ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

The Starlit Trail

by

Kenneth Perkins

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXIII CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER 7, 1925 NUMBER 1

FOUR CONTINUED STORIES

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POETRY

A BLAZE OF GLORY

By FRED MacISAAC

Football taught Bill Alden how to fight—so he carried the lesson from the field. And, believe it or not, it taught him how to win a girl's love.

First of Three Parts Next Week.

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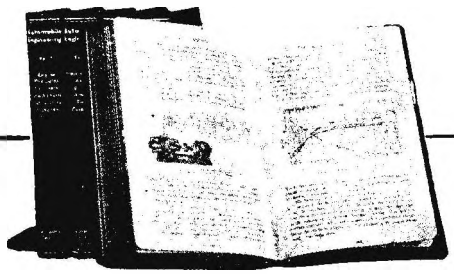

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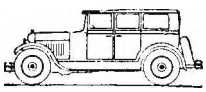

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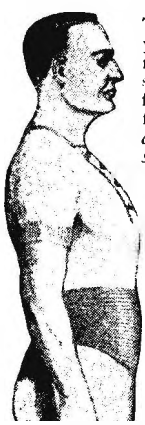

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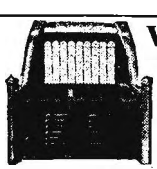

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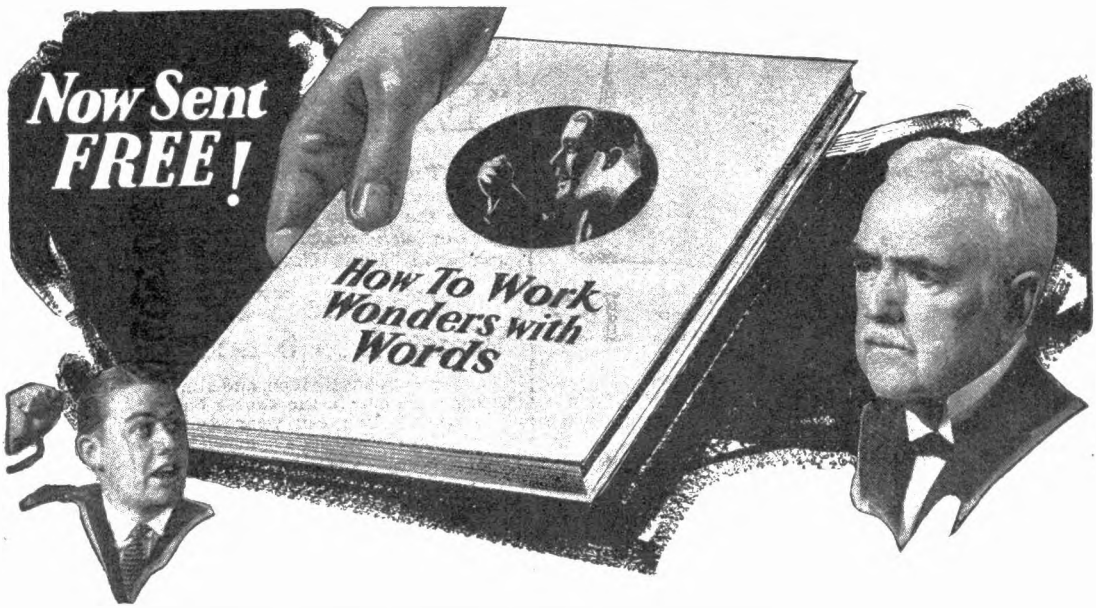

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXIII SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 1925 NUMBER 1

The Starlit Trail

By KENNETH PERKINS

Author of "The Bull-Dogger," "The Gun-Fanner," etc.

CHAPTER I.

ORPHEUS IN SODA MESA DESERT.

COMFORTABLY reclining at the edge of a water pocket, Reverdy plunked at his banjo. This was a rather curious procedure, because the water pocket had turned out to be only a dry saline with contour lines of incrusted sticks, stones, and salt particles that marked the successive periods of evaporation. The salt glistened in the starlight. Plunk Reverdy's hair—bronze in shade—glistened likewise as the hot wind tousled it.

"I knew a calf-kneed lady—"

So he sang—to his horse, his pack burro, and the stars.

"Down at old Pedro's bar."

Like the wild creatures that came to the call of Orpheus's divine lute, certain denizens of the Soda Mesa Desert were summoned by this strange rhythmic sound.

First there came a coyote, peering over a red rock—and looming almost as big as a lobo there in the moonlight. Plunk Reverdy was of half a mind to draw his gun and blow the inquisitive, yellow-livered visitor off the ledge of that bowlder. But he had just struck a new chord which demanded a finger on each of the four strings. It was a chord for which he might have hunted all his life. Besides, he was not in the killing mood.

"Her cheeks like ocatilla,
Whose flowers are red in spring,
Her hands like sojuaro
With prongs a-blossoming."

Next there came a wild horse to the scene. He stood high up on the rim of the cliff on the other side of the cañon. His head was held aloft, his shaggy mane was tossing. Reverdy imagined that his nostrils quivered, but the beast was too far away and the light too dim to see this. And yet there he stood—as inquisitive as the measly coyote and considerably more appreciative. If he came too close Reverdy would have to be ready with his six-gun. No telling what these desert stallions would do to an unmounted man.

"But one thing else, I'll tell yer,
Oh, Mr. Buckaroo,
Like any cholla cactus,
She'd stick you through and through!"

His voice rang with a haunting melody up and down that narrow arroyo. The wind might have carried it far across the breast of the desert, except that the rhythmic strains and the twanging of the banjo were caught in a labyrinth of grotesque draws, precipices and barrancas which the centuries had carved. The strains were caught, tossed back and forth, recovered, and held finally as a song is eternally imprisoned in a shell.

Another denizen of the desert arrived. He was more hardened, and yet more tortured by the fierce heat, than that wild broncho on the cliff's edge or the coyote in search of the fountain of this music. The wild horse came perhaps because he had chanced to wander to leeward of Reverdy's pinto; the coyote came perhaps in search of water. But this other desert creature came most certainly because he had heard that melodious song wandering up through the arroyos.

It was a man.

Reverdy could see little of his face, because of the lop-brimmed sombrero. The long chin bristled with stubble, and a blobber lip was all that the starlight caught. The man wore rags—well torn by mesquite and cactus and splintered rock. Patches on his clothes were sewn with twine of leatherwood bark; his old boots were tied up with buckeye twine.

"You sure are powerful happy, pard," he said to the minstrel. "Singing thataway. I figure there's plenty of water in this hole."

"Not very much."

The desert wanderer looked into the water pocket and saw what appeared to be a glistening bowl of salt.

"Nary a drop!" he exclaimed. "And yet you can sing!"

"I've got a little left in my canteen. Half of it's yours."

The other reached out greedily.

"Well, I cain't exactly refuse, pard," he said. "Haven't had a swig for three days except by cuttin' out a hollow place in cactus and waitin' for it to fill with sap. Which my stomach is on the bum likewise. Bein' I haven't et for three days, either."

"I've got enough and to spare," Reverdy said. "Half of the grub's yours also."

"Well, I must say, pard, you're white through and through. No, don't build a fire. Couldn't stand anythin' hot. I'm het up enough already."

Reverdy watched him fall greedily to the duffel bag. Evidently his stomach had not been upset enough by sojuaro sap to prevent his eating. He ripped off the top of a can and gouged out the beans with his paw—precisely like a bear. His rapacity did not stop there, either, for he actually ate raw bacon, tearing at it with his yellow teeth without slicing the slab.

"How about making some flapjacks and coffee?" Reverdy suggested.

"Couldn't think of it, pard—couldn't think of it. A fire would make me crazy."

Reverdy was about to ask him just why he was so afraid of a fire; but it was rather too personal a question. For all he knew, the man was a fugitive.

"I reckon you think I'm an outlaw, pard?" the man said affably. "Don't blame you. Just look at me. Look at my clothes ripped all to pieces—and my feet. And my skin—all scratched up. D'jever see any worse lookin' specimen of hooman? I reckon not."

Reverdy stared at him, almost laughing. The other went on:

"Well, leave me explain. My name's Podsnapper. Been huntin' for surface float, same as you. No water anywheres down there in the plain, which maybe you've found that out already.

"My hoss kicked off. My grubstake give out—bein' I couldn't pack much to start with when I started back for civilization on foot.

"And now while I'm eatin' the rest of these beans I wish you'd reel off another verse or two of that song I heard a-floatin' up the cañon. For it shore has a soothin' effect on my sunburned ole carcass."

Reverdy could not help laughing at the audacity of the stranger, drinking his fill from the precious canteen, gorging himself from the duffel bag of provisions, and now demanding music with his meals.

The minstrel, however, was not the one to deny his guest. He had sung his songs gratis and played his banjo at many a cantina, and for the delectation of good men and bad. Orpheus drew no distinction between charming the savage beast and the gods on Olympus.

"I knew a calf-knee'd lady
Down at old Pedro's bar.
And though her past was shady,
Her eye was like a star."

He sang with a big Napatan boot tapping softly and syncopatingly upon the hard packed sand. The melody softened all sounds—the champing of the horse, the loud guzzling of the stranger, the clatter of a tin can thrown far down into the bowlder wash.

It had the same softening effect on these sounds as the starlight had on the fierce desolation of the gulch, the rocks, the red and gray strata of the cliffs.

The man who called himself Podsnapper threw away the last can he had opened and then walked over toward the singer. He stood looming against a great background of stars, nodding his head in cadence as if the music had taken possession of him:

"Oh, she'd stick you through and through!
She'd stick you through and through!"
Like any cholla cactus
She'd stick you black and blue!
Oh, one thing else—"

The song broke off precipitously, as Reverdy saw the barrel of a gun twinkling in the starlight just in front of him.

"One thing else I'll tell yer,"

he resumed, trying to cover up that unfortunate stumbling on his lines—

"Oh, Mr. Buckaroo,
Like any cholla cactus
She'd stick you through and through."

It was no use. The stranger evidently had made up his mind to call some sort of a showdown, and it was futile for Reverdy to try stalling for time. He was not going to be allowed another second. Besides, the stranger had heard that slight check in the rhythm of the song—which in ragtime is disastrous. Everything was out of joint.

"Sorry, pard. You've treated me white; but it's got to be. I want your horse."

"*My horse!*" the other exclaimed. He burst out in an oath. He was really swearing at himself. He had known well enough that the stranger was crooked; and he had limbered his trigger finger, so to speak, keeping his eye open for any queer movement on the part of his guest.

But his guest had bided his time. Plunk's first moment of watchfulness was naturally relaxed. Then the stranger had waited for Plunk to occupy his hands with that banjo.

"Claw the air now, hombre," Mr. Podsnapper was saying quietly. "We won't need no fuss. Just leave me frisk you of your shootin' iron. Otherwise I don't reckon you'll part with your hoss peaceful like."

But, Reverdy objected to parting with his most precious possession "peaceful like," even with the odds a hundred to one against him. He was quick at the draw. His hand when plunking that banjo went so fast at times your eye could hardly follow it. It looked like three or four hands. He pretended to lift his arms, but his right came up with the complicated movement of unbuttoning his holster flap and drawing a gun.

In that starlight it is conceivable that with some adversaries he might have gotten away with this desperate move. As it was, a flash of light spurted out of the stranger's hand. Plunk Reverdy's gun clattered to the rocks as a slug ripped his arm. A moment later the renegade, having picked this gun up, mounted the horse and rode off down the cañon.

Plunk waited, lying so that his wounded arm lay resting easily on the sand. He watched the retreating rider until the latter was swallowed up in the darkness of a clump of mesquite trees and piñons. Then, without taking the time to bind his wound, Plunk crawled over toward his saddle pack where he kept his rifle.

He loaded it with one hand, drew himself up to a standing posture, leaning against a bowlder.

By this time the escaping rider had emerged from the piñon grove and was crossing a patch of black sage. His victim sighted on him, his shoulder pressing against the butt, the muzzle supported by the bowlder, his left hand at the trigger.

Now the horse thief was past the black sage which had made a protective background for him against which he seemed almost invisible. But on riding out upon the moonlit sand he was clearly etched, and afforded a perfect although distant mark.

Plunk Reverdy fired.

The stranger lurched forward on the horse's withers as if he had been hit from behind by a crushing weight. The horse wheeled, ran to the side of the cañon, giving the appearance that no hand was at the reins, then stood pawing at the sand. A moment later he wheeled again, his head coming up sharply.

The rider was still on, but clinging, low crouched over the withers, as if tied there like an inert and shapeless thing—as, for instance a saddle pack.

CHAPTER II.

THE GIFT HORSE.

ONE morning some days later Reverdy, having in a measure healed his crease with an application of peeled stems of prickly pear, awoke to the sound of hoofbeats.

They came from far down the cañon which was already suffused with the misty glow of sunrise. He saw a Mexican mozo—to all appearances a humpback—riding off, hell bent, for the open desert.

Whether this hombre had been snooping around Plunk's diggings with intent to steal or kill was not apparent. At any rate, by the frantic manner in which he kicked his heels into the shaggy pinto, he appeared to be in a mighty big hurry to get away.

The incident naturally enough brought Plunk to a sudden, complete awakening; and his eye ran back over the trail which the fugitive was covering. Down in the bed of the cañon, tethered to a dead sycamore, was a horse.

This was very peculiar—and intriguing. Plunk had no horse. He had traveled a few miles to water, with his burro, which because of that gun wound he had been forced to ride. A horse was a very attractive animal at this juncture.

He went down and examined the strange creature—from a safe distance.

This was quite an ordinary old horse—a blood bay with a speckled face. The white dots over the forehead thickened down the cheeks until they merged into a gray and white about the nose. It reminded Plunk of the dim white stars that come out in the afterglow of sunset. There was a flecking of white over the croup, which looked like a scattering of cirrus clouds.

He was a gentle-looking critter, for his nose, unlike many of the bronchos of that country, was straight instead of being Roman, which is the sign of orneriness. Nor was he goose-rumped like many an outlaw Plunk had seen in his day.

With nostrils distended and sniffing gently, he watched the man approach. The results of his sniffing seemed to assure him that the stranger was a friend, and he resumed nibbling a patch of weed while he was being studied.

There was, in analysis, only one thing peculiar about this animal. His reins were crossed under his throat, and the bight, slung over his withers, terminated in a piece of white paper.

Now, there was nothing extraordinary about having his reins crossed. Plunk had seen many horses ridden that way. It was a good scheme for a stranger with a hard hand to ride a mount with a soft mouth.

But as to that paper—

"All right, old bronc, I'm coming up to you, so don't get scared."

Plunk circled the animal so as to approach him from the proper side. He expected a demonstration of some sort or other when he reached for that piece of paper; but nothing happened. Indeed, the old critter just went on nibbling, taking a step or two to the end of his hackamore which tethered him to the tree bole.

There was writing on the paper—a closely scrawled note evidently addressed to Plunk himself:

To the hombre which I stole his horse a few nights ago in White Lobo Gulch

This was the gulch in which Reverdy and the man calling himself Podsnapper had made each other's acquaintance.

when you read this here note which Im dictatin same to the mucker whos been nursin me, why then Ile most like be daid and gone. so your listenin to a voice which its comin from the grave.

Reverdy flattened the paper out, for it was crumpled, and went on reading:

Now hombre you treated me white and in return I plugged you. but most like being I only hit you in the arm yore still alive and kickin and won't find much trouble in gettin out being you hev a burro. if yore dyin from the wound I giv you why then this letter aint goin to count and I figure Ile hev to burn in hell for a couple million years in payment for what I done.

A smile came over Reverdy's rugged face. It was the most peculiar document he had ever read in his life—and delivered in a most peculiar way. He could not help but glance over to the old nag again. The animal was nibbling calmly enough at the patch of weed. The note went on:

But if you aint daid hombre then I reckon I kin make amends and I wont kick off with remorse twistin my soul like I had my nose in a tournkay. Im returnin your hoss.

No I dont mean your own hoss because same fell into a barranca and busted his laig. but Ime returnin one which is much better. a gentle ole critter which will foller you around like a kid brother. accept this hoss—a favorite of mine—and leave bygones be bygones. I forgiv you for that bit of led you sent me as a partin shot. which same is now festerin in my lung. but it ain't your fault. its mine, so goodby hombre, and luck be with you.

From the peculiar state of uneasiness into which this "voice from the dead" had plunged him Reverdy turned to the contemplation of that gentle old cayuse.

Any man might have had an aversion for that animal from the very start; any man might have been justified in approaching him with a definite feeling of fear, or at least mistrust. But Reverdy, strangely enough, took an immediate liking to him.

And it appeared that the horse took a definite liking to Reverdy. The old plug rubbed his gray whiskered face against the man's shoulder as the latter was untying the hackamore from the bole. Then without taking up the slack in the rope he followed his new master out into an open space of sand in the bowlder wash. He even prodded Plunk with his nose—after the manner of a pet horse greeting a beloved owner.

There was no saddle. This meant there was something of hazard in vaulting to that bare back. But Plunk had no desire to ride all the way to Cobb's Coulee on a burro when he had a gentle-looking cayuse like this for a mount.

Putting a hand on the horse's withers—without, however, clutching the mane—he swung aboard. He held the reins, avoiding the slightest pull, mindful of the fact that a horse with crossed reins is naturally tender mouthed and given to rearing. Hence Plunk realized that to manage him necessi-

tated the use of knees, the shifting of his weight, and the merest pressure of a crossed rein against the horse's neck.

Thus he rode. The horse stood for a moment, then responded to the signal of his rider's knees, and went up the cañon with the easiest canter Plunk had ever known.

A short workout and Plunk was satisfied. He returned to his camp, strapped what remained of his pack on the burro and started for home.

As he rode northward out of the Soda Mesa Desert and struck for Gold Pan Gulch and Mule Town, he wondered just what this gift horse signified.

Had Podsnapper really experienced a fit of remorse? He had given little evidence of being that sort of man. Yet on a deathbed strange conversions are liable to take place.

As Plunk felt the easy-riding, patient old critter ambling along the trail, he was inclined to think that that desert scarecrow who had robbed him of his food and water and his mount had actually—as a last act of his life—tried to make amends. And yet—

Reverdy drowned his misgivings in song, raising his voice against the red, sun-baked cliffs:

"Oh, the bandit, he's plumb ornery, plumb ornery, plumb ornery,
Oh, the bandit, he's plumb ornery and likewise, too, he drinks.
And if you ever cross his trail
Say Buenos Dios, but don't fail
To throw yore six-gun on his tail
Afore an eye he blinks."

CHAPTER III.

TARANTE.

BEFORE arriving at Mule Town, Reverdy stopped at a cow outfit just on the edge of the desert.

A group of men lolled about the veranda of the main shack and in their midst was a stocky, wrinkled gentleman with a long gray mustache, a bearskin vest and a rusty star.

It was a pleasant scene for one returning from the fires of Soda Mesa Desert. Pleasant was the mooing of the cows for their calves in separate corrals; pleasant was the fiddling of locusts, and pleasant was the sound of water from the artesian well, gurgling from a pipe and sparkling down the irrigation ditches.

The man with the star stopped—evidently in the climax of his recital—and greeted Plunk Reverdy. He greeted him as a father greets a son; and the cowboys took him in their arms as brothers receiving one who has long been lost; the old ranch wife greeted him as a mother—and immediately bustled about preparing a feast.

As Plunk basked in these affections he was thinking to himself no doubt of how he would relate his adventures. He was by nature very proud; he had a name as a sharpshooter and a fighter who always won his duels.

This time he would have to explain of course how he had lost his mount—and how he had received that wound in the arm. He would have to explain likewise that the man he shot had managed to get away. And while explaining these points it would be necessary to assume a becoming modesty.

No one in fact had ever known him to brag. The narration of his exploits generally had to be coaxed from him. But that does not mean that he had any false modesty. He had a fine sense of pride—the right kind of pride.

I mention these points of his character because they throw much light on what happened in the following conversation with Sheriff Hornuff.

That official, after the greetings were over, went on with his recital:

"I've just been down to Sody Mesa myself, Plunk," he said. "We might have run into each other, in fack. You say your last diggings was down near White Lobo Gulch. Well, I've been further south than that this trip. Was trailin' a ornery skunk by the name of Tarante—"

"Name of what?"

"Tarante," the sheriff answered. "Ain't you ever heard of Tarante, the outlaw?"

"Yes—I have—somewhere," Plunk agreed. "But didn't know what he looked like."

"Well, I did. Had his measurements and such from the pen. He escaped some time ago, and has been killin' every gent he speaks to ever since. Had the Mexes and Injuns scairt stiff of him.

" He boasted that no man in the world would ever stand up to him face to face and fight. The only way *he'd* ever get caught was to be sniped from the chaparral somewheres and get it in the back.

" His eyes—so the renegades down in the desert said—would freeze a man so's he couldn't pull the trigger. Somebody who was afraid to walk up to him and fight plugged him in the back—and at a good safe range. Whoever that was—he was wise, I'll say!"

Plunk Reverdy's heart was beating swiftly. He held his breath—and then tried to say calmly:

" This shot from behind, chief—did it get him?"

" Well, I'll smile! Did it get him? He died a slow, long, lingerin', remorseful death with a hole right between the shoulder blades."

Plunk looked around at the cowboys. He was itching to say: " I'm the man that fired that long range shot." But something had taken all the wind out of his sails. He noticed that the emphasis was not put on the long range—but on the fact that it got the bandit in the back—a bandit who had boasted that no man could get him any other way!

Well, this was tough luck—but it was no great matter. Why say anything about it? Every one knew Plunk was a good shot anyway.

" I went down there," the sheriff was saying, " to get him daid or alive. Well, I found him half way between. He was in a Mexican posada—right in the next room, and I heard him groanin' and swearin' he'd get even. There waren't nobody down there to help him much 'ceptin' a Papago witch doctor.

" And I figure he hastened the end, if anything. I heard the bandit callin' to his henchmen— which there waren't any of 'em around—and tellin' 'em he wanted 'em to go and find this hombre, and plug him. Then he sort of eased up, and said, ' No matter.' He'd get him himself. He had a way!"

" What way do you reckon that was, chief?" asked one of the stockmen.

" Don't know. Just delirium, I figure. He give what money he had to a mozo which worked at the posada, and told him to go and get an old hoss which months ago he'd left at a ranch somewheres."

" And what was he to do with the horse?" Plunk asked.

The answer to this question might satisfy a curious doubt that had arisen in his mind.

But the sheriff could give no answer. " Don't know," he said. " I went into the room. The mozo was scairt stiff of my star and wouldn't say anything. And he didn't go after no hoss either. Leastwise not while I was anywheres around watchin' him. Well, pretty soon, the bandit seen my star and laughed. He asked me how fur did I figure I'd trail him now?

" I said not much further. He was as good for my intents and purposes whether daid or alive. Well, he kep' on laffin'—his glazed eyes fixed on my star—and then he kicked off."

The group of listeners—the cowboys, the foreman and the ranch owner—made their eulogies. It was a good day for them. Tarante had been feared. Their sheriff was a hero.

" Only I was sorry he died," said the latter, chewing thoughtfully at his gray mustache, which was a habit of his.

" Sorry!" they exclaimed. " Now what're you handin' us?"

" I'm sorry that he could boast of dyin' with a slug in the back. I'm sorry too that it waren't me that had the final chanst at him. And I wouldn't of given it to him in the back either. If it had been me—I'd of met him face to face!"

Reverdy made a move—as if to say something—to explain that lots of times you can't get a man to stand just the way you want when you plug him.

Then it was that one of the cowboys noticed his right arm and the bandages showing under the sleeve.

" What-all happened to *you*, Plunk?"

Again Reverdy found himself on the verge of explaining. He had a good killing to his credit. But what credit is it to a man when you have to bolster up the deed with explanations?

Of course, he *could* explain. It was easy enough. But Reverdy had a very sensitive sort of pride.

"This?" he repeated—glancing at his arm. "Oh, nothing, gents. Just had a little set-to with a Papago renegade. Nothing to interest you. Just a personal matter—as you might say."

They say he did not want to talk further. "A personal matter" with gunshooting was a point that a man in that part of the country had a perfect right to refuse to discuss.

Even the sheriff—looking Plunk in the eye—chewed the end of his long gray mustache—and said nothing.

CHAPTER IV.

HELL FOR LEATHER.

MULE TOWN was transfigured in the Saturday night illumination. Cantinas poured out their yellow beams across board sidewalks. The sand of the main street glittered in the light of the stars; Puma Mesa ordinarily a smirch of ghastly red, reflected from its surface of denuded iron and shale a soft and ethereal radiance.

Mechanical pianos banged out; the guitars on the Mexican side of the main street twanged La Paloma; cowherders and muckers, who had come to town to celebrate, made the night at once hideous and joyful. Honky-tonks were clamorous with yipping, singing and fighting.

Then there was something of a cessation—like frogs stopping their croaking at the approach of a greater power.

Cowboys and muckers crowded into the Rex Cantina. The veterinary went there; the stage-driver went there; the Japanese who kept the chowcart went there; the barber, the sutler, the harness-maker went there. From across the street the Papagos and greasers flocked, and stood without the swinging doors listening.

A song filtered out into the starlight.

"Oh, the bandit is plumb ornery, plumb ornery, plumb ornery,
Oh, the bandit he's plumb ornery, and like wise, too, he drinks."

"It's Plunk Reverdy with his banjo!" declared one. "He just come horsin' into town from his desert diggin's ridin' a gentle ole bronc with stars on its nose."

"Plunk Reverdy, is it!" remarked another. "I've heard tell the whole town congregates for to hear his voice. And the men all stop fightin'—"

"And the gals all weep—"

"And the cows stop millin'—"

"Come on in!" cried a buckaroo. "We cain't hardly afford to miss this!"

Two locomotive headlights fixed on either end of the gaming room and used as "spots" were focused upon a rather gaunt, windburned youth. Despite the glare his eyes were a clear piercing gray accustomed to a desert sun. The spotlights illuminated a leathery neck, a woolen shirt, a bearskin vest and khaki trousers.

The performer was seated high upon a throne, which a few minutes before had been a gaming table. In fact, the chips of the stud that had been in circulation during that game now jingled merrily as the youth tapped his Napatan boot in syncopation to his tune.

"And if you ever cross his trail,
Say Buenos Dios, but don't fail
To throw your six-gun on his tail—"

Plunk Reverdy looked down at the faces, closeherded all about him.

Next to the table were the gamblers whose game had stopped in his honor—a card in front of each chair with four cards upturned. Jammed about them were cantina girls, a palmist, a barkeep and the humpback whom the proprietor hired for luck.

Stockmen from the range to the north, and muckers from the desert to the south were on the floor ten deep. Off in the lobby through a great doorway you could see Mule Town's aristocracy. The Rex Cantina was also a hotel—the most respectable hotel in Mule Town.

A gentleman with silvery locks and a white goatee, and holding a dusty black sombrero in his lap, was seated on a bench on the staircase landing. Next to him directly under a lamp was a girl with black ringlets, a sad, handsome face and dark eyes that were focused intently upon the Rex Cantina's star performer. Perhaps she

was wishing that she could enter the forbidden ground of that dance hall.

The last time Plunk had seen this girl she had those same black ringlets. But she was then a gawky child with a pretty face, thin freckled arms and feet that stepped on each other. A few years had elapsed. He remembered something about her being sent to Phœnix to school.

The childish curves of her face had gone; but curves had come to her gawky arms. It had taken four years of Phœnix to erase those freckles. It had taken four years to make her perfect.

With the gullibility of any actor, Plunk Reverdy was of the opinion that his songs had made her wistful. But when he sang a funny song to cheer her up, he saw that she was sadder than ever.

"Sing us 'Ole Black Joe,' Plunk—that's what we're waitin' for!" some one called out.

"No, sing us somethin' so's we kin dance," said one of the cantina girls. "And sing without your banjo so's we kin dance with *you*."

"Stay up thar on the table where you belong!" cried a cowpuncher. "Leave us do the dancin'. Give us that one about 'Cactus Kate'."

"And then sing about 'Coyote Jim' and the 'Foundlin' Kid'!"

"And then about 'Hell and Nell Carson'!"

Plunk tuned up again. "You all want weepy songs. But this is Saturday night. Wait till Sunday morning for weeping! Here goes a lively one so's we can have a little hell for leather!"

They took their partners. The big herders, with girls in their arms, sent the crowd jamming against the side of the dance floor. The Texas Tommy went around the old worn-out groove on the floor shuffling and kicking away the sawdust and sand.

It was the liveliest tune of Plunk Reverdy's repertoire, played solely for the benefit of that girl with the black ringlets seated in the hotel alcove with the distinguished, white-bearded man.

When the tune was over Plunk looked across the heads of the couples to the hotel doorway—and saw her crying.

"Well, it's no use, I'm through," he said. "The evenin's performance is a freeze."

"Oh, you ain't goin' to hesitate now, Plunkety!" they cried. "Don't forgit your ole pals!"

"Don't leave us in misery, Plunk! Nothin' to dance to but the pianola!"

"And the pianola won't work!" said the barkeep, "bein' it's been pawin' and hoofin' and rarin' all evenin'."

"Another jig, Plunk, for the sake of these gals who all love you."

Reverdy tried again. Perhaps he could make that girl, over there under the lamp of the vestibule, smile.

He tuned up. There was a silence, merging softly into rhythm of soft chords and shuffling feet. It increased to a furious syncopation with cowboy heels pounding the old puncheon floor. Reverdy's arm was going so fast you could see three instead of one. His song was as merry and uproarious as any coon-shouting ever heard in Mule Town—but his face was drawn.

The girl over there was watching him. She was wondering perhaps what made his face so gray. The dancers didn't wonder—or even look. They would pay the piper in any coin he asked. Only he never asked for payment—except the effervescent payment of a fishbowl of lager—or the still more effervescent payment of adulation.

He didn't finish this particular performance. He slid down from the table—almost as if he had fallen.

"What the hell's got you, Plunk!" one of his cronies asked in alarm.

"He's been out in the desert—we forgot that—" said a cantina girl.

"His hand is all red—the one he was playin' with."

"Come on and have a drink on the house, Plunk—and everybody in the house drink to him."

Three or four of the cowboys bore him along to the bar—for he appeared to be heavy on his knees.

"He's been playin' all evenin' with a wounded arm, so help me!" a girl cried. She unbottoned his sleeve.

He was grinning—as the veterinary held a glass to his lips.

"His arm's all taped," the cantina girl declared. "And he was playin' for you and you sheep-headed coots danced! Look at him!"

"Oh, hell — it's only a crease," said Plunk. "Got it out there—fightin' a Papago rustler. Forget it!"

They plied him with drinks. They brought water from somewhere or other, and bandages, and tape. The horse doctor was the leading actor for a moment.

No, not the leading actor exactly—Plunk was that. He was as much of a hero as if he had saved the town from a raid. I might venture to say that if they knew he had just killed a deadly bandit down in Soda Mesa Desert, they would not have idolized him more.

He looked up—glancing into the hotel alcove at the dark-eyed girl under the lamp. She was still with her distinguished old companion. Yes, she had been crying.

But her expression was changed now. Her eyes were flaming. She looked at this peculiar, banjo-playing hero from the desert, and smiled.

"Well, gents—and gals," Plunk said. "It was worth it."

The man with the best physique in the house—I mean Plunk Reverdy—and the man with the worst, stood side by side at the bar. The latter, in a manner of speaking, had edged his way under the legs of the crowd that surrounded Mule Town's favorite native son. It was Hump Pablo, God of Chance, Mascot of the Rex Cantina.

"I want to buy him a drink!"

"Hump wants to buy him a drink!" they repeated.

"This'll mean good luck for you, Plunk!" said the gamblers.

In the performance of this ritual, Hump Pablo found occasion to stand on the rail, and lift his gnarled, wrinkled head toward Reverdy's ear.

"She wants to see you—that gal out in the vestibule."

Plunk turned sharply upon him.

"Go easy now," said the dwarf. "Wait till that ole bird with the white beard comes in to spend what's left of his jack on the faro table."

Reverdy glanced away—this time to the speckled mirror. All sorts of things were written on that mirror in flour and lard. Some one had designed an eagle and flag and scrolls. But through it all he could see the girl off there in the vestibule, with her white bearded, silvery haired companion. He watched her for a long time.

There were not many girls like her. In fact there was no girl like her in Mule Town. With the exception of Mexican women, and the cantina girls, and a few squaws, womankind was not well represented in this municipality.

Of course there were plenty of rancher's wives and daughters. But they considered Mule Town a good place to stay out of on Saturday nights. The only respectable place in town was the Rex Hotel, which opened upon the Rex Gaming Parlors and Dance Hall, by a door big enough to drive a stage-coach through.

With the cessation of music, the crowd thinned. You could hear the mournful twang of guitars from the Mexican side of the street. The doorways cleared of their crowd. The gamblers resumed their monte, stud and faro.

At one table miners were betting prodigious sums on which direction an ant, placed within a chalk-marked circle, would crawl.

This particular game intrigued the old man with the black sombrero, the silvery locks and the goatee. You can teach a faro table to do tricks, this old man decided, but an ant is fundamentally honest.

"I'm bettin' three hundred dollars," he said, "that this insect will crawl in the direction of the bar. Being ants are known to have as good sense as human."

"I'm bettin' three hundred," said the veterinary, "that this here animal will crawl in the direction of the water-trough outside. Bein' a ant has an instinct for findin' what he wants—even quicker than a burro kin smell a water-hole in the desert."

"An ant don't generally want water," said the barber. "So I'm bettin' he'll crawl towards my shavin' parlor, bein' they's an ant-hill just under the step. And this ant's been havin' such a hot time settlin' bets,

that I figure he'll be plumb sot on goin' home."

The croupier, who held a long forefinger lightly pressing the ant against the green baize, released the pressure and everybody watched breathlessly.

It seemed that he had pressed a little too heavily, for the ant couldn't get up.

"He's plumb exhausted," said one.

"You've squashed him," said another. "Look at his forefeet wigglin' and champin'."

"He's only scratchin' his haid," said the barkeep. "Kin you blame a ant for stoppin' to think when they's nine hundred dollars at stake?"

"He ain't thinkin'! He's wrigglin' like a calf that's been roped and hog tied. Which it's my opinion that the croupier squashed him."

"He's goin' home!" cried the barber.

"No he's goin' to the water trough!" said the veterinary.

"He's ruminatin'!" said one of the onlookers. "Now he's trailin' off toward the bar."

"Which shows he's a good native son!" said the old stranger with the black sombrero.

"Consarn the pestiferous little tick! He can't make up his mind."

Plunk Reverdy had already made up his mind which way to go.

Before waiting for the momentous decision to be handed down by that ant, Plunk left the crowd, now unnoticed, and slipped out to the vestibule.

The girl with the black ringlets was waiting for him.

CHAPTER V.

NELL BROWER.

THE girl turned a curiously radiant face up toward him—radiant partly because of the oil lamp shedding amber beams upon her forehead; and because, no doubt, her skin was delicate for that sun-baked part of the country.

I imagine that some one going through a gallery of many uninteresting pictures, and lighting finally upon one that had been eagerly looked for, might have had an expression somewhat like that girl's.

Reverdy went close to her—so close that he might have counted the three light freckles recently brought out by Arizona on her chin. Plunk was a happy-go-lucky sort of fellow, and never took womenfolk very seriously. So he was not embarrassed. Besides he had been fussed over by a lot of Mule Town's feminine contingent.

He judged she was going to say something about how she enjoyed his voice.

"Do you remember me, Plunk?"

"Of course I do; You're Jackson Brower's grandchild."

"Do you remember teaching me to rope a calf out on the ranch?"

Plunk laughed. "I remember you long before that when you had two missing teeth and chapped knees and—"

"You never mentioned that then. You sang about me and called me Black-eyed Susan and Juanita and Nelly Gray and—"

"I knew you were growing up," he said, which was as big a whopper as any man ever told. If you had prophesied what that tough little ragamuffin was going to develop into Plunk would have been the last to believe.

"I'll come out with it without any hedging," she said. "I want you to go on a dangerous journey."

He answered without any hedging too. "I'll go."

"It's through the Soda Mesa Desert."

"There's nothing dangerous there," Plunk said. He added, realizing that he had stretched a point. "Not if you have plenty of water."

"The sheriff said there were bandits."

"None with clean guns," said Plunk. He burned with a desire to recount his recent very romantic experience with the deadly gentleman known as Tarante. But he was a youth of finely educated pride—a fact that always kept him from boasting. Besides he would rather have posed before her as a hero who had killed seven outlaws when they were face to face with him!

This story of shooting a man in the back was only worth telling when you could impress upon the listener the remarkable distance of the shot. And that was proverbi-

ally a point of exaggeration. It resembled, for instance, boasting of the size of a fish which had gotten away.

"My grandfather," the girl was explaining, "is a fine old gentleman of fighting stock. You saw him in there—"

Plunk nodded his head. "We all know Jackson Brower." He was about to say that the old fellow was at that moment betting large sums on the peregrinations of an ant. But the girl went on eagerly:

"He has a claim down below Soda Mesa and he's taking his whole household with him. If I told him that I was trying to pick out the best man in Mule Town to go with him across the desert and protect him he would never forgive me. But you see there will be two women with him, a little boy and two Mexican hostlers whom I don't trust."

"And you—"

"Oh, no. I'm staying here. I have work to do in Mule Town. A sort of missionary's job. I have just been appointed by the Agent to teach a school of Navajo children. Letting my poor old grandfather go out there without me has made me think a lot. He is the dearest thing in the world that I possess.

"The sheriff said he must not go alone—which made him laugh. My grandfather said he could take care of two women and a little boy—as well as any deputy the sheriff picked out. Then the sheriff came to me and talked it over. The two Mexicans, he said, would leave us the moment our water gave out. Then there are mirages and a lot of deep arroyos that get you twisted—"

"I reckon some one's told you the truth about Soda Mesa," Plunk said. "I've been born and raised in this part of the country and if you want to find out where hell is—you don't have to go any further than just beyond the first sierra you see looking toward Mexico."

"The sheriff said he would appoint a deputy. But I said I wanted to look the man over first and pick out the right man. I picked you out when I saw you making those crazy people in there dance when you had a wounded arm."

A blush went across Plunk's jovial, tanned face. It was, of course, a blush of tremendous delight.

"Well, I accept the nomination, girl."

"But, no! First I want to hear you give me your word that you'll take them through safe. No matter what happens—they must be safe. If anything should happen to my poor old granddad—"

"It won't till I'm plugged, quartered, and buried under six feet of adobe mud," said Reverdy.

She took the hand he held out. She took it gently, as if mindful that the wound he had there must still be a painful one.

"Where'll you be when I get back?" he asked bluntly.

She looked up quickly, her face lighted.

"Where we used to meet!" she said. "I remember—it was in the calf corral near the water tower."

"I'll be there a week from to-night," he said.

"So will I." Then she added the condition: "If you come with the news that granddad is safely on the other side of Soda Mesa."

This condition did not worry Plunk. He left her, his heart singing, and went in to see old Jackson Brower.

Now this interview was a delicate one. Jackson Brower had no conception that he was growing old. He could still take care of himself in the desert—as he had done for fifty years of work among miners and assay shops. He was a frontiersman dyed in the wool.

"Do you remember me, pard?" Reverdy said to him.

It was a recess in the ant game. The "court" had temporarily adjourned because of his inability to make up his mind. The ant had curled up on the baize and lay on his back trying to uncurl himself; and no amount of prodding from Jackson Brower's toothpick, or the veterinary's pencil, or the barber's corkscrew would set him on his feet.

"Do I remember you?" the old fellow said genially. "Why dad burn my hide, of course I do! Been listenin' to them fool love songs of yours all evenin'. You're Plunk Reverdy. Used to bust broncs up to my ranch." He took the youth's hand

and reached up and slapped him on the stalwart back.

"Still the same lanky young shaver—eh, Plunk? 'Cept your muscles are harder and your hide thicker."

"Well pard, I'm on my way down across the desert—maybe taking the same trail as you. I thought considering there are a lot of bad men and renegade Indians hanging around down there, we might take the trail together."

"Who's afraid of bad men and Injuns?" the old fellow snorted.

"Well, they're always starved when they get chased down that direction. Can't tell what they'll do."

Old Jackson Brower chuckled. "That beats me. A fellow of your size worryin' about Injuns. Well—still and all—Plunk I'd admire to have you in my party. Come along. I'll see that the Injuns don't hurt you."

"I'd be much obliged for that," Plunk said with diplomacy.

"I see you've got a crease thar in your arm, too," the old frontiersman observed with less of scorn. "Wouldn't want a fine young coot like you to git into trouble with Injuns and such when you cain't protect yourself. You come along."

"When do you start?"

"Sunrise. Got a good hoss? All right. It's a go. Come along. Glad to have you—and I'll see that you git through safe."

The town barber returned now:

"Are we goin' to play some more, pard?" he asked of old Brower.

"Play until mo'nin'!" said Brower.

"Good!" said the barber. "I've just been out to change my luck."

"Where you been?"

"Over to my ant-hill, to git another judge."

CHAPTER VI.

"WHO'S GOING TO GET ME?"

IN Mule Town a young man's fancy—when turning to thoughts of love—is beguiled by the palmist at the Rex Cantina.

It was late. The palmist was closing up her booth at the lower end of the dance floor. "Look here, old lady," Plunk said. "Get out your pack of cards and answer me a question: Am I going to marry a girl with black ringlets and big dark eyes, and three freckles on her chin?"

Augustina, wrinkled, gray haired witch that she was, appeared eager enough to unburden herself of a prophecy, which had been fermenting in her mind all evening.

She took Plunk's hand.

"*Por Dios!* There is blood on this hand!" she cried with considerable dramatic expression.

This did not strike Reverdy as much of a miracle in second sight, as everyone in the cantina had witnessed the fact that his hand had bled when he played that last rollicking jig on his banjo.

"You have killed a man!" the crone announced, looking up with smoldering eyes.

This was more to the point. But yet a rather simple deduction, inasmuch as Plunk had confessed to a gunfight with a "Mexican rustler."

"What I want to know, old lady," he objected, "is not what man I got—but who's going to get me. I mean who's going to marry me?"

She disregarded this, clinging tenaciously to the same thread: "It is a deadly bandit that you have sent into eternal torment."

Now this was considerably more serious. The old witch was heading for something. And Plunk had a disagreeable feeling that she knew more than she ought to.

"You shot him in the back. And he gave up the ghost, returning to hell where he was bred."

Plunk Reverdy shoved back his chair, suppressing an oath of surprise as well as anger. But he did not get up. He thrust his wounded hand out again so that her shriveled fingers could trace the lines of his palm. He would let her tell what she knew—with all the embellishments dear to her theatrical old heart.

"And you have his horse."

"Good God, *señora*, you've got some imagination."

"You think I am spinning lies—from imagination? Instead of from the fire of the gods?"

"Where do you get this idea of a horse?"

She changed her voice. Plunk himself was of the "profession." I mean he was something of an actor—just as she was. What was the use of wasting her words?

"I want to help you. To warn you. For you need help more than any other man in this world."

It was quite possible that old Augustina had a soft spot in her shabby old heart for this care-free youth.

She went on—in a completely different lingo: "Some Mexican herders told me what happened in a posada—down below Soda Mesa. Tarante, the bandit, came in with a wound in his back. He swore eternal vengeance on the man who had inflicted that wound. A sniveling coward—so he said, had hidden behind a rock and hit him at long range."

This struck Plunk to the quick, and he drew back his hand.

"Plunk Reverdy— you are a very proud youth!" old Augustina mumbled wisely. "That is the one line written in your hand more vividly than all the others. You could cut your hands this way and that with scars but you could not take away that line of pride. You could crucify your hand with a nail, but your pride would ride over the pain, and the line would still be drawn there—as it was first drawn by the Creator."

"Wonderful words, old lady," said her client. "But am I going to marry a girl with black ringlets and three—"

"One warning I will leave with you, youth, before you go out into Soda Mesa Desert. I am an old woman—and a wise one. I am the seventh daughter of a seventh son! The Witch of Endor was my ancestress.

"When I saw you look at that dark haired girl, I saw her eyes—and yours, burst into flame. I knew then that you would come to me. No, you will not find love there. That is your answer."

"You're a crazy old woman!"

"Maybe you'll ask me why?" She stopped him from leaving the table, clutching at his sleeve with her talons. "I'll tell you why. Because if you are wise you will refuse the quest she has sent you on."

"Oh, yes. Like hell."

"If you go to the desert, you will be destroyed."

Plunk Reverdy was now laughing. "Forget it, and I'll buy you a drink, and give you a couple of bucks. And we part friends, as usual."

"It is because we are friends, that I am begging you to hearken to my voice." She discarded all theatricality, and pleaded, precisely like an old woman pleading with a refractory boy—yes, even a son. Everybody, as I have said, loved Plunk Reverdy.

"My poor unfortunate youth! Condemned by the Fates and Destiny!"

He found he would have to tear his shirt to get free of those bird-like fingers.

"I am telling you once, Plunk Reverdy —and only this once: Tarante will get his revenge—as he swore he would on his death-bed."

Plunk did not think it necessary to explain to her that he had reformed on his death-bed and sent his forgiveness with a gift.

"He will get his revenge by all the gods in Heaven—and you can not escape it."

"I thought I heard you say just now, that Tarante is dead."

"Dead! Yes, of course! But *por Dios*, my dear and condemned youth! What difference can that make!"

Plunk left her peremptorily. And his shirt sleeve was torn.

But that mattered little. Rather than study Augustina the palmist, it was much more fun to observe the vagaries of the barber's, the barkeep's, and old Brower's whimsical ant.

CHAPTER VII.

THE EMBARKATION.

A STRING of horses stood, dumb and inscrutable, at the water trough in front of the Rex Cantina and Hotel. It was just before dawn, and all the shacks of Mule Town—gray formless beings with eyeless sockets—waited, likewise dumb and inscrutable.

Puma Mesa seemed to overhang the sleeping settlement. Its rugged facade of

lignite and quartz, having caught the first rays, was a livid flame of red. A great fire, so to speak, had leaped upon the town catching it unawares before sunrise. There had been an intense darkness, then—as if some witch doctor had performed a miracle —a mountain appeared right over your shoulder illuminated so clearly that every bowlder and piñon on it was clearly etched.

In the gloom below, the train of pack mules, saddle horses, covered wagon and old Jackson Brower's household goods was starting for the desert trail.

It was the first look Plunk Reverdy had of his protegés. Old Jackson and the girl had not yet appeared. But there were two Mexicans, a squat breed with Papago blood who was the horse wrangler; and a slight, poetical gentleman from Nogales with a downy mustache; who was the cook.

There was also a shriveled Kentuckian woman—something over eighty—who was Jackson Brower's aunt.

A large fleshy lady, who was always steaming except on this particular morning, which was the only time Plunk ever remembered seeing her cool, was packing fly-dope, permanganate for snake bites, a bobbinet and soap in a carpet-bag. Her son, a freckled faced lad with two missing teeth and red hair was pestering Plunk Reverdy with questions, about mules, sawback saddles derringers and kit knives.

And there was also one other character—famous in Mule Town—who for some reason or other had turned up at this most significant moment. You might liken the departure of a covered wagon and a mule train for the Soda Mesa Desert to the common scene of old days when a ship put out to sea for a distant and perilous port. It was an occasion.

And the more fuss that was made and the more ceremony about putting off—the more uncertainty seemed to arise concerning the ship ever coming back. The embarkation for Soda Mesa Desert had these dramatic attributes. Indeed, the sheriff himself rolled out of his bunk in the pitch dark, pulled on his boots, and came to the Rex Hotel to bid the party Godspeed.

He was a quiet-voiced insignificant little man standing there. But when he lit a Mexican cheroot you could see the clear blue eyes with the habitual squint from too much staring at sun-swept alkaline plains. You could see his long, gray moustache and jaw, big, red, and bristling with a white stubble. It was like a plentiful shaking of salt on raw beef.

He went to Plunk—who was answering three questions at once—propounded to him by the red haired boy.

" I'd admire for to talk to you a minute, Plunk," said the sheriff.

Reverdy knew that Sheriff Hornuff took things over—seriously, particularly when womenfolk and old men were concerned. Reverdy was his opposite. The journey was an adventure for him.

The shriveled Kentucky woman, the fat lady, the red haired boy, the wrangler and the poetic cook gathered about.

" I'm appointin' you a deputy for this here occasion," said Sheriff Hornuff with great ceremony. " And I want to know if you're totin' a gun which is clean, and a horse which you kin trust it on all occasions."

The newly appointed deputy showed his chief his six-gun—and the latter went through the performance of inspecting arms, in a truly military manner. It got everybody nervously interested—which was one of the main reasons why the sheriff insisted upon it. Of course he knew well enough that the cleanest six-gun in Mule Town would probably be found in Plunk Reverdy's holster.

" And now your horse," he said.

" You've seen the horse already—down at the Bar Ace yesterday."

" Didn't examine him careful," said the sheriff, going to the mount.

Now Sheriff Hornuff knew the horses of all the men in that range. It was a sort of Bertillon fingerprint system with him whereby he catalogued the population of Mule Town, Cobb's Coulee and the surrounding ranges. He could rarely remember a man's face, never his name, but he could always remember the horse he rode.

" Where did you git this here gray-whiskered fuzz-tail?"

" A Mex in the desert gave him to me," said Plunk, " in return for my pinto."

"H'm! Never seen him before. And he ain't no wild cuitan which has just been broke either. A gentle ole stock hoss I take it." He examined his teeth by the light of the lantern Plunk held up. Then he examined his head, his withers, his body, his legs, his hoofs. "Hoofs as hard as flint—and no shoes. A well broke stock hoss which has been runnin' wild some time I take it. He'll be good for eatin' up desert trail."

He then stood off and squinted at him as an artist examining a picture. The horse meanwhile moved toward Plunk and laid the side of his face against Plunk's shoulder.

"The gentlest hoss that ever breathed," said Plunk. "I'm goin' to let this little kid ride him for a while."

"Oh, I kin ride 'im all right," said the boy with the two missing eye teeth. "Ain't no doubt about me handlin' 'im."

"Well, he passes muster," adjudged the sheriff. "All right get to your mounts and tell old Brower we're ready." Sheriff Hornuff drew Plunk aside.

"Now then Plunk, your hoss and your weapon satisfies me—And now I'm wonderin' about *you*."

"That's kind of a ornery statement, chief," Plunk said with something of a chip on his shoulder.

The other went on earnestly: "I want to impress on you, my boy, that this ain't no play—like for instance playin' songs and gettin' all the cantina gals to fall in love with you.

"In plain terms, Plunk, I'm trustin' you with the life of that thar old thoroughbred, Jackson Brower. And of the old lady in the covered wagon there fussin' with her carpet-bags; and of the boy, too, and of his man; and of the two Mex mozos, which they ain't overly important.

"If anything happens to the Mexes we might let you off on extenuatin' circumstances. But concernin' that gal's granddad, they ain't no extenuatin' circumstances if anything happens to him. I had a talk with her—and I give her my word that you would handle this thing right."

"I gave her my word likewise, chief," Plunk said.

They shook. And as the sheriff's hand grasped Plunk's the latter felt for the first time the seriousness of his mission. Old Sheriff Hornuff must have imparted a vital sort of responsibility through his handclasp. He had succeeded in making the happy-go-lucky Plunk feel anxious for the safety of six human lives!

When they next met each other Reverdy and old Hornuff did not shake hands.

CHAPTER VIII.

SODA MESA DESERT.

SODA MESA DESERT was a land the buzzards had some time since forsaken.

It was a panorama of splintered peaks, mesas of gray slack banded with glaring red and yellow strata; arroyos that even a coyote would get lost in. If a coyote ventured beyond the first jagged sierra all he would have to do to get a meal was to find a prospector.

No need for the coyote or lobo to get excited during the hunt. Just trail him and he would lie down and die sooner or later. The problem was how was the scavenger himself to get out of the desert after his feast?

Three desert wolves and seven coyotes went down there once in a band. They were following a handful of unfortunate travelers—human beings, who, according to the general rule of Soda Mesa Desert were doomed to lie down and die before a given number of days had elapsed.

But this band of loboes and coyotes had already learned by experience that to go far into the desert meant trouble for themselves as well as for the human beings. Particularly at this season of which I write, when the water-holes were all turned to bowls of salt.

When I say loboes and coyotes, I speak figuratively. I do not actually mean desert wolves. The band I speak of is a band of renegades. The three loboes are three white men of more or less mixed breed; the seven coyotes are seven Indians.

I had something of an aversion to calling these incarnations of ferocity and cowar-

dice human beings. But such they were, although it disgraces my race to say so. The orneriest, hell-diving mustang ever roped has something more of nobility about him than these renegades.

And they were not entirely unusual in Soda Mesa Desert. You mix Mexican and Papago blood and you have a measly and dirty sort of fellow. Mix a Mexican with an Apache and you have one that is measly, dirty and also insolent.

One of these breeds was delegated by his companions to circle around the band of unfortunate travelers who had just come from Mule Town and then ride toward them as if he were a lone wanderer from the desert. They chose for this mission a gnarled old man with high cheekbones, skin like brown paper that has been crumpled, and long dry fingers like strands of unwound cordage with knots in them for knuckles.

As he was bidden, he hid his pinto in a certain arroyo, then leading a burro packed with a few cans, kyacks, pick ax and pan, he approached the travelers who had come into his domain.

The little caravan, he noticed, had encamped in the shade of a few bowlders and yuccas. A fire of mesquite roots was sending up a thick pungent smoke into the still air. A poetical looking Mexican with cow's eyes and a downy mustache was cooking. Another was unsaddling horses and mules. A very old bent woman was rummaging for cans in the floor of a prairie schooner.

A tall man with black sombrero, and silvery hair that fell to his shoulders, appeared to be the chief of the outfit. He was smoking a corncob and looking philosophically at the glaring red of the surrounding mesas. A fat, apoplectic woman was already gorging herself with the first strips of bacon from the poetical cook's pan. A small red-headed boy, with something of worship in his fox eyes, was watching a gaunt, brown-haired youth. This latter was plunking at a banjo and singing:

"Oh, Canteen Nell was a jolly old soul,
A jolly old soul was she!
And when she danced, she toted a gun,
Which same was intended for me!"

The tall, silvery haired man with the eagle eyes, studying the red and yellow strata of surrounding cliffs, was not the first to notice the sudden approach of a stranger through the thick chaparral. He had no idea that any human being—other than his companions—was in that desert cañon.

The man who first saw the little stranger with the high cheekbones and the rope like fingers, was no other than the youth playing with happy abandon at the banjo.

"And when she danced she toted a gun,
Which same was intended for me!
But hell for leather was lots of fun—"

The banjo—and the singing voice stopped. The performer called out:

"Holloa there, hombre! I saw you when you were coming down through the divide! Get away from the hostile side of that jack, sling your holster over it, and have a drink of water."

A second look at this old wanderer convinced everybody in the party that he was not exactly the man you would want to drink with. And furthermore, Plunk Reverdy had had a very disagreeable experience with just such a character, not so very long ago.

But the first law of the desert was bred deep in Plunk's blood and bone. A stranger must have half your food and your water—if he is in need.

"But there is plenty of water, *señor*," the shriveled gnome said, "just yonder across the divide."

"Well I'm glad to know it," said Plunk. "You've already done us a good turn telling us that. So fall to if you're hungry."

"I am hungry, *señor*. You are my pard—and master, from this day on."

"I might be your pard and master while you're eating," said Plunk. "But from then on I don't expect to ever see you again. So get to your feed, then vamose."

The rest of the party were very much of Plunk's opinion—except in the one detail of letting him have anything to eat at all.

The cook's bovine eyes seemed to take on something of human malice. He kept the bowie knife, with which he had been slicing the bacon, menacingly ready. The wrangler herded his horses together as if on the slightest provocation this desert wolf would make off with one. Which was if

not a just supposition, most certainly a true one.

Old Jackson Brower watched the stranger from under beetling white brows. No one should eat while such a tramp was eating. A ridiculous procedure—inviting him to stop! Just like a sentimental banjo-player. Besides whose food was it anyway?

"Outrageous!" said the damp, melted fat lady. "The idea of holding up our supper for that old wretch!"

The "wretch" said nothing while he ate. He watched every one—something after the manner of a dog with a bone, looking up under tangled horse-hair eyebrows, as if ready to growl if any one approached too close.

There was complete silence while he ate. When I say silence I except the sloughing and munching and slobbering of the tramp's mastication. Every one watched with apparent disgust; the old woman with fear. The red-headed boy stood legs akimbo, his big mouth widened in a grin that showed the sockets of the lost eye-teeth.

Jackson Brower watched fiercely, like an eagle waiting for the remnants of a feast; the plump damp woman, who was the hungriest, fumed and sweated. The cook stood by with his knife. Plunk Reverdy took his banjo and was about to play—but he found he could not.

He remembered having served music with meals once before!

When the guest finished, he wiped his mouth with his dry, ropy hand, and said:

"I'm thankin' you-all. I won't forgit. Won't offer you nothin' bein' you're gents and ladies and wouldn't take same. But I kin at least show my thanks by offerin' this here Mex cook a tip."

He gave the cook the "tip" bowing to him with mock obsequiousness. The cook looked at him fearfully, the whites of his bovine eyes showing like a cow that hears the whirr of the lariat.

The tip was a rawhide bag which on examination proved to contain a bit of gold dust in the seams. Cleaning it out carefully would give enough for a haircut, drink and tamale in Horner's cantina back at Mule Town.

By the time the cook had counted his money, so to speak, the departing guest was on the trail.

The whole crowd watched him; for he had an air. Furthermore two days had elapsed since they had seen a human soul other than themselves. And each one, by now, was getting heartily sick of everybody else.

"Oh, Canteen Nell was a jolly old soul.
A jolly old soul was she!"

"You don't seem to have learned yet, Mr. Banjo-player, that I'm not musical in my nature," old Jackson Brower said, with a venomous glance at Plunk.

"I thought you said you brought him along so's we could have music around the campfire?" the red-headed boy objected.

"So I did!" the old man growled. "But the air's gettin' too hot and stuffy to have it vibratin' with banjo chords."

"Maw said the banjo-player come along for to protect us agin Injuns," shouted the red-headed boy, turning his fox-eyes adoringly to Plunk.

Plunk realized that this was heading straight for a fight. And old Brower would have fought—there's no doubt about that. He would have rolled up his sleeves, brushed his silvery hair away from his eyes, and lit in like a hot-headed schoolboy. And he was about to do it if you could judge by his flaming face.

"I think I'll eat," said Plunk, putting his banjo away.

He ate, and as he ate he watched the dwindling form of the desert tramp going up there on the zigzag trail to the cañon rim, followed by his pack burro.

When Plunk was through with his meal, he rolled a cigarette, lay in the sand and felt comfortable; so comfortable that he was in danger of bursting out in song. But there was Jackson Brower peering at him maliciously from under the black rim of his sombrero.

Instead of playing, Plunk looked up in the direction which their "guest" had taken. The desert renegade was just now climbing to the rim. A moment later he had disappeared over the divide.

His visit had left a bad taste in Plunk's mouth. It reminded him of that extremely

disagreeable adventure with the outlaw Tarante.

In fact, the gnarled old tramp had had a gleam in his red eyes very much like Tarante's. Plunk could not get those eyes out of his mind. Nor could he get the eyes of the Mexican cook out of his mind. He evoked the picture of them widening until the muddy whites showed at that moment when the tramp had given him the " tip ".

This cook with the poetical face and cow's eyes came over to Plunk right now.

" I had to wait," he pleaded. " He said I would be kill'. *Por Dios,* in fear of death I must wait till he was out of your reach. Then he said I must give you thees."

To the amazement of Plunk and all the rest of the outfit, the Mex handed him a note.

" *He* gave you this!" Plunk repeated. " Why didn't you read it?"

" Please, *señor,* I don' can read."

" And why did you say you didn't give it to me right off the bat?"

" That hombre said I would be kill'. He whisper to me while you all stood to watch. What terrible crime have I commit', *señor,* when I am threaten' with death itself—"

But Plunk Reverdy was reading the note.

We havent nothin agin you Reverdy.

He read that first sentence partly aloud. But then he went on rapidly to himself:

We dont like your shootin-iron, which same we respect, but you get outen the way. if you mozey off a ways and stay off, we wont touch you. but them others in yore outfit we intend to raid. if you stay might youll shoot down three or four of us. but we got planty of men to spare. if you beat it and leave them to us, why theyll be less blood shed and the raid will be pulled off gentlemenlike.

Reverdy's face was white. It was the pallor that comes of a terrific shock. His feelings must have been, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the feelings of fear for the safety of his protegés—and then of a consuming rage.

Whoever these renegades were, they were certainly yellow-livered skunks to think they could put up a proposition like that to any man! Trying to dicker with the one dangerous member of the outfit, so that they could fall upon their prey without a fight! It was such a dastardly trick that Plunk's first insane desire was to take a bowie knife, find them, and rip their yellow vitals out.

He crumpled the paper in his fist as if he were squeezing the life out of a man's throat.

" What's the note say?" old Brower demanded.

" Never mind what it says!" Reverdy cried, his lips trembling in his rage. He tore it up, throwing the pieces wide into the mesquite.

Next he jumped for his horse. Not the pinto he had been riding, but his own gentle riding gift-horse which he had loaned to the red-headed kid. He wanted a horse that could cover that zigzag trail up to the cañon rim where that nasty little gnome had disappeared. He would be the first one to kill. And most surely a horse could overtake a man and a burro.

" Where you goin?" Old Brower asked.

" I'm going to plug that coyote," said Reverdy. " And as for you all—you're going straight home. So pack up. But don't hit the trail 'til I come back. Stay right here in the cañon bed so I can keep you in sight!"

" Who are you to order us back, Mr. Banjo-player!" Brower roared.

But Reverdy was galloping off.

The Mex wrangler was close herding his horses between the covered wagon; the Mex cook was crossing himself and praying to many saints.

Old Brower was scratching his silvery hair and swearing.

The red-headed kid was jumping about excitedly, gleefully, yelling questions at the top of his lungs:

" What-all's happened, maw? Why's he ridin' off that-away? What was in that note? Why was he so white? Why was his lips a-tremblin'? Why are the Mexes' knees shakin' that-away for?"

His mother, fat and puffing, her crimson face streaming, had gotten to her hands and knees in the sand and was searching about diligently for something in the mesquite patch.

"Shut up and help me find these pieces of paper," she ordered. "And we'll find out the answer!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE DEAD TARANTE SPEAKS.

NOW if we analyzed Plunk Reverdy's act, which was the act of a moment, we could build up enough propositions and paragraphs to cover several hours of discussion or reading. The main thing to remember is that he followed his first impulse—which overcame him on the spur of the moment—the impulse to chase that little coyote and punish him for daring to make such a cowardly offer.

You must not forget that Reverdy had a very sensitive pride. He took that note as a personal insult. Those renegades had made a proposition which showed that they thought he might conceivably be a coward himself. It was enough! He went hell-bent to show them how much of a coward he was!

Of course he was not fool enough to think that he would let his protégés out of his sight. That under the circumstances would be criminal negligence. He had come now to regard them as a hen regards her chickens. Plunk would go off for a little distance for a worm, perhaps, but he would not let his helpless little chickens out of his sight.

An older and more cautious man might have ordered his outfit to intrench, while he went scouting up to the cañon rim in the hopes of finding some trace of the enemy. That would have been wise. No use in ordering them to flee home without some idea of the enemy's position. They might bump right into an ambush.

Then again, a very old and very cautious man might have ordered them to intrench and have remained with them. But this would have invited disaster. To wait there with a limited supply of water until you were attacked was ridiculous. Plunk Reverdy had heard somewhere of that military axiom which stipulates that in an engagement with a larger force the right move is to make the attack yourself.

Thus in analysis Plunk did what was right, although he did it not after any analysis whatsoever, but in a moment of blind rage. He went after that sniveling coyote, with a reasonable guess that the enemy was in that direction.

Their emissary, the twisted little tramp, would most probably go back to them for protection, inasmuch as he had no ostensible means of escape aside from his own feet and a pack burro.

As Plunk was chasing him, he felt that he was going to meet the enemy alone—and have it out.

Furthermore, as I have said, he kept an eye on his outfit down there in the cañon bed, and comforted himself with the feeling that those bowlders, which had served them as shade, offered the protection of intrenchments—yes, of a fort.

But now as he urged his horse to the very limit of the old fellow's strength to the rim of the cañon, Plunk began to think more and more. His own hurt pride at being approached by cowards was of less and less importance. The safety of the outfit—for which he was responsible to the sheriff, to civilization, to God, and to that girl—became of terrific and vital moment.

He looked back again. There they were. And the cañon was a scene of sun-baked peace. The floor was simmering; the stretches of sand were like white-hot iron. Beyond were imitation lakes of blue water which the fierce glow of the afternoon had evoked. To one side was an arroyo, well choked with cactus, mesquite and other chaparral which the few hours of sun which entered that narrow defile could not destroy.

Reverdy had just estimated that a lot of men could hide in that arroyo with their horses, when he saw the man he was chasing.

The little old bandit had just crossed a slight depression beyond the rim of the cañon, had come up on the other side, and was now riding a horse. He had tricked Plunk pretty well in making the latter think that he had no means of escape aside from that jackass.

It would take scarcely two minutes to urge his horse down that depression and

up the other side. In that two minutes Plunk would lose sight of his outfit. But what's two minutes? What's two minutes when you're hell-bent on killing a man?

Plunk dove down, with the one thought in his mind of plugging that measly little tick. When you're going to kill a man, I imagine, it is hard to think two or three different things at the same time. Anyhow, there he went.

Down the adobe banks he went, tearing through thorn bushes until his shirt was ripped and his horse was scratched cruelly. Now that horse was in some respects like the most famous pack animal in all history. I mean Balaam's ass. Balaam's ass, it will be remembered, turned around to his rider and made a remark to the effect that he was being urged to do something that was not possible for any pack animal to do.

Similarly this gift horse turned his white-specked, lugubrious face about and looked at Plunk out of the corner of his eyes. Plunk never forgot it, although at that moment it gave him no pause whatsoever. He dug his heels into the old critter's flanks, urged him through the cactus and up the other bank.

He reached it in time to see his victim galloping off in a cloud of alkali, across the flat top of the mesa rim. He didn't seem to be of any mind to turn around and look behind him either. He went tearing off, low crouched, without so much as trying to fire at his enemy. Probably he thought that he was well out of range. But he was not.

Reverdy fired. And the shot went home. In what part of the bandit it lodged there was no telling. Suffice it to say the renegade rolled from his saddle into a patch of purple sage. He lay there convulsed, arching up like a snake that has been crushed amidships, and then fell down flat again.

A lot of things happened in the next few moments.

The whole episode of that renegade getting almost out of reach and then falling reminded Plunk of the shooting of the bandit Tarante. And that horse Plunk was riding, turning around and looking out of the corner of his big brown eyes with the most human look of accusation Plunk had ever seen, reminded him of the bandit Tarante likewise. Perhaps this was because Tarante was the giver of the horse.

And then Plunk thought of the strange prophecy of Augustina, the palmist. It all came at once—all these visions arising at the same instant like two photographs mixed up on one film. Plunk visualized the seamed, canny face of Augustina as he had seen it a few nights ago at the Rex Cantina.

Why he thought of her now he never knew. But he saw her speaking to him, as distinctly as if she were face to face: "Tarante is dead! Yes, of course! But, *por Dios*, what difference can that make?"

Yes, Tarante, the bandit he had killed, was going to get his revenge. How, no one in the world could have guessed. But Plunk knew it was coming. Perhaps it was just the fraction of a second before it came; but he knew it.

The horse made a peculiar, stumbling movement. It was like a ship dipping into a storm before you can either see the swell of the sea or feel the wind.

I have tried to describe how the depression in the cañon rim, which Plunk had just crossed, prevented him for the space of two minutes from keeping his eye on his outfit—his helpless chickens down there in the cañon bed.

Of course he looked back the instant after he had plugged the fugitive renegade. Now as he looked back he saw one of them —the fat woman—waving a red Navaho blanket.

She was waving to him.

He scowled, pulling his sombrero brim down so as to shade his eyes. Yes, she was waving frantically. And so was the little red-headed boy. And the old Kentucky woman was waving with empty hands as if she were a jointed wooden figure being pulled rapidly by a string. One of the Mexicans was crawling under the covered wagon; another was sneaking off to a horse.

Old Brower, the most conspicuous figure because of his black sombrero—although he seemed no larger than a black ant—was leading the cavy of horses and mules to the protection of a row of giant bowlders.

Reverdy waved back to them.

Then a shot rang out. Plunk saw far down there, in what looked like a dead flat patch of sage, a series of twinkling lights, followed by sharp pistol shots, like a man away off on the other side of the cañon cracking a horsewhip.

The whole scene had come as such an overwhelming tragedy that Plunk's heart fairly stopped beating. Then he gave a quick yank at his mount's head, turning it sharply about so as to wheel the horse and dive again into that depression through which he had just come.

The horse tensed up to throw back. Aside from that first little stumbling lurch, which I have described as the uncertain dip of a ship's prow into a coming storm, Plunk had no idea in the world what was about to happen.

And he couldn't believe what happened either. Nor did any one else that he ever told.

In a word, that gift horse of Tarante's turned in the blink of an eye from a gentle old stockhorse into a catamount, into a man-killing puma, into a demon. He started in on a series of cork-screwing bucks, the first of which loosened Plunk from his seat, and the last of which nearly loosened his head from his body.

Plunk had no doubt in his mind now what had happened. In fact, he thought he had figured it out fairly quick. But when he tightened his knees in an attempt to regain his seat he didn't find anything to tighten them against. He was on the sand instead of on the horse's back, and above him was a demon rearing up against the sun, poising to land on his victim's chest with his forefeet.

Plunk rolled. The revolver which he had clung to tenaciously all this time was knocked out of his arm with a sledgehammer blow. The sledgehammer was the flint-like, desert-hardened hoof of the horse. The victim did not stop rolling; he went on down the sand bank, through the cactus, over a ridge, into a ditch, while that brute up there on the edge of the bank looked down at him, teeth bared, eyes flashing red, more like the eyes of a madman than of a horse.

But Reverdy landed comfortably against a bowlder, which erased all the details of that hideous picture—the tossing mane, the bared yellow teeth, the rolling eyes, the snorting nostrils, the murderous hoofs.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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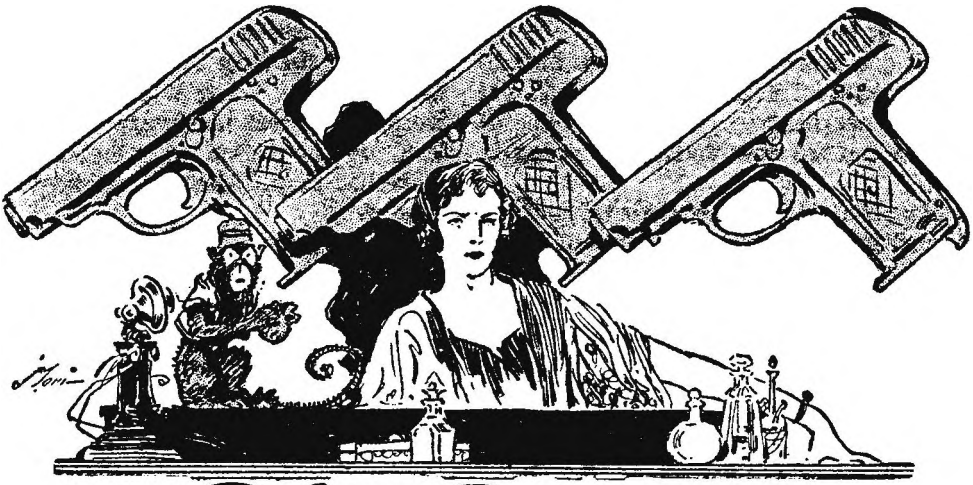
FORWARD, MARCH!

A BREAKFAST o' beans an' a lunch o' the same!
A nightmare o' drillin'—you march till you're lame—
A shavetail lieutenant to put you to shame:
What say you? The life wouldn't harm me?
Then what o' the battle? The reek o' the smoke?
The groans o' the wounded? A dyin' man's choke?
I live if I'm lucky—if not, then I croak!
Sure! Three cheers for a life in the army!

The whine of a kris in the hands of a spick—
I'll die if I'm slow an' I'll live if I'm quick!
It don't make no diff'rence what duty I pick
Nor what might turn up to alarm me—
I gotta be brave through what fights I can't tell—
I'm paid just to fight, an' I gotta fight well;
But livin' in "civvies" is my dream o' hell—
So I guess I'll just stick to the army!

Robert Leslie Bellem.



The Three Thirty-Twos

By HULBERT FOOTNER

Author of "Madame Storey in the Toils," "The Under Dogs," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

FAY BRUNTON was one of those stars who suddenly shine out on Broadway in full effulgence, and are almost as quickly darkened. Most people will remember her name, but I doubt if many could name the parts in which she appeared. But to those of us who knew her, she remains a vivid and lovely memory; she was so beautiful! And that was not all of it; beauty is not uncommon on Broadway: it was her great sweetness of nature that endeared her to us; her girlishness; her simplicity.

She was not a great actress; her smile was her passport to popular favor. She had only to come out on the stage and smile—and she was always smiling—for the house to be hers.

She was so plainly enjoying herself you see; and in her smile there was a confident expectation of friendliness that touched the hardest heart. In the ruthless and artificial world that centers on Broadway, a thing so sweet and natural was simply irresistible. In a single season the whole town took Fay Brunton to its breast.

My employer, Madame Storey, who knows everybody in the great world, had become acquainted with Fay, and through her I had met the girl. By degrees, I can hardly say how, Fay and I had become intimate friends. She brought color and incident into my life. To a plain jane like me, she was simply marvelous. I was the recipient of all her charming confidences—or nearly all; and as well as I could, I

steered her with my advice among the pitfalls that beset a popular favorite.

For one in the limelight she was incredibly ignorant of evil. And you could not bear to put her wise to the ugly side of life. I can see now that I was wrong in this.

How bitterly I regretted that I had not warned her against Darius Whittall in the beginning. But I had thought that her natural goodness would protect her. Goodness, however, is apt to be blind. Whittall's name had been connected with Fay's for several months now, but he was only one of many. I had hoped that one of the young men would win out; particularly one who was called Frank Esher, a fine fellow.

I banked on the fact that Fay had been shy about mentioning his name in her confidences. As for Whittall, he was a notorious evil liver. It was not what he had *done* however, but what he *was*; black evil lurked in his eyes. His wife had committed suicide some weeks before. To me he was no better than a murderer.

How well I remember the morning that Fay came to our office to tell us. It must have been November, for the trees in Gramercy Park had shed their leaves, though the grass was still green. This was during Fay's second season when she was appearing with huge success in "Wild Hyacinth." She came in beaming, and I marked the gleam of a new pearl necklace under her partly opened sables. What a vision of youthful loveliness she made, sparkling with a childlike excitement! One thought of a little girl who had been promised a treat.

She had Mrs. Brunton with her. This lady was not her real mother, but an aging actress whom Fay had rescued from a cheap boarding-house, and set up as her official chaperone. Such an arrangement is not unusual on the stage. Mrs. Brunton was a typical stage mamma; over-dressed over-talkative; a foolish woman, but devoted to Fay, and people put up with her on that account.

When Fay came to call, business was dropped for the time being. I took her in to my mistress. What a complement they made to each other! That one so dark and tall and wise; the other simple, fair and girlish. Alongside my regal mistress, the girl looked the least bit colorless, but that was inevitable. There is only one Madame Storey. Fay was not aware that she suffered by comparison with the other, and if she had been, I doubt if she would have minded.

Mrs. Brunton was in a great flutter. "Oh, I hope we're not interrupting anything important! Fay couldn't wait a minute! What I have been through since last night you wouldn't believe! I didn't sleep a wink! And then to be hauled out of my bed at eight o'clock! *Eight o'clock!* And dragged here half-dressed. Is there a mirror anywhere? I know I'm a sight—!"

And so on; and so on. The exasperating thing about that woman was that her talk never meant anything. She surrounded herself with a cloud of words. Nobody ever paid any attention to what she said. Talk with her was a sort of nervous habit like biting the finger nails.

Meanwhile Mme. Storey was gazing into Fay's face with searching kindness. Nervously pulling off one of her gloves, the girl mutely exhibited the third finger of her left hand. I caught a glimpse of an emerald that took my breath away.

"Who is it?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Darius Whittall," she murmured.

It was a horrible shock to me. Fortunately no one was looking at me at the moment. The thought of seeing my friend in all her youth and loveliness handed over to that *murderer*—for such he was in all essentials—was more than I could bear. The bottom seemed to drop out of my world.

Mme. Storey's face showed no change upon hearing the announcement, though she must have known Darius Whittall better than I did. She infolded the girl in her arms, and murmured her good wishes in Fay's ear.

Meanwhile Mrs. Brunton was talking away like steam puffing out of a boiling kettle. I perceived a certain glint of anxiety in the old lady's eye; she knew that Darius Whittall was no paragon for a husband. But he was so rich! so rich! who could blame a mother? She was relieved

when Mme. Storey appeared to make no difficulties about the match.

"Well, I never thought he'd be the one!" said Mme. Storey with an appearance of great cheerfulness.

"Neither did I," said Fay laughing.

"Are you dreadfully in love with him?"

"I suppose so—I don't know. Don't ask me to examine my feelings!"

"Look at her!" cried Mrs. Brunton. "Isn't that enough? Radiantly happy!"

"But if you're going to marry the man," said Mme. Storey laughing, "surely you must know the state of your feelings!"

"I want to marry him," said Fay quickly. "Very much. I suppose it's because he needs me so."

Mme. Storey's expression said: "Hum!" But she did not utter it. She asked when it was going to be.

"Soon," said Fay. "There's no reason for delay. It will be very quiet, of course."

"Of course," said Mme. Storey.

Fay seemed to feel that some further explanation was required. "It's true his wife has only been dead two months," she said. "But as Darius pointed out, she had not been a real wife to him for years before that."

"Poor woman!" said Madame Storey.

We all echoed that. "Poor woman!"

By this time I was aware that my mistress was not any better pleased with Fay's announcement than I had been; but she was too wise to burst out with her objections as I might have done.

"Why do you suppose she killed herself?" she said thoughtfully.

"Oh, don't you know?" said Fay. "She was in love with somebody else. Darius talks about her so nicely. He offered to let her divorce him, but she wouldn't because of her religion. A Catholic, you know. I suppose she could see no way but to end it all. Darius honors her for it."

"Oh, don't talk about it!" cried Mrs. Brunton. "Don't let that cloud darken this happy day! How that poor man has suffered. And such a gentleman with it all. Such delicacy! I could tell you things about him! But never mind!"

What has he given *her?* I thought.

Fay and Mme. Storey ignored her interruption. "But *I* think," the former went on with gentle censure, "that she ought to have considered what a dreadful blow it would be to her husband."

"Still," said Mme. Storey dryly, "if she had not done it, you would not be marrying him now."

"No-o," said Fay innocently. "I suppose not. Of course Darius is going to sell the house at Riverdale," she continued with an involuntary shiver. "I shouldn't care to live there where it happened."

Mme. Storey struck out on a new line. "Well! Well!" she said, "what a poor guesser I am! Frank Esher was the one I backed."

I saw a spark of animosity leap out of the old woman's eye. I suppose it occurred to her that my seemingly candid mistress was trying to gum her game.

"Oh, Frank Esher!" said Fay pettishly. "Don't speak of him!"

"He was *so* good-looking!" said Mme. Storey dreamily.

"Good-looking, yes," said Fay with some heat. "But impossible! You don't know! Oh, impossible!"

"I liked him," said Mme. Storey, "because there seemed to be a genuine fire in him. Most young fellows are so tame! I should have thought he would make a wonderful lover."

Fay, silenced, looked at her with rather a stricken expression in the candid blue eyes.

Mrs. Brunton rushed in to fill the breach. "Fire!" she snorted. "Preserve us from that kind of fire. That's all *I* have to say. I don't speak of his rudeness to me. I am nobody. He treated Fay as if she was just an ordinary girl. No sense of the difference in their positions. A dreadful young man! He spoiled everything. So different from Mr. Whittall. He is such a gentleman. You never catch him making a vulgar display of his feelings!"

Fay had recovered her speech. "That incident is closed," she said. "Frank was simply a thorn in my side."

But Mme. Storey would not let Frank drop. "By the way, what has become of him?" she asked. "I haven't seen him for ages."

"We quarreled," said Fay with an impatient shrug. "He was always quarreling with me. He said that would be the last time, and he went away somewhere. Peru or China or somewhere. Nobody knows where he's gone. Now I have a little peace"

But the look in her eyes belied her words.

There was a lot more talk. Like every young girl when she first gets herself engaged, Fay could hardly speak a sentence without bringing in the name of her lover. One would have thought Darius was the Oracle. It was absurd and it was piteous.

Darius had no objection to her finishing out the run of "Wild Hyacinth." But after this season of course she would retire. Darius had bought a town house. No, not a big place on the Avenue; Darius hated show. A dear little house in the East Seventies; Darius had said that was the smartest thing now. Very plain outside, and a perfect bower within. Like a French *maisonnette*. Darius had such original ideas. And so on.

When they got up to go, Fay said to me wistfully: "You haven't congratulated me, Bella."

What was I to say? The tears sprang to my eyes. Fortunately she considered that the emotion was suitable to the circumstances. "Oh, I want you to be happy! I want you to be happy!" I stammered.

The words did not please her. She withdrew herself away from my arms somewhat coldly.

II.

WHEN the door closed behind them I broke down. Mme. Storey looked at me sympathetically. "Ah, Bella, you are very fond of her, aren't you?" she murmured. "This is damnable!"

In my eagerness I involuntarily clasped my hands. "Ah, but you won't—you won't let it go on!" I implored her.

"I?" she said in great surprise. "How on earth could I stop it, my dear?"

"Oh, but you could! you could!" I wailed. "You can do anything!"

She shook her head. "As an outsider I have no business to interfere. And anyhow my better sense tells me it would be worse than useless. If I said a word to her against her Darius, she'd rush off and marry him the same day. You saw how she looked at you just now. No! it's a tragedy, but it's beyond our mending. If I have learned anything it is that we cannot play Providence in the lives of others. We can only look on and pity her—"

"That's what your head says," I murmured. "What about your heart?"

She rose, and began to pace the long room. "Ah, don't drag in heart," she said, almost crossly one would have thought; "I can't set out to save every foolish girl who is determined to make a mess of her life!"

"I can't bear it!" I said.

She continued to walk up and down the long room. That room had been expressly chosen for its length, so that she could pace it while she was thinking. How well it suited her! the bare and beautiful apartment, with its rare old Italian furnishings and pictures.

She herself was wearing a Fortuny gown adapted from the same period; and when you turned your back to the windows which looked out on matter-of-fact New York, you were transported right back to sixteenth century Florence.

I felt that anything more I might say would only damage my suit, so I remained silent. But I couldn't stop the tears from running down. Mme. Storey looked at me uneasily every time she turned.

"We must get to work," she said crossly. I obediently took up my note book. "Oh, well," she said in a different tone. "For your sake, Bella—" She returned to her desk, and took the telephone receiver off its hook. "We'll see if we cannot dig up something in the circumstances surrounding Mrs. Whittall's death, that will give this foolish girl cause to stop and think what she is doing."

She called up police headquarters. "Rumsey," she said, "do you remember the case of Mrs. Darius Whittall who killed herself about two months ago? Well, I suppose there was an inquest or investigation of some sort, and that the findings are on file somewhere. Come and see me this

afternoon, will you? And bring the papers with you. I want to go over them with you—I'll tell you when I see you—Thanks, at four then. Good-by."

Our worthy friend arrived promptly to his hour. Inspector Rumsey was not a distinguished-looking man, but he was true blue. His methods were not brilliant, but patient and industrious, and he was always superior to the political considerations which have been known to sway some of the officials of his department. He owed part of his reputation perhaps, to his friendship for my mistress, who often helps him with the more subtle points of his cases. He in return, I need hardly say, is able to render us the most valuable assistance.

The papers he laid before my mistress told a simple and straightforward tale. On the night of Sunday, September 11th, Mrs. Whittall had dined alone at their place in Riverdale. Her husband was dining with friends in the city. After dinner, that is to say about nine thirty, she had complained of the heat, and had asked her maid, Mary Thole, for a light wrap, saying that she would walk in the grounds for a few minutes. Almost immediately after she left the house, the sound of a shot was heard. Everybody in the house heard it, since the windows were all open.

The butler and the second man rushed out to the spot whence it came, which was a little pavilion or summer house placed on a slight knoll overlooking the river, about two hundred yards from the house. They found the body of their mistress lying at full length on the gravel outside the entrance to the pavilion.

She had evidently fallen with considerable force, for her hair was partly down, the hair pins lying about. An ornamental comb which she wore was found about four feet from her body. One of her slippers was off. So it was judged that she had shot herself within the pavilion, and had fallen backwards down the three steps.

There was a bullet hole in her right temple, and so far as the servants could judge she was already dead. The revolver was still lying in her partly opened hand. Upon a microscopic examination of the gun, later, the finger-prints upon it were proved to be those of Mrs. Whittall's fingers.

The body was immediately carried into the house and laid upon her bed. The family physician was summoned. The powder marks around the wound could be seen by all. In his confusion and excitement, the butler felt that he ought to notify his master of what had happened before sending for the police. Nobody in the house knew where Mr. Whittall was dining that night, and the butler started telephoning around to his clubs, and to the houses of his most intimate friends in the endeavor to find him.

He could not get any word of him. He was still at the telephone when Mr. Whittall returned home. This would be about eleven. Mr. Whittall's first act was to telephone to the local police station. He upbraided the butler for not having done so at once. A few minutes later the police were in the house.

Mrs. Whittall's own maid had identified the revolver as one belonging to her mistress. She had testified that she had seen nothing strange in the behavior of her mistress before she left the house. So far as she could tell, there was nothing special on her mind. She was a very quiet lady, and saw little company. She had left no letter in explanation of her act. Not more than a minute or so could have elapsed between the time she left the house and the sound of the shot, so she must have proceeded direct to the pavilion and done the deed. Indeed it happened so quickly it seemed as if she must have run there.

The doctor testified that Mrs. Whittall was dead when he saw her. Death must have been instantaneous. The bullet had passed through her brain and was lodged against the skull on the other side from the point of entrance. Questioned as to her possible reasons for the deed, he said he knew of none. The dead woman was in normal health, and though he had known her for many years, and was a friend, she did not often have occasion to send for him in a professional capacity.

She seemed normal in mind. He admitted, though, that she might have been seriously disturbed without his knowing any-

thing of it, since she was a very reticent woman, who spoke very little about her affairs.

Mr. Whittall testified that the revolver found in the dead woman's hand was one which he had given to his wife some three months previously. It was a Matson make, thirty-two calibre, an automatic of the latest pattern. She had not asked for a revolver. He had given it to her of his own motion, believing that every woman ought to have the means of defending herself at hand.

He did not know for sure if she had ever practiced shooting it, but he believed not. Only one shot had been fired from it. He understood that she had kept it in the top drawer of the chiffonier in her room, but he had never seen it there. He did not notice anything unwonted in her behavior on that day, or he never would have left her alone. It was true, though, that she had suffered from periods of deep depression. She brooded on the fact that she had no children, and looked forward with dread to a childless old age.

Such, in effect, were the contents of the papers spread before us.

"Merely a perfunctory investigation, of course," said Inspector Rumsey. "Nobody suspected there might be something peculiar in the case. Nobody wished to turn up anything peculiar."

"I had hoped that there would be enough in these papers to accomplish my purpose," said Mme. Storey gravely. "By showing them to a certain person, I mean. But there is *too much!* We must dig farther into this business. It is not a job that I look forward to!"

"What can you expect to do now, after two months?" said the inspector.

"Oh, there are plenty of leads. Firstly: if Mr. Whittall was dining in New York that night, it is strange that he should have arrived home in Riverdale as early as eleven."

"Right!"

"Secondly: if it was such a warm night, why should Mrs. Whittall have called for a wrap? When one steps outside to cool off, one doesn't wrap up. It is indicated that she meant to stay out awhile."

"Right!"

"Thirdly: Whittall's explanation of his wife's alleged depression is mere nonsense. It is a simple matter for a rich woman to adopt a child if she is lonely."

The inspector nodded.

"Fourthly: when a person shoots himself dead one of two things happens. Occasionally the grip on the gun is spasmodic, and remains fixed in death. More often in the act of death all the muscles relax. In that case when she fell from the steps the gun would have been knocked from her hand, just as the comb was knocked from her head. As a matter of fact they say the gun was found lying in her *open hand.* I am forced to the conclusion that it was placed there afterward."

I looked at her struck with horror.

"In that case she must have been decoyed to the pavilion," said the inspector.

"That is for us to find out."

"The double identification of the gun as hers is an awkward point to go over," he suggested.

"Matson thirty-two's are sold by the hundreds," said Mme. Storey. "There is no evidence that this one bore any distinguishing marks. Why not another of the same design?"

"In that case Mrs. Whittall's gun would have been found."

"Maybe it was."

The inspector slowly nodded. "A case begins to shape itself," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

"It is not yet a matter of public interest," said Mme. Storey. "As soon as we have sufficient evidence that it is, we will put it in your hands. In the meantime I wish you'd trace where and when Whittall bought the gun that he gave his wife, and the number of it. You have better facilities for doing that than I have."

He nodded.

III.

A PLEASANT-FACED young woman very neatly and plainly dressed, came into my office somewhat shyly, and mutely offered me a printed slip which had been filled in. I read at a glance that the bearer was Mary Thole who had been sent by Mrs.

——'s Employment Agency as an applicant for the position of maid. One of our operatives had brought about this visit, without the girl's suspecting what we wanted of her. I looked at her with a strong interest.

Through my association with Mme. Storey I have learned to read character to some degree, and I said to myself that the lady who secured this girl would be lucky. Good servants are rare. This one's manner was respectful without being obsequious. She had a clear and open glance.

I took her into my mistress, who, with a nod, bade me remain in the room. She told the girl to be seated, and there was some preliminary talk about references and so forth, while Mme. Storey studied her without appearing to.

"What was your last place?" she asked.

"With Mrs. Darius Whittall, *Madame.*"

"Why did you leave?"

The girl lowered her head. "My—my mistress died," she faltered.

"Ah, yes," said Mme. Storey. "Now I remember reading something about it. A very sad case."

The girl nodded. I saw two tears steal down her clear pale cheeks. Hastily fumbling for her handkerchief, she dried them, then looked imploringly at Mme. Storey as if begging to overlook this weakness.

But of course both our hearts were touched. "Had you been with her long?" asked my mistress.

"Two years, *madame.*"

"You were very much attached to your mistress, then?"

"Oh, yes, *madame!* I never had so kind and gentle a lady!"

Satisfied that we could depend on her, my mistress now threw off further disguise. She rose and walked about. "Had you ever heard of me before to-day?" she asked.

"Yes, *madame.* I read in the papers—"

"Good! then you know something of my business. I may as well tell you at once that I do not need a maid. That was merely a pretext."

The girl looked at her greatly startled.

"Oh, you have nothing to fear," Mme. Storey went on. "I merely wished to satisfy myself that you were an honest and a faithful girl. I am satisfied of it. I mean to be frank with you. Mr. Whittall has engaged himself to marry a friend of mine, a beautiful young girl. I think that is a great shame."

"Oh yes, *madame!*" she said earnestly. "He—he is not a good man!"

"So I think myself," said Mme. Storey dryly. "I want you to tell me all the circumstances surrounding Mrs. Whittall's death."

The girl's eyes widened in horror, and she pressed one hand to her cheek. "Oh *Madame* do you think—do you think—that *he—!*"

"Hush!" said Mme. Storey. "Answer my questions carefully and we'll see."

The girl went on in a daze, more to herself than to us: "Of course I always knew it was due to him—in a way—he made it impossible for her to live—but I never thought that he might actually—"

"Don't jump to conclusions," warned Mme. Storey.

She reseated herself at her desk.

"May I ask something?" said Mary humbly.

"Certainly."

"Is it—is it the beautiful young actress, Miss Brunton?"

"Yes. What put that into your head?"

"Well, it came to my mistress's ears that her name was being connected with Mr. Whittall's, and she heard she was a nice girl, so it seemed a great shame to her on the girl's account. So she asked Miss Brunton and her mother to come to Oakhurst—that was the name of the house, to lunch and spend the afternoon. She wanted to stop any scandal that was going about, that might hurt the girl. That was the sort of woman she was."

"Hm!" said my mistress, "and did they come?"

"Yes, *Madame,* and my mistress told me the girl was a dear—that was her own word, and she hoped she could really make friends with her."

"Was Mr. Whittall present at this luncheon?"

"No, *madame.* My mistress had fixed a day when she knew he would be out of town."

"When was this?"

"I cannot say to a day. Late in August some time. Two weeks, maybe three before my mistress died."

"What can you tell me about that visit?"

"Not much, *Madame.* I was busy about my work, of course. When the car drove up to carry them away, I peeped out of the window, and I had a glimpse of the young lady, as she turned around to say good-by. Such a beautiful young lady! She was happy and smiling, so I supposed everything had gone well."

"You cannot tell me anything they did?"

"Nothing, except I heard they had tea sent out to the pavilion."

"Who served it?"

"The butler would be at the tea-wagon, *Madame,* and the second man serving."

"What were the relations generally, between Mr. and Mrs. Whittall?" asked Mme. Storey.

Mary looked uncomfortable. She said in a low voice: "They were living apart *Madame*—though under the same roof, since before I came. They never quarreled before the servants, of course. They were cold to each other. It was the gossip among the servants that Mr. Whittall was always trying to persuade her to get a divorce, and she wouldn't because it was against the laws of her church."

"So is self-destruction." remarked Mme. Storey gravely.

Mary looked up quickly. Evidently this was a new thought to her.

"You considered that Mrs. Whittall was an unhappy woman?" asked Mme. Storey.

The girl nodded. "But I never heard her complain," she added quickly.

"Had she ever spoken of adopting a child?"

"Not seriously, *Madame.* Once I heard her say that a child was entitled to a father as well as a mother."

"Now let us come to the day of the tragedy," said Mme. Storey. "I want you to tell me everything that happened that day, beginning with the morning."

"I can't tell you much," said Mary. "What happened at night seems to have driven it all out of my head—It was Sunday. I suppose *Madame* went to early Mass as usual. She would not let me get up on Sunday mornings to dress her, nor would she have the car. She walked to church.

"Then came breakfast. I tidied up her room then. I don't remember anything about the morning; I suppose she was writing letters. After lunch she slept; I dressed her when she got up. I scarcely saw her during the day. She wanted us to rest on Sundays. Dinner was always earlier; half-past six. I had heard downstairs that the master was dining out. Mrs. Whittall didn't dress for dinner on Sundays. She came up from the table in less than half an hour. I was in her room then—"

"How did she look?"

"Quite as usual, *madame.* Calm and pale."

"What happened then?"

"A few minutes later a special delivery letter was brought to the door."

"Ha!" said Mme. Storey. "Why was this never mentioned before?"

"Nobody asked me about it, *madame.*"

For the first time an evasive note sounded in the girl's honest voice.

"Was not such a thing very unusual?"

"No, *madame.* Mrs. Whittall's mail was very large, she was interested in so many charities and committees. So many people wrote to her, asking for one thing or another. There were often special delivery letters; telegrams, too."

"Did you have this letter in your hands?"

"Yes, *madame.* I carried it from the door to my mistress."

"Describe it."

"Just an ordinary white envelope with the address written on it. No printing."

"Did you recognize the handwriting?"

"No, *madame.*"

"Was it a man's handwriting?"

"I don't know. I just gave it a careless glance."

Again the evasive note.

"Then what happened?"

"Mrs. Whittall said she wouldn't want me any more, and I went away."

"Then?"

"After awhile, an hour maybe, she sent for me back again."

"You found her changed then?"

Mary looked at Mme. Storey in a startled way.

"Y-yes, *madame*," she faltered. "Her cheeks were red. She was nervous. She tried to hide it."

"Where was the letter then?"

"It wasn't anywhere about. It was never seen again."

"Was there a fireplace in the room?"

Mary looked frightened again. "Y-yes, *madame*."

"Did you not look there afterward—next day, perhaps?"

The girl hung her head. "Y-yes, *madame*."

"And found some scraps of burned paper?"

"Yes, *madame*." This very low. "I swept them up."

Once more to my surprise, Mme. Storey dropped this line of questioning.

"What did Mrs. Whittall say to you?" she asked.

"She said her afternoon dress was too hot, *madame*, and she wanted to change. So I started to get a negligee from the wardrobes, but she said no, she had a fancy to put on her blue net evening dress that she had never worn. She wanted her hair done in a different way, too. I was a long time dressing her. It was the first time I had ever found her hard to suit. At the end she asked for her blue velvet evening cloak, as she wanted to walk in the grounds for the cool."

"Had she ever done that before?"

"Not as far as I know, *madame*."

"Describe the blue dress."

"A simple little frock, *madame*. Just a plain, tight bodice of charmeuse, and a full skirt of net in points over underskirts of malines. A scarf of blue malines went with it. She had never worn it because she said it was too young for her."

"How old was Mrs. Whittall?"

"Thirty-seven, *madame*. She wasn't old at all!" the girl went on warmly. "She was beautiful! She was beautiful all over!"

"Where did she keep her revolver?" asked Mme. Storey.

"In the top drawer of the chiffonier in the bedroom. I could feel it lying at the bottom of the drawer when I put things away."

"Were you in the bedroom when you were dressing her that Sunday night?"

"No, *madame*—in the dressing room, which adjoined."

"Did she leave the room at any time while you were dressing her?"

"No, *madame*."

"Did you leave the room?"

"No, *madame*. The wardrobes were right there along the wall."

"When she was dressed, who left the room first?"

"She did, *madame*. I remained to tidy things up. I was still in the dressing room when I heard—when I heard—"

"I know," said Mme. Storey gently. "Please attend well to what I am going to ask you. When Mrs. Whittall left the room where did she go?"

"Out through the door into the hall, *madame*, and down the stairs. I heard her heels on the stairs. She was in a hurry."

"She did not go into the bedroom first?"

"No, *madame*."

"Did she have anything in her hands when she went out of the dressing room?"

"No, *madame*."

"Did the blue cloak have a pocket in it?"

"Only a tiny pocket inside for a handkerchief."

Mary held up thumb and finger, indicating a space of an inch and a half.

"Would it have been possible for her to conceal the revolver inside that tight bodice?"

"No, *madame*."

"Then I ask you, was it possible that she could have carried her revolver out of the house with her?"

The girl stared at her with wide eyes of horror.

"No, *madame!* No, no! I never thought it out before. Oh, my poor mistress!"

She broke down completely.

Mme. Storey lit a cigarette to give her time to recover herself.

"Well, after that we know pretty well what happened," my mistress said soothingly. "Just a few more questions. Did it

occur to you at any time before your master came home to look in the chiffonier drawer to see if Mrs. Whittall's gun was there?"

"No, *madame.* I never thought. I scarcely knew what I was doing."

"When did you first see Mr. Whittall?"

"He came running up the stairs to the bedroom, where the—where the body was lying. He ordered us all out of the room. 'I must be alone with my dead!' he said. Those were his words. Very dramatic."

"H-m!" said Mme. Storey, with a hard smile. "And then?"

"In just a minute he called me back into the room by myself, and started to question me, very excited."

"What sort of questions?"

"I can't remember exactly. Like the questions you were asking me. What was she doing all day? What made her go out? And so on."

"Did you tell him about the letter which came?"

"Yes, *madame,* because he asked me if any message had come."

"What did he say when you told him about the letter?"

"He didn't say anything then. Later, when we were waiting to be questioned by the police, he sort of said to me and Mr. Frost, the butler, and Mr. Wilkins, the second man—we were the only ones who knew about the letter—he said maybe it would be better if nothing was said about it; and we agreed, of course, not wishing to raise any scandal about the mistress."

"What can you tell me about his subsequent actions?"

"Well, *madame,* whenever he got a chance, I saw him looking, looking about the sitting room and the bedroom."

"For the letter?"

"So I supposed."

"Did you know then that it had been burned?"

"Yes, *madame;* I had looked before he came home."

"Why didn't you tell him it had been burned?"

"I didn't want to give him that satisfaction."

"What else?"

"Well, as long as the police were in the house Mr. Whittall was right there with them. After they had gone he went out. He took a flash light with him, because I could see it flashing down the path to the pavilion. Then I lost him. He was out of the house about ten minutes. When he came back he wanted me to go to bed. But I asked to stay up—by her. He went to bed."

"Can you tell me what became of the pistol that was found in Mrs. Whittall's hand?"

"The police captain took it away with him that night. Later, I heard that Mr. Whittall had given it to him."

"Now to go back," said Mme. Storey. "When your mistress sent for you to dress her, you said you found her excited. Do you mean pleasurably so?"

"Yes—no—I can hardly say, *madame.* When I thought over it afterward, I supposed she had made up her mind then to end it all, and was just sort of wrought up."

"That was reasonable. But you know now that you were wrong?"

Mary nodded.

"I don't know what to think now," she said unhappily.

"That letter," said Mme. Storey—and Mary instantly began to look nervous—"what do you think was in it, Mary?"

"How should I know?" she said. "A girl like me, just a lady's maid."

"But you thought it had something to do with the tragedy."

"Not direct."

"Well, indirectly, then."

"Whatever I may have thought is proved wrong, now."

"Tell me what you thought."

"I don't think I ought," was the stubborn reply. "I told you the truth when I said I didn't know the handwriting. It was only a guess."

Mme. Storey tried another tack.

"Mary," she said, "Mr. Whittall has told his fiancée that his wife killed herself because she was in love with another man."

"That's a lie!" she said excitedly. "At least, the way he means it. My mistress was a good woman!"

"I am sure of it," said Mme. Storey gravely. "But I can also understand how a woman married to a man like Whittall might conceive an honorable love for another man and still remain true to her marriage vows."

The girl broke into a helpless weeping. Still she stubbornly held her tongue. At length Mme. Storey said:

"Mary, your mistress was foully murdered. Don't you want to see justice done?"

"Yes! Yes!" she sobbed. "But I don't see how *he* could have done it. I don't know what to think! I don't see any use in raking up a scandal."

"The whole story must be opened to the light now," said Mme. Storey gravely. "If that is done, no possible blame can attach to your mistress's name. Wouldn't you rather tell me here than be forced to tell in open court?"

Mary nodded.

"Then, Mary, from whom did you think that letter had come?"

"Mr. Barry Govett," she whispered.

I exclaimed inwardly. Barry Govett!

"You mustn't lay too much on that!" Mary went on, as well as she could for sobbing. "I am ready to swear there was nothing wrong between them I don't believe they ever saw each other alone but once. That was at our house in the summer. Mr. Govett called unexpected. He didn't stay but an hour.

"I happened to go into my mistress's sitting room, where they were, and I saw them. I saw by the way they looked at each other how—how it was with them both—how it would always be. I had never seen anything like that—" She was unable to go on.

IV.

Barry Govett was the most prominent bachelor in New York society. I had been reading about him in the papers for years. His name regularly headed the list of men present at every fashionable entertainment, and one was continually being informed of his visiting this great person or that in Newport, Saratoga, Lenox, Tuxedo and Palm Beach.

Prominent as he was at this time, he must have been still more prominent a few years ago when the cotillion was still a feature of every ball. I have always wondered what a cotillion was. Barry Govett was the cotillion leader par excellence. They said then that one had to engage him months ahead like royalty.

All this I had gathered from the gossipy weeklies which, like every other stenographer whose social life was limited to a boarding house, I used to read with avidity. Barry Govett was their *pièce de résistance.* Before all this happened he was once pointed out to me in court costume at a great fancy dress ball; and I thought then that he had the most beautifully turned legs I had ever seen on a man.

He must have been over forty then, but still conveyed the effect of a young man; very handsome in his style. But too much the cotillion leader for me. When I thought over this I wondered what a woman like Mrs. Whittall could have seen in him. One never knows!

Mme. Storey, in her clever way, managed to get him to tea one day. The moment he entered the outer office I was aware of a personality. Of course no man could occupy so lofty a position for years, even if it was only at the head of a frivolous society, without acquiring great aplomb. Close at hand in the daylight I saw that there was little of the youth remaining about him, though his figure was still slim, but I liked him better than I expected.

He had a long, oval face, refined in character, almost ascetic-looking, with nice blue eyes, though they were always pleasantly watchful, and betrayed little. He was wonderfully turned out, of course, but nothing spectacular. It was the perfection of art that conceals art. I was immediately sensible of his charm, too, though I had discounted it in advance. The smile and the bow conveyed no intimation that he saw in me merely the humble secretary.

I took him in to Mme. Storey. She was playing the great lady that afternoon, and the black ape Giannino in green cap and jacket with golden bells was seated in the crook of her left arm. Mr. Govett hastened forward and gracefully kissed her hand. I

wondered if Giannino would snatch at his none-too-well-covered poll. We were always amused to see how the ape would receive a new person. He is an individual of very strong likes and dislikes. However, he only made a face at Mr. Govett, and hissed amicably. Indeed, Mr. Govett held out his elbow, and Giannino hopped upon it and stroked his face. This was a great victory.

"Dear lady," said Mr. Govett, "this is a great and undeserved privilege. To be invited to tea with you, and"—looking around the room—"alone!"

"Just me and Giannino and my friend Miss Brickley," said Mme. Storey.

He whirled around and bowed to me again, murmuring: "Charmed!" My hand was horridly self-conscious in the expectation that he might offer to kiss it. I wondered if it was quite clean. Which way would I look! I could see too, that Mme. Storey was wickedly hoping that he might. Fortunately he did not.

"Miss Brickley has been dying to meet you," she said slyly.

"Ah! You do me too much honor!" he said.

I was rather fussed, and therefore I was bound not to show it. "Well, you're such a famous man," I said.

"Now you're spoofing me," he said, shaking a forefinger in my direction. "It's not much to be a hero of the society notes, is it?"

Tea was waiting, and we attacked it forthwith. Mr. Govett stroking Giannino's pompadour, and feeding him sugar, supplied most of the conversation. His gossip was extremely amusing, without being malicious—well not *very* malicious. No doubt he suited his talk to his company.

Had we heard that Bessie Van Brocklin was going to give a zoological dinner? It was in honor of her new cheetah? He didn't know quite what a cheetah was; the name sounded ominous. The Princess Yevrienev had promised to bring her lion cubs, and the Goldsby-Snows would be on hand with their falcons. Somebody else had a wolf, and he had heard a rumor that there was an anaconda being kept in the dark. Oh, and of course there were plenty of monkeys in society, zoological and otherwise. It ought to be a brilliant affair.

Had we heard the latest about Freddy Vesey? Freddy had been dining with the Stickneys who were the last householders on Madison Square. Carried away by his boyhood recollections of old New York, Freddy had leaped into the fountain, causing great excitement among the park-benchers. An Irish policeman was convinced that it was an attempted suicide. Freddy had argued with him at length from the middle of the fountain. Freddy had refused to come out until the policeman promised to let him off. No, Freddy had not undressed before jumping in, he was happy to say, and thereby the world was saved a shocking disclosure of the means by which he preserved his ever youthful figure.

All the while this was going on, I could see that Mr. Govett was wondering why he had been asked to tea with us. He knew of course that we had something more to do than gossip in that place. But he betrayed no particular anxiety.

Finally they lighted their cigarettes. Giannino, who adores cigarettes, though they invariably make him sick, coolly stole Mr. Govett's from between his lips, and fled up to the top of a picture frame, where he sat and mocked at us. I dislodged him with a stick which I keep for the purpose, and depriving him of his booty, carried him to his little house in the middle room.

When I came back Mme. Storey was saying: "Have you heard that Darius Whittall is going to marry Fay Brunton?"

"That was a foregone conclusion, wasn't it?" said Mr. Govett with a shrug.

"Not to me!"

"Ah yes, of course, the adorable Brunton is a friend of yours." I could see by his eyes that he was thinking: "Is *this* what I was brought here for?"

"Is Whittall a friend of yours?" asked Mme. Storey.

"No!" he said shortly.

"Barry, you and I have known each other for a good many years," said Mme. Storey, "and I have confidence in your discretion, though you always make believe not to have any—"

" Thanks, dear lady."

" What do you think of me?"

" I think you're an angel!"

" Oh, not that tosh!"

" I think you're the greatest woman in New York!"

" That's not what I want either. In all these affairs that I have been engaged in, are you satisfied that I have always taken the side of decency?"

" Oh, yes!" he said quite simply. " What a question!"

" Good! Then I ask for your confidence in this affair. I am investigating the circumstances surrounding the death of Mrs. Whittall."

He gave a start, which he instantly controlled. One could not have said that he showed more than anybody might have shown upon hearing such an announcement. " Good Heavens!" he murmured, " do you think there was anything more than—"

" She was murdered, Barry."

" Oh, my God!" he whispered. His face turned greyish; his hands shook. I thought the man was going to faint; but even while I looked at him, he steadied himself. I never saw such a marvelous exhibition of self-control. He drew a long breath.

" How can I help?" he asked quietly.

" By being quite frank with me."

He looked at me in a meaning way.

" Miss Brickley is familiar with the whole circumstances," said Mme. Storey, " and she possesses my entire confidence. Nothing that transpires in this room is ever heard outside of it, unless I choose that it shall be."

" Of course," he murmured. " Still, I don't see how *I*—"

" Mrs. Whittall was lured out to the pavilion by a letter which we have reason to suppose she thought you had written."

He jumped up involuntarily, staring at her like one insane; then dropped limply into his chair again. It was some moments before he could speak. " But I never wrote to her in my life!"

" Then how could she have known your handwriting?" asked Mme. Storey.

" Well, I mean nothing but social notes; answers to invitations and so on." He saw that he had made a slip, and added hastily: " How do you know that she *did* recognize my handwriting?"

" We mustn't waste the afternoon fencing with each other," said Mme. Storey, mildly. " You are aware of something that would help me very much in this matter."

" What makes you think so?" he asked with an innocent air.

" You betrayed it just now. It leaped out of your eyes."

" I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

" Barry, nothing can be altogether hidden. Your secret is known to a few people."

" I have so many secrets!" he said with a silly-sounding laugh.

" You were in love with her."

" If you imply by that—" he began excitedly.

" I imply nothing. From all accounts Mrs. Whittall must have been a saint."

" She was," he said. " And of course I loved her. Everybody who knew her loved her. In our world she moved like a creature apart. She was *really* good."

" Of course," said Mme. Storey. " But that is not what I mean."

He remained obstinately silent.

" Why did you call on her unexpectedly one afternoon last summer?" Mme. Storey asked bluntly.

He stared at her in confusion. " Why —why for no special reason," he stammered.

" On that afternoon," pursued my mistress relentlessly, " you told her that you loved her, and she confessed that it was returned."

He suddenly gave up. " Rosika, you are a superhuman woman," he said simply. " I am in your hands—we all are!" He relaxed in his chair, and his chin sank on his breast. The guard had fallen from his eyes, and he looked old and heart-broken. Mme. Storey gave him his own time to speak.

" You understand," he said at last, " my only object in trying to put you off, was to protect her memory—not that it needed protection, but only from misrepresentation."

" I understood that from the beginning," said my mistress gently.

"It is true that I was in love with her," he went on. "Since many years ago. Almost from the time that Whittall first brought her home. We called her St. Cecilia. At first it didn't hurt much. I had no aspirations. She was like a beautiful dream in my life, which redeemed it from trivality. I fed my dream with what glimpses of her came my way.

"Later, all that was changed. Oh, it hurt then! Because I knew that she must be unhappy, and I longed so to make her happy. I wanted her so! Up to the afternoon that you spoke of we had scarcely ever been alone together, and we had never exchanged any intimate speech. But before that, even in a crowd, I had been aware that she had a sympathy for me. In short, she loved me.

"You may well wonder at that from a man like me! But you see—she saw beneath the grinning mask I wear. She brought out the best in me, that I have hidden for so many years. Even then I had no thought of—I knew her too well!

"And then on the day you speak of, a note was brought to me by special delivery from her. I had stored away scraps of her handwriting; invitations and so on, and I never doubted but that it was from her. Just four words: 'Come to me quickly!' I flew. When I entered her sitting-room, she seemed surprised, but I thought that was just a woman's defense. I took her in my arms. She surrendered for a moment, just a little moment; then she thrust me away.

"She denied having written to me. For a moment I did not believe her—I had already burned the note, so I could not show it to her; however she made it abundantly clear she had not written it. Then we realized somebody must be trying to entrap us, and we were alarmed. But she said nobody could hurt us if we kept our heads up and walked straight. She sent me away. Yes, for good! for good! There was never any doubt about that. We were never to attempt to see each other alone; we were not to write—except in case of desperate need. It was I who exacted that. If the need was desperate, either of us might write to the other.

"When I heard of her death—by her own hand as I thought—I felt betrayed; I felt if things had come to *that* pass she might have sent for me first—

"Oh, well, you are not interested in my state of mind! How gladly I would have put a pistol to my own head! I did not do so because I could not bear to sully her name by having it connected with mine. And so I keep on the same old round, showing the same old grin! I dared not even stop for fear of people saying: 'Oh, old Barry Govett is broken-hearted because of, well, you know!'—A pretty world, isn't it?" He finished with a harsh laugh.

Nobody said anything for awhile. What was there to say?

Finally he raised his head. "But you have given me a renewed interest in life," he said grimly. "The same hand that forged that letter to me, afterwards forged the letter that lured her out to the pavilion."

"There can be little doubt of that," said Mme. Storey.

"By God!" said Govett quietly. "If the law doesn't get him, *I will!*"

"Oh, you may leave the murderer to me," said Mme. Storey, with a dry smile, the significance of which I was to appreciate later.

V.

I SEE upon referring to my notes that this took place upon a Friday afternoon. Mr. Govett had not much more than left our place when Fay Brunton dropped in. She looked sweet enough to eat. To our relief she had left the inevitable mother behind on this occasion. Fay did not take tea, but dined at six in order to have a short rest before going to the theatre. She just had fifteen minutes before dinner, she said, and had just rushed around to tell us —her news, after what we had just heard was like a bomb-shell. I could scarcely repress a cry of dismay.

"Darius and I have decided to get married on Sunday morning." My wonderful mistress never changed a muscle of her smile.

"What!" she said with mock reproach. "Must you abandon us so soon?"

"I am not abandoning you!" said Fay,

giving her a kiss. "It's the most wonderful plan!" she went on happily. "You know little Larrimore, my understudy, who is dying to have a chance at the part? Well, she is to have it. For a whole week! It's all been fixed up. It will be given out that I am indisposed. The fact of our marriage will be allowed to leak out later. And if Larrimore makes good she can keep the part. It's only that I don't want anybody to lose any money through me.

"We are to be married on Sunday morning in the hotel. Strictly private of course. And immediately afterwards we'll hop on a train for Pinehurst. Think of Pinehurst after weather like this! And what do you think? Darius has secured a loan of a private car from the president of the railway! I've never been in a private car, have you? And then a whole wonderful week in the woods!"

"Wonderful!" cried Mme. Storey, and there was not a tinge of anything but sympathy in her voice. "But are we not to see you again? To-morrow is Saturday, and you have two performances."

"How about to-night after the show?" suggested Fay.

Mme. Storey shook her head. "I have an engagement." This was not true. "How about to-morrow night after the show?" she went on. "I must have a chance to give you a little party before you step off into the gulf. Come here. My flat is too far up-town."

Fay looked dubious. "I should love it," she said, "but Darius, you know. He hates parties."

The expression in my mistress's eyes said: "Damn Darius!" But she laughed good-humoredly. "Oh, I don't mean a *party*, my dear. Just you and Darius and Mrs. Brunton, Bella and I."

"I should love it," said Fay. "If Darius doesn't mind."

"Why should Darius mind?" demanded my mistress. "Doesn't he like me?"

"Oh, yes!" said Fay quickly. "He admires you ever so much!"

"Then why should he mind?"

The girl could not withstand the point-blank question. "Well, you see," she faltered, "he thinks—that you do not like him very much—that you disapprove of him."

"Fay," challenged my mistress, "have I ever by word or look given you any reason to suppose such a thing?"

"Oh, no, Rosika! And so I have told him. Over and over—But he still thinks so."

"Now look here," said Mme. Storey. "I am never the one to interfere between a married pair—or a soon-to-be-married pair, but you must make a stand somewhere, my child, or you'll soon find yourself a loving little slave. I mean when you are in the right. Now this particular notion of Darius's is a silly notion, isn't it?"

"Y—yes," said Fay.

"Then you should not give in to it—But look here, I'll make it easier for you. Let's pretend that it's your party. You tell Darius that you have asked Bella and me to your hotel for supper after the show on your last night, and he could not possibly object, could he?"

Fay's face lighted up. "Oh, no!" she cried. "That will be splendid!"

"All right!" said Mme. Storey. "Expect us about quarter to twelve. You'll have it in your own rooms of course, where we may be quite free."

"Now I must run!" said Fay.

"Oh, wait a minute!" pleaded Mme. Storey, slipping her arm through the girl's. "This is the last moment I shall see you alone! There are so many things I want to talk to you about! And now you have driven them all out of my head. Is the little nest ready in the East Seventies?"

"It will be when we get back from Pinehurst." Fay launched into an enthusiastic description.

"And what happens to Oakhurst?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Oh, didn't I tell you? Darius has put it into the hands of Merryman. It's to be sold, lock, stock and barrel."

"And quite right, too. By the way, do you know what Darius's movements will be to-morrow? I must see him if I can, in order to remove this ridiculous wrong impression he has got of me."

"You're so kind, Rosika! All I know is, he's going to sleep at his rooms in the

Vandermeer to-night, in order to be on hand early for all the things he has to see to to-morrow."

"Well, I'll call him up at the Vandermeer."

Arm in arm, they had been moving slowly out through my office with me at their heels. They had now reached the door. Mme. Storey kissed the girl fondly. My mistress was playing an elaborate game, but at least there was nothing insincere about *that* gesture.

"One last thing," she said, "I want to make you a little gift of some sort—"

Fay made a gesture of dissent.

"When the news comes out you will be showered with all sorts of useless things. I should like to give you something that you *want*. What shall it be?"

"Oh, I'd much rather leave it to you, dear."

"Well, now, I must think of something original." She feigned to be considering deeply. "I have it!" she said. "I will give you a beautifully mounted gun with your name chased on the handle. Every woman ought to have a gun."

"Oh, thank you!" said Fay. "But I have one! Darius says too, that every woman ought to have a gun. He gave me one months ago."

"Oh yes, I remember" said Mme. Storey. "What sort of gun?"

"A Matson 32, automatic."

I shivered inwardly. Did the man buy them wholesale?

"Do you carry it about with you?" asked Mme. Storey laughing.

"Oh, no," said Fay simply. "I keep it in my bottom drawer."

"Ah, well, I'll have to think of something else then," said Mme. Storey.

They embraced, and Fay went.

The instant the door closed after her, Mme. Storey said to me: "Quick, Bella! Your hat!" She went to the window to wave her hand to Fay, when she emerged below. While standing there, she continued to speak rapidly to me.

"Pick up a taxi, and go to Merryman's. That's the big real estate office on Madison Avenue near Forty-Fourth Street. If it's closed, you'll have to look up the address of one of the partners in the telephone book, and go to his house. Apologize for disturbing him and say that your employer —who wishes to remain unknown for the moment—has just learned that the Whittall property in Riverdale has come into the market. Ask for an order to view the place to-morrow. Explain that, owing to your employer's leaving for the West, to-morrow is the only day he will have for the purpose—Wait a minute! Fay is just getting into her car—Now she's off. Run along!"

VI.

NEXT morning we drove up to Riverdale in Mme. Storey's own limousine, but instead of her regular chauffeur, we had Crider at the wheel, an admirable fellow, quiet and keen; the chief of all our operatives. I pointed out to Mme. Storey that if anybody at the house was curious about us, it would be an easy matter to find out who we were by tracing the number of our license.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "By to-night it will all be decided, one way or the other."

Riverdale, as everybody knows, is not a "dale" at all, but a bold hill on the mainland, just to the north of Manhattan Island. On the one side it overlooks the Hudson river; on the other the flat expanse of the Bronx with Van Cortlandt Park.

The original village may have started down by the river, but now the whole rocky height is thickly covered with handsome new villas standing in their beautiful and limited plots.

It is an exceedingly well-to-do community, but not at all fashionable. Fashion has fled farther from town. "Oakhurst" however is a survival. It was built and laid out by the first Darius Whittall in the days when "a mansion on the Hudson" was synonymous with everything that was opulent and eminent.

The grounds were of considerable extent. We drove in through beautiful wrought iron gates and past a lodge in the English style. The house was invisible from the road. We wound through a woods of evergreens and oaks before coming to it in the

midst of its lawns. It was a long, irregular structure built of native stone. It had no particular architectural pretensions, but the years had mellowed it. It looked dignified and comfortable. This was the back of the house really; the principal rooms faced the glorious prospect over the Hudson with the Palisades beyond.

We drove up under a *porte cochere,* and upon alighting, were received by an irreproachable butler. This was Frost. All I need say of him is that he was the perfect butler; ageless, expressionless, characterless.

I showed him our order to view the place, and Mme. Storey expressed a wish to be shown the grounds first. Whereupon he handed us over to the second man, a sort of embryo butler; younger, fresh-faced; not yet able to subdue his curiosity and interest at the sight of a woman so beautiful as Mme. Storey.

He conducted us around the side of the house to the head gardener, who was directing the operations of several men engaged in setting out shrubs.

So we began our perambulations. There was only one thing about the grounds that really interested us; i.e., the pavilion; but of course we said nothing about it, waiting until we should arrive there in proper order.

In front of the house the ground fell away gradually in beautiful flower beds and terraces, to the edge of a steep declivity which dropped to the river. The steep part was wooded in order to mask the railway tracks below.

At this season it was all rather sere and leafless except the grass which was clipped and rolled to the semblance of green velvet. Stables, garage and other offices were all concealed behind shrubbery.

We could see the pavilion off to the left as you faced the river; that is to say the southerly side. On this side the hill ran out in a little point ending in a knoll, and on the knoll was the pavilion, in the form of a little Greek temple with a flattened dome and a circle of Doric columns. The winding path which led to it was bordered with rhododendrons, backed with arbor vitae.

As we approached, I pictured the beautiful woman running down that path to the aid of the man she loved, as she supposed; and I seemed to hear the shot that ended everything for her. At the foot of the three steps one instinctively looked for bloodstains in the grey gravel; but of course all such marks had been erased long since.

Mme. Storey said to the gardener: "I should like to sit down here for five minutes to look at the view. Will you come back?"

The man bowed and hurried away to look after his subordinates.

As we mounted the three steps Mme. Storey laid her hand against the first pillar to the right. "There," she murmured, "the murderer waited concealed, gun in hand."

Inside, there was a circle of flat-topped marble benches. The view from that spot is world famous. One could see both up and down the glorious river for miles. Only within the last few years the foreground had been defaced by the cutting of new streets and the building of showy houses.

"Our first job is to decide how the murderer got here," said Mme. Storey. "He must have familiarized himself with the spot beforehand."

"But of course he knew the spot!" I said, in surprise.

"Mustn't jump to conclusions, my Bella!" she said with her dry smile. "It warps the judgment. All that we can say so far is, some person unknown to us stood behind that pillar and shot Mrs. Whittall."

I thought Mme. Storey was over-scrupulous.

As soon as we looked down to the left, the means of access was clear. The present boundary of the Whittall property was only about a hundred feet away on this side. It was marked by a rough stone wall, not very high; any determined person could have scrambled over it.

On the other side of the wall a new street had been laid off down to the river. There were several new houses looking over the wall, and a boating club house down at the end. Once over the wall it was an easy climb through the dead leaves and thin undergrowth up to the pavilion.

"If you followed that street back over the hill and down into the valley on the other side," said Mme. Storey, "it would bring you out somewhere in the vicinity of the subway terminal at Van Cortlandt Park. That is the way he came. You cannot trace anybody on the subway."

She went on: "Now what did Whittall do with his wife's revolver?"

"A search?" I asked anxiously, thinking what a little time we had.

"Oh, sit down," she said, suiting the action to the word. "And appear to be enjoying the view like me."

She produced a cigarette, and lighted it. "Let us search in our heads first."

She went on: "During that minute when he was left alone with the body, he took the revolver out of the drawer and dropped it in his pocket. All during the time when the police were in the house it lay there in his pocket, burning him! As soon as he could, he left the house with his little flashlight as Mary has told us, and came this way. He was looking for the letter then. He was afraid that his wife might have carried it out in her hand, and dropped it when she fell.

"Not finding any letter, he still had to dispose of the gun. Well, there he was. He dared not stay out more than a few minutes. Put yourself in his place, Bella. What would he do with it?"

I shook my head helplessly.

"I think his first impulse would be to toss it from him as far as he could," Mme. Storey resumed. "But it was night you see, and the risk would be too great that the morning light would reveal it. There are too many men working on this place! For the same reason he wouldn't dare hide it in the shrubbery. He would next think of burying it, but I don't suppose Whittall had ever dug a hole in his life. Besides, he would have to get a tool, which would take time, and anyway, where in this carefully manicured place *could* he have buried it without leaving telltale marks?

"Then there's the river, that's the ideal hiding-place. But it's too far away. It would take him twenty minutes to go and come, not counting the time he spent looking for the letter, and we have Mary's word for it that he was not out of the house more than ten—I think he would have risked the trip to the river, Bella, had he not known of water nearer to. For a guilty person with a heavy object to hide, instinctively thinks of water!"

We saw the gardener returning along the path.

Mme. Storey smiled at him. "I have a horror of mosquitoes," she said to him as he came up, "and I want to ask you if there is any standing water on this place, or near by? Any pond or pool or basin?"

"No, *madame*," was the reply. "Nothing of that sort anywhere in the neighborhood."

"But are you *sure?*" she persisted sweetly. "They say that even a pan of water is enough if it's allowed to stand."

"Well, there's an old well down at the foot of the front lawn," he said good-humoredly. "But I hardly think the insects could breed there, because it's twenty feet down to the water."

"Still I'd like to look at it," said Mme. Storey. "If you wouldn't mind."

"Certainly, *madame*."

He pointed out a path which led down to the right, without returning to the house. As he led the way, he gave us a history of the well. "The original house on this property stood on the edge of the steep bank, and this was the well belonging to it. When Mr. Whittall's grandfather pulled the old house down he did not fill up the well, but built an ornamental well-house over it. But the late Mrs. Whittall thought it was incongruous, and so it was, and she had it removed. Her idea was to bring over an antique well-head from Italy, but for some reason this was never done, and so at present it just has a temporary cover over it."

In a hundred yards we came to the spot. It was on the lowest level of the gardens and terraces in front of the house. One could picture the old-fashioned farmhouse which had once stood there. The magnificent elm which had shaded it, had been allowed to remain. The brick work of the well projected a few inches above the ground, and over it had been laid a heavy wooden cover with a trap in the middle, having a ring.

"Will that open?" asked Mme. Storey, pointing.

He got down on his knees to pull it up, looking bored at these vagaries of my mistress, but still respectful.

"I want to look in it," she said.

He made place for her, and she in turn got down on her knees to peer into the black hole.

Suddenly she clasped her breast. "Oh, my pin!" she cried. "It fell in!" And got up with a face of tragedy.

The old gardener scratched his head. I think he was a Scotchman. He looked utterly disgusted. Oh, the folly of these gentlefolk! his expression said.

"It must be recovered!" my mistress said agitatedly. What an admirable actress she was! "It must be recovered! I value it above price!"

"Well, ma'am, I suppose it can be got," the man said slowly. "There's not above three feet of water in the bottom. I have a block and tackle in the tool-house. I will send one of the men down."

"My chauffeur shall go down," said Mme. Storey.

"No need of that, ma'am."

"No, I insist! My chauffeur shall go down. If the others will help him I shall see that all are well rewarded for their trouble. And you, too!"

"As you wish, ma'am." He went off to summon help.

With a slight smile, Mme. Storey pressed an emerald bar-pin that she had unfastened from somewhere or other into my hand, and sent me for Crider. I found him still sitting like a wooden image at the wheel of the car. I gave him the emerald, which he pinned inside his clothes, and whispered his instructions. His eyes gleamed. We returned to the old well.

The under-gardeners had gathered to help, and the old man was dragging block and tackle toward the spot.

"This will take some time, I suppose," said Mme. Storey when he came up. "We had better be looking over the house while we wait."

So we went back up the slope.

We had no particular interest in the interior of the house, but we went over everything dutifully under the guidance of the butler. It was one of the most attractive houses I ever was in. If I had never heard anything else about the mistress of it I would have known from the inside of her house that she was a superior woman.

It had nothing of the awful perfection usual to the houses of the very rich; nothing of the museum look. It was full of character. There were no "period" rooms. It was above all the house of an American lady.

On the ground floor there was a magnificent suite of rooms with rows of windows overlooking the gardens and the river; drawing-room, library, morning-room, dining room. At the south end a great square room with an immense fireplace had been built on. This they called the lounge.

Up-stairs Mrs. Whittall's own suite occupied the best position, that is, the southwest exposure. There were three rooms; sitting-room, dressing-room and bed-room. I don't suppose that much had been changed there since her death; and it was very sad to see the narrow little bed where her body had lain; the dressing-room where Mary Thole had attended her for the last time; and the delightful sitting-room where she had had her one and only interview with the man she loved.

In order to give Crider plenty of time we made our tour last as long as possible, but we had returned to the main floor ere any word came from him. There was a central hall which was furnished with comfortable chairs. Mme. Storey said to the butler:

"If we may, we will wait here a little while. It is so cold outside."

"Certainly, *madame*," he said and withdrew. We had a feeling, though, that he was lingering somewhere close by. Well, after all, we were strangers in the house.

In a few minutes we heard a car approach swiftly through the crunching gravel, and come to a stop with a grinding of brakes. Mme. Storey and I looked at each other significantly. She shrugged. We heard the car door slam outside, feet came running up the steps, and the front door was flung open. There stood the master of the house. The light was behind him, and I could not read his expression.

The thought flew instantly into my head that the butler, recognizing Mme. Storey, or perhaps suspecting us on general principles, had telephoned to him. He had had just about time enough to drive up from town.

VII.

"WHAT! Mme. Storey!" Whittall cried very affably. "What a surprise! I had no idea that you were interested in my property. Why didn't you let me know?"

She ignored the question. "It is beautiful!" she said blandly, "but I am afraid it is too expensive for me."

They shook hands. I could see his face now. He had it under pretty good control, but his eyes were narrow and sharp with curiosity.

He was a handsome man in his way, with dark, bright eyes in which there was something both defiant and shifty. It was the look of a schoolboy who knows he has a bad name, and is determined to brazen it out. Why had not Fay Brunton's instincts taken alarm? I wondered afresh. But perhaps Whittall had a different look when he faced *her*.

"Oh, it's too expensive for anybody to own as a residence now," he said with a laugh. "I supposed it would be bought by a real estate operator, and subdivided—Have you seen everything?"

"Yes, thank you," said Mme. Storey. "We were just waiting for a few minutes. I had the misfortune to lose a piece of jewelry in the grounds, and they are looking for it."

"Ah, I am so sorry!" While he smiled in polite sympathy, his sharp eyes sought to bore into her, but my mistress's face presented a surface as smooth as tinted china.

"We might as well go and see what they are about," she said, moving toward the door.

"Don't hurry away!" he begged. "I don't often have the chance of entertaining you."

However, at this moment the butler appeared, to announce that *madame's* pin had been found, and we all moved out to the front steps. Crider was there, and the head gardener. Crider passed over the emerald, and with a meaning look gave his mistress to understand that he had been successful in his other quest. A great relief filled me. Whittall had not come home in time to frustrate us. Mme. Storey was loud in her protestations of thankfulness. She opened her purse to reward the gardener and his men.

"Where was it found?" asked Whittall.

The gardener spoke up. "At the bottom of the old well, sir."

It must have given Whittall a hideous shock. I scarcely had the heart to look at him. He uttered no sound; his eyes were divested of all sense. His florid face went grayish, leaving a network of tiny, purplish veins outlined against the grayness. Several times he essayed to speak before any sound came out.

"Come inside, a minute," he gabbled. "Come inside—come inside!"

Mme. Storey looked at Crider, and he followed us inside. My mistress had no notion of trusting herself alone with that madman. Whittall led the way across the hall, walking with such quick short steps as to give almost a comic effect. He opened the door of the library for us to pass in. He was for shutting it in Crider's face, but Mme. Storey stopped him with a steady look. So Crider entered and waited with his back against the door. It was a beautiful, quiet room upholstered in maroon, with three tall windows reaching to the floor.

Whittall was in a pitiably unnerved state. Consider the height that he had fallen from. On the eve of his marriage, too. He drew a bottle from a cabinet, and poured himself a drink with shaking hands. Gulped it down at a draught. He went to the windows and jerked at the curtain cords senselessly, though they were already opened to their widest. Again, one was reminded of something comic in his attempt to make out that there was nothing the matter. Finally he asked in a thick voice:

"Am I to have any explanation of this extraordinary visit?"

"I would not insist on it, Whittall," said my mistress, almost regretfully, one would have said.

"I do insist on it," he said quickly.

"Very well. It was not an emerald pin,

of course, that I was looking for at the bottom of the well."

What was it, then?"

She turned to the door. "What did you find there, Crider?"

"A Matson thirty-two automatic, *madame*. The magazine is full."

"Hand it over!" said Whittall.

Crider, naturally, made no move to obey.

"This is mere folly," said my mistress calmly. "It is to be handed over to an authority higher than yours."

"Of what do you accuse me?" he cried wildly.

"Of nothing yet, except throwing this gun down the well."

"It's a lie! It's a lie! I never saw it before!"

"Then why all this excitement?"

He turned away, biting his fingers.

"This is worse than useless," said Mme. Storey. "Open the door, Crider."

Whittall instantly became abject and cringing. "Wait a minute!" he implored. "Give me a chance to explain. Oh, my God! This frightful unexpected accusation has driven me out of my senses. Give me a chance to recover myself. Don't you see what you are doing? You are ruining me beyond hope. And all for nothing—all for nothing! I am as innocent as a child."

I am afraid we all smiled grimly at this last cry of his. However, Mme. Storey waited.

"Give me a little time," he muttered. He took another drink. He then said in a stronger voice: "Send those people out of the room and I'll tell you all."

"These two are my trusted employees," said Mme. Storey. "We three are as one. You may explain or not, just as it suits you."

After a moment's hesitation he said: "I will explain on one condition: that if my explanation is a reasonable one, you promise you will not proceed against me immediately. But if you are determined to proceed against me anyhow, what's the use of my telling *you* anything? You can go ahead and be damned to you."

This was too much for Crider. "I'll trouble you to be civil to Mme. Storey," he said, flushing.

My mistress silenced him with a gesture. To Whittall she said coolly: "I am not prepared to proceed against you yet. As to the future, I make no promises. Are you willing on your part to give me your word of honor that you will not marry until this matter is cleared up?"

"Certainly!" he said quickly. "Word of honor. But don't tell Fay yet. It would break her heart."

"I have no intention of doing so, yet," said Mme. Storey dryly.

There was a considerable silence.

"We are waiting for the explanation," said Mme. Storey at length.

Whittall turned around. He had evidently decided on his course.

"It is true that that is my wife's gun," he said without hesitation, "and that I threw it down the well. But I swear as God is in His heaven that I did not shoot her. The reason I acted as I did was to prevent a scandal. I immediately suspected that she had been murdered. Then I found the gun in her drawer. Well, a dirty scandal would not have given her back to me; it would only have besmirched her reputation still further."

"I know all about the 'other man,'" said Mme. Storey coolly. "I have talked with him. If you are suggesting that he shot her, I answer that it is impossible he could have done so."

Whittall's face was a study while she was saying this. Finally he shrugged. "In that case," he said sullenly, "I know no more than the next man who did it."

"What gave you reason to suspect that it was murder?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Oh, the general circumstances."

"Nobody else suspected such a thing."

He shrugged indifferently.

Nothing more seemed to be forthcoming, and presently Mme. Storey said: "Your explanation so far is no explanation."

He turned away, visibly in a state of indecision. Then he flung around. "Oh, hell, I suppose it's all got to come out now!" he cried. "I was warned of her murder!"

"Beforehand?" Mme. Storey asked sternly.

"No. What do you think I am?

Shortly after it was committed. That is why I came home so early. I was dining with a friend. I was called to the telephone. A voice, unknown to me, said without any preliminary explanation: 'Your wife has just been shot. If you want to avoid a nasty scandal, you had better hurry home and secrete her revolver, so it will look like a suicide.'"

I could not help smiling at this tale. It sounded so preposterous.

Mme. Storey, however, was grave enough.

"A man's voice or a woman's voice?" she asked.

"A man's."

"Can you offer any corroboration of this?"

"Certainly."

"Where were you dining, and with whom?"

"What right have *you* to cross-examine me?" he said, scowling.

"Oh, if you'd rather tell the district attorney—" said Mme. Storey calmly.

"I was with Max Krueger, the manager of Miss Brunton's company," he said sullenly. "We were at the Norfolk. It is not a hotel that I frequent, but we had some private business to discuss, and I didn't want to be recognized."

"Yet the person who called you up knew where to find you."

He flung out his hands violently. "You will have to figure that out as best you can. It beats me!"

Mme. Storey took a thoughtful turn up and down.

Whittall went on: "It has been established by a dozen witnesses that the fatal shot was fired at nine thirty. Krueger will testify that at that hour I was dining with him in the Norfolk—ten miles away from here. So your case against me collapses. Krueger will tell you further that about ten minutes past ten I was called to the phone.

"Naturally, I did not tell him the nature of the message I received; but he'll tell you that I left immediately. Before eleven I was back here. I suppose the taxicab driver who brought me here can be found, too, if he is looked for. Krueger is in his office now. Come with me and question him, and let this ridiculous charge be laid once and for all."

Mme. Storey agreed to the proposal. Again she pointed out to Whittall that she had not yet made any charge.

There was a brief discussion as to how we should dispose ourselves for the drive to town. Naturally we did not intend to let Whittall out of our sight. I thought we all ought to go in Mme. Storey's car, but she ruled otherwise. She and I and Whittall would ride in his car, she said, and Crider could bring her car along after.

While Whittall waited for us in his car, biting his fingers with impatience, Mme. Storey gave Crider his private instructions: "Do not follow us, but drive to your own place as quickly as possible, and change. Telephone Younger to come and get the car. You had also better get in touch with Stephens. Get back to the Adelphi Theater as soon as you can. Whittall will be there in Max Krueger's office. You and Stephens between you are to keep Whittall under observation until further notice, reporting to me at my office by phone as often as you are able."

That was hardly a cheerful drive. Mme. Storey and Whittall sat side by side on the back seat without exchanging a single word the whole way. Whittall crouched in his corner, scowling and biting his fingers. If Fay could have watched him then, that in itself ought to have given her pause. Whittall had a skillful chauffeur, of course. He had a special instinct to warn him of a traffic policeman. When the road was clear he opened his throttle to its widest and we sped like a bullet. Then at certain moments he abruptly slowed down, and sure enough presently the brass buttons would appear. We made Times Square in twenty-five minutes.

The Adelphi was one of the newer theaters in that neighborhood. Its name has been changed now. At this time Whittall was reputed to be the owner, but I do not know if this was so. It was perfectly clear, though, that Max Krueger was Whittall's creature. "Wild Hyacinth," I should say, was not showing at the Adelphi, but at the Yorktown, farther down Broadway, which

was much larger and had a greater seating capacity.

A deceitful air of activity pervaded the offices. Apart from rehearsals, theatrical business seems to consist of lengthy conversations which end exactly where they begin. There were a number of depressed-looking actors of both sexes sitting around the outer office waiting for an interview with the manager. Yet, Krueger, as we presently discovered, was alone in his office, with his heels cocked up on his desk.

Whittall marched straight into the private office with us at his heels. Snatching the cigar from his lips, Krueger leaped to his feet. He was a rosy, plump little man of the type that I have heard described as a fore-and-aft Jew; a blond. He looked astonished, as well he might, at the combination which faced him.

Without the slightest preamble, Whittall cried out with a wave of his hand: "There he is. Ask him what you want"; and went to the window, where he turned his back to us.

Krueger, greatly flustered, began to pull chairs out and to mumble courtesies.

"Never mind, thanks," said Mme. Storey. "We won't sit down. Just answer a few questions, please. It is by Mr. Whittall's wish that we have come."

"Anything, Mme. Storey — anything within my power!" the little man replied.

"What were you doing on the evening of Sunday, September 11?"

Krueger was horridly taken aback. He stared at us in a witless fashion and pulled at his slack lower lip. His distracted eyes sought his master for guidance, but received none, Whittall's back being turned.

"Well, speak up, can't you?" barked Whittall, without turning around.

"Yes—yes, of course," stammered Krueger, sparring for time. "Let me see—September 11— I can't seem to remember offhand. I shall have to look it up."

"That was the night of Mrs. Whittall's death," Mme. Storey reminded him.

"Oh, to be sure—that dreadful night!" said Krueger in suitable tones of horror. "That was the night of the private showing of the super-film 'Ashes of Roses.' I looked in at that."

This was certainly not the answer that Whittall looked for. He whirled around with a face of terror. I rejoiced that we had caught the villains napping, as it seemed. Something had gone wrong with their concerted story.

"Tell the truth!" gasped Whittall.

"Eh? What?" stammered Krueger, blinking.

"Tell the truth, I said!" cried Whittall in a fury, banging the desk.

"Oh, to be sure—to be sure!" stuttered the demoralized Krueger. "Mr. Whittall and I had dinner together that night. At the Hotel Norfolk."

I smiled to myself. This came a little late, I thought. It sounded as if it had been learned by heart.

"Why did you not say so at once?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Well, it was a private meeting, *madame*. We had business to discuss. I didn't think that Mr. Whittall wanted it known."

"At what time did you meet?"

"Half past seven."

"Describe what happened."

"Well, we had our dinner. Afterward we went out to the smoking lounge. Shortly after ten a boy came through paging Mr. Darius Whittall. Mr. Whittall was surprised, because he had not thought that anybody knew where he was. Everybody in the room looked up, hearing *that* name. At first Mr. Whittall wasn't going to identify himself. Just some trifler, he said, or a newspaper reporter. But he was curious to find out who had got hold of his name. So after the boy had gone on, he went out to the office.

"In a minute or two he came back. He looked very agitated. All he said was: 'Something wrong at home.' He got his hat and coat, and jumped in a taxicab."

"Now are you satisfied that I did not do it?" cried Whittall.

"Quite!" said Mme. Storey.

I was surprised at this answer.

She asked them both a number of further questions, which they answered readily. Whittall rapidly quieted down. It had the effect of a cross-examination, but knowing my mistress so well, I could see that she was only stalling for time. She did not

want Whittall to get away from there until Crider was waiting outside to pick him up. Nothing of moment to the case was brought out by their answers.

Finally we went. The street outside was crowded, and I could not pick out Crider anywhere, but I had no doubt he was safely at his post. Just the same, I felt that we were doing wrong to go away and leave Whittall like that, free to work his nefarious schemes. And as we drove away in a taxicab I voiced something to that effect.

"But we have no reason to order him detained," said Mme. Storey calmly. "He didn't shoot his wife."

"What!" I cried, astonished. "You still doubt that?"

"No," said Mme. Storey, smiling at the heat I betrayed. "I'm sure he didn't."

"But obviously that man Krueger was ready to swear to anything that would please him!"

"Obviously," she agreed.

"And the story about the telephone call! Fancy anybody calling him up and saying: 'Your wife has been shot!' Just like that. Why, it's preposterous!"

"Quite!" said Mme. Storey. "Whittall is far too clever a man to have offered me so preposterous a story if it were not true. There is nothing so preposterous as the truth sometimes."

"Well, if he didn't do it himself, he certainly *had* it done," I said excitedly. "And that telephone message was from his hireling, telling him that the job was accomplished."

But Mme. Storey still shook her head. "Think of the risk of blackmail, Bella."

"What makes you so sure it wasn't Whittall?" I asked helplessly.

"It's so simple," she said. "If Whittall had plotted to shoot his wife, he would have shot her with her own gun, wouldn't he? And then we never would have known."

I looked at her in silence. Why, of course! My theory went down like a house of cards.

"No," she went on gravely; "here's the best part of the day gone, and we're almost where we were yesterday evening. Well, not quite! Because Whittall told one little lie, which will appear later."

"Then are we up against a blank wall?" I asked, discouraged.

"Oh, no," was her surprising answer. "I know who did it."

I looked my breathless question.

But she only shook her head.

"No evidence," she said, frowning. "Not a shred. It's almost the perfect crime my Bella!"

VIII.

MME. STOREY and I returned to the office. We found her car waiting out in front for orders. The chauffeur, Younger, handed over the gun fished from the well at Oakhurst, which Crider had given him for safe keeping. Mme. Storey in my presence marked the weapon for subsequent identification.

We found a number of matters awaiting our attention, which we got out of the way as quickly as possible. Meanwhile we ordered in a light lunch of sandwiches and milk.

While she munched her sandwiches Mme. Storey paced slowly up and down the long room, considering deeply. With the last bite she evidently finished mapping out her course of action.

Her first move was to call up Fay Brunton in her dressing room at the theater. They had an aimless friendly talk, which was, however, not so aimless on my mistress's part as might had been supposed, for she found out (a) that Fay had not seen nor heard from Darius Whittall since we had left him; (b) that she was still looking forward to the supper party in her rooms that night. I also marked this bit:

"I saw the new film, 'Ashes of Roses,' last night," said Mme. Storey. I knew this was not true. "Have you seen it?" Fay's answer ran to some length; it was evidently in the negative, for Mme. Storey said: "Well, you ought to. It's really quite tremendous." The talk then passed to other matters.

Mme. Storey then called up Inspector Rumsey at headquarters. She asked him if he had succeeded in tracing the purchase of the guns by Whittall. He said he had full information. She then got him to tell her what his movements would be that af-

ternoon and night, so that we could get in touch with him any time we might need him.

Crider called us up to report that Darius Whittall had called upon the president of the —— Railroad. Crider was not able to say, of course, what was the occasion of the visit. Upon hearing this, Mme. Storey instructed Crider to send Stephens to the —— Terminal to find out as best he could what orders had been received respecting the president's private car.

I must try to set down in order all that we did that afternoon. The significance of much of it did not become clear to me until night. First, an operative was dispatched to the garage run in connection with the Hotel Madagascar—where Fay lived—with instructions to learn what he could about the movements of Miss Brunton's cars on the night of September 11. Fay kept two cars—a brougham which was driven by a chauffeur and a smart little sport model that she drove herself.

It appeared that in this very up-to-date garage a complete record was kept of the movements of all the cars stored there. Every time they went out their mileage was taken, and again when they came in. This was to prevent their use for unauthorized purposes.

Second, an operative—this one a woman—was sent to interview Miss Beatrice Dufaye, the well-known cinema star, in the guise of a representative of some mythical magazine. Miss Dufaye was the star of "Ashes of Roses," a picture which was the sensation of the moment, and at present she was resting at her country place at Glen Cove before starting work on her next picture. Among other things, this operative was instructed to work in certain questions unostentatiously relative to the private showing of "Ashes of Roses" on September 11. This had been made a great social occasion in theatrical circles.

A third operative was instructed to learn the present whereabouts of Mr. Frank Esher. Esher, you will remember, was the young man who was so deeply in love with Fay Brunton, and for whom we suspected she had a tenderness in return. After a quarrel or a series of quarrels he had flown off to parts unknown. This operative was furnished with the address of his last employer, his club, and his last home address.

Finally I received my assignment.

"Bella," said my mistress, "I want you to go to Tiffany's with me, to help choose Fay's wedding present."

It struck me as very strange that we should spend our time this way when matters were at such a critical juncture; and especially as we were determined to prevent this wedding if we could. However, I said nothing. We used up a good hour choosing the most beautiful among the tiny platinum and jeweled watches they showed us.

"Take it to the hotel," said Mme. Storey, "and give it to her maid to keep until Fay returns from the theater. You may let the maid have a peep at it as a great favor. This ought to put you on an intimate footing at once. You will no doubt find her packing her mistress's things for the journey to-morrow.

"It will seem quite natural for you to show curiosity in Fay's pretty things. Take plenty of time. Fay cannot get home until nearly six, if she comes at all. Ordinarily, on matinée days she has dinner in her dressing room. I want you to find out what Fay was doing on the night of September 11."

"What Fay was doing?" I said.

Mme. Storey looked at me in a way, which did not allay my uneasiness.

"Have patience, Bella. I cannot yet forsee how all this is going to turn out."

She drove off up to Riverdale again with the object of recovering the gun which Whittall had presented to the captain of the precinct. It was from this gun that the fatal shot had been fired.

I proceeded to the Madagascar, that towering palace of luxury. Fay like most women in her position, had two maids, one of whom waited upon her in the hotel, and one at the theatre.

I was already acquainted with Katy Meadows, her hotel maid, and of course the nature of my errand immediately broke the ice between us. Katy was a pretty, vivacious Irish girl with naturally rosy cheeks. Fay spoiled her. Katy went into raptures over the watch.

Just as Mme. Storey had said, I found her packing. Fay's things were spread over the whole suite. I did not have to express any curiosity, for Katy insisted on showing me everything—hats, wraps, dresses, lingerie, shoes in endless profusion.

It was immoral that one woman should possess so much, but oh! what a fascinating display! Unfortunately I had something else on my mind, and was unable to give myself up to the contemplation of it. The suite consisted of three rooms; a beautiful corner sitting-room with Fay's bedroom on one side and Mrs. Brunton's on the other.

After we had finished rhapsodizing over the watch I lingered on. Katy was bustling from room to room bearing armfuls of Fay's things that had to be packed. She was in a great state of fluster.

"Four o'clock!" she cried. "Mercy! I must get a move on me! They're going to have a supper party here after the show, and everything must be out of here before that, and the place tidied up. But don't you go, Miss Brickley. Sit down and talk to me. It keeps me going—"

In the end it was not at all difficult to get what I wanted. I led up to the matter as I had heard Mme. Storey do over the phone.

"I went to see 'Ashes of Roses' last night. It's a dandy picture. Have you seen it?"

"No," said Katy. "I must wait until it shows in the cheaper houses."

"That was a great party they had the night of the private showing last September," I went on. "I suppose your folks went. They say all the famous people on Broadway were there."

"Mrs. Brunton went," said Katy unsuspiciously, "but at the last moment, Miss Fay wouldn't go. Said she didn't feel good."

"I thought she was never sick," I ventured.

"Oh, not sick," said Katy. "Just wanted to stay quiet and read. I left her in bed reading. I remember that's the night I saw A. J. Burchell, starring in 'Well-Dressed Wives'. Don't you love him?"

So much for that.

While I was in the suite, things were still arriving from the shops. I remember I was looking at a marvelous negligee when the telephone rang. From Katy's responses I understood that it was Fay calling from the theatre. Fay was evidently issuing somewhat complicated instructions, to which Katy returned breathless affirmatives.

Katy finally hung up, and turned around with wide eyes. "What do you think!" she cried. "They've changed all their plans. They're going away this evening instead of to-morrow morning!"

I thought that was the end of everything. Mme. Storey had gone up to Riverdale, and I didn't know when she'd get back. Luckily Katy was too much excited herself, to notice the effect that her announcement had on me.

"For the Lord's sake," she cried. "You never know what they're going to do next! I'm to pack the dressing-case and the small wardrobe trunk, and leave everything else for Maud. I'm to take the things to the—Terminal—my own things too, and meet them in the Grand Concourse at six thirty!"

There was only one thing for me to do, and that was to get out as quick as I could. Which I did. What was I to do? I felt desperate. If I tried to go after Mme. Storey, likely I would only pass her somewhere coming back. I didn't dare call up the police station at Riverdale, because I didn't know if she would give her right name there, and if I mentioned it, I might upset all her plans. There was nothing for it, but to return to the office and wait for her. At the worst, I was prepared to go myself to the Terminal, and denounce Whittall in public, though I died for it.

To my great relief that was not required of me. At the end of an hour, Mme. Storey came into the office bringing a very pretty young lady whom I had not seen before. She introduced her as Miss Larrimore. I was too excited at the moment to remember that this was the name of Fay's understudy.

"Miss Larrimore wanted to see our offices," Mme. Storey explained amiably.

Perceiving from my face that something

had happened, Mme. Storey allowed the girl to pass on into the long room, while she lingered in my office. I hurriedly made my communication. Mme. Storey was not in the least disturbed. Indeed, she laughed merrily.

"I fancied that some such move might be made," she said. "So I kidnaped Fay's understudy. I expect they're looking for her now."

"But—but where did you find her?" I asked, amazed.

"Oh, I knew that after reporting at the theatre for every performance, she was free to go home if Fay had turned up in good health. So I went to her boarding-house, and asked her to go for a drive. We'll take her back directly. It will be fun!"

From her hand-bag Mme. Storey took an automatic pistol, and put a mark on it in my presence, before dropping it in the drawer of my desk. This weapon was identical with the one which had been recovered from the well at Oakhurst that morning.

My mistress did not hurry herself at all. After showing Miss Larrimore her artistic treasures she announced that she would drive her up-town. "I'm going to drop in on Fay at the theatre," said Mme. Storey. "You come along, too."

It was not the first time that Mme. Storey and I had applied at the stage door of the Yorktown theatre, and we were admitted without question. The star of the company was allotted two rooms on the level of the stage; the outer was used to receive her friends in, while the inner was devoted to the mysteries of make-up and dress.

When the outer door was opened we heard the voices of several people within. Mme. Storey slyly bade Miss Larrimore to enter first, while she hung back with a smile. Cries of relief greeted the understudy.

"Oh, here you are!"

Then Mme. Storey entered with me at her heels. They were all there; Whittall, Krueger, Mrs. Brunton and Fay. My mistress appearance created a startling effect. Whittall was arrested in full flight so to speak. The man froze where he stood. His face turned livid. Krueger was frankly terrified; while Mrs. Brunton was herself, for once. She snarled. She could not have known what had taken place that day, but she saw clearly enough that her darling scheme was endangered. Fay swam towards us, perfectly candid in her gladness. Whittall made an involuntary move to stop her—then he saw it was useless.

"Rosika and Bella!" cried Fay. "What a lucky chance! I was just about to write you. Darius said it would sound too casual to telephone. I am afraid our little party for to-night must be off, my dears. But Darius says we shall have a big one as soon as we get back. Our plans are all changed.

"It turns out that the private car is required in New York on Tuesday, and we have to use it to-night or not at all. I suppose I am silly, but my heart was set on that private car. So we're off at seven o'clock. Miss Larrimore will play my part to-night. We'll be married in Pinehurst to-morrow."

Mme. Storey looked at Whittall with a cold smile. He visibly writhed under it. He had given her his word of honor, you remember. The tension of that moment was almost unbearable. Everybody in the room was aware of it except the two girls who were laughingly whispering about the night's performance. There was something inexpressibly touching in the sight of their happy ignorance.

Finally Mme. Storey spoke. "I'm afraid I've got the thankless job of throwing a monkey wrench into the works," she said.

"What do you mean?" asked Fay, laughing.

"I can't let Mr. Whittall go away to-night."

One can imagine what a hell of rage and frustration Whittall was undergoing during those moments. I don't suppose that the arrogant millionaire's will had ever been crossed before.

"What!" said Fay, opening her eyes wide.

"Some time ago," said Mme. Storey coolly, "Mr. Whittall promised to back me in a scheme I was getting up to open a studio building for poor artists. My plans

are ripe now, and I have called a meeting for to-morrow. I am counting on him."

"Oh, but surely," said Fay, more and more surprised, "under the circumstances; can't somebody appear for him? Can't it be put off for a few days?"

"No," said Mme. Storey with cold firmness.

From astonishment Fay graduated to indignation. Suspecting enmity in my mistress, she turned from her. "Darius!" she said.

What a bitter moment for him! He hesitated. His eyes glittered in the direction of my mistress with an expression of reckless rage. But upon meeting her cold glance they fell again. He knew that the word "murder" had only to be whispered to destroy his chances forever. "I gave her my word," he mumbled, grinding his teeth. "I've got to stick to it."

Fay's gentle eyes flashed. She could see now that there was much more in this than appeared on the surface. But pride would not allow her to ask any more questions. She was much angrier at her renegade lover, than she was at Mme. Storey.

"Oh well, of course it doesn't make any difference," she said tossing her head. She slipped her hand under Miss Larrimore's arm. "I'm only sorry on your account, my dear." She drew the other girl into the inner room.

IX.

THE events which succeeded this scene were simply baffling to me. Katy was ordered back from the station to the hotel, and told to unpack all her mistress's things and put them away. The private car was cancelled. At this, Mrs. Brunton could no longer contain her feelings.

"How dare you come here interfering in our private affairs! What does your silly meeting mean to us when Darius and Fay are going to be married! I never heard of such a thing—"

And all that sort of thing. The outburst was quite natural. Mrs. Brunton had had a hard life, and Whittall's twenty millions blinded her to all other considerations. There is no doubt but she loved Fay as if she had been her own child.

Now, Whittall, when he heard this, executed a rapid *volte face*. A moment before, he had seemed absolutely suffocated with rage against Mme. Storey; now he turned against Mrs. Brunton, and roughly silenced her. "Mme. Storey is our friend," he said. "You have no reason to speak to her in that manner. This is an important matter. She knows what she is doing."

Mrs. Brunton didn't know what to make of it, and no more did I. To my further astonishment, Mme. Storey allowed a reconciliation to be patched up, and when I left she and Whittall were chatting together as amicably as you please. Since Fay was to go on as usual, her supper had been ordered in. I can't tell you what happened after that, because I had been sent to the office with private instructions to receive the reports of the various operatives who had been detailed on the case, and forward them to Mme. Storey at the theatre. I supposed that she and Whittall remained at the theatre throughout the performance, exchanging compliments—and watching each other.

During the evening Mme. Storey called me up to say that the little party would take place in Fay's rooms after the performance as at first arranged, and that I was to be there. She instructed me to get in touch with Inspector Rumsey, and to ask him to be waiting in the lobby of the Madagascar at quarter to twelve. I possessed no key to Mme. Storey's plans, and this latter message caused a feeling of dread to weigh on my breast.

In due course I went home to change my dress, and then proceeded to the hotel. I saw the inspector waiting in the lobby, and nodded to him as I passed. When I was shown up to Fay's suite I found that I was the first to arrive. Katy pounced on me to learn the inner reasons for her mistress's second extraordinary change of plans, but I had no heart to gossip with the maid.

There was a table ready set for six persons. It looked lovely with its snowy cloth set off with glass and silver and flowers. All around the white paneled walls, relieved with an old mezzo-tint or two, there were

pink-shaded lights bracketed in threes, and casting down a pleasant glow on the comfortable furniture covered with crisp cretonnes. Only the most expensive places dare to be as simple as that. There were flowers everywhere in the room. To me there was a horrible irony in the sight of all this dainty preparation for such a scene.

Fay, Mrs. Brunton, Darius Whittall and Krueger came in together. Their faces gave nothing away.

"Where is Mme. Storey?" I asked involuntarily.

"She'll be up directly," said Fay. "She met a friend in the lobby."

I supposed this was Rumsey.

Fay and Mrs. Brunton disappeared within their respective bedrooms to remove their wraps. When Fay left the room something of the inferno of passions that was consuming Whittall, broke through the mask he wore.

He looked at me as much as to say: "What the hell are you doing here?" I paid no attention. Mme. Storey entered, and he smiled at her obsequiously. Mme. Storey lit a cigarette, and lingered in the sitting-room exchanging some trivial remarks with Whittall until Fay returned. She then said something about tidying herself, and entered Fay's room alone.

When she came back we sat down at the table, and the waiters entered. Mme. Storey alone of the women, was not in evening dress, nevertheless by her mere presence she dominated the scene. Everybody else was trying to be funny. There was a ghastly hollowness about it. Whittall was the loudest of all. Fay seemed pleasant toward him, but I suspected that her pleasant manner concealed a certain reserve. Mrs. Brunton seemed to be satisfied that everything was going well, as long as there was plenty of noise.

Fay occupied the place of honor at the head of the table, with Mme. Storey on one hand, and me on the other. Krueger sat next to Mme. Storey, and Mrs. Brunton next to me. Whittall faced Fay across the table. Fay, I remember, was wearing a pale pink gown embroidered with self-colored beads in a quaint design. It lent her beauty an exquisite fragility. When he thought nobody was looking at him, I would catch Whittall gazing at her like a lost soul.

The meal, I suppose, left nothing to be desired. I cannot remember what we ate or drank. Some day I hope I may be invited to such a perfect little supper when my mind is at peace. This one was wasted on all of us. It was soon over, and the cigarettes lighted. Mrs. Brunton chattered on.

"There was twenty-one hundred dollars in the house to-night. That's a hundred and fifty more than capacity."

"How do you do that sum?" asked Whittall facetiously.

"Standees," said Mrs. Brunton. "—And *what* a house! So warm and responsive. I could have hugged them to my breast!"

"Rather an armful," put in Whittall.

"And when she finished her waltz song, didn't they rise to her! Oh, it was wonderful! Never have I heard such applause! And didn't she look sweet when she came out to acknowledge it? I declare her pretty eyes were full of real tears!"

"Well, I thought maybe it was the last time," said Fay.

"I thought they would *never* let her go!" Mrs. Brunton rhapsodized. "She took fourteen calls!"

"Oh, mamma!" protested Fay, laughing. "Draw it mild!"

"Fourteen!" said Mrs. Brunton firmly. "I said it, and I stick to it! Fourteen!"

She appealed to Whittall and to Krueger, and they made haste to agree in order to shut her up.

"One doesn't have to exaggerate the successes of a girl like Fay," she went on complacently. "I saw Mildred Mortimer and her mother hidden away at the back of the house. I can imagine what *their* feelings were!"

Such was Mrs. Brunton's style. She turned it on like a tap. She had been something of a beauty in her day, and she looked quite handsome to-night in her black evening gown, with her hair freshened up with henna, and prettily dressed.

Whittall, remember, made an effort to break up the party. "Fay, you look tired," he said. "I think we'd better beat it."

Fay protested. Krueger, always eager to take a hint from his master, pushed his chair back. No one else moved. I saw Mme. Storey, for whom this suggestion was really intended, glance at her wrist watch. Then she helped herself to a cigarette.

The crisis was precipitated by an innocent question of Fay's. "Why are you so quiet, Rosika?"

"I am thinking of that poor lady who is dead," said Mme. Storey gravely.

It was like an icy hand laid on each heart there. A deathly silence fell on us. It seemed to last forever. I felt paralyzed. Mrs. Brunton was the first to recover herself. She was afraid of Mme. Storey, and dared not be openly rude, but her anger was evident enough in her voice.

"Oh, I say! What a thing to bring up at such a time and place! I'm surprised at you, Mme. Storey!"

"We are all thinking of her," said Mme. Storey. "It would be better to clear our minds of the subject."

"*I* wasn't thinking of her, I assure you!"

Even the gentle Fay was resentful. "It's not fair to Darius," she murmured.

"Darius is a man, and must face things."

I glanced at Whittall. He had the look of one braced to receive a fatal stroke.

"I am so sorry for her!" murmured Fay distressfully. "I often think about her and wonder—But Rosika, is it *my* fault that I am happy? that I have everything, while she is dead?"

Mme. Storey made no reply to this.

"She solved her problems in her own way!" cried Mrs. Brunton excitedly. "Who shall blame her? Can't you leave her in peace?"

"She did not kill herself," said Mme. Storey slowly. "She was murdered."

Again that awful silence. Horror crushed us.

Whittall lost his grip on himself. "You promised me—you promised me—!" he cried shakily, "that you would not tell her—"

"We had better not talk about promises," said Mme. Storey with a steady look at him.

"Darius!—you already knew this!" gasped Fay.

He could make no answer.

Fay turned to Mme. Storey. "Rosika—how do you know?—how do you know?" she faltered.

"She received a letter that evening which drew her out to the pavilion. She was unarmed when she left the house."

"Then it's quite clear," said Fay, laughing hysterically. "The letter must have been from her lover. He pleaded with her for the last time, and when she was obdurate he shot her in a fit of desperation."

"She was shot within three minutes of leaving the house," said Mme. Storey relentlessly. "Not much time for pleading. No! somebody was waiting for her in the pavilion with the gun ready."

"But it must have been her lover!" wailed Fay.

Mme. Storey sat looking straight ahead of her, pale and immovable as Nemesis. "It was somebody who is among us here," she said.

You could hear the tight breasts around the table laboring for breath. Each of us glanced with furtive dread at our companions. Whittall broke again.

"Well, who?—who?—who?" he cried wildly. "Out with it!"

"Somebody among us here?" quavered Mrs. Brunton in a high falsetto. "I never heard of such a thing!"

The aging woman with her touched up cheeks and dyed hair looked like a caricature of herself. Everybody around the table looked stricken, clownish, scattered in the wits. I'm sure I was no exception. Only my mistress was as composed as death.

"Fay," she asked, "what were you doing on the evening of September eleventh?"

I turned absolutely sick at heart. Mrs. Brunton and Whittall loudly and angrily protested. The exquisite girl shrank away from Mme. Storey, and went as pale as paper. Apart from the noisy voices of the others I heard her dismayed whisper.

"Rosika!—I?—*I?*—Oh, Rosika, surely you can't think that I—"

"This is too much!" cried Mrs. Brunton jumping up. "Must we submit to be insulted here in our own rooms? Mr. Whittall, are you going to permit this to go any further?"

"No!" cried Whittall, banging the table. "This woman is taking too much on herself! She has no right to catechize us!"

Mme. Storey looked at me. "Bella," she said, "admit the gentleman who is waiting outside."

As well as my legs would serve me I got to the door. Inspector Rumsey was in the corridor. He came in.

With a wave of the hand, Mme. Storey introduced him to the gaping company. "Inspector Rumsey and I are acting in concert in this matter," she said. "I suppose you will allow that he has a right to ask questions."

Rumsey quietly sat down in a chair away from the table.

"Now, Fay," said Mme. Storey.

The girl raised her gentle eyes in an imploring and reproachful glance upon her friend. "Oh, Rosika, how can you?" she murmured.

Mme. Storey's face was like a mask. "I must do my duty as I see it. Answer my question please."

Fay put a hand over her eyes. "That was the night of the first showing of 'Ashes of Roses'," she murmured. "I did not go. I was not well. I went to bed when mamma went out."

"But you got up again," said Mme. Storey remorselessly. "I have a report from the garage where you keep your cars, stating that you telephoned for the sport car at eight ten that night, and that it was handed over to you at the door of your hotel five minutes later. It was returned to the garage at half-past ten."

"Oh, yes," murmured Fay feebly. "I forgot."

Mrs. Brunton and Whittall looked dumfounded. As for me, I simply could not believe my ears.

"Where did you go?" asked Mme. Storey.

"I—I was just driving around for the air. I don't remember exactly."

"According to the custom of the garage," Mme. Storey continued, "a reading of the speedometer was taken when the car went out, and again when it was returned. The elapsed mileage was twenty miles. That is just the distance to Riverdale and back."

Fay sat up suddenly. "I never went to Riverdale!" she cried sharply.

"Then where did you go?" persisted Mme. Storey.

A deep blush overspread Fay's face and neck. "Well, if you must know," she said a little defiantly, "I picked up Frank Esher in front of his house and took him for a drive."

Again, Mrs. Brunton and Whittall looked at her openmouthed.

The inspector spoke up cheerfully. Like everybody else, he wished to be on Fay's side. "That will be easy to verify," he said, taking out his note-book.

"Unfortunately," said Mme. Storey coldly, "Mr. Esher has disappeared."

"Well, anyhow," cried Whittall, "you can't convict her of a crime simply because she chanced to take a drive that night. It's ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous!" echoed Mrs. Brunton.

"I have not yet done," said Mme. Storey. "Inspector, will you please state what you learned respecting the purchase of the guns."

Rumsey consulted the notebook. "On May 24 Mr. Darius Whittall purchased two Matson thirty-two caliber automatics from Lorber and Staley's. He has no account there. Those were the only pistols of that design he ever purchased from them. One was numbered 13417, the other 13418."

Mme. Storey turned to Whittall. "Are you willing to concede that you gave one of these pistols to your wife, and one to Fay?"

"I refuse to answer without advice of counsel," he muttered.

"It doesn't matter," said Mme. Storey undisturbed; "for we already know from other sources that you gave one to your wife and one to Fay, making the same remark to each—Fay, where is yours?"

"In the bottom drawer of my bureau," came the prompt reply.

"Will you fetch it, please?"

Fay called to Katy. The girl immediately appeared in the doorway, looking white and scared. Evidently she had overheard at least part of what had occurred.

"Bring me the gun from the bottom drawer of my bureau."

The strangeness of this request completed the demoralization of the maid. She stood there like one incapable of motion. Fay herself sprang up, and ran into the next room. From there we heard her cry:

"It's gone!"

Then her excited questioning of the maid. Katy swore that she had neither touched nor even seen the gun. She had not yet reached that drawer when her packing was interrupted, she said. The girl got the idea somehow, that her own honesty was in question. She had no idea that her words were convicting her mistress. Fay finally came back to her seat with a wandering and vacant air. She kept repeating: "I can't imagine—! I can't imagine—!" The inspector looked very grave.

Mme. Storey remorselessly resumed: "I recovered Mrs. Whittall's pistol this morning. It is in my possession, properly marked for identification. The number of it is 13417. The pistol found in Mrs. Whittall's hand, that is to say the one from which the fatal shot was fired, was subsequently given by Mr. Whittall to the captain of the precinct. I obtained it from the captain this afternoon. The number is 13418. Here it is."

She produced the weapon from a little bag that she carried on her arm. She handed the sinister black object to Rumsey, who read off the number "13418," and handed it back to her.

At first I couldn't take it in. Neither could Fay. Her wandering eyes, like a child's, searched from one face to another for the explanation. Mrs. Brunton and Whittall were sitting there, literally frozen with horror. Rumsey had got up. It was from his grave and compassionate gaze at Fay that I realized she stood convicted in his eyes.

What a dreadful moment!

Fay burst into tears and dropped her head between her outstretched arms on the table.

"Oh, how can you? How can you?" she sobbed.

At that something seemed to break inside of me. I forgot everything—my duty to my mistress, everything. I was only conscious of the weeping girl whom I loved.

"It's a shame! It's a shame!" I heard myself crying. "She didn't do it! She *couldn't* have done it! Look at her. What does your evidence amount to beside that?"

Fay reached for me like a frightened child, and I took her in my arms.

Mme. Storey never looked at me. No muscle of her face changed.

"The rest lies with you, inspector," she said quietly.

Rumsey's distress comes back to me now. Then I was oblivious to everything.

"It will be all right—it will be all right," he kept saying. "I'm sure that a further investigation will clear everything up. But I'm sorry. I would not be justified— I must ask the young lady—"

Mrs. Brunton jumped up with a shriek. "Is he going to arrest her?"

"Don't call it an *arrest,* ma'am; a brief detention—"

"Oh, no, no, no!" Mrs. Brunton flung herself down beside the girl and wrapped her arms around Fay's knees. "It is all lies!" she cried. "All lies! It was *I* who shot Mrs. Whittall!"

I have not the heart to describe the painful scene that followed. Fay was broken-hearted, of course, but the shock to her proved to be less than Mme. Storey had feared for. It turned out that for weeks past Fay, with the clear instinct of a simple heart, had divined that her companion was carrying a load of guilt on her breast, though of course the girl had no idea of its nature. She was already secretly estranged from the woman who passed as her mother.

Nevertheless she loyally wished to accompany her to police headquarters; but the rest of us dissuaded her from it. Krueger went with Mrs. Brunton, but Darius Whittall remained with us. He had to learn his fate. Before Mme. Storey and I he said with a despairing hangdog air:

"It was not my fault, Fay."

She looked at him with gravely accusing eyes. There was nothing childish about her then.

"No," she said quietly, "but you were not sorry when it happened."

Unfastening the pearls from about her neck, and drawing off the ring, she handed them over.

He knew it was final. He went away, a broken man.

When we three were alone together Fay wept again on my breast. Mme. Storey looked as uncomfortable as a boy in the presence of emotion. From the little bag she took the gun she had produced at the table.

"Here is your gun, Fay," she said. "I took it out of your drawer when I went into your room to change my hat."

We opened our eyes at that. Nothing so simple had ever occurred to us.

"I hope you can forgive me for those terrible moments I gave you," Mme. Storey went on. "I couldn't help myself. That woman covered her tracks so well, there was nothing for it but to force a confession."

Fay forgave her freely.

"I owe Bella an apology, too," Mme. Storey said with a rueful glance in my direction. "For keeping her in the dark. You see, I needed that outburst from Bella to give the scene verisimilitude."

This made me feel rather foolish, but of course I was not troubling about a little thing like that then.

Poor Fay! "I am alone—alone!" she sobbed.

To create a diversion, Mme. Storey murmured the name of Frank Esher. "I suggest that that woman may have fomented the trouble between you and him because he was poor," she said.

"She was always against him," Fay agreed.

"Why don't you write to him now?"

"I don't know where he is," mourned Fay.

"In care of the British-American Development Company, Georgetown, British Guiana," said Mme. Storey dryly.

"Oh, Rosika!" This with her face hidden on my shoulder.

"In fact, why not cable?" said Mme. Storey.

"Oh, Rosika! You do it for me."

"Well, as a matter of fact I have cabled already," said Mme. Storey.

I cannot do better than conclude by appending Mrs. Brunton's—Elinor Tinsley was her real name—subsequent confession to the police. All that was so baffling in the case therein becomes clear.

"I am aware that anything I say may be used against me. I want to tell the truth now. I'm glad it's out. It was too great a load to bear. I did it for her; for the one whom I called my daughter. I loved her as much as I could my own child. In spite of all I said, I knew that she had not sufficient talent to maintain her as a star. So many new faces coming to the front each year. I wanted to secure her future. I wanted her to have the best.

"When Mr. Whittall began to pay her attention I saw our chance in him. But his wife was in the way. He was anxious for a divorce, but she wouldn't consent. I could not forget about it. I brooded and brooded on it. I felt I had to act quickly, because Mr. Whittall had a reputation for fickleness. I was afraid he'd take a fancy to somebody else. Once he told me the name of a man he thought his wife was secretly in love with—I won't mention it here—and that gave me my first idea.

"I got a sample of Mrs. Whittall's handwriting by writing her a begging letter under an assumed name; and I practiced and practiced until I was able to imitate it. Then I sent a letter as coming from her to this man I told you about, hoping that it would result in throwing them into each other's arms, and that there would have to be a divorce then; but weeks passed, and nothing happened. I was no further forward than before.

"Then one day Mrs. Whittall asked my daughter and me to have lunch and tea with her at her place. And when we were having tea out in the pavilion, the whole thing seemed to unroll itself before me. I thought of the first showing of 'Ashes of Roses' that was coming soon, and what a good chance it would give me, and I made up my mind I would try again that night. I knew I wouldn't have any trouble with Fay, because she doesn't care for pictures, and I could easily persuade her not to go.

"I got a sample of that man's handwriting on another pretext, and I practiced

until I was able to write a letter that looked like his. I bought the gun at —— (a big department store) for cash, so the sale couldn't be traced. I knew the kind of gun Mr. Whittall had bought for his wife and for Fay—a Matson automatic, thirty-two caliber—and I got the same.

"I wanted to make it look like suicide. Then I wrote a letter to Mrs. Whittall in this man's name, asking her to come to me, for God's sake, in the little pavilion at nine-thirty that night. Of course she ought to have known, after the other letter, but I figured if she was in love she wouldn't stop to think. If she hadn't come, I'd just have tried something else. I sent the letter the same afternoon with a special delivery stamp on it. Through a messenger it could have been traced.

"My daughter and I had special invitations to see the private showing of 'Ashes of Roses' that night. Without seeming to, I persuaded Fay to stay at home. I took a taxicab to the theater, arriving there about eight fifteen. I had the gun in my reticule. I greeted many friends in the lobby, so I could prove an alibi if anything went wrong. I took a seat on the side aisle, beside one of the exits, and when the lights were put out it was easy for me to slip out through that exit without anybody seeing.

"I took the West Side Subway to the end of the line and walked up the hill to Riverdale, and on down the other side toward the river. I had fixed in my mind the road that ran alongside the wall of the Whittall property. I climbed the wall and went up the hill to the pavilion. I was in plenty of time. I took the gun in my hand and waited, hidden behind a pillar. I kept my gloves on so I wouldn't leave any finger-prints on the gun. When Mrs. Whittall came running in, I pressed the gun to her temple and pulled the trigger. She fell back outside. She never made a sound. I closed her hand over the gun as well as I could and went back the way I came.

"I had found out from Mr. Krueger that he and Mr. Whittall would be dining at the Hotel Norfolk that night. I wanted to warn Mr. Whittall to secure his wife's gun. I knew he'd be glad enough to hush up any scandal. But I was afraid to stop at Van Cortlandt for fear somebody might remember seeing me in a telephone booth. So I rode on the subway down to One Hundred and Forty-Fifth Street, and telephoned from a pay station there. Then I rode on the subway down to Times Square and took a taxi to the hotel. That is all I have to say."

THE END

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HAPPINESS

OH, *what* is happiness? Tell me that!
My mother thinks it is a hat;
My brother thinks it is a car;
My father calls it his cigar!

My cousin tells me it is dances,
And Ray declares it's taking chances—
Though Archie says that it's a yacht,
While Frances sneers that it is not!

But as for me, I cannot say.
I find a little every way.
Perhaps I'm stupid—very so—
And that is why I do not know!

Sonia Ruthèle Novák.

The Bronze Hand

By CAROLYN WELLS

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

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

THE palatial liner Pinnacle steams from New York for Liverpool with a crowded passenger list, containing the usual important personages, beauties, bores. Oscar Cox, about fifty, mining magnate, is the wealthiest man aboard. He fraternizes with the young folks—flappers and sheiks—in an unclelike way and promises a great surprise at the end of the voyage. Maisie Forman, loveliest girl on the ship, is proud and retiring, but Max Trent, writer of fiction, interests her and they become deck companions. Mr. Cox exhibits to a group of passengers a bronze hand, copy of a Rodin masterpiece. Lily Gibbs, a spinster who claims expertness in palmistry, reads a prophecy of disaster in the metal palm. Max Trent, late at night, intercepts a woman about to leap into the ocean. She is Maisie Forman—and the mysterious beauty makes no explanation of her desperate act. Oscar Cox is found dead near a library deck window, slain with the bronze hand. Hudder, the dead man's personal servant, cannot, or will not, give any information to the ship's captain, and bolts from the stateroom when asked to get a key from his master's pocket. Pollard Nash, a passenger, assists Captain Van Winkle in an investigation.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GLOVES.

"JUST as well he's out of the way," Nash said, as the door closed behind the retreating servant. "Will you get the key, doctor? I—I can't."

Not sharing the layman's unreasoning horror of death, Dr. Bowers extracted a bunch of keys from Cox's pocket, and the two men examined the contents of the locked drawer of the trunk.

"No letter of credit or express checks or anything that represents money," said Nash, as he ran over the few papers the place contained. "Such things he has doubtless put in the ship's safe. Here's his passport, receipted bills, and a few letters."

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for October 31.

"Let's look at the passport," said Bowers.

But from that document they learned nothing that they did not already know, except that Cox was fifty-one years old, and that his object in going abroad was set down as "travel."

"Here are some cards of London shops and other business addresses," Nash said. "Mostly clothiers or men's furnishings."

"What are the bills?" asked the doctor, who began to think there wasn't much detective work going on. At least, none of a brilliant nature.

The bills were all from New York shops. Almost all were from tailors or jewelers.

"To show the customs people, when he comes home," Nash said. "He wears a lot of jewelry, good stuff, too. See, these bills are old, but here's his pearl set of evening studs and buttons, and his ring and some pins. But, look at this!"

He held out to the eyes of the other a bill of very recent date from a Fifth Avenue jeweler.

It itemized a pearl necklace, with square diamond clasp, at fifty thousand dollars; a shoulder buckle of diamonds and sapphires, at ten thousand dollars, and three diamond bracelets at five thousand dollars apiece.

"Whew!" exclaimed the doctor. "What does this mean? I'm not surprised at his buying the things, for I've heard he's a multi-millionaire, but where are they?"

"If on board, they're in the ship's safe," said Nash, eying the bill. "But more likely he gave them to some fair dame before he started."

"Why are the bills here then?"

"Might be lots of reasons. Maybe he made the presentation the night before he sailed, and so had the bills still in his pocketbook. Well, even for a gay dog—which he never seemed to me to be—this is going some!"

"You don't think he was fond of the ladies?"

"Not to this extent. I mean, I didn't think so. This looks as if he was. But on board, though he fooled around with those flappers, it was always in a nice bachelor uncle sort of way—"

"He wasn't a bachelor."

"No, but he'd been a widower fifteen years, he told me, and somehow he had taken on bachelor airs. Well, this bill gives us a sidelight on his character, whether it is of any help to us or not.

"Perhaps that Hudder person will know who was or is to be the recipient of these trinkets."

"It's not easy, I find, to pry information out of that automaton. But I may be able to surprise or scare it out of him. He won't answer questions put in the ordinary way."

"Here's a letter of introduction."

"Not social or personal," Nash said, glancing at it. "Merely a recommendation to a tailor."

"Great dresser, Cox."

"All of that. Well, let's see if his personal belongings tell us any secrets." But the toilet appointments and carefully put away underclothing and haberdashery gave up only the evidence that they were the property of a rich man of fine tastes and punctilious neatness. Shirts were monogrammed, handkerchiefs were fit for a Beau Brummel, the silk hose could be drawn through a finger ring and the neckties might have been selected by an artist.

Checks for other trunks that were in the hold appeared. also for hatboxes and various cases.

"He's taking enough luggage not to buy anything over there," Bowers grunted. "Why such a terrible lot of stuff?"

"He was an extravagant nature all through," Nash asserted. "Look at this dispatch case and these collar and cuff boxes—all of the finest leather with gold monograms. Even his shoe-trees are made to order. Without being what is termed a dandy, Oscar Cox was one of the most luxurious dressers I have ever seen."

"But everything seems to be new," said Bowers, thoughfully.

"Not everything. And it's quite in keeping that he should renew things before they were worn, not after."

"Well, we've struck no money at all, not even chicken feed for use on the boat. He must have some about."

"Belt, probably. You'll have to get that."

"The man to embalm the body will be here shortly. Can't you wait for him?"

"Yes, certainly. It does seem ghoulish, doesn't it? I say, doctor, it's all terribly queer. I mean a murder, with no police, no coroner, no real detectives, no witnesses—bah, how can the criminal ever be discovered?"

"Yet, on the other hand, how it is narrowed down, compared to a murder on land. Here, the murderer is necessarily on this ship. Within a few hundred yards of us this very minute. And, he can't get away! Surely that ought to make it easy to find him."

"Surely it doesn't! Why, we've no idea, except for a few, what men on board Cox knew. We don't know but he had an enemy in the second or third cabin or even in the crew. We don't know but he had those gems on him, and was murdered for those. In a word, we know almost nothing of the man, and apparently can find out nothing. You must admit that isn't a hopeful outlook. On land, there are friends, relatives, associates, who may be questioned. On board, every one lives in select privacy, if he chooses, and no one knows anything about the man in the next stateroom to his own."

"All true—I hadn't seen it in just that light."

"That's the light it's in. As you say, the man who clawed Oscar Cox's face with that awful bronze, is even now on board, and separated from us by only a few wooden walls. But he's as secure from suspicion—I mean, he probably is—as if he were on another ship. Why, in a house, or in a room, all present may be catechized, for all present have common cause with the victim, in that they are in the same place, and for the same reason. But here—it's like a whole town, and there are as many human beings on board as may be found in a small town—you can't ask questions of people who hadn't even nodding acquaintance with Cox."

"What, then? Give up all hope of finding out the truth?"

"No, not that. But it depends largely on chance information, and on—oh, it calls for the work of a real detective—a big one. I'm the merest novice, I've had almost no experience—it wants a super-Sherlock Holmes, not an ignorant beginner."

Nash's tones were so earnest, the doctor didn't affront him with mild compliments or protestations of faith in his powers.

He nodded his head, and Nash went on; "I was pleased and flattered when the captain asked me to look into the matter, but Lordy, it's a huckleberry above my persimmons! I'm not lying down on the job, and I may have a streak of luck, but I sure recognize my own inadequacy. Guess I'll talk it over with Trent; he's a writer of mystery yarns."

"Does that give him a working knowledge of cases?"

"Not necessarily. But he may give me a steer. I'll put it up to the captain, and if he doesn't mind, I'll call Trent in conference."

"All right, Mr. Nash. And here are the men from the surgery. I'll stay with them, and whatever we find on Mr. Cox's person in the way of a money belt or other personal effects, I'll turn over to the captain and you can see them."

Nash obtained a short interview with Captain Van Winkle at once, but was asked to wait until evening before opening the packets Cox had deposited in the safe.

"We must cable his people," the captain said, looking harassed. "But he seems uncommonly short of people. We can't reach any business addresses until to-morrow, and there's only his home address left. But, still according to Hudder, that's a bachelor house and his apartment is closed for the summer. No use cabling a caretaker. Hudder vows he doesn't know the name or address of Cox's lawyer. I never heard of a human being so utterly alone, apparently. Any help from his papers?"

"Not those in his stateroom. Perhaps from a money belt—and there's the safe."

"Yes. Come to my office directly after dinner, will you?"

"Yes, captain, and may I bring Max Trent?"

"Who's he?"

Nash explained and was permitted, even urged, to bring Trent.

Captain Van Winkle was a man of sound

sense, and not above asking help when needed, and when he had faith in his helpers.

Nash went away, and was immediately joined by Mallory, who had been waiting for him. Together they made their way toward where Trent's chair was located.

Not uninterruptedly, however. Groups of people stopped them, others waylaid them and it was well nigh impossible to shake them off.

Nash shuddered as he was forced to pass the place where Cox's chair had been. And near there, Lily Gibbs stopped him, and said pleadingly: "Dear Mr. Nash, do give us some news. Think how anxious we are to know what's being done toward finding the slayer of dear Mr. Cox."

"And how should I know?" Nash asked, a little brusquely.

"Oh, now, now!" and Miss Gibbs shook a finger at him. "A little bird told me that you were investigating! That you are a regular Sherlock, and you're surely going to bring the miscreant to justice."

Nash had never liked the woman, still less did he like her mode of address, but it occurred to him that whatever news or rumor might be afloat on the ship, she would know of it, and he felt he must glean every possible bit of information that might help him.

So he stopped, and Mallory with him, and talked to Miss Gibbs.

"You overrate my ability, dear lady," he said, "but I think we all want to find the criminal if we can. Not I alone, but all the passengers on the Pinnacle want that."

"All except one," said Lily Gibbs, dryly.

"Point well taken. Yes, all except one. Or more, if he had confederates."

"You know, Mr. Nash, what he was killed with?"

"What?" Nash was determined to be non-committal.

"That terrible bronze hand! Do you remember the night I examined it—Mr. Cox showed it to us—and I said it was an evil hand? The lines in that palm were evil lines—remember?"

"Yes, Miss Gibbs, I do remember. And you were a true prophet. Can you see anything more—clairvoyantly, I mean—as to the crime?"

Amy Camper, who sat near, arose and stood by Lily's side. Her husband remained in his chair, but he was listening.

"Not here and now," Miss Gibbs replied, in a low, tense voice. "But later I will try—I may—"

"Now, Lily," exclaimed Mrs. Camper rather crossly, "don't mix in with any of that foolishness. Tell her, Mr. Nash, that it is out of place in real detective work."

"What do you think about it all, Mrs. Camper?" said Nash, ignoring her request. "What does your husband think? You two sat near Mr. Cox every day—you knew him fairly well, didn't you?"

"We sat no nearer to him than you did, Mr. Nash," Amy Camper seemed a little ruffled. "Yours and Mr. Mallory's chairs are just the other side of his."

"Yes, but we are not often in our chairs. We're birds of passage. You and Mr. Camper spend most of your time in yours."

"But not most of our time talking to Mr. Cox," she returned with spirit. "Indeed, he devoted a lot of time to that gang of flappers who everlastingly hung around him."

"Do you know what I think?" said Owen Camper, rising and coming slowly over to them, "I think that hand—that bronze horror, was flung at him—"

"Flung!" cried Mallory, "I never thought of that!"

"Yes, flung, say, by some one in sudden anger, not meaning to kill the man."

"But who would do it?"

"Might have been that queer duck of a servant, the one Cox called Hudder."

"He is devoted to his master," Nash put in.

"Oh, you can't tell. He seems so—but who knows? For that matter, who knows anything about Cox, anyway? Anything much, that is."

"I thought you knew him pretty well, Mr. Camper," Nash said, quietly.

"Not well, no. I met him a few times at one or two clubs in New York, and I've seen him at ball games now and then. But we were not what you would call friends scarcely acquaintances."

" Was he fond of ladies' society?" Nash pursued.

" That I don't know anything about. As I say, I've only seen him among men. He was a general favorite, except once in a while when he would fall into a boasting vein. Then he was insufferable."

" What do you know of his nephew?"

" Nephew?"

" Yes, nephew and namesake."

" Oh, you mean the young chap who was so wicked and then reformed. I've heard of him, but I never saw him. I don't know where he lives, I'm sure."

" The difficulty is to know to whom to cable the news of Cox's death," Nash said, watching Camper closely.

" What! Doesn't anybody know anything about his people? Not Hudder?"

" Can't seem to get definite information," Nash said, and then, turning sharply on his heel, he went off and Mallory followed.

A moment later they met Mr. Allen and Mr. Mason, and this time Nash paused of his own accord.

" Can either of you men advise me?" he began. " The captain has been kind enough to ask me to help him look into the Cox matter a little, and I'm terribly afraid I can't make much headway. Mr. Cox seems to have been very much alone on board."

" Lots of us are," said Mason, looking keenly at the earnest young man. " What do you want to know, especially?"

" Some relative or friend in New York to whom to send the news of his death. To-morrow it will reach the papers, but if we could get in touch with his people to-night it would seem more circumspect to advise them first, don't you think?"

" It does seem so, to be sure," Allen agreed. " But I've no knowledge of his home affairs, have you, Mason?"

" No, except that he didn't have any. I mean, he lived alone, and I never heard of any relatives. His wife died years ago—"

" Is he interested in—in any lady now?" said Nash, quickly.

" Not that I know of," returned Allen, and Mason shook his head in agreement.

" He had parties—" Nash suggested.

" Parties? Orgies!" and Allen laughed. " I went only once, but that was enough for me! He struck the high spots when it came to entertaining!"

" Then he was a man who may have made enemies?"

" Well, not on account of his parties. For those who like wild times, they were just about what they'd like. And more mildly inclined revelers didn't have to go. At least, not more than once." Allen smiled as if at amusing recollections of his experience there.

" I knew Cox a little in a business way," Mason volunteered. " We had a few deals together in some mining operations and in an oil field. But it was several years ago. He became much richer since. However, I know nothing at all of his private life, and I've never heard anything against the man in his business or social relations. I've not talked with him much on this trip, because he favored the younger element so strongly —a phase of life very distasteful to me."

Mason evinced so strong a distaste for the younger generation that Nash almost laughed at him, and Mallory set him down for a first class prig.

" But can't you advise me, Mr. Allen, how to go about getting in touch with the right persons? What about his lawyer? his banker?"

" Better try a club, I should say. Try the Millennium Club. I'm pretty sure he was a member of that."

" Good idea. We can advise them and ask them to notify the proper persons."

The two younger men passed on, and Allen said, musingly, to Mason:

" Unique case, isn't it? Murder on the high seas—I mean on a modern liner, is almost unheard of. We might be on a pirate ship!"

" Yes, and the brutal means employed! Surely it is the work of a fiend in human shape. Poe's ape would fit into the case better."

" Doubtless done by some deck hand or sailor, who knew just when to strike."

" And the motive?"

" Oh, robbery, of course. We all know so little about Cox, that we don't know what he had on him or with him in the way of valuables. But I'm told that he frequently went down to the second and third cabins

and also down among the sailors and stokers; and gave them money in some cases. It is not improbable that some one of them, ungrateful or jealous, sneaked up and did for him."

"It might be," Mason looked interested, "for the weapon was ready at hand."

"Did Cox have it on deck this morning?"

"I suppose so. He often did, and if not, how did the assailant get it?"

"It's all very mysterious. And there's the other angle, that it was done by one of ourselves. I mean by some one in the first cabin. How do we know what men on board knew Cox far better than we did? With hundreds of people on these upper decks, a secret enemy would never be known or suspected, if he kept his own counsel."

"You mean, some one Cox knew?"

"It may be. I'm only surmising. But the field of surmise is so wide, so boundless, that, to my mind, there's practically no chance of discovering the murderer."

"It seems so," Mason agreed. "I think the most astute sleuth would be baffled by such a problem. Come on down for a cocktail, it's nearing dinner time."

Nash and Mallory, on their way, were again interrupted by an onslaught from the bunch of young people who had been Cox's special friends.

There were about a dozen of them, girls and boys, and they surrounded the two men with a demand for news.

"We know you know things," Sally Barnes declared, "and you've got to tell us. It's our right. Mr. Cox was our friend, and we ought to know all there is to know."

"There's practically nothing to know," said Nash, gently repulsing her hand from his coat sleeve.

"Oh, yes, there is, and if you don't tell us, we'll worm it out of Miss Gibbs. I saw her vamping you back there!"

"Do get it from her! That's a fine idea. She'll probably be able to tell you a lot more than I can."

"Yes," Sally pouted, "but her tell won't be true."

"Neither will mine, for I shall have to make it up if I tell you anything."

"Oh, bother!" cried Sally, and turned to Mallory, as Nash went on down the deck.

"You tell me, Mr. Mallory," she said, sidling close to him and drawing him away from the rest of her crowd.

"Mr. Nash spoke the truth when he said there's nothing to tell," Hal told her gravely. "I think, Miss Barnes, you young people might at least show the dead the respect of silence on this awful subject. There's no reason you should forego any of your pleasures or sports, for Mr. Cox was merely a fellow passenger, but as he was also your friend I think it would be better taste for you not to be gossiping about the affair."

"Gossiping!" and Sally looked at him curiously. "Why, if talking about the murder is gossiping, then everybody on board is doing the same thing. And you bet he was my friend! Why, Mr. Cox told me things he wouldn't tell anybody else."

"He did! What sort of things?"

"Oh, that wakes you up, does it? Look here, Mr. Mallory, which is the detective one of you two smart Alecks? You or Mr. Nash?"

"Both of us—"

"I know. But I mean which is the Sherlock and which is the Watson?"

"Oh, we're not a real firm like that. Nash and I consult together about things."

"Yes, but which is the detective? You?"

"Yes, if you will put it that way."

Mallory indulged in this bit of prevarication hoping to find out if the girl really knew anything of importance which he could, of course, pass on to Nash.

But his hesitancy enlightened Sally.

"I don't think you are," she said, with a positive wagging of her bobbed head. "I think Mr. Nash is. If he will listen to me, I will tell him something; if not, he can go without."

"Hey, Polly, wait a minute," called out Mallory; for Nash, having shaken off the youngsters, was looking back for his friend. "Come here, will you?"

The two men and Sally retreated to a sheltered corner, and Sally said seriously: "I have a clew, Mr. Nash, and I want you to take it and find the bad man who killed Mr. Cox."

The quiet simplicity of her statement made Nash look at her in amazement.

Usually she was so boisterous and frivolous.

"Yes, Miss Barnes?" he said. "I shall be glad indeed to have your clew."

In her rather capacious deck bag Sally fished about until she found a small parcel wrapped in crumpled tissue paper.

"There!" she said, with a look of triumph. "There!"

Shielded from view of passers-by, Nash unrolled the paper and found a pair of kid gloves, tightly rolled up, and as he examined them he discovered they were men's gloves of tan kid, of light weight and fine workmanship.

One of them showed a few reddish stains, and the other a slight blur that might have come from being so closely wrapped up with the stained one.

Nash gazed at them, and said, in a low tone: "Where did you get these?"

"I was just down in the third cabin," Sally explained, "taking some Fourth of July goodies to the kids down there. Two women were looking at these gloves. They said the parcel had been thrown from an upper deck and, sucked in by the breeze or by the ship's motion, had fallen right at their feet. I offered them a dollar for the parcel, and they were glad to take it. That is all."

CHAPTER VII.

THE JEWELER'S BILL.

"YOU'RE a bright child," Nash declared, rolling the gloves up quickly and stuffing the parcel in his pocket. "Come along with us while we talk to Mr. Trent."

"No," Sally objected, shaking her curly bob. "He thinks I'm a little fool. You tell him about the gloves, and you smarties dope it all out—the murder business, I mean—and then, if you want any more clews found, you just tell me and I'll find them."

With a saucy *moue*, she turned away and went dancing down the deck.

"Queer little thing," said Nash later, "but clever as they come."

"Oh, well, getting the gloves from the steerage women wasn't so terribly clever," Mallory returned. "The cleverness will be when you announce from a study of those gloves the age, sex and previous condition of the murderer. Hello, here's Trent alone! Good work!"

Max Trent, his cap well down over his eyes, was lying back in his steamer chair, apparently doing nothing. In point of fact he was waiting for Maisie Forman to come out on deck, and although that required no physical exertion his brain and eke his heart were alive with eager anticipation.

But the girl did not appear, and Nash dropped into her vacant chair as he began to talk to Trent. Most of the passengers had gone in to dress for dinner, and the three men, conversing in low tones, ran small chance of being overheard.

Nash put it plainly to Max Trent that he desired his help or at least the benefit of his advice, for the captain had asked him to do what he could in the way of investigation, and he had the captain's permission to get Trent to work with him.

"You see," Nash went on, "it's the captain's duty to record all these happenings and to do what he can to apprehend the criminal. But he can't take the time to do regular detective work, nor does he know how to go about it. He has none of the sleuth instinct, nor has he any real responsibility, save as the facts are presented to him.

"At least, that's what I gather. And between you and me, Captain Van Winkle, though a gallant and experienced sailor, has small knowledge of Scotland Yard procedure. So, as I'm intensely interested in this thing, I'm hoping you are, too, and that together we can find the man who killed Oscar Cox."

"I am interested—deeply," Trent replied. "I've been thinking it over all the afternoon. But it's like looking for a needle in a haystack. On land there are certain people or groups of people who knew the dead man, who can be called for examination, who will give information that may be of utmost value. But here on this ship we have no such opportunities.

"So far as we know, Oscar Cox had few acquaintances, save those he made since

we sailed from New York. Yet he may have had—must have had—on board some enemy who hated him enough to kill him. Now, how can we learn who that enemy was? How discern among a thousand or more first-class passengers which one knew Cox and had sufficient grudge against him to kill him?

"For, as you must see, the crime was the work of a master mind. Whoever killed Cox was a genius. He chose the psychological moment when every one, nearly, was off the deck and on the way down to lunch. Moreover, they were all engrossed in the hullaballoo of the holiday celebration, and the opportunity was ideal for the criminal's purpose."

"Also," Nash put in, not willing that Trent should do all the talking, "he was clever enough to leave no footprints or fingermarks, and no clews of any sort."

"You mean, none that we've found," Trent corrected. "It is said there are always clews, if one can see them."

"And if one can read them," added Nash. "Look here." He drew from his pocket the parcel Sally had given him.

Trent unrolled it and gazed at the gloves with interest.

"If these are the murderer's gloves," he said after a moment, "they prove afresh that the crime was carefully thought out. For these are new gloves, with no marks of wear or usage that might give us a hint of their owner. Also, it is quite possible that the murderer stole or in some way procured the gloves of another man. Miss Barnes did right in getting them from the women below, and I have not the slightest doubt that they were worn by the murderer when he committed his dastardly crime.

"They were worn, of course, to avoid any finger-prints on the bronze. I think we are not going too fast when we assume the bronze hand was the instrument and that it was wielded by a man with murderous intent."

"Or a woman," Hal Mallory pointed out. "There is no reason, on the face of things, why a woman should not have done the deed. Although the idea is shocking, women murderers have been known, and, given sufficient motive, a woman could have committed this crime. The weight of that bronze is enough to kill, without such very great force behind it. And as we are utterly at sea, there's no reason for exclusively suspecting a man."

"You're quite right, Mr. Mallory," Trent agreed gravely. "Now, as I see this thing, we cannot depend on clews at all. I mean material clews. To my mind the gloves indicate little of definite importance. If they belonged to the murderer, then he was a man, and presumably a man of our own class.

"Indeed, for that matter it would have been difficult if not impossible for a man from a lower-class cabin or from the crew to get up here. Yet, if such a thing did occur, then the villain stole these gloves from some gentleman, or they were given to him. But I can't see a clever, ingenious crime, as this one surely is, committed by other than an intellectual and efficient mind."

"I agree," Nash nodded. "However much a brute from below may have wanted to kill Oscar Cox, how he could get up here just at that particular moment—"

"Oh, come, now," Mallory said. "It could have been done. Suppose it was a steward or a deck hand—I mean the ones who swab down and all that. One such could come up here unnoticed if he watched his opportunity. Who of us would pay any attention to the sailors or workmen who attend to routine duties? To be sure, we would notice one now, but before the tragedy dozens of them might come and go and we wouldn't even see them unless they bothered us in some way."

"True enough," Trent said thoughtfully; "but all the same, it connotes to my mind a mentality far above any sailor or deck hand. The man who could conceive and carry out this thing ought to be found in a high position of some sort."

"As Mr. Dooley used to say, 'Yer remarks are inthrestin', but not convincin',' " Nash remarked with a smile. "Now, to me it seems that the criminal had this one set purpose, that he bent every effort and every circumstance toward its accomplishment, and that he need not necessarily

have had cleverness or brilliancy in any other direction."

"I'm glad we do take different views, Nash," Trent declared cordially. "If we are to work together, it will help us both to see it from various angles. I'm keen to do what I can, but you must remember that as a detective I've had positively no experience. My books are purely imaginative. I have that twist in my brain that people call detective instinct, but whether it's worth tuppence when put to actual test I've no idea. We see the captain this evening?"

"Yes, right after dinner."

"There's much to ask him. I think I'll skip dinner, or have a bit sent to my room, for I want to make a few notes."

But on his way to his stateroom Trent stopped at the florist's shop with which this liner was equipped, and bought a small pot of blooming primroses, which he sent to Maisie Forman's room with a scribbled note.

And he was greatly pleased half an hour later to get a short missive, saying Miss Forman was quite well, although unnerved by the awful tragedy of the day; and that she would be glad to see him on deck the next morning.

Trent put the little note carefully away, for he never had secrets from himself, and he owned right up that he was becoming more and more interested in the girl.

Then, half smiling to himself at his new rôle of working detective, instead of merely a chronicler, he made a systematic and methodical résumé of the case as he knew it. And he was forced to the conclusion that his knowledge was deplorably limited. He knew Oscar Cox was dead; he knew, almost to a certainty, that he was killed by the bronze hand, his own property, which he treasured.

A whimsical idea of a headline passed through Trent's mind: "Killed By His Own Hand"; but he sternly brushed it aside, deprecating his too active imagination which sometimes ran away with him. And then he realized he had no more items of fact to list.

He ran over in his mind what he knew of Cox. He had seen him more or less frequently in the smoking room. He remembered his genial cordiality and unfailing good nature. If he had an enemy on board, it was not one of the men with whom Trent had heard him converse.

As to the women: Cox was uniformly polite and even gallant, but Trent had not noticed his especial attentions to any one woman on board. Several had obtruded themselves on Cox's notice, such as Miss Gibbs and her ilk, also mothers of eligible daughters; but Cox—and Trent had seen him—waved them off with an airy indifference that usually precluded any further attempt at friendship.

And yet, although preposterous on the face of it, Mallory's hint of a woman criminal must be considered. It would certainly be possible for a woman to have accomplished the horrid deed.

Not, of course, the women he had been thinking of, who gayly made advances to the jovial millionaire, but some woman who was in his life and who had, say, followed him on this trip with evil in her heart. In that case it would not be one of the women Cox had talked to, but some one who had not spoken to him at all. Some one who knew him and whom he knew, yet to whom he purposely appeared to be a stranger.

Well, Trent mused, there were probably a hundred who would fill these specifications, so far as an outsider could see, and how could the right one be discovered? Anyway, Trent didn't think it was a woman. Of course, it might be, but first he proposed to look for a man. A man who knew Oscar Cox, but had not professed to; who had a mortal grievance of which Cox and himself only, of all on board, were aware.

Yet, how to go about tracing such a man?

To begin with, it must have been one who had access to Cox's room, with sufficient intimacy to go in there and get the bronze hand. Trent didn't think Cox had it with him on deck that morning, as it was not a handy thing to carry about and it had been shown so often to Cox's acquaintances that they were all familiar with it.

Yet, how absurd! Probably the man had

not been in Cox's stateroom at all, before he went in to get the instrument of death. A criminal of his ability wouldn't. Oh, well, as far as Trent could see, he could see nothing. It was all a most impenetrable mystery. All he could do was to keep an open mind and make the most of what he might be told that evening.

It was too big an affair for a novice to handle. He wished there was a great detective on board who would take up the case, and let him, Trent, watch his working. That would be the ideal situation, thought the writer of stories. Then he remembered that the most mysterious crimes are often the simplest of solution. This was comforting, although in no way a definite help.

Deeply absorbed in his thoughts, Trent ate his dinner from the tray the steward brought him, and then, concluding the time was ripe, he went to the captain's room and found the others already there. Captain Van Winkle showed his usual courteous demeanor, but the observant Trent could see an underlying effect of resentment, as if the captain felt the unfairness of the fate that had thrust this trouble upon him and his ship.

"I do hope, Mr. Trent," he said after a few words of greeting, "that you and Mr. Nash can learn some facts or find some clews, even if you do not identify the criminal. I feel that my responsibility does not extend far in those directions. I shall enter all the facts in my log, of course, and make my report to the consul at Liverpool, who will take up the matter in such wise as he sees fit. The police will board the ship and make their own investigations. They will conduct an inquest or not, as they deem best. The effects of Mr. Cox I shall turn over to the steamship authorities, or there will be whatever disposal of them the consul orders.

"That, gentlemen, is my duty in the matter, and it shall be done. Now, if you can learn anything as to the motive for this crime or the perpetrator of it, you will be conferring inestimable benefit on the public at large, on the steamship company, and on myself. You may have the freedom of the vessel, with due care as to the rights of the passengers, and you may call on any of the stewards or others of the crew for any aid they can give you. I needn't say the officers will be glad to help, if possible."

"In a word, captain, you are deputizing us to do what we can in the matter of investigation and offer all facilities at your disposal."

"Exactly that, Mr. Trent."

"Then first of all I think we must ask to see the property of Mr. Cox which is in the ship's safe."

The captain hesitated. "We are not the police, Mr. Trent," he demurred. "I admit I do not feel like opening Mr. Cox's sealed parcels."

"Then we can do nothing, captain," Trent responded promptly. "Those deposits might explain matters to such an extent that we could put our hand at once on the criminal's shoulder. A threatening letter, a bit of a journal, a will or deposition of some sort. Unless we can know all there is to be known of Oscar Cox, I cannot undertake to delve into the mystery at all."

"Of course," Nash supplemented, "if there are only valuables—money, bonds, jewels, or such—we would turn them back at once, to be sealed for the authorities."

"And another thing, captain," Trent said, "I understand there were bills found in Mr. Cox's stateroom for very expensive jewels. He may not have brought these gems on board; but if he did, and they are not in the safe, they should be sought for. It must be remembered that the murderer, and possibly the thief, is on board this minute. He cannot get away. We have three days to track him down. We may not be able to do it, but we should, I think, be given every assistance in your power."

"You are right, Mr. Trent," Van Winkle agreed thoughtfully. "I will send for the purser and get the articles Mr. Cox put in his care."

This was done, and when the packets were opened every one was excluded from the room save Trent, Nash and the captain himself.

"It is wise that no one else knows," Van Winkle said. "Tongues will babble."

It was not a large array of material that the investigators opened up. There was a letter of credit from a New York bank, but it was not for an extravagant sum.

"At least it tells us his bank," said Nash, with a nod of satisfaction.

Then there was a much certified letter to a large bank in London, with details of the transfer of a list of securities.

"That looks as if he meant to remain in London a long time. It is like a general moving of his residence."

Another item of interest was a letter to Oscar Cox, from the Hotel Britz in London, stating that one of the best suites had been reserved for him and his wife dating from the arrival of the Pinnacle.

"His wife!" exclaimed Nash. "Then he *is* married and she is awaiting him in London!"

"Or Liverpool," suggested the captain.

"Yes, one or the other—or maybe somewhere near London. Anyway, he was married, the sly dog!"

"No real reason he should tell of it, if he didn't choose," said Trent, sensibly enough. "Hello! here's a memorandum of those same jewels."

A small paper bore in Oscar Cox's fine, neat script a list of one pearl necklace, one shoulder buckle and three bracelets, all with the same prices attached that had shown on the jeweler's bill. And this list bore the caption, "For Her."

"H'm, small doubt those gems were for his wife—likely as not a bride, or almost so. Now, where are those jewels?"

"How do you make her out a bride, if she's in England, and he just sailed from America?"

"Several explanations for that. They were married and, say, expected to sail. He was detained—of course this is mere suggestion—but for some reason, she went on, and he followed as soon as he could."

"Why keep it secret?" asked the captain.

"Lord, man, *I* don't know! Perhaps for some reasons mixed up in the mystery which brought about his death. Maybe he ran off with another man's wife or sweetheart. The fact that he is married opens up an illimitable field for conjecture."

"Maybe he wasn't married yet," remarked Nash. "Maybe he was to join the lady in England and marry her and take her to the hotel where he had reserved a suite of rooms. And maybe he was taking the jewels to her for a wedding present."

"Not at all unlikely," Trent agreed. "That would explain the exceeding newness of his clothing. For all the world like a bridegroom's outfit."

"Here's another paper," cried Nash, fingering an envelope. "By Heaven, it's his will!"

It proved to be a will, but a very informal one. Merely a single sheet of paper, which set the fact that on the death of Oscar Cox, everything of which he died possessed should become the absolute property of his wife, or if she should not be living at that time, then the estate was to go to his relatives. No names were given of wife or kin. But the document was duly signed and witnessed, and Trent opined that it was a true and legal will.

Except for a book of travelers' checks and two first class railway tickets from Liverpool to London, that was all of the lot.

"Why two railroad tickets?" said Trent, curiously. "Looks as if he expected to meet the lady in Liverpool."

"I think you've got the story wrong end to," Nash exclaimed. "He had two tickets to London, because he expected his wife to accompany him on this trip. For some reason, purposely or by accident, she couldn't come. He had to proceed—business reasons, or something—and she will follow on the next boat. She has her own steamer ticket, but he forgot to give her her railroad ticket. The jewels she may have or they may have been stolen on board this ship."

Trent nodded. "Good enough for a theory, but nothing to back it up, especially. Now, captain, you can put all these things right back in the safe. I have a list of them, and though the list may be helpful, the things themselves are of no use in our work. I think the fact that Cox was married, or possibly was just about to be married, is a most important point. To

my mind, it has a strong bearing on the fact of his murder.

"Now, here's my plan, so far as I've formulated one. Find out all possible about Oscar Cox. In two ways. One, by asking of people on board who knew him. Two, by wirelessing to New York, to his club and bank and even to the jeweler who sold him that bill of goods. He could very likely tell us if Mr. Cox was yet married or was about to be. He might give us the lady's name. All such details would be extremely helpful.

"Further than this I have not yet gone, but I am far more hopeful of ultimate success than I was when I came into this room to-night. I thank you, captain, for the honor of being asked to help, and I shall use my best efforts and report progress when—or if any!"

When deeply interested or in earnest, Trent fell into somewhat stilted language, and as Nash put it, "sounded like one of his own books."

"To-morrow," Trent went on, "I'd like to have Mr. Cox's trunks brought up from the hold and run over their contents. There might be something in them more indicative than all these papers and jewel bills."

"You may have them, Mr. Trent, and then they may as well be left in the Cox stateroom," the captain told him. The body has been removed and has been embalmed. But I am told it is still a terrible sight, and I assume there will be no need for its further exhibition on board."

"No, there is nothing to be learned from it," Trent said. "It must await the action of the Liverpool or Scotland Yard authorities, I suppose. But we know the means used, and we have seen the resultant wounds. The clothing and property Mr. Cox had on him when he died are safely taken care of. So, as I say, there is no need for further examination of the remains."

The session over, Trent begged of Nash that they have no more conference that night. He said he believed to sleep over the matter would be the best thing for both of them and they would meet early next morning to compare notes and lay their plans.

Nash agreed and went at once to his stateroom. Trent, with one of the officers went to the wireless room, to send the messages decided upon to New York.

Trent asked permission, under his newly acquired authority, to see the outgoing messages of the afternoon.

There were a lot of them, for the passengers were addicted to communication with the shore, and Trent ran over them rapidly.

None referred to Oscar Cox's death in any way to rouse suspicion. Several told of it as of news, but Trent gleaned no information.

He smiled to himself at his quest, for surely the last thing a criminal would do would be to send word to any one of his deed!

But the detective's interest was caught by a wireless that he thought might be from Maisie Forman. It was addressed to Jonathan Forman, and it read:

No behold what do on or back.

And it was signed "Mary."

"Sent by Miss Forman?" he asked the operator.

"Yep. She sends one nearly every day. To her father."

"Thank you."

Trent kept on until he had looked at every message sent out that afternoon. None held his attention save one from Sherman Mason to a man named Frey. .

And this interested him only because it also made use of the word "behold" in no apparent connection.

This message said:

Behold nothing off for Italy take muff.

Of course the messages were in code, and "behold" must mean some simple phrase in general use. He would look up his code book as soon as he reached his room.

"Muff," too, must mean some important paper or article, perhaps known only to the men interested in that particular message.

Trent went to his room, and studied his code book far into the night. But neither the word behold nor the word muff appeared in its lists.

"Private codes," he grunted, sleepily, and with a weary sigh he put himself to bed.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DRESSING CASE.

IN spite of his troubled slumbers, and the weight of responsibility he felt, Trent arose and dressed next morning in a thrill of delight that he was to see Maisie Forman again.

He frankly admitted to himself that he was rapidly falling in love with her, but he admonished himself sternly that he must not let that fact interfere with his work as a detective. He invariably smiled at the notion of being a real detective, but he purposed to take the matter very seriously and do his level best. He had formulated a few of the next steps he should take, and he was impatient to get to work.

So after his breakfast he was among the first on deck and seeing Owen Camper striding along for exercise, Trent joined him.

"Good morning, Mr. Detective," was Camper's greeting, and Trent realized that little may be kept secret on an ocean liner.

"Detective in name only," Trent returned, with a wry face. "Do help me out, there's a good fellow. Do tell me some facts about our mysterious victim. He's almost as unknown as his assailant. To be sure we know Oscar Cox's name, but that's just about all we do know of him."

Trent was not really so helpless or so in need of help as he affected, but he hoped to get some scraps of knowledge in this way.

"I don't know anything more about him than the next man," Camper replied, with an air of indifference. "Why do you try to delve into it, when there's no hope of solving the mystery?"

"Don't say no hope. In fact, that's all there is—hope. I've practically nothing else to buoy up my spirits."

"Do you know what I think?" Camper waxed loquacious all at once. "I believe it was that queer man of his who did for him. That thing he called Hudder."

"Any reason to think so?"

"Not perhaps what can be called a reason—but, elimination, you know. There's no one else to suspect. Who else on board could have had any motive?"

"Dozens of people, for all we know," Trent asserted. "Whoever did it had a deep, a desperate motive. That crime was premeditated and carefully executed. It was the work of a fiendish mind, but a clever one. Agree?"

"Yes. But that doesn't let Hudder out. He may have a far more clever mind than appears in his blank face, and he may be a fiend at heart."

"May be, yes. But for that matter you may be, or I may be, or any one on board may be. We have to find more than maybe's before we can really suspect anybody."

"And how are you going about it?"

"I'm going to ask questions. And then more questions. I must find out first, who and what Cox really is—or was. Next, who on board were more acquainted with him, than appeared on the surface. There's the real secret. Somebody knew Cox well enough to want to kill him, and that somebody is even now walking the deck and laughing at our puny efforts to find him out."

"And you think you can find him out?" Camper's tone was incredulous and a little sarcastic.

"I hope to. As I told you, hope is all I have at the moment. But I expect to get more. More information, more evidence, more—"

"More clews?"

"This is a case that doesn't abound in clews, nor evidence of a spectacular kind. You see, the deck and wall and all the locality of Cox's chair was washed and scrubbed and swabbed within an hour of the crime. So, there's no chance for that sort of clew. And so far, his stateroom has given up no evidence of importance. You're sure you know nothing of him, Camper, more than you told?"

"I haven't told anything, and I don't know anything. I've known Cox for years, but only as a mere acquaintance. I'm not in his class, financially, and I never cared to be in his class socially.'

"Why, what sort did he travel with?"

"Big money spenders, gay dogs, high livers, hard drinkers, all that such things imply."

Owen Camper's tone was bitter, more so than the subject seemed to call for, and Trent wondered if perchance these things implied were not a source of resentment to the man not able to afford them. He had heard that the Campers were social climbers, and he surmised they might have been snubbed by Cox for presuming on their slight acquaintance.

"Cox seemed a good-natured, simple hearted man," he said, not with entire sincerity.

"Yes, if a snake in the grass is good-natured and simple-hearted!" and this time Camper's animosity was plainly evident.

"Bad as that!" commented Trent, casually. "Then I'm more than ever sure he had a real enemy on board, and I propose to smoke him out."

Camper turned pale and then suddenly red.

"No," he said, earnestly, as if regretting his disclosures, "no, you look after that Hudder. He's the man you want—he's the man who killed Cox. Why, who else could get that bronze hand from Cox's stateroom? The servant could, of course, but a fellow passenger couldn't walk into another man's room, pick up that murderous thing, and come out here and fire it at his head!"

"Sometimes Cox had that bronze thing with him."

"He didn't yesterday morning. For somebody asked to see it, and he said it was in his stateroom. Said he'd have Hudder bring it out after lunch. Well, Hudder did—and used it as he saw fit."

"Maybe," Trent said, "maybe." And then as he saw a certain person making her way toward her deck chair, Trent rushed off with rather scant ceremony.

"Good morning, Miss Forman," he said, as he sat down beside her, "I missed you frightfully yesterday. How are you?"

"I'm all right now, but that awful affair was too much for my nerves. I couldn't sleep last night. Your dear little posy was a help—"

The smile that accompanied these words went straight to Trent's heart.

Such a pathetic, sweet little smile, and yet with no hint of coquetry or flattery.

"I'm so alone, you see," she went on, looking straight ahead, and almost as if thinking aloud, "I've no one to speak to when I'm frightened."

"And you were frightened? It's all awful, to be sure, but there's no cause for fear, Miss Forman."

"No, I suppose not. I mean to overcome it—it's just a horror of—of being alone."

Trent clamped down his leaping impulses, and forced himself to say, calmly:

"You need never be alone at such times as I can be with you," putting just the right shade of polite kindness in his tone.

His reward was another little smile, and a nod that accepted his suggestion in the spirit it was made.

"Tell me," she went on, "have they discovered the—who did the terrible thing?"

"It isn't they," he said, a bit ruefully, "it's I." And he told her how the captain had asked Nash and himself to make such investigation as they could in the hope of solving the mystery.

"And I want to do it," he concluded. "I want very much to find out who was the criminal, but it is not an easy task. And I am not a practical detective at all. I've already learned it's one thing to make up a crime story, knowing the solution from the beginning, and quite another to be pitched headlong onto a most mysterious case, without a clew or a bit of evidence to guide you!"

"There are no clews?" Maisie spoke in a hushed voice, almost as if afraid of the answer.

"Positively none. Camper, over there, suspects the man, Hudder—or says he does. But I can't see that chap killing his master out on deck. If he had murderous intent why not carry it out in the stateroom?"

"Then Hudder would surely have been suspected," she said, quickly.

"So you're a detective, too!" he bantered. "Yes, you are right. But Hudder was down in the kitchen places, getting Cox's lunch ready."

"Who was around where Mr. Cox sat?"

"Nobody and everybody. I mean, nobody that we can definitely name, but at the same time everybody on board might have been there. With the excitement of the Fourth of July celebration going on, and the noise of the rattles and whistles, the murderer had opportunity to do his dreadful work unnoticed. Even if there was an outcry from the victim, it would have been lost in the noise of the crowd."

"But weren't people just—inside the doors—"

"As I see it, they were mostly on the stairs. On the upper landings they were looking down at the crowd below, and the whole mass was slowly moving down the stairs and toward the dining rooms. Where were you?"

"I? Why—why, I suppose I was here—or, no. I must have been in my place at the table. What time did it happen?"

"We place it between one-ten and one-forty."

"How do you know so exactly?"

"It doesn't seem to me that is exact. Half an hour is a long time to investigate. But we know because Mr. Camper says he left the deck at ten after one, and the deck steward took Cox's tray up to him at one-forty. He knows the time, because he was late, on account of the extra menu being prepared in the kitchen, and he was afraid Mr. Cox would be annoyed. He says he reached the deck at one-forty, and it was he who discovered the tragedy. That places it surely between one-ten and one-forty, but I can find no one who admits being on deck at all between those times."

"I left the deck about—oh, I don't know what time. I didn't look. I saw the crowds on the stairs, and I went around outside, and stopped at my stateroom for a book, and then I went down in the elevator. I didn't want to get into that crowd."

"No." Trent looked thoughtful. "I left you here, remember, about quarter before one."

"Yes, I know you did. And I stayed a short time longer, and then went in."

"Did you see Mr. Cox as you passed?"

"No. I went around the stern. He was up toward the bow, you know."

"Yes. Did you see anybody?"

"No one I knew. But I know so few on board."

"Yes, of course. Now, look here, Miss Forman. When you went to your room and got your book, did you go immediately to the elevator?"

"Yes, directly."

"Then, you had to pass Cox's stateroom. Did you see anything—notice anything? Was the door open?"

"Why—I don't know. I don't know which Mr. Cox's room is."

"It's at the end of the next corridor to your own."

"Oh, is it? No, I didn't glance that way at all, for the people were looking over the stair rail, and I paused and looked down for a moment, and then went on."

"See any one you knew, then?"

"No, no one. As I looked over I saw the Campers on the landing below. Then they moved along, and I went to the elevator. I reached the dining room just about the time they did."

"Did you speak to them?"

"No. their table is on the other side of the room. I don't think they saw me."

"Oh, well, these things get us nowhere. I shouldn't be surprised if we have to confess utter failure, after all. You see, it's hopeless to try to find out an enemy of Oscar Cox in such a mass of people, without the least hint as to the man we're to look for."

"It certainly seems impossible. Why don't you drop the whole thing? You can't be so deeply interested in bringing the criminal to justice, since Mr. Cox wasn't a special friend of yours."

"No, he wasn't. But common humanity demands the effort. And, too, the captain put it up to us—Nash and myself—to do what we could. So, of course, my duty is clear."

"And your pride is at stake," Maisie smiled.

"Well, yes, but that's riding to a fall. My pride is a limp affair to-day compared to what it was before this thing happened. My detective instinct, I find only works when I have invented the problem and its solution both myself."

At that moment a steward approached, bringing a wireless message for Maisie. She took it quietly enough, but Trent noted that her fingers shook a little.

"Allow me," he said, and whipping out his penknife, slit the envelope for her, gave it back, and then immersed himself in a book, while she read it.

Returning the paper to its envelope, the girl sat motionless for a time.

Stealing a glance at her face, Trent saw that she was gazing out to sea with an expression that showed her thoughts were far away.

He turned his eyes back to his book, although he was not reading.

At last she said, speaking softly and dully, almost as one in a dream.

"I have to turn around and go back home, as soon as we land."

"What!" cried Trent, roused to activity. "I won't have it!"

Maisie stared at him, with a funny little smile.

"What have you to say about it?" she inquired, laughing now, as if the idea were deliciously absurd.

"Oh, I've a lot to say about it. I—I don't want you to do that. I planned to see a lot of you in London—after you—after you had joined your friends."

"I know—but now, I'm not going to London. My father says for me to come straight back home, on the Pinnacle, or any other boat that may sail sooner."

"Is your father ill?"

"Oh, no. But—but dad is—is by way of being dictatorial—at times."

"I should say so. Look here, you do a little dictating yourself. Tell him you won't go home. A nice thing to do! When you've just got over!"

"But suppose I want to go home?"

"Suppose you don't! Anyway, I don't want you to. And these friends of yours, who are to meet you at Liverpool—what about them?"

"They—they don't matter. Oh, I *don't* want to go back—especially now—"

Trent's heart jumped. Did she—*could* she mean especially now that they were becoming such good friends?

"Don't go, then. At any rate, don't decide to-day. Let your dad wait till to-morrow, and then see how you feel about it."

Trent had in his mind certain wild plans for a moonlight stroll on an upper deck, and a low, whispered conversation, that might—just *might* make a difference in Maisie Forman's plans for life!

And then Nash and Mallory came along, and Nash gave his colleague a reproving glance as he saw him wasting time dallying with a girl.

"Come on, Trent," he said, a little shortly, "we've the trunks up from the hold, and we're going to examine them."

He spoke in an aside, but Maisie heard it. An involuntary shudder could be noticed even beneath her rug, and her face paled again, as Trent had noticed it before.

"I can't bear to hear anything about it," she said, in response to Nash's frankly curious glance. "Please go on, Mr. Trent. I'll read to divert my mind."

"Don't blurt out things like that before a lady, Nash," Trent said irritably.

Nash turned round and faced him, raised his eybrows, gave a nod of apologetic assent, and turned back again. No word was said, but Trent saw that Nash thoroughly understood and he was glad he did.

They went to Cox's stateroom, where Hudder awaited them. He had the keys, which had been found in the dead man's pocket, and he solemnly proceeded to open one piece of luggage after another.

Mallory was present and the four men made quick work of it. For the most part there were only clothes and toilet appurtenances, and again the young men expressed surprise and admiration at the richness and beauty of the things.

"Surely a wedding trip," Nash declared. "Either he is just married or just about to be. You know nothing of Mr. Cox's wedding, Hudder?"

"No, sir," said the stolid one, with such a blank face that Trent had need of much self-control not to pitch him overboard.

The case he took out was beyond all doubt a lady's case, and as Hal snatched the keys from Hudder he at once picked the right one to fit it.

Thrown open, the case proved to be fitted up with the most beautiful and complete set of brushes, bottles and all the appointments of a most elaborate toilet set. The mountings were of gold and the monogram on each was E. M. C.

"For the lady!" Mallory declared, and Nash and Trent nodded.

Hudder betrayed no surprise and no curiosity.

Questioned, he denied any knowledge of the lady they surmised existed, he knew nothing of his master's plans, he had no idea what names the initials stood for, and with unvarying respect and exasperating indifference, he reiterated his ignorance.

"Well, we've got to find that woman!" Nash declared, and Trent, interested anew, agreed.

"The man must have been already married," Trent said, thinking deeply. "For if not, that will would be of no use. If it were made before the wedding ceremony, it would be annulled by the marriage, so why do that? But it is dated June thirtieth, the day before we sailed from New York. So he must have been married on that date. Now, where is the lady?"

"Waiting for him on the other side," Nash returned. "They were married, no matter when or where. She went abroad—or maybe lives over there. Then he wound up his business affairs, and started off to join her on a perhaps belated honeymoon. He brought this beautiful toilet case; also, as I see it, he brought that consignment of jewelry, and somebody knew of it all, and bashed his head in and robbed him, in the excitement of the Fourth. Too easy!"

"As to reconstruction, yes—if that's right," Trent said. "But who did it?"

"Foolish question number such-and-such," Nash answered. "But I don't mind confiding that if I knew I'd tell you, my friend."

"Well, we have E. M. C. to work on. The C is, of course, for Cox. And probably M stands for the lady's maiden name, while E is for her first name. Edith, Elizabeth, Esther—"

"Ethel, Enid, Emily," Mallory piped, in mockery. "Why guess? Why not wireless back to New York, to the Bureau of Vital Statistics, or whatever the place is, and inquire the name of the lady Oscar Cox recently married?"

"Hal Mall!" Nash cried, staring at him. "Sometimes you show—"

"Yes, I know—almost human intelligence! Well, you fellows may be asute sleuths and all that, but you haven't much ready chicken feed in the way of common sense."

"Can we do that?" Trent asked of Nash.

"Sure, we can do it. Whether we get a reply before we land, I dunno. I fancy the bureaus and such places are a bit slow in their returns. But, no harm trying."

"We ought to get some answers to last night's messages pretty soon," said Trent, as they finished going through the trunks and found nothing more of interest. The clothes were left for Hudder to refold and repack, and then Trent conceived the brilliant idea of looking in the ship's letter box for possible missives put there by Cox while on board.

"Everybody writes letters and notes the first few days out," Trent said, "thanks for gifts and all that, if not regular business letters. Let's look."

Permission gained they opened the mail box, and Cox's handwriting being easily distinguishable, they soon found several letters obviously written by him.

"It seems sort of awful," said Nash, hesitating as he was about to break the seal of the first one, "this opening a man's mail when he can't say a word in protest!"

"Why, we're doing it in his interests," Trent cried. "All we do is for the purpose of bringing justice against the wretch who killed his fellow man. I don't see the necessity of any apology for that!"

"I should say not!" exclaimed Mallory.

The letters however seemed not of great importance. Three were to women and contained thanks for flowers and books sent to the steamer. They were couched in courteous but conventional terms, and were most certainly not to close friends.

Two were to men at summer resorts and merely stated that the writer's foreign address would be the Hotel Britz, London, until further advices.

The last, a fat letter, was of more enlightenment. It was quite evidently to Cox's lawyer, one Mark Sheaffer, and told him of a few business details to be attended to. Also it enclosed two other letters which Mr. Sheaffer was instructed to address and post in New York.

These were penciled on the outside with a light E. F. and J. F. presumably to be erased when the lawyer should address them them properly.

They were, of course, opened.

The one to E. F. said simply, "Do not try to find me. It is useless."

The other, to J. F. said, almost equally briefly. "Everything all right. Muff all right. Don't worry. Will write from London." This laconic screed was signed Osee, which, they concluded was a nickname for O. C.

"About as wise as when we started," Nash said, disappointedly.

But Trent was thoughtful. Muff, he remembered was a code word he had seen before. He must find out what it meant. But he said nothing about it, for he had not told the others of the copies of wireless messages he had read up in the operator's office.

He couldn't have said, exactly why he was withholding this information, but he was impelled to do so, for the present, at least.

They went down to report to the captain, and found his room overflowing with a crowd of youngsters who had come to pester the life out of him, as he laughingly expressed it.

Although not overly fond of the flapper gang, Captain Van Winkle was kind hearted and indulgent to them.

"Why, yes," he was saying, as the others came to the door. "Yes, I see no reason why you shouldn't have your treasure hunt. To-day?"

"No, to-morrow, said Sally, the ringleader. "We have the treasures; Mrs. Craig gave us a gold vanity case, and Mr. Camper gave us a stickpin. So we'll fix it all up for to-morrow afternoon."

"All right, all right," said the captain, shooing the young folks out as he saw the men arrive. "Scoot, now, I'm busy!"

The rollicking horde ran off, and behind closed doors Captain Van Winkle listened with interest to the report given him.

"Are we much farther along?" he asked dubiously, for it all meant little to him.

"Indeed, yes," Nash declared. "We have lots of addresses of people Cox knew and we have a certainty that there is a woman in the case somehow or somewhere. And that, to my mind, is a whole lot!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE TREASURE HUNT.

"HAVE you heard the latest reports?" Amy Camper spoke eagerly, and appropriated a vacant chair near Maisie as the latter sat idly looking out to sea.

The girl looked up, a little surprised, for she had not encouraged the Campers in their efforts at sociability.

"Oh, I know you're not crazy about me," said the volatile little woman, "but really, I'm not so bad when you know me. You know you're very exclusive, Miss Forman."

The light laugh that accompanied the words was intended to take off the edge of their rudeness, but to Maisie's mind it only accentuated it.

"Then why intrude on my exclusion?" she returned, but it was said in a good-natured tone.

"Oh, come now, don't take that attitude. Let's be chummy, do. You chum with those youngsters, why not with me? I assure you I'm worth while."

Maisie laughed. The woman was so irrepressible.

"But I don't doubt that," she said. "Only I'm not of a gregarious sort, and the trip is so short—"

"Yes, I know all that. Now, let's talk about the murder. Do you know, they say there's a woman in the case?"

"Do you mean a woman killed Mr. Cox?" Maisie's eyes widened in horror.

"Oh, I didn't say that—but it seems there's a woman mixed up in it somehow."

"How?"

"Nobody knows, exactly, but in his luggage they found all sorts of presents for her

—gold toilet sets and jewels fit for a queen—"

"Ridiculous, Mrs. Camper. Are you sure of this, or is it unfounded rumor?"

"That I can't say. Only the stories are afloat—one hears them everywhere. Aren't you interested in the matter at all?"

Amy Camper looked at her curiously.

"Yes, but not in silly stories, without foundation. I should be glad to know that they have discovered who killed poor Mr. Cox, and that the murderer would be brought to justice. But I have no interest in the details. I never read detective stories, you see."

"Yet you are close friends with the great author who writes them," and Mrs. Camper smiled slyly.

"Yes," Maisie returned, with dignity, "Mr. Trent is very courteous and friendly. He is an interesting man."

"Who is?" said Owen Camper, joining them. "Trent? Oh, yes, he's very clever. And I believe he's on this job of tracking down Cox's murderer. Personally, I doubt if he can do it. On a big ship like this, it's mighty hard to know much about people. I say, Miss Forman, don't you think it might be something to do with 'The Black Hand,' the society, you know?"

"Why, I never thought of that! You mean the clan or gang, or whatever they call it?"

"Yes, the Blackhanders. It might be their work."

"But I understood that bronze hand was Mr. Cox's property. It would be a coincidence if it had been used by the society! Or do you mean Mr. Cox was a Blackhander?"

"No, not that, of course. But I don't get it at all."

"You were among the last to see Mr. Cox alive, weren't you?"

Maisie put the question quietly, but it seemed to startle Camper.

"Why—what makes you think that?" he said.

"I don't know—but your chair was near his, and you left the deck—when did you leave the deck?"

"I don't know—nobody ever knows the time of such movements. When did you?"

"I don't know, either. But I was at the table when you came into the dining room."

"Were you?" and Camper looked at her, curiously. "Look here, Miss Forman, do you know what I think? I think we ought to hang together—"

"Hang together?"

"Yes, all our crowd—I mean all on this side of the deck, Cox's side, you know. We must stand by one another, if we are questioned."

"Will you please explain yourself definitely, Mr. Camper?"

"Don't scare the life out of her, Owen," said his wife. "Miss Forman is not interested in the murder, personally."

"But, this is what I mean," the man insisted. "Any one on this side of the deck might be suspected of killing Cox. When we are questioned—as we all will be—I think we ought to declare that we were all off the deck before the crime occurred. For, we were, you know, and inquiries would lead nowhere."

"All off the deck? How can you possibly know that?"

"Because we were all anxious to get down to the dining room and see the fun. Cox wasn't killed until one-forty, and by that time we were all at our tables."

"I think they assume the crime was committed between one-ten and one-forty," Maisie corrected him. "Do you know that they have discovered the time more definitely?"

"No, I don't know that they have. I went away at one-twenty and he was alive enough then."

"They say you declared you left the deck at one-ten," Maisie said, and her straightforward glance was a little disconcerting."

"But, as I have told you, we can't state those things with any exactness. Nobody knows, to the moment, when he did anything."

"Then you ought to have told the detectives that," and Maisie's glance was now distinctly reproving. "They must be given all the help possible."

"Are you accusing my husband of this thing?" Amy Camper's tone was angry.

"Good gracious, no!" and Maisie smiled at her. "But I'm sure you agree that we must tell all we know, but we must be most careful as to its accuracy."

"You're right, Miss Forman," Amy smiled at her. "Now, look here, let us take you under our wing. You are so alone on board. We won't bother you to death but—you do need an older woman at times. Come and sit at our table in the dining room—it breaks my heart to see you eating all alone."

"Thank you," Maisie again withdrew into her shell of cold disdain. "I prefer a table to myself. I like to read while at meals, rather than talk."

"Oh, very well. But do be friends; do be chummy. I can do a lot for you. I know nearly everybody on board."

"So do I!" and the beaming face of Lily Gibbs smiled as she came by and heard Amy's last words. "Nearly everybody. I say, Miss Forman, come out of your shell and be a mixer."

"See if you can persuade her, Lily," Amy Camper said, as she and her husband drifted away, and Miss Gibbs remained.

"You can't, Miss Lily," Maisie said, but not unkindly. "If you're my friend, I wish you'd try to protect me from 'mixing', instead of thrusting it on me. Can't you understand, even if the Campers can't, that I don't want to mix. Surely, I make it plain enough."

"Surely you do," Miss Gibbs returned, placidly. "Why is it, my dear? You know you're getting yourself talked about."

"Talked about! What do you mean?"

"Why, everybody's saying that since you're so averse to being sociable, there must be some reason—"

"Good Heavens!" cried Maisie, "one would think we were in a small summer boarding-house! Why, on a big liner one is supposed to be as independent as in a large city hotel!"

"Yes, but they think you're mysterious. Traveling alone, you see, and no friends on board—but men—"

"Hush!" and Maisie's eyes blazed, "I won't stand it! How dare you talk to me like that?"

"I'm just telling you what they say," Miss Gibbs' placidity was undisturbed. "It isn't nice for a young girl like you to get herself talked about."

"I'd rather be talked about than to be talked to—like this! I don't refuse your friendship, Miss Gibbs, but I resent your intrusion on my affairs and I also resent your speech. If you and the Campers continue, I shall have no recourse but to remain in my cabin all the time."

"And what would poor Mr. Trent do then?" Lily laughed slyly.

"He would, I think, be sorry, for we are friends," Maisie said, simply. "But I would rather forego his pleasant chat than be subjected to the sort of talk I've had this morning."

"Well," Miss Gibbs took her departure, "I've done my part. I've warned you that you're being talked about, and called sniffy and snobbish and all that. If it doesn't bother you any, why, all right."

"It certainly doesn't!" said Maisie, with a voice full of angry scorn.

Then the youngsters came along. Sally in the lead, intent on her proposed frolic.

"Oh, Miss Forman," she cried, "will you join the treasure hunt? You pay ten dollars, you know, and it goes to the sick babies' fund. Then we search the boat for the hidden treasure—and it's such fun! And we've Mr. Mason to help us—in Mr. Cox's place."

She was clinging to the arm of Sherman Mason, who looked a little bit embarrassed as he smiled down at Maisie.

"You see, Miss Forman," he explained, "the captain said that the young people ought not to be deprived of their frolics because of the tragedy on board. In fact, he said, and I agree with him, that was all the more reason why they should have diversion. It's a terrible shadow to be cast over their sea trip, and I feel we ought to do what we can to blot it from their memory. So I'm—well, I'm just under Miss Sally's orders. May we hope you'll join in the game? Surely you need diversion as much as the other young people."

Maisie smiled at being classed with the flappers, but as she was about to decline the invitation, she remembered what she had been told about her unpopularity and

it occurred to her that here was a good chance to refute the aspersions, with no help from the Camper-Gibbs faction.

"Why, yes, I think so," she said with her charming smile. "But you must instruct me. It so happens that I've never attended a treasure hunt on board a liner."

"It's this way," Mason said, courteously, "We hunt in couples. If you will be my partner for the event, I will show you the routine and all that."

Again she hesitated. She knew Mr. Mason only slightly, yet save for Trent, there was no one on board she especially wanted for a partner. And after that cat's remarks—as she mentally styled Lily Gibbs—she felt that it would be wiser not to hunt with Max Trent, even if he should ask her.

So she said, gracefully: "Thank you, Mr. Mason, I shall be pleased to have you for my partner in the hunt—and I hope we shall be the winners—the victors—what do you call them?"

"The finders," chirped Sally. "Good for you, Miss Forman! I was afraid you'd be too upstage to join in. Now, may we hunt in your cabin? Captain won't allow us anywhere without the passengers' permission."

"No, my child, certainly not. I told you that when you asked me before."

"Yes, but that was before you said you'd hunt with us."

"Not in my cabin," said Maisie, decidedly. "I strenuously object to such an infringement on my privacy. You have plenty of other places!"

"Oh, yes, it will be all right. We'll let you know more when our plans are farther along. Oh, there's Mrs. Hemmingway. We must see her about this. Come on." And the wild horde flew along the deck, while Mason sat down a moment by Maisie.

"Gay little piece, Sally," he commented. "Real flapper type, but with a good clear brain inside her little bobbed noodle."

"Yes, I can't help liking her. But I'm almost sorry I agreed to this rollicking game. I'm not upstage, as she puts it, but I'm afraid it's a bit undignified—"

"Oh, come now, Miss Forman, you've promised me, and I shan't let you off. It will do you good to mingle with the scatter-brained bunch, and besides, a lot of older, even elderly, people are joining in. Myself, for instance."

Maisie looked up to meet his frankly smiling eyes.

"Oh, well," she said, mischievously, "if you old gentlemen are in it, it is assured of dignity at least."

"Didn't catch any compliment, did I?" he said, gaily. "You'll take back your epithet when you see me scamper for the treasure."

"Do we have to scamper?"

"Of course. Unless you're just going to be a make-believe seeker, and hang behind."

"Perhaps that's just what I shall do. Will that handicap your efforts?"

"Not of necessity. Though as a proper cavalier I shall wait on my lady."

"Well, we'll see. Here's Sally back again."

"Oh," cried the irresponsible one, "we're going to have the hunt to-day, this afternoon at four o'clock. I'm afraid if we wait till to-morrow somebody else will go and get murdered, or something. Puppy Abercrombie and I are going to fix up everything in a jiffy. It's a lot more fun to do things in a hurry. Puppy is a good worker," she looked admiringly at the youth who returned an adoring glance. His more dignified Christian name of Dane had been extended to Great Dane, and then shortened to Puppy, as much easier to handle.

He was tied to Sally's apron string with the rest of the boys, but being, as she said, a good worker, his star was just now in the ascendant.

"Miss Gibbs and Mr. Camper are to hide the treasure," Sally further informed, "and some grown-up smarty-cats are going to invent the clews. I don't do any of those things, for if I did I couldn't hunt, you see. So I look after some other details. Come along, Mr. Mason, you're wanted."

Apparently the energetic girl had found a worthy successor to Oscar Cox, for Mason arose, with an acquiescent smile and followed her.

"What's all this?" Max Trent said, wonderingly, as he turned up a few moments later, and took his own chair. "They say you're going to join in this infernal hunt game, as Sherman Mason's partner."

"Yes," Maisie smiled her most enchanting smile at him. "You're not pleased?"

"Rather not! Why couldn't you hunt with me?"

"Nobody asked me, sir."

"But you knew I would! And I never dreamed you'd go in for the fool thing!"

He was distinctly disgruntled, and Maisie's feminine whim rejoiced at the sight.

"Oh, well," she sighed, "one must have a little diversion now and then."

"Diversion's all right, but why couldn't you take it with me?"

"I was so afraid I wouldn't be asked, I said yes to the first invitation," she returned, demurely.

"What has come over you? Are you going in for gayety?"

"Why not?"

"Instead of—tragedy?"

Trent felt a bit of a brute to refer thus to the scene of the deck rail, but he was beginning to be impressed by the contradictoriness and mystery of this girl who interested him so deeply and he was determined to get at the root of the matter.

"Yes," she said, steadily, and very gravely, as she looked straight at him, "instead of tragedy."

"I'm glad," he said, heartily, entirely reassured by her sweet, appealing eyes, "and will you—will you promise not to return to the—er—tragedy act?"

"I promise," she said, but her voice was somber now, and her gaze left him and wandered out to sea. It stayed there so long, that he ventured to interrupt her reverie.

"Well, since you've thrown me over in the matter of the treasure hunt, will you dance with me this evening in the lounge?"

Her face turned back to his, white and startled looking.

"Oh, no," she spoke abruptly, "oh, no —I couldn't—couldn't dance—"

"Very well, then, will you stroll the deck with me? It's moonlight — and perhaps the moonlight may—may illumine our hearts."

"Sounds nice!" she said, and now the lurking mischief reappeared in her smile. "I'll see about it—and tell you at dinner time."

With that he was forced to be content, and they lapsed into a desultory conversation that was nearly if not quite in their usual vein.

At four o'clock that afternoon the treasure hunters gathered in the lounge for instructions. There was a large party, for many were interested in the cause, and others came for the fun.

Maisie looked very sweet in a sports costume of white knitted silk with a fluttering chiffon scarf of jade green and a little hat to match.

The instructor gave them as a first clew the number forty-nine, nothing more.

Faces were blank for a moment, and then some one cried, "Stateroom 49!"

"Of course," they chorused and all rushed to that stateroom.

But to their knock the door was opened by a smiling stewardess who said, "No, not *Room* 49."

The emphasis was unmistakable, and a bright mind offered, "Table 49!"

Down to the dining room they sped, and pounced on the table bearing the charmed number.

Here they found a card under a plate which bore the legend, "Not *Table* 49."

Well, what next? Aha, Deck chair 49!

To the deck and found the chair occupied by a pleasant old lady, who beamed at them through her spectacles, and said, "Not *chair* 49!"

Then they were puzzled, and much thinking was done.

"Not a real number," Mason volunteered. "Perhaps a jest—say, a forty-niner."

"Is there one on board?" asked many, and the information was forthcoming that there was, an old chap in the second cabin, who was a real forty-niner.

Down they trooped, and the guess was right.

Old Mr. Groton was so glad to see the

merry crowd he was loath to do his part and give up the paper which would send them away.

But he was persuaded, and he surrendered a card bearing only the words, Humpty Dumpty.

Here was a poser.

"Eggs," somebody suggested, "the kitchen!"

Like a flash, many rushed for the kitchen, but Maisie said to Mason, who was watching her animated face with admiration in his eyes, "I don't believe it means eggs and I'm not going down to the commissariat department. You go, if you choose."

"Not if you don't. Have you any idea what it means?"

"No. Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. There's no wall on the ship, is there?"

"Not exactly. There may be, but they wouldn't give such an obscure clew."

"No, I suppose not. Well, how about Humpty Dumpty in a book—in the library?"

"Good! Mother Goose, of course. Didn't suppose they had that in the ship's collection—it may belong to some child on board."

Several, overhearing, inclined to the library, and thither they went.

But no Mother Goose was in the catalogue, though the library steward aided them in their search all he could.

Nor did any one know of the child owner of the book.

"Oh, wait!" Maisie cried, "I have it! Alice In Wonderland!"

The beam on the face of the library steward showed that her guess was right, and that he had known all the time. He handed her the book when she asked for it, and as she quickly turned to the part about Humpty Dumpty, between the leaves lay a sealed envelope addressed to the treasure hunters.

Quickly opened, it read:

Seek the quarter deck,
There you'll surely find
Treasure in good measure
Of a pleasant kind.

The quarter deck. Many didn't know just exactly where to find that locality and stewards and officers were besieged with questions.

All were answered quickly and courteously and the seekers scrambled here and there, hunting assiduously, but all in vain.

Nearly half an hour was spent in fruitless hunt, when a clever brain suggested.

"Not the real quarter deck at all! A—oh, a deck of cards!"

Blank faces greeted this idea, until somebody else said, "That's right! The smoking room, or the lounge—"

Then everybody was off, searching for all the playing cards on board.

And at last, two of the younger set, a pretty flapper and her attendant swain, discovered in the drawer of a card table a part of a pack of cards—thirteen, to be exact—representing a quarter of a deck! And on the cards were the two parcels that were their rich reward. A lovely vanity-case for the girl and a gold stickpin for the boy were grasped with shouts of glee and triumph.

But Sally Barnes was not among the group of merry-makers.

No, she was down in the captain's office, shut in alone with him, and her earnest face and grave tones were quite at variance with her usual demeanor.

"Yes, Captain Van Winkle," she said, and her eyes held unshed tears, "I did just what you told me. I got the stewardess out of the way, and then I slipped into Miss Forman's room, when all the others were on the other side of the boat. And—in the back part of the wardrobe, behind a hatbox, I found these."

As gravely as the girl, the captain looked at what she gave him.

They were five jeweler's cases, empty of contents.

Yet it was only too easily to be seen that one had been made for a necklace, three for bracelets, and the other a square case that might have contained a shoulder buckle.

The name on the satin lining of each was the name of the Fifth Avenue jeweler whose receipted bills had been found among the effects of the late Oscar Cox.

"You found these empty, Miss Barnes?"

"Yes, captain. Oh, what does it mean?" and her tears poured down in a flood.

CHAPTER X.

PLANTED?

CAPTAIN VAN WINKLE was at his alert best.

Detective work was not his metier, but looking into matters that affected the well-being of his ship was.

"Don't cry, Miss Sally," he said, kindly. "Whatever it means, you have done only right in finding these things for me. How did you know—or rather what made you suspect the jewels we are looking for might by any chance be in Miss Forman's possession?"

"Well, you see," Sally stammered a little, "she wears a stunning pearl necklace with a square diamond for a clasp, that never came from the five-and-ten!"

"And how did you know that the jewelry in question included a necklace of that description?"

This time the girl hesitated longer, but said, at last, "Well, captain, I wormed it out of Hal Mallory. He's a nice chap, but about as water-tight as a sieve. And I wanted to know about Maisie Forman. She's a mystery to us on board. Why is she traveling alone, Captain Van Winkle?"

"Bless my soul, I don't know! Do you suppose I ask such questions of my passengers?"

"No—but do you—don't you think she is an—you know—an adventuress?"

Captain Van Winkle laughed.

"No," he answered, "no, I don't. And you're a minx to mention such a word in connection with that young lady. Don't do it again."

Sally was not afraid of the captain, for she *was* a minx and was afraid of nobody, but she knew when she was scolded and took it docilely.

"But, captain," she demanded, "what about these jewel cases?"

"Aye, that." He fell into a brief reverie.

Then suddenly, he looked up, touched a bell and sent for Trent.

Max Trent, none too well pleased to be dragged away from Miss Forman's society, came at once, and the captain laid the matter before him.

"You are investigating the murder of Mr. Cox," he said, looking at Trent keenly, "and, as you know, we found among Mr. Cox's papers, certain jewelry bills. Do you think these empty jewel cases represent the items specified on those bills?"

Trent examined the cases with interest.

"I think there can be no doubt of it," he declared. "See, this is obviously a case for a necklace. These three just alike would answer to the three bracelets and this other one would just fit a shoulder buckle. It seems a shoulder buckle of gems is a popular ornament just now. And, as you see, these cases bear the name of the firm who sent the bills."

"Yes," said the captain, "tell Mr. Trent where you found these, will you, Miss Barnes?"

Sally looked up regretfully. There was no sauciness on her pert little face now. It was with a sad inflection that she announced:

"I found them, Mr. Trent, in the wardrobe in Miss Forman's stateroom. They were hidden behind a hatbox."

Trent stared at her a moment. He was not a man given to disclosure of his feelings. His brain worked like lightning; he thought of several things to say, of several attitudes to take, and then decided on the simplest.

"Indeed," he said. "And how did you happen to be looking in there?"

"The captain asked me to," Sally returned, still with that odd quietness that made her seem older and prettier.

"In the interests of the case," Captain Van Winkle supplemented.

"Well," Trent said next, "it is a find. It certainly is a find. Of course they were 'planted.' That's what detectives call it, when incriminating evidence is purposely placed where it may be found."

"Yes," and Captain Van Winkle nodded. "Now we must find out who did the planting. By the way, Miss Barnes tells me that the necklace Miss Forman wears is like the one described in the jeweler's bill."

"Rot!" Trent was getting nervous. "As if a pearl necklace could be described."

"But it mentioned a square diamond clasp, and they are not common."

"Are you implying that Miss Forman's necklace could by any possibility be the necklace of the Cox bill?"

Trent's tone was icy, and his eyes glittered.

Captain Van Winkle sighed. He knew men, and he saw at once that if there was any question of Maisie Forman's implication in the case, he could expect no more help from Max Trent.

And he had depended on Trent. He knew he was not a detective, but he was experienced in the ways and means of detectives, vicariously, and he had hoped that Trent would at least find a suspect before they landed at Liverpool.

"I am not implying anything, Mr. Trent," he replied, "but it is necessary to take these facts into consideration. It will be an easy matter to ask Miss Forman about the cases. If she denies all knowledge of them and has no idea how they came to be in her wardrobe, we surely have a clew to work on. We must be able to discover who could get to her room and put them there. Perhaps it was done during the treasure hunt, for then intrusions into some staterooms were permitted—"

"Not Miss Forman's."

"No, but Miss Barnes went in there—at my request—and the one who 'planted' the cases may have done so, too."

"Yes," Trent was holding himself well in hand. "Yes, it may be so. Suppose I ask Miss Forman about it at once. I left her in her deck chair, taking tea."

"Yes. Just a moment, Mr. Trent. Have you any suspicions at all?"

"Not suspicions, captain. But there are a few ways to look—a few people who might be questioned. For instance, the man Hudder. You know, in detective stories, it is frequently the valet or butler who is the villain.

"In this instance, it is peculiarly probable that Hudder is involved. He knew his master, as no one else on board did. He had every chance in the world to do the dreadful deed.

"He had unquestioned access to the bronze hand, and—"

Trent paused impressively, "he had ample opportunity to take those cases—having himself stolen the jewels—to Miss Forman's room and secrete them where they were found. That is my opinion as to what happened, and I've not the slightest doubt you will find I'm right."

Trent sat back, with the aspect of a competent and complacent sleuth.

The captain had listened attentively and now said:

"You spoke of a few people—who else?"

"Well, I hate to mention names, but I suppose it must be done. I don't like the way Mr. Camper talks and acts. He seems to me like a man with a secret, and I can't help the feeling that he knows more than he has told. Both he and his wife are of a pushing, intrusive sort, yet when you ask them anything, they evade your questions."

"The Campers, eh? Any one else?"

"No, unless it might be Andrews, the room steward. I have a hunch—that's what we detectives call it—a hunch, that this particularly gruesome murder was not committed by one of the first class passengers. It seems to me the work of a brutal mind, a man of the lower orders, without heart, soul or conscience. Gentlemen, so-called, have committed murder, but they shoot or stab—they do not batter, like a caveman, and with such a terrific weapon. No club or bludgeon could have done the work of that fearful bronze hand!"

"You knew Cox, Mr. Trent?"

"Only on board. I've heard him hold forth in the smoking room, and I've seen him frolicking about with the youngsters, but I can't say that I knew him. Miss Barnes, here, knew him far better than I did."

Sally, who had been sitting silent, broke into the conversation.

"Yes, I did know him pretty well. That is, I knew the side he showed us young people. And he was as nice as nice. He was gay, genial, and very generous. He treated us as a big, kind uncle might. But that wasn't all there was to Oscar Cox. No, sir!

"That man was deep—oh, but deep!

He had a diabolical charm—don't laugh—he did! Oh, not like a sheik—I know what I'm talking about, more like a—a power of darkness! If he wanted a thing, he'd move Heaven and earth, but he'd get it. Yes, sir!

"And he could bend anybody to his will, not by persuasion, but by absolute domination. Now, don't think all this showed out in his gay friendship with us youngsters, but I read that man; oh, you bet I did!"

"You show great divination of character, Miss Barnes," the captain said.

"But it's all true, every word of it. And here's what he said to me, one day. 'Before I leave this ship, I'll tell you something that will knock you all silly with astonishment. By Gad, I will!' That's what he said, and by the earnest way he spoke I knew he meant it. So, I tell you he had some secret, some big secret, and he meant to make it public before we landed.

"Oh, I don't mean it was a bad secret. I don't know what it was. Only—I do believe that his—his death, was the result of that secret, or mixed up with it somehow. I mean somebody killed him because of the secret."

"Miss Barnes," the captain said, kindly, "I've carried many passengers across the ocean, and I think I may say that fully half of them have had secrets. More. I think fully half the earth's population has secrets. I own I can't get very excited over the news Mr. Cox meant to divulge."

"And, too," Trent offered, "the man was an awful liar. I say that dispassionately, for it is true. He told conflicting tales on many subjects, especially of a mythical nephew, of great prowess, who cropped up one day in Boston and the next day in Timbuctoo."

"Yes," and the captain smiled reminiscently, "I've heard him tell of his namesake nephew. Well, Mr. Trent, what do you advise as the next step? It seems to me there ought to be some sort of an inquiry. I won't say inquest, as we have no coroner, no jury, no witnesses. But I propose to get together a few people and ask questions of and before them all. This may lead to new disclosures which we could get in no other way.

"I know that both you and Mr. Nash have done all you can in the way of private investigation and technical detective work, but, as you will be the first to admit, it hasn't amounted to much. So I shall exercise my prerogative of absolute authority and carry out my own plan. If nothing comes of it, at least, there will be no harm done."

Trent was terribly upset. It seemed to him there might be great harm done by the captain's plan. Although he had scoffed at the idea of Maisie Forman's connection with the case, it had stirred his heart to vague forebodings. There was much about her that was mysterious, much that was strange and inexplicable.

Why had she tried to jump overboard? Why had she told no one of her home life or circumstances?

As if to harass him further, Sally spoke up.

"Do, captain, and I'll help you get up the party. We'll have Hudder, of course, and Andrews. And, then, let me see, the two Campers, and Miss Forman; by the way, captain the whole ship is talking about that girl."

"Why Miss Barnes?"

"Oh, just because she's so mysterious. At first, they merely kicked because she went high-hatting around, and wouldn't speak to anybody. But lately there have been rumors—just vague hints, you know, that she's queer."

"Queer, how?" Trent's eyes glared at the volatile Sally.

She looked at him steadily, and returned:

"She walks around, late at night, after everybody else is in bed. There, tie that up in a pink ribbon and take it home! I'm sorry to knock your inamorata but, as I see it, you're going to lay down on this job, and—I think I'll have to lend a hand." Then Sally's impish little face broke into a lovely smile. "Now don't think for a minute I'm ag'in' Miss Forman—I'm for her—miles for her! But she's got to be told that she'll find the footlights farther front—and I suppose I've got to be the one to broadcast it to her."

Trent hesitated. He resented Sally's im-

pudence, he resented her remarks about Maisie, but, also, he sensed her attitude as a defender, a helper. Did he want her? He didn't know, and at his irresolute face, Sally burst out laughing.

"Don't worry, Mr. Trent, I'm not going to eat the girl. Well, go ahead, captain, fix up your party. Ask Mr. Sherman Mason, he's a wise bird, if ever there was one, and Mr. Craig, too. You need people like that for ballast. Then, with Polly Nash and Hal Mall and me, I guess we'll call the invitation list closed. Oh, you might add Miss Gibbs. Silly Lily they call her, but she's nobody's fool."

"Miss Barnes," and Captain Van Winkle looked seriously at the girl, "I admit I have heretofore looked upon you as a—"

"As a half-witted flapper," Sally put in, coolly, when he hesitated.

"Your own words," he took it up, with equal coolness. "But to-day I've learned your true worth. If you will continue to help me, I shall be grateful. But I want to exact secrecy. It is not the thing to spread our plans at large, and I'd like your promise."

"Put it there!" and Sally held out an impertinent hand. "Your word is my law and if I couldn't keep secrets better than some men, I'd take a correspondence course in silence!"

Trent went at once in search of Miss Forman. She was not in her deck chair, so he scribbled a hasty note and sent it to her room, begging her to meet him on the upper deck, where he had saved her life that night.

He did not word it thus, but she understood.

He went up and found a secluded nook for them, and had two chairs in readiness when she appeared.

She was already dressed for dinner, and wore a light wrap over her yellow chiffon gown. Round her neck was her string of exquisite pearls, and as she seated herself, Trent noted with a peculiar sensation that the clasp was a brilliant and beautiful square cut diamond.

"I asked you to come out because—because I want to talk with you," he said, a little lamely, as she looked inquiringly at him.

"Do you know, I thought that might be the reason," she laughed, and then she gave a little sigh of content as she settled herself in her chair.

The deck was empty save for themselves; everybody was dressing for dinner, and the spot was ideal for a chat.

The sun was still well above the horizon, but it was making its way downward through a tangle of crimson and gold and blue, and the reflections were on softly rolling waves.

A little breeze stirred the gold bronze tendrils of Maisie's hair, and her fine face looked sweeter than ever as she turned it to Trent confidingly.

"I'm glad you sent for me," she said. "I was listless, and I dressed early thinking I'd come out for a while before dinner. So, here we are."

"Yes," he said, with an answering smile, "here we are. Oh, Maisie, I love you so—can you—do you—want me to?"

She sat upright and looked at him.

"Are you in your right mind?" she said, softly.

"Never saner. I didn't mean to blurt it out like that—but I had to. Tell me, Maisie, tell me—"

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me everything! Tell me that you love me, that you're glad I love you, that you will marry me, and that we'll live happy ever after!"

His spirits rose as he saw no reproof in her glance, but she did look puzzled.

"Max," she said, quietly, "there's a reason. Why this avowal just now?"

He stared at her. "I suppose it is precipitate. But, it's love at first sight, and all that sort of thing."

Maisie looked off at the sea and sky, and said, as if to herself:

"There's no moon; he isn't moonstruck. There's not enough sun left to think he's sunstruck. Wake up, Max!"

She smiled at him indulgently, as at a foolish child, but he saw the light of happiness in her eyes, the hint of joy in the dawning flush on her cheeks.

"Good God, Maisie!" he cried, "if to

hear that much, so enhances your beauty, what will you be when I tell you more!"

"Silly!" and she flushed a little deeper. "And, my goodness, do you already assume that I fall into your hand at your asking, like a ripe plum?"

"Peach, not plum, and of course you're going to say yes. Eventually, why not now?"

"If this is a proposal, it strikes a flippant note," she said, musingly, and Trent at once turned serious.

"I don't mean to, darling. My love for you is the deepest, truest, sweetest thing in my whole nature. It has grown quickly, but none the less surely and sanely, in these few days. Please tell me, sweetheart, please tell me you want it."

He leaned over to her chair, taking both her hands and looking into her face.

Maisie Forman was very beautiful just then. For the first time in her life she heard words of love that awakened a response in her own breast. For the first time she was asked for love by one to whom she was glad to give it.

Other men had proposed to her, other men had begged for her favor, but to none of them had her own heart said yes.

Now, and although she had known it before he told her, now she was spoken to by the man she loved, the man she wanted.

For a moment she was silent, dumb with the glory of it.

"Dear," she said, very quietly, "dear," and her inflection of the simple word conveyed to him more than the wildest protestations of affection could have done, "I cannot answer you now. I will—at some other time."

She looked away a moment, and then added, lightly:

"Come, you must run and dress for dinner. You will be late."

"No, sit still." He spoke with sudden determination. "Maisie, listen. There is something I must say to you, and say quickly. Your name is being spoken by the passengers—"

"Yes, I know. Some of the cats told me."

"But you don't know all. You are going to be called on to explain—"

"To explain!"

He could scarce tell whether her face paled with anger or with fear. It was perilously near the latter, he thought.

"Yes. Oh, how can I tell you—but I must. Maisie — Miss Forman," his deep distress and concern made him seek refuge in formality, "where did you get that string of pearls you wear?"

No stammering schoolboy could have done the thing more stupidly. No village idiot could have been a greater blunderer.

Yet his tragic, almost fierce, tones told her this was no jest, no light query.

Unconsciously she clasped the pearls with one hand and stared at him with frightened eyes.

Yes, frightened, he was sure now.

"What—what do you mean?" she stammered.

"What I say," he returned. He was getting hold of himself now, and this thing must be gone through with. "Surely, you've no objection to telling me. Who gave them to you?"

"I fail to recognize your right to put such a question."

"Perhaps not. Then, tell me this. From what jeweler did they come? At what shop were they bought?"

Her face cleared a little.

"Oh, you're only asking as a connoisseur. Why, they came, I think, from Cartany's. They are lovely, aren't they?"

"Yes. And who gave them to you?"

"Now, see here, my friend. I'm not engaged to you, you know. I didn't say yes to your extraordinary proposal of a short time since. I object to these questions, and I refuse to answer."

"But, Maisie, listen. Oh, my dear heart, you'll have to listen. I'll have to tell you. Among the papers of that man who was killed, that Mr. Cox, they found jeweler's bills from Cartany's and one was for a string of pearls like these—"

"How does that interest me, do you think?"

Her hauteur was suddenly in evidence and tones were like cut steel.

"Because it interests others. Because the pearl necklace itemized had a square diamond clasp. Because—" he decided on

frankness, "because the case that belongs to the necklace was found in your room—"

"In my room! Another case, besides my own?"

"Oh, dearest, is it your own? Can you prove it?"

The light of hope came to Trent's eyes, as he awaited the answer.

"What have I to prove? This is my own necklace—given to me by—by a friend. I refuse to be quizzed or questioned in the matter. Perhaps you'll be good enough to tell me what it's all about. why you are telling me these strange things, and who is making the trouble?"

"Yes, I'll tell you."

They were standing now, Trent held her by her two arms, and with steady eyes looking into her own, and in a steady voice, he told her.

"Among the Cox papers, they found receipted bills for a pearl necklace, also three diamond bracelets and a diamond buckle. The jewels cannot be found, but all five of the cases were discovered to-day, in your wardrobe, behind a hatbox."

At first, Maisie Forman looked steadily back into the deep eyes fixed on her own. As she continued to gaze, her face grew whiter and whiter, until, with a stifled, choking catch of her breath, she turned aside her own eyes and drew herself away from him.

Then, turning back, she said, suddenly:

"You knew this, just now, when you—you told me—"

"Yes," he took her gently in his arms. "Yes, I love you, and always shall. For myself, I ask no explanation, I put no inquiries. But, oh, my beloved, others will question you. Others will demand explanation. And, so—so, my dearest, let me help you."

"What do *you* think about the cases found in my wardrobe?"

"I think they were planted there," he returned, promptly.

"Planted?"

"Yes, that means put there by somebody, with an intent to get you into trouble, or at least to shift trouble from his own shoulders."

"Oh! Yes—yes, I see; that's what they were—planted!"

And then, with a strange, tantalizing, almost mocking smile, she ran away from him, and disappeared down the corridor that led toward her own cabin.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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BIRTHDAYS

WHEN I was just a tiny girl,
It nearly broke my heart,
To think my lovely birthdays
Were so very far apart

I had to wait a whole long year
Between each loved event,
And many ages seemed to pass
Before the year was spent.

And, oh, I thought it dreadful
When I chanced to overhear
My mother say how glad she was,
She had but one a year!

All this was very long ago.
My childish days are past,
And now I wish my birthdays
Would not come round so fast.

Caroline Seymour.

Primitive Wins

By WALTER A. SINCLAIR

SOMETHING was crawling heavily in the thicket behind Audrey Cantrill. Breathing pantingly, too. She swung abruptly from her easel and posed fearlessly, inquiringly, although her maulstick was her nearest approach to a defensive weapon.

As she gazed, startled but not alarmed, a pair of cool blue eyes stared up at her from a head held near the ground.

"Well?" she managed to inquire calmly.

"Not so well as I'd like," softly responded the man wriggling through the tall grass. He smiled an ingratiating, frank and friendly smile, although it ended in a grimace of pain. "Don't be alarmed."

"I'm not," retorted Audrey coolly, albeit the hand which clutched her palette vibrated just the slightest.

"Not of me, I mean," he added with another involuntary grimace, as though a sudden twinge of pain had passed through him.

He raised his head, turned it sidewise, and listened for a moment. Faintly came the purr of an approaching motor. The sound promised that a car would pass within half a minute on the road which lay three hundred feet from where they were.

"Can you—will you hide me?" the man asked, wriggling toward Audrey's field umbrella. He turned to her a look of mingled pleading and trust. "I am unarmed, and I don't want to be seen by the men coming in that car. They are searching for me. Speak quickly—I don't want to involve you against your will."

"Yes, I will," murmured Audrey. "But where?"

Without replying, the man crawled hastily to shelter behind her umbrella. This was one of those big striped sunshades, such as one sees stuck in the sand at a beach or over the driver's seat of a wagon. A coarse canvas mushroom with a thick, six-foot pole having a sharpened end which can be thrust into the ground for anchorage.

Just then the sunshade lay opened on its side where it had been blown by the wind while Audrey was painting. She had not

jabbed it deeply enough into the soil, and had been too engrossed to notice that it had been toppled from its upright position. The spread canvas top lay on edge, making a shelter from espionage from the road.

"Go on painting as if nothing had happened," directed the fugitive in a low voice. There was a quality of command mingled with assurance in the words which compelled Audrey to act instantly.

With her back to the road she faced her easel, unseeingly, to be sure, and, dipping a brush in her paints, poised to touch the camel hair tip to the canvas before her. Her entire attention, however, was concentrated in her ears.

With a quiet squeak of brakes the car slid up to the low wall of loosely piled rock which marked the boundary between road and field.

"Hey, feller! Yoohoo, artist!" yelled an excited voice from the direction of the car. "Hey, feller! Painter!"

Summoning an annoyed expression, as if to register that she had been snatched rudely from the deep absorption of her painting, Audrey turned and faced the road. Beside the wall stood a powerful black touring car in which were three young men. A fourth had stepped out of the opened door beside the driver's seat and was standing on the wall, addressing her.

This fellow and two of his companions wore light gray motoring caps and tight-fitting, snappily tailored clothes of ultra-Broadway patterns. The driver wore a red-and-green sweater in place of a coat.

"Well, what is it?" called Audrey, raising her voice in polite impatience when the man on the wall hesitated, staring.

"My Gawd—a skoit!" he ejaculated, as if doubting the evidence of his own eyes. "A jane without a skoit!"

Outlanders all, they might well be excused for their amazement. They had hailed what appeared to be a slender youth clad in a floppy, gray felt campaign hat, O. D. flannel shirt, and khaki trousers—pants rather, if the names indicate distinction in price, cut and social rank. And when this person had turned around to face them—

First, there was her face—uncompromisingly feminine. Delicately curving in outline, small, almost a perfect oval were it not for the fearless yet piquant forward uptilt of chin. Tanned by months in the open field, her cheeks held a glow which no beauty parlor sold.

Beneath black brows as perfectly formed as parentheses stared two dark and fearless eyes which might, under proper circumstances, be melting and maddening. Then there was a small, determined nose and a pair of lips tinted a different red than that favored by fire engines and flappers.

Her figure, too, was feminine, although of the modern school. The straight main lines did not hide altogether a soft curve here and there. The hands clutching the palette and brushes were small boned, slender, tapering and brown. Nor, after the first surprise, did the cheap outdoor garb, bought at some army and navy store, seem incongruous or clumsy as worn by Audrey. Although cuffs and trouser legs were rolled up negligently, a certain artistic touch, a neatly belted waist or the way she wore her masculine clothes gave them picturesqueness.

They were in the picture, too. These men were strangers to that region or they would have known that at this season the fields, the mountainsides and the creek banks were speckled with artists and art students in all sorts of costumes.

This, had the strangers realized it, was that enchanted region in the Catskills to which certain of the Washington Square-Greenwich Village art colony migrated each summer. They came here to work, to paint, and when in the field they wore working clothes.

Before noon arrived there would be scattered over the landscape for miles about other girl artists in khaki pantaloons, khaki breeches, or knickers, as well as a few in conventional skirts. Also there would be girls wearing out bizarre outfits originally designed for the big costume party. There were men artists, too, uniformly favoring khaki pants, upon which paint brushes could be wiped carelessly.

"What is it?" repeated Audrey, her voice now firmly controlled.

"Say, cutie, have you seen a—now—fel-

ler, a little bigger'n me, in a blue suit and cap?" demanded the spokesman of the man hunters.

The girl could see three gold teeth glitter in the exact center of his mouth as he grinned at her. Another glitter winked brightly from his left hand as he patted the gorgeous purple cravat decking his soft silk shirt.

The gesture plainly was made to display the huge diamond worn on a middle finger of that hand. The right had rested lightly in his side coat pocket, clasping some hard object which outlined itself against the cloth.

"I've been busy painting and haven't been watching who went along the road," evaded Audrey, darting a lightning-quick glance at a blue suit with white diagonal stripes huddled in the shelter of her sunshade.

The back was to her, the face pressed against the canopy as though watching through some tiny hole in the umbrella.

"We don't mean somebody in the road," rejoined the man on the wall. "We're searching these fields."

"Well, you can see for yourself," the girl replied, with a sweeping gesture of her brush, and moved to resume painting.

"This guy's a friend of our'n that got lost off the car," announced her interrogator. Behind him, two companions were leaning forward, each clutching something black and compact in his right hand.

"Wait down at the village and he'll probably find you, then," advised Audrey over her shoulder. "I'm busy."

"See here, baby, we're dicks—see?" proclaimed the spokesman of the sinister quartet. "Detectives—see? This party we're looking for knocked off a guy early this morning. See what I mean? We are looking for him. Now, come clean. Seen him anywhere?"

"I've answered you once," replied Audrey haughtily, while a little shiver trickled down her spine.

Coming through the village from her barn studio that morning, she had heard talk about a man having been found dead down the road some five miles. He had been shot and had fallen by the wayside. The tragedy had been staged on a lonely, tree-flanked road suspected of being part of the rum-running express truck route between the Canadian border and New York City.

The law-abiding countryside had shrugged and murmured something about the desirability of letting the rum-runners and hijackers kill each other off.

"I heard you," sneered the swarthy-faced inquisitor. "But what's to prevent that being him hiding under that—blanket?"

Audrey's breath had stopped an instant until the man shot out the last word and pointed shrewdly. He had snapped his hand out of his pocket and he pointed with a stubby object of black metal, an automatic pistol.

Its snout was aimed at a human shape shrouded in a gaudy Navaho blanket, standing in the foreground some dozen feet beyond Audrey's easel. Two feathers sprouted from the blanket's peak. The figure seemed to be a grotesque Indian facing away toward the mountain.

"Why, that's only a scarecrow that I rigged up for my manikin, my model until I got my picture far enough along to get a real model," explained the girl earnestly. The sight of that ugly black object in the man's hand made her anxious to convince him.

"Is zat so?" jeered the fellow. "Nothin' but a scarecrow, huh? Seems to me you're mighty anxious about a dummy. Looks to me mighty like a man. What's more, I ain't going to take no chances that it ain't. Come out there, scarecrow, and let's see yer face. Or I'll shoot."

Followed a tense moment; then the sharp bark of a weapon whipped through the morning stillness.

The girl, who had crouched aside, although she was not in direct line of fire between the marksman and his garish target, now ran toward the dummy Indian.

"See what you've done—ruined my Navaho blanket," she remonstrated angrily and without a trace of fear.

Scarcely pausing, she snatched the blanket away, disclosing an ordinary scarecrow frame of wooden upright and crosspiece, on

which fluttered the all but disintegrated rags of an old coat and overalls. Holding up the gay red-and-black blanket so that the bullet hole was displayed, she walked calmly toward the gunman, her eyes flashing defiance.

Having simultaneously demonstrated the damage and her fearlessness, she let the blanket trail from one hand and carelessly tossed it aside as she passed the sprawling sunshade. The folds dropped concealingly over the man in blue who lay there so quietly.

"Now I hope you are satisfied," Audrey exclaimed, gazing defiantly at the man on the wall and at his companions eagerly lined up behind him. "If you continue to annoy me, I'll report this to the sheriff."

"Ah, t' sheriff! Git dat!" barked the gunman, highly amused. "If I ever toined dis rod on dat apple-knocker—baby! But don't get sore, cutie. Yuh got noive. Good-by, and don't let dat Indian scalp yuh."

As the car disappeared in a cloud of dust far down the winding mountain road, the blanket was tossed aside and the man lying there threw a pair of binoculars at the feet of the young woman.

"Would you mind using those to see if they're looking back or if they dropped out any one to spy?" he requested.

"They're all in the car and driving very slowly, scanning the fields on both sides," she reported after a careful survey with the glasses.

She turned to the man, who sat up and regarded her with a wan grin. The face was rather a somber one for grins, a lean, firm-jawed face with high cheek bones and an aquiline nose. A strong face despite the need of washing and shaving. Audrey decided there was plenty of character in its lines, its bearing, in the gaze. The man might have been any age from twenty-six to thirty.

"Then I must get away from here and quit exposing you to danger," responded the stranger, gathering himself to rise. "There are no words to express my appreciation and admiration of your gameness."

He winced and grunted, falling back and clapping one hand to his right calf.

"Why, you're wounded!" exclaimed Audrey, seeing the scarlet smear on his fingers.

"Nicked me, all right," he grinned. A humorous thought seemed to strike him. "We're kind of out of luck with the modern girls when it comes to this. In the good old days the newspapers always reported that some beautiful maiden tore up her petticoat to bandage the wound."

They both laughed gayly together.

"Don't hint that the modern girl can't match that," Audrey reprimanded. "Here is a perfectly clean piece of white cotton I brought to clean my brushes with. Use that."

"That's better. Only a flesh wound, and the slug went out," the man commented after bandaging his calf. "Let me sit a minute and I'll limp on. I don't need to assure you, Miss—Miss—"

"My name is Audrey Cantrill," the girl informed him.

"Sounds like Texas. You from there?" he asked. She shook her head. "I am, originally. A great country. As I was saying, Miss Audrey, I don't need to assure you that those charming gentlemen were not detectives, as they so quaintly pronounced it. They are modern soldiers of fortune, jazz-age mercenaries who, through the existence of a certain well-known amendment, have exchanged their humble status of cheap gangster gunmen for the more romantic, lucrative title of hijackers.

"They are not seeking to arrest me, but to evict the vital spark from my temporal body. In case you read the obits, my name is Spencer Aldrich, your very grateful admirer. Some day I hope to give you the complete synopsis. Right now I need to get where I can watch those birds without being seen by them. Isn't there some way I can get up to the top of the mountain here quickly?"

Above them towered Loomover Mountain, the loftiest of the Catskills in that region. Rising as straight as though it had been trued by some glacial adze, the nearby face of the height presented an uncompromising-looking barrier.

For miles this almost perpendicular front was reared. Sparse but continuous greenery ascended the natural wall, and a fringe of

trees crowned the summit, apparently brushing the thick, snow white cotton clouds which bulged heavily on the clear blue sky. Massive and impressive, Loomover brooded above the artists' summer colony.

"That road out there winds up around the easy slopes," Audrey explained, pointing behind them. "But it is six miles to the top, following all the turns and levels. An old wood road. A car could get up fairly fast, but it would take you hours to walk it. If you can climb, though, I know a secret path straight up the face of the mountain.

"See that irregular line of foliage running up the front of Loomover? Either a natural phenomenon or else some patient person planted them as a ladder. Once I thought the Indians did it, but the bushes and trees are too young, I learned. They are spaced near enough so you can get foothold on a tree and draw yourself up by hand to the next one. You're screened most of the time."

"I could watch the entire country from up there, see every road for miles around," Aldrich enthused. "They'll hang around this region, looking for me, and I can follow them with these glasses until I get ready to close in. I wish I had a change of clothes; they know my suit but not my face. Let's see what the old scarecrow has to offer. No; they wouldn't cover my skin."

He had wandered over to the wooden frame with the weather-tattered, flapping rags, and was examining them hopefully.

"Hello—what's this?" he exclaimed. "As I live and breathe."

He was fingering a six-foot bow which hung from one arm of the crosspiece.

"A friend who was out West brought it to me," explained Audrey, while Spencer Aldrich picked up the primitive weapon affectionately. "I've had it and the arrows around the studio for ornaments so long it occurred to me to use them in a picture."

"I see. The idea is an old Indian standing, sort of worshipfully in the foreground before the mountain," Aldrich comprehended, with a smile. He had stepped back to the canvas.

"You're laughing," she accused, a bit hurt. "I know it isn't very good, but I was hoping to get something different from a conventional landscape. Something that will sell."

"You mistake me. It's fine," he cried, noting the desperate note in her last words. "If you'll permit a suggestion: I know something about Indians, and I notice you have a blanket Indian, and a Navaho blanket at that, in this Catskill setting. The little details, you see. Your technique is first class. And I've seen some good pictures."

"Oh, it's all wrong," Audrey cried. "You heard me say I hoped to get a model or get one of my friends to pose—"

"Let me, when I can come back here in a few days," he suggested impulsively, touched by the tone of her voice. "I've got a little Indian blood in me somewhere away back, I understand. That's why, when I was a kid, I liked to practice with these. Mind my trying out the bow?"

When she nodded permission, Aldrich seized an arrow from the quiver lying beside the scarecrow and ran back until Audrey began to wonder if he ever was going to stop. Finally he threw himself into position, left arm extended, right hand drawing the arrow's shaft to his ear.

"The scarecrow," he called.

There came a musical twang of released bowstring, a swift streak through the sunshine, and the arrow struck, vibrating, at the junction of the two scantlings forming the scarecrow frame. Aldrich came, jubilating.

"Haven't lost the old eye. I could spend all day doing this, but I must go. If it wouldn't take too long for you to run home and change into your right clothes, I'd give you forty dollars cash for that outfit you are wearing. Yes, and throw in this suit to boot. That shirt and khaki pants would be ideal for here."

"But they aren't worth forty," she quibbled.

"Worth more to me, right now," he snapped. "Unless you're one of those rich art students that can't use forty."

"I just can, though," she stated. "And I will. Wait."

Throwing the Indian blanket over the recumbent sunshade so that a low dog-tent was formed, she dived under. Thirty seconds later she emerged, clad in a snugly-fitting bathing suit, rolled stockings and high bathing shoes.

"You see, I was all dressed underneath to stop at the pool for a swim on the way to lunch," she explained. "A lot of us do that. One gets so warm out here in the sun, and there is no time to go home to change into bathing togs, so we come prepared. You'll find your disguise under the tent. Dive under and toss me out your swap."

"You've made everything possible," Aldrich declared, a few minutes later when they faced each other in exchanged apparel.

He looked at her with more than admiration—there was a wistful yearning in his glance as it rested on her. Audrey had not donned the coat, but stood attired jauntily in his white sports shirt and blue trousers, his cap pulled over her dark bob. As pretty a stage "boy" as he ever had seen, the man's gaze proclaimed.

"I'm just grateful enough to ask one more thing: Why, after my wild introduction, did you do all this—help me?"

"Why, because—" Audrey hesitated.

Her cheeks were flaming, her eyes tender. They confessed to seeing something powerfully attractive in this stranger, unshaven, disheveled, and hunted though he was.

"Oh, just because. Woman's reason. Don't you know the unexpected, the touch of adventure appeals to every woman? Our lives are so placid—dull, stifling, compared with men. And you come, with man hunters trailing you, to break the monotony. It's like in the 'Girl of the Golden West'."

"Yes, but that fellow in the play was a bandit, a criminal," Aldrich reminded her. "And I'm not."

"Then why not go to the sheriff, the police or troopers?" she insisted. "If you're in danger of being shot down, why don't you seek protection?"

"Don't ask me. I can't show openly now," he evaded. "I know it sounds suspicious, but take one more chance on me. Maybe it is the appeal to the primitive that makes me want to settle this alone."

"Maybe I feel the same lure of the primitive," she murmured.

"Then, in spite of what I am—Oh!" he broke off with an effort and halted the impetuous step he had taken toward her. "I must go now, or I never will. You might be seen with me. Dangerous. Hurry home and hide my togs a few days. May I—? I *am* coming back to see you."

"I'll expect you," she called, waving.

He was limping rapidly toward the bush-hidden base of the path she had indicated. Soon he was lost to view. Occasionally through the shrubbery she caught glimpses of khaki. Then nothing but shrubbery and rocks showed on the mountain face.

Work was out of the question after that exciting interlude, Audrey decided as she dreamily packed her painting kit. Her heart was climbing the mountain wall but her mind stubbornly remained on solid earth, considering the facts she knew.

A man had been killed. Hijackers were hunting down Aldrich as the slayer. Hijackers preyed on rum-runners and rum-guard gunmen. She refused to believe Spencer Aldrich was one of these. But what was he? Why did he lurk in hiding instead of going to the officers?

Out of dreams which turned her face alternately rosy and pensive, she was wakened by the purring of a motor, a familiar sound. Around the shrubbery at the bend dashed the gunmen's car. She cast a hasty, worried look toward the mountain path and then faced the road.

Near by the car wheezed gently to a sliding stop. The man with the prominent gold teeth who had addressed her before, again spoke.

"Hey, girlie, we come back to pay the damage," he hailed, with a show of geniality. "The other boys tells me right I shouldn't oughter shot yer blanket. So I comes back to say I'm sorry and to pay yuh for it. I'll buy it off yuh, see? Nothin' could be fairer than that. I got plenty jack, see? Will fifty do? Here."

He approached, peeling bills from a thick wad of yellowbacks he had dug from his pocket, offering them temptingly as he approached. The girl shrank back, holding her painted canvas so as to shield herself

below the waist. Two of the fellow's companions alighted.

"Aw, don't get ritzi, kid. Vincent Parisi never harmed no dame," placated the man.

His bulging, seal brown eyes darted past her and bulged even farther. At his swift, excited stare, Audrey cast a hasty glance behind her.

Lying in the grass were Aldrich's coat and cap. With the speed of a rattler striking, the self-styled Parisi snatched the Indian blanket from under Audrey's arm and threw it over her head. Immediately his arms twined about her neck and shoulders, winding the smothering folds closer about her.

"Joe, Nick. Quick!" called the leader urgently. There followed the rush of feet, a seizure by other hands. "Wrap her in it tight. See, look—his coat and cap. And her with his pants and shirt on. She must be his woman, planted here to cover his get-away. A good idea we got too late, this coming back. The umbrella, that was where. See, blood.

"I knew we hit him this morning when we seen him from the mountain, and winged him when he dived into them bushes. I said he come into this field, didn't I? You wanna know where he is now? I'm making book, five-to-one. See her when we popped into sight? She looked up at that mountain!"

"What for?" demanded one voice, its owner panting heavily.

"You, Nick, got a sharp knife but dull brains," snapped Vincent. "Why was we up there? To look. Because you can see everything for miles around, clean across the Hudson. To look for him, sure. Well, we give a look."

"We chase him back up the road, hey?" asked Nick.

"Me and you and Jim, yes," answered the leader. "Joe, he stays on guard here. Looky. Up there this morning when we was on top, I look around, see? To find if there is any other way up but this long, winding road. And I find the top of a path right up the side, right straight up from here. From tree to tree like a ladder, beginning right over there where I'm pointing. Joe, you stand at the bottom with yer rod ready, and shoot him if he comes down. We'll take this car and hustle up top. We'll catch him between bases and tag him out for keeps. Heave this jane into the bus and shove off. We'll need her up there."

"Yeh, but listen," complained a third voice. "He could look down and knock me off with his rod—"

"He ain't got none, I'm telling yuh," snarled Vincent, impatiently. "Yuh don't suppose if he had one he wouldn't-a used it when we was potting after him from the car. He lost it when he fell off the truck when the shooting came off at three this morning. When they knocked off Rocky. I seen the gun fly out-a his hand before he jumped into the woods then, even if you didn't lamp it. He ain't got no gat on him or we'd a-heard it before now. Yo-heave."

Muffled in the blanket, Audrey felt herself heaved to the floor of the automobile which started rapidly on its climb, lurching over rocks, rain fissures and thank-you-ma'ams as it ascended. Vincent and Nick were urging profanely that Jim step on it. The driver replied that he was giving the boat all he had and that more would shake it apart.

The violence with which she was being tossed about convinced Audrey that the driver spoke truly. This stormy voyage up Loomover duplicated the storm raging within her.

Curiosity, doubt and faith tossed her with mighty cross-seas. She had trusted a strange man without any reason she could put into words. She had aided him and had done the thing which had betrayed her into the clutches of killers.

For that she had no regret. But these men, speaking among themselves after they had ceased pretending to her, charged Aldrich with being a killer, with being on a truck which had escaped after a battle. There was only one kind of truck that ran through battle in early hours. And only one reason for an armed man riding it.

"He isn't a rum truck gunman," stated her heart. And reason threw out its hands despairingly and sat down.

A loud report startled her. Instantly the car lurched more drunkenly and wabbled furiously.

"Hell, a blow-out!" exclaimed Vincent,

with appropriate additions. " I thought we was being shot at, that time. All hands to the jack, and put the spare on snappy. Damn this hick road, winding around here where we can't keep an eye on that mountain front or that field. Still, we got both routes covered. He can't escape."

Aldrich couldn't escape. The words struck coldly on Audrey's heart. She remembered Vincent's words: Aldrich had dropped his gun. He was at the mercy of this gang which had no mercy.

And how about her own plight? The thought gave her a little shiver, tightly swathed though she was in that heavy blanket. They suspected her of being Aldrich's woman. There was warmth in that thought. In a primitive manner, she and Aldrich were fighting barehanded against these modern human tigers. Her pulse quickened.

Preposterous the whole affair seemed to her. Here in the most populous State, with centuries of civilization to its history, this primitive tooth-and-fang game was under way. Farther down, the roads were alive with people, no doubt, with law enforcers too.

On this mountain she was away from the modern world. Only a few persons climbed that steep. She had seen none go up that morning. These gangsters could feel almost certain of no interference.

The car finally slithered to a stop after rattling and bumping up the final stage of its climb. Audrey was dragged out roughly and unrolled from the smothering blanket. While his two henchmen held her by the arms and rushed her along, Vincent darted ahead, his automatic held ready. They were on the peak of Loomover, a narrow plateau scarcely fifty feet wide at that point. An abrupt ledge rimmed the side overlooking the field in which she had painted that day. At certain spots the rim overhung the sheer side—rocky shelves jutting out above the abyss. Along this ledge they ran cautiously.

" I don't see him on the climb," cried Parisi, peering over the edge. He was a city bravo, bold on pavements but cautious in this wilderness height. He clung to a tree trunk with his left hand while he leaned over to look, always holding his pistol ready. " And I don't see Joe down there. Where's Joe? Where's that yellow rat? Gone!"

The hijacker leader turned a glaring face toward his captive. She straightened and stared back defiantly.

" Where's yer guy hang out up here?" demanded Vincent, nervously flashing side glances at the thick shrubbery which crowned the mountain crest. " Where's he at? Be snappy, if you like living?"

" I don't know," she replied. Then, with eyes blazing, she added: " I wouldn't tell you if I did."

" Yuh *are* his woman," exclaimed the man venomously. " I'll show yuh, the both of yuhz. I'll bring him outa hiding if he cares that much fer yuh. Nick, Jim, shove her out over here. On this ledge. Don't be afraid. That guy ain't got no gat, I tell yuh. Here, you!"

His worried underlings pushed Audrey out on a shelf of rock jutting over the void. Vincent stepped behind her and pressed the muzzle of his pistol against her back. At her feet was a sheer drop—death on either side.

" Call him to come to yuh, cutie, if yuh don't want to go over. Ready with yer guns, you two, and look for the first sign of him," he added to the pair who were sheltering their bodies with tree trunks.

Raising his voice, the chief gangster yelled: " Come out! Come out, rat—or I'll blow yer girl right off this cliff! Come on, before I count ten. One—two—thr—"

Through the tense stillness hummed a muffled twang. There was a flash in the sunshine. A piercing scream—a man's.

Audrey felt the metallic pressure removed from her back. The pistol clattered at her heels. She whirled and jumped to safety, dodging Vincent as he blindly clawed the air, clawed at his own arm, reeled and went over the brink. Screaming, he vanished from view, his arms outflung. Through his right wrist stuck an arrow.

Snatching up Vincent's gun lying at her feet, the girl covered the two startled, paralyzed killers as they turned to gape. While

they hesitated, pistols half raised, Aldrich sprang from the bushes behind them. Wresting a gun from Nick, he struck down Jim with the butt. Then, faster than the eye could follow, he joined their wrists with steel.

"There's no alternative. I'll have to come into the open to deliver them to the sheriff," mourned Aldrich, explaining things to Audrey where the prisoners could not hear. "Not my line. I'm an under-cover agent of the enforcement service. Early this morning I managed to drop from a tree branch to the top of a truck that streaked under me. The tarpaulin cover I lighted on muffled the sound. I rode unnoticed.

"My idea was to stick along and learn their way station or terminus. Then Vincent's hijackers popped out of a lane in this car and cut loose. The truck guard knocked over one hijacker and the truck escaped. I lost my hold and fell off just as Vincent turned on the searchlight. My face was covered, but they got a good look at my clothes before I dived into the bushes. We've played hide and seek all morning. I wanted to keep contact with them until I could phone some officer without coming to light. My value wanes as soon as I show my face.

"Vincent sighted me from up here and got near enough to pot me just before I met you. Later I was almost up here when I saw them grab you. I hustled down, but they'd gone, leaving that one fellow. While I was still fifty feet up, I lured him to the bottom of the path and then smashed a rock down on his gun arm. Broke it, but he snatched up his gun and ran. Then I saw your bow and arrow still there. I scrambled up here madly, and beat them here for the ambush. Now that I'm in the open, I can come calling. Yours truly, William Tell."

"Oh," breathed Audrey softly, "I thought the archery ace was named —Dan."

THE END

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THE MOUNTEBANKS

PUNCH in red and yellow, with a nose like any parrot's beak;
Poor belabored Judy, with her rusty-hinges voice;
Dancing on their myriad threads, made merry-mad by fingers weak—
The mountebanks are in the square! Rejoice!

Graybeard plays a silver flute; a slender lass will sing to it;
A monkey, gay in green and gold, will caper to its call;
Toes tap paving, eyes bulge wide—who knows what heartaches cling to it?
The mountebanks are showing in the Mall!

Somersaults by fragile lads who smile with lips compressed and pale,
Juggle, jig and balance, while their master struts superb;
Jane and Jenkin little guess what blows will bruise, if one should fail—
The mountebanks are showing! Crowd the curb!

Tawdry lace-and-spangles, jape and grimace—yet they bring release,
Here from childhood's sorrows, and there from age's pain—
Songs, trained poodle, pantomime—the pennies shower—then "Police!"
The mountebanks have vanished through the rain!

Harold Willard Gleason.

The Jungle Call

By CORALIE STANTON and HEATH HOSKEN

Authors of "The Great Outlaw," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I and II.

PAUL CAMERON, big game hunter and explorer, is in Equatorial Africa after elephant, with 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. Mr. and Mrs. Donald, missionaries who were to be her hosts, have mysteriously disappeared. The girl is a sympathetic, understanding man's woman, and Cameron, Grant, and Merridew admire her, each in his own degree Sir Carl Ploerel, wealthy archæologist, offers to finance the excavation of certain African ruins with Cameron's help. The beautiful Lady Mary Stour unexpectedly arrives as a guest of Sir Carl's sister. Seven years previously Cameron had carried on a desperate flirtation with the titled lady, and now she is a widow and expects him to marry her. He discovers that Claudia Scott has preëmpted his heart. Dr. Merridew turns drunkard and frightens Claudia with his love declarations. Lady Mary warns her to keep "hands off!" where Cameron is concerned. Mr. Donald is brought back by natives who say that a witch doctor has kidnaped Mrs. Donald, and only a white woman can rescue her, Claudia Scott volunteers.

CHAPTER XVI.

FLIGHT.

"MRS. DONALD! Mrs. Donald!" "Yes, Claudia," came a weak voice from the interior of the small dark tent.

The girl came in, closing the flap behind her. It was pitch dark and icy cold. Outside a furious wind was blowing the dust of the desert about in blinding whirlwinds.

The camp fires were quite obscured by it; and everywhere gloom reigned and silence but for the neighing of the terrified horses. The tremendous difference in night and day temperature was telling on the two women, who were insufficiently clothed for the icy nights after broiling in 85 in the shade during the day.

Claudia could not see Mrs. Donald, for there was no light in the tent. It was about seven o'clock in the evening as far as she could judge, having no watch. There had been a few cheap watches among the

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things Sir Carl had provided as gifts for the natives, but everything had been taken from them by this time.

"Mrs. Donald, how are you feeling?" she asked.

"Oh, all right, dear," was the answer.

"Has that awful weakness gone?"

"Well, I haven't felt it so much this afternoon. We've been here two days now. It was the long trek, I think, and so rough and such wind all the time."

"Mrs. Donald, we must escape to-night."

"Oh, is that it?" The weak voice was brave and cheerful. It had a charming soft Highland lilt. "Of course, I'm quite equal to it, Claudia. Has the medicine man come back?"

"They are expecting him to-morrow. The Juju at Tesindi has decreed our death. But there's more than that. I've discovered a Turkana among the tribe here. He's from the other side of the lake.

"As you know, they're akin to the Masai, and Vincent and I had a Masai head-man for years and he was our greatest friend. So I've chummed up with this native and I think I can trust him.

"And he says that when we sent Mongo back to Titinti to ask for help, they discovered it here and overtook him and left him wounded and dying in the desert. So he'll never get there. Poor Mongo, he was a faithful soul!

"But, you see, we can't afford to wait. The Chief is entirely under the influence of the Laibon and he's jealous of us. I haven't the slightest doubt about it, Mrs. Donald, that they will kill us both to-morrow—in some way."

An awesome silence fell between the two women.

Lydia Donald was probably too weak to think.

But Claudia went over everything since she had reached the first camp of the tribe and found Mrs. Donald half out of her mind, and ministered to her in the rough trek northward until they were now both of them face to face with death.

It seemed so queer. The Chief who, with a portion of his tribe, was taking them farther and farther from civilization, looked so little like a bloodthirsty executioner. A little old man with a wizened face and funny tufts of white among his inky wool, clad in a shirt and a pair of ragged trousers, and on his head an old straw hat, with the crown gone, set rakishly. And the ceremonial blanket was wrapped around him when he received the women in audience.

The medicine man was different. Claudia had treated him like a child, as she treated all natives. And he had responded like a child, but not quite. There was something beyond.

She could not make it out. Some darkness. Outwardly all gleaming teeth and chatter. He was a wizened little man, too, with queer lines drawn in color on his oily face. A certain intelligence he seemed to have, the intelligence of an ape.

He was naked to his waist but for a handkerchief of dull-patterned calico around his neck. From wrist to elbow his arms were encased in copper wire. Below the waist he wore a petticoat of blue edged with a band of gold. On his head was a tall brushlike tiara made of some stiff feather bristles.

He was accompanied by an attendant with a goat-like beard wearing a tuft of white plumes on his head attached to a handkerchief that made him look as if he had toothache, a nightgown garment, and carrying a shield of hide and a long spear-like sword.

At first all had been plain sailing. Claudia was conducted to Mrs. Donald. In a ring the chief and the head people welcomed her, with dried green leaves as offerings for luck, and spitting on the ground as a form of complimentary greeting. She had distributed her gifts. She had been shown her quarters next to those of Mrs. Donald.

And then the tribe had left them alone, taking up their life of hunting, and obviously in the midst of some religious festival, if their pagan rites can be described as such.

Then, to break the monotony of the two women's lives, a native was taken very sick. This was three days after Claudia's arrival.

Claudia was called to minister to him,

the witch doctor being away—gone to consult the Great Juju of Tesindi, who lived behind a mat of bamboo grass under some acacia trees in a salt pool miles and miles away. The intestines of a sheep were taken as offerings, as well as some cloth and an alarm clock from the white women.

Claudia and Mrs. Donald looked at each other in distress at this sacrifice on their behalf to idols not even of mud and stone, but of the dark spirit.

Claudia had plugged the native with quinine and phenacetin, hoping for the best. But it was a case of double pneumonia, helped on by the fearful cold winds, and the man died.

From then onward all had been confusion and doubt.

The camp was struck. They were hurried day after day into the desert. Mrs. Donald was very ill. There was no open hostility, but their hearts grew heavier every day.

And now it had come to a head. Claudia, through her Turkana friend, had discovered what was going to happen. The Chief had had news from the medicine man that the Juju had decided on the sacrifice of the two white women.

It was the most powerful Juju in Africa—Claudia had by now discovered that this was said of each one of these terrible entities that lay a curse on those who offend them, and, as hard-headed men and travelers had told her, had been known to follow a man from Darkest Africa and strike him down in the Paris Opera House.

The Turkana told her that if the Juju were disobeyed, the Chief and all the tribe would fall under the curse, all their cattle would die, and their women would bear no more sons to become *el moran* (warriors).

There was nothing for it but to attempt to escape. Claudia knew it would be difficult. In all human probability they would fail, although the Turkana swore that he would help her. To stay and die quietly at the hands of the tribe was unthinkable. Mercy they could not expect. She had failed to save the native's life; she had been matched against the witch doctor, and been beaten.

She had known the danger, as the man lay dying, when, amid wailing and gnashing of teeth, the few women who had accompanied them brought back the witch doctor's favorite remedy, chickens' entrails, and tied them round his forehead and neck and ankles.

This had happened, as she roughly calculated, three weeks ago, and all the time Mrs. Donald had been very ill. This was against them, too, the natives jeering at a white Laibon who could not heal herself.

So it was a case of now or never. Claudia had made all her plans, and told Mrs. Donald about them.

"We can't risk taking our boys," she said. "Only the two I have got to know best. The Turkana says he will give me the signal in the early hours of the morning, when the camp fires are almost out. Can you sit on a horse, Mrs. Donald?"

"I can do anything," was the quiet answer. "But do you suppose we shall really get away?"

"If we ride fast enough."

"Won't some one follow on the other horses? Didn't you bring six?"

"We shall need four. The other two are dead, poor things. The Turkana has poisoned them." Her eyes were misty. "We have fortunately kept all the chocolate and the meat extract and the raisins Sir Carl made me bring. They will keep us alive. The boys must find their own food on the way."

"How far have we to go?"

"Impossible to say. Perhaps a hundred miles. Our only chance is to ride like mad for a day so as to get out of reach."

"We may fail, Claudia."

"I know. Then—" She broke off, and added cheerfully—"but we must take hope with us, dear Mrs. Donald."

"Yes, and prayer."

Another silence fell. Outside, the natives were chanting wild warrior music, preparing for to-morrow's great feast on the return of the medicine man.

Exactly nineteen hours later, the two women dismounted from their exhausted horses and flung themselves on the ground, panting so that their hearts seemed to be

bursting out of their bodies, roasted by the sun, hardly in their right minds, and feeling half dead, so that they cared about nothing on earth, not even about their liberty.

It had been fearful, the race for dear life in the grilling heat.

The two boys were scarcely in better condition, though born under that fierce sun. They forgot even their torturing thirst and lay on the ground like logs.

After a short time Claudia raised herself into a sitting position, and looked around her, gathering her wits, realizing that on her everything depended.

Mrs. Donald lay supine, and her appearance filled the girl with alarm. The strong, shrewd face was the color of ashes. A little while ago she had been a well-preserved, healthy woman of fifty; now she was all but a skeleton. Anxiety about her husband had eaten her away. Mr. Donald was not strong.

She had said very little about the actual kidnaping, but Claudia guessed that the blood that had stained the knife found in the mission house was hers. She had offered resistance in defense of her husband and been wounded. Claudia had found and tended the ugly wound on her shoulder. She had said nothing, but knew that there must have been considerable loss of blood.

It was a strange landscape she looked out upon, flat, rocky desert bounded in the east by some low hills on which she espied a short thorn scrub—called the " wait-a-bit " thorn by travelers—a sort of acacia that during dry spells will show no leaves for years. It was too far for her to see whether there were any leaves on it now.

Nearer there were half dried up pools of salt water, thick with water fowl. Here and there, for some reason only known to nature in her capricious moods, a single wild date palm rose tall and lonesome, its leaves making a noise like a watchman's rattle in the hot dry air.

Pulling herself together was a weary task. She ought to be glad that they were alive, of course, that their escape had been safely made, that the Turkana had been as good as his word and brought the horses to her tent in the short hour when all the camp was asleep.

Looking at Mrs. Donald, she was spurred to action. That helpless figure demanded all her energies.

She roused the two boys with an authoritative call.

" You must go over to the hills over there and get leaves for the horses to eat. Otherwise they die and we all die, too. Quick! Quick!"

The horses were finished for the moment, too; but nature would assert itself, and they must be fed.

The boys demurred. She goaded them.

" You are tired! You cannot put one foot before the other! You are babies, then! You want your mother! Your mothers are stronger than you!" She gave a ringing laugh, dreadfully hollow in her own ears.

It had the desired effect. The boys scrambled to their feet and went off.

She watched them reach the nearest pool and stop to drink. Then she heard them yell and spit out the water. It must be salt. Nature warned them. Natives were not particular. In the Congo she had seen their whole *safari* drink in a swamp pool from which the green face of a dead man stared out at them. But salt no man can drink.

She looked at Mrs. Donald, asleep, and sighed. Then she hobbled the horses, the lovely creatures with hanging heads and heaving flanks, beginning to search for food. Tears came into her eyes. She felt so inadequate, so utterly forlorn. To keep one's heart high, that was the thing. A high heart! A high heart! She looked up at a palm tree and its leaves rattled encouragingly.

The boys were soon lost to sight behind a cluster of queer-looking towers that she knew were ant hills. There were but one or two more hours of daylight. Westward of the lake were mountains behind which the sun would set.

Alone in the desert, without a tent, with only two boys, with but little food, with Mrs. Donald, who could probably not stand much more!

She forced herself to walk up and down. She must keep a calm mind and a clear head and a stout heart.

About half an hour later she thought she ought to wake Mrs. Donald. When the chill of evening came, it would be dangerous for her to be asleep.

"Mrs. Donald!" she called. "Mrs. Donald!"

There was no answer. Mrs. Donald was very fast asleep.

Claudia knelt down and gently shook her shoulder.

"Dear Mrs. Donald, you must wake up!"

The woman's shoulder felt strange to her touch.

"Mrs. Donald!" she cried aloud.

The next moment she knew that it was no good calling to her. Mrs. Donald was not asleep. She was dead.

Silence! Silence! A silence that encompassed the whole round earth.

Mrs. Donald was dead. Claudia took her handkerchief out of her pocket and covered her face. It was a rather dirty bit of linen—a most ignominious pall.

This splendid woman, doctor and artist and lover of souls, was no more. The natives she had come out to heal and to win for her Master had killed her.

Claudia paced up and down, occasionally giving the horses' necks a mechanical pat. If the animals could not get food and drink, they would die. When the boys came back and found a dead woman, they would inevitably run away. Natives have a dread of death, and, besides, they would put it down to the Juju.

There seemed but little hope. Claudia felt that she would find herself alone in the desert, and the end could not be long in coming for her.

All the same, training and habit and faith did not desert her, and realizing the bathos of the action, she ate a few mouthfuls of chocolate.

Silence! Silence!

Claudia rose from her knees beside Mrs. Donald's body, refreshed. It would be wrong to say comforted. Rather was she reinforced in spirit and prepared.

She thought out the most bitterly ironical speeches to make to the boys so that they might be ashamed of their fear of death and be persuaded to trek on with the body. But, somehow, she did not find her knowledge of Swahili adequate.

Quite suddenly, and probably because she was alone, she collapsed. She laid her head against the satin neck of the lovely Arab she had ridden and cried like a lost child, terror-stricken, making the most miserable sounds known to human ears.

Then she became aware of something, and, with a last convulsive outburst she stood up, instinctively looking toward the south.

She saw a speck—the size of a mouse in the desert. It grew to a dog, to a horse—a real horse, with a real rider, coming toward her at a sharp trot.

She waved her hand wildly. The rider came at a stretch gallop.

It was Paul Cameron—alone.

He flung himself from his horse and grasped both her hands. They both were speechless.

Claudia's head was turning round and round. A memory of old African days came to her—the well-known story of Stanley finding Livingstone in the great Equatorial forest, going up to him, saluting him politely with the words: 'Dr. Livingstone, I believe!'

Even in the presence of death she laughed.

Then, for the first time in her life, she fainted.

CHAPTER XVII.

"SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS—"

CLAUDIA opened her eyes by the side of a little salt lagoon, whither Cameron had carried her as easily as a woman carries a feather fan.

In the burning heat the salt moisture which Cameron dabbed on her forehead and wrists stung like fire. But more burning still was what she saw in his eyes—the unconquerable passion that had brought him unerringly to her side.

He did not speak to her as a lover then. He looked back toward where Mrs. Donald lay on her desert bier. But his arm sup-

ported her, and for a moment or two she allowed herself the ecstasy of that touch.

Then she straightened herself and stepped away from him to show that she could walk alone.

A muffled fire of question and answer followed.

"Is Mrs. Donald asleep, Claudia?"

"No, she's dead."

"Great Heavens; and you are alone!"

"No—the boys have gone to try to get some scrub for the horses."

"How many boys?"

"Two—those I trusted most."

"What did Mrs. Donald die of?"

"Exhaustion, I suppose. She has been terribly ill."

'Did the natives ill-treat her?"

"I don't think so. It was just too much for her. The ride here was fearful."

"How did you get away?"

She told him. His face hardened into stone, as she spoke of the Juju of Tesindi and what the Turkana had said about their sacrifice. As an unspoken vow of vengeance it was terrible to behold.

"How did you find me?" she asked him.

"We got news of Mongo from a runner, one of Sir Carl's boys you took with you."

"Yes. I sent Mongo back to tell you that another native had died since I reached the camp and that we were afraid they might turn on us. Mongo managed to get away, but it appears that he was followed and wounded in the desert. The other boy must have gone with him, or followed him."

"I got to him just in time," Cameron said. "I think I patched him up all right and he has gone back to the camp. I came ahead of the boys. There were not enough horses. I don't suppose they are more than half a day's march behind. They are traveling light.

"I left them before dawn. But I haven't made anything like the distance I meant to. A horse is not much of a help in these parts. My poor beast has not had a drop of water since dawn."

"Neither have ours since two o'clock in the morning. And no food. If we don't get away quickly, they will die."

"We must go back and meet the *safari*," he said.

"Mrs. Donald?"

"We must get her on to a horse."

"Can you persuade the boys?"

"If they won't come, we must leave them behind."

They had been walking slowly back to where Mrs. Donald lay.

Cameron knelt bare-headed by her side, removed the handkerchief from her face, felt her forehead and heart, and then covered the gaunt and tragic countenance again.

He then rode after the two boys while Claudia watched horrified, as great dark birds began to congregate and hover over the inanimate form. They were very high up as yet, perceiving her, but with cries that struck terror to her heart. A prayer of thanksgiving was on her lips. What would she have done if Cameron had not come?

He came back after a while, leading his horse, the boys accompanying him, bearing pitifully small bunches of dried leaves and twigs, which the horses ate ravenously.

Then there followed a scene ghastly grim. Cameron forced the boys to help him to secure Mrs. Donald's body on one of the horses. With their sure instinct they knew she was dead and ran away, screaming with terror. Cameron pursued them and brought them back, saying sternly:

"The white Laibon is sick, not dead. You are cowards and poltroons. Do you think white women die so easily? Fear it is that kills, and white women know not fear."

But the boys only pointed up at the vultures in the sky, quivering and with faces distorted by terror.

"If you do not do as I tell you, I will kill you with my firestick and leave your bodies here, and the death birds will get a good meal."

He produced an automatic pistol and covered them while they carried out his instructions. A fur coat that he had brought strapped to his saddle covered Mrs. Donald.

He then made Claudia eat a meat extract lozenge, and gave her and each of the boys a small drink of water from his bottle. Then they set off, he and Claudia and one boy riding at a walk, and the other boy leading the horse with its sad burden.

Just as darkness fell they came face to face with Cameron's fairly numerous *safari*. They fed and watered the horses and stopped for a meal and then trekked on through a magnificent starlit night. And so on for four days and nights, camping for one night only—a terrible experience, because all the boys kept up one continual wail as evidence that death was in their midst.

"I am half crazy," said Claudia to Cameron before they started.

"Another day and night will see us at the place where Mr. Donald was found," he answered encouragingly. "From there we will send a rider with the freshest of the horses and they will send us down more fodder and water from our camp and we shall be back in forty-eight hours from then."

All through the long and painful trek he had treated her as a comrade, never speaking a word of love, except what his voice and eyes could not help betraying. And, despite fatigue and hunger and sorrow in the presence of death, it was a time of unbelievable content.

A land unreal and wrapped in a haze, a wordless land, a land of things that could never be said, a land of lovers united that was too good to be true.

Until the last day.

They were a considerable party by then. Owing to their slow pace, a goodly number of Sir Carl's and Cameron's boys whom Claudia had taken with her on her first trek, and who had accompanied the two white women on their forced march northward in the hands of the warrior tribe, had overtaken them, separate parties catching up with them day by day, one and all reporting the wrath of the great Juju of Tesindi at being balked of its prey, and stating that the most terrible curse had been laid on the camps of Cameron and Sir Carl, so that none of their operations could prosper.

The boys themselves did not appear overcome by dread of this magic. Most of them had been from time to time in the more civilized parts of Kenya and Uganda, and some even to Mombasa and Zanzibar. And the extremely good pay they received probably had something to do with it.

Under the shadow of Mount Kulol, the great volcano, they camped for the last time—only seven miles from their own camp up the narrow, stony paths, but impossible to achieve in the darkness, because of a high piercing wind that was blowing the dust about in whirlpools, which would make the light of the torches insufficient and unsafe.

Claudia and Cameron came out of the tent where Mrs. Donald lay, strangely preserved in the semblance of life by the arid air and the icy nights. A ring of fire was around the tent. The boys were used to it by now, and, seeing that they were all safe and sound, and that there was plenty of food, they had philosophically come to the conclusion that Bwana Buffalo had power over the Great Darkness itself.

There was a lull in the wind. It was about midnight, and they were not going to attempt to sleep, as they meant to start at the first gleam of daylight.

The huge precipices of the volcano sheltered the camp. Claudia and Cameron stood near one of the fires. Heavy clouds were driving about the summit of the mountain, every now and then a rift showed a star. The atmosphere was dense and choking in spite of the cold.

"Do you think it means rain?" Claudia asked.

"Let us hope it may," the man answered. "It would make all the difference to us."

"What is that noise?" She held her breath, listening to a strange dull roar.

"A storm on the lake, I expect. I have heard of them, although I have never seen one. No doubt we hear it here because the slopes of the mountain concentrate the sound."

"It sounds angry," she said. "And mysterious. Angrier than lions, doesn't it? I thought there was nothing angrier than a lion roaring in the night."

"Are you afraid?" he asked.

"Afraid—of what?"

"Of life? Of savage things?"

"No, I don't think so." She forced herself to speak calmly. "I try not to be afraid of anything. My father used to say that fear was our greatest enemy."

"I think he was right. And had he a remedy for it?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

She hesitated; then said in her usual cheerful voice:

"Love."

"Love!" the man repeated, something boyishly wistful in his voice. "Yes, he was right, Claudia. Can't we overcome fear by love—you and I?"

"How do you mean?"

"I don't exactly know. But we love each other, and your father, a wise, saintly man, looked on love as the great panacea."

"He did not mean always what you mean by love," she said gravely.

"Then—what?"

"Love—universal, love of man, love of nature, love of God."

Cameron was silenced. Opposite them rose the mighty mountain from which the lava streams had descended ages and ages ago, burying what many kinds of human love?

He took her hand, his inner being seething with revolt.

"You talk in abstractions. We love each other, you and I."

"But it is no good. You are not free."

"The last time we met you told me you loved me."

"It was wrong. It was weakness. I was going away alone to join Mrs. Donald. I thought I—I might never see you again."

"Claudia, Lady Stour has gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes. She has gone back to Entebbe and Zanzibar with Miss Ploerel. She was leaving a day or two after I left to find you. She wrote to me to say so. Claudia, I have come to my senses. I cannot marry Lady Stour. I do not love her. I love you. What I thought was strength is only another form of weakness. It would be a lie. She couldn't want me, if I told her the truth. And I'm going to tell her. Claudia!"

"Yes."

"Help me! Give me strength."

"But I don't know whether it's right."

Just then a wail of uttermost anguish went up from the boys in the camp. The moon had shown itself through the clouds. From the giant precipices of the volcano great funnels of shadow descended in which the moonbeams became entangled, making a momentary fall of black and silver, like some mighty dark waters shot through with light.

Claudia shivered.

"What is it?" she asked. "What is the matter with them?"

"Ridiculous superstition," he answered impatiently. "They think it is unlucky for the moon to shine on the dead."

The wailing grew in volume. It sounded like the cry of lost souls on the day of judgment, a piercing, terrifying noise.

"Let us go back to the tent," said Claudia, shivering again. "There must be something the matter."

They rounded the corner of a rock and found the camp in darkness.

"The fires have gone out," said Claudia. "What does it mean?"

Cameron called out to the boys, several of whom came running up, saying that all of a sudden the wood had got wet. This in a dryness that made itself felt by all the atoms that make up the earth crackling under one's feet! He shouted at them in fury to light the fires again. They slunk away.

"They have let them out," he said. "They have gorged themselves on that marua I shot for them this morning."

But through the night the clamor grew and grew. Cameron and Claudia sat in a tent next to that which held the mortal remains of Mrs. Donald. At last the noise the boys made grew so terrific that Cameron went out and called them all together.

He came back to Claudia.

"The fires have gone out on the rain-makers' mountain," he said. "That hill we saw lit up earlier. The rain-makers are doing their magic, and now that the fires have gone out, they think the rain will come. They are mad with delight. We can get on our way in about an hour. Listen, Claudia, our love is everything!"

She shook her head slowly.

"Yes—everything. I am not going to give you up."

In the darkness of the hour before dawn and amid the wild, unearthly cries of the natives who madly celebrated the breaking up of the three-year drought, he took her in his arms.

Their lips met in the strange ecstasy of that savage land; their souls mingled, exalted, tipped with fire. The real world was thousands of miles away. They were one with the volcano and the roaring lake and the yelling natives.

The dawn broke. They looked at each other, man and woman, as in the first days of creation.

They went their ways, and, half an hour later, the *safari* was on its last march to the camp at Titinti, bearing its solemn burden and two beings who had looked into the heart of things and were exceedingly glad.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CHALLENGE.

ON the morning of that self-same day, Mary Stour and Luke Merridew were in conversation in the great central tent of Sir Carl Ploerel's camp. It was an erection more like a state Shamiana at an Indian prince's durbar than the makeshift mess and living room of an African hunter and explorer.

Timbered walls had been run up and a thatched roof added. Inside, tapestries and rare Persian rugs hung on the sides, and the floor had been boarded with parquet—brought in sections on the porters' heads, and spread also with rugs. Tables, chairs, divans—all were luxurious and Eastern, and their transport had necessitated a small army.

Indeed, all sorts of things were still arriving from rail-head. The only thing lacking was the electric light, impossible since the river had disappeared into the earth.

Nobody could laugh at Sir Carl because he always laughed at himself first. With a deprecating gesture, he said, when Cameron and Grant and Merridew were first invited to view his completed installation:

"I know what is in your minds, my friends. Vulgarity in excelsis—what? But I must have these things. Please ask me to your camp. I shall love to come and learn how I really ought to live, how I would live if I were one of you."

That speech was characteristic of him—his imperial way of doing things and his humility, real or assumed.

Mary Stour was a luxury woman first and last and all the time. The camp was made bearable to her by the very things most out of place in it. The cushioned *machilas*, the silk hangings of her tent, the sealskin and ermine rug on her bed, the table delicacies from the great shops of Paris and London—all these were the breath of life to her.

The heat and the flies and the boredom and the smelly natives she put up with because she wanted to be near Cameron. But even for his sake she would not have stayed in the camp for a day if it had been the real thing.

To be frank, Sir Carl and his sister bored her to extinction. They were both far too clever and most of their conversation was entirely over her head. She admired them not for their brains, but for their illimitable spending power.

Her own head was as empty as it was beautiful, except for the native cunning necessary to a lovely woman in order to obtain all she wants. She had always been used to money, but she wanted more, always more. She could even have loved Cameron more than she did if he had had millions, although she would have married him if he had been a beggar.

Grant she detested secretly, but with Merridew she had a curious affinity. She had taken to him at once, although his faults and his pet vice were patent to her very worldly eyes. But, like many modern women, she had very lax views, and, if he chose to drink himself to death, that was his own lookout. That something dark and hidden in him, while it revolted Claudia, attracted Mary.

He had just been telling her that they had news that Cameron's *safari* would arrive at the camp some time early in the afternoon, bringing back Miss Scott and Mrs. Donald's body.

"Paul will be astonished to find me still here," she said.

"A more than pleasant surprise," he answered flatteringly. He had discovered that this lovely lady liked the "butter laid on thick," as he called it. "Cameron is greatly to be envied being such an old friend of yours, Lady Stour."

She smiled ravishingly, with the upward toss of her little head.

"It was perfectly horrid for Miss Ploerel breaking her ankle," she said. "We should have been well on our way to Jinja by now."

"But how cruel to want to deprive us of your society!" he exclaimed. "Are you so terribly bored, fair lady?"

"Not a bit. I love it. But we really do feel we are in the way."

"Fishing! Fishing!" His oily voice was playfully warm—very decidedly warm.

"And now you don't think Miss Ploerel can go for some time, do you, doctor man?"

"Not for a month at the very least. It's not an ordinary journey. And Miss Ploerel is not young, though so fearfully game. But she's doing very well, and much better this morning. I've taken the splint off and am starting massage."

"She told me she was seventy the other day. I could hardly believe it."

"Amazing! And Ploerel is supposed to be nearly eighty. But then he hasn't any age."

"You hit the nail on the head, doctor man. He's a real man of mystery. He gives me the creeps sometimes."

"A queer fish all right! He says he is a Jew, and he has a crucifix in his tent, and is always reading the Koran."

"I sometimes think he might be one of these Jujus. He looks at you and you feel everything inside of you squirm. If he wasn't so kind, I should say he had the evil eye."

"You are wonderfully sensitive."

She smiled, well pleased; then said, properly grave:

"It's too sad about poor Mrs. Donald! And what an ordeal for Miss Scott! She is an extraordinary girl, isn't she? Do you know that kind of independent, manly woman always rather frightens poor little me." This in her pretty baby-talk way.

The man laughed.

"I shouldn't call her manly," he said. "Nor do others of my sex, I should say."

Some peculiar smothered feeling in his voice made her ask:

"What do you mean?"

"Well, of course, it is a pity Mrs. Donald kicked the bucket—that must have spoiled the show a bit—but I think Cameron has enjoyed this particular *safari*."

"Enjoyed it?" she queried innocently.

"Haven't you noticed, fair lady, that our Bwana Buffalo is dead nuts on Miss Scott?"

"Paul! You mean he is in love with her?"

Very, very innocent was Mary's voice.

"You haven't noticed anything?" he asked. Again she was struck by something unknown in his voice. It was what Claudia had heard that day down at the excavations, when it had seemed to her almost as if he had expressed himself in some medium other than speech. But Mary's perceptions were more obtuse, and she only thought he had been drinking more than usual.

"You are being very funny, doctor man, although you don't know it," she said. "Paul and I have been devoted to each other for years. We are going to be married as soon as possible. So, you see, you must have made a mistake."

Merridew was profuse in his apologies. What a purblind ass she must think him! Nobody had told him. Of course, he was mistaken, and anyhow he had no business to say what he had said. It was this rotten life that turned one into a busybody and a gossip. He had never noticed really that Cameron and Miss Scott were anything but friends. And why shouldn't they be? And so on and so forth.

Mary listened, smiling sweetly.

"It's not a secret at all," she informed him. "Sir Carl and his sister know. And Miss Scott knows. I don't know about Mr. Grant. Paul's a reserved sort of person, isn't he? You see, we don't talk about it. My husband has only been dead a little over six months."

They talked of other things until he took his leave. He made her flesh creep with an

account of some of the native poisons he knew about. They parted on the most amiable terms, Mary giving a gentle pressure to his soft, moist hand.

When he had gone, she stood for a while with narrowed eyes, thinking, thinking.

Of course it was true. She had really known it all the time. Cameron loved Claudia Scott. She herself was nothing more to him—no more than a stick or a rag doll. In the odious, humiliating phrase—he got tired of her. Of Mary Stour! She thought of other men to whom she had turned deaf ears these last seven years!

Paul, her Paul, loved that ugly freckle-face!

She stood there, red points, like danger signals, in her eyes; her lips drawn back in a thin smile.

She turned her attention to Merridew. He was mad about Claudia Scott, too. That was quite apparent to the woman who knew men. That was what that queerness in his voice meant—jealousy. What on earth did they all see in the girl?

She must be got rid of. She must be watched. She must at all costs be put out of Cameron's way.

He dared to be false to their eternal love. Well, let him! Passion and rage and jealousy arose like strong drink to her head. She clenched her hands in front of her and looked at them, long, slender, white at the knuckles, the nails digging into the palms, holding, what was hers—never letting it go.

This man was her man. Did he want to get away? Let him try!

CHAPTER XIX.

MENACE.

CHRISTMAS came and went; the New Year was entered, and now they were at the end of January, coming every day nearer to the climax of the hot weather in March. And still not a drop of rain had fallen.

Only Sir Carl's limitless resources in man power and money saved the camps from the worst consequences of the drought. The engineers had managed to canalize the stream below the excavations, from whence they received a small but steady supply. In addition, water was brought from the lake every day in large quantities. But this was purely local. The natives were suffering severely. All those who could had taken their stock down to the lake, which saved the lives of some of the beasts, but exposed them to the danger from wild animals that frequented the swamps by the lake.

Sir Carl supplied water to the neighboring villages, but most of them had migrated lakeward. There was a great concentration down there, and there were rumors of hostility toward the white men who were held responsible for the lack of rain.

Mongo brought the first news one day as Cameron and Grant had just returned from *safari*. They had been down to the lake shores for meat, and had shot a couple of elephants and a hippo and some smaller game and birds on the way back. They had also followed the spoor of a black rhino and sighted a bull, but the birds that accompany these beasts, picking off ticks and pecking at their sores, had warned him of their approach by a wild fluttering of wings, and off he had gone crashing into the tall grass of the swamps. A herd of topi had, however, consoled the sportsmen's eyes, and they had accounted for two of the finest heads.

Then they were met by Mongo, whom they had left behind in charge of the boys in the camp, with the news which, although by no means alarming, still had its serious side. The medicine man of the warrior tribe who had kidnaped the Donalds was proclaiming the vengeance of the great Juju of Tesindi.

The rainmakers had joined up with him and declared that the white men prevented the rain from falling, and that none would fall until they had taken their departure. And in addition, throughout the country for a hundred miles around, the name of Mrs. Donald, "bad white Laibon," was whispered as possessing even in her grave some evil magic that was causing death among the cattle and disease among the tribes.

Cameron spoke sternly to Mongo, telling him to contradict such wickedness, for was not the white man the best friend of

the natives, and had not the dead white Laibon healed their sickness, and when they had unburied the ancient city below the lava would not white men come from all over the world to see it and bring great wealth and prosperity to the tribe? But when he had dismissed Mongo he said to Grant:

"It was weakness to listen to poor old Donald. We ought to have insisted on sending to Baringo for the assistant commissioner and had these chaps punished. I shouldn't at all wonder if they gave us some trouble. Of course Donald's idea is fine—that he came to heal and not to kill—but it doesn't always work."

"No good looking for trouble," rejoined Bobbie in his dry way. "I wish we could get rid of Merridew," he added abruptly.

"Why?" asked Cameron. "He's been so much better lately."

"Can't get anything to get drunk on," Grant replied. "I think I've managed to stop every source of supply."

"Then, why worry? We hardly see him. He's always down at the excavations. And he works like a nigger. Now he's got the entrance to the caves opened up, he doesn't seem to think of anything else."

"I have told you before, Paul, I'm a Celt, and I see things you don't see. And Merridew's no good to us."

They had been standing outside the mess tent, and suddenly Cameron sat down rather heavily in a deck chair. Grant looked at him. He was pale, with a greenish tinge under the eyes and a queer glazed look in them.

Also, his shoulders drooped and there was an air of lifelessness about him in startling contrast with his usual virile energy.

"I say, Paul, you're seedy again," said Grant accusingly. His very concern made his voice almost unsympathetic.

"I don't feel up to much," his friend admitted.

"Heat?"

"I don't think so. It's the same way I felt before. My eyes bother me. Do you remember I told you?"

"Of course. It was some weeks back, wasn't it, just before Merridew had that last bout? You consulted him, and he said it was liver. But I don't suppose he had any idea in the state he was in."

"That was it. But it passed off."

"And now it's come on again. How long?"

"Oh, on and off for about a fortnight."

"How does it take you?"

"Difficult to explain. Chiefly eyes, I tell you. Everything seems to go away from me—the walls of the mess tent, for instance, until the place looks as big as St. Paul's. And a bit of light-headedness with it. I don't suppose it's anything. More than likely it may be the heat."

"I should have another talk with Merridew, Paul. After all, he does know his business."

"Yes, if it goes on, I will."

Grant left his friend and went off to supervise the boys who were boiling down the hippo fat, so useful as a substitute for lard in cooking, and for softening boots, and even as a lubricating oil for rifles. Unless looked after, too much of the precious substance had a way of disappearing into their capacious stomachs.

CHAPTER XX.

DEFIANCE.

A DAY or two later Merridew brought a patient up to the Mission Hospital, a boy who had had his leg and foot badly crushed by a huge rock down at the excavations.

Claudia met him, cool and businesslike in her nurse's garb.

She took her instructions from the doctor, and together they attended to the injured limb.

She had lately seen him several times. The hospital had now ten patients, all from villages to the south. Northward, the strange hostility of the tribes to the splendid memory of Mrs. Donald made them keep their sick even to die on their hands rather than send them to Titinti.

As usual, the big, disquieting man was purely professional as they made the round of the beds. The natives frankly delighted in him. He cracked the broadest jokes with them; he seemed to enter into their inmost

spirit—that mysterious make-up of child and brute and animal, and something else.

And often Claudia, realizing the something else, wondered if Dr. Merridew had not black blood in him. His appearance certainly supported the possibility. There was the darkness, the unfathomable depth, that she had always felt. Was it not akin to the unbridgable gulf between the white man and the black?

When it was over she told him that Mr. Donald had gone over to the village on which he was concentrating his missionary efforts.

"He is wonderful," she said. "He works and works; he never gives up. It is so slow; it seems as if a hundred men's lives would not be long enough. But he goes on. He has got one convert at last, and the boy's wife has had a baby, and he wants to baptize it."

"He *thinks* he has got one convert," said Merridew with a fat, careless laugh.

"That is not for us to say," Claudia reproved him.

"Oh, well, he's a good old dodderer and won't do any harm, like some of them do. I'm parched. Will you give me a peg?"

"What will you have—some banana juice or lemon squash?" she asked, forcing herself to be friendly and natural. "You know we're teetotalers here."

"Anything," he answered. "Even water—to get rid of this thirst."

When she had called a boy to bring the drink, she saw him standing in the veranda with his arms stretched above his head.

"Water!" he cried. "Water! Water! I shall die."

He turned at her footsteps and his face terrified her.

But he only said, with another laugh: "I can't stand this drought much longer. Or, I think I could stand it without the wind. The wind comes straight from hell."

"Yes," she admitted, "the wind is very trying. But we actually saw some clouds this morning, and they say it may mean rain."

He shook his head.

"No—it won't rain. Miss Scott, it won't rain until something has happened in the caves. You know how we are getting on down there."

"Yes, I have heard you are doing wonders, Dr. Merridew."

"I have all the caves open to me now. I can go in and out as I like. They are putting in the electric light. They think they will have enough power—at any rate for a time. Why have you not been down?"

"I have been so busy here," the girl said.

"But you must come down. I must show you the caves. You will marvel at their beauty. They are the most beautiful things in the world. And I want to show them to you. I want you to come into the caves so that I can tell you how much I love you."

"Dr. Merridew!"

"Don't be angry with me!"

"I will not listen to you. I have told you so before. Please go!"

"No, no, I won't say anything now. But I must tell you some day in the caves. There must be hope for me."

"There is not."

"Not now; but some day."

"Your drink is on the table, Dr. Merridew."

He went into the room and gulped down the contents of the tall glass. She saw some of the yellowish liquid trickling down his chin. At the same moment he looked at her with his wide smile, showing all his dazzling teeth, so inexplicably vacant.

"You must come to see the caves," he said. "I want to show them to you—all of them—the very farthermost one of all."

Again she felt that sensation that he was not really speaking, but that some unknown medium was conveying his meaning to her; and she felt sick all of a sudden.

Fortunately just then Mr. Donald was borne round the corner of the hospital in his *machila*, and hailed the doctor in his kind and courtly way.

Not half an hour after Merridew had gone, and while Claudia was still recovering from his disturbing presence, another *machila* hove into sight, this time borne by four boys decked out in white ballet petti-

coats and blue sashes and covered with blue beads, and containing that very beautiful lady, Mary, Marchioness of Stour.

In spite of her perturbation at the sight, Claudia could not help smiling at the comic opera effect in this all but unknown desert of these natives put into a uniform like Venetian gondoliers.

Lady Stour got out of the *machila* and came toward Claudia, an entrancing vision in *eau de nil* that coolest of all colors, though unlike any of the waters of the Nile that Claudia had seen, and she had seen them all from source to sea. Chinese silk and heavy lace dyed to match, and a hat of felt of the required pattern, and the inevitable veil, and pearls lying heavily on the pale brown skin—this luxurious beauty gave, as she always did, a touch of unreality to the arid surroundings that were beginning to parch the life out of them all.

She looked a trifle ravaged herself; her tropical richness was obscured by a touch of languor. She had no resources, and her present life consisted of the most intense boredom punctuated only by the occasional glimpses of Cameron, when the passion that consumed her was given free rein, only to be met by a coldness and preoccupation that to save his life the man could not have turned into anything warmer. He did his best, but honor is a chilly substitute for love, and his increasing physical *malaise* made his efforts to content her all but ridiculous.

"I have come on a disagreeable errand, Miss Scott," said the thrilling voice with the ping very noticeable in it. "May I come in out of the heat? I wonder we are any of us alive."

As she ushered her visitor into the living room of the Mission House, Claudia inquired after Miss Ploerel.

"Oh, her foot is almost well, thanks. Dr. Merridew thinks we can leave early next week. The journey will be horrible, but we are determined to get away."

"Can I get you a drink, Lady Stour?"

"No, thanks. You are looking very ill, Miss Scott. May I sit down here?"

"Do. I don't feel ill, thank you."

"Perhaps I should say more worried than ill." She smiled as she spoke, tossing her head upward with the little familiar movement so inexplicably attractive combined with the archly vivacious dark eyes.

"I am not worried, thank you, Lady Stour."

"I am afraid I am, Miss Scott." She took a letter out of her handbag, looked through it, and handed it to the girl, her thumb indicating a paragraph. "Read that, will you, please? It came with others this morning, forwarded from Entebbe with Sir Carl's mail."

Claudia hesitated. The sprawling, legible hand was quite unfamiliar to her. She felt a pang of disgust. Other people's letters meant gossip. That secret that she carried in her heart, so priceless, so entirely hers—she felt it was about to be desecrated.

And she was right.

"Read, please!" said Mary.

Claudia read:

> I hear that that gay Lothario, Paul Cameron, is roaming about Central Africa with a girl he picked up in Uganda. There is quite some scandal about it, I can tell you. Knowing he is your special property, *cara mia*, I thought I ought to mention it. Look after that bad boy! He's the delicious kind that has to be kept on a leash. Those worth having always are. I suppose you'll marry as soon as it's decent. Or is it off, by any chance? Do let me know if you've seen him in Africa! But I suppose if he's off on another *bonne aventure*, he hasn't shown up in civilized parts.

Claudia put the letter down on the table with half closed eyes. For the second time that morning she felt physically sick.

"It's not nice, is it, Miss Scott?" said Mary.

"I do not know who wrote that letter," Claudia answered very calmly.

"It is a great friend of mine, Lady Goudhurst. I am quite sure she would never repeat aimless gossip."

"It seems that she has," said Claudia.

She smiled into the lovely face.

"But there is more than that," Mary went on. "You mustn't mind what I am going to say, Miss Scott. I know, of course, that you are quite blameless in the matter. But I have heard from another source—here—that this same thing is being talked about."

"A source—here?"

"Yes. I must be frank, because so much depends on it for me. Dr. Merridew suggested to me quite openly that he believed Paul was in love with you."

Claudia was speechless. There was a pregnant pause.

"You must see how very painful it is," said Mary.

"Surely, Lady Stour, there is only one answer to that," Claudia said, frank and pleasant at heaven alone knew what cost to her pride. "To tell Mr. Cameron about this very ridiculous gossip."

"I did, of course. He denied that there was anything in it. But then, what else could he do?"

"I don't understand."

"You could not expect a man like Paul to bring you into such a question, could you?" Her voice was of the sweetest, but the ping was like the sound of a mosquito, hungry for blood, buzzing outside a net.

"How could there be any question about it?" asked Claudia, still fighting for dear life to retain her self-control.

"What do you precisely mean by that?"

"You and Mr. Cameron are going to be married, are you not?"

It was definite; there was no getting away from it.

Checkmate!

"I know," said Mary, her eyes throwing out hatred as her hands would have liked to throw out vitriol. "But, you see, mud always sticks."

"Even when there is no mud, Lady Stour?"

Mary did not answer this directly.

"You see," she said, "Miss Ploerel and I are going away next week. I wanted to try to make you see that you ought to go, too."

"Indeed! Why?"

"Because—oh, can't you see it? I mean, you are a nice girl—you can't want this gossip to go on! And if I am gone away and you are still here—with Paul at the camp, what will people say?"

"Who can have written to your friend that Mr. Cameron had picked me up in Uganda?" asked Claudia, her voice sharp-pointed with disdain.

"I don't know—I haven't any idea. But somebody has. It may have been Dr. Merridew. I can't tell. Haven't you written home about your adventures?"

"Certainly. But I haven't any friends—like Lady Goudhurst."

Checkmate again!

"I can quite understand that you are upset," said Mary in a different voice, full of cajolement. "It is upsetting to both of us. But can't you see how much more difficult it will be if I go away and you stay here? It may be Dr. Merridew who has written home. If so, he will write again. This gossip will go on."

"I am sorry," Claudia said, "but I do not think I ought to go away. Before she died, Mrs. Donald and I had a talk about the work here. She begged me to carry it on. Mr. Donald needs help very badly. I can give it. I have no ties anywhere else. Why should I desert this work?"

Mary's mouth drew down at the corners. She bowed her head and locked her hands together. Tears were in her voice.

"I can't tell you what I have gone through," she said. "I don't think a girl like you would understand. And yet I know you are kind. You are always helping people. Everybody says so. For seven years I have lived in hell so that I could one day be Paul's wife. If you allow this gossip to go on, every one will say that now I am free, he doesn't want me. You must know how when once these things are started, there is no stopping them."

Claudia opened her lips. A dozen things came to her that she might say, contradicting, refuting, denying. Why did not Lady Stour take Cameron away with her into the soft palaces where she was at home? Why did she put a few paltry weeks of convention between her and the happiness she had been through hell to gain? Why? Why? A hundred whys!

But she knew it was no good. The lovely, vivacious, brainless face had nothing to do with it. She knew that what had something to do with it was the hot blood of seven years ago. The bonds had been forged; they were stronger now than then. Then, they could have been broken easily; now they were indissoluble.

What good would any words do?

So she smiled and said calmly:

"I think you are exaggerating, Lady Stour. Naturally, it is horrid to be talked about. But I was brought up very practically, and I am afraid my duty lies here for the time being. We are very busy here and likely to be more so, and the more we can get the natives to trust us, the better it will be for us all."

Mary rose, forgetting herself. Her face was gray with fury.

"If you think I am going away while you stay here, you are very much mistaken," she said.

Without a word of farewell, she walked out of the house, and signaled to the *machila* boys.

CHAPTER XXI.

SUBTERFUGE.

EVERY morning for a week after that Sir Carl sent up a horse in the charge of a boy on another horse to take Claudia down to his camp to massage Miss Ploerel's ankle. The girl had volunteered, having heard how essential the treatment was, and how the little old lady generously objected to Dr. Merridew's doing it because they were working against time at the excavations. In March, when the thermometer registered more than a hundred in the shade—if there was any shade—they would have to give it up.

On the seventh morning, a Saturday, Cameron came up with a boy riding Claudia's horse.

She was shocked at the sight of him. He looked so gray and thin, with all the life gone out of him.

One question rushed to her head—was it worth it? Was she worth serving—this Africa who devoured men?

He explained his presence conventionally. There was a boy slightly injured at the camp—not bad enough to bring him up to the hospital. Merridew had seen to him, but he wanted some bandages and especially ointment and some phenacetin.

Would Claudia mind bringing them down? And would she have a look at the boy after she had finished with Miss Ploerel? Merridew was down at the excavations. He had found some ornaments in one of the caves, and, as they were very brittle, they were being packed up before they were brought to the surface so that the air should not get to them.

"I came up with the message," he said, "because I'm odd man out to-day. I'm lazying in camp."

"You're not well enough to go down," said Claudia, her heart sinking with fear.

"Oh, it's nothing—I'm not feeling very fit; but, then, who is?"

Claudia collected the things that Merridew asked for and gave instructions to the chief native assistant about the patients' food.

Cameron was sitting in a chair on the veranda when she came out. He arose and looked at her, his dark blue eyes worn out like fires that had burned away in the night and left only gray ashes. Then he smiled, and the effort that he made pierced the girl's soul.

"You are very ill," she whispered.

"Oh, no. I shall be all right soon. I just hate not feeling well."

"Of course you do," she answered stoutly. "I know how that feels."

"You know everything."

His voice was so hopeless that she was forced into a cheerful protest that she was far from feeling.

"I say, you mustn't give way! That wouldn't be like you."

"How do you know what is like me?" he asked wearily. "You ought to understand that I feel nothing is worth while." There he was, the man, even the strongest man, throwing his burden upon a woman—by implication, at any rate

"That's a thing you've got no business to feel," she said quietly.

"Oh, I know! Bless you, Claudia, don't rag me! I can't stand that. I'm going to play the game."

It was not only what he had said that weighed her down as they rode side by side to Sir Carl's camp. It was what she saw in his face, his empty eyes.

But one or two sentences, just after they had dismounted, certainly made all the dif-

ference in the strange and startling decision that she took that morning—a decision that contradicted her whole upbringing and was wrong in every way, since it was a sin against the light, the deadliest of all.

"You're going to see to Miss Ploerel's ankle, Claudia," he said. "I don't suppose I shall see you again to-day. I'm taking Lady Stour down to the excavations for the first time. You know how it is with me. I wish to God I had never met you, because I know what life might have been and now never can be. It's knowing that you are here—that it might have been so different—that makes my particular hell." He pulled himself together and with a look as wistful as a child's who does not understand its punishment, he added: "I am a first-class blackguard, Claudia. Try to forgive me."

Before she could say anything he had walked away to find Lady Stour.

Which presently she felt to be a good thing. For if she had poured out her heart to him and acknowledged her love over again, she might not have been able to do what she did. In its way she knew it was a blessing that they had found Mary Stour still at the camp after that night in the shadow of Kulol. Because the thing had to be.

Miss Ploerel was charming, witty, and grateful as ever.

"You are a wonderful girl," she said as Claudia's strong fingers firmly manipulated the healing ligaments and muscles of her foot. "Such a safe girl," she added with a little laugh. "Do you know what I mean?"

"I don't think I do," said Claudia frankly.

"Ask my brother," the old lady replied.

Claudia thought that a very queer retort.

When she had finished with Miss Ploerel, she attended to the injured boy, whose yells she subdued with her always telling sarcasm.

Just as she was going to remount her horse, Sir Carl came out of the big living tent, and called out a good morning in his charming light voice.

She replied, and he invited her into the tent.

"I want you to taste my new 'refresher,' as they call it, Miss Scott," he said. "It's a dead secret concoction of my own; but Cameron and Grant say it's the only drink that makes them feel cool even for a second."

Claudia accepted with a smile.

The great tent gave an imitation of coolness because of the thickness of its walls and hangings. On a table in the corner was a mass of papers and plans relating to the excavations.

Sir Carl invited her to sit down in a luxurious *chaise-longue,* heaped with cushions, and clapped his hands, Oriental fashion, to order the drinks.

Claudia and he were very good friends. They had never come anywhere near to intimacy, but the girl appreciated his great intellect and his facility in passing knowledge on to others. She discounted his everlasting reference to his own race and to his money as an eccentricity that no doubt a grasping and parasitic world made necessary.

She joked him on his habit of wearing wraps and having an overcoat hanging over his shoulders even in the most torrid hours of a most torrid day.

"I have no blood," he told her. "As a nurse, you should understand that."

The drinks came in two tall silver cups. Claudia's tasted of peppermint, which she did not like, but admitted was a cooling factor.

When they were finished, the old man drew his chair nearer to hers.

"I have a proposition to make to you, Miss Scott," he said. His manner was amusing as always to her, a mixture of imperial command and humble appeal. "You mustn't turn it down. Certainly not without thinking it over very carefully."

"What is it, Sir Carl?" she asked.

"I want some one to look after me," he said. "Some one I can absolutely trust. Some one who will be interested in my interests and make me comfortable. And," he added, with his womanish smile, "some one who doesn't care a damn about my money."

"You want a secretary, Sir Carl?" she asked.

"No—a wife. Will you marry me, Miss Scott?"

This was a shock. Claudia felt affronted, unreasonably, but because she knew herself already dedicated to the end of her days. The man went on:

"I shall not ask much of you." He smiled again, sadly. "You know, I have often told you I have no blood; and I am old. I am seventy-eight."

"I can't believe it," she said, glad of the relief. "I never could believe it."

"It's true."

Again she could not see that he looked old. Ageless—that was it. That parchment mummy face without lines, that brow made for thought, that rather weak mouth and very domineering nose, all cut in half by the ink-black brushlike mustache.

"What do you say?" he asked.

"I couldn't say anything. I am so astonished."

"Why? You are the only woman I have ever asked to marry me. I can explain myself easily. I am very old. I shall not live long. But I don't want a nurse. I enjoy very good health. I am not asking for anything but your companionship—your cheerfulness, your outlook on life that makes for sanity and comfort.

"You want nothing from me. I don't tempt you with my money. That would be ridiculous. I honestly believe you are the only woman I have ever met who hasn't troubled me about my money.

"But, on the other hand, I think that when I'm gone you would make good use of my money. I could leave it in your hands and feel quite content. Selfish, isn't it? What do you say?"

Claudia shook her head, bewildered, taken aback, without a clew, without a lead.

"You are so fond of helping people," Sir Carl said. "Think how many people you could help!"

The old man spoke casually, merely throwing out a suggestion.

"No conditions—nothing of that kind, you know. While I live you can do exactly as you like. When I'm gone, everything will be yours. You can build a hundred hospitals, or buy a Balkan kingdom, or throw it into the sea."

This almost frivolous attitude of Sir Carl's did the trick. He had studied human nature. He had set his line with the only bait.

Before Claudia, robbed of love, arose a vision of illimitable opportunity for service. It was also the certainty that this was a means to put herself beyond Cameron's reach. His misery hurt her so that she would do anything to put him out of it. She was like a sensitive person in a hurricane at sea, who would do anything, promise anything, possible or impossible, to a power that could cause the wind to cease and the waves to drop. Cameron had said: "I wish to God I had never met you—it is knowing that you are here—that makes my particular hell."

This was a means of withdrawing herself. She might be there in body, but she felt that it would be the final sundering of their spirits. Cameron would never forgive her.

Her reasoning was chaotic, but it sufficed.

She took the step cheerfully, as she did everything, right or wrong. Cameron's misery—that was the deciding factor—his wretchedness, the spoiling of his life and health and work; because he loved her, and was bound in honor to marry Mary Stour.

"You are going to say yes, aren't you?" asked Sir Carl imperially.

"Yes," she said. "I thank you very much for being so frank. It is a great honor, a great opportunity. I do hope I shan't be a disappointment."

He laughed.

"I'll take the risk. I should like it to be as soon as possible. Would you mind? I might send a message to Mr. Haydon at Jinja. He could do everything necessary for me and come down and marry us here. I'm sure you don't want satins and laces and pearls. Do you care for jewels, by the way?"

Claudia gave her frank, outdoor laugh.

"I've never had anything but a gold safety pin and a wrist watch in my life," she exclaimed.

"It's so much nicer," he said rather slyly, "to be able to have things and not have them."

"What do you mean, Sir Carl?" she asked.

"Well—you will understand. To come into the world, to have power over all the kingdoms thereof and over heaven and hell, and yet to be among men as a beggar."

Frankly, she did not understand. He attributed to her obscure motives that were not known to her simplicity. She was fighting for freedom, not for herself, but for the man who would tear his soul to pieces unless she removed herself.

Always she had done things practically. She felt this to be a practical move. To do her justice, she did not realize her own power.

Grant and Sir Carl both wanted to marry her. Merridew was madly in love with her, although he was tied to his poor mad wife. Cameron was tied to Mary Stour.

Her plain freckled face was a lode star to all these men. She only thought of the one. To his peace of mind she would have sacrificed the three others and herself too. In reality she was as ruthless as the most conscious of man-conquering sirens. She hung scalps on her belt without hunting them. Her motives were different—that was all.

Her puzzled eyes made the old man laugh again.

"You do not understand yourself," he said. "I shall try and teach you to. Will you let me send for Haydon to marry us here?"

"Yes, if you wish it, Sir Carl," she answered.

The die was cast. The thing had to be done. Best get on with it.

CHAPTER XXII.

A DEADLY DRAUGHT.

CAMERON'S tent looked like a stage set when Merridew went into it that evening. Cameron himself, hollow-eyed and emaciated, was writing at a camp table lit by a lantern. Another lantern hung from the ceiling, casting a yellow light on the tawny coat of a lion cub asleep on the floor and on a large wreath made of blue bead flowers that lay on the camp bed.

The lion had been brought back by Cameron after its mother had been killed by Tishi, the head gun bearer, and the blue bead wreath had been made by Mongo and another boy for the grave of Mrs. Donald.

Merridew came in with a bottle in his hand.

"Cameron, I'm changing your medicine," he said in his rich voice. "I don't like the look of you at all this last day or two."

"Changing my medicine?" asked Cameron, looking up from his letters. "Why is that?"

"The last didn't do you any good."

"No, it didn't. That's quite true."

"I'm getting worried about you. I've been refreshing my mind with notes I made of the disease."

"What disease?"

"The disease you're suffering from, my dear Cameron."

"Oh, and you know what it is now?"

"Yes. I've diagnosed it at last. I admit I must have seemed a pretty fool. But, there, these things are so obscure. It's really liver trouble, as I thought at first—only of the most complicated kind."

"I see. But what do you want me to do now, Merridew?"

"Take a dose of this, old fellow."

"A new medicine?"

"Yes. That is, a variant of the other. You said the other didn't do you any good, didn't you?"

"Yes. It certainly didn't."

"Well, this will."

Merridew went over to Cameron's camp washstand. He had the catlike tread of the perfect dancer. He took a glass and poured some of the mixture from the bottle into it. Then he took up the water bottle and made a feint of pouring some water into the glass. But as a matter of fact, he poured no water into it. He looked at Cameron who had his back to him, not knowing that at that moment Cameron had eyes in the back of his head.

"Now, drink this off," said Merridew, coming to Cameron's side.

Cameron took the glass and put it on the table. Then he rose and went to the tent door and called out to one of the boys to fetch Mongo.

Mongo came.

"Mongo, go and fetch a goat here," Cameron commanded. "One of the old billy goats, please."

Merridew stood staring at him, his large, dark oily face shining in the candle light.

"A goat, Cameron!" he exclaimed. "I don't think you're yourself. I'll go and fetch somebody."

He made to go out of the tent, but Cameron's hand was on his shoulder, hard as steel.

"No, Merridew, please," he said quietly, "you'll wait here until Mongo brings the goat."

"But why a goat?"

"I'm going to try your new medicine on the goat," was the curt answer.

Merridew made a rush, but Cameron was too quick for him. In the scuffle the doctor dropped the bottle he still held in his hand, and it was smashed to pieces on the hard floor.

Drama, swift, intense, breathless, filled the next few minutes.

Merridew, his large face greenish and dripping, was corralled in a corner of the tent more by the strength of Cameron's will than of his arm.

Mongo brought the goat, and Cameron bade him pour the contents of the glass that Merridew had handed to him down the animal's throat.

The goat fell to the ground almost immediately. After a brief period of convulsive movements it stiffened; in a little more than five minutes it was dead.

Mongo dragged the carcass away. Cameron told him on no account to let the boys touch it. He was to bury it at once.

The lion cub slept through it all.

Then Cameron told Merridew to sit down.

"We must have this out," he said. "You have been trying to poison me. I thought as much. Indeed, I was almost sure. I didn't take any of that last medicine. I saw you were watching me. What is up, Merridew?"

Merridew blustered with apparent indignation, throwing his arms about, protesting vehemently against the accusation.

"It is a trick of yours, Cameron, to put me in the wrong. You must have given the goat something beforehand. I know you have always disliked me—both you and Grant."

"You know perfectly well it is nothing of the kind," Cameron said sternly.

"Then it must be a dreadful mistake!" cried the big man. "I must go and look at my medicine chest."

Again he tried to get out of the tent and again Cameron prevented him.

"I can only hope that drink went to your brain, Merridew."

"Drink!" Merridew exclaimed. "When have I had anything to drink lately! There's nothing left in this cursed camp."

"Then, lack of drink, which has the same effect on some people, I believe. I'm not going to say much, Merridew. I'm going to assume you were temporarily out of your mind. You could have no possible reason for wanting to kill me.

"But it isn't the first time you've let me down. I don't personally think you are suited to this kind of life. You overdo things and you are too excitable. So I propose that you should leave us as soon as possible. We won't make a fuss about it. Just make your arrangements and get off as soon as you can."

"And if I refuse, Cameron?"

"I don't think you will, Merridew. I should dislike to have to let Grant and Sir Carl know."

"It's a threat, then?"

"If you like to call it so. But I don't really see how you could expect to stay."

"Oh, all right! You're darned autocratic, Cameron. But I suppose it's not to be wondered at considering the ridiculous fuss they all make about you. I suppose I shall have to go. They'd all stand by you and make the place too hot for me. All right, I'll get off. May I leave the tent now?"

His look of suppressed fury made no impression on Cameron, who, being without personal fear, did not realize what a dangerous customer he was dealing with, and,

having little medical knowledge, really put down this deliberate attempt on his life to an increasing brainstorm, due first of all to over-indulgence in alcohol and then to the fact that Merridew had been deprived of it.

Cameron never dreamed of the real motive, which was that Merridew was madly in love with Claudia and knew that Cameron was also in love with her and suspected that she cared for him. Otherwise he would have acted very differently.

"Certainly you can leave the tent now," he said. "As long as you get away within a week, nothing more will be heard of this business."

Merridew went out, and Cameron sat down wearily. Without having felt the excitement, he now felt the reaction following on his discovery. It could not fail to be a bitter knowledge that his life had been attempted, that some one had planned and plotted to get rid of him.

He thought of his strange sensations, of his eye trouble, of his queer illusions about space and height, all part of a deliberate plan to end his life. Only Providence had saved him by planting those suspicions in his mind that he had thought ridiculous at first, and by giving him the sudden inspiration about the goat.

The next morning Grant came to his tent and called out:

"Is Merridew with you, Paul?"

"No," Cameron answered, coming out. "What's up?"

"He's wanted over at Ploerel's camp, and I can't find him."

"Down at the excavations, I suppose."

"No, he's not. I've just sent a boy down."

The day wore on and on and Merridew did not appear. The night fell and it was realized that he had disappeared.

Only Cameron knew why.

And he kept his own counsel. Wisely or unwisely, he told no one about the attempt on his life. Mongo was bound to secrecy about the incident of the goat. And Merridew's disappearance was generally looked upon as a mystery, but very definitely a mystery connected with his avid appetite for alcohol. No search was made for him. It was accepted that he had gone away of his own accord.

And he knew Africa inside out.

CHAPTER XXIII.

TROTH.

CLAUDIA'S engagement to Sir Carl naturally changed Miss Ploerel's plans. She wished to remain until Mr. Haydon, the church representative at Jinja, arrived to perform the wedding ceremony.

Lady Stour, of course, would remain, too.

Claudia never forgot Mary's tinkling, malicious, hate-inspired laugh when the announcement was made to her. Years later it still rang in her ears, and she would close her eyes with a mental shudder at a picture too tragic and terrible for words.

The occasion was a dinner party at Ploerel's camp, given two days after Claudia had accepted Sir Carl's proposal.

Until then nothing had been announced.

Before the meal cocktails were served in an open summer house of grass. This was a most unusual luxury, and Lady Stour exclaimed, as she came out of her tent and found Sir Carl and Claudia alone in the banda.

"My word, this is a real party! Miss Scott, are these cocktails in your honor?"

"As a matter of fact, they are," Sir Carl informed the beautiful lady. "You shall be let into the secret first of all, Mary. Miss Scott is going to do me the honor of becoming my wife."

A moment's stunned silence, and then that ever-to-be remembered laugh.

"Oh, but how perfectly, excruciatingly funny!" exclaimed the mosquito voice.

"Forgive me, I don't see the joke," said the old man.

"Oh, no, I don't suppose it is, really! Only—it just caught me that way. You and Miss Scott, Sir Carl! It was so unexpected."

"So it seems," he said, with an enigmatical smile. "I wonder if the others will take it that way."

It was then that Claudia caught the hatred-laden glance. She could not but ad-

mire that radiant beauty, so vivacious, so strange in its contrast of *gaminerie* and mystery. Clad in a color she affected in the evening, which the French call ashes of roses, a dead-looking grayish, brownish pink, that enhanced the black bronze tints of her hair and the red brown of her eyes, Mary Stour was indeed a wonderful vision. A wrap of georgette and grey fur floated around her. Pearls worth a fortune lay on her breast and were twined around her wrists.

A truly magical figure in the desert. A contrast, violent to grotesqueness, with Claudia's white flannel skirt, silk shirt and woolen coat.

Mary's infuriated thoughts could almost be heard buzzing in the evening air.

This gawk, this plain-faced, unattractive frump—to marry Sir Carl Ploerel! To become perhaps the richest woman in the world!

That was Mary Stour—always wanting, wanting, wanting—place and power and men and money. Paul Cameron's love and fidelity—every man's homage and desire, Sir Carl's millions—and anything else she could get in this world. Figuratively, of course, not being able to have them all at the same time; but wanting them, and feeling that they were her right.

That was what Claudia read in the lovely face.

The sheer, naked sex-hatred of the woman with beauty against the woman without beauty but with everything else that mattered.

Cameron was the next to put in an appearance. He came out of the big tent, having arrived earlier to go over some plans of the excavations with Grant and Mark Glamorgan.

Claudia and Mr. Donald had been fetched over in Sir Carl's *machilas*.

Lady Stour passed on the information to Cameron in a high-pitched, almost hysterical voice.

"Paul, what do you think, Miss Scott and Sir Carl are going to be married! Sir Carl is angry with me for being amused, but it struck me all of a heap,"

The venom was better disguised this time. The voice was light and casual.

But the effect was electrical.

Claudia's eyes were on the ground. She did not see what Mary saw—a blackness descending on the man's spirit and putting out the sun. Once and for all to the jealous eyes of the woman whose property he was Bwana Buffalo gave himself away.

Then came Grant and Glamorgan and Mr. Donald, and the news was made known to them. And once more Mary Stour saw a man stricken to his soul. Then came Miss Ploerel, leaning on two sticks, and in the secret, of course.

They all drank to the health of the happy pair.

Sir Carl explained the position with his usual curious mixture of Sultan-like authority and humble self-depreciation.

Miss Scott had made him the proudest, the most grateful of men. As they knew—he was always declamatory in a restrained way and never left anything to other people's imaginations—he was not an orthodox Jew, and he was willing to be married according to the rites of the Church of England to which body Miss Scott belonged.

Mr. Donald, unfortunately, could not marry them because he had never taken Holy Orders, but only enjoyed the Bishop's licence as a lay reader and preacher. So that Sir Carl had sent to Jinja for Mr. Haydon, who would no doubt come as soon as possible to perform the ceremony. He, Sir Carl, and Miss Scott were both agreed that they would remain there until work at the excavations became impossible owing to the heat.

After that they adjourned to the big mess tent for dinner.

It was a feast, with tinned delicacies from Europe and some tender guinea fowl and a cake made from ground nuts and honey, and Claudia's and Sir Carl's healths were drunk in champagne.

Afterward they sat out and watched Kulol and fancied they saw streaks of molten fire among his tremendous precipices.

Claudia spoke to neither Cameron nor Grant alone before they parted. Both of them shook hands with her in the presence of Sir Carl, with words of congratulation.

But the hands of both told her what they felt. Cameron's clasp was angry with fury of futility. Bobbie Grant wrung her hand in despair.

CHAPTER XXIV.

EAST MEETS EAST.

OUT of sheer, desperate boredom, Mary Stour had taken to riding out alone, either in the early morning before the heat, or just before evening fell, when it became again bearable.

She took no delight in the weird and arid scenery; but there was simply nothing to do. Riding killed an hour or two and improved her health, which meant her figure.

All the men were down at the excavations, working feverishly against time. Miss Ploerel, still unable to move about easily, was engaged in writing her reminiscences. More than seventy years old, the little lady had known more notable people, including kings and emperors, intimately than almost any other woman of her time, and she had been persuaded to pass on some of her experiences to an interested world.

Claudia was up at the Mission Hospital, where they were very busy. And, anyhow, Mary would not look for companionship there.

A very intelligent boy among Sir Carl's personal servants accompanied her on these rides. She was not at all linguistic and had picked up only a few elementary words of Swahili. Bimbo, this boy, had been undervalet to Sir Carl in Cape Town, and had even been to England with him, and spoke some mixture of English and Dutch that Mary could follow.

On this particular morning, just a week after the dinner party that had announced Sir Carl's engagement, Mary rode further than usual.

It was early, but still the parching heat was too much for the horses, and they dismounted at a place where Bimbo had discovered some suspicion of moisture in a shallow gully among some thorn scrub. This moisture was brackish and not salt.

Mary looked around her, uninterested, out of temper, hating the place and the people, particularly the people, bitterly aware that Cameron's love for her was dead.

The land shelved downward to the lake. On the opposite side to where they stood was a gently sloping piece of pasturage, such as it is called in these parts, acres and acres in extent, rock and sand, red-brown, with the small thorn scrub growing in spare patches, watered in some way from springs far below.

Here were hundreds of heads of cattle and sheep and goats belonging to the nomad tribes who had gathered as near as safety permitted to the shores of the lake.

And now among the grazing animals there were patches of white, like snow, which were the bones of ponies and even camels that had been brought down from Abyssinia and had existed here many years ago, but had all been killed off by the drying up of this desert land.

From far below came smoke out of a native village of thatched huts.

And there arose a curious noise, a sort of thick moaning, a strange, repellent sound.

"What is that noise, Bimbo?" Mary asked.

From what he answered she gathered that the local honey hunter had called at the village down below, having collected his bags of wild honey and sold it to the villagers, who had made beer out of what they had not eaten, mixing it with water and allowing it to ferment. And they were exceedingly full and exceedingly happy, having spent the whole night in drinking.

"Pigs!" said Mary, who would never get used to Africa.

But there was another noise that she heard—nothing to do with the natives. She looked down on the pathetic pasture, like a map, or a child's Noah's Ark laid out, with the animals at great distances from one another. The noise that she heard did not come from the natives, drunk on honey beer, or from the animals. It was a specialized sound.

"That other noise, Bimbo?" Mary asked. "What is that?"

"Me not know," answered the boy, a puzzled look in his black face. "Like white man make merry all alone—like white man who had got the jim-jams."

Mary gave a little cry. From below, almost indeed under her feet, a big figure clambered up a hidden path. She saw a dark, oily face, and the pitiless sunshine burned on thick convex eyeglasses, so that they seemed as if they must set their surroundings on fire.

It was Merridew in khaki shorts and a shirt, wearing a funny little plaited grass cap on his head, and with a long dark blue cotton scarf wound around his neck and hanging behind him.

The sound that Mary had heard was his laughter. A weird sound—a white man laughing all alone in an African desert.

Merridew hailed her enthusiastically.

"What good luck to meet the most fair lady!" he cried.

Mary was never offended by his extravagances or his familiarity. She had decided that he was an eccentric, but frightfully clever, and that there was "a great deal in him."

"But what has happened to you?" she asked, and at the same time she gave Bimbo a peremptory glance, telling him to get out of ear-shot "Everybody has been wondering. Why did you disappear?"

"The truth is," he answered, with a mysterious importance, "there was no scope for me at the camp. I can confide in you. You have always understood me. I went away to make researches among the natives. My passion is research into the secrets of the natives. I believe that I am finding wonderful knowledge for the healing of mankind. Ploerel's camp was like the Ritz Hotel and Cameron's like a Bloomsbury boarding-house."

Mary laughed.

"You are too delicious, Dr. Merridew! But where are you living?"

"Not far from here. With some very wise men."

"Witch doctors?"

He nodded.

"How thrilling! And are you really finding out things?"

"Amazing things." His voice sank. "Things that our European faculties have never dreamed of. Things that our Medical Council at home would give its soul to know."

There was something eerie about it, far too deep for Mary Stour, whose shallow mind only felt excited.

"Besides," he went on, "at that camp I could not live. I was stifled. I was trodden under foot—and my heart was broken."

"You were in love with Miss Scott?" she asked suddenly.

"How did you know?"

"I did."

"Cameron stole her from me."

"You must not say that. Mr. Cameron and I are going to be married."

"He stole her from me, all the same. Do you not know it, Lady Stour? He loves her, as she loves him. Has he kept faith with you?"

"Yes."

"Is he everything he ought to be?"

Their eyes met. In his dark gaze Mary lost herself and began to learn strange things.

"No," she said. "You are right. Paul loves her. She has bewitched him. He has forgotten me."

"And will you let him?"

"How can I help it?"

A change came over his face. His mouth twitched. He turned away from her, and said in a muffled voice:

"I hate her as much as I love her. I hate her now."

Mary's lips lifted in a little smile.

Then, as he turned to her again, she said:

"She has spoiled my life as well as yours. While she is there, Paul will never come back to me." Craft prompting her, she did not tell him of Claudia's engagement to Sir Carl.

She knew, anyhow, that it made no difference to Cameron's feelings for her. She knew that. She had seen it in the man's face. She had felt it in his every look and word. She was spiritually obtuse, but she was anything but a fool. Claudia might be another man's betrothed, another man's wife, but he would still love her and want her with all his strong soul.

While she lived she would always be there in spirit—that strong, quiet, inexplicable something that had drawn all these men in the camp, that would draw men

wherever she went. Nothing to do with youth, nothing to do with beauty—something immortal, some odious witchery that ordinary women did not know.

Witchery to be met with witchery! It flashed like a beam of light through Mary's infuriated mind.

"He will come back to you," said Merridew slowly, and, as he looked at her, she and he seemed to come together in some strange way in some dark place. They understood each other. He had said so. It did not seem as if words were necessary.

"Not while she is there," Mary said. "You hate her, Dr. Merridew! You said so!"

"Yes, I hate her."

"She must be got rid of. Surely—" She moved nearer to him—"there must be some way."

"There are many ways," he said. "But we must choose the right one."

"There is no time," she urged. "Every day he is deeper in her toils."

"It will be done at the right time," he said. His voice was profound; beneath it was something even profounder. "Don't fear, fairest lady! She shall be put out of your way—very soon. She shall not spoil your life as well as mine."

"How will you do it?" she breathed.

He smiled and Mary gave a little inward shudder at that vacant mouth with the glittering teeth.

"Wiser for you not to know," he said. "Wiser for the fair lady not to know!"

Mary felt afraid.

"We are to leave the camp very soon—Miss Ploerel and I," she said hurriedly.

"I shall know when you are going," he answered. "I have means of knowing. It will happen—very soon. I will go now. You can rest easy. Fate holds much in store for you. Good-by, fairest of ladies!"

They shook hands, and he went down the path, scrambling as lightly as a goat.

Mary felt a chill of momentary terror, but it did not last. That unholy pact was justified in her jealousy-maddened soul.

"He has black blood in him," she said to herself, as she mounted her horse, thinking how different he was now to the ordinary big, clever, slangy Englishman of the earlier days in the camp. Something dark in him had come to the surface. And she had black blood in her, too, though not a soul knew of it.

Anglo-Indians might suspect it, but nobody knew. Her mother had been a Eurasian, daughter of a Burmese temple girl and a distinguished soldier, who went "fanti" and lived as a native and committed suicide on his wife's grave. So there was black blood in Mary, and a touch of insanity, too. But no one knew. Only, when she met a man like Merridew, it explained the kinship, the meeting of East with East.

To Bimbo she said, as they neared the camp:

"You are not to say you saw the Laibon, Bimbo. He is studying with wise men in the desert. He is learning much wisdom. Nobody must know."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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FULFILLMENT

ALL does not pass with the summer's rose,
All is not gone when the swallow goes,
For ever beneath dull autumn skies
Earth's fairest flower a seedling lies.

All is not dead with the withered leaf,
All is not locked in winter's grief;
Over the snows a southern breeze
Whispers a hope to the budding trees.

Carewe-Carvel.

The Kick in Football

By JAMES W. EGAN

"NOW, when I was playing football for Kale—"

Dunc Bunker closed the wire, threw away his eyeshade and began to reload an utterly noxious brier.

All of us in the editorial room of the Seattle *Standard* smothered groans. All, that is, save the sporting editor, Mitch Johnson, an irreverent young sport.

The Eastern football scores had shown Dunc's alma mater humbled 13 to 6 by some upstart education foundry out in the rutagabas and such *lese majeste* ever moved our telegraph operator to digging up the past.

Unheeding the more or less bored visages about him Dunc Bunker placidly resumed:

"In my day at Kale no bush college could even score on us. Of course football in those days was *football!*"

"Oh, be yourself!" rudely cut in the sporting editor. "Quit broadcasting that old banana juice! Times have changed since mother wore her hair long and they put real tobacco in nickel cigars, but don't go goofy thinking the game ain't still a he-man scuffle! Football has a lot more kick in it than when it was simply a case of which team had the most tonnage!"

Scornfully Dunc drew on his pipe.

"You young Solomons, with large damp areas yet surrounding your listeners!" he observed. "Football with a kick in it? Did I ever tell you of my second year on the Kale eleven, and our famous contest with Quinceton?"

"Only about eighty or ninety times," responded Mitch. "Why don't you go home when your day's work is done?"

Dunc Bunker shook his head.

"No, I've never told this story. It was Ram Rodney's final game with Kale. Speaking of the kick in football—well, I guess you all must have heard of Ram Rodney. There was one of the greatest kickers whoever put a toe to leather. He wasn't much of a punter or dropkicker. The place kick was his dish. He could boot goals from fifty yards away.

"Yes, old Ram sure swung a mean foot-

ball slipper. But of all the place kicks he'd made none approached his wonderful boot in the Quinceton classic. Oh, the kick that was!"

"Gosh, I'm all suspense!" quivered the sporting editor. "If you must spring the yarn cut out the long lead and give us the detailed play. I have to stay until the pink comes out, anyway."

This wasn't true as far as Ben Shimmons, Len Langlow and myself were concerned, but we remained. Once in a while Dunc Bunker proved interesting; besides, in the course of a long talk, his brier was apt to go out. There always was something to look forward to.

That year Kale—said Dunc—had a strong backfield. Ram Rodney was at right half; Fat Philbrick at full; yours truly holding down the other half. Signals were called by 'Shrimp' Wallack, a quarter no bigger than a two-bit drink in a blind pig, but just as full of dynamite.

Our line at the first of the season was a little lighter than the coach liked. We had the greatest coach who ever ate plug tobacco. He was the celebrated Bill Gore—"Bloody Bill" Gore. To play under him you had to shed the red corpuscles freely. When he retired from the gridiron he opened a chain of butcher shops in New Jersey, I've heard.

One evening in early fall Bloody Bill gathered Shrimp, Ram and me, as well as Ted Hooker, who was captain and left tackle, around him after our daily bruises had been received.

"The line's gotta get more weight," he remarked, shifting his half-pound cud "Them scrubs busted through it to-day like it was a fence built of paper pickets!"

None of this "supervarsity" stuff when I went to college. Scrubs were plain scrubs.

"The heft ain't there," admitted Cap Hooker. "And I hear Quinceton got six or seven baby elephants out front."

Bloody Bill tossed off a chirp about our rival which would have blistered enamel.

"Find me some huskies and find 'em quick!" he exhorted. "Kale has a bunch of big hams who seem to think college is only a place to carry books! I want each of you birds to round up all the extra poundage you can and have the owners on hand to-morrow afternoon. Get 'em here even if you've gotta knock 'em cold and drag 'em!"

With this, the coach poured a pint of liquid tobacco into the ground about and left us.

He didn't need to say any more; we knew Bill Gore. And next day you can bet we showed up with several big hunks of fresh meat in tow.

Shrimp Wallack brought a couple of two hundred pounders and a set of skinned knuckles. He was such a small guy it had seemed safe to argue with him. Of course, mistakes will happen.

Most of the unwilling grid candidates were freshmen. There was no rule then against freshmen playing. There was no rule against a freshman doing anything—as long as it was something an upper classman had told him to do.

Outside of Shrimp's pair, none of the new material looked good in action. Bloody Bill went around spitting brown streams and striking phrases more golf than football in character.

Just as the coach was warming up well a solitary figure suddenly wandered onto the field. I got the first glance at him and nearly fumbled a punt.

This lad must have been six feet something without socks and a lot nearer two hundred and twenty pounds in weight than chop suey is to China. And he was wearing a suit which fitted him about like a banana skin would a watermelon.

"What do you want?" barked Bloody Bill, almost choking on his chew as the figure approached him.

"I want to play on your football team," said this specimen, with a nervous grin spreading over his broad, freckled map. "Last Thanksgiving I made the touchdown that give Susqually High the championship of Cedar County."

"My Gawd—no?" exclaimed the coach. "Where the devil is Susqually?"

"That's my home town," was the answer. "It's out in the State of Washington."

By this time all the players had clustered round. When we heard where the newcomer was from we thought it explained the terrible suit of clothes. None of us ever had been west of the Mississippi and our idea was that folks in far off Washington dressed mainly in bark or Indian blankets.

"From Susqually, Washington, eh?" mused Bloody Bill. "And you want to play football with Kale? Well, that'd be a long way to ship the remains. What's your name, if any?"

Believe me or not, this was the answer:

"My name is Jedediah Thackeray Jenkins."

"What?" The coach started back. "It's a wonder you didn't get writer's cramp when you registered!"

The big Westerner gave Bill Gore a sort of boobish stare.

"Built like an ox—probably both ways from the neck," I heard our coach mutter. "All right, J. Dictionary Jenkins of Susqually," he said aloud, "I'll throw you to the wolves. Get into football togs and I'll put you with the scrubs."

"I'd like to have the address of his tailor," observed Shrimp Wallack as Jenkins tramped obediently away.

"Oh, maybe the tailor ain't to blame," suggested Ram Rodney. "They tell me it rains something awful out in that country!"

The beefy young man from Susqually didn't size up so worse in grid garments, however. Several times he stopped Ram and Shrimp dead, and once I suffered the misfortune of his falling on top of me. He left me flat—and that's no gargle of girlish grief, either!

Thereafter Jedediah Thackeray Jenkins turned out regularly. But the boys refused to toy with those jaw-twisters wished on him in misguided parental enthusiasm. We simply began to salute him as "Beef" Jenkins.

Big Beef could play football, even if a trifle slow upstairs and down. I don't know how he made yardage in his classes; sometimes it seemed to me he belonged back in the Fourth Reader.

Being a quick-witted guy, Ram Rodney used to have a lot of fun kidding the Westerner. Occasionally his stuff would get rough, and one day I mentioned the matter to Fat Philbrick. Not that I really cared much.

"Ain't you heard, Dunc?" Fat said. "Ram's sore at Beef because he's been shining up to Shrimp's sister."

"Where did that Washington hick meet Viola?" I asked, surprised.

"I dunno. She follows the moves of the football squad close and—well, anyway, it come about. I understand she don't exactly hate the big evergreen, either."

"Gimme the aspirin!" I yelped.

You see, Viola Wallack was one of the cutest little nifties living around the college. Ram, who was a handsome bird, had been keeping everybody else off the grass for a couple of seasons. Most of us had figured Shrimp's sister and the right half for the rice and old Oxford act some day.

Now, under the circumstances, why pretty Viola should waste any smiles on the Susqually specimen was more than a crossword riddle to me. But you can never guess a woman. I've learned a lot since I got married myself and started battling over bills.

Don't think I'm dragging the girl in just to decorate the yarn. There wouldn't have been nearly so much kick in Ram's famous place kick had it not been for two sparkling blue eyes in the stand. Oh, that old, old stuff!

Despite the fact he looked like an argument in favor of evolution Beef Jenkins somehow or other had made himself interesting to Viola Wallack. Not even Shrimp was able to dope it out.

"Beef is just about the dumbest egg whoever stuttered into Kale—I give up!" confessed our quarterback.

I'll never forget the laugh Shrimp handed the gang when he told us of a call Ram's new rival paid to the Wallack home. Viola and her brother's Aunt Priscilla, an old hen from Boston, was present, and the girl introduced the visitor.

"This is Beef Jenkins, aunty," she said.

"Beef, indeed!" sniffed aunty. "What a terribly vulgar suit-on-him!"

At least, that was the way it sounded to Jenkins.

"What's wrong with the suit?" he came right back. "It cost me thirty dollars at Susqually, with an extra pair of pants thrown in!"

Aunt Priscilla turned about nine separate colors, Shrimp choked, and Viola finally managed to get out:

"Aunty wasn't referring to—to your clothes, Beef. She said 'pseudonym'. It means something like a nickname."

Well, it was a long while before the echoes of that one died out. Aunt Priscilla was off the Westerner for life, of course; but Viola showed no signs of turning an icy shoulder.

Bloody Bill Gore appeared to like Beef's efforts at mayhem in practice tussles and chose him for a sub guard. The star of Susqually High got into the last half of our first game against some little ham and egg knowledge mill and he certainly did his share when it came to busting arms and collar bones. I think Kale won by a margin of seven touchdowns and eleven fractures.

After the contest, however, Beef complained of having received a vicious kick on the dome.

"Oh, that's all right," said our coach, taking a fresh chew and smiling down at the various molars, bicuspids, and facial fragments adorning the recent field of battle. "I saw the bird who did it, and believe me, he won't be able to use that leg again this fall! We got off to a good start to-day, boys. In the opening game last year we didn't break half as many bones!"

Kale had got off to a good start. By the time the Quinceton game was at hand we had crippled more opposition gridders and shed more blood than any eleven in the history of the college. And I'll tell you Bloody Bill was proud of the bunch!

Beef Jenkins had played in most of the brawls, for his heft was valuable in the mass plays and dog piles. He never did know the signals, but that didn't matter so much in those good old days. It was getting the other fellow's number that really counted.

But I must get to the Quinceton game. Naturally, the annual classic drew an enormous crowd—or so it seemed to us, in that pre-stadium era. The Kale field was the place of encounter and the mob of spectators included even the dead language profs.

Bloody Bill Gore preached murder to us for ten minutes before the whistle whined, and we set ourselves for the kick-off just yearning to crucify the foe.

Quinceton wasn't present to make it any ice cream social, either. I'm not apple-saucing you when I chirp a lot of ears and noses entered that fracas to emerge with much different architecture. I think every man on each eleven had a set of brass knuckles handy.

Toward the end of the first half the Quinces were lucky enough to reach our thirty-yard line. "Screw" Ingersoll, their famous end and a fine leather booter, was called back to try a drop kick.

Several of us managed to crash through the heavy Quinceton line. Beef Jenkins was in the lead and had a grand opportunity to block Ingersoll's effort. As usual, however, he was a bit snailish. And while he was figuring things out the Quinceton star toed the brown gooseberry squarely between the uprights.

On the very next play Ted Hooker got at Ingersoll's trusty right leg and twisted it so expertly he had to hobble off the field. But the damage had been done.

Maybe you think Bloody Bill Gore didn't let loose at the end of the half! He was so hot that the tobacco juice he spat out during his oration hissed and smoked as it struck the dressing-room floor. He rode Beef Jenkins like a polo pony.

"You big bale of hay!" he sneered. "So you're the hero who made the touchdown that give Susqually High the championship of Cedar County? You ugly-mugged, bran-faced, goose-brained yokel! Why didn't your triple-dashed parents tie a rock around your double-blank neck and drop you in the nearest river on your first birthday! Another dumb play like the one you just pulled and I'll fire you so far off this football squad you'll hit New Zealand on the first bounce! Believe me, you'll be canned Beef!"

Nor did the rest of us escape Bloody Bill's soft, mild reproaches.

"What do you think you're doing out there—attending a meeting of the ladies' aid?" he stormed. "You play football like you been brought up on buttermilk all your lives! Some of you ain't even got blood on your teeth yet! Get out and beat these blank dash blanks or I'll personally murder eleven guys at the end of this game!"

The team fared forth for the last half as full of death and destruction as the mushrooms picked by amateurs. We bucked, kicked and slugged like fiends, hitting the Quinceton line with all we had.

And still it was a tough job to make yardage. We bounced off the opposing baby elephants as if we were tennis balls striking cement. Both sides battled back and forth in the center of the gridiron.

"Get through! Get through!" Shrimp Wallack would rave. "For the love of God, make a hole and get through!"

But it seemed all twenty-two husky young men could do was smash one another dizzy. Twice Ram Rodney attempted place kicks from more than forty yards away and missed by an eel's eyebrow. We realized the half was nearing a close—with Quinceton ahead!

Then suddenly came the break which changed the whole complexion of things and set the stage for the peerless place kick. Desperate, Shrimp Wallack essayed a run around our right end, and raced clear to the Quinceton five-yard line before being downed.

Kale rooters began to tear the seats up into firewood and the noise would have made the average Fourth of July din sound like a pin dropping.

We still had five yards to go, however, and those stubborn Quinces held like rock. First I carried the ball without achieving an extra inch. Ram Rodney likewise failed. On a third attempt Shrimp Wallack put his faith in Fat Philbrick—and Fat fumbled!

There went the oval, bounding along several yards from the goal line. As it happened, Beef Jenkins had the best chance at it. Of course it had to be Beef, with the gray matter always in low gear!

"Fall on the ball, you dumb rutabaga!" screamed Shrimp.

The ever alert Ram Rodney was directly behind the Susqually freshman. Even as our quarter cried out his foot drew back. With all the strength of his powerful leg muscles it now shot forward, catching the stooping, blundering Beef about where his jersey ended in the rear.

Big as he was, the force of that mighty kick was such that Jenkins went flying headlong onto the ball, and rolled right over the goal line with it in his arms!

Shrimp Wallack grabbed Ram and hugged him.

"Eureka!" he said, or something just as good. "That's the first and only place kick for a touchdown I ever saw!"

A second later the whistle blew, ending the contest. Having seen victory snatched from defeat, as I believe the saying is, Kale rooters went nutty. A bunch of them came down on the field, headed by pretty Viola Wallack, and what do you think they were yodeling with cheers? It was:

"Rah, rah, Beef! Rah, rah, Beef!"

Blah, Blah, Beef!

Abruptly Dunc Bunker paused.

"So Jenkins got the credit, and the girl, too?" queried Ben Shimmons.

"Of course he got the credit! Most of it, anyway!" snapped Dunc. "A swift kick made him the college hero. As for Viola Wallack—well, she gave Ram the gate and eventually married Beef. I believe they're living on a ranch near Susqually at present, and having an awful time trying to raise wheat, four kids and enough money to pay off several dozen mortgages. Serves 'em right!"

"And Ram Rodney?" I queried.

"Oh, he's fine! I envy that bird! When Shrimp's sister chose Beef he swore he'd stay single, and the result is he has lived happily ever after. But I'll never forget his great place kick for a touchdown when we played—"

A sardonic laugh cut him short. It issued from Mitch Johnson, the irreverent sport scribe.

"I see your pipe's out, Dunc," he observed. "Next time you want to smoke would you mind filling it with plain, ordinary, everyday tobacco?"

THE END

Mix and Serve

By EDGAR FRANKLIN

Author of "A Noise in Newboro," "Where Was I?" etc.

CHAPTER XV.

MATRIMONY.

IT will perhaps occur to you that the already shaken Henry Wells cried aloud in his great amazement, that he reeled back, thunderstruck, babbling incoherent nothings, looking for escape. Henry did none of these things. Given the right material in the first place, suffering only makes a man the stronger and the better poised and the more resourceful. Well, Henry was of the right material, and he had suffered.

"Er—yes, yes!" he cried brightly and as evenly as you please. "Hello, everybody! Yes, I just dropped in to see if all the windows were fastened."

For a moment he even beamed. It really seemed to Henry in that moment that he had said just about the right thing. He had not lost his head for one second, that is; even as it swept over him, he had conquered the very natural wave of staggering surprise. He was sure that he had not so much as changed color or given any other sign that might have been construed as an admission of guilt.

Yet somehow he seemed to have failed in making exactly the right impression. Gloria's lovely eyes were dilating; her rather dark cheeks had turned to a ghastly tint for an instant and now were flaming, although certain facial struggles indicated that Gloria was attempting a quiet smile.

Jeanne was leaning forward tensely, the sandwich still in the same position; but that such a thing was impossible in one so carefully reared as this young woman, one would have said that Jeanne's own eyes sparkled purely delighted excitement. Her mother, however, had arisen and drawn herself up to her full height, and now her penetrating gaze was fixed upon Henry very much as if the lady expected Henry to explode and wreck the house.

So, obviously, he had *not* said just the

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right thing, and apologies of some sort were in order. Henry did his best to master the slight confusion that was coming upon him. He ceased beaming, and addressed Gloria directly:

"You see, I didn't know that you—er—well, I had no idea that you—er—"

At last Gloria Clay had arranged her smile.

"Mr. Wells means that he thought I'd gone away," she explained swiftly, sweetly. "He's the agent for the property here, you know, and I told him that I was leaving."

There was a pause of several seconds after this. There was a smile on Mrs. Dayton's lips which passed description.

"Of course," she said readily. "Come, Jeanne!"

"Oh, but we mustn't run off like this, mother," the girl protested. "I want to hear—"

"Come, Jeanne," said her mother.

"No, I wish you wouldn't go," Gloria put in quickly. "I suppose I know what you're thinking, and I assure you that you are quite wrong and—"

"And I assure *you*, Mrs. Clay, that I am very rarely wrong, and that this really is not one of those rare occasions," Mrs. Dayton responded with a lethal smile. "Jeanne!"

"Oh, but—"

"*Jeanne!*" said her mother.

She was plainly a person of authority, in her own family at all events. So presently the door closed upon them, and upon the living room descended a stillness so terrific that Henry Wells seemed literally pressed down into a chair.

"Gloria, I never—" he began thinly.

"You never meant to do that? Of course you meant to do it!" Mrs. Clay came near to screaming. "You—you fiend—you did that deliberately to hurt me! You—you devil in human shape, you!"

"Gloria!" choked Henry.

One short, wild laugh was his only answer—a weird sound, too, this laugh. Then Gloria had turned away from him; her fine little hands were pressed tight upon her cheeks; her eyes were closing; she was vibrating.

But she was not weeping; this seemed to be a distress too terrible for tears. She looked at Henry suddenly, something like wonder in her eyes.

"I had just told them the whole truth about last night, and they believed me," said her odd monotone. "And Jeanne's mother, socially, is a power in our own set—or what used to be my set. She would have helped me; she was promising to help me when—when you walked in with your key," said Mrs. Clay, and her voice was no longer a monotone.

"But I—"

"And you walked in laughing and humming!" Gloria cried, and threw up her hands. "If ever a man looked as if he were marching into his own home, all ready for a welcoming hug and kiss, you did at that moment."

"Well, I never meant to," Henry said desperately. "How could I know that you were here, Gloria? The last I saw of you, you were on a train, going away forever."

"Well, I left that train at the junction and took the other one straight back. I'd seen *you* making a cowardly flight, you know, and the Parkers and the Rich girls declined even to look at me after you'd gone, and— What on earth are you doing here, by the way?"

"Oh, I left the train before you did," said Henry.

"And I came back to fight, because one coward was enough," Gloria said, with surpassing bitterness. "I came back to fight and to win, and I would have won, too, with Mrs. Dayton's help—because, after all, Henry, I *am* decent, you know, and a lot of people in Burnstown have known me since I was a little girl."

"I know," Henry groaned, and avoided her eye.

"And then *you*—" Gloria gasped as a surge of feeling overcame her, and clasped her hands together and literally wrung them. "Well, it's all over *now*—that is certain!"

This time Henry said nothing at all. He stared at the floor steadily, blackly. Miriam, of course, was definitely lost; what he himself desired mattered not one whit, one way or the other. There are things which one does. That was all.

"Gloria," Henry said gently.

"What?" snapped Gloria.

"I—I want you to marry me," said Henry Wells.

Mrs. Clay's eyes opened widely.

"What—what did you say, Henry?" she cried.

"I said that I'd—I'd appreciate it very much if you'd marry me."

"You're trying—trying to do the right thing. Is that it?" Gloria laughed, not so very steadily, and gazed on at Henry. "There's something terrifyingly fervent in the way you go about it."

"Maybe there would be if I wasn't afraid of making some new blunder," Mr. Wells muttered.

"You might try," Mrs. Clay said, and there was a new and peculiar softness to her voice.

Henry's heart stopped short—and then pounded on again.

Oh, no, it was with no joyous thrill that this happened—rather was there something sickening about the sensation. It was just as if some giant hand had clutched Henry's heart very tightly for an instant and then had cast it aside. Nevertheless, Henry rose and went straight to Gloria's side on the divan.

"Will you?" he said simply.

Gloria glanced up at hm very briefly indeed; then she dropped her eyes again.

"Well, Henry, there seems to be nothing else to do," she murmured; and then, incredible woman that she was, she looked up suddenly, brilliantly, and threw her arms about the neck of Henry Wells. "Oh, Henry, you're such a dear, silly boy?" she cried.

Must it be admitted that Henry's arms went about Gloria? He had set out to do the conventionally proper thing. They did. And this time Henry kissed Mrs. Clay, too—not once, but several times; and now Gloria's beautiful head was upon Henry's shoulder.

"Oh, Henry, you—you might have asked me two or three days ago, and saved all this!" she submitted.

"I—yes," said Henry.

"Because I've been wondering if I shouldn't marry you, and I couldn't—well, I've been wondering," Gloria's dulcet voice went on, and she snuggled a little closer to Henry. "We'll have to leave Burnstown. We can't go on here, a living scandal!"

"We'll leave."

"I don't mind. Do you?"

"Not a bit! I'd rather leave. The sooner we go, the better," Henry said readily.

The glorious girl looked up at him again; this time she continued to look. "Henry, we'll go all around the world," she said. "That's what I've always wanted to do. We'll spend at least two years doing that, and—"

"Oh, I couldn't afford that!" Henry said hastily, apologetically.

"You needn't!" Gloria laughed softly. "I've got hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars now, you know. Why, every last thing they've invested for me has simply turned into heaps of gold! Henry, I think we'll live in France for awhile and then we'll go to Northern Africa. We'll see Egypt, and we'll go out into the Sahara, and maybe we'll turn into desert Arabs, and—"

It is unbelievable, of course, but Henry was not listening to this very attractive word picture. Nay, Henry was looking at a little mahogany desk across the room, but in point of fact he was seeing a thing entirely different.

A shadowy Miriam seemed to be over there, smiling her cynical contempt at him. Miriam—Miriam—

Somehow, Gloria seemed to have put four or five inches of space between herself and Henry Wells. Her hands were on his shoulders now; she was still looking up at him, but in the most different way. The sparkle was gone from her eyes; they were clouding rapidly.

"Henry, your—your arms don't feel a bit as if you loved me!" she said.

"Why, Gloria, I—"

"And you don't *look* at me as if you loved me!"

"Well, but—"

"And I—I—I don't love you, either!" the impossible Mrs. Clay cried suddenly and astoundingly, and she drew away from Henry and crossed to the most distant arm-

chair; and there, after a final stare at Henry, she bowed her head and wept. "No, I don't!" said Mrs. Clay heartbrokenly. "I —I thought I did, and I don't!"

"Yes, but—gosh darn it, Gloria! Be reasonable!" Henry pleaded miserably. "Maybe we don't love each other just now, but we will after we've been married awhile. That happens nearly always—"

"No, it doesn't."

"Yes, it does. Why, I've heard of lots of people who—"

"You haven't, Henry—you know perfectly well you never have."

"But I tell you I have, and—"

"We don't love each other; we never can, and we're going to be wretched—wretched!" Gloria sobbed.

"Well, wretched or not, I want you to marry me," Henry answered. "You will, won't you?"

"Have I any choice in the matter, after what you've done now?" the girl flared.

"Well—well—say, I wish you wouldn't feel that way about it. Gloria, let's—let's get married to-morrow!"

The streaming eyes gazed up pathetically at him.

"Very—well," choked the happy bride-to-be.

"I'll make all the arrangements?"

"If you're able to do it without making more trouble."

"And I'll come for you—I guess we'll have it at noon?" Henry said patiently.

"Oh, I don't care—I don't care!" said Mrs. Clay. "Oh, I wish that I'd never been born!"

"Well, you don't hear me doing any cheering because *I* was born, do you?" Henry inquired sharply. But instantly his voice softened as he crossed quickly to Gloria and took her hand. "Doggone it, I'm *awful* sorry, Gloria!"

"So am I," agreed Mrs. Clay. Her fingers tightened on Henry's, though; perhaps in that little space of time, united as they were in the common grief of their impending marriage, Gloria and Henry Wells were really closer than they had ever been before.

"Anyhow, it might be a lot worse," Henry said bravely.

"Might it?" Gloria asked with difficulty, and there was only doubt in her voice.

"You bet! Why, we'll have a regular whale of a time, off somewhere new!" Henry pursued gustily. "We'll forget every nasty rat in this town and—and— Why, gosh, Gloria, a year from now we'll be simply crazy about each other!"

Gloria looked up at him with a numbed smile.

"Poor boy!" she murmured. "Poor little boy!"

"*Me?*" Henry cried in protest. "Doesn't matter what happens to *me!* I've forfeited every—er—ah—"

"Thanks," sighed Gloria. "Thanks!"

"Well, I didn't mean to put it like that, but you know what I'm trying to say," Henry stammered uncomfortably. "I—say, I'd better get back to the office and tell Stannard he'll be doing business alone after to-day."

"Yes, Henry," said the quivering lips of the bride-to-be.

Henry drew a deep breath.

"So just give me one good, old-fashioned, regular kiss, honey—" he began.

"No, Henry," Gloria sighed tremulously, waving him away. "You don't want to —to kiss me. And I don't want to kiss you. Just go."

"But I'll come for you to-morrow!"

"Yes, Henry," whispered Mrs. Clay.

"About half past eleven?"

The bride-elect looked up. Perhaps she was trying to smile brightly as she nodded; but an instant later she had collapsed, huddled over the arm of her chair, racked with sobs.

"Oh, Henry! Henry! Why did you ever do it? Why did you? Henry, won't you go now?" was what Henry understood her to say. "Won't you please go now and let me be alone?"

Henry went out almost on tiptoe, closing the door softly after him with cold, shaky fingers.

And this slightly funereal atmosphere seemed to settle in concentrated form on his face as he started the firm's car and drove slowly away from Gloria's home. Hunched forward were this happy bridegroom's shoulders, and his eyes were dark

and savage; far from the traffic, too, were Henry's thoughts, and such of the population as escaped being ground to death under his wheels did so by their own quick maneuverings and with no assistance from Henry Wells.

He roused suddenly, though, as he came to the end of the Main Street block where stood their office. Ida was there, on the corner. She may not have been watching for Henry's approach, but she stepped into the car beside him as he drew in to the curb —a different Ida, too, with all assurance gone and two faintly rouged patches standing out on ghastly white. Why, Ida—Henry observed—could hardly speak; she was trying to do that now.

"Yes—here!" she managed. "Don't go down in—front of the office. I'm afraid."

"Has John—"

"No! Henry, listen! Please listen! Last night—"

"Here! I don't want to hear anything!"

"But you must hear this!" Ida pleaded. "Henry, I—I telephoned home that I'd spent the night with my cousin Nettie, and —and I found out just this afternoon that Nettie's been visiting in the Falls for a week. And—and my brother Joe found it out—about the same time; and somebody —I don't know who it was—told him something—"

"Ida, if you please!" Henry said firmly. "We all have our own troubles, and I've got mine. I'm horribly sorry for you, kid. I'm sorrier than I can tell you. *But* I'm not interested or—"

"Yes, you are! Because John's your friend and your partner and—and he's killing John!"

"Who is?" Henry gasped. "Where?"

"My brother Joe, right in the private office," said Ida, who really did seem to bear important news. "Henry, please, *please* go in there and stop him!"

Young Mr. Wells pursed his lips.

"Well, of course, I haven't seen much of your brother Joe these last years, Ida, but as I remember him he's about twelve feet tall and he has a pair of fists that look like a couple of triphammers," he reflected. "I don't believe I could do very much. How long has he been with John?"

"Ten minutes, almost."

"Oh, well—then there isn't a thing I could do!" Mr. Wells said decidedly.

"Well, if—if you're really afraid," the girl said with an hysterical gulp, "I'll go in myself and—"

"No—sit still, Ida," Henry said suddenly. "I think I've reconsidered this. I think perhaps this is exactly the solution I've been looking for. I'll go in there now and knock your brother out or—or something."

He stepped down, too, in the same quick, impulsive way that had marked his stepping from the train.

Sometimes fate does arrange these things; it was Henry's conviction that fate had arranged this one, as a graceful exit for himself from a painful situation and as a means of sparing Gloria the duty of marrying him. There was something big and splendid, too, about this idea of dying for one's friend. Unless his recollection of Ida's brother Joseph was greatly exaggerated, by this time to-morrow many people might well be speaking kindly of the Henry Wells they had so vilified to-day.

Henry, then, stepped almost eagerly into the office—and paused inside the door and listened—and then as a matter of fact continued to pause.

There had been one loud crash back there. Now there was complete, awful silence!

CHAPTER XVI.

VENGEANCE.

AND so, at a rough guess, it was all over. They were both big men and powerful. Maybe, as sometimes happens, each had wrought the destruction of the other at the same second! The continued silence hinted at something like that. Although—"

"You get that, don't you, Stannard?" the heavy voice of Mr. Joseph Mears asked.

"I get it," said John's tone, about which there was something astoundingly calm. "There's no need of smashing my desk with your fist to emphasize it."

"To hell with your desk!" said Mr.

Mears loudly. The whole family, perhaps, was not of the very finest grain, and of them all this Joseph was the most uncouth. "That's my last word to you, Stannard. If you've been lying to me, I'll kill you—just as sure as I've got these two hands to do it with! And one thing more: don't kid yourself by running away. This world ain't big enough for you to hide away from me in, once I start hunting you!"

"Have no fear! I shall not run away," John responded almost contemptuously.

This seemed to be the end of the interview. There was a crunch of heavy shoes now, and Joseph Mears strode into view and down the store—a giant, a creature even mightier than Henry had fancied. Without apparent cause, a bright, soothing and friendly smile suffused Henry's countenance as Mr. Mears paused before him, looked around blackly and demanded:

"Where's my sister?"

"I—why, I don't know," said Henry Wells, and also looked about in surprise.

"She was here ten minutes ago, Wells."

"I just came in—just this very second," Henry said swiftly. "Possibly she has—er—stepped out?"

Something rumbled horribly, inside Mr. Mears.

"When she steps in again, give her a message from me!" said he.

"I—why, yes, I'd be delighted to do that!" the junior partner assured him.

"Tell her she needn't come home, Wells! Tell her she's got no home, so far as we're concerned!"

"No home—so far as you're concerned," Henry repeated blandly, and without a hint of either curiosity or protest. "All right. I'll tell her."

The heavy tread went on, outward bound, causing the office to shake a little. Mercifully, Henry observed, its owner was going down the block the other way and not in Ida's direction. He indulged in several long breaths and moved on toward the private office.

John seemed to be uninjured. John was sitting at his own desk and opening a pile of letters. Here, indeed, was a man of character, for in spite of all, he was attending to business.

"You're working?" Henry muttered.

"Why not? Somebody has to work around here! Business goes on as usual, no matter who quits," clicked from Mr. Stannard. "Enough stuff here now to keep us both busy till after midnight. Sit down over there and do your share."

He rose. He slapped a bale of correspondence down on Henry's desk. He resumed his seat and lighted a fresh cigar.

"House all right, out there?"

"Oh, yes," said Henry. "She hadn't gone."

"You said—"

"I know. That was my mistake. But she's going to-morrow."

"Aha! Where?"

"She doesn't know yet. On her honeymoon, John."

For a moment Mr. Stannard ceased being busy.

"Mrs. Clay getting married after—er—who's she going to marry?"

"Me," sighed Henry.

The senior partner slit open another envelope.

"Oh!" he grunted; and then, glancing at Henry, he added with a most unpleasant sneer: "Dear me! Going to be quite the honorable gentleman, after all, are you?"

"Well, that's damned sight more than *you* can say, apparently!" banged from Henry Wells.

"What?"

"You heard me!"

"Look here, Wells!" thundered Mr. Stannard, and strode down upon his associate. "I told you that my personal affairs were—"

"Look here, Stannard!" cried Henry, with equal vigor. "Cut out the noise! Cut out the bunk and the hypocrisy and all the rest of it! I'm not interested in your personal affairs; I'm only ashamed that I've been linked with you in business and that I'll probably have to live that down somewhere, if it leaks out.

"I've always thought you were a decent, upright fellow—plumb clean and straight in every way, with a lot of bluster that was just funny. Well, I was dead wrong and I'm through with you! Now I tell you to your face that you're nothing but

a low-down, dirty whelp, and I honestly think I can lick you! If you want to try it, start something and I'll be just tickled to death! How about it?" concluded Henry.

He looked Mr. Stannard straight in the eye—and with quite remarkable effect, too, for Mr. Stannard flushed a little and paled a little; and then avoided Henry's eye for a little and finally said uncertainly:

"Is that—on the level—the way you feel about me, Hank?"

"That's about one-tenth of what I feel! Do you want to hear the other nine-tenths?"

"No, I guess not. I—I guess I'd better tell you the truth, Henry. Ida and I were married last night, over at Catesville!"

"Eh?"

"Yes, I couldn't stand seeing her—oh, dancing and running around with any one else. Sort of drove me crazy, every time, and—well, when we left the party last night we beat it over to Catesville and old Dr. Crane—know him? No? Well, he's a good old sport, Henry—he married us."

"But why Catesville? Is it a secret?" Henry asked blankly.

"Well, it was going to be a secret until her confounded uncle got home next Monday, Henry," Mr. Stannard sighed. "You see, Ida's her uncle's pet and her uncle, having about a billion dollars, is the czar of the family; and then the family thought it was all arranged for her to marry Dick Mellon and they'd have gone wild about her marrying me, unless the uncle broke the news and approved—and then they'd have to grin, of course.

"That was the idea and Ida was plain scared to tell 'em before the old boy got back. Don't blame her, either, Henry. They're a violent lot, that family. I never could understand how Ida came to be one of 'em. Why, she's just a little flower, Hank—she's just a tender little—"

"I know," said Henry, "but when her brother was threatening to kill you, you didn't tell him?"

"Of course, I told him. He didn't believe me. We haven't got any marriage certificate, you know. Yet, that is. Crane didn't have a single blank; he's expecting a new lot in a few days and he's going to mail it. Joe didn't believe that."

Henry sat back in his chair and relaxed.

"Why didn't he call up your minister?"

"He did, Henry. Nobody answered. He was going off to his camp this morning, trout fishing, and his wife and the cook went with him. They were the witnesses. Joe didn't believe that one, either," Mr. Stannard said, somewhat nervously. "Matter of fact, Hank, I'm sort of uneasy. He may do something — er — rash before he's convinced of the truth. Dave, the other brother, evidently phoned him before he came in here, that there was no record of the ceremony in the county clerk's office—and now Joe's started out to trail down the minister. If he doesn't find him before his patience or his temper gives out—I don't know."

Henry nodded sagely.

"Oh, I suppose there's always a chance that he may pot you," he reflected. "The moral is: when you marry a lady, do it openly. Now, my marriage to-morrow will be open and—" The airy effect died out with the words themselves; Henry turned to his desk.

"You're really going through with it?" John inquired.

"Let's not discuss it," said Henry. "Lets get to work. This is probably the last work I'll do here, you know. Gloria doesn't want to come back to Burnstown after we—"

"'Stoo bad," John said hastily. "There's my sweetie, just coming in. Poor little kid! She was scared to death when that big lummox showed up! She—"

He sped away, presumably to comfort his sweetie. Henry sighed heavily and went on reading letters.

From the front office, now, came murmurs of the softest quality and little cooing sounds and even a sniffle or two. John seemed to be getting on with the comforting process—and Henry sat back with a sigh that shook his very bones.

It was well enough for those two! They were, apparently, honestly and tremendously in love, and they were married. Well, by this time to-morrow Henry also would be married, but he would not be in love—

tremendously or any other way—with his beautiful bride. And that was no less than horrible! Of course, they could live apart and that, in all probability, was what they would do; but they'd be married just the same and Henry would spend the rest of his years pining vainly for his Miriam.

Out there, the typewriter began to click again in the emptiness. John returned to his desk, uneasy still of eye, but whistling. Henry hunched over his desk once more—and so, remarkably enough on this particular day, passed one hour, passed two hours—hours actually devoted to business!

The shadows were lengthening, too. Normally about now there would have been that stir in the outer office which came just before quitting time. Now there was only one typewriter to stop its clicking—and that, by the way, had stopped and there were voices in the outer office and now light steps approaching the private office. And the door opened and Henry felt himself strangling, for Miriam herself was with them!

Henry had seen her in several moods; here was still another. Miss Benton might have been the most casual acquaintance, pausing to discuss a business matter. She smiled faintly as she nodded to Henry and to John, and the latter rose hastily.

"I'll disappear awhile," said he.

"It isn't necessary," Miss Benton said quietly.

John, however, had already left. Miss Benton, slim hand resting on his desk, regarded Henry with quiet, unimpassioned curiosity.

"Henry," she said smoothly, "every one seems so anxious to-day that I shall have all the news. Mollie called up. She said that somebody had told her that somebody else had said—you know the whole absurd process, of course—that you were going to marry Gloria Clay to-morrow. Well, I—I wanted to ask you myself if that were the truth, and I wanted to be face to face with you when I asked it. Is it the truth?"

"It—yes."

Perhaps Miss Benton's lips tightened a trifle. That was all.

"Then I wish to congratulate you, Henry, for she is a very beautiful girl indeed. And I want to wish you both all the happiness and good luck in the world and—and I think that's all."

"No, it isn't, Miriam!" Henry said quickly, as he hurried to her. "I want to say—"

"Wait, please! Is it anything that can be said, with perfect propriety, to one girl by a man who is going to marry another girl to-morrow?"

"Well, maybe not, but—"

"Then please don't say it to me," smiled Miriam, as she turned away. "Good-by!"

"Well—we've said that before and—"

He paused before Miriam's sudden gaze. If ever eyes were fathomless, these were!

"But perhaps we didn't quite mean it before, Henry," said their owner. "And *now,* perhaps, we both do mean it, because we both know that it is—good-by!"

She opened the door and passed out of his life. Mr. Stannard returned almost at once, glanced at Henry and said, with amazing gentleness:

"Well—get to work, old man."

"Damn work!" choked Henry.

"I know, but—but you'll have to try to forget, Hank, and—"

"Damn trying to forget!" gasped the junior partner, and bit into his lips.

Mr. Stannard shrugged his shoulders and went on with his own task, considerately turning his back upon Henry. In the outer office, Ida seemed to be speaking:

"Going to let that vamp simply take your man away from you—from right under your nose? Well, excuse me, Miriam, but you're a plain nut!"

"What's she talking about?" hissed Henry.

"I dunno," grunted John.

"Well, you certainly are, honey! Your heart's breaking in two this very second and you know mighty well it is!" the apparent Mrs. Stannard said. "Your trouble's what they call *pride*—and it's a bum, false pride, girl, you take that from me!"

At this, of course, Miriam was sweeping out haughtily, Henry knew. Although if she was, she must have left the door open. No, Miriam was talking—even talking rapidly, albeit Henry could not catch one word.

"No!" said Ida's harsher voice, evidently in agreement. "It's because that kind of vamp knows she can get away with it! Well, nobody could take *my* man away from *me*, Miriam! Not if I had to kill her to stop her; and I could do that little thing, too!"

John grinned widely.

"Women are funny, ain't they?" he muttered comfortably.

"I want to know what's going on out there!" snapped Mr. Wells, as he rose and hurried forward.

He failed of gaining much information, however. Miriam was still there and she turned slowly and looked at him—and instantly he understood that she had found even another new way of looking at Henry Wells!

It was past any grasping of Henry's. He knew that she had altered most peculiarly, though. Miriam, always erect, was even more erect than usual; and the keen light in her eye was new. There was something elemental, something ominous, something—well, he did not know just what, but he did know that it startled him greatly. Why, Miriam, although still as lovely, looked like a primitive, savage woman!

Now, without a word, she had left.

"What do you suppose—" Henry began.

"What's the use of supposing, where women are concerned?" grinned the married man, and devoted some minutes to his work before: "Oh, Hank! We'll have to stay late. Do you mind if I go out to dinner first?"

"Not at all."

"I'd like to take the kid down to that Italian joint and then we'll have to gun up a place to live for awhile, till we decide just where to settle. I'm not going to take her to that bunch in the boarding house."

"Go ahead," Henry sighed.

"Well, I guess we'll start now then," said the senior partner. "It's about six." And he opened the door with a gay: "Oh, honey!"

Oh, honey failed to answer. Mr. Stannard took another step or two.

"Oh, Ida!" he called. "Well, that's funny, Henry. She's gone."

"Where to?"

"How do I know? She took her hat and jacket, too. I don't see why she went off like that without saying anything."

"Well, I can't help you," Henry sighed absently, for he was doing his very best to become absorbed in his work.

"Well—I'll have to wait for her, I suppose," Mr. Stannard grunted.

And so he returned to his desk and went on with his letters; and thus, for all of forty minutes, he did his waiting; until suddenly:

"Say! That kid's gone home alone to break the news and try to square us!" he cried. "My—my Lord! They'll butcher her! They'll—"

He snatched the telephone toward him shakily. He spoke, also shakily. Presently, he thrust back the instrument and scowled deep concern.

"That's mighty peculiar!" he said. "She isn't home. That was her sister Kittie—and Kittie's a good kid. She wouldn't lie to me."

"Did she go out with Miriam?" Henry asked sharply.

"No, she was there after Miriam left—a little while, anyway. Do you suppose she's been hurt anywhere around the streets?"

"No. Every one knows her around here."

"All the same, it's doggone peculiar!" said Mr. Stannard.

"Let's get on with the job," said Henry.

The senior partner controlled himself and sat down again. Seven o'clock struck presently—and half past seven. The day had been one of unseasonable warmth and it seemed to be growing even warmer as evening waxed. Distantly, too, there were rumbles of thunder—dull, sinister rumbles, that hinted at an impending disturbance of some magnitude.

Eight o'clock struck. John thrust back his chair with a loud creak. Henry, at this unexpected sound, jumped bodily out of his own.

"Say! I can't sit here another second like this!" he cried. "I've got a feeling in my bones that something's *wrong!*"

"What d'ye mean?" Mr. Stannard demanded, in the oddest rasp.

"Those two girls went off together, some-

where or other. They—Johnny, I never saw Miriam look as queer as that before. I mean, when they were talking about Gloria, out there."

"You don't think they've gone to blackjack her?" the senior partner laughed.

"I don't know what I think! But I've got a horrible hunch—"

"Piffle! If Miriam's with Ida, she's all right, Henry. Ida's too tender and gentle a little soul ever to—"

"She didn't sound so blamed gentle when she was talking out there. She—Johnny, I'm going to call up Miriam. I can't stand this any longer."

"Well, if you do, ask her if she saw anything of Ida after she left here!" requested Mr. Stannard and, despite the self-control on which he so prided himself, came near to biting off one finger-nail in its entirety.

So Henry Wells gripped his own telephone and hoarsely demanded the number of Miriam's home. Distantly, the thunder rolled again, and more heavily. Mr. Stannard began work on another nail. He may have been hungry.

"Yes! Hello!" Henry barked. "I want to talk to Miss Miriam—yes! What? Well, was any one with her then? Yes. Yes. Did she say when she'd be in? Well—no. No message," Henry sighed.

"Well? Well? Ida there?"

Henry looked up at his partner with a pale, peculiar little smile.

"She went home with Miriam, two hours ago," he reported. "They took Miriam's car and went off together in a rush, the maid said. They didn't say where they were going or when they'd be back."

"They didn't even wait there for dinner?"

"Apparently not. The girl says Ida came down in a thick coat of Miriam's and Miriam herself wore another. They—they were going somewhere, John!"

Mr. Stannard abandoned his meal and threw up both hands.

"All right! Out with it, Henry! D'ye honestly think that they—they went out to do some damage to Mrs. Clay?"

"I give it up!" shuddered Henry. "Of course, Miriam's the sweetest, gentlest thing alive and she wouldn't hurt a fly, ordinarily, and Ida's just a little kid and a girl, too. But women are darned funny, John. They—well, they seem to go to lengths sometimes that'd never occur to a man, even. And then, coming right down to cases, Johnny, and making no more bones about plain speaking, I know exactly how I'd feel if any one—any girl—had done the things to me that Miriam thinks I've done to her, with some one man responsible. I could go out and kill him in a second and laugh over the job!"

"Oh, Ida'd never let her—"

"Never let her!" Henry echoed savagely, as a flash of lightning showed above the dim office illumination for an instant. "Ida was the one who suggested it!"

"Well—well—call up Gloria then!" Mr. Stannard barked. "Have done with this damned twaddle—make sure she's all right and then we'll start out and see if we can find the girls. Call up!"

Henry obeyed, sitting grim-lipped and silent through one minute—through two and then through four minutes and—

"What?" he said, and then: "All right!" And he hung up the phone and stood up, ashen now, rather than merely pale. "Nobody—answers out there, Johnny!" he said. "The girl says she's had a lot of calls for that number during the last hour and it hasn't answered once!"

"Crash!" remarked a thunderbolt, quite near Burnstown. Mr. Stannard started so sharply that his teeth clicked!

"She's simply not answering the phone!" he stated. "All the same, maybe we'd better get out there and—and—"

"Arthur's old raincoat's over in the closet here," said Henry Wells, from the depths. "Better put it on, John. I'm going to wear mine."

Silently, the senior partner accepted the garment. Silently, the junior partner switched off all lights but one and closed the windows. Silently, and with a great deal of speed, they made their way to the still area of lower Main Street; and while Mr. Wells locked the door Mr. Stannard stepped into the firm's rather decrepit car and started the motor.

Aye, and they even whizzed silently up Main Street, as big drops began to spatter

on the windshield and the wind began to howl through Burnstown. Henry was cold. For an evening so very close and humid, he was amazingly cold. His feet and legs seemed to be a mass of chills and his hands were like ice. And he was a bundle of live nerves, too. Why, when that elderly man with the upturned collar and bowed head started across the street, Henry shrieked aloud and gripped the side of the window, although they had not come within twenty feet of the elderly man. John Stannard, who was, of course, much better poised, commented upon this with a string of profanity that would have shamed a mule-driver—and was hardly aware that he had even spoken!

Now they were spinning through the residential part of town and trees were swaying and water was hammering on the streets and people were running madly for their homes and—Henry huddled down and stifled another yell. If the next bit of lightning came any nearer than *that* one, they'd never get to Gloria's!

Although they seemed to be almost there now. John had turned down the shadowy square, with its big, old trees; now John was turning up the drive and Henry shut his teeth and peered ahead. There was no sign of light about the place—no sign of life. Their headlights flashed for an instant on the garage door, which was closed and padlocked. Their headlights then settled on the front door of the home, as John stopped the car.

The door was wide open, swinging in the wind!

"Well, from—from—from the looks of that, I guess we're not chasing any false alarm!" Henry chattered as he leaped out.

Mr. Stannard was at his heels. Mr. Stannard, oddly enough, stopped short on the top step and looked at Henry, just as Henry was looking at him.

"Well—keep your nerve with you, Hank!" Mr. Stannard advised as he stepped into the living room.

Several seconds he fumbled about in the gloom. Then, and not without a little gasp, he found the switch and turned on the lights, as Henry slammed the door and waited, tense as any fiddle string. So, for a moment, they stood and looked about—and there was another mighty crash of thunder near at hand—and at the very same second these two gentlemen yelped aloud and stared cold accusation at each other, and as quickly stared back at the scene before them.

A chair had been overturned. Over there, the corner of a rug was twisted over queerly—and over *there* another rug had been rolled entirely into a ball! More, there were scratches on the nicely polished floor—some deep, some faint, but new scratches, nevertheless, in every part of the room!

"Well, there was a fight!" Mr. Stannard said, thinly.

Henry, for the moment, could no more than nod. He was looking about numbly, at floor, at tables, now at the old mantelpiece across the room.

"And it must have been some scrap, too!" the senior partner pursued, hoasely. "Henry, I—I guess your hunch was right! I guess—where are you going?"

Mr. Wells did not reply immediately. He had sped across the room to the mantelpiece which had attracted his eye; now he was before it and reaching for something—and *now* he had tottered half-blindly toward the center table and the better light of the chandelier overhead, and in his hand was a shining revolver.

Face queerly contorted, hands trembling, he sniffed at the barrel of the thing and then glanced at the cylinder and winced. A jerk and he had broken the pistol at the joint, and on the table rolled three fresh cartridges and two empty shells! A moment, Henry stared down at them; then he faced his partner with a smile as awful, perhaps, as has ever come to human lips.

"Well—well, there's the answer!" he choked.

CHAPTER XVII.

SACRIFICE.

OUT in the wild night, thunder boomed—roared and rumbled for many seconds—boomed again, so heavily that the old house trembled. Blaze after blaze of lightning flared through the rain-

lashed windows; wind of hurricane violence shrieked and roared through the big trees about the house. And to all these manifestations of an irritated Nature, neither Henry Wells nor his partner gave an instant's heed.

That grisly little quintet of metallic bits upon the table held them in a spell literally hypnotic.

John managed first to drag his eyes from the sight. He nodded twice before he was capable of:

"Well, it—it looks as if something had happened, all right!"

"Yes!" Henry said, very quietly, and stared on.

"And Ida's been dragged into it!" John cried suddenly. "My little kid's been dragged into this, Henry! That crazy woman came out here and shot Mrs. Clay down, and if she's capable of that, she's capable of accusing my little Ida and—"

"Wait!" Henry Wells smiled. "There's something I want to say before you go any farther with that stuff, John!"

He reached for the cartridges and gathered them up. He squinted down the empty cylinder, located the two sections from which shots had been fired and fitted back into them the empty shells. He replaced the fresh cartridges, too, and then dropped the revolver into his own hip pocket—and smiled again.

We have seen Henry in various degrees of perturbation. Mainly, the causes of his perturbation have been, at least relatively unimportant. But now something of the utmost importance seemed to have taken place; and in the whole of stormswept Burnstown that evening there was probably not one person so utterly calm as this same Henry Wells!

His hands had ceased their trembling; the rest of his anatomy was steady as any rock; the smile with which he favored the senior partner could never have been more quiet on the laziest afternoon at the office.

"Johnny," said he, "get this one point settled in your mind! Er—something pretty awful has happened here, but no woman did it. *I did it!*"

"Huh?"

"*I* did it!" Henry repeated, incisively. "We'll work out the finer points later on, Johnny. For the present, just remember this: I got to thinking over the fact that I was going to marry Gloria and didn't want to do it!

"I talked it over with you at the office; and I'd got a bottle of whisky somewhere and was drinking. You tried to stop me and couldn't. Pretty soon, I'd worked myself into a fury and I took this gun out of a drawer in my desk. *You saw me take it*—remember that! You heard me say I was coming out here to shoot Gloria and you tried to stop me and I threatened you with this gun. And then I came out here and killed her! Is that all clear in your head?"

There was something strangely soft about John's smile.

"I hear you say it, anyway, you old fool," he said. "But if you think for a second that I'm going to perjure myself for the sake of seeing you hanged for a crime you never committed, you've got another—"

"No, I haven't another guess coming!" Henry cried, and strode down upon him with eyes flashing. "That's the truth, and you stick to it! Because if you don't, Johnny, you'll get these three other bullets. and that's not a threat or a promise; that's an oath!"

"Well, all right, Henry," the senior partner said, gravely. "Maybe—I don't know. We'll have to see. It might be just as well, first you know, to make sure that something of the kind really has happened. We—we'd better look around a bit."

Henry straightened up and shook himself.

"That's true. There isn't much doubt about what we're going to find. The only question is, where we'll find it. I'll look in the kitchen, John."

Lips tight, he hurried away. Somewhere, a switch clicked and a thin ray of light shone in a doorway; and gazing at this thin streak Mr. Stannard quite literally held his breath. However, Henry was back now, expression quite unchanged.

"Nothing there," he said. "Everything's in order."

"Um-um? Henry!"

"What?"

"Be a trifle calmer! I mean, drop some

of the heroic stuff and be yourself. There's been a row here, but that doesn't necessarily mean murder. I've been looking all over the floor and the furniture and there isn't a sign of blood anywhere."

Henry's preternaturally keen eyes swept the place.

"That doesn't mean much," he said cheerily. "She may have been wearing a heavy coat when it happened, or something of the kind. A bullet's not like a knife, you know."

"Well, I don't know that it ever occurred to me, because I've never specialized in messy murders—but at that, I suppose you're right," said Mr. Stannard. "Do you suppose she—do you suppose anything untoward happened up above?"

"That's what I've been wondering. The fight, naturally, started in here and Gloria probably ran upstairs to escape. Are there scratches on the stairs?"

"Plenty of 'em, Henry," the senior partner said dubiously. "Looks as if a regiment of soldiers with hob-nailed boots might have fought it out there."

"We'll look upstairs," the altered Henry said briefly.

Mr. Stannard followed without visibly bubbling enthusiasm. He paused, indeed, at the foot and smiled in a strained way.

"Y'know, I've seen a lot of stairs in my time," said he, "but in all my life I never saw a pair of stairs I wanted to climb so little as I do these. I—all right, I'm coming!"

The upper hallway was entirely dark. In a rear chamber, though, a light was burning brightly and the door was all but closed. Even the new Henry shuddered a little.

"I'll do the investigating in there," he said. "You turn on the lights in the other rooms and—John!"

"Well?"

"If—if you find anything, keep quiet. I mean just tell me and then get out and tip off the police. I'm going to be discovered crouching beside—beside whatever you find."

Without comment, Mr. Stannard opened the door nearest him, scratched a match and hunted the switch. Henry steeled himself and advanced upon the door of the fatal chamber. Well enough did he know the sight that awaited him. As well, too, did he know that the actual blame was all his own. If he had never gone to Gower's party—if he had never sampled Gower's bedevilled punch—if he had never—just here the most deafening crash of all set the house to shivering again and put an end to Henry's introspective tour. Rain roared down upon the roof; the windows rattled wildly; and Henry Wells walked boldly in!

An instant, his eyes closed and he turned extremely sick. Another, and he had forced them open and was looking feverishly for—it. Still another, and Henry breathed again, for "it" was not in sight at least. There had been a considerable commotion in here, to be sure; the closet was open; a drawer from the dresser lay overturned on the floor, with divers feminine odds and ends scattered all about.

The bed was rumpled, too; but in spite of all this, everything but the inner corners of the big closet was in plain sight and there was no sign of the mortal part of Gloria Clay. Henry crossed to the closet and gazed inward—and sighed. The battle had extended even to this point, for shoes were everywhere and in wildest disorder; but there was no hint of Gloria.

"Is—is—she in here?" asked Mr. Stannard from the doorway.

"No."

"Well, she isn't anywhere else, Henry," said the senior partner, more steadily. "These other four rooms look as if nobody'd been in 'em for months, except to dust. No attic here, is there? No, I remember. No back stairs either. Well-planned old shack this is, Henry; sometimes I wonder why we never sold it to Fosbrey or old man Mills or Simon—"

"Never mind selling it now; nobody'll ever live in it again when this has leaked out," Henry said, bitterly and impatiently. "John, the fight went on in here, too!"

"I see that. This must have been Mrs. Clay's room, eh? Hank! There isn't a sign of blood in here either."

"I don't believe that means a thing."

"Maybe it doesn't, but it's encouraging when a man's trying to grab at straws. Now, possibly—"

"Never mind the straws," sighed Henry Wells, and seated himself wearily on the bed. "Let's figure out just what did happen. Ida must have egged Miriam on to a point where—"

"*Ida?*" Mr. Stannard cried. "I tell you—"

"All right. Then let's say that Miriam simply went out of her head; *I'd* do that if the cases were reversed, John. She came out here, literally insane. I imagine she may have attacked Gloria and that Gloria tried to get away—and didn't, because Miriam had brought a pistol with her. Then, in whatever room it may have happened, Miriam—Miriam fired two shots into her!" Henry shuddered and shut his eyes again for an instant. "What happened after that?"

"I don't know. But I do know that my little Ida never—"

"How would *you* try to hide a body?" Henry asked, earnestly.

"My dear boy, believe me, I wouldn't have one to hide in the first place!" said the senior partner. "I'd—"

"They must have dragged the poor little thing downstairs after—after it happened," Henry went on, doggedly. "That's what scratched up the stairs. Then—yes! They dragged her outdoors and never came back in here. That's why we found the door open! We'll have to look outside, John!"

"You think they tried to bury her?"

"I'm afraid I do."

"Let me tell you one thing, Henry!" said Mr. Stannard. "I don't know what kind of a girl this was you were engaged to, because I never knew Miriam very well. Maybe she had it in her to go around shooting pretty kids like Gloria and burying 'em in gardens. I doubt it. But I can tell you right now that I know Ida, and if Ida was ever mixed up in anything like that, she'd drop dead on the spot—so if you don't find Ida lying around, you'll never find the other."

"Come and help me look!"

"In this rain?"

"Rain! Rain!" Henry laughed wildly. "What difference does rain make, at a time like this?"

"It makes a lot of difference to me, Henry, because I catch cold darned easy," said the senior partner, who was becoming more and more himself. "Anyhow, I think you're all wrong. I don't believe any one was killed around here. Maybe they kidnaped Gloria?"

"Why were the shots fired?"

"Why not to scare her?"

"John," said Henry, sadly, "if that had happened, the bullets would have struck the walls or the floors or the ceiling, wouldn't they? Well, there isn't a mark to show where one of those bullets stopped! Will you come with me? There's a lantern in the kitchen."

"I will not!" Mr. Stannard snapped. "I want to go downstairs and think a while, Henry. I want to dope out what's become of Ida. Something's happened to that kid, you know! She'd never stay away from me like this unless—"

Henry had departed. Mr. Stannard followed more slowly and reached the lower floor in time to see his partner crossing the living-room very grimly, lighted lantern swinging at his side. Now Henry had gone, out into the roaring, howling night.

Rather more than half an hour had elapsed when he reappeared, water streaming from his rubber coat, his hat a mere oozing pulp. There was something baffled about Henry, and still something faintly relieved.

"There's not a sign of—what are you phoning about?" he began.

"I called up Kittie, of course," Mr. Stannard rapped out. "She hasn't heard anything from Ida *yet!*"

"Well, she's not around this place," Henry said. "I've been over every inch of it. There hasn't been any—any digging, so far as I can tell with the ground soaked up this way. Gloria's car's in the garage and there's nothing else in there; I poked the lantern through the window and looked. What—what *does* it all mean?"

"Means this, to me!" John said sharply. "I've been thinking. I think your woman went wild and did something reckless; you're right so far. And I think she was afraid to let Ida loose for fear she'd tell; I think she scared the poor little kid into sticking with her."

"Perhaps," Henry said moodily.

"And I think I want to find my wife!" the senior partner shouted. "She's no business being mixed up in this!"

"Well, I wish I could help you," his associate sighed. "That gun, you know. It might have gone off once by some accident—but not twice. I'm beginning to believe that the girls were panic-stricken after—after it happened. There's room enough in the back of Miriam's car for a trunk, almost. I think they put poor little Gloria in there and just drove off, looking for a place—you know."

"And when they're pinched, Ida'll be equally guilty in the eyes of the law!"

"Ida put the idea into Miriam's head, John."

"That's all damned nonsense!" the senior partner cried. "That—"

"Well, Johnny," Mr. Wells smiled forlornly, "somehow I don't believe that this is any time for you and me to get into a violent argument. Is there any use staying here?"

"Whether there is or not, I'm not staying. I'm going to find Ida!"

"Where?"

"Well, I—I don't know just where, Henry," Mr. Stannard said less forcefully. "I don't know where to look first."

"Then let's lock up here and go down to the office. That's the place they'll call up first, when they get their senses back. After all, they're just two girls, John. The fury's going to die out and they'll yell for help. Miriam will, anyway."

"Well, I hope she hasn't put my wife, too, beyond help by that time," Mr. Stannard said savagely. "That's a dangerous woman, that lady of yours! That—"

"Do you want to stop anywhere for dinner?" Henry broke in.

"No. Do you?"

"I never want to look at food again," Henry Wells said. "Come!"

The thunder was still booming steadily; lightning flared over deserted, drowning streets. The wind howled on and the rain itself, apparently, had settled in for an all-night drenching downpour. The official motor of Stannard & Wells wheezed and splashed and skidded about for a little before consenting to roll down the drive, but at last they were heading toward Main Street again, and the silence in the car was quite as grim and complete as on the uptown trip.

So far as any sign of life was concerned, their own office block might just have risen from the bed of the ocean. They entered silently, nervously, and shook off what moisture would consent to be shaken off; nervously they made for the dimly-lighted office in the rear—but here at least all things were quite as they had left them.

"Are we—just going to sit and wait?" Mr. Stannard inquired.

"We are, unless you've something better to suggest," said Henry. "We'll get to work and try to keep our minds busy. What time is it now?"

"Little after ten."

"Well, I'll try Miriam's house again, then, and if she isn't home now something *is* up!" said the junior partner. Mr. Stannard walked the floor, now glaring at the back of his head, now peering anxiously; but all that Henry had to report when he had finished his telephoning was: "Something's up!"

"Haven't they heard from her?"

"They have not. The girl says her aunt's nearly distracted—and Miriam's mighty careful of her aunt's feelings, too," Henry muttered and ran his fingers through the thick hair of his weary head. "Say! Are you really able to do any work?".

"I'll be banging my brains out against this wall in another ten minutes if I don't try," said the senior partner, with conviction. "I can't just wait—and wait!"

"You're right," said Henry, and turned to his desk.

The astonishing thing is that, after whatever haphazard fashion, they were able to force themselves back to the real estate business.

There was, of course, nothing else to be done; habit, also, helped considerably. Rather luckily, Mr. Wells discovered a nine-page communication on a subject which, in the dear long ago, had interested him tremendously. He read it and shut his teeth and set about some figuring. John chanced on a scathing letter from his

deadliest enemy among realtors and promptly flared up, even to the point of hauling out his private typewriter and composing an equally scathing reply.

Again, these were the first few days of the month, when there was plenty of routine clerical work to be done. Midnight was booming, rain was slashing and slapping at the front show window, when John lugged in several of Mr. Tibbins's books and several of Mr. Gower's files.

Henry's chair came about slowly, still later, and his haggard smile rested on his partner.

"Quarter past one—and not a word," he said.

"I know it."

"I'm going to try Miriam's house again."

"Go ahead! Ask if Ida—"

"All right—all right!" snapped Henry Wells, and picked up the telephone.

There was a considerable wait this time. Then some one seemed to be shouting into the phone as Henry spoke, and he winced and removed it an inch or two from his head and Mr. Stannard caught:

"Ah say she foamed in round midnight an' say she ain't comin' home t' night an' she di'n' say when she was comin' home! Wassat? No, ah dunno wheh she foamed in fum, 'cept it was a long distance call. No, ah dunno no moh 'bout it. No time o' night t' call a person outa bed!"

And there was a sharp click and Henry glanced at his partner.

"You heard it?"

"Yes. You didn't ask about Ida."

This Henry ignored completely.

"John, I'm all in," he said. "I'm going to try to get a couple of hours sleep."

"I wish to Heaven I could do that!" John said bitterly. 'I could no more close my eyes than I could fly, with that poor little kid a prisoner in an automobile, with a crazy woman and a body!"

"I'd advise you to try it, anyway," said the junior partner. "I'll take the big armchair and stick my legs on another. You take the couch, if you feel like it; there's more of you than there is of me."

At three sleep had not yet come to Henry. But it had come to Mr. Stannard. Sprawled in unlovely profusion on the couch, the larger partner slumbered mightily and noisily—poor old cuss, Henry reflected, with his Ida and his bluster and all the rest of him! Well, later in the morning he'd have to be convinced of his duty in the way of backing up Henry's confession.

The confession, the junior partner had now decided, was to be made about the time Miriam was caught and arrested. And he had devised a satisfactory and tricky little twist for it, too! Miriam, he had no doubt, would herself confess the plain truth. All right, let her! It was Henry Wells's intention, at about that time, to come forward in the most melodramatic way possible and give himself up, making all the oaths they required to support the statement that he himself had done the dastardly act and that Miriam was only trying to save him by sacrificing herself. He could dress that up and fill in the details so completely that the most astute prosecutor in the world would never be able to break down his story. Now, for one thing, Henry reflected, as the clock struck four and Mr. Stannard turned over with a long groan and made himself more comfortable.

The little green devil (oddly, he looked exactly like Jeanne Dayton's mother and he wore a long kimona like Wallace Gower's and he was streaming with water) poked Henry's shoulder for the last time. Patience under this kind of treatment ceased to be a virtue and Henry wrenched himself away—and awoke with a sharp little yip of pain.

The clock informed him that it was now half-past eight; sun was streaming through the windows, too; but the matter of most immediate interest to Henry Wells was his own anatomy. From head to foot he was one stiffened pain! His injured knee hurt, his shoulder screamed; there seemed to be fifty other spots, scattered all over him that had each its individual ache. Distracting excitement removed for a while, one apparently did not smash grape-arbors and leap from express trains without certain definite consequences.

Still, they didn't matter very much, Henry concluded, as he arose and tried to limber up the joints. Here was another brilliant day, of the sort on which they usually did so much happy business—and

before that same sun had gone down in the west Henry Wells would be locked up in the county jail, a self-confessed murderer, held without bail for the perfunctory work of the Grand Jury and the trial courts!

Yet he was not disturbed. A dozen new details had anchored themselves in his mind before sleep at last claimed him; in his own artless way, Henry was now entirely certain that he could prove his guilt beyond any reasonable doubt. That was enough. He felt remarkably sane this morning.

He considered John Stannard, whose tortured mind still permitted him to sleep soundly. At least they'd better start the day with food! Henry sighed, telephoned the quick lunch place on the next block for rolls and coffee, and went about such a toilet as one may make in a small wash-basin before a cracked mirror. He woke John when the tray arrived.

It will be assumed, of course, that John protested at having been allowed to sleep while his little Ida suffered. He did so volubly, noisily, beginning almost with his first waking breath. Hot coffee, crisp rolls, did something to restore his poise in one way and to upset it in another way, for as he set down his cup Mr. Stannard said:

"Well—no word from Joe Mears or Dave either, is there?"

"Lord!" muttered Henry. "I'd forgotten all about 'em!"

'I hadn't. You know what's going to happen to me, don't you? They're a pair of hulking brutes, Henry; they're nearer animal than human! If they haven't found the dear old clergyman during the night, they'll be in here to finish me. And particularly with Ida missing and—"

"Johnny, do you really believe that's so?" Henry asked earnestly.

"Do I believe it?" the senior partner cried hotly and indignantly. "I cer—"

"Well, then, old man, before anything like that happens, would you mind helping me dope out some kind of affidavit, swearing that I killed Gloria Clay and—"

He, too, failed to complete the sentence. The outer door had opened and heavy steps had entered; and now:

"Hey, Stannard! You here, Stannard?" a great voice boomed.

The senior partner winced, just once, and then smiled remarkably at his old friend.

"I'm sorry, Henry, but I guess there isn't going to be any time for that now," he said. "I think that's Dave's voice!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CALLER OR TWO.

TO his credit be it said that with no hesitation whatever John Stannard arose and walked through the door of the private office. His head was up, too, as befits the head of a gentleman going to his doom; but with the first step into the outer office—just, in fact, as Henry caught up with him—Mr. Stannard relaxed with one small, relieved puff.

"Oh!" said he. "I thought—say, who are you?"

"City marshal," responded a person built to match his voice. "You Stannard?"

"I am."

"All this stuff," pursued the marshal, and included the entire outer office in a sweep of his arm and then consulted a memorandum. "Six desks, eleven chairs, eight rugs, two settees, forty feet of rail and two gates! Nineteen hundred and three dollars and forty cents due Jennings & Cary on the lot!"

"Well?"

"Well, d'ye want to pay this bill now or shall I take away the stuff?" the marshal asked, astonishingly.

"Neither!" snapped Mr. Stannard. "I don't get the idea of this, but it's a pretty thin bluff. That account is covered by a note and the note isn't due—and it's none of your damned business in any case. Get out of here."

The caller smiled, using only one side of his mouth.

"It's a lot of my business, brother," said he. "I've got a court order here to collect or take the goods. Look it over!"

He thrust forward a folded paper and Mr. Stannard snatched it and examined it scowlingly; then:

"Well, you can get away with murder in this town, if you're in right with the authorities!" he snarled. "I'd forgotten

that Will Cary was Jim Bentick's brother-in-law. There's nothing legal about this."

The visitor smiled and expanded his chest, suggesting that a hogshead was concealed beneath his shirt, and glanced over his shoulder toward the doorway, where waited four other gentlemen of similar build.

"That's signed by Judge Martin Stevens, and that's plenty good enough for me," said he. "It was handed me to look after. Well, how about it? Do you want to come across or shall I remove the stuff?"

"You might just as well start removing the stuff," Mr. Stannard said coldly. "Of course I'll bring suit against Jennings & Cary for this—and against you, too, if you remove one piece of paper that doesn't belong to them. But if you dare lay a finger on that stuff, go to it!"

Then he laughed derisively and, thrusting Henry ahead of him, returned to the private office and slammed the door—and listened, with greatest interest, and then grunted, for it was quite apparent that the marshal was not lacking in daring!

Heavy feet were thudding all over the store. Things were bumping, banging, scraping. There were countless sounds of light rapping, as drawers were emptied on the floor. There were several violent raspings and creakings as, apparently, sections of rail were pried loose.

"You might almost think," Henry observed, "that some one had a grudge against this firm."

"Oh, well—I never liked that gray furniture, anyway," the senior partner reflected. "Cary stung us on the rugs, too, Henry. If I had it all to do over again I'd put in light oak and just a fine grade of linoleum on the floor."

"Yes, but we haven't it all to do over again."

"I don't believe we have," sighed Mr. Stannard.

And now, after another interval, the outer door slammed and grave-like silence settled on the place. Silently, the partners opened their door again and considered the ruin. Piles of paper were on the floor—and telephones and typewriters—and that was really about all that remained of the business home of Stannard & Wells.

"I wonder how they came to overlook the waste baskets and the water cooler?" mused the senior partner. "Oh, well—it doesn't matter."

"It—it doesn't seem possible that we're really through!" Henry muttered.

"Well, if we've got Bentick after us in earnest—and we seem to have—we're through, Henry. Everything else apart, we're finished."

"And it's my fault!" Henry choked.

"No, it isn't, old man," said Mr. Stannard, and threw an arm around his shoulder. "It's more mine. If I'd never nagged you into mixing with people it never would have happened."

"I tried, Jack. I tried to mix and serve the firm, but—"

"Well, you sure did some of the most remarkable mixing a man ever—answer that phone, Hank, will you?" said the senior partner, and turned white as his associate. "I—I swear I haven't got the nerve."

The receiver wavered about in the general region of Henry's left ear.

"Y—yes?" said Henry.

"Peter Fosbrey speaking," said a curt voice. "That you, Wells?"

"It—is," said Henry.

"Stay where you are. I'm coming right over," said the voice.

"Fosbrey," reported Henry.

"The—the sheriff of the county?"

"The same, John," said the junior partner, and held out his hand. "Good-by, old man."

"But he can't be coming after you when—"

"Oh, no. Miriam's been taken, of course. Maybe she's hysterical and talking about me; maybe Ida told 'em to send for me. That doesn't matter, one way or the other. I'm going to confess as soon as he gets here, Johnny, and you'll have to vouch for my confession."

"But—"

"Johnny, I've never asked many favors of you. Well, I ask this one. You help me prove that I'm guilty or—"

"P-s-s-t!" said Mr. Stannard, and glanced down the store. "Yes, it's Fosbrey. He must have flown."

"All right," said Henry Wells, and went

on lighting his cigar with exaggerated unconcern. "Keep quiet till we get the lay of things, John."

The sheriff, who was, in fact, a rather small and genial appearing man of fifty, paused wonderingly in the store.

"Looks as if you were going out of business," he laughed.

"We're making—er—a few changes," John responded.

"Are, hey?" said the sheriff, and arrived in the office. "Well—have to get down to my business in a hurry. Haven't got more than three minutes. I'll sit over here by you, Wells."

"Oh, I—"

"What I came to talk about—I was just across the street in Fox's office," the sheriff clicked on. "Y' know, we were South most of the winter, and when we came back Mrs. F. got after me, hot-foot, to attend to it—and then we had to rush off to Utah, and I didn't hear another thing from her, all the time we were there. That's the way with the women! They get an idea and hang on to it."

He paused and stared slightly at the partners. There really was something odd about the way they were both leaning forward and gazing at him.

"And—er—what was the idea?" Henry said with forced calm.

"Eh? Oh, of course. Why, Finch's old old house, Wells—the old Ferris place. Y' know, Mrs. F. went through it three times and she was crazier about it each time. We got in last night, and I had to swear I'd see you first thing this morning. So! Is it sold yet or not?"

"Well—well—no, I believe not," said Mr. Stannard, and managed to bring back his best frown. "Is it, Henry?"

"Er—not that I remember," Henry said mechanically. "No! No, it isn't."

"Old skinflint take anything less than twenty-two thousand?"

"Not a cent, I believe."

"Well, he can't lug any of it into the next world with him, drat his parsimonicus old hide! That's one consolation," muttered the sheriff as he slapped his check book to the desk. "However, I'm buying the house! I—say, I can't wait for any formal contracts now; I'll pick them up tomorrow or Monday. I'm going to leave you a thousand dollars to close the deal, Wells, and you scribble me off a temporary receipt. That all right?"

"Oh, that — that's — all right," said Henry as cold fingers reached for his pen.

And shortly, after an outward rush, the door closed on Mr. Fosbrey. Fishily, almost, did Henry smile at his partner.

"Well, *can you beat it?*" he muttered. "When selling that place meant everything, the whole world had to turn upside down to stop us! Now that it doesn't matter, we've sold it!"

"Yep," grunted the senior partner, for his mind was working back to more familiar channels. "Hank, I've got to get out and hunt for Ida."

"Wait a little while," said Henry, and shivered. "We're going to hear from them pretty soon. They can't get very far in daylight—like that, you know. Something's going to happen before noon."

"Well, I'm not going to wait till noon to—"

Henry's strange, gasping laugh stopped him.

"John! Finch was going to give us that Ridge job on the strength of our good reputation," he said. "We've never even heard from him, have we?"

He bowed his head; the laugh ended in another shiver. John sighed heavily.

"I guess there was nothing he cared to say, Henry," he muttered. "Gosh! Wouldn't it have been wonderful, putting that over?"

"We'd have had a hundred thousand clear apiece at the very least! And instead of that one of us is—is going to the gallows, I guess!"

"Yes, and the other one of us is going to be shot on sight if he doesn't get out and do something to stave it off and find his wife and disappear with her till that blamed minister can be located. I'm going to get out and—"

Here Mr. Stannard hitched about, with the odd, nervous jerk that was growing quite habitual, and gazed down the store.

"Well, who the dickens is *this?*" he queried softly.

"Policeman?" Henry hissed.

"No, some fat old party. He—why, it's old Gamaliel Mayne himself!"

"Oh! Finch's lawyer," the junior partner grunted. "He's just come in to take Finch's property out of our hands."

"Well! Looks as if you were going out of business!" said a thick, elderly voice.

"Oh, we're just—ah—making a few changes," Mr. Stannard responded. "Come right in, Mr. Mayne."

"I'm coming—I'm coming," the other assured him with his good natured chuckle.

He waddled in, then—a rather comical figure unless one happened to know that he was the richest and one of the most prominent lawyers in town. His head was fringed with straggling hair; he wore spectacles which invariably tilted sidewise, and there were spots upon his vest; but he had a kindly eye and a charitable soul. If for no other reason, one knew that by the fact that he failed to break into denunciation of Stannard & Wells as he seated himself with a puff and laid the aged brief cases across his knees.

"Well—I was going to ask you boys to come over to my place, and then I was passing and I had the things with me, and I thought I might as well stop. U-mum!"

They nodded.

"Well, you got on the right side of Joel Finch, hey?"

They nodded again, weakly. It was coming. Although it did not seem to be coming very rapidly. Mr. Mayne was smiling and opening his case.

"Too bad about Joel's daughter, wasn't it?" he queried. "Guess it isn't serious, but it scared him and Mrs. Finch. Worse of having an only child."

"W-what happened to Joel's daughter?" the senior partner asked.

"Hoh! Didn't you hear? Why—why, she's in Italy, you know. Took quite sick, too, and they cabled for him and Mrs. Finch. Yep. She called him up at my office—Mrs. Finch did—just about as he'd finished giving his orders on this stuff of yours, day before yesterday afternoon. They motored right over to the junction and got the night train and sailed last evening. However," chuckled Mr. Mayne, "I guess he left things in good hands, hey? Yours and mine!"

"Oh!" said Henry brilliantly.

"Yes, sir, you got on the right side of Joel. He said he'd pepped you up quite a bit, he thought. Now, then, one question I have to ask first: Have you or have you not sold the old Ferris place for him?"

"Eh?" said Henry. "Oh, yes. Sold it to Fosbrey this morning. Here's his check and—"

"Haw, haw, haw, haw!" the visitor cried delightedly and slapped his plump thigh. "Good for you, by golly! He said you would, though! Joel said it. Yes, sir. He said you would. Well, that's fine! That clinches it, of course. Now, let's see."

He drew out several documents and spread them on his knees.

"Well, now, I guess these are all in shape. They're the contracts giving you boys the whole job of developing and selling Joel's Ridge. Short and sweet, I made 'em, too, but I guess they cover everything. Look through 'em."

He sat back, humming contentedly. The partners read, seemingly, if not with full understanding; and as they read they thought and:

"Well, Mr. Mayne," John sighed, "I don't know that we shall be able to take this on after all. You see, some—er—things have came up unexpectedly since we talked to Mr. Finch, and we're pretty short of ready—"

"Oh, well! Oh, see here!" the lawyer protested. "You're not expected to finance any part of this, you know. Lord, no! Why, you can draw on me for anything up to fifty thousand dollars, right away. I've got Joel's authority for that. Send you over a check for that amount as soon as I get back to the office, if you like."

They gazed dizzily at one another, Henry and John.

"Well—er—that's fine," John managed. "But there's still another point: Mr. Finch was going to give us this largely because we've both always borne good reputations."

"Nothing happened to 'em lately, has there?" Mayne chuckled.

"You—you haven't heard anything?"

"Not a word."

"Well, Jim Bentick's—ah—circulating a lot of nasty gossip about us—about Henry, mostly, although I'll come in for mine, I suppose—and when it gets into the papers—"

"Bentick!" repeated the old gentleman and made it clear that, upon occasion, his absent eyes could grow extremely keen. "Funny! Say, I wouldn't worry about Bentick or the papers, either."

"Why not?"

"Well, there's two or three reasons, John. This is private information for the present, too, by the way. *I'm* the reasons! Bentick's bossed things around here too long. He's stolen too many thousands and helped too many crooks—and, generally speaking, he's ruled the whole roost when he ought to be in jail."

He nodded sagely and glanced down the store.

"I've collected enough evidence against Bentick, privately, to send him up for life. A scandal doesn't help a town, though. I'm intending to go to Bentick this afternoon and ask him to leave town for good. I figure he'll go out on the ten fifteen."

"Well, upon my soul!" gasped Henry.

"Yep. Sort of selfish in a way, maybe. I dunno. My boy Fred can't seem to get on in politics while Jim's around—and I've always aimed to see Fred in the United States Senate. Bought out the *Gazette* yesterday, by the way, to sort of help things along. So you needn't worry much about anything getting into the *Gazette*."

"And the *Chronicle* doesn't print scandal!" John said brokenly, for there seemed to be so many, many things this morning that might have been. "That would leave just the *Star*."

Another amiable rumble came from Mr. Mayne.

"So far's the *Star's* concerned, Johnny, I guess you don't have to lie awake about that, either. Sam Folger's owed me six thousand dollars this last three years and he hasn't paid a cent of interest since a year ago March. I imagine he'd do a favor for me if I asked it." And here Mr. Mayne rose bulkily. "Now, you fellows study over those contracts pretty careful and see if there's anything you want to suggest, and then bring 'em over to my office around three and we'll 'tend to the signing."

Henry smiled wanly.

"Well, we're much obliged to you, sir, but sooner or later you're bound to hear—"

"Henry, if I hear anything rough about you, or John, either, for that matter, I'll take the name of the party and start suit on my own account! Why, good Lord! Haven't I known you both since you were knee-high to a toad? G'-by, and be over there by three. I've got to see Bentick at four, even if he doesn't know yet what it's about."

He tucked his case under his arm and waddled down the store again. A minute dragged by while the partners still gazed at each other.

"Well, I thought that selling the house was about all the pure irony that could be packed into one day," muttered Henry Wells, "but this—this is the outside limit!"

"Yep."

"Why, we've got everything we wanted —*everything!* And we can't even reach out and touch it. Or I can't—you can, very likely."

"I? Possibly, if I'm not shot first."

"You're not going to be shot. And I'll find a way of getting Ida clear of the mess, too, Johnny. Fox & Fox will help with that. And when—"

"I guess so," snapped the senior partner, and headed toward the clothes closet. "Henry, honestly, I—I don't hear a word you're saying. I'm going crazy, wondering what's become of Ida, Hank. I can't sit around here any longer, waiting for news. I've got to go and hunt the kid!"

"But—"

"I tell you, I've got to!" said Mr. Stannard, almost in a shout, as he jammed on his hat. "I'll be back some time. If I can, and have anything to phone about, I'll call you up—if you're here, of course. But I've got to find Ida and—*why, here's Ida now!*" he ended from the doorway.

"A—a—alone?" Henry faltered.

Mr. Stannard did not even pause to answer; he had left with a cyclonic rush—and from out there came a sound of kissing—and a squeal or two—and a mumble in John's voice and:

"Why—why—it looks as if we were going out of business!" came in Ida's familiar tone.

"No, we're—er—just making a few changes!" said John. "To blazes with that! Where have you—"

Henry Wells tried hard to shut his teeth together and succeeded only in making them chatter; cold perspiration came to his brow and his hands turned clammy and his knees shook. Because Ida, evidently, was alone. He simply dare not rise and look and make sure that she was alone. But she was, fast enough, and that meant that Miriam Benton had been taken and—

"Is Henry down town?" Miriam's voice asked.

Mr. Wells shut his eyes and gripped the arms of his chair. He sought to rise—ah, and now he was rising; and even if he seemed incapable of any cyclonic rushes, at least he was making his way to the door.

And, now, with half the distance passed, Henry stopped. If it had been his intent to clasp Miriam in his arms, he seemed to abandon that plan. There was, so to speak, something about Miriam just now. For one thing, she was cool, sweet and serene as if—instead of having passed a night horrible beyond description she had just risen from a particularly pleasing breakfast in her own home. Not one hair of Miriam's seemed out of place; not a cloud was in her clear, steady eye. But for another thing, that same eye was not shimmering any very warm affection for Henry Wells.

"Good morning, Henry," said Miss Benton in the most casual way.

"G-good morning," said Henry Wells; and then his voice broke with a great cry of: "Miriam! Oh, Miriam, I—"

"No, please don't be demonstrative!" smiled the frigid Miss Benton, and waved him back. "I just stopped off for a moment on the way home—to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

Miss Benton smiled pleasantly, rather absently, too, at the books on John's desk.

"Why, mostly, Henry, to tell you that you're not going to marry your pretty little charmer to-day or any other day."

"Huh!"

"No, she's already married. She married George Dingman last evening at Cowans Falls, you know, and you'll find my name and Ida's on her marriage certificate if you ever happen to see it. Oh, you're curious, aren't you, Henry?" said Miss Benton with the same odd smile. "Well, I'll tell you all about it. You see, Henry, Ida suggested that it was really foolish to let her steal you—and *Ida was right!*"

"U-huh!" Henry said brilliantly.

"And Ida declared that the lady had been madly in love with George for a year or more—and she was right that time, too. We went to see George first, Henry; we arrived in the nick of time, too. He was just going to shoot himself, I believe. He said he was, at any rate."

"Why?"

"Why, he'd been hearing rumors, too, of course, and—"

"*That's* what was the matter with him yesterday, then," Henry cried.

Miss Benton raised her pretty brows.

"I don't know, I'm sure. That was what ailed him last night at all events. He had a gun. It seems that somebody used two of the bullets last week to kill George's favorite dog when he was taken sick, and George felt that it would be wonderfully fitting to put the other three or four bullets into himself. So I took the gun away from him and put it in my pocket, because I thought that—just possibly, you know—your little Gloria might need some persuading. I left the wretched thing at her house, by the way; I could feel it going off in my pocket every second!"

Now, Miss Benton smiled once more at the books. It is entirely impossible that a girl of her breeding could have smacked her lips; yet without ever the suggestion of a smack, Miss Benton contrived exactly that effect.

"Where was I, Henry?" she pursued. "Oh, yes—George. Well, we spent twenty minutes convincing George that the gossip was really all nonsense and that, if ever he intended to win Gloria, he'd have to make an awfully swift job of it. So he got into his car and trailed after us, and Ida and I got into my car, and off we went to see Gloria. And I will say for him, Henry, that he did make a swift job of it!

The lady informed us that she'd been in love with him all the time. Heigho!"

"Go on."

"Why, that's all, isn't it? We tried to show them, Ida and I, that if ever they expected to marry, it would have to be last night—and *not* in Burnstown, where *you* could turn up accidentally and wreck everything. Just about the time the tornado started, we made for Cowans Falls; and they were married, Henry," Miriam said sweetly, and considered the junior partner pensively. "She was rushed into it, perhaps; we gave her fifteen minutes to pack her trunk; the house looked as if a bomb had been exploded there when we left it, what with dragging her trunk around and all—but she's married now, Henry, to George! They're going all around the world, I believe. They plan to live in France for awhile and then see Egypt and—the Sahara, I think she said. She thought they might turn into desert Arabs, or something. I hope so!"

"But you—but you—last night—"

"Why, Ida and I stayed with your family at the Falls for the rest of the night," said Miss Benton. "I was afraid to risk driving back, with half the road washing out when we went over and the cloudburst still on. I must go home now and explain things."

The petrified effect was leaving Henry. He was on his feet now and advancing upon Miriam with outstretched arms.

"Honey!" he cried brokenly. "It's all right, after all! It's—"

Miss Benton retired.

"Of course it's all right, Henry. *She didn't get you!*" she said quickly. "But as matters between you and me are concerned, I'm afraid that nothing has changed and nothing will change. I mean that we have said good-by—forever."

"But, Miriam—"

"Not after that, Henry!" Miss Benton smiled, and turned toward the door.

"Hank!" cried the senior partner, and entered with Mrs. Stannard, encircled by his arms, bouncing after him. "They met Dave! He'd found the old bird, and it's all right."

"You're not—not going to be assassinated?"

"It looks that way, Hank."

Mrs. Stannard's sharp eye was upon Miriam.

"You've made it up, you two?" she queried.

"Oh, no," smiled Miss Benton.

Inside Henry Wells something was snapping. He did not know what—or why or how. But whatever it was, it was snapping. He had been through too much; now something was giving—snapping.

"You don't mean you're still sore on Henry? With *her* out of the way and everything?" Mrs. Stannard cried.

"Oh, perhaps you don't understand—" Miriam murmured, and flushed a trifle, and then looked steadily at Henry.

The something kept on snapping. It was more mysterious and ominous than ever now. It was just as if Henry's joints and his mental machinery and everything else inside him was clicking apart.

"H-Henry!" said Miss Benton.

"Ugh!" Henry managed.

And now there was a sudden rush, and Miss Benton's arms were fast around his neck and tears were trickling down Miss Benton's cheeks.

"Oh, Henry, it's only just because I love you so!" she cried. "Don't you know that, Henry? It's just because you're—you're my whole life, and I love you so!"

Three seconds, Henry looked gravely at her. Then the last something snapped.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!" cried Mr. Wells. "Haw, haw, haw, haw!"

"W-what?" Miriam faltered.

"Haw, haw, haw, haw!" roared the junior partner. "Ho, ho, ho, ho!"

"Has he—has he gone mad?" Miss Benton screamed.

"Not in a million years," said Ida Stannard. "He's just excited. Here! Put him down in the chair here, John. That's right. And don't get all fussed, Miriam. There's nothing really the matter with him. My brother Dave blew up just like that, the time he had the three fingers cut off. He'll be all right in a couple of minutes."

Even again, Ida was right!

THE END

The Smart Alec

By BEATRICE ASHTON VANDEGRIFT

WHAT'S the biggest snap on earth, I ask you?

Being a nightwatchman on the Arctic Circle where the day is six months long? Starting from the bottom when you're father's only boy and father's the President? Holding down the job as groom to a Mexican hairless?

Nope, there's one that makes all the others look like gingersnap without the ginger—the snap of being the town wit in a hick village where they're still debating as to whether chickens cross the road to make the world safe for pedestrians—where last season's jokes, like last season's straws, pass for new—where they think Cobb is a kind of a horse and George Ade a new-fangled soft drink.

Say, kidding one of these innocent, serious-minded and unsuspecting dumb-bells affords as much kick as sitting in front of a looking glass and telling yourself funny stories. There's simply no percentage. Copping off the title of Town Wit of Laughing Waters was as easy as it would have been for Robinson Crusoe to elect himself mayor. There was absolutely no competition.

And, as you must have guessed, I was *it*.

I had everybody in that humorless hamlet tongue-tied, talked out and trembling. They were afraid to say good-morning, good-evening or how do you do for fear that with such an innocent little snowball of a remark they'd start my tongue rolling into an avalanche of sarcasm.

Nonchalantly strolling into the general store of a bright morning I would turn the grocer green, start the customers charging for the door and get the checker players so woozy they were afraid to move.

I bearded graybeards in their dens and had 'em apologizing for their insignificant part in the Civil War, town gossips ceased their gab as I bust in on back fence seances, the fellows feared and hated me and the janes feared and loved me.

That was the kind of a guy I was.

Leastways until Vivian came.

She was a tiger cat. She had a forked tongue and it worked two ways. It could have run lightning ragged and have enough pep left over to sprint with Nurmi. Looks? They would have caused Pola Negri to plead for comedy parts. And, unlike any other woman I have known, she had a sense of humor and didn't care two winks and a whistle for the men.

Twenty minutes after she hit our podunk the boys were wearing bow ties and the girls were having hysterics in front of their mirrors. One glance at her flash and fire and the town sirens began turning in alarms to their fond parents.

The first evening after her arrival, the village Valentinos commenced breaking front porch dates to loaf around the soda fountain where the cunning little red hot mamma was accustomed to cool off.

Got an idea of her? No, you haven't —you couldn't—unless you've had personal acquaintance with hurricanes, volcanoes and other violent upheavals.

Don't annex the impression I'm raving about her. I'm not. She didn't mean anything in *my* young existence. Fall? Not if she paved the way before her with an assortment of banana peels, wet asphalt and newly polished ice.

But she certainly nabbed my nanny. Gosh all golf balls, how that woman got on my nerves! I hated her. I tried to pay no attention to her whatsoever, but I was always wanting to *show* her.

I was prepared at first to meet her pleasant. I was willing to perform my share and go almost halfway to initiate her into the Society of Laughing Waters with all the courtesy due a stranger. But when I saw her, giggling and gabbing with a bunch of the fellows and girls around the soda siphon, she didn't seem to be having any more need of initiating than the Exalted Ruler of the Elks.

I strolled in, flopped on a stool and not noticing anybody, told the trembling fizz fixer to dope me out a carbonized aqua pura tinctured with a ten per cent solution of citrous, which is the high brow stuff I'm accustomed to spring on that poor sap to get him scared silly.

"Sure, sure, Alec! Right away," he promised, nervous, leaving off mixing a fudge sundae. "A carbonized a-aqua—what?"

"You dumb-bell!" I taunted. "Don't you know anything whatsoever about physics?"

The kid blushed.

"Oh," he murmured, painful. "You want a little castor oil or something, mixed—"

I scowled at him and wheeled to see if anybody was snickering. Not a peep out of the crowd. They knew better. They were all camping on their stools as meek as a row of dunces. All except this new jane, Vivian.

She threw back her blond, bobbed head and let a laugh trickle out that was as cool and spraying as a garden hose.

"Funny, aren't I?" I inquired, pleasant.

"Oh," she tittered, surprised. "Are you?"

"Ask Will Rogers," I returned, endeavoring to remain cool. "He's a judge of humor—I met him once."

"Ah, when grief meets grief!"

I frowned and turned again to the boy, unheeding the patter of this silly female.

"Hey, bo," I commanded, gruff, "change that order to siphonated citrous medica lemon, and make it snappy."

The poor sap jumped to obey me.

"If you please," came a sweet voice, "I'd appreciate it if you'd let him finish my fudge sundae."

"Oh, sure," I agreed, gallant. "Women and children first—always—'specially if there is no woman present."

The rest of the crowd cringed under this remark but the jane came back peppy, "Who's a child?"

"Pardon me," I laughed, stinging. "My error."

"I'm seventeen years of age," she stated with dignity.

"Say, you'll be *some* wit at thirty-four, won't you?"

"Why?"

"You're half there now."

She flushed, hot.

"Do you mean I'm only half-witted?" she snapped. "Well, and if *you* don't look

out," she warned, "you'll be losing *your* mind."

"How so?"

"'From him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken,'" she quoted with a wicked little giggle that seared my ears.

The gang snickered, whether at me or her I didn't exactly know, though I felt rebellion somewhere in the ranks.

"Ha!" I exclaimed with a bow of mock humility, "it seemeth I have met my match!"

"But not your equal," put in Xantippe's daughter with a smirk.

"No, thank heavens. I am still a man—and the lord of creation."

"If you're a lord," she flared up, "I'm glad I'm a lady. And men aren't the only things on earth anyhow."

"No," I agreed, gracious. "There's tadpoles with their little tails and elephants with their big trunks and seals with their flappers—"

"There!" she interrupted, triumphant. "You notice even the seals can't get along without their flappers. How could mere man?"

"He could," I announced calm, while the gang waited to see how the battle went, watching me in my cool nonchalance, a true spectacle of all that was manly holding its own against this fast, ferocious fighting specimen of the warfare sex. "The direst day in the history of civilization was the day the Lord robbed unsuspecting Adam of his rib—"

"Rib?" she exploded. "Say, from some of the flat humor the boys are trying to pull nowadays I'm beginning to think it was his funnybone was taken."

"Yeh," I continued heated; "and from the thickness of some dames' noodles it looks as though man's whole bony structure went into the female make-up—"

"Leaving man himself spineless," she cut in with a laugh that was echoed from somewhere in the crowd.

I got mad. If I had stayed there a minute longer I wouldn't have been responsible for what I said or did. Like electric wires and puzzles, I'm dangerous when crossed.

"Never mind that mess you're doping, bo," I told the soda boy, benevolent. "I can see it's getting way beyond you. Leave off and try something simple, like the little lady's sundae. Well, so long!" I saluted the gang, breezy. "Au reservoir and all that twaddle. So glad you have met me," I addressed the jane with a courtesy and savoir faire that would have made the British court look like the night court.

I performed my exit with dignity, wincing at a long, sweet laugh that oozed out after me like molasses.

That darn dame! Thought she was something—didn't she?—just because she hailed from New York where the janes are so smart they make a mustard plaster feel soothing.

Well, maybe I *had* met my match, but that only meant—there'd be fireworks!

II.

DON'T you hate a clever woman? The kind that knows more than you know and knows that she knows and wants you to know and everybody else to know? The kind that corrects you every time you pronounce some word you never tried pronouncing before? The kind that pats you with one hand and pinches you with the other?

With men in the world, clever women are about as necessary as toothpicks to a day old baby. God made the female simple—a rag and a bone and a hank of hair that isn't even a hank with this new boyish bob.

Yep, education, the lipstick and the vote has got 'em so complex they're even a puzzle to themselves. The vote they don't use, the lipstick they do and the education they pretend to.

What's a man going to do anyhow? It's pitiful. For centuries he has been painfully digging by hand a few gold grains of knowledge out of the mire of ignorance. Then along comes woman with a steam shovel and in a day picks up as much as he has in a thousand.

And marriage. That don't work the way it used to, either. To be happy somebody's got to be dumb—and it was usually the woman.

Now, they're getting so wise you can't tell 'em any more that you're staying down town late at a special board meeting Saturday night. Having been a stenog once herself she knows boards don't meet that late Saturday night. And try and tell 'em nowadays that the reason you didn't bring all of your pay home was because you donated your weekly tithe to charity. She knows prize fights, ball games and burlesque don't catalogue under that head.

So marriage has come down to a fifty-fifty, you-know-me I-know-you proposition. Ignorance means bliss—wisdom, blisters. Leastways that's what I've doped out about wedded life from the barber shops, the Sunday funny section and the new novels.

Nope, I'm an old-fashioned man. I believe the woman should remain dumb. In self-defense I believe it.

Can you blame me, then, for not tumbling for this keen, cutting but cute Cleo?

Yet whenever I saw her coming I would rush to meet her as reckless as the Yankee doughboy went to meet the barbed wire. I knew I was going to get hurt, but I didn't care. And in the end I hoped to win. I had to. Folks were sided up, for and against me, and there was money on us, thrown in with the little matter of my reputation as a wit.

"Good morning!" I'd hail her, genial, crossing the street with my new collegiate pancake in hand. "How are you and every little thing?"

"Every *little* thing's just fine," she told me, smiling a smile that would have K. O.'d anybody but me. "*You're* looking well."

"Oh, sure," I answered easy, drawing up to my full height. "Five feet eleven inches of me is feeling great, but the other inch isn't so good."

"I'll bet that inch is the top one," she tittered, her eyes focused on my head.

"Well, maybe I *am* going cuckoo," I came back, warm. "I got reason enough."

"What?"

"You."

"You're going crazy over me—or because of me?" she wanted to know, gazing at me sideways with a queer smile.

"Hey, lay off! Leap year's gone and leaped."

She blushed.

"Don't worry," she said, her mouth tight. "If you were the last man on earth you'd be one too many."

"And I guess I'm one too many for you now," I observed, sly.

"And I guess I'm holding my own all right," she stated, cool.

"Grant you that," I allotted, gracious. "What, going so soon? When do we meet again? And will it be swords or pistols?"

"Daggers!" she hissed, looking them. And went on.

Have I got to add that I stuck to that trim little warship like a barnacle to a barge bottom? I was the only one that dared to. After a few samples of her sarcasm the other fellows retired to milder skirmishers with the coy village belles whose idea of keen persiflage was a jab in the slats and a shy, "Aw, tell me another!"

III.

In two weeks I fell and didn't get up. Don't kid me. I couldn't help it. She was kind of cute, you know—big, black eyes that were sharp but sweet and a little cropped head I was always aching to pat—and a cunning swing to her short skirts and the kind of soft pink cheeks I wanted first to bruise and then to kiss—just a little devil that made me so mad I had to love her or bust.

I didn't mean to end our war like that—with bets on me and my rep and all. I meant to fight it out to the bitter end, but I got taken unawares. I guess that's how all the other great battles were lost.

Every day she would wound me with her words then sort of heal me with her eyes. Till one night in September, at the senior marshmallow roast down at Buccaneer's Beach, I surrendered.

We sat to the lee of one of those sand dunes that rise on the shore like the sleeping shoulder of some big giant. Below us, on the beach, the twenty-one other seniors were executing an Injun dance in the glare of the bonfire that was scattering sparks into the sky so high you couldn't tell what were sparks and what were stars.

The sea air, soft with salt, came blowing

the sand at our feet, making little whirls chase each other like a kids' game of tag. And the night was that deep, dark stage blue, so close, so real you'd think, if you stuck your finger in it, it would hold the print.

The moon hadn't come up yet. The rim of it was balancing over the sea, like a yellow sail that grew and swelled as though with a breeze. And this was the night on which I fell for the little fork-tongued tease.

She was sitting on the dune beside me, feet tucked like gray mice under her skirt, sifting the sand through her fingers as solemn as an hour-glass. She seemed so calm, so friendly, after all our wars, I thought I could call a truce and settle without further bloodshed. I started by discussing an amiable subject—marriage.

"Funny what makes people like each other," I began, soft, reaching to catch the grains that trickled through her fingers.

"Yeh, isn't it?" she laughed, throwing the sand forty ways. I saw there and then that what I mistook for surrender on the part of the enemy was merely a recouping of forces. She resumed the word battle with an energy that would have made an old-time suffragette look like grandma at the hearth fire.

"But it isn't so funny when they up and promise to like each other for life," she added, viciously catching her wind-tossed front bangs in those little white teeth.

"You've pronounced a mouthful," I agreed. "But sometimes it isn't for life. That's why I'd rather go to a funeral any day than a wedding. The funeral's final."

"What made you so cynical about married life?" she inquired, sort of frosty.

"Oh, the same thing that gets all us baches that way, I guess—the fact that we haven't tried it," I answered, light. "What makes you so cynical yourself?"

"Oh, the same thing that gets most of us women that way," she mocked. "The fact that nobody's asked us to try it."

I gasped. It was the first time I'd ever heard a woman talk so open and above board about her own sex.

"Don't tell me nobody's asked *you*," I muttered savage, an ache gripping me that I couldn't fathom.

She was silent, twisting the blue silk scarf that was wound careless around her cute warm throat.

"Have they?" I insisted.

She tossed her head, airy as a Shetland pony on the moors.

"You told me not to tell you."

"Well, I want to know."

"What for?"

"Maybe I—I'm going to ask you myself."

She laughed merry and lifted her face to the moon that was now looming higher.

"Won't you understand?" I mumbled tense.

"Understand what?" she teased.

"You know."

"Know what?"

"That I love you—terrible."

"Terrible!" she echoed.

"And that when we get out of this damn school in June—I'm going to marry you."

"Lovely!" she tittered, addressing the tall weeds that nodded over the sand dune. "Wouldn't we be the great ones? Acting the way we do now just think how we two would act when we actually stepped into the ring!"

"We'd get along all right," I declared. "We've got a sense of humor. That's been the trouble with married life. Folks have been taking everything so darn serious—spatting over burned toast and everything. But we'd only laugh. We'd see something funny in everything. Oh, Vivian, let's try it! It would be great! We'd show up marriage to these sour old cynics that're all the time yelping about it. I'll get a good job, Vivian, and we'll save—"

"Sure," she agreed, bright. "We could save lots. With you in the home I would never have to trot out for amusement."

I gulped. That last didn't set so good, but after all it only went to show what a great little sense of humor she had. That was the kind of a woman to import domestically. Full of pep, laughing in the face of ice bills, sending you off every morning with a pun and greeting you at night with an epigram, cooking out of a joke book and serving the dinner slapstick—

That's the way married life ought to be. And if every woman in the world was like

Vivian, bachelor clubs would be turning into day nurseries.

"Well, will you marry me then, *please*, Vivian," I begged.

A spark came floating over our way from the fire and she tried to catch it with a piece of driftwood.

"What for, Alec?"

"Because I love you. Oh, Vivian, honest—I—I love you!"

"Alec, for heaven's sake lay off this serious stuff. It suits you like tragedy does Harold Lloyd. Be yourself, Alec. Say something mean."

"I can't. I'm surrendering."

Down by the fire the seniors were savagely spearing marshmallows on willow sticks and dancing around like devils. And with every marshmallow speared, so was my heart. But though earth was cruel, overhead heaven beamed kind.

All right, if she wouldn't take me for butter or würst I'd throw everything over and board a tanker for 'Frisco or join an Australian sheep ranch or lose myself in the dens of the Paris underworld. I'd show her!

"Well," I began, devilishly gay, "I surrender. Fix the indemnity and I'll pay."

She looked thoughtful, far-gazing seaward.

"Well, what's the price of defeat?" I asked again, easy.

Then she looked at me, and in the dark her eyes were mysterious.

"You, Alec," she said sweetly. "Merely you."

Thus we became an engaged couple. And leaving the sea and the stars and sweet things I had a vague feeling should have been said and done, we joined the senior war dance, full of fire and pep and the aim to show the world what a real modern engagement should be. None of this mooning mushy stuff and taking everything so doggoned serious.

"Let's keep on like we've always been," suggested Vivian. "Instead of spooning around in the dark all by ourselves we'll be the life of every party. Instead of cooing we'll try kidding, instead of petting, punning. And we'll never get mad at each other, will we, Alec? No matter what you say I'll laugh it off and no matter what I say you'll come up smiling."

"You bet!" I agreed, enthusiastic. "We'll be the peppiest pair in lovedom."

"We'll tell each other just what we think."

"We'll make a three ring circus look like a three day wake."

"Rah for our side!"

"Rah! Rah!"

Thus we started off with a bang to show the town. On meeting in front of the post-office Vivian would hail me with a remark that would have justified wife-beating and I would come back with the kind of snappy reply husbands get hailed into court for. But we swallowed it all with a good nature that was the marvel of the village.

Other engaged couples grabbed each other's hands and fervently repeated their vows as me and Vivian breezed into their midst, pulling the kind of stuff that would make Gallagher and Shean sound sensible.

We kept it up for a week—mock battles, snappy encounters, brisk skirmishes, using words like dumdum bullets, scattering wit like grapeshot with nobody wounded and only one casualty—the town was knocked dead.

We simply turned the spotlight of sarcasm upon the specimens of mild, moony, mildewed lovers that were vegetating on front porches till pa did them part, when at last, by paying a sad, sober parson the sum of ten so-called joy beans they were at last able to vegetate on the back porch till death did them part—and showed them up silly.

We were a radiant example of what young love should be.

Then came the evening of the senior prom.

I called around for Vivian polite and proper and tooted her to the hop in my new rolls rough sedan that I had picked up third hand a few days before from a farmer out Middleton way.

"Well," commenced Vivian, settling down into the front seat beside me and smoothing out her party cape, "what's been detaining *you* all this time?"

"The awful fear that I wouldn't be a worthy match for you," I returned, gallant. "When a girl spends two hours in front of a

mirror, mere man needs at least four to in any way equal her."

"Who informed you that I spend two hours in front of a mirror?" she asked, chilly. "It's only the plain janes that have to—"

"And the pretty ones that like to," I butt in, still more gallant.

"Glad you think I'm pretty," she said, melting.

"I always think as you do, my dear."

"Which gives you the reputation for being clever," she added.

We didn't say anything more till we'd parked the car in the line outside the front entrance of the school which they always let us use for dances, parents and being expelled. Vivian breezed into the superintendent's office that was being employed as a ladies' boudoir, and after a time that seemed to me too long to be necessary she blew out in a blow-out of a slick green dress.

"Great!" I commented, dodging the dancers that had spotted my fiancée and were beginning to hedge us in. "But where's the jacket?" I asked, taking an inventory of the upper part that somehow seemed missing.

"Where your brains are—nowhere," she returned so loud that some of the fellows around us heard and snickered. "This is all there is to it," she explained, more kindly. "You see—it's only a sort of strait-jacket effect."

"Strait-jacket!" I chuckled. "What have you been doing to warrant a strait-jacket, huh?"

"Contemplating your murder," she answered with a wicked look.

"Ah, death!" I breathed, tragic. "Anything rather than this! And will I have to wait long, Vivian?"

"No longer than you're expecting me to wait for you," she said, weary and resigned.

"Anything worth having's worth waiting for," I reminded her.

"Yeh, lots of people stand in line for hours to see a show that's advertised big—only to find out it's a flop."

"Who's a flop?"

"If you don't know, smart Alec, I won't be the one to attempt enlightening you."

"There's something you don't like about me," I surmised, "now isn't there, Vivian? And what could it be?"

"Your shirt for one thing," she remarked, cool and high while the whole floor danced close around us to listen in on the latest returns. "You look like somebody's just give you a hundred stripes."

A couple of snickers trickled in from the audience.

"Stripes are all right," I declared, my voice rising to match hers. "There's the Stars and Stripes—"

"Long may they wave!" put in Vivian fervent.

"Which I also fondly hope for your so-called permanent," I injected, solicitous.

"Permanent?" she cooed, dangerous. "Nothing is, my dear—least of all, engagements."

"Aw, listen, Vivian," I whispered, beginning to get scared. "Let's call it quits—"

"Quits is right!" she cut in, icy. "Quits for good and all."

She was almost crying, but as full of poise as a movie queen.

"Why, what's the matter?" I asked, gentle. "I haven't done anything, have I?"

"Oh, no—making remarks like that about my—my permanent wave in front of all those cats," she hiccuped, savage.

"Well," I said, hot, "commenting on my new shirt in front of all those fellows wasn't anything either, was it?"

"If you don't like what I do and say why do you keep on hanging around me?" she asked, fishing down inside her dress for a hanky.

"If I *hang* around you," I flared, mad enough to be facetious again, "it's because you *roped* me in."

"Funny, aren't you?" she exploded with a laugh that chilled me like Eskimo pie. "Always so funny. You'd laugh at your own funeral!"

"Well, I'd be the only one, then," I returned, dignified. "My friends would be sorry to see me dead."

"Yeh, all your wonderful friends!" she tittered, sarcastic. "Think you're popular, don't you? Just because everybody laughs at the stuff you pull. Well, they've got to do something when you're around. If it wasn't laughing it 'd be crying."

" Just what you're doing now."

" Am I?" she flared, dabbing at her cheeks. " Well, guess again. I merely have a c-cold in the head, mister—a portion of the shoulder I'm about to hand you right now."

She whirled gay and beckoned to a fellow who started racing up the floor after her like a slave does at his master's call.

" Vivian," I pleaded, frightened, " don't act so. Who started this, anyway?"

" I don't know who started it," she snapped, slipping into the arms of the other man, " but I know who's going to finish it!" she tossed over her shoulder, and I was left alone.

The guy took her home. I tagged 'em in my car and parked it on the other side of the street while they said good night on her front porch. It took 'em so damn long. There they were, framed indistinct in the light from the doorway, and I couldn't make out a thing.

Once or twice she whirled away, then nearer him, then away again, finally almost melting with his shadow till my chest got so hot I could have spit lava.

Did he kiss her? I couldn't see. They were close enough to. If he did I'd kill him! But I couldn't be sure.

Then he broke away of a sudden and beat it down the pike while she stood and looked after, twisting the vine that made cross-word puzzles in light and shadow on the front porch.

And doubt tore my heart and soul so I had to find out—even if I made a fool out of myself doing it.

I dismounted from my car, ripping my pocket a little on the rusty door hinge, and strode across her yard, a masterful and portentous figure in the dead of night.

She started some as I came to her side and leaned against the railing.

" Vivian," I pleaded, " won't you wait a minute? Aw, come over and sit down a minute in the hammock while I ask you something. Please come and sit down, Vivian."

" I've stood for you so long," she said, cool, " I can keep on standing."

But she consented to be led to the hammock and sat stiff on the edge.

I didn't look at her, only straight ahead, and nobody said anything till I bust out with: " Vivian, did that roughneck—kiss you?"

" His neck wasn't the least bit rough," she contradicted in a voice that made me seethe.

" Glad to know it," I said, sarcastic. " Lovely little lily boy, isn't he? Has one of these skins you'd love to touch—with a brick."

" Are you detaining me to insult my friends?" she inquired, polite but weary.

" No," I muttered, all the old pep gone. " Only—only to ask you to—to come back and—like me again."

" Once was enough."

She was so cold, so far away it seemed I could never reach her. How can two people be so close they are touching each other and yet be a thousand miles apart, and two other people who *are* a thousand miles apart be so close they seem touching? Guess it isn't radio or railroads or telephones that bring people near—but the heart.

And Vivian might as well have been in Mars.

There she sat, so sweet, so pretty, so near in the lamplight that filtered gold dust from the street, making her hair ripple like the moon on the sea. And knowing I was losing her made something bubble up in me like a gusher and I broke.

So did the hammock.

Don't know how it was, but there we plopped, tangled up in a mess of fringe and cushions that would have had a Turkish harem looking like a monk's cell—and my arms were tight around her—and I kissed her. It was so sweet and warm and nice I *knew* that *he* hadn't. So she let her head stay on my shoulder the way it was when we fell.

And I kept saying over and over: " Oh, honey, dear! Oh, Vivian!"

I was crying, but she was, too, so it didn't make any difference.

Then after awhile she lifted her head a little and her breath crept soft and warm to my ear.

" Alec!" she whispered. " Alec!"

" What, dear?"

"Why—why didn't you ever say that before? Why didn't you ever *do* this before?"

"What?" I asked, though I knew.

"These—these sweet things that—that everybody does."

"I thought we didn't want to be like everybody," I reminded her. "But I guess you can't get away from it," I added, thoughtful.

"Alec," she said again after a pause that wasn't empty at all, "don't ever, ever tease me any more, will you, Alec? It was awful!"

"I know, dear," I whispered, gentle. "It don't seem to work, does it? I guess love and wit just don't mix. I guess there's some things in life after all you're not supposed to kid about. And this—" I said, smoothing her hair that was lying so trusting on my shoulder, "this is one of them."

She laughed, sweet and shy, and raised her fingers to smooth my hair, too.

"Oh, Alec!" she giggled, ashamed. "Aren't I silly, though?"

A torrent of old-time wit came gushing to my lips. Say, wasn't that a beautiful opener? But I let it pass.

"Honey," I said, humble, "I am saying nothing—nothing at all. Hereafter my lips are sealed. I take a firm resolution to preserve the peace and placidity of our happy family. Not a pun, sally or epigram shall come between us. I am silent. I am dumb."

"You always were!" she taunted.

Say, isn't that the woman?

THE END

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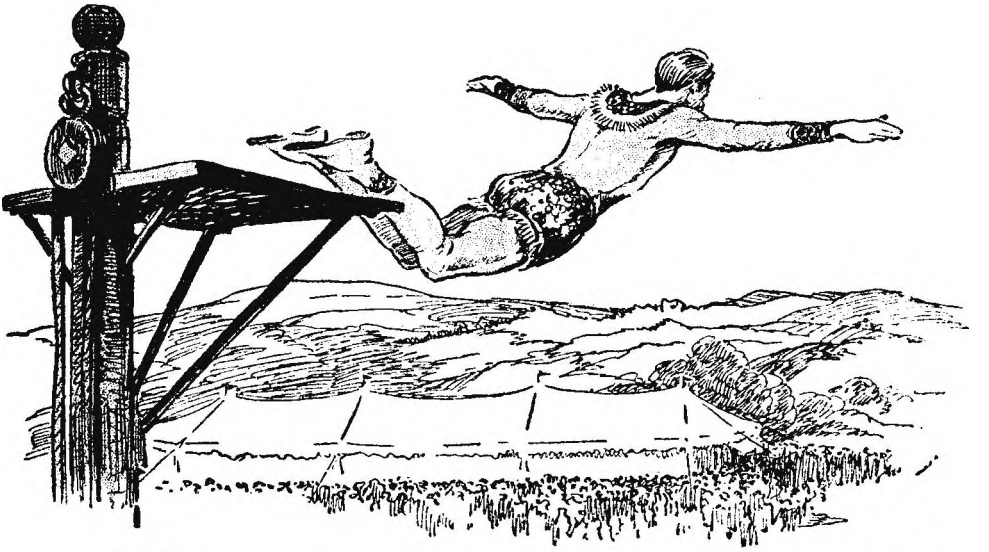
A MATTER OF DRESS

EACH year the girlies' gowns are growing bolder,
Girls are wearing less as they grow older;
Each winter feels a trifle colder—
Where will it all end?
They get a little worse with each creation,
Cause a little more of a sensation,
Leave a little less imagination,
What will they take off next?

Next year the blind will have an awful season,
Styles are even going to be more teasin';
Lord help the men to keep their reason—
Girls, please have a heart!
Abroad the wealthy are no longer going—
"See America" first, the idea's growing;
Lots of scenery here since the girls are showing
More and more each year.

But they haven't got anything on Eve,
For she set an awful pace;
All she wore was a cut little smile,
And she wore that on her face (between two little dimples).
Fashions to-day are driving men insane,
But the clothes Eve wore made Adam raise Cain;
So they haven't got anything on Eve,
For she had nothing on herself!

David Morrison.



Bred in the Flesh

By BERNARD FAIRFAX

IT was much too early for me to go to the theater, nearly an hour and a half before I went on, but I didn't feel inclined to go back to that beastly room at the hotel, so somehow I found myself walking down the dark alleyway to the stage door. The light was falling fast and no one was around the entrance, which was unusual.

I was just about to retrace my steps when I nearly fell over a man sitting on an old chair by the entrance.

"I beg your pardon," I apologized. "I didn't see you."

"That's all right," he replied. "The light is pretty bad. I find it kind of peaceful here," he continued.

"Yes, and smelly as well," I observed.

Then I recognized him as one of the acrobats that opened the show.

"I hate the first week or so of the season in vaudeville," I ventured. "I've been on the farm all summer. Nights like this I used to lie in the hammock and listen to the katydids and the locusts and watch the moon and the stars, but my star-gazing generally ended in falling asleep and waking up shivering and after that, peace. To come back to this grind—it's rotten."

"Well, the show business ain't what it was thirty years ago. You young fellers kick now—yes, you'd have passed out if you had to do what we did for a living then. I was stting here, half dreaming, half asleep, thinking of them days when you almost fell over me."

He took a slab of tobacco out of his pocket, bit off a hunk, put it back again and spit across the alleyway.

"Yes, Mom and I have been in the show business thirty years. It's a long time. We got out for a while and rented a hotel, lost our money, so started again in the one line we did know. D'ja see our act? The two boys do most of the work now. I balance the pole on my feet at the *finale* and Mom and Joe hang on the ends and I swing 'em round. It's a good finish."

" Yes," I agreed, " it's got the punch."

He chewed on his wad for a while and said nothing.

I sat down by him on the sill of the door and lighted my pipe. By the flare of my match I took in his lined face and his funny old toupee that Mom, as he called her, was always brushing down before he made his entrance. He chewed and I smoked in silence for awhile.

" I was just thinking of how I joined up with Sampson Brothers' Circus twenty-five years ago," he resumed. " It must be all of that. They were in winter quarters, just about ready to go out. I was doing a trapeze act at the time and Bill Wurelle was my partner. He was as clever as you make 'em—but he couldn't keep away from the booze. He broke his neck about a year after. We were rehearsing and getting into shape when the boss sent for me one morning.

" ' Walt,' he says, ' I got a young fellow here for the outdoor attraction. He's going to jump into a net about eighty feet. You know nets. Look him up, will you? He is around somewhere. See what his rigging is like. I don't know what he can do. His name is Ole Johnson.'

" ' All right, I will,' I says.

" The next morning I tumbles into him sitting kind of disconsolate on a trunk.

" ' Is your name Johnson?' I asked.

" ' Yes,' he says.

" I holds out my hand. ' Waring is my name. The boss spoke to me about you; said I might help you with your rigging. Is it here?'

" ' Sure,' he says.

" I see he didn't care much about my interfering, and I wasn't keen on it either, but I knew the governor didn't ask me to help him for the fun of talking.

" ' I tell you what you do,' I suggested. ' My riggin' is up. Suppose you jump into my net. It's only about forty feet?'

" Well, with a kind of a bad grace he does it seven or eight times. Just an amateur, I can see that, but he gets by. I give him a few tips and winds up by saying, ' If you go higher, don't jump unless I'm there. Nets is awful tricky '—and I walks away to leave him to think it over.

" Well, about two days later some one comes running after me and says ' He's going to jump from his own pole.'

" I rushed into the barn, but before I gets there he'd done it; lands wrong and hits his two eyes with his knees. He is unconscious for the best part of an hour and has two black eyes the next day which is painful to look at.

" We opens and for the first few days has no outside attraction. Finally the boss sends for him and says, ' Are you ready to start work?'

" He replies, ' Yes; I will make it if it kills me,' but his hands is shaking and his lips trembling, so the governor tells him ' I ain't aiming to send you back in no box. You'd better go home.' He buys his rigging from him dirt cheap and that ends that.

" On the car that night the boss calls me into his stateroom.

" ' Sit down, Walter,' he says, very affable like. ' I've got to have that outdoor attraction. You can make it easy. Will you do it?'

" ' How much is there in it?' I asks.

" ' Fifty dollars,' he snaps.

" That was a lot of money in those days. I starts to do some quick mental arithmetic. If we play thirty weeks, it's $1,500 extra, and gosh I needed it. The missus is home; we are expecting another baby in a month or so. That means hospital bills.

" I remember what it cost to bring Benny into the world. He was just about four then, and I had him along with me with the show. Some trouble he was, too, always in mischief or getting nearly run over by wagons or something. I was sparring for time, and in a kind of a weak voice I says, ' Make it sixty dollars and I'll consider it.'

" ' No,' he replies, ' not a cent more. Fifty is my limit.'

" I knows him and says 'O.K. Give me a week's practice.'

" 'All right,' he says, lights a cigar and picks up his paper, so I gets up and goes out of his compartment.

" I sits on my berth and gazes at Benny curled up there fast asleep. His hair is kind of damp and his cheeks rosy. In his arms is an old black doll he was always

carrying around. I remembers what his mother says to me just as I was leaving her.

" ' I want Benny to have a good education; he's got to be something better than we are—a lawyer or a doctor.' I was afraid she was going to say President or clergyman, but she didn't. ' Not like we have been all our lives, dragging around the country. You have got to take him with you this season, because I can't look after him, but it is the last time he will ever see this life—he'll forget it; he's too young to remember.'

" Well, just then I would have done anything to humor the poor girl, so I promised, but she makes me swear it, so I takes her in my arms and I swears and kisses her good-by and seizes Benny by one hand and my grip in the other and dashes for the train. Gosh, I used to hate them partings.

" Well, I looks back at Benny again fast asleep and says to myself: ' Fine, it's a cinch,' and I takes off my clothes and rolls in alongside of him.

" Well, the next morning directly the big top is up I sets up my rigging. I can only jump from sixty foot in the tent, which I does. Then I makes up my mind to take a chance and start getting that extra money as soon as possible, so I walks out and tells the boss I am ready to get at it the next day.

" We fixed up the rigging in the morning. The jump is advertised at one hundred and twenty-five feet, but no one can tell the difference between that and eighty when you are on the ground looking up. We test the net, and you can bet your bottom dollar I goes over it thorough.

" The parade is over and the crowds are all over the lot. I am to jump at 1.30 sharp. Well, I gets into my tights and bathrobe and some one comes and says ' All ready, Walter.'

" I walks out, feeling like a guy on his way to the electric chair, and nervous as an old woman.

" They roped the crowds off, and again I goes over the net, testing every guide rope. While I am going over it I notice within a few feet of where I am going to jump is a wheat field. A fence keeps the crowd from walking all over it. It is a beautiful green, looks like a wonderful carpet, and there is just enough wind to move it back and forth like a restless sea.

" Well, the side show announcer starts his speech, introducing me as the only man in the world who can do this death-defying deed, and asks the crowd to stand well clear in case I miss the net, which cheers me up no end.

" I throws off my robe and they pulls me up to the top of the pole on a pulley which I drops when I get on the platform, which is just large enough for me to stand on.

" It is cold up there, the wind goes through my tights and I shiver; I am scared. I am so terrified my teeth chatter. I looks down and the crowd seems like fly specks.

" Then my eye falls on that damn wheat field again. It is waving back and forth and never still. All the time I am wondering how I can back out. I know I really can't.

" I don't know how it was, but I looked towards the big top and standing up against the canvas wall watching me is Benny. I can just see his little yellow head and that blamed back doll he is holding up for me to see. I think of my promise to his mother. I sucks in my breath—I jumps.

" I knew at once that I had missed the net, and I knows I am going to land in that wheat field. I can feel myself hitting it and being picked up. I can see the crowd's white faces; they are carrying me to the pad tent.

" ' Is he dead?' they ask.

" No, I am alive, half conscious; but, oh, the pain! Suddenly I seems to see our little front parlor and Mrs. Hopkins, our next door neighbor, is telling Mom something and trying to comfort her the best way she can.

" Mom's face is white as a clown's, and she is just holding on to the back of the chair as she sways. Then I switch back to the circus again and I sees the boys and girls with their show taking up a subscription, and I knows it's for her.

" Then I hear a voice say, ' The doctor is here.' He is bending over me and ripping the tights off. I am beginning to lose consciousness, I know I am dying, it has all gone black. I can't breathe—

"Just then I hits the net and goes twenty feet into the air again and lands safe."

The old chap wiped the sweat that had gathered on his forehead at the memory.

"You wouldn't imagine one could think of all that in a second or so, would you?" he asked.

"No, and you did it for the balance of the season?" I asked.

"I did," he answered.

"Tell me of Benny; after the sacrifice you made for him by now he should be a successful lawyer or doctor. Which of the two professions did he take up—law or medicine?"

A cackle came out of the semi-darkness.

"Law, medicine—hell! You've seen the act; you've noticed that fair boy who does all the clever foot balancing work. Well—that's Benny."

THE END

THE SPACIOUS MAYFLOWER

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Would reach from coast to coast;
The cook turned gray as, day by day,
He fed that myriad host.

And when a touch of *mal de mer*
Those lusty fathers pained,
What moans and groans and overtones
That hardy vessel strained!

We see descendants everywhere,
A never ending troop;
They number more per ancestor
Than any other group.

We humbly move, escutcheonless,
Among such folk as these,
Content to feel that none will steal
Our genealogies.

The Mayflower! The Mayflower!
Our largest boat was she;
If not for her we should incur
Far less posterity.

Elias Lieberman.

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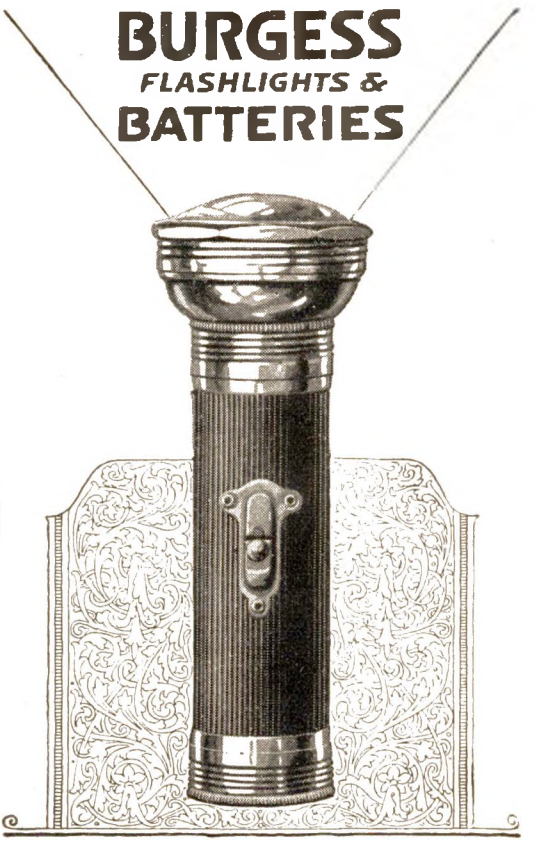

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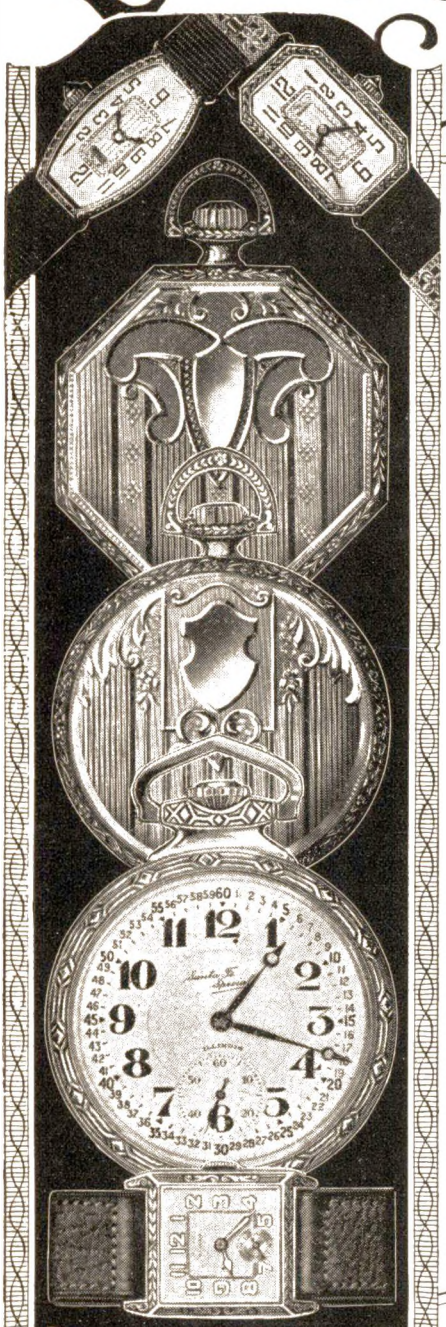

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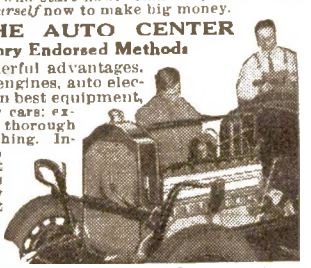
Why take small pay from uncertain jobs? Why be bounced around from this to that, and not know whether you are going to have a job tomorrow or not? You can change all that. Learn a trade. Know Autos—how to repair them, and take advantage of the countless opportunities to make money. Pave the way for a business of your own—a business that can make you independent for life. You can do it with a few weeks training at the Michigan State Automobile School—the great auto-trade school in the heart of the auto industry. **Be a Trained Man—Successful!** More than 18 million cars in use, thousands more made daily. All need service by trained men. More men needed for good jobs. More garages, electric service stations, tire, battery and welding shops needed. This means amazing opportunities for men who start now. Small capital needed, no experience. Fit *yourself* now to make big money.

COME TO THE AUTO CENTER

Learn by Factory Endorsed Methods



Here you have wonderful advantages. Study autos, trucks, engines, auto electricity, tractors. All on best equipment, up-to-date. Many new cars; expert instructors; a thorough course that slights nothing. Inspect the great auto plants. These great companies approve this school. Get factory endorsed training at Detroit, the Auto Center. Good positions open. Here's your chance to be independent. Write today for full information about Detroit training to make the most money.

MICHIGAN STATE AUTOMOBILE SCHOOL
751 Auto Building **Detroit, Michigan**

2427 "Ads"

ARCHITECTURAL DRAFTSMAN — Thoroughly competent draftsman and designer for large apartment house work in Philadelphia; at least one year's work to start immediately; salary $75 to $85 per week. In reply state briefly experience, age and soonest date available.

Like this for

Draftsmen

Within three months 2427 concerns have advertised for draftsmen. Only skilled men are wanted. No chance for the man who wants to learn "on the job". More and more men will be needed. Right now is the time for YOU to learn this profession. Earn up to

$3000 A Month

I have hired and worked draftsmen for 25 years. My training is the practical kind that fits you to make good from the start. I know what other Chief Draftsmen want and will prepare you for a steady, well paid job in your spare time at home. Very little schooling required. You can learn in a few weeks and begin earning money before your training is finished. I show you how. Don't even think of enrolling in a school till you hear from me.

Special Offer Now!

If you write at once I'll give you a chance to earn your training without any cost to you. As soon as you enroll I send you a complete Drafting Outfit, just like the one I use myself—everything you will need while learning and for your BIG JOB later. Many of the thousands I have trained are earning $3500.00 a year and more. Write me TODAY—or just send this coupon for free book.

Write Quick or Mail Coupon!

Chief Draftsman Dobe,
1951 Lawrence Ave., Div. 14-58, Chicago, Ill.

Without any obligation whatsoever, please mail your book, "Successful Draftsmanship", and full particulars of your liberal "Personal Instruction" offer to a few students. It is understood I am obligated in no way whatever.

Name .....

Address .....

..... *Age* .....

Agents $90 A Week

Big Winner. Just out. Complete line of waterproof aprons for men, women and children. Year-round demand. Show samples—housewives order on sight. Styles for every use. Best values in America. Direct from Akron, the rubber city. **100% Profit.** Mrs. Martin, W. Va., made $30.00 in one day. Jos. Brand, Ohio, made $10.43 in one hour. You can do as well.

FREE Outfit—to workers. New plan starts you without capital. No experience needed. Simply take orders. We deliver and collect. Commissions paid same day you take order. Send for exclusive territory and **Free Outfit Offer.** WRITE TODAY.
KRISTEE MFG. CO., 651 Bar St., Akron, O.

NEW BIG POWERFUL MIRACO Ultra 5 TUBE RADIO

now only $59.50 retail

GET SPECIAL OFFER

Factory prices save you 1-3 to 1-2. Users everywhere report Miraco Ultra 5 gets programs coast to coast, Canada to Gulf, loud and clear on speaker; outperforms $100 to $280 sets. Many hear Europe. Marvelous value—let testimony of users convince you. Smaller sets $13.75 up. Write.

AGENTS DEALERS Write!

MIDWEST RADIO CORPORATION
Pioneer Builders of Sets
4910 E. 8th St., Cincinnati, Ohio

MIRACO RADIO GETS 'EM COAST to COAST

BOYS & GIRLS Earn Xmas Money

Write for 50 Sets St. Nicholas Christmas Seals. Sell for 10c a set. When sold send us $3.00 and keep $2.00. No Work—Just Fun.
St. Nicholas Seal Co. Dept. 105 Brooklyn, N. Y.

BOYS & GIRLS $2.00 Given NO WORK JUST FUN

Simply sell 50 Sets of Our Famous Christmas Seals for 10c a set. When sold send us $3.00 and keep $2.00. Trust you till Xmas.
American Christmas Seal Co. Dept. 124 Brooklyn, N. Y.

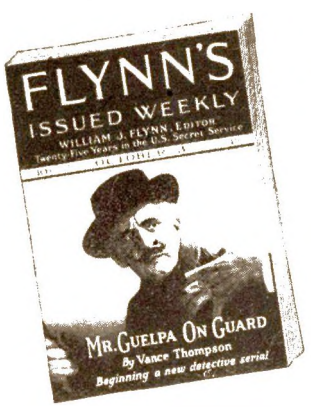
Xmas Gifts

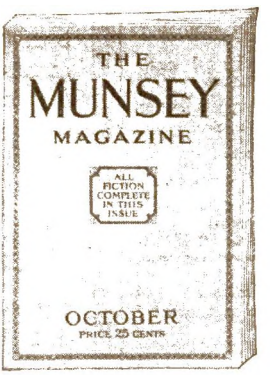
MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE is America's greatest and best all-fiction monthly. It prints more good stories of all lengths than any other fiction monthly. Each number contains one hundred and ninety two pages of delightful stories. Subscription price, one year, $3.00.

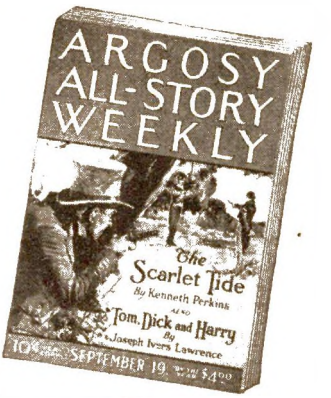
ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY is a clean magazine planned to please the whole family—no other fiction publication contains a higher standard of literary excellence. Each issue contains one hundred and sixty pages of the best selection of mystery, romance, love, adventure and humor produced in the English language. Subscription price, one year, $4.00. (Canada, $6.00).

FLYNN'S is one of the most interesting magazines of detective stories published. The editor of this magazine is none other than WILLIAM J. FLYNN—for twenty-five years in the Secret Service of the United States Government. There is no more experienced detective living—no greater authority on the art of detection. His trained intelligence guarantees a great magazine of detective stories. Subscription price, one year, $4.00. (Canada, $6.00).

A handsome greeting card announcing the gift in your name will be sent so that the magazine and the greeting card are both delivered on Christmas morning.







Send the coupon Now!

FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY,
280 Broadway, New York City.

Please send..... magazine for..... year with Christmas greeting card to

Name.....

Street.....

City..... State.....

Acknowledge order to:

Name.....

Street.....

City..... State.....

"It's almost a miracle!"

SOMEONE suggested it to her—or, did she see it in an advertisement? Listerine, for the hair and scalp—particularly when you have dandruff, and so many women are troubled this way.

Dandruff is *most* of a nuisance when your hair is bobbed. (At least you notice it much more then.) Her hair had been bobbed only recently. And that was when she discovered the trouble.

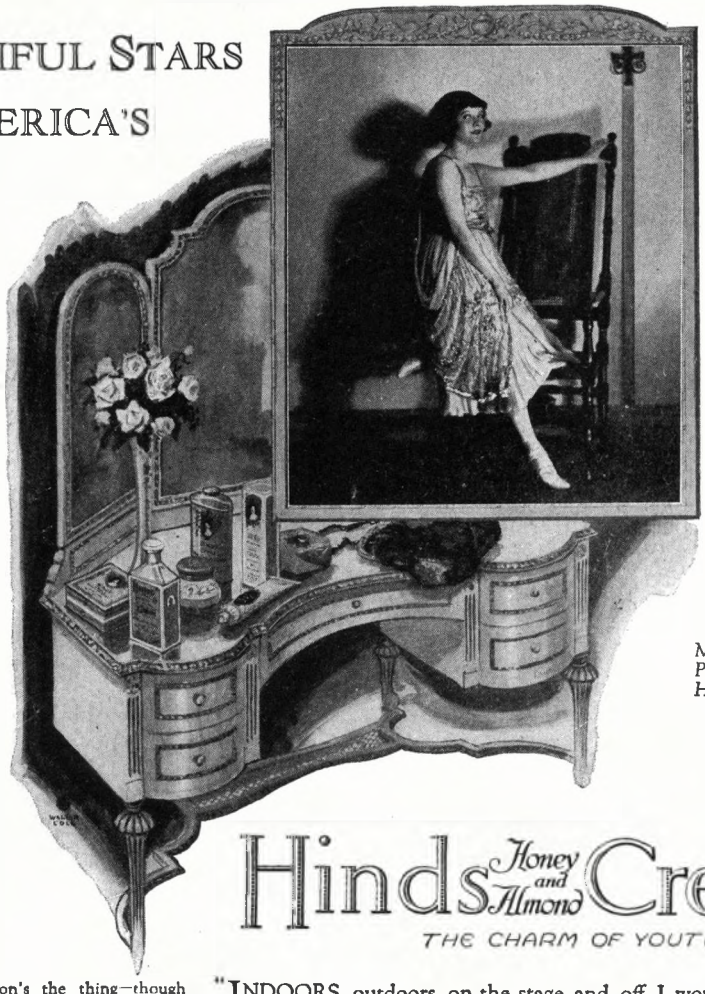
But just a few applications of Listerine, doused on clear after a shampoo, made a difference that seemed almost miraculous to her.

It is really wonderful the way Listerine acts when applied to the hair and scalp. Invigorating, refreshing. And how it brings out that luster and softness that women want—and men like.—*Lambert Pharmacal Company, St. Louis, U. S. A.*

YOUTHFUL STARS OF AMERICA'S STAGE

and

Their Dressing Tables



Miss Patti Harrold

Hinds Honey and Almond Cream

THE CHARM OF YOUTH

THE complexion's the thing—though the features be as perfect as Helen of Troy and the features as classic as a Greek goddess—there can be no real beauty if the skin is not clear and fine and smooth. Beauties of the stage know the value of Hinds Honey and Almond Cream in preserving that exquisite softness and smoothness of texture so essential to daintiness and charm. After summer's suns and winter's winds, it refreshes like a cooling drink—heals like a magic touch.

May we send you "A Week-End Box" including all these Toilet Requisites 50c. —or, if you prefer, separate packages for your trial,—see offer below.

FOR TRIAL: Hinds Honey and Almond Cream 5c. Either Cold or Disappearing Cream 5c. Talcum 2c. Face Powder, sample, 2c.; trial size 15c. Trial Cake Soap, 8c. Be sure to enclose amount required, but do not send foreign stamps or foreign money.

"INDOORS, outdoors, on the stage and off, I would not be without Hinds Honey and Almond Cream for any consideration. Before going for my daily horseback ride I put a smooth coating of the cream on face and throat. In the summer time for golf and tennis, sailing and swimming there is nothing that can possibly keep the skin and complexion in such soft and pink perfection. And the one point of especial value that I find in Hinds is that it does not clog the pores. On the contrary, it aids materially in keeping the pores open, the skin active and the complexion clear and bright. I think Hinds is 'first aid' to keeping one's complexion in the best of condition at all times and under almost all circumstances."

PATTI HARROLD
The youthful star of "Irene"

A. S. HINDS
272 WEST STREET PORTLAND, ME.

Hinds Cream Toilet Requisites selling everywhere or mailed postpaid in U. S. A. from laboratory

When Eyes Are Close

Is Your Complexion at Ease

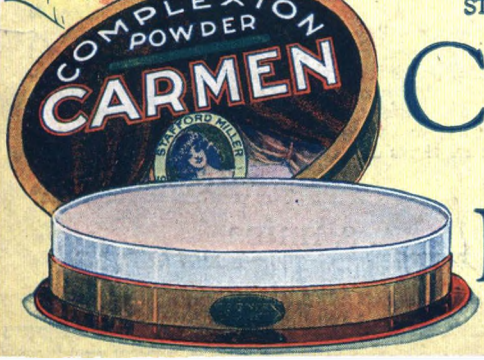
The Final Touch

Does your complexion wince under the appraising gaze? Does it fear the verdict—"make-up"—"coarse"—"muddy"? Or is it a complexion of confidence—one that delights in close inspection? It *is* the latter if you use Carmen! For Carmen gives the beauty, the youthful bloom, the satiny smoothness that craves scrutiny, knowing that the more critical the gaze, the more pronounced the praise.

Carmen, the powder that *stays on*, is also Carmen the powder whose charming natural effect on the skin is never lessened under dampness or glaring light. It is truly the face powder extraordinary, as a test will show.

Sample Offer Send 12c to cover postage and packing for purse size box with three weeks' supply—state shade preferred.

STAFFORD-MILLER CO., ST. LOUIS, MO.



CARMEN
COMPLEXION
POWDER

White, Pink, Flesh, Cream and new Brunette Shade, 50c Everywhere