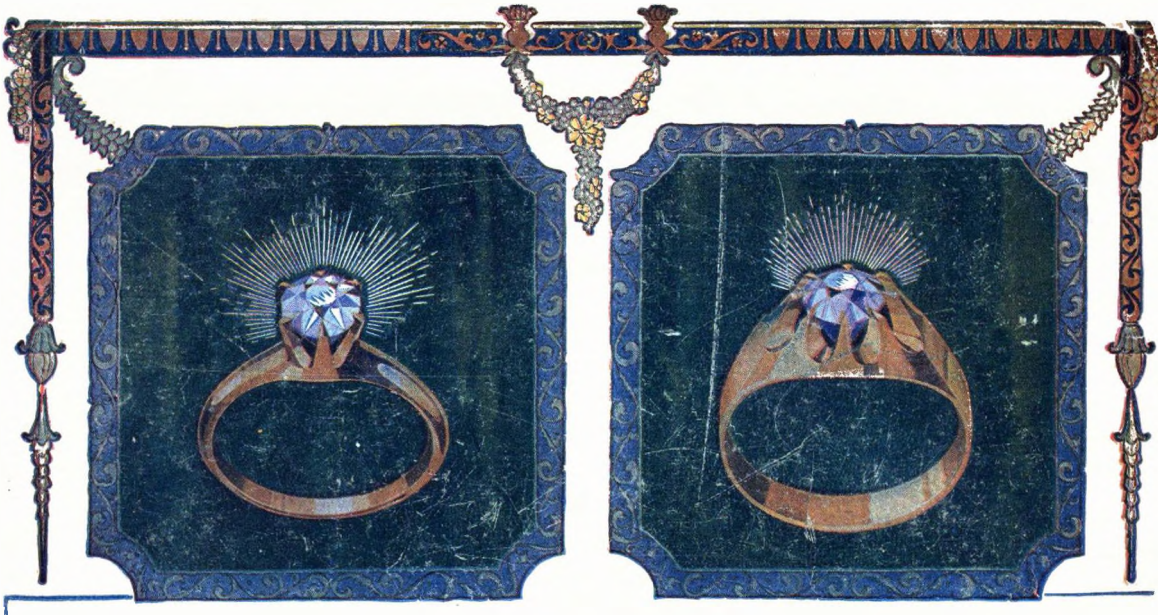
Wholesome, because real *baking* makes beans digestible.

Flavored and made richer with Heinz famous tomato sauce, and pork of prime breakfast bacon cut.

One of the **57**

Four kinds to suit any taste

Heinz Baked Beans with Pork and Tomato Sauce
Heinz Baked Pork and Beans (without Tomato Sauce) Boston style
Heinz Baked Beans in Tomato Sauce without Meat (Vegetarian)
Heinz Baked Red Kidney Beans



Send the Coupon
-we'll send you a Lachnite

No. 7A1410
This solid gold solitaire is the most popular ladies' ring in the world. Beautifully finished, the essence of good taste. Setting is a flashing Lachnite Gem weighing about 1 carat.

Price	$18.75
Deposit	4.75
Monthly	2.50

No. 7A1504
This solid gold ring is shaped and finished by hand. No finer or more fashionable ring could be made. It is set with a brilliant Lachnite Gem weighing about ¾ carat.

Price	$18.75
Deposit	4.75
Monthly	2.50

SEND NO MONEY. Just send us your name and address and we will send you, prepaid, on approval, a genuine Lachnite Gem mounted in a solid gold ring. Wear it ten full days. These sparkling gems have the eternal fire of diamonds. Their brilliance and hardness are guaranteed forever. We wish you to select a ring from this advertisement and wear it 10 full days at our expense. ***Then, if you can tell it from a diamond, send it back.*** 100,000 people are now wearing brilliant Lachnite Gems. These people have proved they could not tell Lachnites from diamonds.

Pay As You Wish

When the ring comes just make the first small deposit ($4.75) with the postman. This is only a deposit. It is not a payment. The money is still yours. Put the ring on your finger and wear it everywhere you go for 10 full days. Then, if you decide to keep it, pay the balance at the rate of $2.50 a month without interest. But if, during the trial, you decide to send the Lachnite back, your deposit will be refunded instantly. You run no risk.

Harold Lachman Co
12 North Michigan Avenue
Dept. 1072 **Chicago, Ill.**

Send me prepaid Ladies' Ring on ten day's free trial. When it comes I will deposit $4.75 with the postman. After ten days I will either return the ring or send you $2.50 a month until the balance has been paid. Total cost to me, $18.75. If I return the ring you will refund me $4.75 immediately. I am enclose my finger size.

Name.....

Address.....

Send the Coupon!

Don't send us a penny. Just put your name and address in the coupon. Write the number of the ring. Be sure to send us your finger size. Cut a strip of paper that will just meet around the middle knuckle of your ring finger. Be sure to send this strip. Send the coupon now for a Lachnite on 10 days' free trial. Act AT ONCE!

Harold Lachman Company 12 North Michigan Avenue Dept. 1072 — CHICAGO, ILL.