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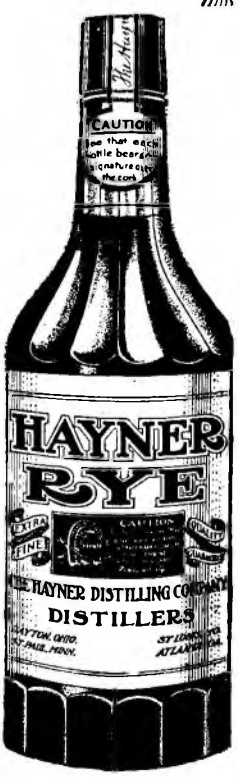

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THE ARGOSY.

Vol. L. DECEMBER, 1905. No. 1.

THE QUEEN'S PRISONER.

BY J. AUBREY TYSON.

A journey with a strange purpose which brought the travelers into peril that threatened more than death.

(Complete in This Issue.)

CHAPTER I.

THE END OF THE PLAY.

IN a small room on the top floor of the Neptune Yacht Club four men sat at a table covered with green baize, cards, poker chips and ash receivers. Around them stood five or six others who watched the game.

The atmosphere of the apartment was charged with the fumes of tobacco, and as a sleepy-eyed waiter raised one of the shades and pulled down a window from the top the gray light of dawn entered with the wintry air.

It had been a long sitting, and the bloodshot eyes and haggard faces of the players revealed the nature of the strain to which they had been subjected.

"Nineteen thousand," said a thick-set, red-mustached man, calmly, as he deliberately deposited a smoking cigar on an ash-tray at his left elbow.

On the other side of the table a tall, lean, square-shouldered man, about thirty, clean-shaven and with dark-brown hair, looked thoughtfully at the pile of chips in the middle of the board.

The thin lips of his well-shaped mouth were slightly compressed and his fingers toyed with the cards that lay face downward under his palm.

"Nineteen thousand," the thick-set man repeated.

"I call," the other said, and as he spoke he wrote on a slip of paper: "I. O. U. $500. John Fornishire."

Then he thrust the slip into the pile of chips.

"Four aces," said the thick-set man as he spread his cards on the table.

Fornishire looked at the cards thus displayed, and nodded.

"It's all yours, Burke," he answered quietly.

"What did you have, Jack?" queried one of the men who had been watching the game.

"Four kings," Fornishire replied indifferently. "I'll cash that slip this afternoon, Burke."

"All right, old man," the other answered, as, after drawing the chips toward him, he began to deal the cards.

Fornishire looked at his watch.

"No more for me," he said. "I've got enough. It's six o'clock. You'll have to count me out."

Burke glanced at the two other players. One tossed back the card that had been dealt to him. The other pushed back his chair.

In silence the players cashed in their chips, and while they were thus employed Burke glanced with a significant expression toward a tall, stalwart, florid-faced, clean-shaven man with gray hair, who stood smoking at a little distance from the table.

The gray-haired man smiled slightly, and, turning on his heel, walked to a corner of the room, where he seated himself. The corner was almost directly behind Fornishire, who, leaning back in

his chair, meditatively watched the smoke-wreaths that curled upward from his lips.

When the chips and cards were put away, three of the players and four of the five spectators left the room. Those who remained were Fornishire, who still sat at the table, and the gray-haired man, who, seated in the corner, appeared to have escaped Fornishire's notice.

At length Fornishire laid his large, muscular hands on the table and gazed at them thoughtfully.

"They look as though they might get a good grip on things," said the man in the corner quietly.

Fornishire started.

"They'll do," he answered curtly.

"I think so," the other assented. "You got those sinews, though, while handling oars in the 'varsity shell, and not—well, not shuffling pasteboards, I fancy."

Fornishire's face grew a shade paler, but he did not look up as he answered:

"The manner in which I got them is no special business of yours, major."

Major Erskine puffed his cigar deliberately.

"No, perhaps not," he said; "but I am sufficiently interested in their future to ask you how much longer this fool game of yours is going to last."

Fornishire laughed mirthlessly.

"Well, the fact is, major, the game's played out."

The other started, and the cigar he had been about to raise to his lips poised in the air.

"You mean——"

"I mean I'm all in—broke. It took just nine years for Jack Fornishire to fritter away the two millions that his father spent forty-five years in accumulating."

The major rose, and, walking to one of the windows, he snapped up the shade, and looked meditatively out into the gray, cheerless atmosphere of the frosty dawn.

"Poor old Tom!" he sighed.

"He was happy enough—so happy that I can't understand why one should pity him," said Fornishire reflectively. "He found pleasure in his work, in his home and in all relations with his fellow men. And, beloved by all who knew him, my father died happy in the knowledge that he had inspired and had retained that affection. It was not my father, but those whom he left behind, who should have your pity."

"Well, what do you purpose to do?"

"To begin to live."

"But——"

"No; all these years of extravagance—years spent with such associates as the idle rich, inane women and dawdling men—have constituted a living death. From time to time I've had glimpses of another phase of life, which has the spice of danger, a life in which men move and think and feel. And, major, I drew the first breath of that life when I drew the four kings that were not quite so good as the four aces held by the man whom you had employed to accomplish my financial ruin."

The face of Major Erskine grew livid. With a muttered oath he advanced two or three steps toward Fornishire.

"You mean——"

Fornishire, with one leg hanging over an arm of his chair, gazed with a half amused, half mocking smile at the face of the angry man.

"I mean that your trusted agent, Sam Burke, has earned the money that you promised to give him on the day on which you should have conclusive evidence of the fact that I was bankrupt."

"Who has dared to tell you such a thing as that?"

Fornishire shrugged his shoulders.

"It needed no telling. Burke is one of the best known card sharps in the West. There is no doubt in my mind that you brought him here, for I employed detectives to learn the truth. I have watched him at his work, and the spectacle has amused me."

An expression of blank astonishment overspread the major's face.

"Are you such a fool, then, that you lost to him deliberately?" he muttered.

Fornishire laughed, and his laughter was indicative of genuine amusement.

"Yes," he said, "I lost to him deliberately, for I knew that when the last dollar of my inherited wealth was gone I would begin to be a man."

The major hurled his lighted cigar into a corner of the room and again turned to the window.

"It's all right, major," Fornishire went on cheerfully. "Your actions in this affair constitute conduct that, according to the prevailing view, is unbecoming a gentleman, but——"

The face that the major turned to Fornishire was purple now, and his cheeks and hands were trembling.

"Hang it, Jack Fornishire; I——"

He stopped abruptly. Fornishire looked at the major's clenched hands and laughed.

"But I dare say you are prepared to contend that you did it all as my father's friend and for my own good," the younger man went on. "For seven years your hobby has been the pursuit of the treasure of the Quelgo Indians. You have wanted me to undertake the expedition which was the one fear that haunted my father."

The major sank into a chair.

"Yes," he answered doggedly; "yes, I wanted you to undertake it. My motive was not only for the purpose of aiding you to add to a store of wealth that stunted your moral development, but——"

The perspiration was gathering in beads on the major's forehead.

"Well?" queried Fornishire.

"But to enable you to accomplish a great mission in the course of which your father failed."

"You have spoken of that before. For some reason or other, you have always found it desirable to cloak in mystery the real object of the expedition."

"I will be more explicit now. First, then, the inestimable woman whom you always have regarded as your mother was the second wife of your father, Thomas Fornishire."

The young man fairly leaped from his chair.

The major went on stolidly:

"Your real mother was the first wife of my old friend."

"She is dead?"

"Naturally, since it happened that your father married again."

"But who—who——"

"Your mother was a princess of the kingdom of Vantoredos, in the heart of the Andes of Ecuador. The approach to this kingdom is guarded by the most formidable tribe of Indians known to travelers.

"The little nation, however, is peopled by the descendants of a ship's company that went ashore on the Ecuador coast, in the year 1763, from the British bark Dovernian, bound for China. Of that kingdom your mother was the rightful queen, but never in the history of all the world did a queen number among her possessions wealth so precious or subjects so extraordinary as are to be found in Vantoredos."

"You have been there?"

The major shuddered.

"Yes," he answered gravely; "I have been in the vestibule of Hades!"

CHAPTER II.

AN INTERRUPTED STORY.

For several moments both men were silent, then Fornishire spoke.

"You have said that a certain mission took my father to the island, and that he failed to accomplish it."

"Yes."

"May I ask you to tell me something of its nature?"

Major Erskine's face grew paler, and as Fornishire watched it he saw it harden.

"On the day you attained your majority your father exacted from me a solemn promise not to reveal to you the secret of his life. It is this you are asking me to tell you now. Within twenty-four hours after that promise was given he died."

"The secret has to do with the treasure of Vantoredos?"

"With Vantoredos, yes; with the treasure, no."

"But it always has been of the treasure that you have spoken."

"It was through the medium of the treasure that I had hoped to get you there."

"What was your real motive, then?"

The major, leaning forward, with his hands gripping the arms of his chair,

gazed with a haggard expression toward the window from which he had raised the shade. Fornishire, impressed by the evidences of his companion's mental struggle, watched his face with curious attention and made no attempt to interrupt his revery.

Fully five minutes elapsed before the major spoke.

"I have said that on the day before his death your father made me promise that under no circumstances would I reveal to you certain circumstances that had to do with two visits he made to Vantoredos—the first in 1870 and the second in 1872. Thus far that promise has been faithfully kept by me."

"You accompanied him on these visits?"

"Yes."

There was a pause, then the major went on:

"I have kept my promise, but in doing this I have acted against my judgment. Within twenty-four hours after that promise was given your father took his own life."

With an exclamation of horror and astonishment, Fornishire leaped to his feet.

"A suicide!" he muttered.

"Yes—by morphine. I knew of his purpose, but made no attempt to restrain him."

"But why? You were his——"

"Because I knew that a more terrible form of death awaited him shortly."

Fornishire sank back in his chair and surveyed the major with staring eyes.

"An executioner from the kingdom of Vantoredos was in the town. Who he was I never have been able to learn, but both your father and myself were assured that he was there.

"Your father received a letter which had been posted in New York, informing him that he had only a few hours to live. It bore a sign that was unmistakable—a sign peculiar to the fiends of Vantoredos—a black thumb-print on an arrow drawn with human blood."

Fornishire, with perspiration streaming down his face, paced the floor with nervous steps.

"What motive inspired these people to seek his life?" he asked.

"He had wedded a second wife, and had failed to take you back with him to Vantoredos. At the time he married your mother she was a princess. There is a superstition among the residents of Vantoredos which prevents them from taking the life of one in whose veins flows the blood of the royal family. Twice in your infancy attempts were made to kidnap you, and ever since then you have been shadowed by spies. Your only safety lies in a visit to Vantoredos and taking command of the partizans who are prepared to espouse your cause as the rightful ruler of their kingdom."

"The ruler of their kingdom—I?"

"You—the son of Carisima, who, for a brief period, was their queen."

"But if they do not seek my life, what evil threatens me here?"

"Insanity."

"You mean——"

"I mean that at a time and in a manner in which you are least prepared to meet the fate the enemies of your mother's race have prescribed for you, they will contrive, by means of infernal methods known only to themselves, to rob you of your reason."

"Under such circumstances, why have you attempted to lure me there?"

"Because, having become convinced, since the death of your father, that your life is in peril, I have attempted to get you to adopt, all unconsciously, the only method of effecting your own salvation. I have been something of a big game hunter in my time.

"Once I found myself, unarmed, confronting a lion that had been slightly wounded by a companion only a few minutes before. The beast came toward me. If I had fled, I would not have been here to tell the tale. But I faced him, and then learned that the stories I had heard of the power of the human eye were no myths.

"Go to Vantoredos, show its people that you have no fear, lead the men who are prepared to obey your commands, and you will have a fighting chance for all that your enemies here would rob you of. Stay in New York, and you will be the victim of a mental disease that constitutes the worst form of insanity."

"How did it happen that my father

went to Vantoredos—that he exposed himself to such a fate?"

"From an old sea-captain whom your father met while on a vessel bound from New York to Charleston he learned the story of the treasure of the Quelgos. He soon persuaded me to accompany him in his quest. Provided with a map obtained from the sea-captain, we had little difficulty in finding the chain of valleys in which the kingdom of Vantoredos is situated.

"Our task of eluding the Quelgos who guard the approaches to the valley was more formidable, but we finally arrived at a place in the mountains above Torbusa, the capital. We had thought to find it sparsely settled, but we had been misinformed. It was a city of at least five thousand souls.

"We had not recovered from our surprise, when, from a copse behind us, there issued a party of armed men, several of whom were half-breeds. These took us before the mayor of the town, who delivered us to the captain of the palace guard. By him we were cast into a loathsome prison, where we spent the remainder of the day and the night that followed.

"On the next morning we were taken in a covered vehicle, drawn by oxen, to the palace. There in a large hall we were brought face to face with a tall, broad-shouldered man who, speaking in fairly good English, asked us why and how we had gone to Vantoredos. Encouraged by the amiability of his manner, we told him how we had first learned of the treasure and how we had gone thither in search of it.

"We had scarcely finished speaking when his brow grew dark, and in a loud voice he called to the captain of the guard who had taken us to the palace. As this man approached we knew we had been talking with the king—Kamordin. With a strange, hard laugh, he directed the captain to take us to the treasure-house of the Quelgos, which, as I have often told you, is a mine the walls of which are literally of gold. We entered the treasure-house by means of a flight of steps that led us to a great subterranean chamber about three hundred feet below the surface of the earth.

"This chamber, lighted by gigantic oil lamps, was about one hundred feet in height. Around the walls were heavy chests. The lids of these were open, and within the chests we saw great heaps of precious stones.

"The captain of the guard watched us silently. In the middle of the chamber we stopped and looked around us with caution. Life is more dear to man than the sight of prodigious wealth, and in our hearts we knew now that our lives were in jeopardy.

"'Behold the treasure of the Quelgos,' the captain said, and there was a note of mockery in his tone. Then, after a pause, he asked, 'Have you seen enough?'

"I replied in the affirmative, but the words had scarcely left my lips when there was a crash at our feet and we fell through the floor into a small, cushioned chamber where all was dark. In a few minutes light came to us and with light came the beginning of a series of fiendish tortures that lasted for three months. Of these I will not speak. May heaven deliver you—aye, both of us—from their like!"

The major, breathing heavily, leaned forward and hid his face in his hands. After a short silence he went on:

"Our reason had almost left us when we were rescued by a daughter of the king, who, with other members of the court, had come from time to time to witness the sport afforded by our sufferings. Our hiding-place was at length discovered, but our enemies came too late. The princess had been secretly wed to your father.

"Once again we were thrown into prison, but our tortures were at an end. Then once more the princess came to our aid. In the darkness of the night we were led forth from our dungeon and into the mountains through which we made our way to the sea.

"Thrice in the course of the year and a half that followed the princess communicated with your father. She had then become the sovereign of the kingdom—a worse fate than that of a prisoner condemned to a life of hard labor in Sing Sing.

"Then you were born.

"Yielding to her passionate entreaties, your father and I returned to Vantoredos and attempted to effect her escape. We had nearly succeeded when we were surprised by Santez, her cousin, who is now the reigning king. Your father escaped with you in his arms. Your mother was left behind, condemned to a life that——"

There was a crash at the window, and, with a heavy groan, the major sank to the floor, a red arrow quivering in his breast.

"In God's name, major!" cried Fornishire, sinking on one knee beside him and looking toward a broken window pane.

"It's a Quelgo arrow, barbed with your father's curse, Jack, my boy," the major murmured. "I violated my oath to save your life and honor. Take this map and go—go to her. I lied. Your father, once a brave man, became a coward. Your mother lives. For twenty years heaven heard her praying—praying that your father might have courage to go to her. Go—go, Jack—go to her, and to my—my——"

His body stiffened and his head fell backward. From his hand there dropped a yellow sheet of paper.

"Major—speak—— Tell me——"

But John Fornishire asked no more of ears that would hear no earthly sound again.

CHAPTER III.

FORNISHIRE MAKES A DISCOVERY.

With an exclamation of horror, Fornishire rose to his feet. Looking through the window he saw the head and shoulders of a man disappearing from the edge of a roof on the opposite side of the street.

As he turned toward the door of the card-room there was a mist before his eyes. Through the mist he saw the wondering, frightened face of the waiter.

With an oath he swung the man aside and started for the stairs. In a few moments he had rushed through the front door and into the street.

Fornishire's weight was nearly two hundred pounds, and, despite his years of idleness, most of this was solid muscle.

He flung himself against the door of the house opposite. Once—twice—thrice his right shoulder struck a wooden panel, then it crashed inward. Through the panel he thrust one of his arms.

His fingers touched the spring-lock within, and the door flew open.

Skipping two or three steps in his mad flight up the stairs, he came at last to a ladder that led to a skylight. In a moment the bolt was drawn and he was on the roof.

Behind a chimney he saw a crouching human form—a thick-set, low-browed man, with closely cropped black hair.

With a hoarse cry Fornishire made toward him.

Suddenly the stranger rose, and the muzzle of a revolver was thrust against Fornishire's breast. He hesitated, then he saw that a dagger was glittering in the left hand of his assailant.

"Stop!"

The word was spoken quietly, but with an intonation that was not without effect on the frenzied man. This effect was enhanced by the light of a pair of determined, steel-like gray eyes.

"Sit down."

Between two houses there ran across the roof a low brick wall surmounted by gray stone slabs. All involuntarily Fornishire sat down on one of these slabs, in the shadow of a chimney, and as he did so he saw a curiously carved bow lying at the feet of his assailant.

John Fornishire did not lack courage, but there are times when real courage grows cool and calculating in the presence of danger. A reckless fool, in the heat of anger might have thrown himself on the armed man, but Fornishire was neither reckless nor a fool. The other had him at his mercy. It was a time to quibble—for life and future revenge.

Fornishire, recognizing the conditions, suddenly curbed his impetuosity and quibbled. He was determined to win the game.

"Well, you've killed him," he said calmly, "and you've been so fortunate

as to get the drop on me. You don't fire. Why?"

The assassin looked at him searchingly.

"I may do it yet," he said.

Fornishire shrugged his shoulders.

"You'll have to be pretty quick. The police will be here soon."

"The police know nothing."

"Don't be too sure of that. The death of my friend is already known to others, and my pursuit of you has not been unobserved. A hired assassin from Vantoredos has little chance of——"

The stranger recoiled a step and gazed at Fornishire with undisguised alarm.

"Vantoredos! What do you know of Vantoredos?"

"Enough to enable me to make clear its location to the newspaper men who will be around here presently; enough to reveal the nature of your mission to the United States."

"He—the major has told you, then?"

"He and others," Fornishire replied, lying boldly.

"But you will not tell of it. You——"

"You may be sure I will," said Fornishire.

With a trembling hand, the stranger raised his revolver and once more pointed it at Fornishire's breast.

Fornishire rose.

"Drop that gun," he commanded, looking into the fiery eyes that glittered in the pale, tense face of the man before him.

"I will kill you," the other said in a low, threatening voice.

"No, you won't do that," Fornishire answered calmly. "You dare not shed the royal blood of Vantoredos. Drop the gun."

The revolver fell to the roof, as, with an expression of abject fear, its owner shrank away from the slowly advancing Fornishire.

From behind the latter there rose a succession of shouts, but he did not turn his head or remove his gaze from that of the man before him.

Suddenly the assassin stumbled and fell backward, then with a wild cry he disappeared over the edge of the roof.

Fornishire advanced and looked down into the street. Lying on the stone pavement, sixty feet below, he saw the figure of the man at whose hands Major Erskine had come to his death.

As he turned to retrace his steps, Fornishire realized that a little group of persons behind him on the roof had also witnessed this second tragedy. Shivering in the wintry air were several half-clad men and women who had been roused from their early morning slumbers by his mad rush up the stairs.

With them was a policeman and the waiter from the club.

It was the policeman who raised from the roof the bow that Fornishire had seen. Without speaking, Fornishire took the weapon from the hands of the officer and examined it curiously. It was about four feet in length and of Indian design. As silently as he had taken it he now returned it to the policeman, who forthwith hastened down to where the body of the assassin was lying.

The man was dead.

Several times in the course of that day Fornishire found it necessary to describe the manner in which Major Erskine had been murdered and how afterward he had seen the assassin go over the roof.

On the body of the stranger nothing was found to indicate his identity.

The corpse was sent to the morgue, and a few days later it was buried in the Potter's Field. The murder soon ceased to be a matter of general interest, and a week later no further reference was being made to it by the newspapers.

Major Erskine apparently left few persons behind him who were disposed to mourn his loss. Though he had been a member of several clubs, he seldom had appeared there and had made few friends. Only six carriages followed the hearse to the cemetery. Fornishire was in the first.

When the will of the major was opened, four days after his death, a schedule that accompanied it showed that his estate was worth more than half a million dollars. In the will John Fornishire was named as the sole heir.

To the will, however, there was a codicil, providing that John Fornishire was to receive from the hands of the testator's lawyers a tin box that had been sealed and entrusted to their keeping.

The box was delivered to him promptly, and without opening it he took it to his room.

It was locked, and, failing to find a key with which to open it, he forced it with a chisel he borrowed from the janitor of the building.

As the lid flew open, two or three packages fell to his feet. Tearing off the wrapper of one of these, he found that it contained bank-notes of denominations that ranged from $50 to $1,000—making a total of $10,000.

There were ten of these packages and with them was an envelope addressed to him in the major's handwriting. He broke the seal, and, drawing out a letter, read as follows:

DEAR JACK:

To some men years bring wisdom, but I am not encouraged in the belief that they will bear such a gift to you. However, you are the son of my best and oldest friend, so I will give you the benefit of the doubt.

There is much that I should like to say to you concerning your future, but of these things I dare not speak, for my lips have been sealed by one whose memory you love and honor.

When this box and its contents reach your hands, I shall be in the grave. The one hundred thousand dollars that the box contains is yours. You lost it at card play, and it came into my hands. Unknown to you, I have made you my heir, but the settlement of an estate frequently requires considerable time. The money you find with this letter will suffice to meet all necessary expenses until such a time as my estate shall come into your possession.

Your friend,
ROGER ERSKINE.

For the rest of the night Fornishire sat in front of his fireplace. At his left elbow was the tin box with its store of wealth, and beside it lay the major's letter.

But when he was not gazing into the fire, he was studying a sheet of yellow paper on which was traced a map, and which, at one corner, bore a little crimson stain.

At length the sound of milk-wagons in the street below caused him to look at his watch. It was after five o'clock.

He folded the map carefully and slipped it into his pocket.

"And so," he muttered, "and so Jack Fornishire, spendthrift and general fool, is John, King of Vantoredos."

CHAPTER IV.

A KING AND HIS RETAINERS.

"JOHN, King of Vantoredos!"

As he muttered the words, Fornishire, covered with dust and stiff in every joint, swung himself from the back of his mule and glanced with a grim smile at four riders who were drawing rein beside him.

An Indian took the bridle of Fornishire's animal and started down the hillside.

"Well, Almores, where's the cabin?" Fornishire asked.

"It is only a few paces further on, señor. We will come to it soon."

The speaker, a short, wiry man with a pointed black beard, was still mounted. He now turned the head of his mule in the direction the Indian was proceeding.

Fornishire removed from his head the sombrero he had been wearing and, producing a red handkerchief, wiped the perspiration from his forehead as he slowly descended the hill.

It was twilight—a twilight that could last only a few minutes, for when the sun sinks behind the great ranges of the Andes the darkness of night settles quickly over the valleys.

Fornishire was in Ecuador.

Three months had passed since he had seen Major Erskine laid in the grave, and since that solemn hour the places that had known him knew him no more.

During the week that followed the opening of the tin box he had been like a man in a dream. A change appeared to have come over all the world—a world that seemed no longer so good

to live in as it had been before—but for all its change it was still a world from which John Fornishire had no desire to depart.

Something within him had told him that he was done with the old life he had been living. But what was there that fate had to offer him in its stead?

Though he did not lack courage, Fornishire became conscious of the fact that a great fear—only half-defined, perhaps, but daily growing more apparent—was laying siege to his mind. The major's warning of the fate that threatened him was ever in his ears. He knew not at what hour or in what place the evil would come upon him. It was the terrible uncertainty of it all that oppressed him.

But something more potent than this peril now preyed upon his mind. His mother, still living, but unknown to him, was in need of aid. Ever since his birth his mother had been praying for freedom, and each time he thought of the dying major's words a flush of shame overspread his face.

His father had been a coward, and his cowardice had tainted the Fornishire blood.

In the heart of the younger man natural impulses which had been dormant for many years now woke and asserted their power—a love of adventure, a sense of family honor and a delight in things mysterious.

Moreover, the Fornishires came of old fighting stock, and each had been distinguished by unflinching loyalty to the cause in which he fought.

Death had interrupted the narrative of Major Erskine, and the true secret of his desire to get Fornishire to Vantoredos had not been revealed. It was idle to suppose that the treasure of the Quelgo Indians had tempted the major. It was equally difficult to believe that an interest in the fate of the unhappy princess had caused a hope of effecting her release to become the dominant motive of the old man's life.

In a nutshell, then, the situation was this:

The death of the elder Fornishire and that of the major had been the result of Vantoredosian enmity. This constituted a motive for revenge. The condition to which his mother had been reduced, as well as the peril which threatened himself, made it necessary that he formulate some plan of relief and self-defense.

Then, too, his curiosity was excited by the knowledge that he was the rightful sovereign of a nation unknown to the world—a nation that had within its confines a treasure that would render its possessor one of the richest of the earth's potentates.

And so John Fornishire decided to go to Vantoredos.

On arriving at this decision, Fornishire reflected on the advisability of having as companions in the projected adventure one or two men whom he could trust.

But the persons whom he had numbered among his friends during the last nine years were not of the stuff of which men of action are made.

Then his mind reverted to his college days, and he reviewed the characteristics of old classmates.

He shook his head sadly as he recollected that most of these had taken life more seriously than he had done, and that, having become responsible citizens of the social and business worlds, they were scarcely likely to embark on an undertaking that would appeal only to irresponsible men.

Then the name of George Coakley occurred to him—Coakley, the careless, devil-may-care stroke of the 'varsity eight of '89, who had succeeded in passing through college only because his fellow students regarded his services in the rowing shell as indispensable. By means that would have been regarded as altogether questionable in the case of almost any other student, Coakley got his degree.

When next Fornishire had heard of Coakley, the latter wrote that, having gone from New York to San Francisco before the mast, he found himself out of funds in the metropolis of the Pacific coast.

Fornishire sent him a couple of hundred dollars for old times' sake, then heard no more from him until he learned that he was a captain in the

Cuban revolutionary army. Subsequently he obtained a commission as captain in the United States Volunteers and had gone to the Philippines. He was discharged from the service on charges of insubordination.

Finally, Fornishire ascertained that Coakley was on a ranch in New Mexico. He communicated with him by wire with the result that the soldier of fortune hurried to him as fast as trains could bear him eastward.

Fornishire found few changes in his old classmate. A little more than six feet in height, Coakley was a big, blond, tanned, blue-eyed, good-natured giant, who, however, loved a fight for its own sake and cherished no enmity against an adversary when the fight was done.

When Fornishire told him of the treasure of the Quelgos, and announced his intention of leading and staking the expedition, Coakley was enthusiastic.

Fornishire did not find it either desirable or necessary to reveal to him the true nature of the quest or to inform him that there was such a person as John, King of Vantoredos.

The third member of the expedition was Miguel Tovala, a Cuban, who, for several years, had accompanied Coakley in his wanderings—partly in the character of servant and partly as a comrade-in-arms. With the exception of Coakley, all who had met him found him moody and taciturn.

He had the appearance of a man who had experienced some severe disappointment that had robbed him of the sanguine temperament that is characteristic of the Spanish race.

With Coakley and Tovala, then, Fornishire had gone to Ecuador, where they arrived without having met with any noteworthy adventure. Both of his companions spoke Spanish, and Fornishire, who already had a smattering of that language, devoted himself to the study of it on the journey from New York to Quito.

It was at Quito that Fornishire had obtained the services of Juan Almores as a guide.

Almores spoke English and Spanish with almost equal facility. He had been born in the mountains and was well-known as a hardy and courageous mountaineer.

More than this, he frequently had been in the neighborhood of the Quelgo frontier in the course of prospecting and hunting expeditions. He had learned a great deal concerning the customs of this strange Indian tribe, but when Fornishire had jocularly referred to a kingdom in the middle of the Quelgo territory, Almores had looked at him curiously and failed to reply. Almores had been engaged to conduct the party to a place which Fornishire, after a careful study of his map, had indicated.

On the way Almores had picked up two half-breeds—Jose, about sixty years old, and Sorto, who appeared to be about twenty-five. It was Sorto who had taken the bridle of Fornishire's mule and was leading the way to a cabin which Almores had mentioned.

The little party came at last to the cabin—a little hut constructed of dried branches. A few paces distant flowed the waters of a narrow mountain stream, on each side of which a quantity of high grass afforded excellent pasture for the mules.

As the two half-breeds began to unsaddle the mules, Fornishire glanced curiously toward the cabin.

"How came that here?" he asked, turning to Almores.

"Two Americans built it three years ago, señor," Almores replied. "Some one had told them that there was gold in these mountains, and they came here to prospect."

"Did they find gold?"

Almores shrugged his shoulders and remained silent. His eyes were wandering toward the top of a rugged spur from a mountainside on the further side of the little valley.

"What became of them?" Fornishire persisted.

"I do not know, señor."

"How did you learn of the location of the cabin?"

"I came with the travelers. They were here two days, and then——"

"And then?"

"Why, then, one morning I awoke to find them gone. I never saw them afterward."

"How do you account for their disappearance?"

"The Quelgos, señor. They are a jealous people. We are near their frontier. Two miles further down the valley stands a big white cross that was put there many years ago. Beyond that no stranger may go and live."

"We are safe at this place?"

Once more Almores shrugged his shoulders.

"I leave you here?" he asked.

"Well, no. The fact is, Almores, it is our purpose to go into the Quelgo country."

Almores nodded, but evinced no surprise.

"You will go with us?" Fornishire asked.

Almores, still watching the top of the spur, did not appear to have heard the question. Following the direction of the guide's eyes, Fornishire saw a tree sway strangely, then with a crash, which was only faintly heard where they stood, it fell into the valley.

"What the devil does that mean?" demanded Fornishire, turning again to the guide.

The face of Almores had grown livid, and he turned toward Fornishire a pair of frightened eyes.

"I will go with you," he murmured tremulously, "and may heaven help us!"

"What does it mean, I ask you?" demanded Fornishire, pointing with one hand to the fallen tree and laying the other on a revolver in his belt.

His voice brought Coakley and Miguel to his side.

The guide, making the sign of the cross on his breast, said solemnly:

"It means that Juan Almores has come once too often to the country of the Quelgos; it means, señor, that among those who are with you now there is not one who will learn to love God's bright sunlight again."

CHAPTER V.

THE ROAD TO VANTOREDOS.

FOR several moments all eyes were turned toward the spur from which the tree had fallen.

"It was a signal, then?" said Fornishire.

"Yes, señor, it was a signal," Almores answered.

"To whom?"

"To me."

"And you were watching for it?"

"A signal, yes; but no such signal as that, señor."

"What was the signal you were expecting?"

"Smoke from a fire of green branches—a sign that I should desert you at dawn. Had the smoke been from dry sticks, I was to persuade you to return."

"You were prepared to betray us, then?"

"Yes, señor. My life belongs to those who rule the Quelgos, for they have permitted me to live. They had commanded me to guide to this place all persons who should seek such guidance, for it was their wish that all who had heard of their treasure should come within their power."

"And what do you understand by the fall of the tree?"

"A death sentence for us all. None of us will be allowed to return. The last day many of the rocks and bushes we have passed have sheltered Quelgos who have watched all our movements. Among us some one has done something to excite their displeasure, and they will no longer repose confidence in me. The fall of the tree, which was dislodged by Quelgo spies, is worse than a death sentence.

"When the masters of the Quelgos hate, they do not shed the blood of their enemies. There is an axiom that 'They whom the gods would destroy they first make mad.' It is so with the Quelgos."

"Who are the masters of the Quelgos?"

"A race of white people who inhabit the kingdom of Vantoredos."

As he spoke, Almores gazed at Fornishire with a curious, searching expression.

"Are they civilized?" Coakley asked.

"Yes," Almores answered, still looking at Fornishire. "They are as civilized as ourselves. Though few of them

have left the district in which they dwell, they are well informed concerning the history of the outside world. But with all their civilization they are devils, and they show no mercy to male strangers."

"How great is the population of Vantoredos?" Fornishire asked.

"About thirty thousand."

"Thirty thousand? Are all descended from the ship's company of the Dovernian—the bark that was wrecked in 1763?"

"The Dovernian! You know then, that——"

The face of Almores was livid, and, as he spoke, he involuntarily drew back.

"Yes," replied Fornishire calmly. "I am not altogether unacquainted with the history of Vantoredos. But you have not answered my question."

"The blood of Dovernian men and women is in the veins of every citizen of Vantoredos," Almores answered sullenly. "Not one of them is a half-breed. The Quelgos, cruelly treated by the Vantoredosians, are a subject race and are regarded as little better than slaves. But why do you, señor, who know the history of Vantoredos, ask me this?"

Fornishire shrugged his shoulders.

"Because I prefer to ask questions rather than to answer them," he retorted coldly. "The original Dovernians could not have numbered more than two hundred. How, then, do we find a population of thirty thousand now?"

"Like the Mormons in your own country, the Vantoredosians practise polygamy. Hundreds of Ecuador women have become their wives."

Fornishire nodded, and turned again to the spur from which the tree had fallen.

In the dusk he was able to see only its outlines.

"Well, what's the game now?" he asked.

"Grub," answered Coakley cheerfully.

From one of the packs Miguel began to draw forth pans and pails.

"And while Mig is making it ready, I'm going to tackle that stream," Coakley went on, and thus speaking he threw his sombrero to the ground and forthwith proceeded to draw off his shirt.

Fornishire did likewise, and in a space of time that seemed almost incredible to Almores the two men, stripped to the skin, were splashing in a deep pool.

Fornishire and Coakley had been thus employed for only a few minutes when a startled cry from the direction of the cabin reached their ears. Then they saw six or eight dark, half-naked figures hurrying toward the waterside.

Both men leaped to the bank and faced the newcomers.

"Well, who the devil are you?" cried Coakley, wiping the water from his eyes and addressing the Indians who lined up before them.

"You are our prisoners."

The words were English, and the speaker was a tall, swarthy and muscular man with black hair, a Roman nose and clear-cut features, who advanced slowly toward them.

"That doesn't answer my question," Coakley retorted, glancing at the speaker curiously.

The man smiled faintly as he replied:

"Since you are so insistent, I will humor you. My name is Kenneth, and I am here to——"

He stopped.

One of the Quelgos who accompanied him leaned forward and gazed with staring eyes at a blurred black mark on Fornishire's chest.

The man who had introduced himself as Kenneth saw it, too. His features hardened, and with a quick movement he drew a revolver from his belt and aimed it at the Indian. There was a flash and a loud report from the weapon. Then the body of the Quelgo lay at Fornishire's feet.

"Get into your clothes," the murderer commanded bruskly, addressing Fornishire.

The order was promptly obeyed by Fornishire and Coakley, who found that their revolvers and cartridge belts had been appropriated by the enemy. The Quelgos quickly saddled the mules and placed the packs on the pack animals. Then, in accordance with directions given by Kenneth, Fornishire and his companions mounted.

The moon was now well up, and at a word from Kenneth the little cavalcade, flanked by nearly two score Quelgos, set off on its journey to Vantoredos.

No attempt was made by Kenneth to separate the captives. Fornishire and Coakley, as often as the torturous paths they traversed would permit, rode side by side.

Almores and Miguel were immediately behind them.

From time to time the shadowy groups of Quelgos gave voice to strange, barbaric songs. Kenneth, riding at the rear of the company, remained silent.

At length, riding slowly, and having passed from one valley to another, they came at last to a cross constructed of white granite and about ten feet in height.

An exclamation from Almores caused Fornishire and Coakley to turn their heads.

"Heaven have mercy on us now!" Almores uttered. "We have left the world behind."

Thus far Fornishire and Coakley had not spoken. Now, however, the soldier of fortune turned to his friend.

"Is this place that they call Vantoredos out of our way, Jack?" he asked.

"No," returned the other; "it seems to be directly in it."

Coakley chuckled.

"It looks a little like it now," he answered; "but is it in Vantoredos that we are to find the treasure of the Quelgos?"

"Yes."

"These Indians do not carry guns."

"No; nor do we just now."

The path narrowed, and Coakley's mule dropped behind the animal Fornishire was riding. Coakley began to whistle softly. The air was "Marching Through Georgia." At length the widening road enabled him to draw abreast of Fornishire again.

"I've got a couple," said Coakley confidentially.

"A couple of what?" demanded Fornishire wonderingly.

"Guns—derringers. I always carry them in my boots, and you may have observed that whenever I take off my boots, whether to sleep or bathe, I always keep them near me. Two or three times that practise has saved my life."

He glanced over his shoulder, then slipped a hand into his shirt.

"Here, Jack, old boy, have a thirty-eight derringer on me."

He placed the weapon in one of Fornishire's hands. Then he added:

"I've got a stripe of thirty-eight cartridges down each trouser leg and a few loose ones in my pocket. Here's a dozen or so."

These, too, fell in Fornishire's bridle hand and were quickly transferred to a hiding-place in his garments.

"Thanks," said Fornishire.

"Don't mention it," returned Coakley pleasantly. "At any time you give the word I'll drop that man Kenneth who is riding behind. These redskins, with their bows and arrows——"

Fornishire's mule stumbled. Its rider said:

"Not yet. He is doing us a service now. Wait until we come to Vantoredos."

CHAPTER VI.

THE RADIUM CAVERN.

For more than two hours captives and captors silently made their way onward. At last they came to a valley that was rather broader and longer than those they had traversed before. Here, in the moonlight, they saw the roofs and spires of a town.

"What in heaven's name is this?" asked Coakley, once more urging his mule to the side of Fornishire's mount.

"I fancy it's the capital of Vantoredos," Fornishire replied as he eyed the distant buildings curiously.

Both turned their heads as they heard the quickening hoofbeats of one of the mules that had been in the rear. Kenneth, putting his animal to a gallop, was moving to a position at the head of his party.

"Halt!" he called.

All the riders reined in. The Quelgos, who had spread out in the course of the march, approached on a run, then, huddling together with their eyes turned

toward their white leader, they stood at attention.

"What's up now?" queried Coakley, leaning toward the disconsolate Almores.

"They are waiting for the guard."

"Been here before, eh?" remarked Fornishire in a low voice.

"Once, señor."

For several minutes the white men and the red waited in silence. Then, along a broad road leading from the town, they saw two lines of men approaching.

As they drew nearer, the watchers made out a creaking wagon, drawn by oxen. Fornishire remembered Major Erskine's story of the entry made by him and the elder Fornishire into Torbusa, the capital of Vantoredos.

"It looks as if history was about to repeat itself," muttered Fornishire.

There was a heavy sigh behind him. Turning, he saw Almores shaking his head despondently.

"If they lock you up with us, by heaven I'll strangle you—you lying spy!" said Fornishire vindictively.

"Alas, señor will not be so kind," replied Almores sadly.

The double line of men had now halted before the Americans and their companions. All were smooth-shaven, considerably above medium height, and wore their hair so long that it swept their shoulders.

They were clad in tight-fitting shirts, ringed with black and red stripes, short red jackets and loose red trousers, but wore no caps.

Each carried a cutlass and had a short rifle strapped across his shoulders.

"We seem to be up against the real thing now," said Coakley in accents indicative of respectful admiration.

"Wait," Fornishire muttered glumly.

In obedience to a command given by Kenneth, the Americans and their attendants dismounted. The two half-breeds had accompanied them up to this point, but when Fornishire, Coakley, Miguel and Almores were conducted to the rear of the covered vehicle and directed to seat themselves inside, the half-breeds disappeared.

As the Vantoredosians took positions around the wagon, the figures of the Quelgos were swallowed up in the shadows of the surrounding mountains.

The lumbering vehicle turned slowly around and the journey to the town was resumed.

Except for the creaking of the wheels of the wagon, the cries of the ox-driver, and the tread of the marching men, all was silent.

At the expiration of a half-hour the wagon stopped. Through the white cloth covering of the vehicle there came a sudden flare of light. The door at the rear was thrown open and a rough voice commanded the occupants to alight.

Fornishire was the first to set foot on the ground. The sight that met his eyes caused him fairly to gasp with wonder.

Before him was a double line of men, each line being about ten feet distant from the other, thus forming a path leading to a lofty gateway set in the side of a mountain. One of the singular features of the spectacle was the fact that the men in each line faced outward and each held a flaming torch aloft.

The gateway appeared to be at least a hundred feet in height, and half-way up the figures of white-clad men were to be discerned on a ledge illumined by ten great braziers.

Preceded by Kenneth, Fornishire and his three companions passed quickly along the lane formed by the long lines of men with averted faces until at last they passed through the great portal and into a broad and dimly-lighted corridor beyond.

Here they ascended several flights of broad steps, and as they moved onward their faces were fanned by drafts of cold, moist air like that which a person might encounter on entering a mine or great cavern.

Along this passage men clad in white shirts, jackets and kilts were passed from time to time. All carried short spears, but, like the men outside, stood with their backs to the path traversed by Fornishire and his companions.

At length, after they had been walking for several minutes, Kenneth turned

to the right and paused before a pair of high, barred doors.

"Bronze?" queried the curious Coakley, nudging Fornishire.

"Gold," sighed Almores. "It is the commonest of metals here."

The yellow gates swung inward.

"Enter," commanded Kenneth, pointing to the new corridor thus revealed.

When the two Americans, accompanied by Miguel and Almores, had passed within, the gate, moved by some unseen force, slowly closed, and the four men heard the snapping of the lock.

Fornishire turned to Almores.

"Well, hound, you apparently have traversed this trail before," he said. "Are we to go in alone?"

"Alas, señor," Almores groaned, "I was never in this corridor before."

"Lead the way. We'll follow you. If there are any pitfalls on ahead, you, as our guide, must discover them. Your knowledge of the signals of this strange people is so singularly developed that my friends and I are agreed that you should have the right of the line."

"Have mercy, señor!"

Almores clasped his hands and seemed about to kneel when the foot of Coakley, who stood behind him, flew out. Almores staggered forward a few paces, hesitated, then went meekly on ahead of the others.

Fornishire, glancing over his shoulder, saw that Kenneth, standing outside the barred gate, was looking after them. There was a strange expression in his eyes and on his face—an expression in which earnestness was mingled with hesitation.

Fornishire stopped abruptly, and, half-unconsciously, began to retrace his steps.

Kenneth turned quickly from the gate and walked away. In a few moments Fornishire was back again at Coakley's side.

The corridor in which the four now found themselves was unlighted, except by the rays of the lamps that burned outside the gate. When Almores had advanced to a point where he felt that the darkness screened the party from the view of any one who might be looking after them from the main corridor, he paused and laid a trembling hand on Fornishire's arm.

"You distrust me still, señor?"

"I neither trust you nor distrust you here. We should be quite content if you leave us. It is better that the rest of us work out our destiny alone."

"You will go on ahead, then?" asked Almores eagerly.

"Jack!"

The voice was that of Coakley, who had sauntered on when Almores halted.

"Jack!"

The word came more faintly now, and as Fornishire ran onward he heard a faint, whirring sound.

"Jack!"

The utterance was scarcely louder than a whisper.

"George!" Fornishire cried.

There was no answer.

Fornishire was about to call again when suddenly he lost his feet, falling with such force that for several moments he was unable to draw breath.

The whirring sound was beneath him now and there was a sudden inrush of air—air charged with flying water.

He rose to his knees and stretched out his arms. The fingers of his right hand came in contact with a wall that seemed to be rushing by him. With an exclamation of pain he drew in his arms. The fingers of that hand were numb.

Then there was a swirling of water at his feet. As he rose to an upright position a hand fell upon his shoulder and he heard a low, guttural cry. Turning quickly, he grappled with some one who had been thrown against him.

"Señor Coakley?"

The voice was Miguel's.

"No; it is I—Jack Fornishire," and as he spoke he grasped the other's arm.

The water at his feet grew deeper, then a faint glow appeared ahead—a light sky-blue mist that seemed to be moving toward him with almost inconceivable rapidity.

The water was above his knees, but the current seemed to be decreasing in force, and the swishing, whirring sound grew fainter. The glow ahead of him was becoming a strong light now, as, arm in arm, he and Miguel watched it.

Then the whirring ceased. Fornishire and his companion hesitated. It was apparent that they had been borne forward by a moving, water-washed platform that had stopped.

Keeping a little in advance of Miguel, Fornishire was the first to come to the end of the passage. There he paused.

He stood at the margin of a subterranean lake. Above and around were thousands of giant stalactites and stalagmites, some of which, nearly two hundred feet long, extended from the cavern roof to points beneath the surface of the water.

The whole place was bathed in a bluish light which Fornishire had little difficulty in identifying as radium rays.

These wonders had scarcely been revealed to his view when an exclamation of alarm behind caused him to turn to Miguel. As he did so something stirred at his feet.

It was an enormous crocodile, which, moving its head from side to side, advanced toward him with open jaws.

Fornishire deftly side-stepped the monster, and as its big, ugly mouth closed with a snap, Miguel kicked it in the middle of the body. The reptile turned, and in a few moments had left the little strip of sand on which the two men stood and had disappeared beneath the rippling surface of the water.

As Fornishire once more looked around him he became aware of the fact that his actions were being watched by the occupants of two black gondolas that lay on the farther side of some big crystal-like rocks about sixty feet away.

The men were white, and the only garments worn by each consisted of a white breech-clout.

From one of the boats there came a familiar voice.

"This way, Jack. This is the first ferryboat across the Styx. Have your ticket ready."

It was Coakley.

CHAPTER VII.

UNSPEAKABLE THINGS.

Following the direction of the voice, Fornishire and Miguel approached the boats.

On the deck of one they saw their friend. Blood was streaming from a cut in his head, but as he sat with his arms clasping his knees he smiled cheerfully.

"It's like a Coney Island side-show, isn't it, old man?" said Coakley laughingly. "But come and sit here with me. We'll—— Hello! What's this?"

From the passage through which the three friends had been so swiftly transported on the movable platform there now emerged a trembling, dripping figure.

It was Almores.

Coakley chuckled quietly as he surveyed the wobegone appearance of their former guide, who, in obedience to gestures made by one of the Vantoredosians, advanced with faltering steps.

Miguel was about to follow Fornishire on board the boat on which Coakley was seated when a restraining hand fell on one of his arms. By gestures he was given to understand that he and Almores were to take places on the second craft.

"Can't these men speak?" queried Fornishire.

"No," Coakley answered. "I tried to get one to talk while you were coming down that infernal chute, but it was useless. He was good enough to make clear the reason, however, for he opened his mouth and enabled me to see that his tongue had been cut out. Can we smoke?"

The last words were addressed to a Vantoredosian who was standing near.

The man nodded, whereupon Coakley and Fornishire proceeded to fill and light their pipes.

"That's better," said Fornishire, with gloomy approval. "How did you get that cut on the head?"

"I came into collision with one of the walls of the chute, and the wall got the better of the argument. Well, we're off." Then, raising his voice, the irrepressible Coakley called: "*Bon voyage*, Mig—*bon voyage!*"

The boats were under way now. Each was about twenty feet long and six or seven feet wide, with a flat deck, which, with its present burden, was only about two feet above the water. The bows

and sterns were pointed, and from each rose, to a height of five feet, a rudely carved image evidently designed to represent a grinning deity of an Indian tribe.

The nature of the motive power was as extraordinary as the vast cavern itself. So far as outward appearances were concerned, the little vessels started of their own volition.

The boats proceeded slowly, but that part of the lake that had first been visible was soon crossed, then they glided into a second cavern, larger than the first. Here, however, the light was much fainter, the stalactites were streaked with yellow and green, and the atmosphere was charged with a moldy odor that had not been apparent before.

They had scarcely entered this big chamber when Fornishire seized Coakley by the arm and pointed to something long and sinuous that was swimming in a course parallel with their boat and only eight or ten feet distant. A moment later both men saw that it was a large drab serpent about eight feet long.

Its head was well above the water, and its red, beady eyes were fixed upon the Americans.

For several moments the two men silently watched the movements of the reptile. Then their attention was distracted by a creaking, cracking sound above them.

As they looked upward they saw that a fragment of stalactite had become detached from the roof of the cavern. With a tremendous splash, it fell into the water. The boat rocked violently and those on board were drenched to the skin.

As Coakley and Fornishire rubbed the water from their eyes they saw that the serpent was gone.

The two boats moved on. The breadth of the second cavern was soon traversed, then the subterranean voyagers entered a lofty tunnel and the blue light became dimmer.

Looking ahead of them, the Americans saw two streaks of pale, yellow light falling athwart their course. When the first of these was reached they discovered that it came from the foot of a flight of broad stone steps that led to what appeared to be a large chamber, about fifty feet above, hewn out of mountain granite and illumined by huge braziers.

But the boats moved on toward the second streak of light, and just as the increasing darkness rendered the features of the men around him invisible Fornishire heard the call:

"Jack!"

He started and leaned forward, then something fell into the boat, and he heard the shuffling of feet and the beating of heavy sticks on the deck. There was an inarticulate cry, and he saw the dark figure of one of the Vantoredosians fall into the water.

Something struck him lightly on one of his legs. He bent over and grasped it.

It was the body of a writhing serpent.

He tightened his grip and drew the reptile toward the side of the boat. Some one's shoulder brushed his own; there was a splash, and the intruder went overboard.

"Did it strike you?" asked the voice of Coakley anxiously.

"No, but——"

"Jack—my son!"

Light was shining on the little craft now, and at the foot of a second flight of steps, less high than the first, Fornishire saw a kneeling human form.

"Father!"

On the deck lay an oar. In another moment it was in Fornishire's hands. With his gaze still riveted on the pallid face of the kneeling man, Fornishire thrust the head of the boat around. A heavy hand fell on his shoulder. The derringer that Coakley had given to him was in his grasp. There was a flash and a detonation that awoke the echoes of the caverns they had passed and the several caverns that were yet to come.

A Vantoredosian fell to the deck, but two others were upon him. Their holds soon relaxed. Coakley was firing now.

"Good old Jack! Keep it going!"

Both derringers were at it. The boat, with its bow scraping against one

of the cavern walls, was almost at a standstill.

It had moved, however, past the place from which the light was streaming.

From the boat behind them came the sound of other shots.

"Let 'em have it, Mig," Coakley shouted.

Every Vantoredosian on the first boat was down. Coakley was aiding Fornishire in his attempt to bring the boat's head around.

"How the devil can we stop it?" he muttered, looking around him helplessly.

He glanced behind him toward the other boat.

"Look, Jack! Look!" he cried. "Almores is with us now!"

The former guide had no derringer, but as the boat that was bearing him on moved into the light Fornishire saw the gleam of a long-bladed knife in his hands, and as it flashed, mute after mute who manned the craft fell from the deck into the water.

"Bravo, Almores!" Coakley cried exultantly.

The head of the first boat had been turned backward. With his oar, Fornishire guided it to the place where knelt the figure of his father. Then, leaping to the stone paving, he seized one of the extended hands.

With a cry of horror Fornishire drew back.

Had Coakley not caught him, he would have fallen into the water.

The figure had dropped forward on its face.

Its detached arms were in John Fornishire's trembling hands.

CHAPTER VIII.

MASKS AND PITFALLS.

Livid, trembling with excitement, Fornishire stood staring at the figure that lay huddled at his feet. Coakley threw a supporting arm around him as he said:

"Don't be a fool, Jack. The body and arms are stuffed with straw. The face is made of wax. Those who fear to shed the royal blood of Vantoredos are cunningly striving to drive you mad."

Fornishire allowed the arms to fall from his grasp. Coakley led him away.

When Fornishire turned again to the place where the image had fallen, he saw that it had disappeared, and that Miguel and Almores were securing the boats by painters which they slipped through rings in the pavement.

"That was a good fight you put up with those fellows in your boat, Almores," said Coakley approvingly.

Almores shrugged his shoulders.

"It was nothing," he replied.

"Well, Jack, now that we've discharged our crews, what's the next move in your little game?" Coakley asked.

Fornishire turned to Almores.

"What did you do to those boats?" he demanded.

"I shut off the power, señor."

"What is the power?"

"Radium, señor."

Fornishire looked absently toward the water in which the boats were lying.

Two long, sinuous bodies were moving side by side, and four beady eyes followed his.

The American, filled with a sense of loathing, turned away.

"Almores, you have been here before?"

"In the outer cavern, yes; never here, señor."

"How are we to get out of this?"

Almores shook his head.

"There is no way unless we return by the path we entered. As you have seen, señor, the gates are barred against us. We should be exposed to new devilwork. Every chamber of this great labyrinth, which extends many miles underground, has some new horror. The only food it would be possible for us to obtain would be the bodies of serpents; the only drink is the water which they inhabit."

Fornishire and Miguel exchanged glances of dismay. The eyes of Coakley were on the body of one of the former boatmen, now drifting in a current that flowed slowly in the direction in which their boats had been proceeding at the time the prisoner revolted.

"And, señor, vast as are these cav-

erns—for you are yet to see the larger and more terrible ones—there is no wall among them that has not eyes and ears in the service of the Queen of Vantoredos."

"The queen! I thought the ruler was a king."

"No."

"Carasima?"

"Alas, no! Carasima was deposed by her uncle, who became Roderick II. He died four years ago. Two days before his death he wedded Griselda—a young woman of great beauty. The adherents of the late king placed her on the throne."

"And Carasima—where is she?"

"Somewhere in these caverns. She was a woman with a mind more lofty and a heart more pure than were possessed by any other woman in the kingdom.

"Before she came to the throne she was secretly married to a stranger who had been cast into these caverns by her father. After the exile of her husband she had a son.

"Her enemies have charged her with murdering him after the flight of his father. Though comparatively little value is set on human life in Vantoredos, the shedding of royal blood is a crime that neither the people nor their rulers ever forgive."

"And they believe that Carasima's son is dead?"

"Yes; that is the reason she has suffered all these years."

"If the son is living, it would be difficult to establish his identity, then."

"No, señor, for every child of royal blood is marked indelibly almost at the hour of his birth. The flesh on his breast is tattooed in such a manner that by the time he attains his twenty-first year the indecipherable marks that he receives in infancy take the form of a condor, with spread wings, and——"

"Great God, Jack! You——"

Coakley was looking at Fornishire with an expression of astonishment.

"Stop!" commanded Fornishire in an angry voice.

Coakley glanced toward Miguel, who nodded his head significantly. Fornishire saw the movement.

"No more," he said.

"It's all right, Jack," muttered Coakley in a conciliating tone as he laid a hand on one of the shoulders of his friend. "Old Mig and I like the game even better than we did before. We'll win."

He chuckled as he turned to Miguel, who smiled sadly.

This by-talk was not without its effect on Almores, who continued to regard Fornishire with a puzzled expression.

"Look, Jack! Look!"

The words were spoken in an undertone by Coakley, who was gazing at the head of the flight of steps. There Fornishire saw a figure wearing a black mask and a red domino.

For several moments the figure was immovable, then it raised its hand, and, by a gesture, invited Fornishire and his companions to ascend.

"Shall we go?" asked Coakley.

Fornishire nodded.

"There's no use in staying where we are," he said. "Miguel, you have a derringer. Wait here. If any one attempts to take possession of the boats, fire a shot or two to give us warning. We'll not be far distant."

Then, turning to Coakley, he added: "We might as well hear whatever it is that that chap up there has to say."

It was Coakley who led the way up the steps. As he came to the side of the figure in the domino he stopped and glanced at Fornishire, who was at his heels.

"Where do you want to take us?" asked Fornishire, addressing the man in the domino.

The mask was turned toward Miguel, who remained at the bottom of the steps.

"He awaits our return," Fornishire explained.

"He must go with you," said the stranger.

"Come on, Coakley."

And as Fornishire spoke, he started down the steps again. His companions followed.

"Stay!" the stranger commanded.

Fornishire turned on his heel.

"Our friend guards the boats," he retorted determinedly, and hesitated.

"We will leave him here," acquiesced the man in the domino.

"In those circumstances we will accompany you, provided, however, that you do not take us too far"

"Where are your boatmen?"

"Discharged," answered Coakley carelessly.

The man in the domino turned to his left, and as he walked with quick steps over a granite pavement, Fornishire, Coakley and Almores followed him.

At length, thus conducted, the two Americans and Almores came to a little flight of steps in the wall. In obedience to a gesture from the man in the domino the three companions mounted the steps.

Ahead of them was a high, narrow door.

Coakley thrust it open.

"Humph!" he muttered.

Fornishire, more impressionable, was dazed by the sight that met his view, and involuntarily drew back a step.

Before them was a lofty, circular hall, about three hundred feet in diameter. The walls were of a gray and yellow stone, carved in the form of columns and arches.

The place was lighted with radium rays, and as Coakley, an experienced miner, looked around him, he nudged Fornishire and muttered confidentially:

"Gold-bearing quartz—ten thousand dollars to the ton, at least. By heaven, if——"

But Fornishire heard no more. In front of him stood a company of not less than fifty male and female figures. The faces of most of them were masked, and nearly all wore white garments.

The costumes of the men consisted of sleeveless shirts, tunics and short skirts. The women wore loose-fitting, trailing gowns without sleeves. Immediately inside and on the right of the door through which Fornishire and his friends had entered the hall was a little group of men attired in a fashion similar to that of the man who had led them thither.

Out of this group there now stepped a short, massive-chested fellow, with a long, hard face, and gray, grizzled hair. He, too, wore a domino and carried a black mask in one of his hands. He made a courtly bow, then said:

"Your majesty is more prompt than the preparations for your reception, for it has pleased you to appear an hour in advance of the time set for your arrival."

The form of address and the courtly manner of the speaker found Fornishire off his guard. He looked with an expression of bewilderment at the man, then glanced at the other occupants of the hall.

From the lips of one of the maskers rose a low, mocking, feminine peal of laughter.

"Your majesty has had a pleasant voyage?" queried one of the domino wearers.

Fornishire bowed awkwardly and was about to answer when a small white hand was laid upon his arm and a soft voice asked anxiously:

"Does your majesty turn handsprings? It is said that you—— Ah, there's the music! Let us waltz."

From a number of stringed instruments behind a great, yellow screen at the opposite side of the hall, there rose the lively strains of waltz music. The young woman who had been speaking took a position for the dance, and, observing that all the persons around him except the men in dominoes were beginning to dance, Fornishire reluctantly clasped the young woman round the waist and did likewise.

Twice or thrice, as he whirled around the hall, he met the eyes of Coakley, whose usually lively features now wore a look of gravity. Fornishire noticed that the right hand of his fellow countryman was in his pocket, and he knew it was gripping the derringer.

Suddenly, from without there came the sound of a pistol shot.

It was a signal from Miguel, who was standing guard at the boats.

With an exclamation of impatience, Fornishire thrust from him the young woman with whom he had been waltzing.

She tightened her hold on his hand and arm and he felt himself drawn down by her weight.

A trap-door beneath her feet had

opened and she was sinking into the hole thus exposed.

"For God's sake, Jack!"

The voice was Coakley's, whose sinewy fingers caused the woman to relax her hold. With a little cry, she sank through the floor, and the trap-door flew back into place.

Twice again the sound of Miguel's derringer reached their ears.

Coakley and Fornishire started for the door through which they had entered.

As the two Americans rushed on, resolved to fight, if need be, to effect a passage, the maskers, whose laughter now echoed through the hall, made way for them.

Then suddenly the floor gave way beneath the two men's feet. They struck something from which they rebounded —there was a crash above their heads— darkness enveloped them and they went spinning down a steep incline, which, smooth as wax, offered nothing to which the whirling men could cling.

CHAPTER IX.

A DRAMATIC MOMENT.

At length, breathless and bewildered as a result of the suddenness and rapidity of their descent, the two Americans found themselves seated side by side in front of a cushioned barrier against which they had been launched.

As they rose unsteadily they saw that they were in a low-ceilinged apartment which measured about one hundred feet in length and the same in width. It was lighted by red lamps.

At the middle of the wall on the farther side was a low, red-carpeted dais on which was placed a large gilt chair overhung by a red canopy.

In the center of the room was a rudely fashioned wooden table. On this rested a heavy iron crown.

Besides Fornishire and Coakley, there were two other persons present. Of these, one was quickly recognized. This was Kenneth, the Vantoredosian who had commanded the party of Quelgos that had made prisoners of the Americans and their companions.

The other was a woman, and, as Fornishire looked, he gave utterance to a low and involuntary exclamation of admiration.

Tall, fair-haired and stately, there was something in the poise of her head and the freedom of her movements that made her seem like a reincarnation of Diana.

Her features and bare arms were admirably molded. Over one arm she carried a domino, and her fingers toyed with a white mask.

The long, loose gown she wore was cut in a style similar to those worn by the women the Americans had seen a few minutes before. It was not white, but of some color that was neutralized by the red light that shone upon it.

When the Americans first saw the woman her red lips were parted in a smile, but, as Kenneth spoke to her and essayed to take her hand, an expression of haughtiness overspread her features and a cold light shone in her eyes.

Kenneth, pointing to the mask the young woman held, seemed to be in the act of expostulating. As she shrugged her shoulders impatiently and turned, Fornishire seized Coakley by the arm.

"Down!" he whispered. "It may go better with us if they do not find us here."

They were in the act of seating themselves behind the cushioned barrier when something was hurled against them with a force that nearly knocked the breath from their bodies.

It was Almores.

"Pardon, señor! I——"

He said no more. As he started to rise he was overthrown by another human projectile.

"Miguel!" exclaimed Coakley joyfully, grasping and shaking the shoulders of his old comrade-at-arms.

Fornishire and Coakley, speaking together in whispers, were asking the Cuban to tell them what had happened at the boats to cause him to give an alarm, when the sound of voices reached their ears.

As they turned to look over the barrier they were confronted by the elderly man who had first addressed them in the room above.

"The movements of your majesty have scarcely been in accordance with our program, for it was here that we originally purposed to receive you," he said, with the same outward show of respect that had characterized his words on the former occasion. Then he added: "We are assembled here to participate in the ceremony attending your coronation."

"It is difficult for me to realize that my claims to the throne of Vantoredos have been so promptly recognized," replied Fornishire, "and I have no desire to accept the honor—at least, not until I have some tidings of my mother."

The features of the Vantoredosian grew harder as he answered coldly:

"We have no knowledge of your mother, but as representatives of a mother whose son died at the hands of your father, we are here to place on your head the iron crown of Vantoredos—a crown that must be worn by all persons not of royal birth who slay one in whose veins flows the blood of the rulers of Vantoredos."

"You mean——"

"I mean that the heir to the throne of Vantoredos was slain by your father, Roger Erskine."

"In God's name, man, do you believe that I——"

"Time presses! Will you wear the iron crown of Vantoredos as a brave man or a coward?"

"But——"

Four men clad in the red and black uniforms of the guards who had escorted the covered wagon to the town on the night before now advanced. Two took the American by the arms. As, thus led, he moved toward the dais, something caused him to look in the direction of a tall woman who wore a white mask.

Through the slits in the mask he saw a pair of gleaming eyes turned full upon him. Immediately behind the white-masked woman stood Kenneth, with a strange, drawn expression on his face.

And, as Fornishire looked, he saw Kenneth raise a hand as if in warning and shake his head negatively as he pointed to where the iron crown lay upon the table.

That the crown possessed some peculiar significance that he had failed to understand was perfectly apparent.

Having charged him with being the slayer of a royal heir, why were the representatives of the dethroned queen resolved to place upon his head an emblem of sovereignty?

Why was Kenneth, who had made him captive, making these warning signals?

Hemmed in and hurried onward by the guards, he had no opportunity to make an explanation to the man who had addressed him as a king. Glancing behind him, he saw that Coakley, Miguel and Almores, also guarded by soldiers, were following him.

Again his eyes sought those of the masked woman, and as their glances met it seemed to him that she shrank from his gaze.

He was at the dais now, and as he mounted it he turned and surveyed the five or six score figures who stood before him.

Many had removed their masks, and he saw that their faces were grim and hard.

The elderly man, who appeared to be master of ceremonies, was standing at the foot of the dais. He raised his hands and all whispering ceased suddenly. When all was silent, he spoke:

"Bring hither the crown for him who, coveting the treasure of the Quelgos, would become King of Vantoredos."

A tall man, black-masked and clad in a close-fitting suit of red, slashed with black, took the crown from the table, and, advancing toward where Fornishire stood, knelt before the dais.

"The man is here," the master of ceremonies went on. "From whose hand shall he receive the crown?"

On the right of the dais there now appeared the tall, commanding figure of a sad-faced woman with gray hair.

"The task is mine," she said in accents that were hollow and distinct.

Thus speaking, she ascended the dais, and as she confronted Fornishire there leaped into her eyes an expression of unspeakable hate.

Then she leaned forward and took the iron crown from the kneeling man in red and black.

In obedience to a muttered word from the master of ceremonies, Fornishire, still with his eyes on those of the woman who stood by him, knelt on the dais.

Then, holding the heavy crown aloft, she said:

"Roger Erskine, brother to serpents, I crown thee Roger, King of the Black Cavern. May all the curses of——"

She stopped. Something in the face of the kneeling man before her seemed to inspire her with alarm. The crown trembled in her hands.

"You—you are not——" she faltered.

"The son of Roger Erskine? No, my mother."

He rose abruptly and, tearing open the front of his shirt, he said in a voice that all might hear:

"If you would crown me, let it be with the crown that is my own—the crown of John, King of Vantoredos!"

The iron crown crashed to the floor, and as it rolled to the feet of the man in black and red the woman sank into the outstretched arms of John Fornishire.

"John, King of Vantoredos!"

The words were repeated in awed tones throughout the hall, and those who stood near the dais saw on the young man's breast the figure of a condor with spread wings.

CHAPTER X.

THE COLLAPSIBLE CELL.

"BETTER now, old chap?"

The speaker was Coakley.

Fornishire raised his head and looked around him. He had been lying on a metallic floor, and by the light of a candle that was held by Miguel he saw that he was in an apartment scarcely more than twenty feet square.

Floor, walls and roof were of steel. Just below the roof, about ten feet from the floor, was a line of perpendicular bars about two feet in height—a line that extended completely around the walls.

Through these filtered a faint blue glow that was not sufficiently strong to illumine the apartment.

Around Fornishire squatted the three companions of his adventures.

"Are you better now?" Coakley repeated.

"Better? What the devil has happened? Your faces are covered with blood and my head—my head—— What is it, George? What have they done to us? Where is my mother?"

Coakley shook his head.

"We put up a good fight, old man," he replied assuringly. "We lit out with both hands, feet and derringers, and dropped 'em right and left, but it was no use. They were too many for us."

"Who attacked us?" demanded Fornishire, rising to a sitting posture.

"That small army of guards who rushed in just after that grand-stand play of yours about the crown of Vantoredos—just after you clasped your mother in your arms. By heaven, it was better than a theater. Why, man, you could have knocked any of those maskers down, even with a feather, after that.

"The guards rushed on, however, and before I knew what was up they had struck you down. Then—would you believe it?—those maskers, men and women, hastened to your aid. You got up and laid about you like a champion. You knocked half a dozen of those red boys to the floor, and while I was fighting my way to your side the floor opened as it had done up in that dancing hall. The earth seemed to swallow you up. I jumped in after you, then came Miguel and Almores.

"What happened next I can't tell you. Things move too quickly for even an American in this fool kingdom of yours. The next thing I knew the four of us were lying here together on this floor, rather the worse for wear. Miguel and Almores tell me that just before they followed us into the trap the red lights went out, and—— Hello! In the name of all the saints, what's——"

Fornishire saw it, too—the white, half-terrified face of a woman looking in upon them through the bars below the ceiling.

It was the face of the woman they had seen talking with Kenneth in the coronation hall.

In another moment it was gone, and the four men heard a little half-stifled cry from where the face had disappeared.

"Where's the door?" demanded Fornishire impatiently, as he moved with quick steps along the walls.

"No use looking for a door, Jack," Coakley answered with cheerful resignation. "Mig, Almores and myself have searched everywhere, but we cannot find even the semblance of one. They must have shoved us in between those bars up there."

But as the four men looked up they saw that the bars had disappeared while Coakley had been speaking.

"The roof's been lowered, señor," said Almores, seating himself dejectedly in the middle of the floor. "The walls will grow narrower presently."

"You mean the room is collapsible?" asked Fornishire.

"Yes, señor; so collapsible that in four hours more the four of us together will be the size of one man."

The faces of the three other men blanched.

"How do you know this, Almores?" Fornishire asked quietly.

"I heard it from the Quelgo Indians, among whom this chamber is known as 'the kernel-crushing nut.' Many men have died here, señor. We are only four."

"Your shoulders, Jack! Be quick!"

In a few moment Coakley's feet were on the shoulders of Fornishire and his head and arms were thrust against the roof.

Four times—once at each of the four walls—Coakley tried to press the roof upward, but each attempt was vain. He was in the act of relinquishing the task when the four men heard a faint click and they saw that, as the roof had descended another foot, there was a perceptible narrowing of the walls.

An exclamation from the middle of the room where Almores sat beside the candle, with his palms resting on the floor, attracted the attention of the two Americans.

"It is getting warm, señors—it is getting warm."

"Warm?" repeated Coakley querulously, as he mopped the perspiration from his brow.

"Yes, señor, the floor. It will be hot soon."

"You infernal croaker, do you mean they are going to roast us alive?" cried Fornishire.

"It is said that here the kernels often are roasted before they are crushed."

Almores, retaining his position on the floor, appeared to be fast resigning himself to his fate, The three others, standing helplessly with pale, drawn faces, surveyed him with an expression of wonder.

Was this the man whose apparent cowardice had excited their contempt only a few hours before?

There is probably nothing in the world so pitiable and nerve-racking as those moments when a strong, healthy man, full of the joy of life, is brought face to face with death, which in some horrible form creeps toward him with the slow steps of a demon that gloats over the mental torments of a helpless victim.

It was death in a form like this that these four men were facing now.

"Well, George, how long is it to last?" Fornishire muttered.

Coakley shook his head moodily.

"I give up, old man. Perhaps it is only another scheme to rob you of your reason."

With a sigh he seated himself on the floor with his back against one of the walls. In a moment, however, he was up again.

"They're at it, eh, Almores?" he said sullenly. "Our time is getting short."

Almores also rose.

"Yes, señors; they have lighted the fires."

The fact rapidly became more apparent. The atmosphere of the room grew warmer, and, as the four men breathed with more difficulty, the perspiration stood out and trickled down their faces and necks.

Then there entered their nostrils the unmistakable odor of overheated iron.

In five minutes more the room assumed the characteristics of a veritable oven. Its occupants were faint and almost blinded by the moisture in their eyes. Each breath was more painful than that inhaled before.

The victims of this diabolical form of torture had removed their coats and placed them beneath their feet. The odor of burning cloth increased the oppressiveness of the death chamber.

Swaying from side to side, as their parched lips and tongues gave utterance to curses on the pitiless wretches who had condemned them to this fate, the four made desperate efforts to maintain upright positions.

To fall upon the heated floor now meant the beginning of the more acute stage of the death agony.

With a maniacal cry, Miguel suddenly grappled with Almores and attempted to throw him down. Coakley staggered to one of the walls, and, with a hoarse shout, smote it vigorously with his fists and feet.

Then a wonder happened.

The wall which Coakley had attacked moved outward, then fell with a resounding crash, the roof rose, and once again the faint blue glow was visible through the bars. There was a sudden inrush of cool air, and with frenzied shouts the four men staggered out. Two fell just outside the lowered wall. A third ran further, then stumbled halfway down a flight of steps and lost consciousness.

The fourth continued on his flight until he came to a dark tunnel in which two boats were lying. He leaped in one, whipped out his knife, cut the painter, then seized an oar and pushed the little vessel off.

"Señor! Señor!"

A dark figure had passed the unconscious man who lay upon the stairs, and, standing at the landing-place, shouted frantically and waved his arms.

"Wait, señor! Wait!"

Fornishire—for it was he—shook his oar threateningly, and gave voice to a wild, incoherent shout of defiance. Then, throwing himself to the deck of the boat, he leaned over the gunwale and scooped up some water in his hands.

The heads of several cavern serpents were raised above the sluggish tide, but he saw them not and—drank.

CHAPTER XI.

WHERE THE TIDE FLOWED.

A WOMAN'S cry—strident with terror—awoke a hundred echoes in a great, dark cavern faintly lighted by blue rays which, here and there, seemed to emanate from some substance embedded in the frowning roof and walls.

"In God's name, come! McNair, Rodriguez, Kenneth—here!"

Near the center of the lake that covered the cavern floor a black boat was drifting. As the cries echoed through the place something stirred on the deck of the little craft, then a white face, ghastly in the dim, blue light that fell upon it, was slowly raised.

"Help!"

The dark figure of a man on the deck rose slowly to its knees. Then the man leaned over the gunwale of the boat, and, scooping up some water with his hands, raised it to his lips and brow.

"Will no one help me?"

The man started, then reached for an oar that lay on the deck. Using this deliberately in the manner of a canoe paddle, he headed the boat toward the place from which the sound appeared to come.

The silence that followed was broken only by the swirling of the water around the blade of the oar.

The boat moved slowly, now through blue rays and now through shadows. Once more the man heard the cry, and he mechanically answered it with a hoarse shout.

Two or three minutes later the bow of the boat struck one of the cavern walls. The figure of a woman leaped toward him.

The boat swayed from side to side so violently that he thought it must overturn.

Four large, yellow eyes, gleaming in the darkness, moved slowly toward him, as the boat drifted broadside on to the wall.

With a new-born activity the man thrust out the oar and with it shoved the boat from the wall, then he began to paddle toward the middle of the cavern lake.

As he did this, he muttered incoherently. The woman crouched to the deck near the bow.

At length, with a low groan, the man collapsed, and as he sank to the deck the oar fell clattering from his hand. The woman leaped to her feet and grasped the oar as it was slipping into the water. Then the boat, now drifting with the tide, was swallowed up in the darkness of a tunnel.

When Fornishire opened his eyes, a faint, cool breeze fanned his face and the bright rays of the sun were streaming down upon him. Overhead was a cloudless sky and around him a circle of precipitous cliffs about eight hundred feet in height.

He saw that he was on the shore of a circular lake about an eighth of a mile in diameter. At one end of the lake was the entrance to a gloomy cavern; at the other was a broad cleft in the cliffs, and in the cleft he saw a rainbow.

A series of seething, booming sounds rose from beneath the rainbow, and he knew that he was only a few hundred feet from a lofty waterfall. Near the shore, immediately in front of him, floated a black boat which, tied to a tree, had been swung against the bank by the current.

But this was not all.

Prone on the ground beside him lay the body of a woman, her face concealed by her arms.

For several moments, Fornishire, utterly bewildered, surveyed the scene around him. The last that he was able to remember had to do with incidents that occurred while he was in the oven-like chamber.

What had happened to him since?

And Coakley, Miguel and Almores—where were they?

Every joint in his body was so stiff that it gave him pain to move his arms and legs. He was trembling as the result of physical weakness, and the light of the sun hurt his eyes.

Near where he lay was a large tree whose branches cast a shadow on the ground. He attempted to summon sufficient strength to enable him to crawl to it.

But the woman?

Who was she? How had she come to this cliff-environed place?

He rose weakly and moved with tottering steps to where she lay. As he knelt down beside her he hesitated, then touched one of the bare white arms.

It was cold.

"She is dead," he muttered.

But even as he spoke, she moved.

As gently as possible, he turned her over on her back. Then he saw her face.

"By heaven, it's—why, it's the woman I saw with that man Kenneth when——"

She half-opened her eyes, then, with a little sigh, closed them again. He hurried to the margin of the lake and there scooped up some water in his hands.

In a few moments he was at the woman's side again and was laving her face.

Once more she opened her eyes.

At first she looked at Fornishire vacantly, then an expression of fear crossed her features and she quickly rose.

"You—you!" she exclaimed in a frightened whisper. "What has brought you here?"

Fornishire shrugged his shoulders, and, smiling faintly, glanced toward the gloomy entrance to the cavern.

"God knows, madam," he replied. "I dare say, however, that it was the same agency that is responsible for your presence here. Do you feel better now?"

She ignored the question, as, retreating a step or two, she looked at him searchingly.

"It was you, then, who saved me last night, when—when——"

"I fear that your power of recollection is somewhat better than mine," he answered, shaking his head gravely. "The fact is that when I saw you lying here I was unable to remember the circumstances under which we met."

"You do not recollect having seen me before?"

"Oh, yes. I saw you in a sort of coronation hall—was it last night? I have lost all sense of time since——"

The face of the beautiful woman before him grew hard and still paler, but it was in a quiet voice that she spoke.

"In the coronation hall—you saw me there?"

"Yes—a few minutes before the beginning of a ceremony in which I played a part. You were with a man who, on a former occasion, had introduced himself to me as Kenneth."

"Ah!"

The hard look deepened on her face, and she turned away.

Fornishire watched her curiously.

"And now, madam, will you permit me to ask whether that coronation incident occurred last night? It is apparent that I have been in a trance. I should like to know how long it has been since I ceased to be responsible for my movements."

"Since you decided to come to Vantoredos," replied the young woman coldly, as she walked slowly in the direction of the waterfall.

Fornishire shook his head dubiously.

"It is plain that her physical gifts are more admirable than her temper," he soliloquized.

A feeling of faintness came over him, and he went to the tree toward which he had started when the young woman had attracted his attention. There he sat down in the shade and pressed his hands to his face.

He suddenly recollected that nearly twenty-four hours had elapsed since he had eaten. He glanced around him and wondered what sort of food was procurable in this cliff-environed spot. A few moments later he started as the sound of clattering stones reached his ears.

Looking in the direction whence the sound had come, he saw two black bodies moving among the shrubbery.

He slipped his right hand into one of the hip pockets of his trousers and drew out the derringer that Coakley had given him; then he approached the shrubbery cautiously.

A white-faced, black-bodied goat looked at him with wondering eyes. The derringer flashed and the goat leaped upward, then fell to the ground.

The other goat quickly disappeared. Fornishire went to the animal that he had slain.

It was a little more than half-grown. Taking it by one of its horns, he dragged it over to the tree under which he had been sitting.

This done, Fornishire glanced toward the young woman, who was now some distance away. At the sound of the shot she had turned abruptly and had watched him curiously until she saw him dragging out from the thicket the goat he had slain.

As he looked toward her now, she turned away.

From one of his pockets Fornishire now produced a large claspknife, and with this he promptly addressed himself to the task of skinning and dressing the animal.

He was not an adept at the work, and more than half an hour elapsed before the body, cleansed in a clear mountain stream that flowed into the lake, was hanging on the limb of a tree to which Fornishire had fastened it with a piece of rope cut from the boat's painter.

From the boat also Fornishire obtained a piece of chain which served as a spit. Dry grass and brushwood were plentiful, and, kindled by means of a strong glass, it was soon snapping and crackling under a cross stick from which hung a goodly strip of goat's meat.

A short search enabled the amateur woodsman to find two flat stones, which he carefully washed in the clear, cool waters of the stream. These he dropped beneath the tree.

On one of the stones he placed his open claspknife and on the other the pearl-handled knife that he was wont to carry in New York.

He smiled gravely as he looked at the preparations he had made for the feast, and then glanced at the beautiful woman whose actions plainly indicated that she had little liking for his companionship.

"It's not a pretty lay-out, but under the circumstances it is the best I can do," he muttered.

He walked slowly toward where the young woman, seated on a rock, was looking across the lake.

"I'm fixing up a sort of breakfast," he said. "It's not up to much, I fancy, still it will give us the strength we need to get away from here."

"To get away!" she retorted, looking at him disdainfully.

"Why, yes. There is some way out of this, I suppose."

She averted her eyes, then in a low voice she answered:

"There is none."

And, as she spoke, she pointed to something that lay at a little distance from her on the ground.

It was a human skeleton!

CHAPTER XII.

A WOMAN AND HER WILL.

"No way out! Surely——"

Fornishire looked around him incredulously.

Truly the cliffs around him seemed insurmountable.

"But I killed a goat a few minutes ago. If——"

"It was one that had missed its footing somewhere on the heights and regained it lower down," she said. "Neither goats nor men can scale these cliffs."

"And the cleft yonder?"

"Through it the water falls a thousand feet."

Fornishire hesitated, then turned his clouded face toward the head of the lake.

"Well, there is a cavern, I suppose, but——"

"Have you forgotten the manner in which you brought that boat through the subterranean rapids just before we landed here this morning?"

Fornishire looked at her with an expression of bewilderment.

"Yes—yes. I fear I have forgotten it."

"That is unfortunate," the young woman said, more kindly. "Were I a man I should like to die remembering that I did a deed like that. As you kept the head of the boat straight down its course and cheered me with brave words, and as you heard the sound of the wall below you and used your great strength to guide the boat to the shore, I thought you were a god.

"And now—now—I know you are only the son of a coward whose name is despised by all who live in Vantoredos."

"The son of a coward!"

Fornishire shrank from her. His face was white and drawn, his hands were clenched, and his anger blazed in his eyes.

"If you were not a woman, I——"

He stopped, then, as her gaze fell before his, he turned and left her. With quick strides he returned to the tree on which was hanging the body of the goat. He rearranged the wood under the flesh on the spit, and, leaning against a tree, gazed moodily across the lake.

For nearly five minutes his thoughts were of the father he had loved and respected. Who was this woman who had insulted his memory?

Rousing himself from his revery, Fornishire went to the fire, and, removing the goat's flesh from above it, he took the meat to the stone on which he had laid his knife.

He then remembered that he had a collapsible cup in his pocket. This he filled at the stream and forthwith began his repast.

He ate as a healthy, hungry man will eat when he has been without food for twenty-four hours. When he was done, he had arrived at the conclusion that goat's meat really was not so bad, after all, and he glanced with some complacency to where the rest of the carcass was hanging on the tree.

As he washed his knife at the stream and took another draft of the cold mountain water, he looked again toward the woman who had so wantonly insulted him.

She was sitting where he left her, but she did not avert her face so quickly as to prevent him from seeing that she had been watching him during the progress of his meal.

Fornishire lighted his pipe and sauntered down to the boat. On the night before he had been mystified by the

motive power of the craft, and his curiosity now inspired him to make an attempt to learn its nature. Almores had explained that the propelling force was radium, but this statement was not of the sort to banish wonder.

Accordingly he stepped aboard the boat and made a careful examination.

Finally he came to an oblong piece of board set in the deck and having an iron ring in the top.

Taking hold of the ring, Fornishire raised the board and saw that immediately below were two small wheels with telescopic shafts. As he drew one of the wheels toward him and gave it a turn to the right, the boat began to move ahead.

He turned the wheel sharply to the left, and the boat drifted back to where it was before.

He then thrust both wheels back to where they were at the time he found them.

As Fornishire replaced the cover, his eyes wandered again to the young woman. She had left the rock and was now standing only a few paces from the boat.

Her face was paler than he had seen it before and she appeared to be greatly agitated.

"What are you going to do with the boat?" she demanded.

"I haven't quite made up my mind," Fornishire answered so curtly that the color came back with a rush to the young woman's cheeks.

"It is apparent, however, that you are meditating some further use for it."

"Perhaps," said Fornishire, stepping ashore.

"But, believe me, it is useless."

"I dare say," assented the American.

"Do not step aboard of it again," she said sharply.

Fornishire looked at her with elevated brows.

"Indeed! And why not?"

The young woman stamped her foot.

"Because I forbid it," she answered with flushed cheeks.

"So!"

Laughing lightly, the American leaped aboard the craft.

"Stop, fool! Are you mad?"

Fornishire walked aft, then stooped and raised the cover of the box in which he had seen the wheels.

"Stop! Would you leave me here alone?"

She was speaking in pleading accents now.

"Why not?" he demanded bitterly. "Have you not shown me that you have no liking for the son of a man whom you have branded as a coward?"

"You are no coward. You are brave and——"

"Well?"

"That rope may break—the rope that holds the boat to the tree."

"And so it might," said Fornishire.

"Well, then, why——"

The American leaped from the boat to the shore. They walked on in silence until they came to the tree on which the goat was hanging.

"I'm afraid the meat is cold, but——"

The young woman stopped.

"You eat the flesh of goats?" she asked with an expression of disgust.

"I have eaten it now for the first time in my life, and it was not so bad as I feared it would be. Indeed, I found it quite to my liking. If you will sit down here I'll cook——"

Fornishire started toward the carcass, and on the way drew out his claspknife.

"Stop!" the young woman cried. "Only a Quelgo will eat the flesh of goats, and——"

"But you must try it. You must eat something, or——"

Once more the young woman flushed and stamped her foot.

"Must! Must!" she exclaimed in indignant accents. "And who, pray, are you who says 'must' to me—twice in a single breath?"

Fornishire stopped abruptly, and slowly turned to the young woman, who was regarding him with flashing eyes.

Then she added:

"Know, sir, that it is for me to command and for others to obey—in Vantoredos."

Fornishire snapped the blade of his knife into its sheath. Then, bowing low, he answered her:

"I did not know it. But, under the

circumstances, I am encouraged in the belief that you will find my Lord Hunger your very attentive and obedient servant—in Vantoredos."

He relighted his pipe deliberately, then turned on his heel and walked slowly in the direction of the waterfall.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE REWARD OF CHIVALRY.

For more than two hours Fornishire sauntered along the shore of the lake and the base of the frowning cliffs. The only signs of life he saw were represented by little lizards and small bugs, the like of which he had never seen before.

He had recovered consciousness about eleven o'clock in the morning and it was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon when he first realized that the place in which he now found himself offered no shelter for the woman who was sitting under the tree where he had left her.

At the foot of the cliffs were numerous dry branches that had fallen from trees above. Gathering several of these, he fashioned them into a hut, the roof of which was supported by two big rocks that lay about six feet apart.

He covered the roof with small sticks and over these spread a layer of mud that he carried from the stream in his canvas coat, which he utilized as a bag.

This done, he plucked several large armfuls of ferns and with these he covered the floor of the hut.

By the time this work was completed it was nightfall, and, gathering up the articles he had taken from the pockets of his coat, he returned to the tree.

The young woman looked up wearily, but did not speak.

"I've been making a sort of hut in which you can pass the night," said Fornishire. "I might have done better if I had had some tools. It won't afford much protection against rain, I'm afraid, but it will keep out any animals or snakes that may be prowling around. Anyhow, you'll find it's better than sleeping in the open air."

She did not answer, and Fornishire's eyes wandered to the stone on which he had left the piece of cooked goat's flesh.

"I hung the meat on one of those branches to keep it from being eaten by the ants," the young woman explained coldly. "I'll go to the hut now if you will show me the way."

Fornishire bowed.

"You'll eat nothing before you go?"

"No."

She rose, and as the American started toward the hut she followed him. When they arrived at the scene of his labors during the afternoon, Fornishire drew back the two logs that were designed to serve as a door. She hesitated, then entered slowly.

"I shall not be far distant," said Fornishire, "and a call from you will bring me to your side. Here's a gun. You might need it, you know."

The young woman reached with almost feverish eagerness for the derringer that he held toward her, but as her fingers closed on the weapon she hesitated, then stepped back and shook her head.

"No, no; I will not take it," she murmured. "It would be useless in my hands."

She went further into the rudely fashioned shelter, and the American replaced the logs he had drawn aside from the entrance. This done, he returned to the tree, which he had come to regard as his camp.

The piece of cooked goat's flesh hung by a strand of rope on the branch where the young woman had placed it. As he took it down he gave a start, and then smiled complacently.

"It is well she hung it on the branch," he murmured. "The ants have marvelous appetites. And what prodigious strength the little creatures have! They have cut off their portion with the knife I left behind."

And he now ate "the food of Quelgos" with rather more relish than before.

He slept on the flat top of a boulder that night, and when the young woman rose on the following morning she found him cooking goat's flesh. But it was not goat's flesh that he laid upon the

carefully washed stone than had been appropriated to her use.

From the interior of the boat he had obtained a piece of iron which he had placed over an improvised fireplace, and on the iron he had fried a fish.

The young woman gave utterance to an exclamation of pleased surprise.

"A canote! How did you get him?"

"I had a fish line and some hooks in one of the pockets of my canvas coat, and this morning the idea occurred to me to try my luck in the lake with some goat's flesh as bait. I soon landed this. You call it a canote? It has no eyes."

"It is one of the cavern fish and is regarded as a great delicacy in Vantoredos, for they are seldom caught."

"I'm sorry I have no seasoning for it, and also that I am compelled to ask you to eat it with your knife."

The young woman laughed—for the first time since he had met her. But the laughter came from the lips that had called the American "the son of a coward," and it found him unresponsive.

The young woman was quick to mark his reason. Her smile faded away, then, as she looked across the lake, she said gently:

"Though we met yesterday, we still appear to be strangers to each other. What am I to call you?"

"My friends call me Jack."

"And your acquaintances—those whom you have not admitted to your friendship?"

"Oh, they call me anything they please. One called me the son of a coward yesterday. But while you eat your breakfast I will leave you. A fish tastes better when it is hot."

He turned abruptly and started in the direction of the cliffs.

"Jack!"

Fornishire halted, and looked over his shoulder.

"Is there something more I can do for you before I go?"

"Yes. You will try to forgive me for my unkindness to you yesterday."

Fornishire's face flushed. No matter how much a man may feel aggrieved by a woman's words or conduct, his sense of chivalry rebukes him when she compels him to listen to an apology.

"It is not necessary that you ask me that," he replied.

"And I thank you for the fish and the hut you made for me."

Fornishire was fast becoming overwhelmed.

"You are quite welcome to all that my poor services can obtain for you," he answered gravely.

For several moments she looked at him curiously, and he returned her gaze.

"You are going to leave me without asking me my name?" she asked, smiling faintly. "That is scarcely chivalrous."

"I feared the question might be impertinent—in Vantoredos."

It was her turn to color now.

"It is plain that it is more easy for you to forgive than to forget unkindness," she answered. "Still, whenever it pleases you to address me, you may call me Tarnavesta."

Fornishire bowed.

The young woman added:

"And perhaps the time will come when you will find that Vantoredos has some of the customs of the world that you have known."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Fornishire, smiling. "Then you take a more optimistic view of the situation than you did yesterday, when you told me there was no escape from this valley."

Tarnavesta started and colored again.

"I have not said so," she answered coldly. "In the future this valley is all that you are likely to see of Vantoredos."

"I ask no better fate," said Fornishire gallantly.

An expression of anger suddenly settled on the beautiful face of the woman before him. Her eyes flashed and her fingers clenched convulsively.

"And you think I would be content to——"

She paused, and the expression on her face and in her eyes now suddenly changed to one of contempt.

"Oh, no," Fornishire replied, with a mirthless laugh. "I have many faults, but egotism is not among them. And now I'll leave you to your fish."

For several moments Tarnavesta

stood motionless—looking after him as he strode off in the direction of the cliffs.

"The fool—the poor fool!" she muttered.

She paused, then added: "Still, his arm is strong and long. I would that there were more such in Vantoredos."

She seated herself beside the stone on which Fornishire had placed the fish he had caught and cooked. By this stood a cup of water.

Her face clouded and she hesitated as she looked at the meal that awaited her. Then with an exclamation of impatience she shrugged her shoulders.

"Bah! He is only a man, and the things he gives me are my own."

Then she ate heartily.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNKNOWN QUANTITY.

FORNISHIRE, at work on a hut for himself, glanced from time to time toward Tarnavesta, whose actions puzzled him.

Grasping a stout stick in one of her hands, she walked slowly along the foot of the cliffs with her gaze fastened on the ground.

"For a woman who so dislikes my company, she seems to bear up pretty well when she is confronted with a situation that promises to make me her companion for life," Fornishire reflected.

The American paused in his work, and, leaning against the side of the new hut, he gazed thoughtfully toward the gloomy mouth of the cavern.

"Who is she, anyhow?" he muttered. "Why is she lying to me? She knows that there is some way out of this place, and is trying to keep the knowledge to herself. What is it she is seeking now?"

Tarnavesta had stooped and raised something from the ground. For several moments she looked at it attentively, then with the object still in her hands she retraced her steps to a small tree near which Fornishire had seen her loitering a few minutes before.

Later in the morning, when the young woman had retired to the hut, the American sauntered over to the tree. At its foot he saw four reddish stones. He examined them carefully, then shook his head and left them where he found them.

He spent the next two hours casting a line into the lake, with the result that he landed six more fish. Thinking that Tarnavesta might be asleep in the hut, he did not disturb her in the course of his preparations for luncheon.

He cooked one of the fish for himself, and found it extremely palatable, despite its lack of seasoning.

It was not until nearly five o'clock in the afternoon that Fornishire again saw Tarnavesta. She was approaching, not from the hut, but from the direction of the waterfall.

As her eyes met his she smiled.

"Am I too late for dinner?" she asked.

"No. I will have it ready in a few minutes."

He went to the stream and from the cool waters he drew out one of the fish he had caught.

As she saw it she frowned and shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"No—no more of that to-day," she said. "Have you nothing else?"

"Nothing except the goat's flesh."

She sighed wearily as she seated herself beneath the tree.

"I'm very sorry," he went on. "As you are doubtless aware, I am a stranger in Vantoredos. Had you done me the honor of visiting me in my own country, I might have been able to offer you a greater variety, but under the circumstances——"

"I'll take the fish," said Tarnavesta.

He went over to his fireplace and placed the fish on the iron top, then added more fuel to the smoldering blaze.

This done, he lighted a second fire, and over this he hung a piece of goat's flesh.

Tarnavesta, sitting in a graceful attitude, watched him thoughtfully.

"The duties of cook are not new to you," she said as he again approached her.

"No. Most of the men in my country know something of them."

"Our men of Vantoredos believe that such knowledge debases a man."

"I inferred that their knowledge of cooking was not altogether complete," the American drawled. "The noble gentlemen put me in one of their ovens and released me while I was still underdone. Their failure as cooks, however, makes it possible for me to serve you with this fish, so I dare say we can forgive them."

"Why did you come to Vantoredos?" she asked abruptly.

The American looked meditatively across the lake as he answered. "Well, there were several reasons responsible for my coming."

"The treasure of the Quelgos was one of them, I presume?"

"Yes, but not the treasure that you mean."

"What other is there here?"

"The honor of my family."

Tarnavesta started.

"And it is your purpose to take this back with you?" she asked.

"Yes—that and my mother."

"Is your mother here?"

"You saw her greet me in the coronation hall."

Tarnavesta rose quickly and the color left her cheeks as she exclaimed: "I?"

"Yes. I saw you there while I held my mother in my arms."

"It is a lie."

Fornishire elevated his brows slightly, bowed, then walked to where the fish was cooking.

He turned it over and remained standing by the fire.

"Come here!"

The call was imperative, but Fornishire gave it no heed.

"Do you hear me, sir?"

The American did not turn his head.

Who was this woman who commanded him to do her bidding, as if she regarded him as her servant? Beautiful though she was, he was in no mood to pander to her arrogance.

John Fornishire had been too long a man of the world to bow meekly to a woman's will, and this woman from the very first had inspired him with distrust.

Her English was as faultless as that of a woman who had been born and bred in New York.

Was she indeed a native of Vantoredos? If not, what was she doing there?

Why had this young woman been present at that mock coronation ceremony, among the people who, fearing to kill him, had attempted to rob him of his reason?

How had she come into the boat on which he had escaped from the horrors of the cavern? Why was her anger excited whenever he spoke of having seen her in the coronation hall?

For two days he had been asking himself these questions, and for two days he had been unable to answer them satisfactorily.

Despite the distrust with which she had inspired him, he was becoming conscious of the fact that her beauty and spirit were laying siege to his will. Fortunately for him, however, her haughtiness and the reference she had made to his father had not only repelled him, but had aroused in him a feeling that was akin to enmity.

These reflections were temporarily put to flight by a realization of the fact that the fish was done. He deftly transferred it from the iron to a flat stone and placed it beneath the tree.

Tarnavesta, tapping the ground with one of her feet, turned her back to him as he approached.

"Your dinner is served, madam," the American said coldly.

"You may take it to the hut," she answered. "The odor of that flesh you are cooking is unendurable."

Fornishire's face flushed, and he hesitated. Then, stooping, he raised the stone from the ground and bore it to the spot that the young woman had indicated.

She followed at a little distance. When he arrived at the hut the American placed the stone by the door, then, with a slight bow, he turned to leave her.

"A moment, please," Tarnavesta said. "You offered me a derringer last night. I will take it now."

He drew out the weapon and was about to give it to her when he suddenly checked himself.

"No," he replied. "As you have said, it may be more useful in my hands."

Tarnavesta turned away petulantly.

Fornishire returned to his tree and there addressed himself to the consumption of goat's flesh.

When he finished, he gazed long and thoughtfully at the rippling waters of the lake, now gilded by the glory of the setting sun.

At first his thoughts were of Coakley, Miguel and Almores.

Where were they now? Would they ever meet again? And what was to be the fate of that mother who had clasped him in her arms?

Then his thoughts wandered to another subject, and, as he glanced in the direction of a hut, he muttered:

"But what the devil did she want with that gun?"

CHAPTER XV.

WHEN THE PUMAS CAME.

THE golden glow of the sun melted away from the surface of the lake. Twilight fell; then the stars began to fleck the sky. But Fornishire had not stirred from the place where lay the remnant of his evening meal.

"What use would she have for my derringer to-night?" he muttered. "Last night she said——"

He stopped. The full moon was peeping at him from over the rim of the cliffs on the opposite side of the valley, and across the yellow disk he saw a shadow flitting. In a moment it was gone.

"It is a condor—the great bird whose image, pricked in my flesh, protects me from the bullets and blades, and in other ways would consign me to a grave in Vantoredos."

With an oath he rose and paced to and fro impatiently.

"Hang it! There must be some way out of this. I didn't come all the way from New York to Ecuador to spend the rest of my life with a handsome, egotistical shrew in this fool hollow in the hills."

As he thrust his hands into the hip pockets of his trousers, one of them came in contact with the derringer.

Why had Tarnavesta asked him for it?

He looked toward the hut to which the young woman had retired. He had left her at the door. Doubtless she was asleep by this time, but—— But might she not wake and leave her sleeping-place during the night?

This idling about all day in the open air had made him drowsy. He drew out his watch. It was ten o'clock.

He started toward the hut that he had constructed for himself, but he had covered scarcely more than half the distance between the hut and the tree when a new thought entered his mind, and he halted.

"No; it will be neither tree nor hut for me to-night," he said determinedly. "The derringer and I will find another camping ground."

He made his way to the foot of the cliffs and climbed into a little cave-like depression that he had seen in the course of the afternoon.

In ten minutes he was sleeping soundly. What roused him from his slumbers he never knew, but when he awoke, with a start, it was with the consciousness that something unusual was happening near him.

As he rose from his bed on the rocky ledge he saw two lights. Of these, one was red and the other blue. Both seemed to come from the ground about a hundred yards distant from where he had been sleeping.

The lights were about sixty feet apart, and in the glow cast by the red one he saw the figure of a woman.

It was Tarnavesta!

The blue light illumined the ledge on which he sat, and, fearing that she would see him, he crouched down until his chin was against the stone. From this position he watched her with lynx-like eyes.

In her hand she held the canvas coat that he had used to carry wet clay to the roof of her hut. From one light to the other she passed quickly and with the coat she seemed to be attempting to obscure the glow.

Now and then he saw her glance

anxiously toward the cliffs on the other side of the valley.

For nearly ten minutes Tarnavesta continued to flit from one light to the other, then on the top of the distant cliffs she saw a dull, red glare.

The young woman moved faster now. With the coat she seemed to fan each fire.

It was apparent that she was signaling to some one on the distant mountain tops.

Then suddenly a bright yellow light fell from the top of the cliff in the shadow of which he had been sleeping.

The red light went out, but the blue shone on.

Tarnavesta had vanished in the darkness.

The American swung himself off the ledge and started toward the spot whence the red light had emanated and where he had seen Tarnavesta last. He found some reddish stones in a heap of water-soaked embers.

He hurried to the blue light that was still burning. On the ground he saw three small pieces of rock from which issued rays of radium.

For nearly an hour he tramped among the brushwood at the base of the long line of cliffs.

Once he fancied he heard a shrill whistle, and he started in its direction. He had gone only a few paces, however, when he heard another whistle near the waterfalls. He ran toward the place from which it seemed to come, and as he ran he clutched his derringer. His search was vain.

The hut of Tarnavesta was deserted. He searched the valley until dawn, but no trace of the young woman was to be found.

Courageous as he had always been, a great fear gripped his heart.

It was that fear which the boldest man must feel when he believes himself to be in the power of unseen enemies—enemies that plan to strike him while he sleeps. To the brave, fight-seeking man sleep is not a blessing, but a curse, in the shadow of which cowards win their game.

And so, from cliffs to lake, John Fornishire, derringer in hand, plodded on through thickets and underbrush and over the sandy beach, where his exposed position would invite an attack of foes. Then, utterly fagged out, he sank upon the fern-covered floor of the hut he had built for Tarnavesta.

The sun was well up when he awoke, and, with heavy eyes, he started toward his fireplace near the tree that marked the site of his camp.

He had walked only a short distance when he saw something that brought a faint exclamation of alarm to his lips and caused him to fall to the ground.

It was the brownish-yellow body of a puma—the lion of the Andes—moving with stealthy tread toward the lake.

Fornishire, derringer in hand, crept backward until he came to a thicket. He had scarcely reached this shelter when he saw a second puma ambling easily toward the first.

In a few moments both animals were at the margin of the lake, then, with their forepaws in the water, they stooped to drink.

Fornishire was still watching them when a third flash of yellow caught his eye.

Another puma was standing under the camp tree, gazing upward at the carcass of the goat.

Sick at heart, the American looked at the little derringer he held in his right hand.

How had these animals entered the valley? Surely they had not come down the cliffs.

He glanced toward the cavern. Then, with a wild shout and all forgetful of the beasts he had just seen, he leaped to his feet and as he ran to the shore of the lake he waved his arms frantically.

"Almores! Miguel! Here—here! The falls are below! Out of the current! Here!"

On the deck of a black boat that had just shot out of the cavern's mouth two men looked toward him with dazed eyes.

Almores was the first to recover his presence of mind. He thrust an oar into Miguel's hand and shouted in his ear, then, running toward the stern of the boat, he placed his hands on two brass wheels.

"Look out for the falls!" shouted Fornishire.

The grim faces of the men in the boat now assured him that they realized their danger. The head of the boat swung slowly round, but the little vessel, moving sideways, was rapidly drifting down with the current.

But, as it drifted, the bow kept headed for the shore. Inch by inch, then foot by foot, the boat drew nearer to the strip of sand.

It was already half-way down the lake, but the more dangerous part of the current was behind it.

At length the little craft drew so near that Fornishire, knee-deep in water, was able to see the veins standing out on Miguel's arms and forehead as, with set teeth and parted lips, he strained at the long oar.

The roar of falling water filled Fornishire's ears, and the spray, driven backward through the cleft by a strong breeze, dampened his face when, with a hoarse shout, he seized the blade of the oar that the now exhausted Miguel held toward him.

The bow of the boat had scarcely touched the sand when the two men leaped into the water and waded ashore.

In a few moments the boat was secured by a rope that had been thrown around a tree. Miguel and Almores grasped the hands of the American, but did not speak.

Their unshaven faces were pale and wan and their eyes dull and glassy. The newcomers gazed at the flying spray of the waterfall, whose thunders seemed to shake the earth, then they exchanged significant glances.

"It was a close shave," said Fornishire quietly.

Miguel nodded. Almores was looking earnestly at something on the shore. Following the direction of his gaze, Fornishire saw five skulking, yellow figures hovering around a thicket.

Fornishire turned again to Miguel.

Something in the man's face caused the American to ask:

"How long has it been since you have eaten?"

"Three days."

"This way, then," said Fornishire, who, while keeping a wary eye on the pumas, led his companions to the camp tree.

There the American quickly cut a big piece of flesh from the carcass of the goat, and when this had been hung over a blazing fire, he took from the stream two of the fish he had caught and cleansed on the day before.

"Have you your guns with you?" he asked as he rejoined his companions.

"I have one, and Almores has his knife," replied Miguel.

"Keep them handy and watch those animals over yonder," said Fornishire.

Neither of the men addressed gave any evidence of the fact that they had heard his words.

Both were plainly suffering from exhaustion, and at times Almores, seated on the ground with his head between his hands, muttered incoherently. Fornishire, despite his curiosity, resolved to ask them no questions concerning their adventures until after they had eaten.

At length the savory odor of the cooking meat and fish was wafted toward them. As it reached the nostrils of Almores he started to his feet and tottered toward where the goat's flesh was hanging over the fire.

Fornishire caught him by the arm, and after considerable difficulty he succeeded in compelling the starving man to reseat himself.

But the odor of fish and meat had reached others than Fornishire's companions.

The five pumas were drawing nearer.

With a wild shout and waving arms, Fornishire ran toward the sneaking brutes. They hesitated, snarled, then, with trailing tails, ambled into the thicket.

As the American turned, he saw that Miguel and Almores had snatched the goat's flesh from above the fire and were eating it ravenously.

With an oath, Fornishire seized the pieces of tough meat and threw it into the stream. Then he took the two fish from the fireplace and placed them before his companions.

"There's a new game on, and we may have to fight," he explained. "Your stomachs can't stand too much just now.

Begin with the fish. To-night you may eat as much as you will."

As the two men attacked the fish, a wild cry rose from that part of the valley that was nearest the cavern.

"The sign of the condor may protect me from Quelgos and Vantoredosians, but these pumas the fiends are driving into the valley are scarcely likely to respect it," Fornishire muttered.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE SERVICE OF DEATH.

THE two fish had disappeared. Fornishire, cup in hand, had made several trips to and from the stream with water for his guests.

The starving men were docile now, but as their host began to question them their answers had become less and less coherent. Presently they slept.

For four long hours Fornishire sat beside them, watching yellow bodies moving to and fro among neighboring thickets.

He had counted twenty-seven pumas.

Now and then four or five of the beasts, more bold than their fellows, manifested a disposition to approach the tree under which were two men who slept and one who watched. But the vigilance of the watcher intimidated them, and they retreated. At length Fornishire went to Miguel and shook him by the shoulders. The Cuban muttered a sleepy protest, then rose to a sitting posture and surveyed Fornishire with dazed eyes.

"Come, get up!" the American commanded impatiently. "This is neither a time nor a place for sleep."

The light of a newly awakened intelligence began to shine in the eyes of the Cuban.

"Do you feel better?" Fornishire asked.

"Yes, señor. But how came I here? Ah, I remember now."

"Well, if you want to carry your memories over the night it's time you and Almores were stirring," Fornishire retorted. "These pumas are getting hungry, and we three are all there is in sight to satisfy their excellent appetites."

Miguel scrambled to his feet, and going to the side of the recumbent Almores, he seized one of his ears and began to pull it vigorously.

Almores rose slowly and rubbed his eyes.

Fornishire put a liberal quantity of goat's flesh over the two fires, and then returned to his friends.

"We'll eat what we can now, and take the rest with us," he said. "God knows when we shall be able to cook again."

Miguel and Almores went down to the stream and laved their heads and faces in the cool water. When they returned they were perceptibly refreshed.

When the three men had done full justice to the repast that Fornishire had provided, the American turned to Almores.

"And now tell me what has happened to you since I left," he said. "Where is Coakley?"

"Señor Coakley is still in the hands of the enemy."

"How did you come to separate?"

Almores looked thoughtfully at the ground for several moments before he replied:

"I have much to tell you, señor, and it is best that I tell you this in my own way. I am wiser than when I saw you last."

Fornishire nodded, and leaned forward with an expression of eagerness.

"First, then, señor, I will tell you something of myself—something that, had I known as much as I know now, I should have told you before. When you understand these things you will trust me."

"Let us hear them then," said Fornishire.

"Twice before I met you I was taken prisoner by the Quelgos, while I was guiding parties that sought their treasure. The first time I was taken there was with me a man whose name was Erskine."

"Major Roger Erskine!" exclaimed Fornishire.

"Yes, señor, that was his name. With him I was taken to the cavern, and with him I suffered as few men in our world

ever suffered before. But he escaped. My life belonged to the Vantoredosians. They might have continued to kill me by inches, for it was in their power to do so. But they let me go. They told me, however, that I was to receive my liberty only on the condition that I bring to their valley all persons who, having heard of the treasure of the Quelgos, applied to me for guidance. This was so that they might slay them."

"How long ago was this?"

"Five years, señor."

"Well?"

Almores shook his head remorsefully as he went on.

"During the first year none came to me for guidance to the Quelgos' country. Then came Thomas Fornishire."

"My father!"

Almores shrugged his shoulders.

"I know not, señor. He was well along in years. His name was Thomas Fornishire. His money caused me to forget my promises to the Vantoredosians. I did not notify them of our approach. When we got to the valley in which Kenneth found you and Señor Coakley, Señor Fornishire found a party of friendly Vantoredosians awaiting him. With them he started for the interior.

"On my way back to my home I was overtaken and captured by Quelgos, and taken to Vantoredos. This time I was sentenced to death, but once more I was released on my promise to warn their spies of the approach of every party I took toward their country."

He paused and glanced apprehensively toward a couple of pumas which had found in the stream the pieces of meat that Fornishire had snatched from himself and Miguel when they had first broken their long fast.

"Well, well?" queried Fornishire irritably.

"During the four years that followed my meeting with your father, I guided three parties of treasure seekers to the valley where you saw the hut. Not one of them ever returned to Quito."

"And their blood is on your soul?" murmured Miguel reflectively.

"Alas, yes!" sighed Almores, as he made the sign of a cross on his breast.

Then, after a little pause, he went on:

"The last party I guided before I met you, señor, was that which consisted of the two men who built the hut you saw in the valley—the two men of whom I spoke to you just before the tree fell."

"I remember. But who were they?"

"They said they sought the Quelgo treasure. But I overheard their talk, for they did not know that I understood English. They had been sent by Major Erskine to McNair, the prime minister of Vantoredos."

"Did you learn the nature of their mission?"

"Yes. Major Erskine wanted to foment a revolution against the king—a revolution that would put McNair upon the throne."

"Well?"

"But the king was dead when the major's friends arrived. His wife, Griselda, had been crowned queen."

For several moments the three men were silent. Then Fornishire spoke:

"What has all this to do with your separation from Coakley—with the adventures that you and Miguel have had since I saw you last?"

"It has much to do with these things, señor, for the revolution has begun and the revolutionists have proclaimed Carasima's son John, king of Vantoredos!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A DESPERATE CHANCE.

"THEY'VE proclaimed me king of Vantoredos?" Fornishire exclamed.

"Yes, señor," Almores replied.

"How did you learn this?"

Once more Almores shook his head wearily.

"That brings me back to my story, señor," he went on. "When we escaped from the collapsible chamber, you outfooted me and got aboard one of the boats."

"I don't remember."

"I called to you to wait, but you would not. I picked up Miguel just as Señor Coakley, who also had fallen, ran to my side. Then armed guards ran out and drove us back to the hall in which

you had danced, and through the floor of which we had fallen into the trap."

"Yes, yes!" said Fornishire as Almores paused abruptly.

"The pumas, señor—they are coming closer."

Shouting and waving his arms again, Fornishire ran toward them. Once more the animals hurried back to the thicket. The American then returned to the tree, and Almores resumed his story.

"The hall was deserted when we entered it, but as the door was closed behind us we heard the sounds of shots and the clashing of steel from an archway on the other side. Fearing that if we approached the scene of the conflict we would sink again through the trapdoor, the three of us crouched near the door through which we had been thrust into the apartment. There we remained for nearly half an hour. Then the door opened and one of the masked domino-wearers came in.

"The man looked us over quickly, and displayed much agitation when he saw that there were only three of us.

"'Where is the other—Fornishire?' he demanded.

"'He is gone,' I answered.

"'Gone!' he thundered.

"Then I told him what had happened—how, after escaping from the chamber, you had leaped on the boat and disappeared.

"He rushed from the hall, and we have not seen him since. A few minutes later the elderly man in the domino, who had acted as master of ceremonies, came in, all pale and trembling. He told us many things that made the situation clear.

"Your departure from the United States had been reported to Queen Griselda by spies in America. It was in accordance with instructions given by the queen that you were directed to me for guidance. When we came to the valley the fall of the tree gave me to understand that I was not to return to Quito.

"As you have learned, no Vantoredosian may shed royal blood. Such an offense, when proved, means death in one of the most horrible forms that man has ever been able to devise. You were the son of Carasima, who, with the members of her former court, was immured in the caverns. The late king never had been able to prove that she had indeed put you to death when you were an infant. It was the late king who devised a plan to bring you back to Vantoredos and have your reason destroyed by your mother."

"To have my reason destroyed by my mother!" Fornishire exclaimed in a voice faint with horror.

"The king had caused her to be suspected of killing you, and it was for that reason that she was dethroned. When Griselda succeeded her husband, she, acting on the advice of Rodriguez, one of her ministers, decided to carry out the policy of her late husband, so far as you were concerned. When they learned that at last you were on the way to Vantoredos, they caused your mother to be informed that you had been slain by the son of Major Erskine, and——"

"Major Erskine had no son."

"It mattered not, señor. Carasima was told that you, Major Erskine's son, had murdered the heir to the throne of Vantoredos. She sent a letter beseeching the queen to deliver into her hands the slayer of her son, and you were handed over to her people. The crown that your mother was about to place on your head was designed in such a manner that as soon as it rested on your temples a compound of radium and other agents would send into your brain rays that would rob you of your reason.

"It had been arranged that, following the coronation ceremony you should be taken to the ball-room, and that when you had been sufficiently mocked there you and your companions should be shifted to the collapsible chamber and there burned and crushed to death.

"But the plan failed. Your mother discovered your identity, you announced and proved that you were king of Vantoredos, and the adherents of your mother attacked the government's representatives who were present. These were driven from the cavern. While the fight was on, the four of us were hurried through the trap and shunted through to the collapsible chamber, and while we were there the queen's people tried to destroy us. Just as we were about to

succumb, our predicament was discovered, and we were released. You, however, ran too fast, and got away.

"While your mother's adherents were seeking you, Coakley, Miguel, and I were captured by six soldiers of the palace guard. Coakley fought like a madman, and the six were slain. Then Coakley disappeared. Miguel and I got to one of the boats, and while concealed in one of the caverns we heard two guards who were seeking you call across the cavern to some of their comrades that Carasima had escaped, that Señor Coakley was with her, and that you had been proclaimed king.

"Hour after hour we drifted on until at last, this morning, we came to some rapids. I kept the power on, and Miguel with his oar supplemented my work at the tiller. Then we shot out of the cavern into the sunshine and heard you calling to us."

"Señor, señor!"

The words came from the lips of Miguel, and were followed by a series of low growls that caused Fornishire to look sharply over his shoulder.

Two long, lithe, yellow bodies were creeping toward where the three men were sitting. Then a puma leaped through the air, and Miguel's derringer barked.

The puma missed Fornishire by about a yard. Miguel fired again, and the beast sprang backward with a yelp of pain. Then it limped off, but as it regained its mate the two brutes looked back, snarled, and showed their rows of gleaming teeth.

"By heaven, señor, the place is alive with 'em!" cried Almores.

"Have they not attacked you before, señor?" asked Miguel wondering.

"There were none in the valley until a few minutes before you left the cavern."

"Is there no way out of here?" asked Almores, glancing at the lofty cliffs that surrounded them.

"Yes," said Fornishire. "We will go out by the way these big cats have come in."

"Do you know the way, señor?" Miguel asked anxiously.

Fornishire laughed boisterously.

"Not yet," he said. "But he's a fool king who doesn't know his own country. Come, Miguel—come, Almores! Let us find the way!"

Almores laid his hand on one of Fornishire's arms.

"Stay, señor, let us think," he said. "The puma is a coward when his belly's full, but these brutes look as if they had had no meat for several hours. Let us think. From what direction have they come?"

"They've come trooping in from some point in the cliffs just above the waterfall. There was none at the other end of the valley until shortly before I woke you. Come, let us find their gate."

Almores looked dubiously toward where Fornishire had pointed, then he tightened his grip on the American's arm.

"Not yet, señor," he protested. "It is too light now. When we leave the valley the pumas shall lead the way."

"The pumas lead! Hang it, man, are you mad?"

"They shall lead and we shall follow, señor—when the darkness comes. The sun already is going down. We will cook the rest of the goat's flesh and take it with us."

Twice or thrice during the long wait that followed the prowling beasts approached so near that the three men found it necessary to drive them away. Immediately after one of these incidents, the American turned to Almores and said gloomily:

"Old man, this valley is beginning to look smaller than it did before, and something tells me that we and these big cats are going to be pretty well acquainted by morning. I can almost fancy that I see smiles on the faces of twenty-seven pumas."

"They never smile at their own jokes, señor, but it may be that they will smile at ours," replied Almores.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A PRISONER OF THE QUEEN.

TWILIGHT came at last. The goat's meat was wrapped in Fornishire's old canvas coat, and each of the three men

grasped a bundle of sticks that had been prepared by Almores from the branches of the tree under which they had been sitting.

From all sides of them came the whines and snarls of hungry beasts.

"Now, señor," said Almores, starting toward the head of the valley. "Let us keep to the beach, where we will have open ground around us."

"Why are you starting for that end of the valley?" asked the wondering American. "If there is an exit from this place it is at the other end."

"Yes, señor, I am assuming that the exit is at the other end."

But it was toward the upper end of the valley that he continued to lead the way.

As the three men walked on, the cracking of twigs in neighboring thickets assured them that they did not walk alone. Fornishire and Miguel kept their right hands on their derringers and from time to time they exchanged wondering glances as Almores, moving with confident steps, walked on ahead.

At last they came to the foot of the cliffs at the end of the valley. Here they found a large tree, like that under which Fornishire had made his camp.

"The time has come," said Almores in a whisper.

And as he spoke he struck a match and held it to the end of the bundle of sticks he carried. There was a sudden blaze, and the bundle of sticks became a torch, from which rose a steadily burning flame and a strong, resinous odor.

"We call these 'fire trees,'" Almores explained as, holding his torch aloft, he permitted the flame to lick one of the boughs.

In a moment the branches were on fire, burning slowly, but with an energy that was unmistakable.

"And yet, señor, it will be four days before this tree is consumed," Almores explained.

Five other trees were fired in a similar manner, then Almores paused and turned to Fornishire.

"So long as you bear that torch you need have no fear of pumas, señor," he said. "And while Miguel and I set fire to more trees, it is better that the señor should go to the other end of the valley and there learn by what way the animals leave."

The American nodded.

"How long will you be getting down?" he asked.

"An hour, may be. Despite his great craftiness in stalking game, the puma is a fool. He prefers the open air to caves, and he will not remember the way he came here, until he is satisfied that this valley will afford him neither food nor a comfortable lair. The smoke and flame will prod his memory in about half an hour, then he will go, and you will watch him slink into some hole beneath the cliffs."

With a flaring torch in one hand and a cocked derringer in the other, Fornishire walked quickly down the beach until he came to a point about two hundred feet above the waterfall, then, turning to the right, he set out in the direction of the cliffs.

In the coverts signs of animal life became more and more apparent. The cracking of dried sticks and low whines from time to time attracted his attention to ugly eyes that reflected the light cast by his torch. This he soon found was sufficient to protect him, without having recourse to his derringer.

At length the breezes coming from the head of the valley brought with them constantly increasing volumes of smoke from the burning trees, and Fornishire, lurking in the shadow of the cliffs, observed that the cries of the pumas were become more fretful and numerous.

Keeping a vigilant watch on the movements of the animals, he saw that gradually they were concentrating at a place about two hundred yards from where he was standing.

Then he perceived that four of the pumas were running to and fro with lowered heads, much in the manner of caged lions and tigers in a zoo. The distance covered by the restless brutes was scarcely more than fifty yards.

As the smoke grew denser, one by one other pumas entered the weird procession. With upraised torch Fornishire approached them slowly.

Several of the animals paused

abruptly, and, huddling together, looked at him with upraised heads. Then from among them one broke away, and ran whining and with bared fangs toward the cliffs. Another followed—another and another, and one by one they disappeared.

No signal, indicating the discovery of the secret passage out of the valley, had been agreed upon at the time Fornishire had parted from Almores and Miguel, but glancing around him, the American saw a tree similar to those that had been set afire by Almores. Hastening to this, he raised his torch, and in a few moments the branches were aflame.

Assured now that the secret of the exit from the valley had been solved, Fornishire shouted aloud the names of his friends. In a few moments he had a response. Then in the darkness he saw the torches of the two men moving swiftly down the beach and in the direction of the tree he had set afire.

"Have you found it, señor?" cried Almores.

"Yes, it's yonder in the cliff."

Almores chuckled as he saw the pumas running in the direction indicated by Fornishire's outstretched hand.

"Come," he said. "We have enough to lead us on. Let the others follow."

The three men quickly crossed the space that lay between them and that part of the cliff in which the pumas had disappeared. It was Fornishire who first found the opening—a hole scarcely more than three feet in diameter at the base of the cliff.

For the moment the American's courage failed him. With a quiet laugh, Almores knelt down, and thrusting his torch into the hole, he waved it around for several seconds.

"I will take the liberty of preceding you, señor," he said, bowing slightly.

Then, feet first, he entered the hole.

"And this is the man we charged with cowardice," the American muttered contritely as the head of Almores disappeared.

In a few moments Fornishire heard a muffled shout.

"The way is clear, señor."

Fornishire passed his torch to Almores, whose hand was extended to receive it. Then he, too, entered the hole.

The American's feet struck bottom about six feet below the surface of the ground. He took the torch from Miguel, and when the Cuban descended the three men started on their way.

The floor of the tunnel sloped sharply. The walls were only about four feet apart, and the roof was some seven feet above the floor.

They had been walking for about three minutes when they came to an iron door. This, in accordance with Fornishire's request, Miguel, who brought up the rear, closed behind him.

The three men now found themselves in a passage hewn out of quartz, with a long flight of steps of the same material. Though the walls were sufficiently wide apart to allow them to walk side by side, they descended the steps in the same order in which they had entered the tunnel.

Down, down, ever down, they continued on their way. The stairs were winding and Almores, who was still in the lead, moved cautiously as he approached the turns.

Once he drew back sharply, and Fornishire and Miguel heard a series of whines and low snarles ahead of them.

At last they came to the last step, and saw a high, broad and straight corridor ahead of them. Here, the gleaming eyes of a dozen or more pumas glared at them from a point about fifty yards ahead.

With a loud Spanish oath, Almores leaped forward and waved his torch. The eyes disappeared.

Side by side and moving freely now the three men walked on for nearly ten minutes longer.

Suddenly they heard a shot ahead of them. There was a gleam of light along the walls that were too distant for the glow from their torches to reach.

"It's the derringer's work now," Fornishire muttered. "Be ready, Miguel."

Almores drew his long-bladed knife.

"Let's run for it before they lock us in," he said.

The three sprang forward, and as they moved they heard the snarling of

the beasts they had been driving on ahead of them.

A torch appeared, and beneath it was the dark figure of a man.

"We're three to one," said Fornishire.

The snarling beasts drew nearer. The torch ahead had stopped.

"On, on!" cried Almores.

But even as he spoke, Fornishire and Miguel had passed him. Then a wild cry echoed through the passage and the distant torch was seen to fall to the ground.

"The beasts have pulled him down!" Miguel cried exultantly.

"Be quiet!" commanded Fornishire. "Would you warn our enemies of our coming?"

In a few moments they reached the bearer of the torch. He was lying on his face, and his bare arms and torn garments were stained with blood. The torch, still flaring, was beside him on the ground.

The passage turned abruptly, and as the three runners sped around the curve a blue light fell upon their faces and a babel of shrieks rang in their ears.

A moment more and the American and his companions were in a vast hall. A word-picture given by Major Erskine came back to Fornishire's mind.

He was in the store-house of the Quelgo treasure.

But it was not on the golden walls and roof, nor upon the chests of gleaming, priceless jewels that his gaze was resting now.

His attention was absorbed by the actions of a score of leaping, frenzied pumas and several desperately fighting men whom the animals had taken by surprise. The crazed pumas were the stronger and one by one the men went down.

Then an exclamation of horror fell from the lips of the American, as, standing at the head of a little flight of steps, appeared the figure of a woman, whose white hands were beating vainly against a massive yellow door.

"Tarnavesta!" shouted Fornishire in a voice that rose above the cries of the warring beasts and men.

She turned and faced him, and, as she did so, a big puma leaped toward her from the struggling pack.

The derringer flashed and the big brute turned round, and, with a howl of pain, started toward Fornishire. The American's flaming torch crashed across the head of the infuriated animal.

Once again his fingers pressed the trigger of the derringer. The puma leaped backward, then dropped to the ground.

Standing at the foot of the steps, with a torch in one hand and a derringer in the other, Fornishire turned again to the scene of the conflict.

Awed by the flaring brands, the pumas were retreating to the door through which they had entered the treasure chamber. Six men, clad in white, lay upon the floor. Almores and Miguel were masters of the field.

Assured that all danger was past for the present, the American turned to the woman who, with heaving bosom and blanched face, stood behind him.

For several moments each met the other's gaze unflinchingly. Then the lip of Tarnavesta curled slightly.

"And so you have come to me again!" she murmured contemptuously. "The eater of goat's flesh has become the king of beasts."

Fornishire smiled grimly as, with a low bow, he answered:

"Yes, madam. He must needs be a king of beasts who would essay the task of ruling in Vantoredos."

The words had scarcely left his lips when the door by which Tarnavesta was standing opened and a tall, stalwart man, wearing a steel helmet and cuirass, paused on the threshold. Behind him was a broad stair crowded with armed men.

A low, musical but mocking laugh issued from Tarnavesta's lips. There was a light of triumph in her eyes as, pointing to Fornishire, she addressed the man behind her.

"Make that man a prisoner, and guard him well," she said. "If he escapes, your head, Rodriguez, shall pay the price of his freedom."

Still smiling, she looked at Fornishire, then added:

"And you, sir, who were good enough

to offer goat's flesh to Tarnavesta in the valley, shall enjoy the hospitality of Griselda, queen of Vantoredos."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE QUALITY OF MERCY.

A FLUSH of anger and humiliation overspread Fornishire's face.

"The devils who do your sweet, womanly will must take me first," he said, and as the man in the cuirass advanced, Fornishire aimed his derringer at his head.

The hammer fell on an empty shell. The American's ammunition was exhausted.

The officer laid a hand on Fornishire's shoulder, but as he did so one of the American's fists shot out and the Vantoredosian went reeling to the floor.

The man quickly rose, and, unsheathing his sword, ran toward his adversary, but ere the blow fell, the queen had seized his wrist.

"Stop!" she commanded, with flashing eyes. "Would you strike down in my presence an unarmed man who defended me when your dull ears were deaf to my calls? Put up that sword, lest I test your courage by directing you to fall on the blade."

She turned to Fornishire and took him by the arm.

"Come," she said. Then, addressing the humiliated officer, she added: "Rodriguez, lead the way to the guard-room."

Then conducted by the queen and preceded by Rodriguez, Fornishire ascended the stairs between two lines of wondering-eyed, steel-clad men.

At length they came to a low-ceilinged room about twelve feet square. Here, in obedience to a gesture from the queen, Rodriguez left them. Stepping into the apartment with the prisoner, Griselda closed the door.

"Well," she asked, "what has the king presumptive of Vantoredos to say to me now?"

Fornishire smiled bitterly as he answered:

"Only this: That as king I shall one day be glad to reciprocate the hospitality which, as queen, you offer me tonight."

Griselda drew back a step, and a stricken look came into her eyes.

"It would be only such hospitality as might be afforded by a tomb," she said in a low voice.

There was something in her attitude that impressed Fornishire as being almost pitiful.

"God forbid!" he exclaimed with feeling. "The world's tombs already hold too much that is young and beautiful."

She drew herself up proudly and again looked at him with flashing eyes.

"And so you, a prisoner, make bold to pity one who is a queen?" she asked.

"Yes, for she has such grievous sins to answer for that I marvel greatly to hear her speak so calmly of the hospitality of the tomb."

She started, and a wan, frightened look settled on her face.

"You blow hot and cold with singular facility," she murmured.

"I have been exposed so often to both extremes since I have been in Vantoredos that I think you can scarcely blame me for having absorbed some of the atmosphere of my environment."

"You think I should fear the tomb. May I ask you why?"

"You planned to compel a mother to destroy the mind of her son."

"I did not know you then."

Fornishire looked at her blankly.

"And you believe that that is sufficient excuse for an act of barbarity which would shock the moral sense of every creature that is capable of reason?"

As he spoke, Griselda's face grew colorless, and she shrank from the gaze of his flashing eyes.

"When I said I did not know you then, I meant that I did not know you were her son."

Fornishire looked at her incredulously.

"But——"

"The late king, my husband, had caused me to believe that for ten years the young man known as John Fornishire was my half-brother."

"Your half-brother!"

"The son of Roger Erskine, who deserted my mother after he and Thomas Fornishire had obtained sufficient of the Quelgo treasure to enable them to live in comfort in the country from which they came."

Fornishire, utterly bewildered, stood speechless.

"Aye, they were a noble pair, indeed —your father and mine," Griselda went on bitterly. "But my mother, wiser than yours, who was her cousin, learned to hate the man who had injured her. Your mother, as queen, protected both men from Vantoredosian vengeance. And when Roger Erskine, threatened with death at the hands of my mother's agents, came here to beg for his life, Carasima compelled my mother to cease her persecution.

"When the throne was usurped, my mother succeeded in having executed the sentence of death that had been passed upon my father. It was her hand that barbed the arrow with which he was slain long months afterward in your country. When I became betrothed to the usurper, he caused it to be reported that you, the legitimate heir to the throne, had been murdered by a son of the hated Roger Erskine. He led me to believe that you, masquerading as John Fornishire, was the murderer of the man whose name you bore. Under such circumstances would the dreaded crown of the Black Cavern, placed on your head by the hands of Carasima, have been too severe a punishment?"

"No," the American assented. "But tell me why it was that I was confronted with the image of my father while on my way to the coronation hall."

"The image had been long in Vantoredos. It was brought out to point accusing fingers at the supposed murderer of the original's son."

Fornishire paced the floor nervously.

"How was it that you and I chanced to meet in the cavern?"

"I had gone in disguise to the coronation hall to see what manner of man my half-brother might be. I did not intend to stay to see the act of vengeance, but everything came about so suddenly—the uplifting of the crown; your mother's recognition; your display of the condor on your breast; and the assault made by your mother's adherents upon my friends, that I was dazed. I fled from the hall and lost my way among the dark passages of the cavern. For hours I wandered about alone—among the serpents and other crawling things that infested the place. Then the pumas came —and you in the boat. Since then I have known that you and I must fight for the possession of the crown of Vantoredos."

"That is why the herd of pumas was driven into the valley."

A bewildered expression crept over the features of the beautiful young queen.

"Pumas in the valley—the valley in which I left you?"

"Yes, the animals that came with me to this hall."

Her brow grew dark.

"It is the work of Rodriguez," she murmured. "He has had the pumas driven through a tunnel that leads to the valley from the top of the cliff."

"Then you did not seek my life?"

"Not since the moment you rescued me in the cavern."

The young woman, looking at him earnestly, smiled slightly. The American's face was very pale.

"Why did you ask me for that derringer?"

"Because you used it so handily that I feared you might shoot some of my friends whom I confidently expected to take me from the valley during the night."

Fornishire bowed slightly, then compressed his lips and turned away.

"If you found me ungallant up there in the valley, forgive me," he said.

She laid a hand on one of his arms, then answered gently:

"I fear it was I who——"

The door flew open with a crash, and Rodriguez entered, pale and trembling. The queen, startled by the man's demeanor, turned toward him anxiously.

"Well, what is it? What news do you bring?"

"Bad news, your majesty. Kenneth has revolted and the palace guard has gone over to Carasima's party. The

palace is in their hands. A report has reached them that John is here. They are advancing on us in force."

The queen stepped back, as if she were in the act of attempting to escape a blow.

"Kenneth has deserted me!" she murmured in accents of astonishment. "Why he——"

She stamped her foot, and her eyes blazed with scorn and anger as she added:

"Oh, the traitor! He has betrayed me because I would not make him king!"

As, turning slowly, she passed out of the room, Fornishire, all unmindful of the fact that he was a prisoner, followed closely.

In the great hall below she turned abruptly.

"They are coming to make you king," she said.

Fornishire shook his head gloomily. She went on:

"In this vast treasure house of the Quelgos all is yours. You——"

"All?"

"Aye, all——"

She stopped, and her cheeks and brow grew crimson as she met his eyes.

From a broad stairway that led to the surface of the ground there came the sound of many voices.

"John, John, king of Vantoredos!"

The steps were crowded with armed men hurrying downward. Then from among them came the voice of one who spoke with authority, and all made way for the speaker.

It was Coakley who advanced, with Carasima leaning on his arm.

"My son!" cried the former queen as she ran toward Fornishire with outstretched arms.

But before she reached his side she stopped, and a look of wonder overspread her face as she saw whose hand it was he held.

Something in the faces of the two young persons before her told a story that she did not fail to understand.

As her son pressed his lips to her forehead, she gave a hand to the stately young woman who was now kneeling before her.

"Can you forgive?" Griselda asked her.

"Yes," the elder woman answered gravely. "And may heaven forever bless the consort of John, king of Vantoredos!"

THE END.

JIM DEXTER—CATTLEMAN.

BY WILLIAM WALLACE COOK.

Author of "Rogers of Butte," "The Gold Gleaners," etc.

A story of the plains in which chivalry and trust are pitted against trickery and deceit.

CHAPTER I.

A BRUSH WITH OLD BLAZES.

"WHAT was that?" muttered Jim Dexter, drawing rein with a startled hand and rising in his stirrups. "There it goes again—a call for help, and in a woman's voice, too! That means us, Kentuck!"

The spurs rattled, the quirt snapped, and Kentuck leaped up the slope.

Apparently the cry of distress had come from Broken Arm Coulee, just beyond the low hill. On topping the rise, the sight Jim Dexter saw in the narrow ravine below sent the hot blood rushing through his veins and brought a muttered exclamation to his lips.

A white faced woman was clinging convulsively to the back of a horse and gazing with frenzied eyes at a huge red steer which stood in the center of the trail disputing the way.

Up the coulee side, well out of danger, a boy sat bareback on an Indian pony watching proceedings with juvenile helplessness.

To add to the woman's terror, the

steer was bellowing, pawing the sand and giving other and unmistakable signs of his hostile intentions. Dexter recognized the brute, and fear for the woman struck to his heart like a knife-thrust.

The steer was Old Blazes, a veteran maverick with a vicious grievance against everything human. The cunning that enabled him to defy the branding iron of lawful cattleman or preying rustler was the talk of a dozen ranches, while his diabolical courage in giving attack, with or without provocation, had inspired a nameless dread all through the cattle country.

Old Blazes had killed his man—a cowboy up on the Bad-Ax who had recklessly attempted to rope, down, and tie him. The cowboy's horse had wandered back to camp and the cowboy had been found trampled and gored out of all semblance to humanity.

An hour later Old Blazes was seen a dozen miles from the place of his crime, darting like a streak through the hills, his horns red and the blood-lust in his eyes.

From that hour the irreconcilable had been proscribed. Over the length and breadth of the cattle country word had gone forth that he was to be slain on sight.

Yet, with every man's hand against him, the wily maverick continued to evade his foes, although many a bullet had been embedded in his tough hide.

Such was the animal Dexter now looked down on in the coulee. He had known the steer at first glance, and he knew also that the woman's life was in danger unless she used quirt and spur to get herself out of the way.

Terror seemed to have paralyzed the woman's horse no less than the woman herself. The bronco was crouching back, head erect, mane flying, nostrils distended, his eyes held to the steer's as by a weird fascination.

There was a brace of navy sixes in holsters at Dexter's saddle-cantle, and a coiled riata at the horn. He understood the uselessness of the revolvers, but instinctively, without swerving his gaze from the coulee, he plucked at the rope, grasping the coils in his left hand and the noose in his right.

"Turn your horse and ride for life down the coulee!" shouted Jim. "Turn your horse, I tell you!" he added in a roar of command, noting the woman's continued apathy.

Thus urged, she made a half-hearted attempt with the reins, but the horse would not answer the bit.

Meanwhile, Old Blazes had made ready for the charge, and Dexter used his irons and shot down the slope into the coulee, whirling the noose about his head.

Kentuck was blue-grass bred, an animal of speed and bottom. Although Blazes, with lowered head and rangy leaps, had a good start in the race, yet Kentuck brought his rider close enough for a throw before the frightened woman had been reached.

Like a long black serpent the rope uncoiled from Dexter's hands, the noose settling squarely about the steer's branching horns. It was a cast for life and death, and a quick prayer of gratitude went up from Dexter's heart at the success of it.

Perfectly trained to his part, Kentuck reared back and braced himself to withstand the coming shock. The rope flickered out, grew taut; then, after a jolt that almost turned the horse head over heels, parted disastrously at the saddle-horn.

A groan escaped Dexter and a forlorn hope sent his hands behind him to the navy sixes. As he brought out the weapons, despair gave place to a negative satisfaction, for Blazes, resenting the dizzy jerk at his head, had whirled from the prey in front to take stock of the enemy behind.

A moment more he was charging Dexter, watched by the woman in the coulee and the boy on the hillside. The woman clasped her hands rigidly and her white lips moved without sound; the boy jerked off his ragged hat, and, with the shortsightedness of his years, began to cheer.

"Do the critter up, Jim Dexter! He's easy for you—anything's easy for *you!*"

The time to cheer is after the battle and not before. The sixes rattled in the face of Old Blazes, who scorned the bullets as so many sand-flies.

Instinct told even the gallant Kentuck that here was a foe to be feared and avoided. A pressure of Dexter's left knee carried the horse to the right, one of the murderous horns scraping his flank as Blazes flew past.

The sixes were emptied into the lean, red back of the maverick, but only soured his temper the more, and stung him to renewed ardor. Spinning about in his own length, he returned with a headlong rush before Kentuck could get clear of him.

The boy on the coulee side had the better view, and whooped with dismay as he saw the gleaming horns lose themselves under the saddle girth.

A scream of agony that might have been human came from the fated Kentuck as he was hurled sideways to the ground, Dexter flying clear of the saddle and alighting a dozen feet away on head and shoulders.

The woman screamed aloud, and the boy yelled frantically from the slope, but both were relieved when the cattleman sprang erect.

Jim Dexter's peril was even greater than before, now that he was unhorsed, but in that moment he had two thoughts for the woman where he had one for himself.

"Ride down the coulee!" he shouted to her.

The woman might have obeyed, for she had in a measure recovered the use of her faculties, but close on the heels of Dexter's command Old Blazes, apparently coming to the conclusion that he had wrought havoc enough, started up the side of the ravine.

He was not making for the boy, but the boy cherished another opinion. His bare heels dug into the pony's sides, and he tore over the crest, shouting wildly for Jim Dexter to kill the steer and save him. Blazes vanished a moment after the boy.

The woman was very quiet now. She was expecting her preserver to come to her, perhaps, and learn how she had withstood the ordeal through which she had passed. There was other work, however, which claimed Jim Dexter just then.

He ran to where Kentuck lay sprawled in the sand, bleeding from the grievous wounds of the sharp horns. The woman heard him speak the horse's name in a voice full of emotion, she saw the horse's head lift and fall back, after which Dexter walked to where one of his revolvers was lying.

Possessing himself of the weapon, Dexter opened it at the cylinder, took a cartridge from his pocket, slipped it into the gun, and returned to his horse. He walked unsteadily. The woman thought he had suffered some injury because of his fall.

Sinking on both knees at Kentuck's head, Dexter wound his arms about the thoroughbred's neck and buried his face in the flowing, dusty mane. He said something, but so low the woman could not hear.

Presently he released himself, and twice pressed the muzzle of the revolver to Kentuck's head. The third time his will strengthened his hand, the weapon exploded and the horse lay still.

Dexter got up and uncinched the saddle, drawing it away. The blanket he spread carefully over the ragged wounds made by the horns.

Stripping off his own coat he threw it over the horse's head. Thereupon he advanced to the woman, and she saw that his eyes were moist.

But she saw something else, too, and that was a livid stain of red on Dexter's white shirt at the shoulder.

"You—you are wounded," she murmured, a deep solicitude in her voice and manner.

"I think with the Indian, madam," said he, "that the faithful animals we love go with us to the Happy Hunting Grounds. Many a time Kentuck has saved my life, and I cannot tell you how much he had endeared himself to me. Now he is gone."

Dexter drew the back of his hand across his eyes and looked away.

"Pardon me," he added, "if I seem to be acting the fool. I never did have much of a whiphand on myself at a time like this."

"You are wounded," the woman repeated, leaning over to touch his shoulder.

"I believe I am," he answered, sit-

ting down on a rock at the trail-side and allowing his eyes to rest upon the traveler before him.

CHAPTER II.

ON THE TRAIL.

It is fair to surmise that the woman had more than a passing interest in Dexter. He had taken a hazard in her behalf, and his heart had been wrung by the loss of a faithful horse, Kentuck being the price the cattleman had paid for his chivalry.

Not only was the woman touched by Dexter's frank sorrow, but the gratitude which was the natural outcome of the circumstances took on a deeper significance because of it. There was a pensive sympathy in her eyes as she returned his calm, steady gaze.

Dexter was tall, square-shouldered, well and sturdily built. He was not a young man, for the woman could see threads of gray in his dark hair.

His face was smooth shaven and bronzed by sun and weather—a strong, handsome face set with steely eyes that had the faculty of looking into you rather than at you.

The woman, as he saw her, was slender, fair-haired and blue-eyed. Possibly she was twenty. There was about her a subtle grace—a charm of face, voice, or manner, or of all three combined—which appealed to him with a power he could not understand.

He got up from the boulder on which he was sitting when the silence that had fallen between them bid fair to become embarrassing, removed his broad-brimmed hat, and stepped toward her.

"You were in great danger, madam," said he, "and I am glad that fortune placed me near enough to be of aid."

"It grieves me to think you lost your horse," she returned with a sorrowful glance in the direction of Kentuck.

"He died in a good cause," answered Dexter briefly. "Are you traveling far?"

"To Clearwater Ranch. I left Siwash City this morning and the boy was guiding me. Is it far to the ranch?"

"A matter of three or four miles."

"Are you acquainted with any one there?" The words came hesitatingly, and an anxious look overspread the girl's face as she put the question.

He smiled. "As I happen to own the ranch," he answered, "it follows that I am pretty well acquainted with every one connected with it."

An exclamation of mingled joy and surprise greeted the words.

"Then you are the Honorable James Dexter?" the girl cried.

"If representing this district for a couple of terms in the Legislature can make a man an 'honorable,'" he replied with a twinkle in his gray eyes, "then I suppose I shall have to plead guilty. But the 'James' is pretty formal for this range. I'm always 'Jim' to my friends, and I hope"—his smile broadened and the twinkle deepened in his eyes—"that you and I are well enough acquainted by this time to sustain such a relation toward each other."

A flush crossed her face. After a moment's hesitation she leaned from the saddle and put out her hand.

"I shall be glad to have you for a friend, Mr. Dexter——"

He laughed as he took the hand.

"Formality seems to grow with your friendship," said he, "but we'll let that pass for now. Tommy Little, the youngster who was guiding you to the ranch, called my name from the hillside, but that was at a time when the steer was monopolizing our attention, so I suppose you did not hear him. You said your name was——"

She had not said what it was, as yet, but that was Dexter's way of getting at it.

"Miss Lee," answered the girl, "Orah Lee."

"If you have business at the ranch, Miss Lee," he went on, "perhaps I can be of still further assistance to you?"

"I feel that I have known you for a long time," smiled Miss Lee. "Roy has told me and written me so much about 'dear, old Jim' that it really seems like meeting a friend. Hasn't Roy told you anything about—about me, Mr. Dexter?"

In truth Roy had not, and Dexter was nonplussed. Still, he did not want Miss

Lee to feel as though she had been neglected.

"Well," said Jim, "I believe he did say something about you. If you will tell me your business with him no doubt it will all come back to me."

"Didn't he tell you that?" Miss Lee asked, in some confusion.

"No; at least, not that I can recall."

"Then I shall leave it for him to tell you, Mr. Dexter." The girl drew back in her saddle, a flash of white driving the color from her face.

"Very well," said Dexter. "You are going to the ranch to see Roy, and I am sorry to have to disappoint you. He is not there."

"Not there?" she echoed in dismay.

"No. He started up into the mountains two weeks ago. You see, Miss Lee, he studied too hard while he was attending that Eastern college, and didn't seem to pick up at the ranch as he ought to have done, so I packed him off to the mines in the hope of bettering his health."

"Oh, Mr. Dexter, it isn't anything serious, is it? You are not keeping anything back from me?"

The throbbing alarm in the girl's voice startled Dexter and vague ideas began drifting through his mind.

"Bless your heart, no!" he exclaimed. "Roy is all right. I'm just simply not going to have him take any chances with his health, you understand. The lad is dear to me—his father and I were more like brothers than friends—and when Joe Burnham died and left Roy in my hands, I promised faithfully to watch over him and care for him as though he were my own son. I think the world and all of that boy, Miss Lee."

"And I am sure he appreciates all that you have done for him," answered the girl. "But"—and here her face fell—"I don't know what I shall do now. Roy did not write me anything about going away."

"He went very suddenly, Miss Lee."

"And he has been gone two weeks! That, I suppose, is the reason he did not receive my letter and meet me in Siwash City."

"There are two or three letters for him at the ranch," said Dexter. "As soon as I hear from Roy, and know where to forward his mail, the letters will go to him."

Orah bowed her head, disappointed and perplexed. After a moment she directed her gaze at the wondering Dexter again.

"What shall I do, Mr. Dexter?" she asked.

"Did you leave any friends in Siwash City?" he returned.

"No. I came from the East alone."

"Alone!" muttered Jim, more and more troubled.

Before he could speak further, Tommy Little came riding back, this time from up the coulee.

After his boyish curiosity had been appeased, and he had looked at poor Kentuck and commiserated Dexter over the loss of the horse, the cattleman sent him on to the ranch with a line to Haverstraw, the foreman. When Tommy had vanished again, Dexter resumed his interrupted conversation with Orah Lee.

"You will have to wait, Miss Lee, until I hear from Roy and find out where he has located himself. Then I can send on his mail and you can write another letter to go with it."

"Do you think it will be long before you hear from him, Mr. Dexter?" the girl asked tremulously.

"I think not," answered Jim. "I was bound for Siwash City when I met you, and there may be a letter from Roy in the post-office there now."

"You were going to town just to see if he had written?" Orah inquired eagerly.

"Not for that alone," and Jim Dexter drew down his brows in a foreboding frown. "When I left the ranch this morning I went on the warpath, but there is no need of harrowing you up with the details. The point that concerns you is this:

"I have sent to my foreman for a fresh horse, and when the animal gets here it will give me pleasure to mount and ride with you back to town. I know a fine old lady there who runs a boarding-house, and you're to stay with her until we can corral Roy. That will be better than to go on to the ranch."

The girl's lips trembled, and it seemed for a moment as though she would burst into tears; but she beat down her emotion bravely.

"I am grateful to you, Mr. Dexter," she said softly. "I am sure that you saved my life this morning, and after Roy comes and tells you about me you will be glad, I think, that you gave me your aid. Not only that, but——"

She broke off suddenly and slipped from the saddle to the ground.

"How thoughtless of me!" she exclaimed. "Where can I hitch my horse, Mr. Dexter?"

She was looking around for some tree, or shrub, to which she could tie the bronco, but Broken Arm Coulee contained no vegetation of any sort.

"Why do you want to hitch your horse?" Dexter asked.

"So that I may attend to your wound," she replied.

"That is nothing," he said lightly. "I struck my shoulder on a sharp stone when I dropped from Kentuck's back. It will do well enough until I get to Siwash."

"I am going to bind up your shoulder now," she said firmly.

"Oh, well," he laughed, "if you insist I shall yield. That bronco is a cowhorse and you won't have to tie him. Just pull the reins over his head and let them hang from the bits. He'll stand like a rock, I'll warrant."

She did as he directed, and he went back to the boulder and sat down. It was pleasant for him to have her soft, deft fingers fluttering about his shoulder, cleansing the wound and then binding it with the handkerchief which he gave her for that purpose.

Her blue eyes were clear and true. To look into them with his intuition was to know her for what she was—a woman among women. When she had finished dressing his wounds, and would have drawn away, he caught her hand and stayed her a moment.

"Perhaps the secret you are waiting to let Roy tell me," he murmured, "is not so much of a secret, after all. College days have ripe hours for sentiment, Orah, and if my boy has found his way to your heart, I thank God for it. He is a noble fellow; a little headstrong, perhaps, but he comes of good stock and is worthy of any woman's trust and confidence."

Orah turned away for a moment, blushing vividly; then she whirled back impulsively, stooped and brushed her warm lips against the cattleman's forehead.

Without a word she went to her horse, and the cattleman gazed after her with a strange, wistful look on his face, averting his eyes at last with a smothered sigh.

At that juncture a man came galloping over the crest and down into the coulee. He was leading a horse behind him.

"Hello, Jim!" the newcomer sang out.

"You made record time, Haverstraw," answered Dexter, starting up. "Where's the boy?"

"Coming with the wagon." The foreman drew to a halt and looked curiously at Orah; after a moment his eyes wandered sadly to Kentuck. "Too bad, too bad!" he said, with a gloomy shake of the head. "How did it happen, Jim?"

As he picked up his remaining revolver and then fell to reloading both weapons, Dexter described his encounter with Old Blazes.

"When you get back to the ranch, Haverstraw," he added, "tell the boys that I will give five hundred dollars to the man who brings that big maverick's hide into camp. Keep a detachment out on the range looking for the ferocious brute.

"As for Kentuck"—and moisture again gathered in Jim Dexter's eyes as they rested on the dead horse—"I want you to lay him away near the ranchhouse. He was a good friend of mine, and Jim Dexter never forgets his friends, living or dead."

The cattleman got into his coat, swung himself to the saddle and spurred to where Orah was waiting.

"We'll ride now, Miss Lee," he said.

As they started off along the coulee, Haverstraw shouted:

"You look out for Kalispel, Jim! Either the old man or the young 'un

would as lief pick you off as to eat a meal."

Dexter made no answer, and did not even look around. Haverstraw continued to gaze after them until they rode out of sight, still curious about the girl.

CHAPTER III.

THE JUDGE DELIVERS A WARNING.

IMMEDIATELY upon reaching Siwash City, Dexter proceeded to carry out his plan concerning Orah. Guiding her to Mrs. Hutton's boarding-house, he introduced her to the landlady and commended her privately to that lady's care and solicitude.

Then he rode off to the town corral, leading Orah's horse and with Orah's warm thanks for his kindness ringing in his ears.

From the corral he went to the town tavern, hailed right and left by every one he passed. Every man, woman and child in Siwash knew Jim Dexter, and knew nothing but good of him.

"Glad to see ye, Jim," beamed Lon Dobbins, proprietor of the tavern, as the cattleman came in. "How's things out at the J. D. ranch? Fine, eh? They always are. No one ever hears anythin' but good of your place. Reckon ye'll ship out a likely passel o' steers this fall if what I hear is true. If ye're wantin' dinner, step right in. Jedge Givins is in the dinin'-room. He was inquirin' about you afore he went in."

"Is Kalispel in town, Lon?" Dexter asked.

Dobbins jumped and gave the cattleman a startled and apprehensive look.

"The old man or the young 'un?" temporized the landlord.

"You know the one I mean, Lon," said Jim.

"Ain't neither of 'em down, Jim," replied Dobbins in a worried tone. "They're decoratin' out at the O. D. K., and I reckon it keeps both of 'em purty close."

"Decorating?"

"Paintin' the ranch-house," laughed Dobbins. "The O. D. K. outfit is gettin' plenty stylish, seems like."

Dexter turned away to the dining-room. At the door he paused to call back:

"Send over to the post office for my mail, will you, Lon? If there's anything, bring it in to me."

"Sure," replied the landlord, and Dexter walked into the dining-room and seated himself beside a portly, bald-headed gentleman who stretched out a flabby hand in eager greeting.

"The Honorable Jim!" cooed the bald-headed gentleman. "Just the man I wanted to see, by George!"

"Anything in particular, judge?" queried Dexter, taking the ragged napkin which the waitress hastened to bring him.

Napkins were a luxury in that cowboy resort. The demand for them was not general, but an ex-member of the Legislature and a circuit judge were looked upon as entitled to the best the place afforded, their demands being anticipated and supplied.

The judge and the cattleman were alone in the room, there being no other guests at table and the waitress having departed with Dexter's order. After assuring himself of this by a cautious survey of the surroundings, the judge lowered his voice and continued:

"There are two things I want to speak with you about, Jim, and they're mighty important."

"Take them in the order of their importance, judge," smiled Dexter. "What's the first one?"

"Well, what's this last piece of trouble between you and Ol Kalispel? Don't get savage now. Be good. I'm your friend, Jim—you ought to know that."

Dexter had frowned darkly at mention of Kalispel.

"Where have you been, judge, that you haven't heard about that?" he asked.

"Been holding court over at Lamark."

"Hasn't any one told you about my recent differences with Kalispel?"

"I've heard rumors; that's all. But what's the gist of the matter?"

"The gist of it is that Kalispel ran off a bunch of my steers, changed the brand

from 'J. D.' to 'O. D. K.,' and now refuses to settle."

"Sure of that?" ventured the judge, with a cautious glance at Dexter out of the tails of his eyes.

"I wouldn't make such an accusation if I wasn't sure of it. You know me, judge."

"I know you're a hot spark when you think you've got a grievance, Jim. If Kalispel stole a bunch of your cattle, why don't you get out a warrant and have him up for trial?"

"I couldn't convict him," was the calm response.

"Couldn't convict him?" echoed the judge. "I thought you said you had a clear case?"

"So I have. My boys missed the steers, and one of Kalispel's men told me in confidence that Kalispel had gathered in the animals and changed the brand.

"But this cowboy won't testify against his employer in open court. If he did, he knows only too well that his life wouldn't be worth *that*." Dexter snapped his fingers.

The waitress returned with the order just then, and there was silence between the cattleman and the judge until she went out again.

"You are sure this cowboy of Kalispel's can be trusted?" asked the judge.

"I wouldn't go the length I have gone if there was the possibility of a doubt," replied Dexter quietly. "I sent word to Kalispel to meet me here this morning and settle for the steers. As he hasn't seen fit to come, I'm going on to the O. D. K. ranch this afternoon."

"You're as mad as a hatter," growled the judge. "These Kalispels are bad medicine, Jim. The old man has got several notches to his credit, and they're not much credit to him, either. Take my advice and stay away from his ranch or else take the sheriff along with you."

A slight smile played about Dexter's lips.

Before he could answer his friend, Dobbins entered the room and gave him a letter.

To the cattleman's intense disappointment, the letter was not from Roy. He read it through and then passed it on to the judge. Here is what the judge read:

MR. JIM DEXTER:

SIR:—You have accused me of rustling twenty of your steers, have mailed me a bill for six hundred dollars, and have ordered me to meet you in Siwash City Monday morning and make payment. This evidence of your distinguished regard does not find me in a receptive mood.

I shall be pleased to welcome you at my ranch on the Bad-Ax whenever you may have the temerity to call, and will then make payment in accordance with your deserts. Awaiting your pleasure, I remain,

Yours expectantly,
OL KALISPEL.

"My, my!" murmured the judge, handing the letter back to Dexter. "You can see with half an eye that Kalispel intends mischief."

"There was something else you wanted to talk to me about, judge," said Dexter, mincing the letter fine and throwing the pieces under the table.

Givins dropped knife and fork and leaned back in his chair. For several moments he hung fire, apparently at a loss how to begin. Finally he said:

"It's about young Burnham, Jim."

"Roy?"

"Yes."

Judge Givins showed unmistakably the nervousness he felt. A friendship covering many years had not only convinced him of Dexter's sterling worth, but also of his blindness to the faults of those whom he favored. For a friend to attempt to shatter his faith in a friend was very much the same as holding a lighted match over a barrel of gunpowder.

Aware of this, the judge made pause and drummed a perplexed tattoo on the table-cloth with his fat fingers.

"Well?"

The word came sharply from Dexter, who turned sideways in his chair, rested his right elbow on the table and his chin in his hand and surveyed the judge keenly and steadily.

"Of course," said Givins, hoping to placate the other's animosity by the ac-

knowledgment, "everybody knows that you like young Burnham, Jim."

"His father was the best friend I ever had," averred Dexter. "I love the boy not only for himself, but also for the good blood that's in him."

"Exactly," murmured the judge, but not with any appreciable ease of mind.

"Roy was fourteen when his father died, and I was made his guardian," went on Dexter. "I was thirty-one then and the responsibility was just what I needed at that time. I have tried to do my duty by the lad, and, because of our intimate companionship, feel positive that I know him better than any one else."

The final words were significant.

Dexter had drawn a dead-line, and would not have the judge essay to cross it.

Being a persistent man, however, and knowing himself to be right in the present instance, Givins picked up the gage and rallied to the attack.

"Look here, Jim," he blurted out, "you always put on your rosy spectacles when you look at a friend, but——"

"I've got them on now, judge"—and a faint smile hovered about Dexter's thin lips.

The smile was encouraging, and the judge felt reassured.

"Good enough," he chuckled. "But it is your duty to young Burnham to be less optimistic in sizing up his character."

"Meaning——?" queried Dexter, the lines deepening between his brows.

"Just this, Jim: Roy Burnham is deceiving you."

The expected did not happen. There was no explosion of temper on Dexter's part. He sat without word or movement, still eying his friend.

"He riots away the money you give him on drink and cards," went on the judge, hurling himself recklessly against the point at issue. "He cozens you to your face and goes his own road behind your back.

"Last night, right here in this town, he came to blows with young Kalispel over a poker game. They were separated, each swearing that he would have the other's life. Now, Jim"—and the judge reached out a hand to lay it in friendly wise on Dexter's knee—"for heaven's sake be advised in time and——"

The hand was struck curtly aside and Dexter got up from his chair. He glared at the judge and made as though he would speak, but bit the words short with a snap of the jaws, whirled on his heel and strode out of the room. Givins wagged his head despondently.

"I've done my duty, anyhow," he said to himself. "God knows what the upshot of it will be. Jim is too fine a fellow to be victimized by that rascally young Burnham, and I would almost be willing to sacrifice his friendship if I could implant a doubt in his heart."

Meantime, Dexter had left the tavern and was taking his way to the town corral. When his horse was made ready, he vaulted to the saddle and spurred off on the trail leading to the Bad-Ax and Kalispel's.

The trail was long, but his thoughts were busy and shortened it. Kalispel and the stolen steers were not in his mind, but Roy was there and so was Orah.

No doubt of Roy had been planted in Dexter's breast. Concerning Roy's disagreement at cards with young Kalispel, the judge was certainly misinformed. Roy was in the mountains and had not been in Siwash City for a fortnight.

It did not occur to Dexter to make inquiries regarding Roy in the town.

Roy had said he was going to the mountains, and of course he had gone.

As to Orah, Dexter was not a little at sea. There was a romance back of her presence in Siwash City—he had plumbed the affair to that depth if no farther.

If Roy had not told him of Orah, Dexter was sure that he was merely biding his time. As for the rest of it, Orah was one girl in ten thousand—a prize for any man who might win her. He was pleased with the thought that Roy was to be that man.

The climax of his reverie brought him to a slight elevation overlooking the valley of the Bad-Ax and the buildings of the O. D. K. outfit. Several cowboys

were lounging in the shade of the ranch-house, and among them he made out the stalwart figure of Ol Kalispel, as well as the slighter and more wiry form of Kalispel the younger.

Ol Kalispel was in his shirt-sleeves, his belt and attached revolvers hanging from the jagged limb of a scrub oak tree close to the corner of the main building.

He seemed to be overseeing the work of two men who were "decorating" the structure, as Dobbins had indicated to Dexter.

The sight of Kalispel brought Dexter's mission vividly before him, and his lips compressed firmly as he took fresh grip of the lines and galloped down into the valley.

An exclamation from young Kalispel drew his father's attention to Dexter's approach.

Scenting trouble, the cowboys flocked together and fixed their eyes on the newcomer.

Ol Kalispel went over to the oak, took down his belt, and buckled it around his waist.

CHAPTER IV.

BEARDING THE LION.

THERE was no hostile move on the part of the O. D. K. outfit as Dexter drew to a halt in front of the ranch-house.

Kalispel senior was leaning against the unpainted wall of the building, his arms folded and a look of insolent defiance on his thin, hatchet face. Kalispel junior was red and boiling, apparently awaiting a favorable moment for an attack.

"You, Nate!" growled the old man to his son, with a warning glance. "This is my fight; I can handle this proposition without any of your put-in."

Young Kalispel mumbled something under his breath. But obedience to parental authority was not his shining trait, and he edged closer to Dexter's horse.

Dexter cloaked his wary vigilance under a careless air, tossed the reins over his horse's head, and dismounted. He might have been at his own ranch and in the midst of his own cowboys, so calm was he and so much at his ease in every movement.

He gave a wordless nod, which earned him no return greeting, and stepped slowly and firmly toward the man with whom his errand had principally to do. He passed within arm's length of the fiery Nate, thus tempting him out of his discretion and the parental authority.

"Take that, you infernal meddler! Mebbe it 'll teach you to leave our outfit alone."

Nate's voice choked and rasped with passion. Simultaneously with the words he flung himself forward. A second later both his wrists were gripped as in a vise by Dexter's steel-like fingers and a murderous dirk was shaken to the ground and kicked away. Then the youth was thrown back for a dozen feet, spluttering with impotent fury.

The cowboys started as though they would interfere.

"Keep away!" ordered Ol Kalispel. "There's too much touch-and-go about Nate, and it served him right to get what he did."

With his eyes fixed on his son, the rancher added: "Clear out of this, Nate. The pay-roll's due to-morrow, so you go to Siwash and get it. The bank will be closed, but I reckon the cashier will let you have the money. We'll need another two-gallon can of red paint, and you better load up with that, too, and bring it back with you."

The old man's desire was evidently to get the boy out of the way. Nevertheless, Nate started off.

As he was on the point of disappearing around the corner of the house, he halted to glare at Dexter and shake his clenched fist.

"If you fool the old man, Jim Dexter," he breathed hoarsely, "I'll camp on your trail till I get you. This range ain't big enough for you and the Kalispels."

"Scatter!" shouted the owner of the ranch, and Nate "scattered," leaving the intrepid Dexter face to face with his father.

Ol Kalispel's person bore the impress

of his character, for a man is built from within, not from without, and nature is not to be hoodwinked. He stood as tall as Dexter, and the cunning devils that made sport with his soul looked brazenly out through his sloe-black eyes. A livid scar crossed his swarthy forehead. Some said it was a brand of Cain left there by his own murdered brother.

Kalispel had started in the cattle business without a dollar, but that was at an early day, before the advent of the Cattle Dealers' Association made rustling more dangerous and less profitable than it is at present.

The enmity of the two cattle owners had not begun with that theft of twenty steers. Widely apart in character, their differences had developed into antagonism without any overt act and farther back than either of them could remember.

The first expression of intolerance came when they ran against each other for the Legislature and Kalispel was beaten by a majority that made him bitter to the point of frenzy. His wrath had settled into a latent hostility that showed its ugly head, serpent-like, from the brush and secret places. This theft of cattle was more an evidence of hate than a desire to reap pecuniary advantage.

It might well be that Kalispel had asked his cowboy to turn informer and take the hide of one of the stolen steers to Dexter so that he could himself see how the J. D. brand had been "doctored" into O. D. K.

This would have been like Kalispel, knowing that Dexter could have no recourse at law.

"You got the letter I mailed to you in Siwash?" asked Kalispel with a leer.

"Yes," replied Dexter calmly. "That is the reason I am here."

"Men have been strung up without trial for accusin' others of stealin' cattle."

"Not when they accused men like you."

Kalispel's eyes snapped savagely, and he half lowered a hand to the weapon on his right hip.

Dexter copied the movement, and when Kalispel thought better of his intentions and shifted his hands, so did he.

"Let's go into the house," said Kalispel, stepping to the open door and waving his guest to enter.

"You first," said Dexter.

With an admonitory look at the cowboys, Kalispel passed in and Dexter followed. The room that claimed them was large and there was no one in it apart from themselves.

Closing the door behind him, Dexter lowered a bar across it. Kalispel gave a raucous laugh as he dropped into a chair in front of a table.

"You seem mighty anxious to trap yourself, Jim Dexter," he said mockingly.

"I am only anxious to keep your men outside while we are transacting our business, Kalispel," Dexter answered. "If I am not mistaken, you have already given your cowboys their instructions."

"You have made a good guess," said Kalispel, with a cunning leer. "They know what they're to do, and, when the time comes, can be depended upon to do it."

"Possibly. You are prepared to pay me that six hundred dollars?"

With a wily smile, Kalispel drew open a drawer of the table and brought out a buckskin bag, jingling and bulky, and tied at the top with a thong. Opening the bag, he emptied a heap of gold pieces out on the table.

"These are double-eagles," said he, manipulating them into stacks of five each. "As you see, there are six piles."

"Just the amount of my bill," commented Dexter.

"Just the amount of your bill," repeated Kalispel, a twinkle of cunning in his wolfish eyes. "You will observe that I put all the gold back into the bag and tie it as before. You are satisfied that the six hundred is here?"

"Yes. Hand me the bill and I will receipt it."

Kalispel laughed sardonically as he shoved the bag to the center of the table and leaned back in his chair.

"You will receipt no bill for me, Jim Dexter," he replied. "That would be *prima facie* evidence that I think I owe

you this money. As a matter of fact, I dispute your claim."

"Then why do you give me the gold?"

"I'm not going to give it to you. If you choose to take it from the table, I shall not stretch out a hand to hinder. But the moment you leave this house I shall run to the door and tell my men that you have stolen six hundred dollars from me and are making off with it. You may fight, Jim Dexter, for you are that sort of a man; certainly you will try to get away. In any event, if you attempt to leave here with the money you will be killed. You cannot prove, in any court of the land, that I stole your steers, but I can prove you stole six hundred dollars in gold from me and were making off with it when you were shot down by my men. I wonder if the case is sufficiently clear to you?"

Dexter was alive to the technicality. Tilting his chair back against the wall, he folded his arms and studied the grinning face of Kalispel.

"If you wish to receipt the bill and leave the gold," said Kalispel, "you may go from here unmolested."

There was but one window in the room, and Dexter could gaze out of it and see his horse standing patiently with drooping reins. None of the cowboys were looking in, nor were they to be seen in that direction.

"You are not to be trusted, Kalispel," said Dexter slowly. "This is a very pretty plot of yours and I have walked into it open-eyed. But how am I to know that if I sign the receipt and leave the gold you will not carry out your original plan?"

"At a word from me the cowboys and even the two men who are painting the house will retire up the Bad-Ax, leaving your way clear. It is up to the Honorable Jim," added Kalispel facetiously. "What is he going to do?"

Dexter threw his chair forward and got up slowly. It looked as though he was beaten. Kalispel was already enjoying his triumph. Bringing his chair to the table, Dexter sat down opposite his enemy.

"Give me the bill," said he, taking a lead pencil from his pocket.

"I thought so, Jim," chuckled Kalispel. "Discretion is the better part of valor any day, and you know how to be discreet when the odds are against you. Here's your bill," and Kalispel took the paper from the table drawer and swept the jingling bag back into it. Dexter receipted the bill.

As he returned the pencil to his coat pocket, he grasped and brought out one of the navy sixes, leaning across the table and holding the point of the weapon within a foot of Kalispel's breast.

The triumphant expression did not fade from Kalispel's face nor did he make any movement to draw one of his own six-shooters. He well understood how disastrous a belligerent act would be, under the circumstances, and he believed in his heart, that this was his enemy's last hopeless gasp in the toils that chafed his soul.

"Well, well," murmured Kalispel ironically. "What do you hope to accomplish by that, eh? I'm at my home ranch, with my cowboys all around me. The Honorable Jim has a bee in his bonnet!"

"Put that bag of money out here on the table," snapped Jim, a glint in his eyes.

"Why, man, you agreed——"

"I agreed to nothing. I've receipted the bill and now I want my money."

It was borne in on Kalispel at that moment that Dexter was in deadly earnest. He was attempting some counter stroke, hard to fathom, but which, to Dexter at least, gave promise of success.

Kalispel leaped up with an oath.

"Lower your voice!" Dexter warned him. "One word above the ordinary tone in which we have been conversing will be my signal to shoot. Now that you are on your feet, put your hands in front of you and turn around."

"Dexter, you're a fool!" grunted Kalispel. "You'll find that this ranch is a hornets' nest before you are done with me."

"Turn your back," repeated Dexter. "You heard what I said, and I am in no mood to repeat my orders."

Kalispel obeyed, and Dexter, with his

left hand, pulled both revolvers from his belt and stowed the cumbersome machines away in his own coat.

"Who is in charge of the men you have out in front, Kalispel?" inquired Dexter, after commanding his enemy to face about and resume his chair.

"Lester," was the sullen reply.

"Then," went on Dexter, "you will elevate your voice and tell Lester and the rest to move off up the Bad-Ax."

"I won't!" ground out Kalispel. "You can shoot me first."

"See here, Kalispel," said Dexter quietly, "don't tempt me too far. It was your intention, if I stood for my rights in coming here, to shoot me down; and you had so framed your design as to make it appear as though you had a shadow of excuse for so doing. I don't want your worthless life, but now that I am in this game I'll either have it or you'll do as I tell you."

Hardened wretch that he was, Kalispel cowered under the fierce look directed at him. He read life or death in the steel-gray eyes and fear struck him with momentary panic. Forthwith he shouted the required words to Lester.

The cowboys gathered from this that the Honorable Jim Dexter had been beaten at his own game and they departed up the Bad-Ax with yells of derision.

Kalispel's face was like a thundercloud, and he eased his overburdened spirit with much profanity.

"There'll be a sequel to this, Dexter," he foamed. "If you don't shoot me now, while you've got the chance, you'll never live to do it."

"You're too tragic," laughed Dexter. "I hope that both of us will live to a ripe old age and that, incidentally, you will come to see the error of your way. Now the gold, Kalispel."

Kalispel plucked the bag savagely from the drawer and flung it on the table.

"You have the receipted bill and I have the money," remarked Dexter. "I guess that will be all."

With the buckskin bag in the breast of his coat, he backed to the door, covering his retreat with the navy six.

Turning quickly, he lifted the bar, flung open the door and ran to his horse.

By the time he was in the saddle, Kalispel was outside, roaring frantically for his men. The men came in due course, but before they could arrive Jim Dexter was well out of the way.

Nevertheless, pursuit was begun, the vengeful Kalispel careering along in the van.

CHAPTER V.

ROY.

ALTHOUGH he had galloped briskly off along the Siwash trail, Jim Dexter did not return to the town. He knew he would be followed, and perhaps by horses fleet enough to overtake him. Therefore he turned from the trail in the scantily wooded country north of the Bad-Ax and doubled back to the creek, being passed by a detachment of the O. D. K. outfit in full cry.

Worn with the day's events, and experiencing some pain from his injured shoulder, Dexter passed the night in a deserted cabin in the hills, continuing on in the morning and reaching his own ranch by a roundabout course. He dropped from his saddle at the boarding-house, and while the Chinese cook was scurrying around to get him a breakfast one of the cowboys came up to lead away his horse.

"Roy has got back to camp, Jim," said the cowboy.

"He has?" exclaimed Dexter, pleasure and surprise mingling in his voice. "When did he come?"

"Early this mornin'. He's down at your lodge this min'it, ketchin' his forty winks as though he hadn't had 'em for a month."

"Let the boy rest," said Jim. "I'll see him after I get my breakfast."

"How did you come out with old Kalispel, Jim?"

Dexter displayed the buckskin bag and jingled its contents.

"He let me have the six hundred, Davis, and I receipted the bill."

"Glory!" muttered Davis, with bulging eyes. "Did he meet ye in Siwash?"

"No; I had to call at the ranch."

"Was the sheriff along?"

"I didn't ask the sheriff to accompany me. Here are Kalispel's guns. Tell Haverstraw to send them over to the O. D. K. range and leave them with one of the boys."

Davis took the weapons and went away, thrilled with things unspoken and drawing his own conclusions. When he had finished his late breakfast, Dexter proceeded to the small building which he and Roy made use of for their personal headquarters.

The cattleman had no other home than this. There was a smart hostelry in Omaha which knew him for a fortnight or a month in the fall, and another in Chicago, where two or three times he had lagged out the winter, and naturally the roof of the Siwash tavern was more or less over his head, but this twelve-by-fifteen one-story frame held the hallowed place in his bachelor heart. There was space but for two rooms—one called the "parlor" by courtesy of its function, and the other a bedroom, occupied jointly by himself and Roy.

The parlor was neatly carpeted and papered, contained a store of well-thumbed books in a packing-box bookcase and a crowning feature in the shape of a "what-not" manufactured by one Shorty Burke out of a dozen spools, some clothesline and three narrow boards.

Shorty had labored over the what-not o' nights, in the bunk-house, and had headed a delegation of punchers which had waited on Jim his last birthday—the thirty-seventh—and bashfully presented the piece of furniture in token of their esteem.

A nail was driven and the what-not hung up, then the cowboys filed through and proceeded to load it down with further evidences of their regard. French John's offering was a bouquet of wax flowers in a round glass case; Brazos Bill and Tobe Henry contributed the navy sixes which have already insinuated themselves into this chronicle; Mike Meagher presented a pin-cushion on a base of petrified wood; Red Bascomb laid bare his devotion with a copy of "The James Boys," in cloth; Juan Moreno looped a horsehair *riata* around the nail that upheld the fabric; from Jake Haverstraw, foreman, a silver-mounted dirk, touchingly inscribed, "The handle for a friend, the point for an enemy"; from Barney O'Rourke, an elk tooth famed as a luck producer, and from Roy—God bless him!—a little daguerreotype of a sweet-faced woman in a frilled cap, framed in solid gold: Dexter's mother.

Ah, that thirty-seventh birthday! Could the bachelor cattleman ever forget it? His eyes filled as they rested on the what-not, and his voice was husky as he went out in front and tried to say a few words to the boys, but succeeded only in breaking down.

When he came back, he put his arms around Roy and gave him a bear's hug.

Among other articles in the parlor may be mentioned the battered old case standing up in one corner and containing Jim's violin. This violin had been his delight even before Roy came into his life, and when the boy was absent at college it had soothed away the lonely hours.

On this morning when Jim had ridden in with his six hundred dollars he entered the parlor softly and tip-toed his way to the door of the bedroom.

Roy was there, partly dressed and sprawled out on one of the beds. He was not asleep. His hands were clasped under his head and he was looking up at the ceiling with the vacant stare of one in deep thought.

Roy Burnham was a handsome young fellow, tall and slender, with dark-brown, curly hair, brown eyes, and a face as delicate in feature as a girl's.

There were dark lines under his eyes as Jim looked at him now, and he was pale and haggard to an extent that aroused his guardian's apprehension.

"Roy!" exclaimed Dexter, starting across the chamber.

The young man gave a start, rose up on one elbow and extended his hand.

"Jim! I've been waiting for you, old chap. When I got here and found that you were away it didn't seem like the same place."

Jim took Roy's hand and sat down on the edge of the bed, still holding it.

"You found out where I had gone, didn't you?" he queried.

"Yes. Haverstraw told me. If I had been here I shouldn't have let you go over to Kalispel's alone. I'd have gone with you, Jim."

The anxiety that vibrated in Roy's words was vastly pleasing to Jim, although he laughed lightly, released the hand he was holding and gave the youth a hearty slap on the shoulder.

"Nonsense! You ought to know by this time, Roy, that I'm able to take care of myself."

"What success did you have at the other ranch?"

Jim gave a brief account of his visit to the O. D. K. headquarters. Roy laughed at the way Jim had turned the tables on Ol Kalispel.

"That was a reckless thing to do, Jim," said Roy, "but it was like you. Take my advice, however, and keep a weather-eye out for old man Kalispel from now on."

"He is the least of my troubles, Roy," Jim answered, his brow clouding as his eyes dwelt on the youth's face. "You are back from the mountains long before I expected you, my boy."

"I didn't go up into the mountains, Jim," said Roy, finding his guardian's face uncomfortable and looking away.

"Where were you, then?"

"In Lamark, most of the time. I came back to Siwash day before yesterday and was asleep in my room at the tavern when you had your dinner there with Judge Givins."

"I didn't dream of such a thing," muttered Jim. "Why didn't you go into the mountains, Roy? You look worse than you did when you left here. There's no use talking, you've got to have a change of climate. You're all run down and played out."

"Don't you fret about me, Jim," Roy returned carelessly; "I'm not so bad off as you seem to think. I just took a notion not to go into the mountains, after I left here, and that's the reason I hung around Lamark. I knew the mountains wouldn't help me, but I thought it would relieve your mind a little if you thought I had gone."

Jim studied the youth gravely. It was possible Judge Givins had not been misinformed, after all, concerning the disagreement between Roy and Nate Kalispel. According to Roy's own statement he had returned to Siwash on the preceding Sunday.

But he had not gambled on Sunday night. Early training had cast him in a different mold. Confident of this, Dexter asked the boy nothing about Nate Kalispel. If the boy had anything to say, he would say it without being urged.

There was something else that concerned Jim, just then, and that was the question of Orah Lee. There was much he wanted to learn about the girl, and Roy must be the one to tell him. He came at the matter in a devious way.

"Did Haverstraw tell you I had lost Kentuck?" he inquired.

"Yes, Jim," was the sympathetic response. "Poor old Kentuck! He was the finest saddler that ever came out of the Bluegrass State."

"He was more than that, Roy," returned Jim sadly. "He was a tried and trusty friend, one to be depended on at any stage of the game. But he gave up his life in a good cause, and I guess that is as much as any one could ask for, brute or human."

"That's so," went on Roy, with a side glance at his companion. "Haverstraw says there is a woman in the case. Look out, Jim—that heart of yours would be a fine mark for the little chap with the bow and arrows."

Dexter laughed. "You haven't any idea who the girl is?" said he.

"Not the slightest," smiled Roy. "But Haverstraw says she is as pretty as a picture."

"Haverstraw is right. What's more, she is as good as she is pretty, and that's saying considerable. By the way, I've got some letters here for you."

"I found them," said Roy.

"Read them?"

"Yes."

"Anything important in any of them?" asked Jim artfully.

Roy vouchsafed him a quick glance and flushed as he answered:

"Well, yes, Jim. I shall have to ride to Siwash this morning."

"Naturally," chuckled Jim. "Orah Lee is very anxious to see you."

"Why," came from the startled Roy, "how do you happen to know anything about Orah?"

"She is the lady I met in Broken Arm Coulee," replied Jim smiling.

"That's the strangest thing I ever heard of," muttered Roy, after peering incredulously at his friend for a full minute. "What was she doing in Broken Arm Coulee?"

"She was coming to the ranch to find you, Roy."

"And you took her back to Siwash?"

"That's the way of it. I placed her in Mrs. Hutton's care to wait until I could get word to you."

Roy Burnham was silent a few moments.

At length he went on:

"Did—did she tell you anything, Jim?"

"No. Said she would leave that for you."

"I ought to have told you about Orah before, Jim," said Roy, sitting up on the bed and letting his eyes wander to a window on the opposite side of the room, "but I thought there would be time enough when she got here. Her mother and mine were bosom friends, and Orah and I have known each other ever since we were children.

"When my father died and I came out here to live with you, Orah and I naturally drifted apart from each other. When I went back East to school, however, we met again, decided that we were in love, and an engagement was the result.

"A few months ago Orah's mother died, leaving her friendless and practically alone, and I wrote and asked her to come out here to me. I suppose I did not do right——"

"Bless you, my boy," interrupted Jim warmly, "you did exactly right. You love each other and you'll be married. I'll build a house for you in Siwash City, give you a half interest in Clearwater Ranch, and—and there you are! You're rather young to settle down, but responsibility is what a young man needs to develop his character and steady him. It's all right, Roy. You've won a prize in the matrimonial lottery, and I congratulate you."

Their hands met, but there was a troubled look in the youth's brown eyes at strange variance with the gratitude and happiness expressed in his face. Before he could say a word a tread of feet reached their ears from the other room, and Dexter got up quickly and passed to the door.

Two men, booted, spurred and dusty from a long ride had entered the house unceremoniously. They hailed from Siwash, and Dexter recognized them as McKibben, the sheriff, and Dune Perry, an aide and deputy.

"Howdy, Jim!" cried McKibben heartily.

"Hello, Mac!" Dexter returned. "What are you and Perry doing on this part of the range?"

"We're here on business, Jim."

"Business, eh?"

Jim heard a smothered exclamation behind him and looked around to see Roy, leaning against the wall, pallid and breathless.

He would have spoken to the youth, but the latter shook his head, laid a finger on his lips and motioned him into the other room with a convulsive gesture.

Surprised and bewildered, Jim Dexter stepped into the parlor, closing the bedroom door behind him. This byplay in the chamber was evidently lost upon the sheriff and the deputy, who were engaged in a critical survey of the other room.

"Yes, business, Jim," drawled McKibben. "I hope you won't take it hard—I've got to stand by my duty, you know."

"Certainly you have," said Jim, "and why should I take it hard?"

"I reckon you haven't heard the news, have you?"

"What news?"

"Why, about Nate Kalispel. He was killed last night on the Bad-Ax trail."

"Killed?" murmured Dexter, his thoughts flying to Judge Givins and the story he had told about Roy's quarrel with Nate Kalispel over a game of cards.

All the dread significance of the judge's story, in the light of the sheriff's news, crowded with benumbing force upon the cattleman's brain.

"My God, Mac! Is that so?" Dexter asked hoarsely.

"I'm giving it to you straight, Jim," said McKibben. "I've got a warrant here for young Burnham. If he's in there, I'll have to serve it."

For an instant Dexter's senses reeled, and he was obliged to catch at the back of a chair to support himself, then as he saw McKibben making for the bedroom door he gathered his faculties firmly in hand and stepped in front of him, barring the way.

"You'll not lay a hand on the boy," said he fiercely. "This is some infernal plot of Ol Kalispel's to get even with me for what I did at his ranch yesterday. I'll stand between you and Roy, McKibben, as long as I have any breath in my body."

They looked into each other's eyes for a space. McKibben made no attempt to force an entrance into the chamber, but presently backed away to a chair and seated himself.

CHAPTER VI.

A BOLT FROM A CLEAR SKY.

"You know I don't want to be ugly, Jim," observed McKibben quietly. "I reckoned my business here wouldn't set well with you, but I had to come, all the same.

"I like you mighty well and I'd go a long way to do you a good turn, but speakin' free between man and man, Jim Dexter, if young Burnham's in this house he goes back to town with me, and no ifs nor ands about it. That's flat."

"Do you want to disgrace the boy?" demanded Dexter hotly. "Do you want to give him an evil name in the eyes of all his friends? I guess you understand how devilish Ol Kalispel can be when he lets himself out. I tell you, he's striking at me over the boy's shoulders. This is an underhand game he's playing—I'm as positive of that as I am that I am standing here this minute."

"You're wrong, Jim," McKibben answered in a kindly tone. "Sit down and we'll talk the thing over. Have you any objection to Perry's nosing around a little while we're palavering?"

"Perry can do as he pleases so long as he keeps out of this other room."

By way of emphasizing his determination to protect Roy, Dexter drew a chair in front of the door and sat down.

The deputy began a slow and exhaustive search about the parlor, feeling back of the rows of books in the primitive book-case, wriggling under a couch draped with a Navajo blanket, diving into a heterogeneous assortment of wearing apparel behind a chintz curtain in one corner—looking into, under and behind everything where the object he sought, whatever it was, might be secreted.

While the industrious Perry was at work, the sheriff and the cattleman proceeded with their conversation.

"You say this is a plot of Ol Kalispel's," remarked McKibben. "I hardly think he'd sacrifice the life of his own son just to get even with you, Jim. Ol Kal is a hard man, as everybody knows, but I reckon he wouldn't do *that*."

"Are you sure Nate Kalispel has been killed?" demanded Dexter.

"His body is at the undertaker's in Siwash. It was brought in by old Ol and two of his punchers a little after sun-up."

"Where was the body found?"

"About two miles north of the Bad-Ax. Perry and I rode past the place on our way here. Young Kalispel had a desperate fight, and the ground was all trodden up and covered with red paint."

"Covered with red paint?" repeated Dexter.

McKibben nodded.

"Old Kal had sent the boy to town after the pay-roll money and a can of paint. The can was smashed and its contents scattered everywhere. Young Nate was covered with it."

"How did Kalispel happen to find his son?"

"Nate's horse galloped to the ranch with an empty saddle. Kalispel mistrusted that something was wrong and went out along the trail with two of his men to investigate. Nate had breathed his last when they found him."

"You think robbery the motive?"

"Well, Nate had the pay-roll money in a canvas sack, and the sack couldn't be found."

"That's Kalispel's word for it," muttered Dexter.

"Sure," assented McKibben, "but I don't think he'd misstate the facts."

"You don't know what he would do. He's tricky and might wish to make it appear that robbery was the motive. Has there been an inquest?"

"Not yet."

"Then, I take it, you don't know who's guilty. What right has Kalispel to suspect Roy?"

"It's known that Roy and Nate quarreled over a poker game last Sunday night, and there was bad blood between them. Besides that, when Nate left Siwash, about nine last evening, Burnham was seen to follow him."

"That is all the evidence you have on which to base an accusation against Roy?" asked Dexter sarcastically.

"I'm not making any accusation, Jim," answered the sheriff; "it's Kalispel."

"The charge won't hold, and I'm not going to have Roy disgraced by being dragged off to Siwash and confronted with it.

"Robbery!" Dexter gave a harsh laugh. "I give Roy all the money he wants to spend. All he has to do is to ask for it. Kalispel is trying to saddle a double motive upon him—revenge, as well as robbery."

"They say—mind you, Jim, I'm not talking from any personal knowledge—that young Burnham has been cutting a wide swath in the gambling dens at Lamark during the last two weeks. He is in debt to several blacklegs there, and Kalispel argues that he wanted the money to pay these claims and didn't like to come to you for it."

Dexter's face reddened with indignation and anger.

"Kalispel argues!" he exclaimed. "He'll argue anything and do anything to injure me. I'll give him all the fight he wants along this line, however, and if he——"

A shout from Perry claimed the attention of both men at that moment. The deputy was standing over the open violin case, a small canvas bag in his hands marked plainly with the letters O. D. K.

"Here's Kalispel's money," cried Perry. "Blamed funny I didn't think of lookin' in this fiddle-box a long while ago."

Dexter leaped up in a daze, the whole fateful significance connected with the deputy's discovery flashing over him with demoralizing power.

A smothered groan was wrung from his lips and he staggered in Perry's direction with outstretched hands.

(To be continued.)

HIS CHRISTMAS ORCHID.

BY BURKE JENKINS.

The tale of an impecunious actor, his "ladye fayre," and a trick with the telephone.

ON the day before Christmas Ben Stockton was low in funds and spirits. Ben was an actor—"out of a job." It is true he hadn't been so long, having graced the shrine of matinée idolatry but the week before.

Just at this time, however, the impecunious state coincident with the cessation of his Thespian duties was particularly irksome. For, be it known, Ben had been paying most rigorous court to Bella Calvert.

Now, Bella had admirers; Bella was wealthy; Bella was worth while. So is it any wonder that Ben tore his hair a little on this Christmas eve when he thought of a fitting gift and the price thereof?

Ben glanced ruefully from his window at the early darkening street, snow-banked and slushy.

A florist's delivery auto, in gorgeous, rubber-tired glory, stopped before the house. A heavily gilded boy trotted up

with a box, the bell rang, and Ben heard a knock at his door.

Ben set the box upon the table, fished into his vest pocket for his knife, and cut the silk cord. There was revealed before his astonished gaze *the orchid.*

What orchid? Why, the only one spoken of that winter—the one that had drawn the crowds to the windows of "Hartley, the Florist," the one of fabulous value.

It was unmistakable, for Ben had seen it many a time and oft, and, besides, Ben knew Hartley himself, who had given him an inkling of its value.

Ben searched for the card. "From an admirer," in a feminine hand, was all that could be learned.

Any one who knows anything about matinée idols knows that Ben Stockton immediately ascribed the gift to the *genus* matinée girl, with the trifling difference, mayhap, that this one went the others a little better and hence argued herself a little more of a fool.

But Ben surely was tickled. Here was just what he'd been pining for.

He squinted at his dress shirt to see if it would stand another wearing, decided no, and began pulling away at the studs.

An hour or so thereafter he was ushered into the Calvert drawing-room and caught the swish of skirts on the stairs.

"Good-evening, Miss Calvert."

Ben rose hastily, but with due regard for the orchid box tucked carefully under his left arm.

"Good-evening, Mr. Stockton," answered Miss Calvert cordially as she shook hands. "How cold it must be outside."

"Quite so," assented Ben, whose hands were chill from nervousness.

"Miss Calvert, I trust that, in keeping with the season, you will allow me the honor." Ben passed over the box with Delsarte grace. None could bow better than Ben—in a play.

Miss Calvert smiled her pleasure and toiled at Ben's hard knot. Ben came to her relief with his blade.

Softly nestled in fern and tissue lay the orchid. Miss Calvert started at sight of the renowned flower.

"Yes, Miss Calvert, it is the Hartley orchid; but what could be more fitting than that the one flower should go to the one woman?"

"You overwhelm me, Mr. Stockton."

"Nonsense, Miss Calvert; it's but a poor tribute, and the only thing at all that has lifted it above the commonplace has been the difficulty I experienced in forcing Hartley to part with it. He finally consented, however, and so I now have my pleasure in the realization that the things that are dearly bought are those that are really worth while."

But Ben's pleasure was short-lived.

A chilliness was creeping into that well-heated drawing-room. Something was wrong.

Miss Calvert's eyebrows had lifted. Conversation lagged and topics grew choppy.

Ben grew uneasy, rose, and backed himself, hat to breast, out into the evening air, murmuring the while a lame well-wishing for the festal morrow.

Once on the street, his thoughts flew fast.

What was the matter? Why had the glow of genuine cordiality faded into repressive dampness?

Then came the awful realization!

Maybe—oh, ye gods—maybe she. Bella Calvert, was the one who had sent that orchid to him!

"All over," cried Ben. "Everlastingly gone; queered forever!"

He fingered madly for a match, started a cigarette, and wandered aimlessly in the abandon of despair. But the very completeness of the wreck of his hopes of Bella seemed, somehow or other, to lend some comfort.

Suddenly Ben stopped short.

His right fist rose and slapped its way into his left palm in an emphasis to the startling of a stray cur.

"It's worth a trial!" cried Ben. "I will do it."

Aimlessness gone, he made straight for Hartley, the florist.

Hartley himself was in.

Ben wheedled, Ben cajoled, Ben whined for the name of the one who had bought the orchid and sent it to him.

Ben must know for sure in order to carry out his scheme.

But Hartley was obdurate; Hartley had his instructions—the name was to be withheld.

Finally, however, upon Ben's calm assurance that it was a matter of life or death to him, Hartley yielded his duty to his friendship, and admitted it was Miss Bella Calvert who had bought the famous flower. His assistant had sold it to her that very day. Ben's thanks inundated the whole shop.

He leaped for the door and made for a telephone booth. Now, Ben, being an actor, was something of a ventriloquist also; so when Bella Calvert went to answer the 'phone it was a voice far from Ben Stockton's that queried:

"Hello! Is this Miss Calvert?"

"Yes," admitted Bella from her end of the wire.

"Well, this is Mr. Hartley, the florist. Miss Calvert, there has been a most unpardonable mistake made in connection with the orchid which you bought."

Bella straightened in interest and—was it hope?

"Well?" she asked.

"The clerk," went on Ben, with deliberation and without a quaver in the feigned voice, "the clerk who sold you the orchid was a new man, and I was out at the time of the transaction, as you know."

"Yes," assented Bella.

"Well, when I came in, the clerk went out to his luncheon without telling me he had sold the flower to you. Now, a gentleman came in shortly thereafter, bought it of me, and wouldn't even trust me to deliver it. This was probably due to the fact that, when it came to the actual sale of my famous orchid, which, you know, I have almost come to love, I hesitated somewhat to let him have it at all.

"He was probably afraid that I would repent after he had gone, and so made sure of it by taking it himself. Accordingly, I have been unable to rectify the error.

"All I can say, Miss Calvert, is to express my most profound regret, return the money, and trust you not to be too hard on me."

Bella Calvert breathed into the transmitter in contentment.

"Of course, I'm much disappointed," she said, "but I suppose it can't be helped. Don't return the money, but make a suitable selection of other flowers and send them to the same address to which I ordered the orchid to be forwarded."

NO WAY OUT.

BY BERTRAM LEBHAR.

A lone shark's threat, his victim's burst of temper, and the tragedy that supervened.

CHAPTER I.

A CONDITIONAL CONSENT.

"WHAT did he say?" asked Rosa eagerly, as Arthur Ladd entered the room.

"It's all right. It came out much better than I dared hope. He gave his consent—conditionally," answered Ladd, taking a seat beside her on the sofa.

"Conditionally? And what are the conditions, Arthur? Are they very hard to fulfil?" she inquired.

"Well, the conditions are that I cut out horseracing, gambling, and all sorts of high living. Your father is a pretty good sort, Rosa; I'm afraid I misjudged him. He wasn't particularly taken with my proposition, and told me with brutal frankness that he thought you were throwing yourself away on me and could do much better. However, he added, he wasn't the kind of father to thwart his only daughter's wishes, so he said if I could eradicate my bad habits, he'd be willing to consider me in the light of a prospective son-in-law."

"Dear old dad!" the girl exclaimed. "And of course you gave him your promise, Arthur?"

"I most certainly did. I'll never look

upon cards or go down to the track again, Rosa, I promise you that. I'm going to turn over a new leaf this very day and work hard to win fame and fortune, in order that I may lay them both at your pretty little feet."

"You dear boy! I know you'll succeed, Arthur. You can accomplish anything you want to, if you put your mind to it. To think that you should have won over my obstinate old father! I candidly confess I never thought you would be able to manage it. Tell me everything that occurred. If only you could have heard how my poor heart was beating while you were going through the ordeal."

"You poor little faint-heart. Well, I don't mind confessing that I felt very shaky myself, first of all. You see, every time I have met your father he has impressed me as being such a stern and fearsome old chap. Winning your consent was one thing and winning his was another, I fully realized that. Oh, yes, I'll candidly admit it was with fear and trembling that I knocked at his library door."

"And what happened?"

"Why, he called 'Come in,' and I went in. He was sitting in a rocking-chair, dressed in a formidable looking dressing-gown, smoking his pipe, reading the morning paper and with his feet resting comfortably on a red hassock. He frowned as I entered. He was a most awe-inspiring sight."

"I can picture him. But go on. Tell me every detail."

"Well, I summoned up all my courage and said 'Good-evening, Mr. Adrian.' He answered in chilly fashion, 'Good-evening, sir. Take a seat. What can I do for you?' The atmosphere just then seemed to grow so cold that I was sorry I hadn't brought my overcoat along.

"I took the seat he indicated, and sat there looking at him like a blithering idiot, not knowing how to begin."

"How did you finally manage it?"

"I think I remarked something about its being a fine day out, and he replied that he'd known better days. Then I sat looking at him again for some minutes trying to get my tongue to form another sentence. Finally he said, fixing his sharp eyes full on me: 'What is it you want, young man?'"

"And what did you say?" asked the girl eagerly.

"I got all my nerve together and answered, 'I want Rosa, sir, if you've no objections.'"

"Oh, how brave and clever of you, Arthur. And what did he say to that?"

"What did he say! Why, he just jumped clean out of his chair and came over to where I sat and yelled: 'You want what, you audacious young jackanapes? Just say that over again.'

"'I want Rosa,' I repeated as boldly as I could.

"'How dare you, sir!' he burst out, spluttering with rage.

"'You told me to say it over again, sir,' I replied meekly.

"'You have the impudence to come here and tell me that you want my daughter. Maybe next you'll be telling me, sir, that my daughter wants you,' he yelled.

"'I have her word for it that she does, sir,' I answered. 'If she hadn't assured me of that fact I would not have come to you.' By this time I had recovered my self-possession again."

"You brave boy!" said the girl admiringly.

"'And so my daughter has gone and made a fool of herself,' he said, and it was then he told me that you were throwing yourself away, and that he had hoped you would have done much better."

"Foolish old dad! And what did you tell him to that?"

"I told him that his daughter might possibly have found somebody who was more worthy of her, but not one who loved her more truly."

"Dear Arthur! Did he shake hands with you and thank you for that pretty speech?"

"He did no such thing. He said 'Fiddlesticks,' and turned his back to me. After a time he snapped out: 'D'ye think you can earn enough to support two, young man?'

"I replied that I thought I could; that you had told me you would be satisfied with a few hardships at first, and

that while at present I was only an architect's draftsman, my prospects of advancement in the profession were good. And then, what do you think he said?"

"I can't imagine."

"He snapped out suddenly: 'You're a gambler. My daughter can't marry a gambler.'

"'I'm not a gambler,' I declared stoutly.

"'Yes, you are,' said he. 'I noticed it the first time you ate dinner with us. I asked you to pass me the pepper. You took the shaker, pressed your thumb and second finger gently but firmly around the bottom, laid your finger as firmly on the top, set it firmly down in front of me, and then gave it a little push toward me, exactly the way practised hands pass a pile of poker chips. You can't fool me, my boy; I'm too observant. When a young man gets the habit as bad as that, he must be a confirmed card player.'"

"Isn't he clever to have noticed as closely as that?"

"Oh, he's wise all right. Then he snapped out, 'I suppose you play the races, too.'

"'A little, sir,' I was forced to admit.

"'Well, you'll have to cut gambling out, young man, if you want to marry my daughter. Do you understand that?' he demanded.

"Of course I promised. 'Then you give us your consent, sir?' I added hopefully.

"'I suppose I'll have to,' he growled. 'I'm not the kind of father to thwart the wishes of his only daughter. If she wants you, I suppose she's got to have you. Perhaps you've got better stuff in you than I think. I'll talk to her later, and if she's really made up her mind to take you, I suppose I'll have to agree. Don't be in any hurry about getting married though. I'll put you on probation for at least a year. If you don't touch a card or play the horses during that time and live within your means, which I'm much afraid you haven't been doing, from what I know of you, I may consent to a marriage by then, provided you're earning enough to support a wife.'

"'And may we consider ourselves engaged during that time?' I asked joyfully.

"'I suppose so,' he growled; 'if Rosa wishes it. Not a public engagement though, mind you.'"

"Dear old dad. Isn't he the best father a girl ever had?" exclaimed the girl enthusiastically.

"He's a good old chap, and he's giving me more than I deserve. I know that, Rosa."

Just how she answered him is none of the reader's business. Neither is anything of what they said to each other during the next hour or so.

At the end of that time, Arthur Ladd, the happiest young man in all the world, rose to depart.

He took her little, white hand in his, and, looking at it admiringly, he said:

"To-morrow evening, little girl, there's one more detail, which I'll attend to. I'll put a ring on that third finger—a ring of such luster and beauty that it will make you envied by all your friends."

"You dear boy!" purred the delighted girl. "But you must not be too extravagant, Arthur."

"Don't you worry. I've got a little money saved for just that very purpose. What kind of a ring shall it be?"

"I'll leave it to you," answered Rosa wisely.

"How about that ring you noticed in the jewelry store window the other day? Don't you remember? Three large diamonds set one under the other. How would that suit you?"

"It was beautiful, wasn't it, Arthur? But it must have been quite expensive. Could you afford as much as that?"

"Don't you worry about that, little girl. I'll get you that very ring before another day has passed. It'll look fine on that pretty finger of yours, too. Let's take the measurements."

"You're sure you can afford to buy that ring?" the girl asked him again as he was leaving. "They were large diamonds, Arthur, and it must cost a whole lot of money. Remember, we are engaged now, and I have the right to speak plainly to you about such things."

"Don't you worry about it," repeated

the young man. "I won't have to pawn my watch, I assure you."

But when he had left her and was on his way to his boarding-house he said to himself: "I wonder how much that ring is going to cost! Two hundred dollars represents every cent I have in the world. By pawning my watch, I might be able to realize fifty bones more, but that ring costs every cent of four hundred dollars, if not more. Well, Rosa has got to have it, and that's all there is to it. God bless her! She deserves the finest ring that money can buy."

From this soliloquy it may be observed that reckless extravagance was one of Arthur Ladd's besetting sins. He was generous to a fault, and in the opinion of his friends as honest a fellow as ever lived, but his hardest job was not to spend more money than he had.

This may sound paradoxical; but by it is meant that Arthur was continually taking upon himself financial obligations that there was no immediate prospects of his being able to meet. "Trust to luck" was his motto.

Up to the present, luck had compensated him for his faith by leading him out of all sorts of apparently hopeless difficulties.

Thus, when he had turned the corner from the house of his affianced, and was walking along swinging his cane and trying to puzzle out how he was going to "raise the dough" (as he termed it) to buy that ring, whom should he come across but Pete Murray, a jockey friend of his.

"Hello, Pete!" cried Arthur heartily. "What's doing?"

"Going to the races to-morrow?" asked the jockey.

"Nope," said the other, remembering his recent interview with Rosa's father.

"I've got a good thing," suggested the jockey carelessly.

"I've quit playing the races, Pete," said Arthur. "I'm going to get married to the finest girl in the world; so I've got to cut out the ponies."

"Better take this tip though, Artie. It's a good one. I'm playing it myself for all I'm worth. I got the tip direct from the owner. A ten-to-one shot, at least."

"A ten-to-one shot!" gasped the other, his interest aroused despite himself. "What is it, Pete."

"Alexis in the handicap to-morrow. It's a fixed race, and he's bound to win. I've got a thousand on him. You shouldn't miss it, Artie."

"Are you sure it's a cinch?"

"Positive. I tell you I got the tip from the owner himself. Don't be a fool. Remember the odds will be at least ten-to-one."

"Two hundred dollars at ten-to-one would bring me in two thousand dollars. That would buy that ring several times over and give me a little capital besides," mused Arthur. "I need some money. I need new clothes and things, and I've got to take Rosa out a whole lot now we're formally engaged. Pete says it's a sure thing, and he has never failed me before. It's too tempting an opportunity to let go by. This shall be the last time though. Nobody will ever know it. By gad, I'll do it!"

CHAPTER II.

A WAY OUT.

By the time Ladd reached his room in Mrs. Jarvis' select boarding-house, his mind was fully made up.

"I promised Rosa that I would never go to the track again," he said to himself, "and I won't; I'll keep that promise even if it hurts. I'll go to a pool-room to-morrow and lay that two hundred on Alexis. I don't think we said anything about pool-rooms.

"True enough, I promised her old man that I'd cut out gambling altogether; but then this won't be gambling, it'll be collecting money. I can't lose if it's a fixed race, and Pete Murray has always been absolutely reliable. After to-morrow, though, I'll cut out pool-rooms and all sorts of gambling. I positively will. Ev[illegible] the surest tip sha'n't tempt me again. I'll settle down to a life of sober, hard work. Rosa is well worth it."

With these reflections he went comfortably to sleep and slumbered that night as sound as a bell.

Next morning when he left the boarding-house to go down to the office of

Skinner & Wheeler, where he was employed, his heart was light and his pocket was heavier by a roll of bills representing a total value of two hundred dollars.

When he entered the office, he was approached separately by the managing clerk, his two fellow-draftsmen, and the office boy.

"Good-morning, Mr. Ladd," said each in turn. "Got anything good for the handicap?"

For Arthur had on several occasions given out good tips on the races, and this was the day of the great event of the season.

"Yes," replied Arthur to each. "Play Alexis as hard as you like. He's bound to win. I'd advise you to get in good. It's your opportunity."

Arthur was never the fellow to keep a good thing to himself.

That afternoon he hurried to a certain near-by pool-room where he was well known and inquired the odds on Alexis.

"Ten to one," was the reply.

"Good," thought Arthur, and for a full two minutes went through a mental struggle as to how he should lay out his two hundred.

If he placed the whole sum on Alexis to win he could earn two thousand dollars. If he split his bet and laid fifty on Alexis to win and one hundred and fifty on Alexis "to show" (i. e., to come in first, second, or third) he stood a chance of winning one thousand one hundred dollars if Alexis came in first, and five hundred and fifty dollars if the horse came in second.

Prudence suggested the latter course. Under ordinary circumstances Arthur would have been disposed to throw discretion to the winds on such a sure tip as this, but these were far from being ordinary circumstances, and he split the bet.

"I'll probably do myself out of nine hundred dollars by this piece of cowardice," he told himself with a sigh. "The horse is bound to come in first. However, I suppose, that this being a matter in which Rosa is concerned, it is right to be careful."

The news that the great race had started flashed over the wire. Arthur stood among the excited throng in the pool-room, nervously chewing on the end of a big cigar.

Of course Alexis would win, or at least show—but if he didn't? Ladd shuddered at the thought.

Bah, such fears were groundless. Pete Murray's tips were always reliable. The telegraph instrument was already ticking out that Alexis was in the lead. It was a cinch!

What a fool he had been not to place his bet straight, and thus win two thousand dollars instead of a paltry eleven hundred. Rosa should have her ring, and she would never know how he had got the money to pay for it. That must be kept a secret, and he would never play the races again.

Surely, though, it would have been criminal not to take advantage of this tip. It would have been throwing away money.

See, the telegraph instrument was already ticking out the finishing of the race, and the man at the key was opening his mouth to shout out that Alexis had won.

"Tack-tack-tack," went the instrument, and the operator read out:

"Finish of the handicap, Pioneer, first; Portcullis, second; Rough Diamond, third."

Arthur listened to the words with a face white as death.

"Pioneer, first; Portcullis, second; Rough Diamond, third!" he gasped. "Where's Alexis?"

"I don't know yet," said the man coldly. "He isn't mentioned."

Dazed and trembling, Arthur staggered from the pool-room. Good heavens! Could it be possible? He had been "stung" by one of Pete Murray's tips! But there must be some mistake. He wouldn't believe it until he saw it confirmed in the sporting edition of the evening papers.

Ordinarily he was wont to bear his losses stoically; but, as has been said, this was not an ordinary occasion. Every cent of that two hundred dollars he had gambled away.

To-morrow he had to buy that ring. How was he going to do it? He hadn't

enough money to purchase Rosa a package of hairpins.

He staggered through the streets and into the office of Skinner & Wheeler to be confronted by an excited group, consisting of the managing clerk, the two draftsmen, and the office boy.

"You're a fine tipster, you are," began the managing clerk angrily. "So Alexis was your sure thing, was he? I've lost twenty dollars by that sure thing."

"I've lost ten dollars," growled one of the draftsmen.

"I've lost five," cried the other.

"I've lost fifty cents," whimpered the office boy.

"'Get in good,' you advised us," snorted the managing clerk. "Oh, yes, we got in good, all right, confound you and your tips. You ought to be hanged, Ladd."

"For heaven's sake, don't," groaned Arthur, sinking wearily into his chair. "Cut out that howling over a few piker bets. I gave you what I thought was a straight tip. How could I tell that what I considered was my best source of information would go back on me? Heavens, I've been stung much harder than any of you! I've lost every cent I have in the world, and I'm afraid I've lost the girl I was going to marry besides."

There was almost a sob in his voice as he uttered the words.

"Gad!" exclaimed the managing clerk in surprise. "Did it hit you as hard as that, Ladd? I'm sorry. Don't take on about it, old man. Better luck next time."

As has been intimated, Arthur Ladd was not of a pessimistic nature. He sat at his desk for two hours brooding over his misfortune and thinking what he would do to Pete Murray if he should come across him, and how much real pleasure it would give him to do it.

A newsboy came in with the sporting editions of the evening papers, and Arthur took one.

Yes, the pool-room man had indeed spoken the truth. Alexis had not even been in the showing. The whole front page of the paper was devoted to the story of the great race.

It described Pioneer's work as a truly splendid performance. Was not Alexis mentioned in the story at all? Oh, yes. See, here was a whole line about him.

Arthur Ladd read the line and laughed aloud; he couldn't help laughing. That line of type appealed so strongly to his sense of humor.

The managing clerk looked at him in surprise.

"What's the joke?" he growled. "You've been brooding these two hours, and now you're laughing."

"I was laughing to read that Alexis came in last. That strikes me as being so funny. Yesterday somebody warned me against playing the races, and called me a gambler. Ha, ha, ha! I'm not a gambler, I'm a lunatic. Somebody ought to apply for a warrant and commit me to an asylum."

There was only the faintest suggestion of bitterness in his laugh. Ladd's buoyant spirits were rapidly asserting themselves again.

When, a second later, he remembered that that very night he must go to Rosa without the diamond ring he had promised her—without any betrothal ring at all, in fact—the laugh froze on his lips.

"Good heavens," he groaned, "what am I going to do? I've got to get that ring somehow, that's certain."

Even as he said the words, his eyes fell upon an advertisement in the evening paper before him. He read eagerly:

DIAMONDS—Easy terms. Jewelry of all kinds. Strictest privacy guaranteed. Best bargains in the city. Jacob Meyer, 915 Nassau Street.

"The very thing!" he ejaculated. "What a fool I was not to think of that before. The instalment plan, of course. So much down and so much a week. Rosa shall have her ring, after all. 'Strictest privacy guaranteed.' She will never know. I'll go around and see Mr. Jacob Meyer right away."

On his way to 915 Nassau Street, he stepped into a store which bore the sign of the three brass balls, and exchanged his gold watch for fifty dollars and a ticket.

A quarter of an hour later he was entering the office of Mr. Jacob Meyer.

The jeweler's offices were on the fourth floor of an office building. A sign on the door read:

JACOB MEYER.
LOANS AND DIAMONDS.

"Loans, too, eh," mused Arthur Ladd. "You're really a most accommodating gentleman, Mr. Jacob Meyer. If you can't suit me with your stock of diamonds, I can borrow some money from you. Things seem to be coming my way."

He turned the handle and walked in. A clerk sat on a high stool industriously working at a big ledger.

"Mr. Meyer in?" asked Arthur pleasantly.

"Speak a little louder," requested the clerk, a gray haired old man. "I'm a little deaf."

"Mr. Meyer in?" shouted Arthur.

At his words a stout, middle-aged man with a red face and sharp, penetrating black eyes, opened the green baize door marked "Private," which led to a second room.

"You want to see me, eh?" he asked.

"You are Mr. Meyer?" inquired Arthur.

"Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

"I want to transact a little business."

"Then please step into my private office. We shall be quite alone there. All business here is transacted on an absolutely confidential basis."

Arthur followed him through the green baize door and sat down in the chair toward which the jeweler politely motioned.

"Now you can speak freely, my dear young friend," said Mr. Meyer in a confidence-inspiring whisper. "What is it? Diamonds or cash?"

"Diamonds," replied Arthur; "if you have what I want in stock."

As he spoke he took a hurried inventory of the private office.

A pair of jeweler's scales stood under a glass case on a table near the window. Against the wall was a big safe. There was no sign of any jewelry in the room.

"What diamonds do you wish, my dear friend?" asked Mr. Meyer almost affectionately.

"I want to get a ring. Three large stones set perpendicularly. Have you such a setting?"

"My dear sir, you are in luck. You should congratulate yourself that you came to me. I have the very ring you describe. I got it in trade only to-day. Three beautiful one carat stones, set just as you describe. Generally I sell the loose stones and have them set to order. This ring, however, is complete. Isn't it most fortunate? I will make a special price to you, my dear friend, of five hundred dollars. You pay cash? Yes?"

"Not exactly," replied Arthur smoothly. "I happen to be a little pressed for ready cash just at present. I guess I'll avail myself of the easy terms you offer in your advertisement."

"Oh, you want credit?" said the jeweler, with just a shade of disappointment in his tone. "Very well, my dear sir, I can accommodate you, I think. Now, how much would you be willing to pay down?"

"Fifty dollars," answered Arthur.

"Fifty dollars!" cried the jeweler. "My dear sir! You must be crazy. Fifty dollars on a five hundred dollar purchase! One hundred and fifty dollars is the very lowest I would take for an initial payment. One hundred and fifty dollars down and the balance at ten dollars a week."

"Then the deal is off," said Arthur moodily. "I haven't got more than fifty dollars ready cash."

"Then why not take a cheaper ring?" suggested the jeweler readily. "I could let you have a fine single stone for two hundred dollars."

"No, I've got to have the three stones set the way I've mentioned. I'm afraid there's nothing doing, Mr. Meyer."

Arthur rose to go.

"Wait a minute; don't be in such a hurry. You look like an honest young man, and I should like to do business with you. Where are you employed?"

Arthur told him.

"Humph! An architect's draftsman, eh? How much salary do you get a week?"

"Thirty dollars."

"Thirty. Very good. How long have you held your present position, young man?"

"Two years; but say, Mr. Meyer, aren't you getting deucedly personal?"

"You mustn't look at it that way, my dear friend. I am merely trying to find out just how good a risk you are. Business is business, you know, even between friends like us. How long do you intend to stay in your present position?"

"I have no intention of changing at present."

"And you are going to get married. Who is the young lady, may I ask?"

"Confound you!" cried Arthur, jumping to his feet. "This is going a little too far. What business is it of yours——"

"Not so fast, my dear young sir. There is really no necessity to get angry. You buy this ring for the young lady, of course. It is customary in the jewelry instalment business for us to find out where the articles purchased go. We've got to be very careful, you see. Of course it's all strictly in confidence."

"You won't make any inquiries of the lady or her family, or let her know in any way that I buy the ring on easy terms?" said Arthur, looking at the jeweler searchingly.

"Not a syllable. It is simply for my private information. If you intend to give the ring to a reliable party I think I will take a chance on you and let you have it at fifty dollars down and your note for the balance in weekly payments of ten dollars. I like your looks, my friend. Now, who is the young lady?"

"Miss Adrian—daughter of Robert Adrian, the silk merchant," replied Arthur sullenly.

"You don't tell me! Young man, you are in luck. Allow me to congratulate you. I have heard of Mr. Adrian. He's a wealthy man."

"Mind you, he mustn't hear about this," said Arthur, beginning to feel sorry already that he had taken this jeweler so far into his confidence.

"Not a word, my dear sir. Haven't I told you that all business transacted here is on a confidential basis? By the way, you want to see the ring, of course."

He went to the large safe against the wall, opened it, and took therefrom an envelope, carefully locking the safe again before he brought the ring over to where Arthur sat.

"Here it is. Isn't it a beauty?"

He handed the ring to Arthur, who examined it eagerly.

It certainly was a magnificent piece of jewelry. The three large diamonds glittered dazzlingly. They were beautiful white stones. It looked the exact counterpart of the ring Rosa had admired in the store window.

Arthur handled it lovingly.

"Very well," he exclaimed quickly. "I'll take this ring, Mr. Meyer. Here's the fifty dollars down."

He handed the jeweler the bills and rose to depart, placing the ring in his leather wallet.

"Not so fast, my friend," said the jeweler sharply. "You cannot take the ring with you now."

He had one finger on a little ivory button as he spoke, as though he feared Arthur intended to carry off the ring by force.

"Can't take it now? Why not?" asked Arthur in dismay.

"Because I have to make inquiries. My! my! what a very unbusiness-like young man you are. How do I know that the story you tell is all right? I must investigate your references. You will please fill out this application form, answering all the questions. It is all strictly confidential, you know.

"You can have the ring to-morrow if all is satisfactory. Here is your fifty dollars back until then."

"But I promised the lady to bring the ring to-night," said Arthur moodily.

"You just tell her it had to be altered so as to fit her finger. Tell her it will be finished to-morrow. It will be all right, my dear friend."

"Very well. I'll be here to-morrow afternoon. You'll find my references all right. And you give me your word that not a soul shall know of this transaction?"

"I give you my solemn word," answered the jeweler.

"That is to say," he added to himself, with a sly smile after Arthur had left the office, "nobody shall know of this transaction while you continue to make your payments promptly, Mr.

Arthur Ladd; but if you should suddenly decide to stop paying before your indebtedness is settled, or to try any funny business with me, as other young men like you have done before now—well, I think we shall know how to apply the screws."

CHAPTER III.

A TRAGEDY.

"MR. LADD," said Mrs. Jarvis sharply, "would you have the goodness to step in here a minute, please. I desire to talk with you."

"Certainly," replied Arthur Ladd, following his landlady into the parlor. "Anything I can do for you, Mrs. Jarvis, will delight me greatly."

"Then you can pay me your board bill for the past three weeks. That would delight me greatly, too, Mr. Ladd. I am getting sick and tired of being put off and put off, I can tell you. You are the only gentleman of all my boarders who is behind in his payments, and I do not intend to stand for it any longer. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"My dear Mrs. Jarvis," expostulated Arthur Ladd gently.

"'My dear Mrs. Jarvis' nothing. Don't you 'my dear Mrs. Jarvis' me. Pay me the thirty dollars you owe, like a gentleman, and then we can talk differently to each other."

"Next week, my dear Mrs. Jarvis, I hope to——"

"Next week nothing, young man. My mind is fully made up. Either you pay me the money you owe, which you can't deny, or out you go this very day."

"You wouldn't do anything like that, Mrs. Jarvis," said her boarder persuasively. "I've lived here so long that I've come to look upon you as a mother."

"Well, you wouldn't rob your mother, would you?" retorted the landlady briskly.

"Rob, Mrs. Jarvis! Don't talk about robbing. I'll pay you every cent I owe you. Honestly I will. Fact is, I'm a little pressed for money just now."

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself, young man, that's all; and you earning a nice comfortable salary, too. I know you're courting a young lady, for I've seen the letters you receive every day in a female hand; but that isn't any excuse for getting into debt. Look at Mr. Perriam, the reporter on the *Star*, who rooms on the same floor with you. He's never behind in his payments, and he's courting a girl, too."

"Perriam courting a girl!" cried Arthur with great interest. "You don't mean that, Mrs. Jarvis. How do you know?"

"How do I know?" replied the boarding-house lady proudly, her delight for gossip for the nonce overcoming her desire for money. "I want you to understand, Mr. Ladd, that I have a pair of eyes in my head. Don't I see every day how Mr. Perriam is getting more and more lovesick? Haven't I seen the picture of the girl on the mantel-shelf in his room? Didn't I happen to enter the room the other day without knocking, and didn't I come across Mr. Perriam sitting in a rocker, with this girl's picture in his lap, staring at it and sighing as only a man in love can do?

"However, Mr. Ladd, that isn't here nor there. To return to the matter of the board-bill. If you can't pay all, you must pay part. Otherwise, out you will have to go. I should hate to do it, for I will say that I like you, but I can't be imposed upon any longer. Too much is too much."

"I'll give you five dollars now. It's all I have, Mrs. Jarvis," said Arthur desperately. "I expect to be able to pay you the rest in a little while."

"All right. It isn't much, but it's better than nothing. Give me the five and I'll give you a little more time to settle the rest. As I said before, I would hate to see you go."

She examined closely the five dollar bill which Arthur handed to her, holding it up to the light to see that the silk threads were there.

"Thank goodness, *she's* settled, for a little while at least," muttered Arthur with a sigh as he climbed up-stairs to his room. "It took my last five dollars to do it though. I guess that confounded jeweler, Meyer, won't be so easy

to deal with. I've received three notices from him already during the last three weeks, and this last one is peremptory. I wonder what he'll do? Guess I'll have to go and see him at his office to-day as he demands. I'm afraid he'll make trouble for me before long.

"If only I could borrow a little money to help me out of all this trouble. I wonder if Perriam—by Jove, I've a mind to ask him! Mrs. Jarvis said he was never behind in his payments. Perhaps he has money. He and I haven't got along well together lately. For some reason or other he seems sore on me. Still, it may be my imagination. At any rate, any port in a storm. I guess I'll tackle him."

He knocked on Perriam's door. There was no answer. "I suppose he's gone out," mused Ladd. "I'll leave a note in his room, making a polite 'touch' and asking him to leave the money in an envelope in my room if he can spare it."

With this intention he turned the handle of Perriam's door, which was never locked, and walked in.

The first thing he noticed upon entering was the photograph of a girl on the shelf.

"Ah," mused Ladd with a smile, "this must be the lady Mrs. Jarvis spoke of. I wonder if she's pretty."

Out of mere curiosity he walked over to the picture. As he gazed at it at close range he uttered an exclamation of great surprise.

"Great heavens," he gasped, "if it isn't Rosa—my Rosa!"

He turned and fled from Perriam's room with the guilty conscience of a man who had opened another man's letter.

"Perriam in love with Rosa and I never guessed it!" he murmured when he had gained his own room. "Rosa told me something once about throwing down another man; but I never guessed for a minute that Perriam was that other man, and she didn't mention the fellow's name. Good heavens, how extraordinary! And he still loves her, poor chap!

"No wonder he's been sore on me lately. I wonder if he's heard about our engagement? Well, I certainly can't try to borrow any money of him under the circumstances. I'll have to face Meyer dead broke and trust to luck, that's all."

Taking his hat and the cane he always carried, Arthur went down-town to call on the jeweler. To term it a voluntary call would not be exactly accurate.

He had received that morning from the jeweler a letter which informed him that he was three weeks behind in his payments of instalments on the ring, and he, Jacob Meyer, did not propose to wait any longer.

Mr. Ladd must visit his (Mr. Meyer's) office that day, and be prepared to settle his indebtedness to date, otherwise Mr. Meyer would be regretfully compelled to take other steps to collect his money.

The words "other steps" were underscored in red ink. Arthur Ladd quakingly wondered what those other steps would be.

Until three weeks previously, the ring transaction had progressed splendidly. Rosa had been delighted when Arthur had placed the flashing gems upon her finger, and had said it was the most beautiful engagement ring she had ever seen.

She had never suspected for a minute that it wasn't all paid for, and had chided Arthur for spending so much money on her. Arthur had started in to pay his ten dollars, weekly instalments, with prompt regularity. Every week he went up to Mr. Meyer's office and was affably received.

At length, however, the financial strain began to tell. Being engaged to a girl was expensive, even though Rosa realized that he wasn't earning a big salary and declared herself contented with the simplest entertainments.

Arthur began to fall behind in his payments, and when he went to the jeweler's office to make excuses, Mr. Meyer's greeting was not pleasant.

Arthur hadn't been near the place now for three weeks, and he felt uncomfortable when he thought of the threatening tone of the jeweler's last letter.

However, the music had to be faced, so Arthur, trusting to luck to find a

way out as usual, walked into the jeweler's office with a bold front.

The same gray-haired clerk he had encountered the first time was seated at his desk working busily at his books. The green baize door which led to Meyer's private office was closed.

"Mr. Meyer in?" yelled Arthur, remembering the man's infirmity.

"Yes, sir," answered the clerk, "he's in his private office."

"Tell him that Mr. Ladd wants to see him," yelled Arthur in the man's ear.

"Go and knock on that door," said the clerk.

Arthur went to the green baize door and knocked for admittance.

"Come in," cried the voice of the jeweler, and Arthur turned the handle and entered, cane in hand.

"Ah, Mr. Ladd!" said Meyer coldly, "I hope you have come to settle your indebtedness."

"Not exactly, I am ashamed to say, Mr. Meyer," answered Arthur humbly. "I regret that I find myself a little short of cash just now. In a week or so I hope to be all right again, and then I will pay you every cent I owe, and keep on paying my instalments regularly."

The jeweler rose from his seat, came over to where Arthur stood, and shook his fist in the young man's face.

"You swindler!" he cried. "You common thief! That kind of talk won't do, do you understand me? You pay every cent of the thirty dollars before this office closes to-night or you take the consequences."

"But I tell you I haven't any money," expostulated Arthur.

"You draw a salary every week," said the jeweler sternly. "What do you do with it?"

"I hardly make enough to support me," answered Arthur bitterly. "I was a fool to enter into this contract with you."

"Would to God that you hadn't," said the jeweler with equal bitterness. "I can see myself losing nearly five hundred dollars through being weak enough to transact business with you. But it shall not be, I warn you. Nobody shall make a fool of Jacob Meyer. You shall pay me every cent you owe me; not only the overdue thirty dollars, but every cent that is coming to me on the future instalments; you shall pay cash down to me now. You have broken your agreement, and I will not transact business with you any longer on a credit basis. You must pay me in cash now for all your indebtedness."

"But I tell you I haven't any money," said Arthur impatiently.

"Then borrow it from your father-in-law to be—Mr. Adrian; he'll loan it to you," hissed the jeweler.

"Borrow from Rosa's father! I daren't," answered Arthur, shaking his head. "He has an aversion to young men who borrow money. No, you'll have to suggest something else, Mr. Meyer."

"I'll suggest nothing. You must find a way, yourself. I'd attach your salary, only how do I know how long you are going to hold that job of yours with your wild habits. You'll pay me every cent you owe me by five o'clock to-night, or——"

"Or what?" put in Arthur.

"Or Miss Rosa Adrian will learn by to-morrow morning that the ring she wears on her little, white finger is stolen property, and that the man who gave it to her and to whom she is betrothed is a thief," finished the jeweler.

"You infernal scoundrel!" cried Arthur furiously. "Did you not promise that you would keep secret——"

"You promised, also, that you would pay me my ten dollars a week," snapped Meyer. "You haven't kept your promise, you cannot expect any more consideration from me. Pay me the money you owe me or I myself will visit your pretty sweetheart to-morrow morning and tear the ring by force, if necessary, from her finger. Of course, Mr. Adrian, your future father-in-law, will be delighted to learn what a frugal young man his daughter is going to marry. It will give him a whole lot of pleasure to realize that he will have a thief for a son-in-law."

He did not have a chance to say any more, for Arthur Ladd, maddened beyond all endurance, sprang at him and seized him by the throat.

There was a scuffle. Even the half

deaf clerk in the outer office heard the sounds of voices raised in anger and the noise of furniture overturning.

He jumped down from his high stool, and, realizing dazedly that all was not right, was about to run in to see if his master needed assistance, when the green baize door burst open and Arthur Ladd came rushing out.

"Look to your master," he yelled to the clerk as he ran for the door of the outer office. "I think I've hurt him."

The gray-headed clerk gazed at him dazedly, evidently trying to decide whether to seize the escaping man or to run to the assistance of his master.

By the time he had made up his mind, Arthur was out of the office and down the stone stairs which led to the street.

The clerk ran hastily into the private office, uttering a yell of horror at the sight which confronted him.

The jeweler lay on his back, extended stiff upon the carpeted floor, his arms outstretched above his head, his glazed eyes looking fixedly up to the ceiling.

In his now lifeless body, evidently penetrating clear through the heart, the keen blade of a sword cane had been driven, the bamboo handle still sticking out at right angles from the rigid form and the blood from the wound dying the thick carpet a fearful red.

"Dead!" shuddered the gray-haired clerk. "Quite dead! Good God, how horrible! That young man has killed him. This cane is the cane I saw him bring into this room only ten minutes ago. My poor master. He was a hard man, but I hate to see him go like this. The murderer must be caught!"

Panic-stricken, he rushed outside into the corridor to give the alarm.

CHAPTER IV.

WORSE STILL.

PERRIAM entered the editorial rooms of the *Star* and sauntered leisurely toward the city editor's desk. Perriam was thirty years of age, but looked considerably older. His hair was already faintly tinged with gray and his features habitually wore a blasé expression, naturally to be expected, perhaps, in the face of a man who in the compass of his few years had acquired more knowledge of the world than most men possess at the end of a ripe old age.

In manner, Perriam was cold and distant. His associate workers were wont to say, admiringly, that they had never seen him excited, and didn't believe it was possible for him to become so, even under the most trying circumstances.

"He's as cold as an icicle, as sharp as a ferret, and the best police reporter in the business," was the way his fellow reporters described him.

"Perriam," said the city editor, looking up from his desk as the reporter approached, "you've come in just in time. Here's a pretty good bulletin from police headquarters. There's been some kind of a murder at 915 Nassau Street. It's an office building, and it looks like a good story. Rush right around there."

"All right," replied Perriam, and without another word left the room.

The city editor watched his tall figure admiringly as it disappeared through the doorway.

"If all reporters were like him," he said to himself, "life would be worth living. Never stops to ask any fool questions—grasps a thing right off, and is out on the story before the words are scarcely out of your mouth. Now, lots of reporters I know would be standing here for the next five minutes, asking what kind of an office building 915 Nassau Street is—whether it's a man or a woman who had been killed, etc. Bet he'll bring back a good story, too."

Perriam walked to the scene of the murder at a rapid stride. It was only a few blocks distant, so walking was the quickest means of getting there. When he arrived, he found an ambulance just driving away.

Inquiry of the elevator man elicited the information that Mr. Meyer, a jeweler on the fourth floor, had been murdered.

"The police are up there now," the man told him. "So is the body. The doctor wouldn't take it."

Perriam stepped into the elevator and was whizzed up to the fourth floor.

The glass door marked "Jacob Meyer, Loans and Diamonds," was ajar, and the reporter heard the hum of voices inside the office.

Perriam entered. Nobody was in the outer room, so he pushed open the green baize door which led to the private office beyond.

Here he found a uniformed policeman, the gray-haired clerk, several reporters, and a tall, heavy-set man with a square jaw. On the carpeted floor lay the body of the dead jeweler.

Perriam recognized the man with the square jaw as Detective Sergeant Connaughton, who had the reputation of being one of the best men in the detective bureau.

"Hello, Perriam," said Connaughton, who had met the reporter on several previous cases. "This looks like a pretty good case for you fellows."

"What is it?" asked Perriam quietly.

"A murder. Stabbed clean through the heart after a scuffle. Must have died instantly, according to the ambulance doctor."

"Have you got the murderer?" inquired Perriam.

"No; but we know who he is, and we will have him in a little while. We've got a clear case against him, too. He is a young man— a customer of this dead man. Was buying some diamonds on the instalment plan, and was three weeks behind on his payments, according to this half-deaf clerk.

"Meyer, the dead man, wrote to him yesterday, threatening to make trouble if he didn't pay up. The young man came to the office about fifteen minutes before the murder and was closeted with the jeweler.

"The two fell to quarreling. This old clerk, half deaf as he is, heard them from the outer office, they made such a racket.

"I reckon the old man grew threatening, and the young fellow lost his temper. At any rate, a few minutes afterward the visitor burst out of the private office and took to the street on a run, yelling to the clerk, 'Look to your master; I've done for him.' Oh, it's a clear case, all right."

"Looks like it. What did he kill him with?"

"A long-bladed sword-cane. We found it sticking in the body when we arrived."

"And you say he died instantly?"

"Yes, according to the ambulance surgeon; the blade penetrated clear through the heart."

"I see. Then there is no mystery about the case?"

"None whatever. It's all as clear as day. That young man will go to the chair for this. He can't escape it."

"Good. It certainly looks like a clear case, all right. By the way, what's the murderer's name?"

"Arthur Ladd. Why do you start? Know him?" asked the detective with interest.

"I know a young chap by that name I don't know if it's the same one, though. He rooms on the same floor as I do at my boarding-house. Let me see that sword cane. I know he always carried one, a bamboo affair. I'll tell you in a minute if it's the same cane or not."

The detective produced the cane, the blade of which was still smeared with the blood of the dead jeweler.

"Yes, that's Arthur Ladd's cane," said Perriam. "I'd know it in a minute. He showed it to me only the other day and explained to me how it worked. You push a button, and the top half flies right off. So this was the cane that did the trick, eh?"

"Yes. What kind of a looking fellow is your friend, Perriam?"

"Small, slim, clean-shaven, and about twenty-two years of age. Dresses well. Blue eyes, light hair."

"The same man," said the detective convincingly. "That's the very description this clerk here gives of him. We may have to use you as a witness, Perriam, if you know that he owned that cane.

"As a matter of fact, however, the clerk's testimony will be strong enough. He saw him go in with the cane and come out without it."

"Then things look black for my unfortunate young friend," said Perriam soberly. "By the way, what can you

tell us about the personal affairs of the dead man?"

"According to his clerk here, he was a bachelor, middle-aged, and a German by birth. He's been in the instalment and loan business for about ten years, and is worth quite a little money. That is all we know about him."

Perriam and the other reporters took notes.

"Very good. Much obliged to you for this information," said Perriam. "Nothing else that you know, is there, Connaughton?"

"No. That's about all, I guess. If we catch our man to-day, you'll hear of it, of course."

Perriam walked out of the office, followed by the other reporters. When they reached the sidewalk they held a conference.

"Looks like a plain case of murder to my mind," said Perriam. "What do you fellows think?"

"I can't see any mystery feature about it," replied Osborne of the *World*. "There's no doubt at all that this fellow Ladd killed him. By the way, Perriam, since you know Ladd, what can you tell us about him?"

"Not much," said Perriam. "He occupies a room at my boarding-house. We are merely casual acquaintances. I know that he's a draftsman in an architect's office, and has no folks, although he comes from pretty good stock, I understand. He plays the races quite often, too. That's all I know about him."

"Well, it's a pretty good yarn, at that. I guess Connaughton was right in doping it out that he killed the jeweler because of the latter's threats. Must be a fiery sort of beggar, eh?" remarked another reporter, and the conference broke up.

The other men went back to their respective offices, and a few minutes after they had arrived there and reported to their city editors the details of the case the sound of their respective typewriters could be heard clicking away for dear life on the story of the murder of Jacob Meyer by Arthur Ladd.

But Perriam did not return immediately to the *Star* office. Instead, he jumped on a north-bound car and rode up-town to his boarding-house.

When he reached there he found his good landlady, Mrs. Jarvis, greatly excited. Policemen, horrible-looking ruffians with big feet, which they did not wipe on the door-mat as they came into the parlor, had been to the house, and were, in fact, waiting across the street at that very moment, watching everybody that came in and out.

They wanted Mr. Arthur Ladd, and they accused him of murder. She was sure there must be some terrible mistake!

None of her young gentlemen were in the habit of committing murders, and so she had indignantly told the policemen. Oh, she had given them a piece of her mind, indeed! But, oh, Lord! What a disgrace to the house!

All these things she communicated to Perriam in one breath.

"Calm yourself, Mrs. Jarvis," said the reporter soothingly. "There is really no cause for you to feel alarmed, so far as the reputation of the house is concerned. Nobody can blame you for this regretful affair. You see, this murder occurred on Nassau Street, way down-town."

"Then you know all about it, Mr. Perriam. Please do tell me. Surely it can't be true that Mr. Ladd is in any way guilty?"

"Yes, I am afraid he is, Mrs. Jarvis. I've been out on the story and it looks like a clear case against him. He went down to a jeweler's on Nassau Street, where he was buying some diamonds on the instalment plan.

"They got quarreling over Ladd's inability to pay, and Ladd stabbed the jeweler through the heart with that sword cane he always carries."

"Oh, the poor young man! The poor young man!" sobbed Mrs. Jarvis. "I can't believe he did it, I really can't believe he did it. He was always my favorite boarder, although I never told him so. Such a nice-mannered, honest young chap.

"Only this very day, too, I was quarreling with him about his board bill and telling him he would have to leave this house unless he paid up. Perhaps that

is what put the murderous thought in his head. Poor lad! I may have driven him to it! Wo is me! But I can't believe he did it; I can't believe it, Mr. Perriam."

"Your confidence is exceedingly commendable, but unfortunately the facts are all against him, Mrs. Jarvis," replied Perriam coldly.

"And will they arrest him?" asked the horrified Mrs. Jarvis.

"They expect to, in a few hours. He can't get very far away. The police have the drag-net out for him. Hasn't he showed up here at all?"

"Not since he left the house this morning. Oh, poor young man! Poor young man! I hope they won't catch him. I really do."

Perriam shrugged his shoulders impatiently and climbed up-stairs to his room.

When he came down half an hour later he had changed his clothes, even to his hat. He called a cab and told the man to drive him to a house situated in the sixties.

The cab drew up before a plain-looking brown-stone house, the residence of Mr. Robert Adrian, silk merchant.

"Mr. Adrian in?" inquired Perriam of the maid-servant who answered the ring.

"Yes, sir. He has just arrived home from down-town. What name, please?"

The reporter took out a card-case and extracted therefrom a pasteboard, neatly engraved:

MR. RICHARD PERRIAM.

The Star.

Two minutes afterwards the servant reappeared and told the reporter that Mr. Adrian would be pleased to see him in the library.

Perriam followed the girl up-stairs.

"Hello, Perriam!" said Adrian cordially, as the reporter entered. "How are you? Glad to see you. Have a seat, and make yourself comfortable. Here, have a smoke. They're imported, and good."

"This is purely a business visit, Mr. Adrian," said Perriam gravely. "I want you to bear in mind that what I have to say to you now is said only in my capacity as representative of the *Star*."

"You used to be glad enough to come here in your personal capacity once upon a time, it seems to me," said the old man with a chuckle.

"I know," replied Perriam, wincing, "but you know why I ceased visiting the house, Mr. Adrian, and it's not exactly fair for you to mention those days. I have been trying my hardest to forget them."

"Well, well. It was only my joke, young man. I didn't think I was going to make you feel bad. I thought you had forgotten all about Rosa by this time.

"You must not feel sore at her. A woman's heart is an uncontrollable thing, you know.

"First of all, when you came around to the house to interview me, and I introduced you to Rosa, I thought she kind of took to you. It seems, however, that I was mistaken. Well, it can't be helped.

"You had my good wishes, and if you had succeeded in winning Rosa you'd have got my consent, for I think a father should let his daughter marry where her heart is set, provided it's a man of good character. Now, it seems since Rosa refused you she has gone and fallen in love with a certain young fellow——"

"Arthur Ladd."

"Exactly. Do you know him?"

"It is about him that I have come to speak to you, Mr. Adrian."

"Ah, you want to tell me something against his character," said the old man sharply.

"I again remind you of the fact that I am speaking purely in my capacity as reporter for the *Star*," said Perriam hastily. "I don't want you to think for a second that I would come here personally to injure a successful rival in love."

"Proceed," said Adrian.

"First, I must ask you a question. Is Arthur Ladd formally betrothed to your daughter Rosa?"

"Conditionally, he is."

"She wears a ring as a sign of their engagement?"

"She does, with my permission; but what of that, Perriam?"

"That ring isn't paid for."

"The deuce you say."

"Ladd bought it on the instalment plan, and has only paid about three instalments."

"The young jackanapes, and one of the conditions to my consent was that he should live within his means," cried the old man angrily. "I'll see about this. I'll dispose of Mr. Ladd before he is a day older. He is a fine young man to think of marrying my daughter!"

"But that isn't the worst, by any means," continued Perriam quietly.

"What! Worse still!" cried the old man. "Then hurry up and speak out, man. Is he a forger also?"

"Worse."

"Worse than a forger! What the deuce do you mean? You're crazy, Perriam. Crazy with jealousy! I don't believe a word of what you have said."

"The police are now looking for Arthur Ladd to arrest him on a charge of wilful murder," said the reporter slowly.

"Wilful murder! Good heavens, you are crazy! My daughter's young man a murderer? It can't be true. What do you mean, Perriam?"

"Jacob Meyer, the jeweler who sold Arthur Ladd the ring your daughter wears, was stabbed through the heart by Arthur Ladd this afternoon. The jeweler threatened the young man with exposure if he did not pay up the overdue instalments on the ring. To save himself, Ladd killed him.

"I've been working on the story. That's why I came up to see you—on business. Ladd has run away."

"The dastardly dog. Good heavens! I wonder if Rosa knows about this. This will kill my little girl. She was dead in love with this young jackanapes, and that's the only reason I permitted the engagement, for I never thought overmuch of him myself. He was a gambler, and I mistrust gamblers as a rule."

He rang the bell, and a maid-servant appeared.

"Is Miss Rosa in the house?" her master inquired.

"No, sir. She went out about an hour ago."

"Alone?"

"No, sir. Mr. Ladd called for her and they went out together."

"Ladd here!" gasped both men, jumping to their feet in surprise. "Where did they go, girl?" yelled Adrian. "Which direction did they take? Hurry! Speak!"

"I don't know, sir," stammered the maid. "They didn't leave any word. As they went out I heard Miss Rosa say to Mr. Ladd something about going to the bank."

"To the bank! I know what's happened, then. That scoundrel has eloped with my daughter. He has come to this house, his hands red with the blood of his victim, and persuaded my confiding girl to run away with him. Perhaps they are married already—my daughter the wife of a murderer!

"We must hurry, Perriam! There is not a second to be lost. You love her and you will help me. They must be caught at once, Perriam. They must be caught!"

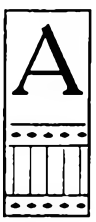
(To be continued.)

AT CUPID'S WHEEL.

I STAKED my all on a single throw,
And waited breathlessly
For the turn of the wheel to bring me round
A fortune or bankruptcy.
When Cupid doubled the reckless cast,
I hurried my prize away—
For whoso wins with his heart at stake.
Were foolish again to play!

Daisy Rinehart

To the Readers of The Argosy



WORD to you personally — every one of you. It is this: I want you to get from your newsdealer the December number of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE. I don't know how many of you now read MUNSEY'S, but I do know you all should read it — know you cannot afford to let the paltry sum of TEN CENTS STAND BETWEEN YOU AND MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE.

For ten cents you can buy what costs us TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS—ten thousand dollars, mind you, for a single copy. It doesn't mean any the less to you that we print nearly 700,000 copies. It wouldn't mean any the less if we printed ten million copies. The hard and fast fact is that in MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE you get for ten cents a ten thousand dollar magazine and get it just the same as if only one copy were printed.

If we printed but one copy of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE it would cost us ten thousand dollars. This first

cost, the cost of making the plates, includes the purchase of manuscripts and drawings and the cost of engraving, the salaries of editors, artists, superintendents, and general managers, the cost of type-setting and of electrotype plates, rents, and general expense. You little realize, no one realizes, what magazine-making today means—the work, the thought, the everlasting care and anxiety and painstaking that it involves—a first-class magazine, I mean.

And a first-class magazine is in fact a first-class magazine regardless of the price at which it sells. The price no longer has anything to do with it. Price is wholly a question of business policy, wholly independent of magazine-making—of the merits of a magazine.

The business side of it is this: Is it wiser to have a small circulation at a big price, or a great big circulation at a small price? MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE was the pioneer in the small price theory. It made the ten-cent price for itself, and made it possible, too, for other magazines to sell at this same price.

The Christmas Munsey

I especially wish you to get this Christmas number of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE. It will be on sale at your

newsdealer's on NOVEMBER 25, but you should ORDER IT NOW. Ask your newsdealer to save you a copy. I want you to examine it and see for yourself if it isn't a tremendously fine example of magazine-making—see if it does not make good my assertion that the price no longer indicates the quality of a magazine.

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I want you to get the habit of reading MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE. Do you know that ninety per cent. of the reading of the world is done from habit? We read this paper or that or the other from habit, and the same is true of magazines. We read everything from habit, or we have the habit of reading nothing.

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Don't fail to get the CHRISTMAS MUNSEY. This is a personal talk with you, the readers of THE ARGOSY—a personal talk with you about MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE.

ORDER THE CHRISTMAS MUNSEY FROM YOUR NEWSDEALER NOW. ASK HIM TO SAVE IT FOR YOU, OR YOU WILL NOT GET IT.

A COLLEGE CONSPIRACY.

BY WILLIAM HAMILTON OSBORNE.

The lamentable drowning of "Gussie" Smith and how it set press and faculty agog.

IT would be unfair at this late date, when all institutions of learning have turned over a new leaf and have completely abolished that unknown quantity called hazing — it would be wholly unfair to state the exact name or location of that great university which constituted the alma mater of Charles Augustus Smith.

It is enough to say that fully one-third of the college men in the East constantly swear by that same college and its mental and physical supremacy, and as constantly swear at all the other colleges. But for the sake of convenience it must be named, and the name of Birdseye University will suit it just as well as any other. This is especially appropriate, for be it known that it is situated, not on the regular line of any railroad, but is the attractive terminus of a small spur, and those travelers who do not board the jigger train upon this spur catch nothing but a birdseye view of Birdseye University.

Now, Birdseye University excelled in everything. Men went there because it was the best place to go; because there everything was carried to extremes, from tuition fees, which were very large, to the chances of passing good examinations, which were very small.

But it excelled in nothing so much as it did in the gentle and now almost unknown art of hazing. Hazing there was hazing with a capital H, and out of this admirable custom grew the harrowing experiences of Charles Augustus Smith—experiences already related in the public press, already commented upon all over the broad land, but experiences which ought to be related in detail to be appreciated.

In fact, it may be said that the college career of young Mr. Smith was one of the influences to which the abolition of hazing was largely due, and for no reason but that it was largely advertised.

Hazing at Birdseye had begun to assume such serious proportions that timid parents adopted an evasive method. They kept their hopeful offsprings out of Birdseye until fall was over, tutoring privately the while, and then entered them just after the conclusion of the midwinter vacation. This was a very effective way of dodging the issue in almost every case, except in the case of Charles Augustus Smith.

Young Mr. Smith never explained the reason why he had not entered the previous fall, but the reason was apparent when one looked upon him. If fear and timidity ever bore human names, the name of each must have been Charles Augustus Smith.

And when the freshman class resumed their studies in the month of January they found this young gentleman already installed, with his room and his seat assigned to him. The freshies smiled significantly to themselves, and looked his name up in the register—and themselves registered a vow of thanks for his very expressive middle name.

"Augustus," said Big Tomlinson, the leader of the class; "that's good—mighty good! It saves us the trouble of inventing one. We'll call him Gussie; it suits him to a T."

It did suit him, for if ever a man had the name "Gussie" written upon his face and form and features, that man was Smith.

He was a chap of medium size, so far as height was concerned; he had a pink-and-white complexion, wore glasses, was afflicted with an embarrassed manner, flushed when spoken to, and had long, light hair, parted in the middle. He dressed in a foppish sort of way, and his coat was padded so as to give the impression that his shoulders were extraordinarily broad.

Unfortunately for him, he kept to

himself, and again unfortunately for him, he studied his lessons, took notes religiously of all the lectures, and his recitations were well-nigh perfect. But for all this, he was Gussie Smith, and nothing else.

Now, if Gussie had delayed his entrance into Birdseye to avoid the exuberant second years, he was all right—he had accomplished his object. But apparently he had not reckoned upon the fact that he had his own class to deal with.

And he did have to deal with it.

For one week had not passed before the freshies had vowed a vow that they could not, would not, and should not stand for a thing like Gussie Smith.

For a time Gussie busied himself in fixing up his room to suit his taste. Among other things, he tacked up a complete system of lazy cords. His walls and ceilings were crisscrossed and gridironed with these things, and Gussie arranged them so effectually that he could sit at his desk, poring over a book, and could do any one of the following things simply by pulling this cord or that: open the door, shut the door, ditto the window or any window, put out the light, pull down the bed covers, revolve his bookcase, drop (by a patent arrangement) coal upon the grate, rake the fire, swing his *robe de nuit* from the closet to the floor of his room, and change his "Busy day" sign on his door to "Walk right in." And all these things at a second's notice.

Everything in Gussie's room was just so; he was a regular old maid.

But it is not these old maid qualities that provoke the admiration of mankind, and the freshman class found that it could not stand Gussie Smith any longer.

Accordingly, Big Tomlinson, the president of the class, and Jenks Jenkins and Bully Whitehead put their heads together.

They were the three giants of the form, and when there was any deviltry going on they were in the van. In five minutes after they had put their heads together they had decided upon a plan of operations.

Bully Whitehead demurred a little.

"It's January," he said, "and it's too cold."

"Not a bit," retorted Tomlinson; "everything's melting fast and it's warm as summer outside. Besides, it's just what he needs. When shall it be?"

"How's Saturday?" suggested Jenks Jenkins.

"Saturday it is," said Tomlinson.

Now, these three young men had already been reprimanded for their exuberant spirits, and they determined that this thing must be done in a corner, on the q. t., so to speak, and they had hit upon Saturday afternoon because the faculty were then generally out of sight.

It was fairly late on Saturday when Gussie Smith, studying inside his room, heard a decided knock upon his door. He stretched his arm up above his head and pulled the handle of a rope.

"Come in," he yelled.

The latch clicked and the door opened.

Gussie looked up; then he rose to his feet and bowed in a respectful manner.

For three men had entered, and these three were none other than Prexie Woolworth, the president of the university, Calculus Manning, the professor of mathematics, and Traditional O'Keefe, who held the history chair.

At least, at first glance that is what they seemed to be. In reality they were none other than Big Tomlinson, Jenks Jenkins and Bully Whitehead, disguised, both for the sake of safety and for the purpose of duly impressing Gussie Smith.

Cleverly disguised, they were, and closely resembling the members of the faculty whom they counterfeited.

"What—what can I do for you?" asked Gussie Smith, in a mild, quavering voice.

"Is this Mr. Charles Augustus Smith?" demanded Big Tomlinson, imitating the precise tones of Prexie Woolworth.

Gussie's hand stole upward before he answered. Then he spoke in a voice trembling with fear.

"Y-yes, sir," and in his nervousness he grasped one of his lazy cords.

Big Tomlinson waved his hand.

"Ready, gentlemen," he said. "One, two, three. Go."

With a mighty yell, they rushed upon Gussie Smith.

At that instant something in the corner clicked, but they paid no attention to it. On they came. The sun was in their eyes, and they did not notice that Gussie had just been able to dodge aside and escape the onslaught.

He stood, with a white face, looking at them as they sprawled upon his desk. Immediately they recovered themselves and grabbed him.

"Come with us," said Tomlinson.

"Where?" inquired Gussie Smith, feeling limp and weak in the grasp of the big fellow.

"For your Saturday constitutional," yelled Bully Whitehead. They marched Gussie down-stairs and across the green.

Students passed them here and there, but at sufficient distance to make their disguise effective. For whenever they met a man—freshie, sophomore, junior, or czar, no matter who he was—that man lifted his hat respectfully and dropped it back upon his head.

Of course, after the first appearance in Gussie's room they did not attempt to keep up the deception with Gussie, for any disguise is perceptible at close range.

Whether Gussie knew who they really were is another question.

He walked on ahead until they reached some marshy ground leading down to the stream. Then Gussie stopped.

"I think I'll go back again," he said. "I—we'll get our feet wet here."

He said it as though that were sufficient inducement to the others to right about face; but they kept on, and pushed him along, too.

Now, January had been a warm month, following the heavy snowfall of December, and the river had developed into a torrent. It was called a river, but after all it was nothing but a small stream, possibly a hundred and fifty feet wide. Now it was very turbulent and very muddy.

"Mr. Charles Augustus Smith," said Tomlinson, "possibly you may have overlooked the fact that you really are a golf ball—a pretty poor kind, but yet a golf ball. We are the professionals, the Willies of the links. We have dribbled you down here and we are about to make a great play. It is necessary for us to lift you into the air and to drive you across this stream. Of course, we may not be able to land you exactly upon the other side, but we shall do our best."

Gussie Smith looked from one to the other.

"What are you going to do?" he asked anxiously. "Throw me into the water?"

"We are not, Charles Augustus, otherwise Gussie," said Tomlinson. "You are familiar with that rule of physics that an object once propelled into space will keep on in the given direction unless its course is diverted by some influence.

"We are going to aim you for the dry land two hundred feet away. If you are so foolish as to divert your course and drop into the stream when you have gone but ten or fifteen feet, we cannot help it. We shall start you in the right direction. The rest is up to you."

Gussie Smith seemed lost in thought. But only for an instant.

"You had better not," he finally exclaimed. "It will be the worse for——"

For whom did not appear, for while he was speaking the three seized him bodily and propelled him, as they had said, into space.

An instant later there was a loud splash, and Gussie Smith had disappeared into the stream.

"Gee, fellows," said Bully Whitehead, scared now that they had carried out their intention, "it must be cold as ice. We ought not to have done it."

"Aw," returned Tomlinson, "it's all right. I've been chucked in myself. He's all right. He'll come out and we will run him for a couple of miles and then take him back and toast his toes. It 'll do him good. Now watch."

They were gazing at the spot where they assumed that their victim would rise to the surface. But the stream was running swifter than they thought.

Finally they saw him, spluttering, three hundred feet down the stream.

He was attempting to reach the farther shore.

He struck out, but suddenly desisted, and, frantically waving one hand in the air, again went down.

"Jehosophat!" exclaimed Jenks Jenkins. "He's gone under again."

"It's all right," said Tomlinson. "He can feel bottom there, and he'll come up again."

They ran down-stream. Their view was somewhat obstructed by the scrub willows that skirted the river, but they kept a sharp outlook.

Finally Tomlinson, scared just a bit himself, called out.

"Gussie!" he yelled. "Where are you, Gussie?"

There was no response.

"Gussie!" yelled the three. "Gussie Smith!"

All this had taken place in almost the space of time that it takes to tell it, yet, when a man is struggling in the water a minute is a long time.

The three stood still and looked into one another's faces.

"Smith! Smith!" they repeated, their eyes fixed on the place where he had last appeared. "Smith! Oh, Smith!"

They heard nothing but the ripple of the muddy waters; saw nothing but the surface of the stream. No hands, no head appeared—no Gussie Smith. Half an hour later three bedraggled men, talking wildly and incoherently among themselves, staggered across the fields toward the college buildings.

These men were men who had leaped incontinently into the stream and waddled up and down, calling for "Smith! Smith! Gussie Smith!"—men whose eyes were strained with much peering into the dusk up and down the stream; men who had darted here, there and everywhere in search of the man they could not find.

"Great heavens!" wailed Bully Whitehead, as they neared their hall. "This is simply awful!"

A mighty groan went up from the other two.

A student passed them, looked at them in surprise, and then hustled off his hat.

For the first time since Gussie Smith had disappeared they remembered their disguises.

Wildly they tore them off, wildly plunged into the darkness of the big stone building, and sought the room of Tomlinson.

They ate no supper. They sat and talked with bated breath.

What to do about it? That was the question.

Jenks Jenkins suggested going to the faculty at once and telling the story.

The other two said no. They advised waiting a day or two, at least; there was time enough to own up to the ghastly truth.

To-morrow they could go down to the stream, and——

They shuddered.

They lighted no light; they did not go to bed; they sat in the darkness all night long and talked.

It is likely that those three saw more of one another's souls that night than they ever thought to see.

The next day they made a hopeless search. The river was more swollen, more turbulent, and heavy stones even were being washed from the bank and carried part way down the stream.

The three men all that day wandered aimlessly among their fellows and through the town. They had a secret. Did they dare divulge it?

Each had reason to ask himself this question the next morning, for it was then that Birdseye University was electrified with the news.

For the New York *Light*, the morning edition of which reached the college town at 8 A. M., contained a full account of the affair.

It mentioned but one name, and that was the name of Charles Augustus Smith. It was headed by the startling words: "Birdseye Freshman Hazed to Death."

The faculty was paralyzed. The president at chapel demanded of his students the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

No man answered, no man stirred; for Tomlinson, Jenkins and Whitehead had frantically agreed to keep quiet, to say nothing.

It was not a question of honor; in their agitated minds it was simply a question of safety, and there was safety in silence.

Some time or other they would atone for this thing, but not now—not now. Later they would seek out the boy's parents and make a full confession, but they couldn't do it now; they simply couldn't.

Well, the end was not yet. The papers took it up. Hazing was bitterly decried. The countryside rose in bitter indignation.

Birdseye's faculty was wild.

But there was more to come; the public authorities took it up, and sleuths canvassed the college buildings and interviewed all the students.

The minds of Tomlinson, Jenkins and Whitehead were suffering under the strain. For the hundredth time they put their heads together, and with a decided result.

"Fellows," said Tomlinson, "my mind's made up. We must make a clean breast of this thing—that's all there is to it. And we'll do it in chapel. We'll get up and do it before all the fellows. That's better than in a stuffy room with the faculty. We'll tell our story. Then we'll be understood, at least. What do you say?"

They agreed. It was on Thursday morning that their determination was to take effect.

On that morning the president rose and made the same appeal that he had made each morning, requesting, nay, demanding, that the students solve this mystery.

He had finished, and Tomlinson rose. Tomlinson held out his hand to attract the attention of the president, and started in to speak. But he stopped, with his glance glued to the entrance door behind the platform.

And well might he stare, for suddenly there had entered a young man wearing spectacles, a young man of timid and uncertain manner, a young man who bowed nervously to the faculty, a young man whose name was Charles Augustus Smith.

All the students saw him at once. Tomlinson was petrified, but he was quick-witted. He dropped immediately into his seat.

"Look! Look!" he exclaimed to Whitehead and Jenkins, who had secured places next to him. "Look at that! Thank heaven!"

Mr. Smith, after bowing to the faculty, as a sort of half-way acknowledgment of his tardiness, stepped jauntily down the aisle and sought his seat. The president stopped him.

"Mr. Smith!" he exclaimed.

Smith halted and turned.

"Where—where have you been?" demanded the president. "Where have you been all these days?"

Smith looked in amazement at the president.

"I have had," he responded, "a heavy cold, and I have been laid up. I have been at my cousin's, sir. My people are in Europe, as you know. I was compelled to stay out for a day or two. I—I came back as soon as I could."

"Mr. Smith," said the president, "is it true that you were thrown into the Minnehaha River last Saturday?"

Smith nodded vivaciously.

"Oh yes," he answered. "I supposed you knew about that. I was, sir, and it was that that laid me up for a day or two."

"Mr. Smith," thundered the president, "why has there been so much mystery about this thing?"

Smith seemed bewildered.

"Mystery!" he exclaimed, "I knew of no mystery. I was in the river and got out, and had to go somewhere to get over it. I'm sorry to have been away, but I could not help it."

"Mr. Smith," went on the president, "I—I must request you at once to point out the men who were your assailants. Do you know who they were? I—I must sift this thing to the bottom."

Charles Augustus Smith smiled.

"I doubt, sir," he said, "whether I could point them out. However," he added, drawing from his pocket a folded newspaper, "the extra edition of the New York *Light* has illuminated the mystery with their photographs. Here, sir, is the picture."

He handed up the paper. The presi-

dent took one look and then literally yelled with rage.

For there, depicted in clear and unmistakable photography, appeared the figures of three men, all arms and legs, making a wild dash toward the camera. And these three men were none other than the president of the college, the professor of mathematics, and the incumbent of the chair in history.

In the excitement that followed, Gussie Smith passed down the aisle and reached his seat. But before he sat down he leaned over and whispered to Tomlinson and his two friends.

"If you fellows," said Charles Augustus Smith, "will keep your mouths shut, nobody will be the wiser. Understand?"

They understood. They subsided, although they were still frightened. The faculty immediately broke up chapel, sent the students to their classes, and went into secret session.

They sent for Charles Augustus Smith. They could get nothing out of him. All that he would say was that he had been thrown into the river, and that was all.

They could find no fault with Charles Augustus, for they knew the attitude of the class toward him, and knew that he had been the subject of abuse. He was a victim and was entitled to consideration and not reproof.

They called up the editorial offices of the *Light* on the long distance wire. They succeeded in getting the office. The editor was very gracious, but he got more out of them than they did out of him, and what he got made a fine story for the afternoon edition.

But they insisted upon an answer to one question.

"Who furnished the details of the story to the *Light?*"

The editor was willingness itself. He told them. It was a reporter of the name of Howard W. Budd.

"Where did Budd get the information?"

"Now," said the editor, "you are asking me too much. I don't know where he got it; I don't care. If it were a fake, I'd haul Budd over the coals, but according to your own admission, gentlemen, the story was undoubtedly true.

"But I'll do anything you say and I'll print anything you say. In fact, I'll be only too glad to print this entire conversation, word for word."

"No, no!" yelled the president. "Don't do it! No, no, I tell you! Hey, Central, don't cut me off!"

"I didn't cut you off," said Central. "He rang off. See?"

Before the president was able to get the editor again, the story had been set up and was on the street in the shape of a special extra.

The faculty were wild, but powerless. Try as they might, they were unable to find the perpetrators of the outrage or the man who had furnished the story to the papers.

It was true that they suspected Smith of making the whole tale up out of his imagination, but unfortunately for this theory, in the early stages of the game, during Smith's absence, they had found men who, from a distance, had really seen the thing, but who were too far off to distinguish the men who did it.

It was an admitted fact that Smith had been thrown into the ice-cold stream against his will, and that was the whole story.

Nobody could blame Smith. They might suspect him, but they couldn't blame him.

But there were three men who did blame him and blame him exceedingly. These three men had a decided grievance. These men were Tomlinson, Jenkins and Whitehead.

"Blamed little rascal," they said among themselves, "to get us worked up like that. It's just like him. Tried to get the faculty down on us. By George, he had no business to worry us like that. Not much. We're not through with him yet."

And they weren't. They determined to make another call on Smith, and to make it in the evening.

Smith was in his room when they appeared. He pulled a lazy cord as usual and opened up the door.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen," he said politely. "By the way," he added pleasantly, "I have never shown you

how these things work. I can do anything with them, even to taking pictures."

He pointed to his camera in the corner, and smiled.

"I snapped it on you fellows that day," he continued, "and afterward came back that same night and got the film. But," he resumed sorrowfully, "I was awful wet and cold, and so I—I just changed my clothes and went down to my cousin's. His wife's a good nurse, and she fixed me up."

He opened an old-fashioned album.

"I'll show you a picture of my cousin," he went on. "He's an awful nice fellow. There he is."

He smiled again.

"His name," he said softly, "is Mr. Budd—Howard W. Budd."

He hesitated.

"He's a reporter on the New York *Light*," he added.

Tomlinson shut the book with a snap.

"Gussie," he said, "we've got an account to settle with you. You've been responsible for a considerable amount of mental anguish. You played us a trick—a measly, little boy's, old maid's trick. We're going to spank your freshness out of you, right here and now. Do you see?"

They started in.

The next morning Charles Augustus Smith was in chapel right on time. He was neatly dressed and his shoulder pads stuck out farther than ever. He bore a smiling countenance. Later three bedraggled members of his class entered a lecture room. Gussie smiled as he saw them.

They were suffering chiefly with swollen countenances, and were variously demoralized.

They were very late, for they had been down-town to attend upon a gentleman whose specialty was whitening discolored countenances.

"Gentlemen," said the professor—O'Keefe, it was, of the chair of history—"what is the meaning of this? What is the matter?"

"We've been knocked out," answered Tomlinson feebly.

Charles Augustus Smith arose.

"Dr. O'Keefe," he remarked in a firm voice, "I desire to make a statement. I made an assault upon these gentlemen last evening. I apologize for it. If any one should suffer, it ought to be I, and not any one of them." Then his mouth trembled. "They—they have suffered enough already, sir."

Dr. O'Keefe smiled.

"They look so," he remarked grimly. "But, Mr. Smith," continued he, gazing disdainfully upon Smith's pink-and-white countenance and his spectacles, "I think you are romancing. Do you mean to say *you* did all this—upon all three at once?"

"Ask them, sir," returned Charles Augustus Smith. "They can tell you. I—am very sorry for it though," he added, "very."

Dr. O'Keefe shook his head, but he was a genial old fellow with lax ideas of discipline, and he was never hard on the men under him. He put his finger on his book.

"Mr. Tomlinson," he said, "give me a brief account of the gladiatorial fights in Rome during the reign of Julius Cæsar."

Tomlinson did it—beautifully, too.

After the class was over, a few men stepped in the corridor and waylaid Charles Augustus Smith.

Among these men were Tomlinson, Jenkins, and Whitehead.

"Say," one or two of these men said to Gussie, "who the dickens are you?"

Gussie smiled. Some one clapped him on the back.

"Hello," said this individual as his hand resounded against Smith's coat, "I thought this was all padding that you had back here."

Gussie blushed.

"I never pad," he said, and his shoulders seemed to grow broader as he said it. "I leave all that to Messrs. Tomlinson and company."

Unconsciously he widened his chest. Immediately one of the crowd sprang forward and threw back Gussie's coat. He laid bare three gold medals that shone in the dim light of the corridor.

"Hello! What's this?" they exclaimed.

Again Gussie blushed.

"I—I only wear these occasionally," he said apologetically, "but I'll tell you now that you ask. The first one—that little fellow—I won in a swimming match last year."

He paused.

"The second," he went on, "I got for knocking out two fellows in succession in a boxing match."

"What's the last one?" asked another man.

"Oh, that," said Smith deprecatingly, "that is only a sort of side-show. It's one I got last summer from a camera club out home. I got it for some interior views."

Tomlinson, with one hand up to his eye, stepped forward.

"Say, who are you, any way?" he demanded.

"I'm Charles Augustus Smith," he answered.

"I know that," returned Tomlinson, "but what I want to know is where you came from—what school?"

"Oh," answered Gussie; "of course. Why, I am a member of the last class from the Hopetown Preparatory School."

A member of the crowd gave vent to a long, low whistle.

"The dickens!" exclaimed this man, who was Bully Whitehead. "That accounts for it."

He, too, stepped forward.

"Say, look here, Mr. Smith," he exclaimed. "I think we've heard of you before. The Hopetown Prep. No wonder. Say, aren't you the fellow that was known up there as Strong-Arm Smith? Are you that chap?"

Smith looked nervously about.

"The—the very same," he said in a trembling voice

"Gee," said another; "that accounts for it, then. But look here, why didn't you come into the class last fall, like a man? What did you sneak in in January for?"

Tomlinson held up his hand.

"Hold on," he said. "'Sneak' is a highly improper word to use with reference to our friend Strong-Arm Smith."

He seized the culprit, forced him to the floor, and compelled him to apologize.

"I'll tell you why," finally answered Smith. "I promised the Preps to play on the school team all the fall; that's why. And," he added, "I had to keep my promise. They would have knocked me into the middle of next week if I hadn't."

This was regarded as mere airy persiflage on the part of Smith—as though anybody could knock him into the middle of next week!

"Gentlemen," said Charles Augustus Smith, "it is barely possible that Calculus Manning, Esquire, is waiting for us in the mathematics-room, and as I know my lesson and the rest of you do not, I am anxious to get over there and impress him to the best of my ability. Will you join me?"

Charles Augustus Smith, alias Gussie Smith, alias Strong-Arm Smith, took off his spectacles, wiped them in an agitated manner, coughed nervously, and—led the march to the mathematics-room.

HUMILITY.

I ASK not a life for the dear ones,
All radiant, as others have done,
But that life may have just enough shadow
To temper the glare of the sun.

I would pray God would guard them from evil,
But my prayer would bound back to myself;
Ah! a seraph may pray for a sinner,
But a sinner must pray for himself.

Charles M. Dickinson.

THE OUTCAST.*

BY W. BERT FOSTER.

The lure of false hopes that paved the way to tragedy, hedged with doubt, and girdled by remorse.

SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTERS PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED.

Ramon Burress returns to his native village possessed of nothing save his medical degree and some debts, which his uncle has given him to understand he will settle. He finds Leslie Searles, his boyhood sweetheart, betrothed to his chum, Seymour Lloyd, and his uncle refuses to settle his bills save by a legacy.

His uncle's taunts, his disappointment and the demands of his creditors half madden Burress, and when, while out hunting, he comes upon his uncle in the woods, he impulsively shoots in his direction.

As his uncle falls dead, Lloyd rushes from the underbrush, crying out that Ramon is a murderer. In his haste he falls and stuns himself. Burress returns to his own home, and later on Lloyd is brought in, discovered by Orrin Paddock, the old herb man. The young doctor does his best to revive him, knowing the while that with his friend's returning consciousness his own doom will fall.

CHAPTER VII.

A GHASTLY RESPITE.

BURRESS had leaned forward and seized the covering, intending to turn it back from Lloyd's body. This brought his face much nearer that of the patient, and on the instant of the girl's speech he saw Lloyd's eyes flash.

Widely the lids sprang apart, revealing the eyeballs, distended and with a glare in them which nothing but fear could inspire. No recognition—or seemingly none; only terror looked out of those staring orbs.

The doctor's hand, steadied now by the emergency, sought the patient's heart. At the instant of the contact a change took place in Lloyd's attitude.

Without uttering a sound, he suddenly threw his arms about the man leaning above him, his fingers interlocked in a vise-like grip, squeezing the doctor to him, crushing the latter's ribs and chest in the maniacal embrace until he shrieked aloud.

The act was so unexpected that Burress was utterly helpless for the moment. Leslie's voice echoed his scream, and she seized Lloyd's arm and sought to break his grip.

"Stop, Seymour! What are you doing?" she cried.

At her words and touch the patient uttered a sound which resembled the inarticulate cry of a dumb beast more than it did a tone from a human throat. He threw himself to the far side of the couch to escape her hand, glancing back wildly over his shoulder as though fascinated by some horrible apparition.

This movement gave Burress a chance to release himself. He gathered his strength, and, crowding his bent knee against the other's body, broke his hold and suddenly straddled Lloyd's legs, holding his trunk down upon the couch by pressure upon the arms.

Panting for breath, uttering now and then the strange, guttural noise, Lloyd continued to struggle to escape.

At the first moment of the attack the doctor believed his old friend had remembered the scene in the woods, and feared for his own life perhaps; the memory of the murder was the chief impression upon his aroused mentality.

But now, looking down into the wide-open eyes of the patient, and hearing the inarticulate sounds he uttered, he was convinced that some awful change had taken place in Lloyd. This was not the Seymour Lloyd whom he had so long known; the very expression of his countenance was foreign to that of his old friend. It was as though a strange

*This story began in the November issue of THE ARGOSY, which will be mailed to any address on receipt of 10 cents.

personality had taken possession of Lloyd while he remained in that heavy stupor.

His body lay there, writhing and struggling under Burress' grip, but Lloyd's self—the soul and mind of the man—had suffered a transformation.

And with this change, whatever it might be, had come the bodily strength of a maniac.

Burress saw that the patient would do himself some injury, or harm those about him, if he was not controlled, and his own strength was waning.

"Leslie! The trunk straps—in the rear office. Quick!" the doctor panted.

The noise of the struggle had brought old Betty to the door, but she was helpless. The girl darted away instantly on the errand, and was back in a few seconds with the long strips of leather.

Still holding the patient flat upon his back, Burress instructed the girl to pass one of the straps underneath the couch and so across poor Lloyd's body and arms. She drew the straps tight and then Burress leaped off the writhing man and made it secure. The second he fastened about Lloyd's legs.

The patient was bound, but Burress himself was shaking like a leaf. Leslie was in tears and old Betty was moaning in the corner with her apron over her head.

Burress dropped into a chair, staring into the glaring eyes of the man on the couch.

What had really happened to him the doctor could not entirely understand.

His mind, that of a plain medical practitioner, had not become warped by dabblings in so-called psychic phenomena.

Some phases of aphasia and amnesia had come under his notice during his practical work in the hospitals; in this nerve-stretching age such cerebral diseases are growing vastly common. And the blow upon the head which Seymour Lloyd had received might well have been sufficient to throw the victim into almost any state of brain disorder.

"What is it? What is it?" begged the girl, gripping the physician's arm with an energy which prevised hysteria.

"He is mad, Ramon! He does not know me! See—see! Look at his eyes. He does not know me!"

Burress seized a glass of water from the stand, dashed into it a few drops of cordial, and administered the mixture to the girl. He seated her in his own chair.

"No, no, Leslie!" he said firmly, holding her hands. "You must not give way—if you would help Seymour. Be brave——"

"But he does not know me!" she cried, as though that fact was a horror which dwarfed all other circumstances. "Look into his eyes, doctor. He is afraid of me."

Burress was gravely contemplating the bound man upon the couch, although still holding her fluttering hands until the cordial should do its work.

"Wait—wait!" he muttered. "Let us be calm. He is not mad, Leslie; it is not that. This—this is more serious than I supposed."

She grew rapidly calmer and he pursued his reflections:

"See! That is not the look of a madman—not as we understand madness. It is fear—wonder—amazement. No, no! I cannot believe him a maniac. It is something vastly different from lunacy. This—this is not Seymour Lloyd who lies here; it is another."

"What do you mean, Ramon? You mystify me. I do not understand."

"Nor do I, only in part. This is not Lloyd—not as we have known him. He is lost for the time being. This is a different personality—a new identity.

"It is not delirium; something much more complex than that. A transformation has taken place in his poor, hurt brain. He does not know us—neither you nor me, Leslie; nor does he recognize his surroundings. See?

"He is like a being new born into the world, but with a man's physique. I did not understand what that struggle meant. I see it now. This is beyond my knowledge, I am afraid. I must wire Munhall; perhaps he can advise us, and he will know of somebody better instructed in such cases than myself——"

"Ramon, you will not leave him!" cried the girl excitedly.

He looked at her gravely and shook his head.

"No. I will not leave him, but I need help and advice. Let me try to explain this to you, if I can. You saw the struggle which was going on just before his paroxysm of physical force? In that one convulsive moment Lloyd was, I believe, transformed into a being upon whose present consciousness was thrust vividly, and for the first time, a realization of terrestrial things."

Leslie sat with clasped hands, gazing fixedly upon the young doctor as he spoke. Her bewildered and anxious expression exhibited how little of all this her perturbed mind had comprehended.

"My poor, poor child!" Burress exclaimed, stroking the hand he still retained in his own palm. "It is terrible to see our friend so; but I do not believe it is like insanity. This condition of mind will not last forever. I have not been a student of such phenomena; somebody with more knowledge than I possess can better advise us of his true condition. But I believe Seymour is, to all intent and purpose, a mere infant.

"And we must not waste time—not a moment. I will send for Munhall and for Professor Oglethorpe, who, I now remember, gave us several lectures upon this branch of medico-science. Be brave, Leslie. This will call for all your fortitude, I know. But the case is not without hope. I say this with every honest intent and belief. Lloyd's condition is serious—more serious than I had any reason to believe, but, please God, we will save him and bring him back to himself—and to you."

He finished brokenly, dropping her hand and turning quickly away. But Leslie caught at his sleeve for a moment.

"Oh, Ramon, I believe you—I trust in you. Remember—remember what he is to me."

Could he forget that? Burress staggered to his feet and for a moment wavered there unsteadily.

Then the instinct of the physician ruled, and he controlled himself. He spoke sharply to the sobbing Betty.

"Find somebody to take these telegrams to the railway station," he said.

He glanced down again at the bound man, whose rolling eyes seemed compassing the entire room and all the objects in it in their terrified gaze. The bandages upon Lloyd's head had become disarranged and he stooped over him to readjust them.

Lloyd shrank away, and again the strange cry—inarticulate and like that of a dumb person—burst from his throat. But Burress did not wince this time.

He arranged the bandages and then trusted himself to look at Leslie once more.

"He is all right. He cannot injure himself or be injured. I am going to the office to write the messages. I will be but a minute."

He walked firmly from the room, crossed the hall, and shut himself into the office.

There a sudden thought came to him, and he crumpled into the chair before Munhall's desk as though stricken by a lightning bolt.

The man whose first conscious word he had feared, the single eye-witness of the tragedy in the forest, had lost all knowledge of the murder and of his own identity.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE OUTCAST OF THE UNIVERSE.

THE chain of circumstances beginning at daybreak that morning, when Ramon Burress stood with the rifle in his hands on the ridge above the wood-road, had been forged so rapidly, link by link, that the man's soul seemed now shackled to the wheel of torture without hope of release.

He lay in his chair panting, utterly unnerved, the tags only of various thoughts clinging to his mind—that mind which was on the verge of prostration. The strain was becoming unbearable.

Dread of the gallows, and hope of escape, were the poles between which he had vibrated for hours. He had worked over Lloyd with the expectation

of being apprehended for murder when his old friend aroused to consciousness.

For Leslie's sake he spent every energy of his mind, every atom of knowledge he had gained of such cases in the schools, to bring her lover out of his stupor, and the shock of having Lloyd open his eyes in this awful and almost inexplicable condition seemed to his overwrought brain more frightful than would have been the result which he had expected.

He was saved, but only for the time being. It merely meant the prolonging of the agony of doubt and fear under which he had labored since morning.

Surely poor Lloyd would not settle indefinitely into this changed personality.

The patient could not be abandoned now. Unless Burress played an utterly brutal part, he could not leave Lloyd bound to that couch, and in the care only of two ignorant and weak women while other physicians were being summoned.

No; all further thought of leaving Barrowsvale must be thrust from him. He must remain and see the matter through. Munhall should be sent for, and Professor Oglethorpe.

He could not go out into the world to wander under an assumed name and to take up some other mode of existence. His medical career, it seemed, was not to be closed so abruptly.

Fate had bound him here, and here he must remain. There was no escape, and this in itself, he saw, constituted one of the modes of punishment to which his crime sentenced him.

Betty knocked at the door after a time and told him that a boy was waiting for the telegrams. Burress pulled himself together with an effort and penned the two despatches.

These sent away by the hand of Betty, who still sniveled and wiped her eyes, Burress turned his attention to plans for the future. And these were not plans dealing with his own safety. Seymour Lloyd's condition, although compassing his own salvation, appealed to Burress as altogether terrible.

Burress believed Lloyd utterly incapable of understanding any function of his own body as well as lacking all acquaintance with the surroundings into which fate had thrust him. The opening of his eyes at the sound of Leslie's voice was purely involuntary. Then, when Burress touched him, this newly born infant with a man's strength and a madman's desire to use it had grappled with him.

As with a babe, Lloyd's strongest impression was fear; with his preternatural intelligence and powers of perception, his alarm at being thrust suddenly into this universe of ours was far greater than that of the new-born child.

Unless skill higher than that of Ramon Burress be brought to bear upon the case, he did not see how Lloyd was to be transformed into his old self.

The situation of a man who had lost all knowledge of the world in which he had lived and worked for twenty-eight years, who had forgotten his fellow-men completely—who had even forgotten the woman whom he loved and wished to make his wife—such a situation appealed to Burress' mind as rising to the heights of human agony.

Certain phrases of Nathaniel Hawthorne's, in his delineation of the character of that wonderful man, *Wakefield*, came to the physician's mind, for they seemed to bear more or less directly on the case in hand:

> Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another and to a whole, that by stepping aside for a moment a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. Like *Wakefield*, he may become the outcast of the universe.

Seymour Lloyd had "stepped aside." That fall down the embankment above the wood-road had constituted the cause for a change in Lloyd's individuality which was marvelous.

He was truly "an outcast of the universe"—a man without a country, without a parentage, without friends. Burress realized that Lloyd's condition of mind at this very moment must be one of uncontrollable horror. If actual insanity did not result, it would be an interposition of divine providence.

He rose from the desk, remembering that he had left Leslie alone with the patient much longer than he intended. As he stepped into the hall a footfall on the porch reached his ear, and he opened the door.

It was Orrin Paddock.

"How is he?" the herb-gatherer asked in a shrill whisper, with the shield of his hand beside his mouth. "How's poor See? He don't sense nothin' yet, dooes he?"

"He is out of his stupor, Orrin," was the reply.

"Gosh! Thet so? An'—an'——"

He wet his lips, but could not speak for a moment. Burress saw that he was greatly excited.

"Wha—what dooes he say?" burst from the old man at length.

"Nothing. The poor fellow doesn't know anybody—yet. He has not spoken."

"He is mad, then? Marcy on us! Thet's what I was a-feared on. This is a turrible day, Dr. Burress—a turrible day! It's jest a-driven that poor boy crazy, I s'pose."

"What do you mean?" asked Burress quickly, his suspicion rising. "Why should See be disturbed by anything that's happened aside from his own accident?"

"Why, he seen yer uncle killed, didn't he?"

"We only suppose so; we cannot know until See comes to himself," the physician said hoarsely, turning his face aside. "And the poor fellow is by no means crazy, so don't go around telling *that* yarn, Orrin."

"Waal, I sh'd think it 'ud make him loony, all right," commented Orrin, shaking his head. Then he looked up suddenly. "Oh, I forgot, doc; Mr. Medbury wanted I sh'd tell ye that he'd put off the inquest till mornin'; he wants you ter view the body."

"Very well," was the almost sullen reply. "I have sent for Dr. Munhall and another gentleman for a consultation on Lloyd's case. When they arrive I shall attend to that matter."

"Then you reckon See's in a purty serious condition, eh?"

"He is."

"An' poor Leslie! Marcy on us, Ramon!" groaned the old man. "It never crossed my mind 'bout her till ye told me an hour ago——"

Burress turned toward him suddenly and seized his arm.

"What do you mean, Orrin?" he asked. "What are you hinting at?"

Orrin Paddock advanced his lips to the physician's ear.

"I'll tell ye," he whispered. "I—I found th' gun ol' Solon was killed with."

Burress fell against the wall, but seized the door-knob to steady himself; otherwise he would surely have slipped to the floor.

"You found the rifle?" he gasped.

It seemed an utter impossibility, for he had buried it deep in the swamp; yet, to a man who had already endured what Burress had suffered that day, even as wild a possibility as the recovery of the fatal weapon seemed probable.

"Yassir!" exclaimed Orrin, awed, yet delighted by the importance of his information. "I tell ye, doctor, I seen it w'en I found ol' Solon an' Lloyd. W'en See fell he dropped th' gun. There it was, stuck in th' bushes, erbout ha'f way down th' bank."

Burress breathed again. Then it was not the weapon he had sunk in the quagmire that the old fellow had discovered. It was another. What other?

Slowly as his clogged mind acted, the true explanation at length flashed through it, and Burress leaped like a spirited horse under the spur. He seized Orrin by the shoulders and swung him about to face the door, through which flooded the afternoon sunlight.

With burning gaze he peered into the old man's countenance.

"Stop where you are, Orrin," he cried huskily. "Don't tell me that you for an instant suspect Seymour Lloyd of shooting the old man? My God! You do—you do!"

It was almost a wail, and, removing his hands from the herbalist's shoulders, the younger man covered his face, his frame shaking with suppressed sobs.

Does sin not bring its own punishment? Only the fool will deny this doctrine.

It was dreadful enough to remember that his own hand had laid Solon Burress dead in that woodland path, and that through his murderous act his old friend Lloyd suffered; but now the finger of suspicion pointed at the innocent victim who even then lay strapped to the couch in the adjoining room.

"Sh! Sh!" warned Orrin. "I dunno what ter think—I swear I dunno. But it looks mighty onsartain.

"There was Solon dead in the road, an' See layin' hurt ag'inst th' rock at the foot of the hill. Ha'f way up th' hill was his gun; it's got his name scratched onto th' butt, too.

"It's a turrible thing, Ramon—turrible! I don't wonder th' boy's out o' his head. An' that poor gal——"

Burress dropped his hands. The thought of Leslie was like the touch of cold steel.

"Have you repeated this to anybody? Did you give Medbury the gun, Orrin?" he panted.

At the moment wild visions of rushing to the coroner and yielding himself up as the murderer ravaged Burress' chaotic mind. The sin upon his conscience was already heavy enough; Seymour Lloyd must not be accused of his crime.

"No, no!" responded the herbalist, shaking his head vigorously. "I ain't said a word to a soul but you, doc. An' I hid the gun. It couldn't be now't but an accident, any way.

"The poor lad must ha' done it without meanin' to. He had nothin' ag'in' ol' Solon. An' that's what is the matter with him now. It's what has made him mad—the remembrance of it, I mean."

But Burress, getting a grip on himself, shook his head.

"No. The bruise upon his skull is the cause of his present condition; there can be no doubt of that. But the danger is—— My God! Nobody else must learn about that rifle, Orrin!"

"I—I didn't know jest what ter do erbout it," said the herbalist. "He's in trouble enough as it is, poor lad! If he gits well, he'll likely tell us all erbout it, an' then 'twill be time enough ter make it public, if that's best."

Gossip as Paddock naturally was, Burress saw he must be trusted to keep his word.

"I depend upon you to say nothing about it, Orrin," the physician said. "Besides, how do we know poor Lloyd had anything to do with my uncle's death?"

He could not look at the old man as he spoke.

"There were probably several hunters in the Big Woods at that hour," he added huskily.

"Thet's so—thet's so!" admitted Paddock. "Bill Gridley went out with a party of six 'at stayed overnight at the Barrows House, I understand. An' them city men air mighty careless with guns."

"And how about the magazine, Orrin?" pursued Burress eagerly. "Did you open the breech? Was his rifle loaded?"

The old man nodded, his lips pressed into a straight line.

"Yep," he said. "An' there was an empty cartridge in it. Poor See didn't even stop to pump that out arter the shot.

"It's a clear case, doc, an' a turrible one. If one o' them air city detectives got holt o' th' gun—— Wall, 'twould be all up with the boy!"

Orrin went away then, intent upon carrying Burress' promise back to the coroner, but the doctor remained to pace the porch, not daring to present himself before Leslie in the sick-room.

The complications of his position were hourly growing in number. Here was a difficulty of which he had not dreamed before. That Lloyd should be accused of the very crime of which he was the sole witness seemed beyond the bounds of credulity.

And yet there was a danger in it.

Lloyd must have fired one shot before reaching the scene of the murder. Burress' own rifle was safely hidden; it would never be found in that morass. But there was a possibility of Lloyd's weapon being a factor in placing the sick man in a grave position.

Added to all that the physician had endured this day, this new situation came near snapping the thread which bound him to sanity. He paced the

porch in the gathering dusk, a victim to fearful mental agony.

His crime was like the first of a row of child's blocks set on end; the shooting of Solon Burress had started a chain of horrors, one falling swiftly upon the heels of another.

The thought that another might suffer for his crime if he escaped had never before entered the physician's mind.

But at once the possibilities suggested by the finding of Lloyd's rifle at the scene of the murder lashed his mind to feverish activity.

The memory of his crime vouchsafed him no peace. At the juncture when it seemed that the laying of his uncle's murder to *his* door was indefinitely postponed, this possibility of an innocent person being accused arose.

He had thought of poor Lloyd as "the outcast of the universe." Surely that phrase more nearly fitted his own state.

He, the criminal, tortured by fear, lashed by the whip of remorse, haunted by visions of his awful act and its more awful penalty—he, Ramon Burress, was the outcast.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PROMISE.

THE housekeeper aroused Burress by coming to the door and announcing supper. He remembered that he had not eaten since the night before, and very little then.

And Leslie had gone without nourishment quite as long as would be good for her, too.

This thought helped to startle him out of his beclouded state of mind, and he hurried into the sick-room and fairly drove the girl to the supper table.

"You cannot be a good nurse and neglect your own body," he told her. "I shall need to depend upon you a great deal by and by, for I foresee that our poor friend may be ill some time. We cannot have you breaking down just at the beginning of the siege."

"Oh, doctor, if you were only sure he would recover," she responded. "It seems so hard that he does not even know me. He seems afraid of me, indeed. Will—will that last?"—and she was sobbing again.

"We will hope that nothing connected with his present state will last for long," Burress declared, restraining his own feelings with difficulty. "Be of good cheer, Leslie. I have sent for two wise men, in whom I have much confidence, and they will help us, I am sure."

He had only casually examined the patient on coming into the room, but when he was left alone with him he bent closer and stared once more into the eyes of his old friend.

The man shrank from him and his eyes glittered with alarm.

This creature—newly born, as it were, yet possessed immediately of matured mental and physical functions—had opened his eyes in a world of moving shadows. Having no memories, no knowledge of his own appearance, and therefore possessing no means of comparison, these shadows, which were really people, must be exceedingly terrifying.

The patient found himself capable of action, and when an involuntary movement had brought him in contact with one of these shadows, his alarm had instigated that display of almost herculean strength when he fought with Burress.

As he sat and watched the countenance of the patient, the doctor tried to put himself in Lloyd's place—to fix his own mind in the attitude of the patient's mind toward this new world into which he had come.

It was plain he had no recognition of objects, words, or persons; the dimensions—length, breadth and depth—were not appreciated, nor the color of objects and their form.

Burress doubted if the man distinguished the difference between himself, for instance, and Leslie Searle.

And while he sat there a strange thing occurred. Lloyd's eyes, in which lay an expression which had never been Lloyd's before, became fixed upon the physician.

The latter observed moisture gather under the lids, which winked vainly to

keep the drops back. The eyes overflowed, and, drop by drop, tears ran down the pallid cheeks. The man was crying, weeping like a child, but without a sound.

Nothing which had occurred since he had struggled with the patient and strapped him to the couch had so moved Burress. This newly awakened consciousness, this utterly strange personality that possessed his old friend, did not even know how to weep as humanity usually weeps.

It made the utter helplessness of Lloyd vastly more real to Burress. The poor fellow was unable to make a single want known. He must be taught to use some series of signs or gestures to express his wishes.

Burress bent the powers of his own mind upon the seeking of a reason for those tears. It was not fear that had excited the flow, for fear had made Lloyd struggle and cry out. Then this must be pain.

The straps were at fault. Burress rose and bent over him. Again alarm showed in his eyes and he recoiled from the physician. The tears ceased flowing, for to the helpless one fear took precedence over pain.

The physician loosened the strap passing around Lloyd's body and arms, and relief was apparent at once in the sufferer's countenance. He removed the one about the leg altogether, and then began rubbing the limbs to restore a more vigorous circulation of the blood.

Lloyd's actions denoted fear when the physician began, but gradually he seemed to comprehend that the relief afforded him was caused by the contact of the hands from which he so naturally shrank.

When Leslie Searle returned, he seemed quite calm, and Burress dared leave her alone with him while he ate.

Lloyd had fallen asleep when Burress came back to the sick-room; nevertheless, the latter prepared some nourishment, and had it ready when he roused again later in the evening.

There was another struggle then, and one which Burress deplored greatly; the patient had to be strapped down before anything could be forced between his lips.

The physician found Leslie of very little assistance to him, after all, for Lloyd seemed more afraid of the girl than of Burress himself!

He winced whenever Leslie came near him, and plainly was alarmed by either her dress or personal appearance. The girl was deeply hurt because of this very evident distaste expressed by her lover, but Burress comforted her as best he might.

Later in the evening Orrin Paddock came in again and offered to sit up with the patient. Burress had had no sleep the night before, and the racking incidents of the day had worn him greatly. He welcomed the old herbalist, for Orrin was well versed in nursing. The girl begged hard to remain with Betty, and the doctor sent her to bed. He had his own couch brought into the sick-room, and lay down in his clothing for short naps during the night.

But there was little rest for anybody in the house. Lloyd's state made him a very difficult patient, and he was in a feverish and most serious condition before the early morning train brought Dr. Munhall and Professor Oglethorpe.

"The old doctor," as Betty called Burress' predecessor, was an old-fashioned country practitioner—one of those Heaven-inspired disciples of Galen who learned their trade long before the word "specialist" came much into use in the medical profession.

Munhall was surgeon, oculist, aurist, dentist, and general adviser for the entire countryside, and although he had never had any practical experience in such a case as Lloyd's, even the college lecturer, Oglethorpe, deferred to the older physician's judgment upon some points.

It had been exceedingly difficult to force any nourishment upon the patient, although he was evidently suffering severely from the pangs of hunger. It was Dr. Munhall who succeeded in placing the liquid prepared so far back in the pharynx that Lloyd was obliged to swallow it.

Meanwhile, Professor Oglethorpe listened gravely to Burress' report of

the accident which had caused the patient's stupor, and to every detail of the efforts the younger physician had put forth in his behalf. A careful examination of the bruise upon the crown followed, after which the scientist sat some time, seemingly digesting what he had seen and what had been told him.

"You, Dr. Burress," he said at last, "are blessed with keen observation. I noticed that while you were under my eye. And I believe your diagnosis of this case from the moment the victim aroused from his stupor has been nearly, if not altogether, correct. It is an extraordinary condition of mind from which he suffers. Only one such case has ever come under my knowledge—that is, where the patient was as helpless as this man.

"I believe you are correct in saying that your friend is a mere babe in point of educated intelligence. He must be in a continual state of alarm at everything he sees and hears, and as for human speech, that of the inhabitants of Jupiter—if it has inhabitants—would be quite as intelligible to him.

"All external things must merely form, to his vision, a great picture like a painted canvas, and he possesses no sense of their especial relation. He has no conception of the flow of time, or of the difference between those whom he sees moving about him—although our movements are evidently what really fastens his gaze and holds his infantile attention.

"You have here, sir, an exceedingly interesting and instructive case."

"I have here a very sick man, professor, whom you and Dr. Munhall must aid me in curing," Burress said gravely.

"Ah, the cure!" repeated Oglethorpe, shaking his head. "That is another matter. This is not a thing that will yield to drugs. If the man ever returns to his original identity——"

Leslie had come into the room unobserved, and now glided forward with clasped hands.

"Oh, sir, he *will* recover?" she cried.

The scientist looked at her keenly, and smiled.

"Now that I see there is one so greatly interested in him, I have more courage to say he *may* recover. Medicine can do little for him, my dear young lady. Patience and careful nursing and love can do vastly more.

"He must have the attention and care which an infant needs. He must be watched and taught from the beginning. If his friends are faithful, he may yet greet them in his former identity—how soon I cannot say."

"Oh, I will do anything—anything!" murmured the girl, wringing her hands.

Burress, seeing her emotion, led her from the room. In the hall she clutched him by the lapels and looked searchingly into his face.

"Ramon," she said, "that man does not inspire me with confidence. Yes, yes! I know he will aid you all he can, and so will the old doctor—bless his dear old heart! But *you*, Ramon—it is in you I trust.

"You love him; think of it! You two boys have always been friends, and you have both been so—so kind to me." She looked at him steadily, although her eyes overflowed.

"I am going to take every advantage of your past kindness, Ramon. I—I know you think well of me." Her expression was an open declaration of deeper knowledge than her words indicated, and Burress winced.

"By our friendship—yes, by the tenderest thought you have ever had in your heart regarding me—I adjure you to be faithful to poor Seymour. You are the only person who has the least control over him. See how he shrinks from even me! You must stay with him; you must watch over him. I am convinced, dear friend, that you alone can work a cure in his case."

The girl's passion forced her ruthlessly to tear away the curtain which masked her very soul. But this was no time for false modesty, and her love made her selfish in her demands.

"Promise me you will not leave him, Ramon," she cried. "You must, you must promise. I'll not let you go away——"

"Who says I am going away?" exclaimed Burress hoarsely.

"Betty. Your trunks remain un-

packed; your suit-case and bag are ready; you were going yesterday. I will be frank with you, Ramon. Gossip is afoot already about you. It is said you owe a great deal of money and that your creditors are pressing you. Betty told me that one man came to dun you yesterday."

Burress winced under this, but made no reply, only wetting his dry lips and turning his gaze away from her upturned face.

"Listen to me, Ramon—you must not go away. I—I have a little money. You shall take it all—I will lend it to you. Don't be offended, dear friend. It is only a loan I suggest."

He regained some control over his features, and looked down at her once more.

He spoke solemnly:

"There is no need of my going away to escape my creditors, Leslie. Solon Burress agreed to pay them, and now that he is—is dead, his administrator will obey the mandatory provisions of his will."

"Then you will stay, Ramon? You will stay?"

"As long as I may," he responded huskily. "I will make Seymour my first care, and I will not spare myself in his need, so help me God!"

He disengaged her hands tenderly, turned toward the office, into which he stumbled blindly, groping before him with outstretched hand, and closed the door between them.

By the love she knew he bore her, Leslie had begged Burress to devote himself to the afflicted Lloyd—to care for and succor his rival in her affections.

And this, too, was but further requital which justice demanded for his crime.

CHAPTER X.

PERJURY.

Ogletiiorpe promised to return in two days to advise with them again, but dear old Munhall agreed to remain the week out, if he could be of any assistance to his successor. He had known Seymour Lloyd since his childhood, and was deeply interested in his welfare.

Burress saw that the old doctor was greatly broken; he seemed to have shifted the responsibility for the health of the community upon the younger practitioner's shoulders with vast relief, and was loath to take it up again.

Forty-odd years he had dwelt here in Barrowsvale, and had ushered into the world, and sped those departing for another sphere, with kindliness. Everybody loved him, but in many things Munhall was hopelessly behind the times.

Burress saw that, without the professor, his old friend would have been of little assistance in planning his further treatment of the patient. Munhall knew how to make Lloyd take nourishment, but he was all at sea upon the more scientific phases of the disorder.

Burress had sworn to remain by Lloyd and devote all the energy and knowledge he possessed in the endeavor to restore him to his old mind. At least, he must watch and care for him closely until the unformed consciousness of the patient should become used to the conditions of life which confronted him.

He would be obliged to live with Lloyd, and teach him hourly, as in some few cases idiots have been taught and their dormant intelligence awakened.

Otherwise the aroused mentality of the unfortunate young man would become clouded and he might end in hopeless insanity.

Leslie did not understand all that she asked when she had wrung that promise from Ramon Burress, but he knew what it meant.

He saw the sacrifice he must make, and, in the calmer mood which followed, he welcomed the task set him as being a partial reparation for his sin.

Medbury, the coroner, sent up word that he desired Dr. Burress' presence at the shop of the undertaker, where the body of old Solon had been prepared for burial, and, shrink as he might from the task, the physician must needs obey the summons.

The inquest proper had been made the day before, and the cause of the old man's death formally decided, but some

details regarding the wound must be added to the official report, and Medbury was a stickler for the red-tape of his office.

Knowing something of the strain under which Dr. Burress had suffered for the preceding twenty-four hours, his townspeople would not think it strange that the young physician should show so haggard and seamed a face, and, much as he shrank from the ordeal, he dared not ask Munhall to go in his stead.

He remembered the ancient superstition regarding the fresh opening of the victim's wounds when the murderer is brought into the house where the corpse lies, and he was in a state of mind to believe in the possibility of such a fantastic notion.

It seemed certain that something awful must take place when he came to rest his profane gaze upon the body of the old man.

But to utterly break down there in the undertaker's shop, under the strain of viewing the corpse, would cause less comment, Burress believed, than seeking to avoid the issue altogether by sending a substitute.

Orrin told him that Cartaret was still in town, and Burress feared Cartaret. The insistent creditor's had been the only face which expressed suspicion connecting Burress with old Solon's death.

Orrin came especially to bear him company to the undertaker's rooms. The herb-gatherer admitted to the doctor as they went along that his mind was vastly disturbed over the gun which he had found upon the scene of the shooting.

"I swanny, doc, I ben't doin' right, an' I know it. I'm hidin' all this from the coroner, an' I been under oath, too! But that poor boy——"

"Let your good heart speak for him, Orrin," the physician said quickly. "Remember that you do not really know anything about the shooting. The gun proves nothing."

"Proves nothin'? Waal, I guess yes, it do!" snapped the old fellow. "I been thinkin o' this purty nigh all night, doc, w'ile I was watchin' with See. If that wound in Solon's head was made by a ball the caliber of See's gun, th' proof's purty conclusive, ain't it, now?"

Burress stopped short in the road and looked at him. He knew Lloyd's gun well—as well as he did his own. It was an entirely different weapon from the rifle he had hidden in the swamp.

Lloyd's rifle was a Marlin repeater, throwing a 30-30 ball, while his own had been a Winchester, using 32-40 cartridges.

The wound in the man's head would be larger and much more ragged than a hole bored by a ball from Lloyd's lighter gun.

The nature of the wound, therefore, would disprove at once any suspicion that might fall upon Lloyd; but he dared say nothing of this to Orrin Paddock at the moment. In saving his friend he could not afford to attract suspicion to himself.

"Come on; come on, sir," quoth Orrin, tugging at his sleeve; "you've got ter go, ye know. God knows I don't wish the boy harm, but I solemnly believe I've done wrong in hidin' that gun."

"It will not mend matters to produce it now, Orrin," Burress interposed quickly. "Let us wait and see how it all comes out."

"Aye! There's allus a chance that See won't never be any better, an' a crazy man can't be punished for his deeds, that's sartain!" declared the old man sullenly.

Orrin was determined to look upon Lloyd as insane, and perhaps it was as well that he did. The herbalist evidently needed some such salve for his conscience; his secrecy regarding the finding of Lloyd's gun troubled him much.

The usual crowd of loungers who attended such entertainments as police court sessions and inquests already thronged the undertaker's room.

Way was made for the doctor and Orrin that they might go forward, and several of his townsmen greeted Burress in hoarse whispers.

It was a gloomy room, and the session had all the solemnity of the funeral ceremony itself.

The body had been made ready by the undertaker for the church service, and reposed in a rosewood coffin upon black draped "horses" at the further end of the room.

Such extravagance would never have been countenanced by old Solon in life, but Lawyer Higby had ideas as to the fitness of things.

As the gathering stirred and opened a lane for his advance, the physician walked forward as though he were a somnambulist. He replied to none of the greetings of his neighbors, and his eyes were fixed and glassy. That foolish superstition of the "blood trial" controlled his racked mind again. What would happen when he looked upon the countenance of him at whom he had fired his rifle twenty-four hours before?

Could he gaze upon the murdered man without some awful thing taking place?

He tottered as he approached the coffin, near which the coroner was sitting at a table. Orrin saw his emotion and offered his arm.

A whisper went around the room. It was an expression of sympathy.

Suddenly the physician observed the beefy face and pursy form of Cartaret in the crowd. The man was watching him closely with every feature of his countenance revealing suspicion and doubt.

The sight acted like a tonic upon Burress' nerves. Before this man—the only person, perhaps, in all that company who suspected him—he must carry the matter boldly.

Medbury welcomed him, and the physician managed to shake hands. The undertaker rose and pushed aside the slide which hid the dead man's face.

"Like to look at him, doctor?" he whispered, with an officious smirk.

He must do it! He must gaze upon the face of the old man who was dead because of his deplorable act. It would be terrible, he believed, for he had a vivid remembrance of the expression of horror on Solon's countenance as he fell there in the wood-road.

He wavered on his feet for a moment, then took a decisive step to the coffin's side.

His back was to the assemblage, and well it was so, perhaps. The undertaker was looking upon the corpse as though proud of his handiwork in preparing the dead man for the grave. Medbury was busy with his papers, and no soul marked the flame of emotion that overspread Burress' face when he distinguished the features of his uncle there in the dim light of the crowded room.

Once at the city morgue, where an older and more seasoned member of his medical class took him, he had seen the body of a man killed in a dance-hall brawl. The man had been stabbed and had died instantly, with the awful fear of death, hatred of his enemy and the agony of his wound all stamped upon his features.

In the countenance of Solon Burress, who had died quite as suddenly and terribly, the nephew expected to see much the same expression. He was unaware of the fact that most men dying of gunshot wounds show in their composed countenances a great peace and content which those passing quietly and in their own beds seldom attain!

Old Solon actually smiled in the sleep of death; and it was not his well-remembered sarcastic and bitter grimace. It was as though, mean and cantankerous as he had been in life, the great revelation which had come so suddenly to him there in the wood-road was of such beauty that it had stamped its reflection upon his mortal husk. The flush died out of Burress' cheek again, and a long, tremulous sigh passed his lips.

The undertaker looked up and saw him wavering there, clinging blindly to the nickel rail of the coffin. He reached for a glass of water and thrust it into the physician's shaking hand, and, having swallowed the draft, Burress managed to pull himself together.

Medbury arose and came over to him.

"If I'd known the old doctor was going to be in town to-day, I'd asked him to come out here instead," he said softly. "Your uncle's death must be something of a shock to you, Dr. Burress.

"I will not keep you long, but before closing the case I wished to obtain a

medical opinion on the nature of the wound. Unless that poor fellow, Seymour Lloyd, recovers, there is little hope of our ever learning who fired the fatal shot, I suppose.

"There were two score hunters in the Big Woods yesterday morning, and some people are very careless about shooting across roads and public passways. But this sad case, I hope, will bring the Legislature to its senses, and be the cause of the passage, next session, of some better law governing the hunting seasons. The death was the result of accident, of course, and perhaps even Lloyd could throw no light upon the matter. Still—— How is he, by the way, doctor?"

Burress had found his voice and self-control. He replied quietly enough, but he avoided looking again upon the face of the man in the coffin.

"That's very sad," was Medbury's comment. "It seems unfortunate that *he* went into the Big Woods yesterday morning, too. He wasn't hunting, for no gun was found with him, I understand. Nathan couldn't imagine what took him clear over there.

"The old man"—Medbury indicated the body with a careless jerk of his thumb—"had started down to the Widow Blythesdale's after a heifer. He held a mortgage on her place, it seems, and she could not pay the interest, and so he was going to fairly take the children's milk from 'em.

"Humph! He was your uncle, I s'pose, but I don't believe you or anybody else will weep much over old Solon's death."

Burress winced at the brutality of the statement. Medbury was removing the padding of the coffin from about the head of the dead man so that the doctor might see the aperture by which the ball entered and that where it came out.

"I want to say in my report what *you* think must have been the caliber of the rifle from which the bullet was fired," the coroner continued. "It's a mighty clean wound on *this* side, you see—where it entered. The skull is broken a good bit where the lead burst the wall of the cavity on passing out. Not a large ball, I should say."

Orrin Paddock had crowded forward to look and listen, as usual, his twinkling old eyes peering over the doctor's shoulder as the latter stooped to scrutinize the hole in the head of the corpse.

The direction of the lead pellet was plain. It had entered rather high above the ear, its course being obliquely downward, as was natural, considering that the shot had been fired from a considerable height above the level of the wood-road.

The point of exit was below the rim of the other ear, and the ear as well as the bone was torn badly on that side. The hole where the ball had entered was almost round, its edge clearly defined, and so small that a lock of the thin hair had been brushed down, covering it completely.

Burress' vision swam. He could scarcely fix his gaze steadily enough upon the wound to see it at first. He was desperately ill—as ill as he had been the previous morning after running away from the scene of the tragedy.

"Now, what do you think, doctor?" Medbury asked. "You have seen similar wounds, I suppose?"

Burress nodded. He could not trust himself to speak for the moment. And then, when his vision cleared and he gained command over his nerves again, he was smitten with a most unexpected aspect of the wound.

He had shot several deer and on one occasion a bear with his rifle, and flattered himself that he could not be mistaken in the mark of his own bullet.

Yet, this aperture looked vastly different from the hole that his Winchester usually bored through flesh and bone.

It would be an easy thing to state as his opinion that the rifle throwing the ball which had killed the man was of different caliber. Why not do so?

Would he not be justified in saying that a gun of smaller bore had done the deed?

His lips parted to make this statement. Surely a criminal may be excused if, when the opportunity arises, he shields himself.

Then he remembered that poor Lloyd's rifle was of smaller caliber than his own.

If he went on record as stating that he believed Solon Burress was killed by a ball of small caliber, and Orrin Paddock weakened and produced Lloyd's gun, *his* opinion might help to fasten suspicion upon the guiltless man.

He scarcely recognized the tones of his own voice when he spoke, but they were steady.

"I believe that the wound was made by a rifle ball of at least 30-40 caliber," he said.

"You'll go under oath to that, I suppose?" asked the coroner, returning to his table and leaving the undertaker to rearrange the body.

Burress took the required oath. The coroner made the record, bowed to him, and the physician walked out.

In the street he found the herb-gatherer shuffling along at his side and peering up at him with his ferret-like eyes.

"I swanny, doctor. Ye're in the same boat with me—if that's any comfort. I seen that hole in poor Solon's head, an' I'm much mistaken if a bigger ball than a 30-30 ever made it."

Burress remained silent, striding on without even glancing at the old man in his flapping linen duster, who still continued at his side.

"*That's* the caliber of the rifle I found—See's rifle, ye know," added Orrin.

Burress still refrained from looking at him.

(To be continued.)

A SCHEME TO WIN.

BY GARRETT SWIFT.

Beating him at his own game, showing what's sauce for the goose may be turned into gravy for the gander.

GIDDLETHORPE lived in a fine house in Omaha. He was a rich man, and pompous enough to let people know that he had not always been rich. He had a few disagreeable ways, and in some quarters was laughed at.

There was one matter concerning Giddlethorpe that was not laughed at. This was Emma.

If there is to-day a poor family in Omaha who has not felt the beneficence and sweet charity of Emma Giddlethorpe, I fail to know of it. She had the poor on her mind all the time. Giddlethorpe never.

Miss Emma Giddlethorpe was young, pretty, and—nice.

There was a young man in Omaha named Loran. It was a queer name, and in some ways Ted Loran was a queer chap. But there were no signs of queerness when he fell in love with Emma Giddlethorpe.

Ted met Emma at a dance. They had a few waltzes together, and it was with the greatest regret that Ted saw Giddlethorpe's carriage, Giddlethorpe's coachman, and Giddlethorpe at the curb, to see Emma home.

Loran went home himself and sat down to think.

"She is the girl for me," he decided. "Of course we cannot rush things. I have only met her once. But think, oh, Teddy Loran, think! To have a cottage with Emma as its queen! To leave for the office after a kiss in the morning! To return at five and receive the twin kiss! Teddy Loran, that would be life."

Mr. Loran was about twenty-four years of age. He was employed as a salesman of ribbons and earned seven dollars a week. The room he lived in was small, uncomfortable, poorly furnished. He usually made his breakfast of coffee and a cruller. Perhaps he might have a roll.

His lunch was generally soup at a free-lunch table, and he recklessly squandered twenty-five cents on a square meal for dinner.

He was about five feet eight inches in height, and weighed about a hundred and forty pounds.

He wore good clothes and was very particular about his dress.

Loran slept well that night, but woke up with Emma Giddlethorpe on his mind.

That morning he ate no breakfast at all. He just dreamed of possibilities.

"It's no use," he said to himself that noon. "I am not actually worth my salt to-day. I've got to have Miss Giddlethorpe or go mad. Now, you see, I can't support a wife on seven dollars a week, unless—well—I think I'll go see the old man."

That night Mr. Giddlethorpe sat reading his paper. He had enjoyed a good supper, and Emma was somewhere busying herself about the house.

The bell rang, and the maid opened the door. Mr. Loran wished to see Mr. Giddlethorpe. He was admitted.

Mr. Giddlethorpe had never purchased ribbons, and therefore had never met Mr. Loran.

He received the young man graciously, wondering what he wanted.

"I believe your name is Loran," said he. "Is there any matter of business you want to see me about?"

"Yes," said Loran. "I think it is a matter of good business. You see, Mr. Giddlethorpe, last night I met your daughter at Mrs. Wigginson's dance. Mrs. Wigginson is a friend of mine. I liked your daughter very much. In fact, sir, she struck me as being just the one—the only one, I may say—I could wish as a wife.

"I said nothing to her, of course. I made up my mind that I would see you and ask your consent to see your daughter with a view to asking her to be my wife."

"Huh!" said Mr. Giddlethorpe. "Ever see her before?"

"No, sir, only once, last night. But I can read human nature like a book. I could see after an hour that she was the very woman for me."

Mr. Giddlethorpe looked at his paper and grinned.

"This fresh chump," he thought to himself, "is about the limit. Emma must reduce her visiting list."

"You were a poor man yourself once, Mr. Giddlethorpe," Loran went on.

Mr. Giddlethorpe leaned back in his chair. He laughed uproariously.

"Well, I should say I was!" he said. "I remember when I lived two days on one loaf of bread and the water I drank from a stream. There were fish in the stream, but I had no way of catching them. Furthermore, if I had caught them, I had no match to light a fire. I knew the Indians used to light a fire by rubbing two sticks together until the heat generated a spark. I tried it. I blistered my hands, wore out my temper, and never even felt the wood get warm."

Young Loran listened eagerly. This was just what he wanted to hear.

He was poor himself. He had a perfect right to anticipate generous treatment from a man who had been so poor as Giddlethorpe.

"You were fortunate in having the ability to make money," said Loran.

"Oh, yes, I was fortunate!" admitted Mr. Giddlethorpe with a laugh. "I was very fortunate. Know what I did? I got so hungry I grew desperate. I met a peddler with a pack. He was an old fellow and I was young, hungry, and desperate. I held him up.

"He was scared almost to death. Of course I wasn't going to hurt him, but he didn't know that. By jiminy, he knelt down and begged my pardon for anything he had ever done to me, and I had never seen him before.

"I took his pack away from him, and went to the next town and began to sell. Shoe-strings went up. I got ten cents a pair. Combs that he would have sold for ten cents I sold for twenty. Asbestos iron holders that would have brought five, brought me fifteen.

"I made enough money to buy a new stock, and away I went. Then after a while I got a horse and wagon. Then I was made. I was rich. That's the way I began life. Oh, I was poor enough."

"Then, having been through so severe a school yourself, you will allow me to speak without fear. May I address your daughter?"

Mr. Giddlethorpe studied his paper attentively, but in fact he was thinking.

"What is your business?" he asked.

"I am ribbon-salesman at Gerald's."

"Rib—how much do you make? What is your pay?"

"Seven dollars a week, sir."

Mr. Giddlethorpe went off in a roar of laughter.

"Seven—seven dollars a week!" he cried. "And you want to marry Emma! You are crazy! It wouldn't buy her shoes. You can't support a wife on seven dollars a week."

"I did not ask to marry her while I was earning that. I asked to be permitted to pay her attention. I may meet a peddler and rob him some day."

Mr. Giddlethorpe laughed heartily.

"Do it! Get some old guy—get anybody! Make some money, and then—we'll talk."

"I'll try it, sir."

Mr. Giddlethorpe was not ugly; on the contrary he offered Loran a cigar. The young man left and began to think.

The process of thinking was something new to one who, since he left school, had sold ribbons to women. He sat in his little bare room with his aching head resting in his hands. He thought of scheme after scheme. Not one of them dazzled him with its latent possibilities.

Then a grim sort of smile spread over his face, and he went to bed and slept.

Loran met Emma several times, but did not speak a word to her of the love that was brimming in his heart. Emma grew to like him. Then, two months after the interview with her father, Loran called again.

"Hello, Mr.—er—Ribbons, is it?" laughed Mr. Giddlethorpe.

"Loran," said the young man gravely. "I am not a ribbon-salesman any more."

"Lose your job?"

"I resigned. I looked about and struck a good thing. I am in the mining business now."

Mr. Giddlethorpe stared.

"Mining! How did you get into mining?."

"Well, I don't mind telling you. An old uncle of mine had a share in a silver mine down in Wild Cat Gulch. It was supposed to be played out. Well, he told me about it, and I offered him ten per cent on all I could take out of it. He let me have it. I am doing well."

Mr. Giddlethorpe set his thinking machine going hard. Here was a young man who had jumped in a short time from a ribbon-clerk at seven dollars a week to a prosperous mine owner.

"Do you own the whole mine?" he asked.

"Well," said Loran, "I control it. I did sell a few shares. I got seventy-five at the very start. I've been paying my uncle three hundred dollars every week. I think I've got a good thing."

"That is what I should certainly call a good thing. What are the shares selling for now?"

"Oh, they are not selling. In fact, there are none for sale. The old shaft is just as good as a new one, and everything was clear gain from the start."

"Yes," said Mr. Giddlethorpe. "I should say so. And you went in without capital?"

"Didn't own a dollar. There are a thousand shares, and I own seven hundred. I could use a little capital for the smelter. If you wanted a couple of hundred shares, I might let you have them."

Mr. Giddlethorpe studied a moment.

"I bought mining stock once and got stuck. I would not try it again without seeing the mine."

"Well, Wild Cat Gulch is not far. I have a good horse at the door, and we can drive out."

"Great Scott, man, not to-night!"

"Oh, we could be there by midnight. I own a small hotel. We can put up for the night and give all day to the examination of the mine."

"Oh, I can't do that. What are you selling your shares for?"

"A thousand dollars."

"Well, I couldn't take two hundred. I'll take ten."

"All right. That will build a new smelter."

"I should say so. I'll give you a check."

"But I haven't got the certificates of stock with me."

"Well, a young man who has developed the business talent that you have is worth trusting. Here's the check. Mail the certificates to-morrow."

Mr. Loran calmly placed the check in his pocket.

"Now, I wish, Mr. Giddlethorpe to revert to a subject on which we formerly held a conversation—I mean concerning my marriage with Emma. You said do something. I have. May I ask her to be my wife?"

"Well, it is too soon."

"I know it's a short courtship, but I may wish to take a trip to New York soon, and it may just as well be our wedding trip."

"Wait a minute," said Mr. Giddlethorpe.

He called a servant and sent for Emma. She came in, and blushed when she saw Loran.

"Do you think enough of this man to marry him?" asked her father.

"I do, papa."

"Then, by the great horn-spoon, go get married. I don't want any fuss about it. I have just given him a check for ten thousand dollars for shares in a mine. He is making money faster than I ever did. Go on with you! I want to read my paper."

The two departed and the minister of the church in which Emma worshiped performed the ceremony, with his wife and a friend as witnesses. The next day the check was deposited and an account opened at the bank. That night the bride and groom visited Mr. Giddlethorpe.

"Well, young people?"

"Yes, we are well enough," said Loran comfortably.

"You did not send me those mining certificates."

"I never had any to send."

Had a cannon ball carried away Mr. Giddlethorpe's head, his face could not have shown a more blank expression, nor could it have been redder in color.

"But—but—you told me you had a mine!"

"So I did and I worked it."

"But—what about my ten thousand dollars?"

"Oh, I put that in the bank to-day. You told me to go do something."

"But—what did you do?"

"I did you out of ten thousand dollars and your daughter. In this case you were the peddler."

Mr. Giddlethorpe's face grew black, then he leaned back in his chair and laughed.

"Let me see your marriage certificate. If you have no mining certificates you may possibly have that."

"Oh, yes, I've got that"—exhibiting the document.

"I am going out for a walk," said Mr. Giddlethorpe. "You won't go out this evening, I suppose."

"No, sir."

Mr. Giddlethorpe put on his hat and went out on the stoop. He looked at the moon long and earnestly. Then he said:

"Well, I'll be darned!" and descended the steps for his evening's constitutional.

THE CITY'S SOLITUDE.

NOT to some bleak and long forgotten wilderness
My feet would turn, had I desire to be alone;
Not of the hills would I seek respite from distress,
Nor let the silent desert hear my sorrow and my moan.
Nay, here where chaos reigns, where din and noise are rife,
The soul can find its solitude, its surcease from the strife.

The myriad throngs that seem to ceaseless come and go,
And, moving on, forget that other men have life—
Forget the simple hand-clasps and forget that they should know
Each other in the battle of Pain and ruthless Strife—
Here where the tide of life rolls on with an incessant moan,
Here on the city's throbbing breast I feel the most alone.

Charles Hanson Towne.

A MONTH IN MASQUERADE.*

BY EDGAR FRANKLIN.

The cue from Fate that was handed out to a man down on his luck, why he felt compelled to act on it, and the risk he ran in the process.

SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTERS PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED.

JOHN DUNCAN is a young New York architect down on his luck. One night while walking about the lower part of the city, he has occasion to aid an elderly gentleman who has been set upon by thugs. The gentleman is mortally injured, but before he dies he gives Duncan a roll of bills footing up $7,000 and a photograph, with incoherent directions about "Henry," and swearing Duncan to secrecy.

After three or four days the body is identified as "William Smith" by an unknown man. Duncan banks the money and awaits developments. On examining the photograph, he finds that it bears a strong resemblance to himself. The name "Henry Alvin" is written across the back. A few days later he is accosted in the street by a stranger who calls him "Henry," speaks about his family, and begs him to return and do as his uncle desires. Duncan makes an appointment with him at the office of a big iron company known the length of the nation, and there, despite his protestations, he is introduced to the other members of the firm as "Mr. Henry Alvin, who has returned to us to take his place at the head of the International Iron Company."

Morley, the stranger aforesaid, who turns out to be the company's secretary, instructs Duncan as to his duties. He learns in this way that the man whom he saw die was one Fraim, the head of the International, who had been searching for his missing nephew and who was now supposed to be absent in Europe. Chambers and another member of the firm are scheming in Fraim's absence, to run the company for their own ends. This would precipitate a panic, according to Morley, and Alvin is needed as a reassuring head.

Duncan accepts the responsibilities, and presently ascertains that one of them necessitates his engaging himself to Beatrice Morrison, who holds the controlling shares in the company Chambers is seeking to obtain. Duncan is in love with Louise Havers, of whom he has made a confidant. She sees in the papers the announcement of his betrothal to Miss Morrison, and writes to Duncan to ask if it is true.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PRICE SOARS.

"COME at once and tell me."

Duncan jumped from his chair with a great determination.

He *would* go and tell her! He would dash to her as fast as wheels could carry him, and tell her that it was not the truth.

He crossed quickly to the bell, to ring for his man; his finger touched the button—and dropped away again.

The papers were telling only the absolute truth.

Not twenty-four hours back he himself had gone to Beatrice Morrison and asked her to become his wife. More than that, he had done it in full possession of all his senses, and while in love with another girl.

The enormity of the situation overcame Duncan. He staggered back to his chair and dropped.

He could not go to Louise and tell her that the story was untrue—that was an impossibility. He would not deceive her, and he could not, for from now on the society reporters would keep the most minute track of his affairs and the public would be regaled daily with most things that occurred between himself and Beatrice, and many more that did not.

From his place at the bottom of the ladder in the old days Duncan had seen similar affairs handled in the press, and he knew.

But was he simply to maintain silence and allow Louise to draw her own conclusions? That would be equally impossible.

No, he would go to her and relate the whole situation. He would tell her

* *This story began in the October issue of* THE ARGOSY. *The two back numbers will be mailed to any address on receipt of* 20 *cents.*

of the condition of things in the International, and explain as best he could why this last act had been so vitally necessary.

He would try his hardest to bring her to a clear insight—and if that failed he would sacrifice everything else and proclaim himself for what he was!

Could he do it? Duncan shook his weary head. He might carry out the whole program, even to creating such a sensation in the business world as had never been heard of, but would it benefit him greatly?

Bit by bit Duncan realized the hard truth.

His miserable act in proposing to Beatrice was not a thing in contemplation.

It was an accomplished fact, and no amount of argument or reasoning could erase it from the list of yesterday's doings.

He had gone to her and put the question, and now, as the papers truly stated, they were engaged. The act had been done.

Would Louise ever admit its dire necessity?

Most certainly no. Duncan knew it only too well.

Louise was a girl of high principles and high ideals. The need of many things she might have admitted; the need of such a deed as this she never would, by any possibility, concede.

To tell the true state to Louise and ask her to forgive would be an insult, downright and absolute. It would mean the eternal loss, not only of her love, but even of her barest respect. He couldn't do it.

Better far, Duncan thought, remain where he was and allow the girl to draw the bitter conclusion she must. It would sadden her, perhaps for life, and it would shatter her profound faith in him, but at least she must credit him with the negative virtue of not seeking to evade the unhappy truth.

Duncan threw himself face downward on the couch and lay there motionless and inert with his nearly intolerable misery, and there, after midnight, his man found him sound asleep.

A tasteless breakfast over, he realized that his decision had rearranged itself somewhat.

There were some things past the bearing of man, and this was one of them. Be the outcome what it might, he meant to see Louise that morning and give her the barest outline of the truth. She would regard him thereafter with the utmost contempt—and he would, in a way, deserve it thoroughly.

And if the interview terminated as it must, then he would bide by his acts, for the sake of the International, and all that that implied, to the end.

He found himself in the Havers parlor presently, very chilly and apprehensive of the coming meeting. He walked to and fro and counted the endless minutes as they dragged on.

After a little his ear caught the sound of a light step descending. He stood still and stared at the doorway in a sort of stupid fascination.

Louise entered swiftly, and with an expression of hopeful eagerness that cut Duncan to the quick.

"My note did not reach you until this morning, John?"

"It came last night. I——"

"But I had expected——"

She broke off sharply and reddened slightly. The flush was followed by a sudden pallor.

"What is the matter, John?"

Duncan could not speak for the moment.

"So it was the truth? It was not what I had almost believed—a newspaper romance?"

"It was the truth, but—oh, I tell you it is not the truth, Louise!"

"You are engaged to Miss Morrison?"

"I? No! Alvin——"

"You are engaged to Miss Morrison?" Louise persisted.

"Louise, let me try to make it clear to you; let me——"

"John, one sentence will make everything quite clear to me. Whatever name you may have assumed—whatever else you may do—you are still yourself. Did you ask Miss Morrison to marry you?"

"But——"

"Did you?"

"I—yes," Duncan cried desperately. "But, Louise, listen to me. There is so much——"

"But I do not care to know it, please."

The girl had turned and was moving toward the door again.

Duncan groaned aloud and darted after her.

He tried to catch her hand, but she folded both behind her back and faced him coldly.

The unhappy man dropped back a pace or two.

"Louise, you can't know—you can't comprehend what impelled me to do it!"

"I am afraid that I understand too well, and—it does not interest me."

"But it is not as you suppose! I don't love the girl, Louise. You should know that better than any one else! I——"

"And still you asked her to be your wife?"

"Yes, but——"

Louise studied him for a moment with sad, thoughtful eyes.

"I could not have believed it, John!"

"But you shall see that I was justified! I'm going to make it all clear to you, Louise. I——"

"Please!"

"Hear me for only a minute or two."

"I do not wish to."

"Louise, I proposed to Miss Morrison for one reason only—to save the country from a panic that would have staggered every business house from Maine to California."

A scornful little smile appeared on the girl's lips for a moment and vanished again.

"That was most considerate."

"You—you don't believe it?"

The girl regarded him silently for an instant, then turned away and walked toward the corridor.

"It is the truth!" cried Duncan wildly. "Insane as it sounds, it is the gospel truth, child. If you will only let me explain to you—let me give you some idea of the real——"

The girl turned in the doorway.

"You have admitted one thing, John, and more than that I do not care to know. It is true that you are engaged to Miss Morrison, is it not?"

"Yes, but——"

"Then, good-by. And—and I can still hope that you will be very, very happy."

"You're not going to give me a chance? Louise, tell me that I may come to you—to-night, to-morrow, whenever you will—and explain."

"John, I hope sincerely that I may never see you again. Good-by."

She left the room, and Duncan caught a glimpse of her skirt as she ascended the stairs.

He was alone and stunned.

He might better have remained away. All ties between them were broken now. Forgiveness, or anything approaching forgiveness, he had not dared expect, yet he had cherished a hope that the girl might listen.

Now that hope had vanished and he was free to go his way untrammeled by any idea of loyalty to Louise.

What should he do? Follow out his original intention of abandoning the whole farce and proclaiming his identity?

As he canvassed the prospect now, even his aching brain could understand that the move would but mean more widespread sorrow.

Once a proven impostor, what a victory for Chambers! And what a position for Beatrice Morrison! The story would come out, and how many columns of lurid stuff would it not furnish for the scribes of the daily press!

On the other hand, would Louise look more kindly upon him for the act? He had been a cur before, he felt, but how would she regard him after the sensation had died down?

Certainly with less kindness even than now, for his sins would have multiplied a hundred-fold.

Duncan fumbled his way blindly out of the quiet house, sore and bruised in spirit. Truly, the price of his adventure was rising hourly—and he had no alternative but to pay.

Waiting at the corner for the car which should take him down-town, he recalled his days of poverty-stricken dissatisfaction in the boarding-house

not many blocks from here, and he laughed long and bitterly. Oh, to return!

In that happy time he had had a roof and a bed and an apology for food, and little more. But he had possessed as well the gift of optimism and the blessing of hope, and, more than either, the deep, firm love of Louise.

Now he had lost all! With millions upon millions at his command, the burden of the world seemed to be resting on his shoulders, and he hoped for very little more than a speedy end to his miseries, did it come even in the form of death.

At the office another ordeal awaited him.

Barrington hurried into his private rooms a few minutes after his arrival, and Downs and half a dozen more.

Morley brought up in the rear.

Their purpose was clear. They had come to congratulate him, and they did it heartily enough.

Duncan's responses were rather lacking in enthusiasm, until he caught Morley's warning eye across the room. He thanked them then with all the vigor he could muster. He had nothing more to lose now, and for the rest of the tragedy he might as well play his part to the best of his ability.

The secretary of the International lagged behind the rest, and presently Duncan found that they were alone.

"It got out, eh?"

Duncan glared at him.

"Yes, it got out, Morley."

"Well—why shouldn't it? It was only a matter of a few days at most when every one would have known the happy fact."

"That was no reason for you to take the announcement upon yourself, Mr. Morley."

"I?" The secretary chuckled. "Who says that I did it?"

"No one else had been told, and—there were details."

"Um-um!" Morley regarded him genially. "Well, I don't deny that possibly, in some curious fit of absent-mindedness, I may have dropped a remark in a quarter where it would be likely to get into print, but——"

Something in Duncan's expression caused him to pause for a moment, then he continued rather defiantly:

"Hang you, Henry! Fraim was right in his estimate of you, in one way. He believed you to be about the hardest and most unreasonable mortal to deal with that ever walked the earth—and I agree with him. What the deuce are you glaring about, any way? Do you know what that announcement has done already?

"It's fairly converted Walters to our side, and he's an acquisition worth having. Next to Chambers or one or two of the London people, there was not a more dangerous character in the International. Now he understands which side is going to win, and he's trying to sneak back."

Duncan's thoughts were wandering a little, and he did not reply. Morley construed his silence as further evidence of bad temper. He shrugged his shoulders, and walked to the outer offices, humming.

"Good-by for the present, my remarkable young friend. Come to your senses and be happy."

Be happy! Duncan smiled forlornly over the words when he was again alone. Happiness and he seemed to have become estranged.

Still, it was something at least that his sacrifice had not been wasted altogether.

Walters had returned to the safe side, and that meant a great deal. If two or three more would follow his example, the danger would be past and Chambers beaten.

When they were once within the fold again and secured there—— Well, perhaps a way would finally appear by which he could safely abandon his rôle and make a new start in life.

But—Chambers. Would he allow himself to be thrashed so easily? Duncan disliked the man hugely, and he had felt a little fear of him on one or two occasions when Chambers' little eyes had rested on him.

He was a wonderfully strong man in many ways, as Duncan knew. He had risen from a laborer at the smelting furnace to the ownership of his firm; he

had brought other small concerns into his own and controlled at last a certain part of the iron market. He was self-educated and arrogant, as hard as flint, and as violent, sometimes, as lightning.

However, he could hardly do much if the rest forsook his leadership. Duncan found the second vice-president an unpleasant subject for speculation, and he called for his stenographer and set about certain routine matters which were up for his attention.

The work had hardly begun when Chambers entered. He surveyed the scene as he crossed the room, and went straight to his point.

"Pardon me, Alvin, but are you very pressed for time this morning?"

"No."

"Then, if you'll ask the young man to step out for ten or fifteen minutes——"

The stenographer rose and left the offices. Chambers followed and tried the door, and then snapped the catch.

He brought a chair to the side of the desk and sat down. Duncan wondered what was coming.

"Alvin!"

"Well?"

"There have been a lot of quiet little private interviews around these offices since you turned up again, haven't there?"

"Why, perhaps. What of it?"

Chambers hitched a little closer.

"Well, you and I'll have one ourselves, right now!"

CHAPTER XII.

A NEW ALVIN HERITAGE.

DUNCAN dropped the papers he held and turned inquiringly to the second vice-president.

The latter remained silent for a moment, eying the ex-architect with that keen, beady stare the latter disliked so intensely.

Finally he smiled a little and spoke.

"Alvin, you're afraid of me!"

A wave of anger surged up within Duncan.

"You're mistaken, Chambers."

"Well—perhaps I am." The other laughed slightly. "Or, perhaps you will be within a few minutes."

"I hardly think so," said Duncan evenly. "What is the mystery, Chambers?"

"There's nothing very mysterious about it, I think. You know pretty well my sentiments on certain matters."

"I know very little about any of your sentiments. And," Duncan added rather sharply, "I don't know that I am particularly interested in knowing any more just now."

"You have a particularly cool way, haven't you—something very much like that of your respected uncle."

He fell silent again. Duncan rapped out impatiently:

"See here, sir! What on earth does it all mean? I shall not try to misunderstand our relations; I know that we are not particularly friendly. Therefore, if you have any business here, let's get down to it, and have it over with."

Chambers glanced at him.

"All right, we will! Alvin, what the devil did you mean by it?"

"By what?"

"By doing what you've just done."

"You mean——" Duncan's eyes opened.

"I mean in getting yourself engaged to that Morrison girl, and you know it."

"My dear man!" Duncan's anger was rising again. "We will not discuss Miss Morrison here."

"Yes, we will! Don't glower like that—it doesn't impress me."

"We will not discuss Miss Morrison here."

"Bosh!" Chambers snapped his fingers. "Alvin, you'll have to break that off, d'ye hear?"

"Break it off?" gasped Duncan.

"Yes, sir, and quickly, too!"

"Why, you infernal——"

"Stop! Your rage doesn't bother me a trifle. I say that that engagement is going to be broken, and I mean it." Chambers' face was turning an angry red. "Oh, it is not altogether for business reasons, my young friend! I—— Well, I am going to marry Beatrice myself."

For an instant or two Duncan was too startled to reply, but very soon a

great indignation set his blood to boiling.

All other things aside, the stupendous impudence of the vice-president in attempting to dictate so delicate a matter roused a fury in him.

He was on his feet in an instant and standing over Chambers with clenched fists.

"You—you insolent cur!" he gasped. "I'll give you thirty seconds to get clear of this office."

"Eh?" Chambers faced him placidly. "And what if I don't leave?"

"I'll throw you out."

Chambers laughed,—a short, quick laugh that was almost a bark.

"I doubt it."

"Then——"

"Oh, just pause for that thirty seconds, and I'll tell you the reason why, Alvin. How about"—he paused and smiled—"how about the three thousand dollars you stole from George Broadfield?"

The complete calm, the perfect assurance of the words dumfounded Duncan. What new legacy of Alvin's was this?

Unwittingly his hands fell to his sides and Chambers smiled again.

He had scored his point.

"Sit down, Alvin."

Duncan reflected quickly. If something new existed, it would be best for him to know it, even at the price of recalling his threat of a few minutes back. He obeyed.

"Now, I suppose you remember nothing at all about that three thousand dollars, do you?"

"I do not," said Duncan truthfully.

"So I supposed." Chambers chuckled. "I'll refresh your memory, Alvin, and I'm sure you will recall, however vaguely, one or two of the principal facts."

He crossed his legs and watched Duncan with a whimsical triumph for a while. The latter waited in silence.

"Just how does that edifying story run? Ah, yes! It's approximately three years ago, I think—a week or so before you went abroad. You had been losing everything you ever owned at the roulette wheel which your friend McIntosh operated up-town. Your uncle had settled up several of the accounts, almost against your will, I believe. Ah, you've always been so honorable, Alvin! It's almost painful sometimes.

"However, you were shy three thousand dollars, and McIntosh began to grow a bit importunate for his money. You were hard pressed. You—Alvin, you're a wonder in some respects!" he said suddenly.

"You look positively interested enough never to have heard the tale before.

"Well, at about that time George Broadfield was actively interested in the International; in fact, he had the second office below this one on the same corridor, I may remind you. He walked out of his room one fine day while you were present, leaving three thousand dollars in cash in the open safe. Don't even remember that, do you? Wonderful!

"I don't know whether you were crazy, or whether McIntosh had made you desperate, or whether you yielded merely to the impulse of the moment; but you took the money and walked straight up-town and paid Mac with it. You always were a little bit impetuous, Alvin."

Chambers came to a stop, and Duncan stared frankly at him. In an uncertain way he wondered whether the real Henry Alvin had ever committed a murder.

"At that time, Alvin, Broadfield was a great friend of your uncle's. He understood, and he said absolutely nothing about the theft. You did not appear again, and very shortly we understood that you had fled the country.

"It must have been a year before Broadfield told your uncle, and then only—— Well, because of a little argument they were having. Fraim wanted to return the money, and Broadfield would not take it."

"Why not?" escaped from Duncan.

"Ah!" Chambers laughed triumphantly. "I fancied you would ask that! It was because in that year—and ever since—Broadfield and I have been the greatest of friends, in business and personally.

"He stands by me and he will stand

with me. I told him that it would be just as well to let the matter rest. One never knew when it might be politic to put the president's nephew in jail. When that nephew is sent along to take the part of acting president, you will appreciate, Alvin, that the value of the little weapon is rather increased."

He chuckled slightly, and ended with:

"Going to throw me out, are you?"

Duncan thought rapidly before replying.

What did his part demand now?

Palpably, Chambers was speaking the truth. He would hardly dare bring forth such an accusation without solid foundation.

Would the real Alvin have been frightened or would he have been defiant? The ex-architect took the middle course.

"Well, if it is true, Chambers, what of it?"

"Just this: Broadfield is ready to prosecute you at a day's notice. It won't be any civil action, Alvin. It will be a criminal charge. You'll go to jail like any common crook; you'll be locked up in a cell, and if lawyers can do it, you'll go up.

"Do you understand that? I don't say that you can be sent up for a term of years—I wish sincerely that I could. But we'll put up a case that'll raise the hair from your head, and we'll stir up a scandal that will do more to blacken this Fraim-Alvin-Barrington management of the International than you can imagine. Do you realize that, Alvin?"

Duncan studied him for a minute. If the whole story was true, he knew that Chambers was quite correct. And still—the man did not seem quite sure of himself somehow.

"And I presume I'm asked something to have this kept quiet?"

"You are asked to break your engagement and leave town for good."

"Really?"

"And if you are fool enough to refuse——"

"Well?"

"You'll do it at your own risk and to the sorrow of this company in its present form."

"Then I do refuse!" said Duncan suddenly. "I refuse as flatly as words can put it. I stay where I am, and you may do as you please."

His fist came down hard on the desk. Now he would know the strength of Chambers' threat!

If the second vice-president arose and left quietly, there was indeed danger. If not——

Chambers had turned purple.

"You think that it is a bluff, do you?" he fairly shouted. "By George, Alvin, we'll show you that it is not. I don't care what you may have been advised about the possibility of returning that money, or what influence your standing in this company would have on the courts.

"I tell you we'll jail you—if it's only for an hour. We'll stir up such a row——"

Duncan leaned back and laughed.

Evidently there were several flaws in the threat. Chambers leaped to his feet, trembling with rage.

The veins in his forehead swelled and his lips drew back, baring the teeth in unlovely fashion; the second vice-president had fallen into one of his notorious fits of temper.

"And even if we never used it against you, do you think I'd let you marry Beatrice, you fool? Do you think——"

"We are going to omit that name from the argument, Chambers."

"Do you think that you are going to get that girl and her money and all that it would mean to the Morley crowd? By heaven, you're not!"

"That's enough."

"You're going to break that engagement and leave this town, if I have to wring your infernal neck."

"Stop!"

Duncan's tone was sharp and threatening now, and told of his increasing anger; but Chambers, in his towering rage, had passed all bounds of reason.

"You'll get out!" he panted. "You will get out, if I have to strangle you with my own hands, you whippersnapper! You'll get out, I tell you! I'm not a man to play with, Alvin. Better people than you have learned that before now. You'll get out of this company and away from that girl, and——"

"You'll do some getting out yourself!"

Duncan, too, had left his chair.

For once he was going to act as his own nature dictated.

With a bound he was upon the other and had grasped his arm. He whirled the infuriated man about and sent him spinning toward the door. He followed quickly, and as Chambers came to a standstill, snarling and clutching at the air, he seized him again, and with a forceful kick dashed him through the doorway and into the corridor.

The second vice-president sprawled for an instant, then rose quickly and glanced about.

He was very quiet now and his lately purple countenance had blanched.

"Mr. Alvin," he said, "this has come to be a personal matter, I see. We'll omit the courts, and—I'll settle with you myself."

He walked quickly to the door of his own office and disappeared.

Duncan returned to his chair, warm and breathing hard.

Had he done the wisest thing in laying violent hands on Chambers? He bit his lips and stared at the desk. And very shortly he knew that he did not care particularly whether or not he had acted judiciously, and that if Chambers came again and repeated his exhibition of frenzy, something of the same sort, but rather worse, would happen to him.

Not many minutes after the encounter, and just as Duncan was cooling down, Morley hurried in. The secretary's face was puzzled and not a little worried.

"Alvin, what under the sun have you done to Chambers?"

"I kicked him out of the office."

"You—what?"

"I kicked him out of this office, and I'm sorry now that I didn't give him a bruise or two to remember it by."

"You didn't—Alvin, whatever possessed you?"

"See here, Morley!" Duncan faced him squarely. "That person came here for the purpose of recalling some of my past. He demanded that I break my engagement and leave town in a hurry."

"Break the engagement!"

"He wishes to marry Miss Morrison, I believe."

Morley whistled in amazement.

"Later on, when I called the bluff, he threatened to break the engagement for me and force me out of here, even if it became necessary—as he delicately put it—to strangle me with his own hands.

"He thrashed around here like a madman for a few minutes, and—he left quite suddenly. If he tries it again, the same thing will be repeated."

"But, Henry, you—you were a little bit wild, you know. People remember."

"So I perceive, but did I ever do anything to deserve strangling?" Duncan asked with tart interest.

"And you know what Chambers is, too!" the secretary continued, frowning in annoyance. "He isn't a man to stir up, Henry. He——"

"Well, neither am I!"

"I know, I know; but you're a man, my boy, and Chambers is a—a brute, when he's angry. If he's in one of his furies, the only thing is to let it work itself out and pay as little attention as possible. He never forgets, and—pshaw! I wish you had acted more diplomatically."

"I am not grieving over it."

"But you've never seen enough of Chambers to appreciate what he is, Henry! He springs distinctly from the so-called lower orders, and under all the polish he has contrived to acquire he is as brutal and passionate as any laborer employed by the International."

"You think I'm in physical danger, do you?" Duncan asked, with a little sneer.

"I—don't know. Honestly, my boy, if you have roused him sufficiently I'm not absolutely certain that you are not. I'm sorry——"

"Then suppose I swear out a warrant and have him locked up for threatening me?"

Morley flushed with horror.

"Henry! Henry! Don't think of such a thing! Consider what the scandal would mean to the International. We'll have to keep up every appearance of peace here or——"

"Well, I wasn't entirely serious," said Duncan, with a smile; "but don't worry about me, Morley. I'm capable of taking care of myself."

"And you will keep out of Chambers' way?" cried the secretary earnestly. "You *will* keep out of his way, won't you?"

"Don't worry. I'll pick no quarrels with him. But if he tries any tricks in the way of eliminating me from this company or this city——"

"Hush!" said Morley. "Please the Lord, he won't! He may calm down and realize that matters are almost beyond him, but if he doesn't—— Henry, you'll be careful, will you not?"

For several days the memory of that lively interview remained with Duncan and helped divert his mind.

To tell the truth, he believed that Morley's estimate of the second vice-president was rather exaggerated and that he himself stood in very little danger, and as the week drew to a close and another wore on he found that eight days had passed without any demonstration from Chambers.

His threats had been made in a moment of rage, and they carried no weight whatever. So Duncan concluded, and the general run of things seemed to justify his conclusion.

Chambers hardly saw him during the business day, and in their few passings neither man appeared to be aware of the other's existence. It was a sufficiently satisfactory state of affairs, and Morley seemed relieved.

Outside the office, Duncan was having a sufficiently difficult time. Once or twice he attempted to see Louise, against his better judgment, and failed. Beatrice he could hardly face, yet on a couple of rare occasions he forced himself to call at her home and carry on his detestable part of lover for a little while.

But the hours burned into his very soul, and after a certain miserable evening he left the house half vowing never to enter it again, be the result what it might.

He returned to his rooms in the blackest possible mood. Where would it end? Where would it end? The question whirled through his brain eternally, and there seemed no answer.

His man met him at the door.

"There's a package for you, sir."

"What is it?"

"I don't know, Mr. Alvin. It's marked 'personal,' and I did not open it. It lies on the library table, sir."

Duncan strolled into the room and looked about. He perceived the thing presently—a little box well wrapped in paper and tied with heavy twine. He laid it down again, and resolved to open it in the morning.

Just now he wanted nothing more than the oblivion of sleep.

Dropping to the couch, he closed his eyes—and was forced to open them again, for his man entered hurriedly.

"There's a person to see you, sir."

"Who is it?"

"That I couldn't say. He gave no name, but he said that he must see you immediate. He looks rather wild."

"Tell him I've gone to bed. He will have to come again in the morning. Find out what he wants."

The man bowed and turned away, but just as he parted the curtains a wild-looking person rushed through. He evaded the servant's clutch and dashed toward the table. He seized the package and held it in trembling hands.

"Mr. Alvin, it's two minutes to twelve—in two minutes it will be midnight, sir!"

"Well——" Duncan was standing.

"Get out, sir! Get out, for God's sake!"

"But why?"

The man licked his lips.

"Go, sir! Quick! It's less than two minutes now, and on the stroke of midnight this box is going to explode and blow you and your rooms and half this hotel into pieces!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BLAST THAT FAILED.

Duncan stood petrified.

That the "personal" package could have contained anything dangerous had not occurred to him.

He had felt far too tired and listless

to speculate upon its contents, but the idea of an infernal machine had not appealed to him as the most remote possibility.

Yet now, it appeared, the entire Exmoor and himself, and several hundred others as well, were likely to be scattered to the four winds in something like one hundred seconds.

"Run! Run!"

The visitor was working furiously over the mysterious package. He had snipped the twine and torn it away. He had inverted the package and was taking off the paper wrappings. Once more he turned and cried:

"Get out, sir! Get away if you can!"

Duncan started and regained some control of himself. He leaped toward the door. He felt himself seized by his man and dragged through the curtains and into the next apartment.

They came forcefully against the door of the adjoining room, and their excited fingers fumbled uselessly with the catch.

Hastily Duncan dodged back. His man did the same. Duncan sprang forward again, and the servant's hands clashed with his own.

In the confusion they were frittering away the precious seconds. But just as the catch gave, a loud whirring came from the library.

Both men felt that the moment of danger had arrived and they held their breaths and waited for the crash that would shatter walls and ceilings. It seemed strangely long in arriving. Half a minute passed and still no explosion had taken place.

A full minute went by in tense silence. From the library a shaky voice issued:

"Come back, sir, if you are there. It is—quite safe now."

Duncan paused, irresolute. What could it all mean?

"Is the danger over?"

"Yes."

He returned slowly to the door of the library, parted the curtains, and looked in.

The remarkable visitor was half sitting, half sprawled in one of the big chairs.

He seemed to be a man of fifty or fifty-five, somewhat gray, and not ornately clothed. Indeed, the marked, neat shabbiness impressed Duncan queerly, as not unlike his own raiment of the near past.

The man's face was ghastly white, and his nerveless hands trembled violently as they rested upon the broad arms.

Duncan's glance traveled to the table.

Here he saw a small wooden box and what appeared to be parts of a clock. Beside the outfit a slim, black stick lay. Quite correctly he surmised it to be dynamite.

"Was that thing—going to blow up?" he asked rather vaguely.

"In another two minutes—even by this time, sir."

"And you mean to say that you walked up to it and took it to pieces under those conditions?"

"I did." The man shuddered. "If you had opened the box, the charge would have been exploded!"

"What!"

"And if you had not, the detonator would have been set off automatically at twelve o'clock, Mr. Alvin."

Duncan watched him for a minute and walked to the table.

None too familiar with mechanics, he could learn little from the jumble of wheels and springs, but several questions occurred to him.

"You are sure you are not mistaken in the character of this thing, are you, my man?"

"Quite sure."

"That stick of dynamite would have exploded at midnight had you not arrived when you did?"

"Yes."

"The machine, then, was sent for the explicit purpose of blowing me into eternity, I surmise."

"Yes."

Duncan rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"You seem pretty certain, my friend."

"No one could be more so."

"And how does it happen that you know so much about the little contrivance?"

The man moistened his lips and groaned aloud.

"I ought to know, sir. I made it myself!"

"And sent it to me?"

"And sent it to you!"

The ex-architect whistled aloud in the excess of his amazement.

He had never seen the man in his life before.

What could he have against him?

Was this some other enemy of the true Alvin—some one who had sworn vengeance against him in his former days—or was it——

Duncan whistled again. The man was watching him almost indifferently, apparently limp from relief at his success.

If he had, as he said, manufactured and sent the devilish engine, why on earth was he there?

"Look here," Duncan said slowly, "you admit that you're responsible for this cheerful device. Apparently, you are crazy. What guarantee have I that you're not going to try some new form of the same thing while you are sitting there?"

The man sat up wearily.

"You have no guarantee at all, sir, save that of my own assurance. The only dynamite in this room lies there on the table—the stick I removed from the box. Take it if you wish."

"I—don't think I care to, thank you."

The other shrugged his shoulders and rose to his feet.

"I am ready, Mr. Alvin."

"Ready for what?"

"The police."

Duncan stared at the man. He seemed absolutely indifferent to the consequences of his act.

"So you expect to be arrested?"

The other laughed bitterly.

"I believe there is a penalty for trying to murder a man, is there not? I'm ready to pay it."

"And you came here with the certainty either of being blown to bits yourself or of facing a term behind the bars?"

"I did."

There was something very curious about the whole business, Duncan thought.

A crank or a criminal would have been waiting expectantly a block or two away for the awful crash. A maniac, in all probability, would have been elsewhere.

This man was certainly not insane, in the accepted sense of the word. A strong suspicion was growing in Duncan's mind. He walked to a chair and seated himself.

"Sit down, my friend."

"You are—not going to send for the police?" The other faced him with astonished eyes.

"A little later, perhaps. I trust you don't mind some slight delay in being locked up?" Duncan smiled whimsically.

"It isn't that, but——"

"Then take a chair for a few minutes."

The man obeyed and his stolid expression returned. Freedom or incarceration appeared to interest him little enough.

Duncan studied him for several minutes in meditative silence. Then he asked rather suddenly:

"You don't consider yourself insane?"

"I am perfectly aware that I am not."

"Then, whatever possessed you to do such a thing—to attempt the murder of a man who never even saw you before, far less attempted to injure you?"

For a moment or two the other did not reply, and he seemed to be thinking hard. When he leaned forward, it was to speak earnestly:

"Mr. Alvin, you and your people are at the head of the International Iron Company."

"Does that carry a death penalty with it?"

"You're the head of a combine which has thrown hundreds of good men out of work and starved innocent children and —and—and——"

Duncan suddenly laughed aloud.

"My dear man, that's all a lie, you know!"

"But the International——" The visitor reddened.

"I'm not talking about the Interna-

tional. I'm talking about the part you are trying to play," said the ex-architect. "You're attempting to enact the rôle of the bloodthirsty anarchist, when you yourself are no more an anarchist than the man in the moon."

"Mr. Alvin——"

"Don't lie about it, my man. I have eyes." He walked straight across to the visitor and confronted him at close range. "Look squarely at me and tell me you honestly hold anarchistic views."

The man faced him for a moment and then turned away with a short laugh.

"I don't seem to be fierce enough for the part, do I?" he muttered.

"Did you ever try to act it before tonight?"

"I never did."

"And when you came here, did you expect to have to pose as a letter of blood and an enemy of wealth?" Duncan pursued curiously.

"When I came here, sir, I had no idea that I should be two minutes free after I had broken up the machine."

Duncan nodded and returned to his chair. He lighted a cigar and leaned back to think.

"My remarkable friend," he said finally, "you admit that you made that thing and sent it to me?"

"I have done so."

"And you admit as well that I have never done anything to incur your hatred?"

"I never even saw you before this evening, Mr. Alvin."

"Then will you be so extremely kind as to tell me why you did it?" Duncan inquired mildly.

The man looked at the floor.

"I—I did it in a moment of madness."

"You did nothing of the sort. You understood perfectly what you were about. Tell me the truth."

The other sat silent.

"Come! Since you didn't do it of your own accord, you did it for some one else?"

"No."

Duncan ignored the negative.

"And that being the case, I want you to tell me who it was."

"There was no one."

"Oh, yes, there was! Give me his name."

"I tell you, I did it of my own accord."

"And I tell you that you did not. Such a man as you appear to be doesn't try such tricks. Own up! Tell me the man and you shall walk out of here free."

"I—no!"

The ex-architect waited for minute after minute.

There seemed no prospect of a confession.

"Look here," he said at last, "you seem to be hesitating on some idiotic point of—well, I presume you'd call it honor. I'll compromise with you, even on that basis. I'll mention one name. If it is the correct one, you'll say so; if it is not, we'll call off the whole thing and—you go to jail. Is that fair?"

"It's—yes, it's fair enough, Mr. Alvin."

Duncan came close to him.

"My man, the person who prompted you to send that affair was named Joseph Chambers."

His eyes never left the man's face—and the story was quickly told!

The visitor went white and glanced up for an instant. His fingers worked nervously, and he mumbled so low that Duncan could hardly hear the words:

"Yes, you're right, sir."

The ex-architect walked back to his chair once more.

"I knew it before you spoke. Well, we'll hear the rest of the story now, and perhaps you'll go free."

"You—you mean it, sir?"

"I do; but I want the truth. You know Chambers?"

"We worked together beside the furnaces, thirty years ago, sir."

"Aha! One of his old friends, I see. And when he wanted a good man to make a really reliable infernal machine, he came straight to you? You don't look like that sort of individual?"

The man threw up his hands suddenly.

"I'm not, sir. I'll tell the truth, for I see that you will have it out of me, and perhaps it's best."

"Good!"

"My name is Brown, sir. I've been a machinist this past twenty years or more, and I've—well, I've had hard luck."

"I see." Duncan was quite familiar with that phase of life.

"Long ago, when Chambers was poor, I used to help him, sir—little as you'd think it now. He doesn't forget, Mr. Alvin, either good or bad. When my run of misfortune started, five or six years ago, I met him on the street one day and he lent me a little money, and —it's been going on ever since."

"Until now you owe the gentleman about——" Duncan inquired keenly.

"Nearly two thousand dollars."

"So I fancied. Go on."

"He's never bothered me for it much, sir. But last week he came and said he'd have to have the money. What could I do? I didn't have it to give him and I didn't have work—and I had plenty of sickness in the family."

Duncan nodded and reflected that he had been spared that last, at least.

"Well, he was hard about the matter, Mr. Alvin, and when he'd driven me near crazy he sprang this. He knew that I was handy, and he said that if I'd contrive something to kill you he would cancel my debts and give me five thousand dollars to get clear with. I—I thought of the five thousand and all it would mean and—and——"

"And you decided that five thousand dollars was worth more to you than breath was to me?" said Duncan.

"I—I was insane, sir. Yes."

"Is that all?"

"Only that the thing worked on me and worked on me, until I didn't care what happened, after the package was gone, so that I could stave it off. If you opened it, it would have exploded; if not, it would have exploded at twelve, when you were near.

"After eleven to-night I couldn't stand the thought of it any longer, and I came here just in the nick of time."

Duncan stared at the ceiling. He knew hard luck and what it meant, even without a family. He recalled his days in the top-floor room; he recalled Chambers' forceful little way of handling matters.

"There's a pad beside you on the table," he said suddenly. "Take it and write your name—and see that you put the correct address there as well."

The man obeyed silently.

"I can find you there, if I should want you?"

"Yes, sir."

"You see that door?"

"Yes."

"Git!" said Duncan.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BAD WORK GOES ON.

A NIGHT'S uneasy sleep, and Duncan suspected that he had acted foolishly in allowing the man to escape,

Indeed, his decision had been reached upon the spur of the moment. The fellow's tale had appealed to him peculiarly, and he had seemed to be telling the truth.

But was it not possible that, hard-luck story and all, the man's attitude had been pure pretense? Duncan himself was acting a part, and he understood better than ever before that with a little care it could be done successfully enough.

Perhaps even that attitude had been something of Chambers' suggestion—a scheme by which to impress Duncan with the means that might be employed in an extremity. The notion was too far-fetched, he concluded, and there were certain things which did not jibe entirely.

For one consideration, the man had appeared entirely willing to submit to arrest. Would he have done that had he been the sort of desperate character who might be expected to manufacture and send an infernal machine?

Again, he had risked his life—or had he?

He had rushed in at the very last moment, apparently overcome by conscience and careless of his own safety, and broken up the machine.

He had removed the stick of dynamite and laid it aside and had waited calmly enough for Duncan to enter and capture him—and certainly he had offered no resistance.

Then the thought occurred—was the stuff dynamite at all?

After breakfast, Duncan decided to settle the question, and another as well. He despatched his man to the address the visitor had left, with instructions to learn whether or no such a person lived there.

While the man was away he attended to a little errand of his own. The stick of supposed explosive was charily wrapped in paper, and Duncan carried it to a chance acquaintance of his new character—a chemist who resided not very far from the Exmoor.

Ten minutes sufficed for the examination. The stick was unquestionably dynamite, in prime condition for a grand explosion.

Duncan presented the friend with it and left, and he was not altogether surprised when, upon returning to his rooms, he found his man waiting with the news that a man named Brown lived in two rooms of the tenement, and that he was a machinist and out of work.

The doubtful points had been settled. The man's tale was evidently true from end to end, and Chambers' first effort at revenge had fallen flat.

But would a similar fate befall the next?

Duncan felt a cold shiver run through him at this, his first realization of what Chambers' active hatred signified. Up to that morning he had been decidedly skeptical about anything being likely to occur which would savor of bodily danger to himself.

Now it seemed that this skepticism was but too poorly founded, and that the second vice-president, having failed in the first attempt, would hardly stop.

His life was in gravest danger. In continuing his character of Henry Alvin, Duncan was really taking a long risk of actual, cold-blooded murder. The prospect brought a bead or two of cold perspiration to his forehead as he entered the elevator to ascend to the International offices.

Before this he had known unhappiness in his new part. Now it was murder.

Chambers, it appeared, was not at business that day, and Duncan suspected the reason and wished that he might have been present.

He thought hard over the event of last night, and finally decided that some one or two of the friendly element might better know of it. Did they advise prosecution of Chambers, it would be a decided relief, and with Brown as a witness, the second vice-president might be happily removed.

Morley had not arrived when he reached the decision. Duncan meditated for a moment and asked that Barrington and Downs be sent to him.

The two big men of the International came shortly, and the door was locked.

"Gentlemen," said Duncan, "you know that Mr. Chambers and I have had a little unpleasantness?"

"Yes." Barrington nodded gravely. "I understood from Morley that something acute had arisen between you."

"The something was a threat or two which made it necessary for me to kick him out of this office."

"You shouldn't have done that!" Downs cried softly. "You never seemed to understand what sort of character Chambers was."

Duncan smiled slightly.

"I'm learning rather rapidly, thank you."

"Something new?"

"Last evening he paid a man to send me an infernal machine."

"What!" Barrington started from his chair.

"Precisely. A nice little contrivance with half a pound or so of explosive stored away in it."

The two men exchanged quick glances.

"You are not certain of it, Alvin?"

"I am quite certain, for I have had the dynamite examined and it is very genuine. Furthermore, I can produce the repentant maker of the thing to prove how and why it was sent."

"But you haven't let it become public?" Downs cried in utter horror.

Duncan smiled as he shook his head, and gave them a brief outline of what had occurred.

They listened silently to the end, and Barrington shook his head sadly.

"It is incredible, but—Chambers is

capable of it, I believe, if you've aroused him sufficiently, Alvin. And you seem to have."

"Inasmuch as it is a fact, it is not incredible," Duncan observed. "What I want to know is this: Chambers isn't particularly useful to the International. Shall I arrest him and thresh the matter out?"

"In court?" gasped Barrington.

"Naturally, and in the criminal court at that."

"Alvin! Henry!" Downs was at his side. "Have you thought what it would mean to the International—a scandal of that kind? Don't you know that we're on thin ice now and that we must keep up every appearance of internal peace, Alvin? Can't you understand——"

"I presume so." Duncan sighed rather wearily. "You mean to say that you would let it pass altogether—this mere trifle of having my life in continual danger?"

"Pass? No, we won't let it pass, and your life shall not be in danger. We'll have two or three Pinkerton men travel everywhere with you from now on, Alvin," said Downs. "We'll——"

"I'm not particularly anxious to be trailed."

"But it is necessary. Apart from yourself, think what your presence here as your uncle's personal representative means to the company. If anything should happen to you——" he broke off, for the scowl on Duncan's face indicated that the somewhat cold-blooded view of his danger was not altogether pleasing. "Ah, you did a very unwise thing in throwing Chambers out, Alvin."

"So I perceive," snapped the ex-architect. "And I may do another if he tries it again. Just say so, and I'll clear out and take another trip abroad."

In an instant both men were on their feet. Barrington was patting his shoulder in soothing, fatherly fashion.

"My dear boy," he cried, "don't think of it! Don't think of it! Consider what you mean, to yourself and us. For God's sake, don't do anything so utterly rash! Stay where you are, and we will do everything in our power to safeguard you. But for the sake of the International——"

Duncan's sharp laugh ended the sentence for Barrington.

When they were gone, the masquerader laughed again, but rather wearily.

For the sake of the International! Everything on earth for the sake of the International!

He wondered whether those two men would not have gone smiling to the scaffold—for the sake of the International!

His burden was growing hourly, as it had seemed to grow from the moment he had taken it on his shoulders.

The fact that his life was threatened, as the fact, was of course rather bad; but it did not interest Barrington or Downs one-tenth as much as the possibility of Henry Alvin being removed from the sphere of the International, or of open dissensions in the company becoming known to the financial and business world. He was only a man and the company was the International.

Yet, perhaps they were right enough. Day by day Duncan was learning that Morley's picture of a world-panic had been no idle fabric of the imagination. It was the hard fact that if the International went, everything else would go, too, and that a year or more of failures and disasters would inevitably follow.

Duncan groaned at the thought and the realization that he was actually powerless to cause the arrest even of the man who had tried to take his life. To get the barest justice for himself, he must risk sacrificing the country—and he could not do it.

Well along in the afternoon his telephone rang suddenly. He was deep in other matters, and he started in surprise at the sound of a woman's voice.

The speaker was Miss Morrison's maid. Miss Morrison, it appeared, was slightly ill, and desired to see Mr. Alvin that afternoon; and the desire seemed to be more or less urgent.

Alvin hated the prospect, yet he could hardly ignore the summons. With Beatrice in good health, hard enough things were demanded of him in the way of keeping up the unpleasant part.

But he left word that he would not return that day, and started on the trip up-town.

He found the girl looking white and tired, wrapped and coddled by the solicitous aunt. A physician was there as well, but on Alvin's arrival he left the room with the elder woman.

"Sit here beside me, Henry."

Duncan complied readily enough. He was sincerely sorry for the girl's evident illness, and he found, somewhat to his amazement, that the feeling brought her before him more as a fellow-being than as the beautiful sacrifice he had come to regard her.

"I have something unpleasant to tell you."

"Yes?"

"Mr. Chambers was here this morning!"

"Chambers? What for?"

"Oh, it was hardly a social call, I think." Beatrice smiled faintly. "He arrived just after eleven, and he had a purpose. He—he——" She stopped and shuddered. Duncan frowned.

"What was it, Beatrice?"

"He tried to make love to me. He asked me to break my engagement and —marry him!"

Duncan almost gasped.

"Beatrice, would you like me to kill him?" he said with perfect sincerity.

"Not quite that," she smiled. "But keep him away from me, dear; I am afraid of him."

"But it's atrocious! I—I—never heard——"

"Oh, beyond the fact itself, he was not particularly offensive—at first, at any rate. He went on quite calmly, and he did not seem particularly astonished when I simply asked him to go. He rose and walked about for a little. Finally, he turned and asked me at least to break our engagement. I—I believe that I grew angry."

The girl's fine eyes flashed a moment.

"At all events, Henry," she laughed, "I think that I acquitted myself creditably, for he seemed to be in a towering fury. He said very little, but he vowed that we should never be married, dear, and then—well, I rang for Parker, and Mr. Chambers was escorted to the door. Oh, it was all quite melodramatic," she ended scornfully.

"Is that all?"

"Only that I cried for an hour or so, I think—until luncheon," Beatrice sighed. "Henry, you are a man—you'll find a way——"

Duncan bit his lips. For his own danger from Chambers he was spending thought enough; but that through him, even in his false character, another should be drawn into the affair, and that one a woman, was intolerable!

"Beatrice," he said, "I'll guarantee that Chambers does not trouble you in future, and that he does not trouble me, if I have to shoot him on sight!"

"My dear boy!" Duncan's cheeks flamed suddenly, for she was patting his hand. "Don't be absurd! I was afraid to tell you, for I know that your own temper is a little inclined to soar, but—I had to."

The physician ended a difficult quarter hour for Duncan by entering abruptly, with the customary caution against too much talking and the news that Mr. Morley had dropped in and would wait for Mr. Alvin.

"Well, Miss Morrison, how's the patient?"

Beatrice smiled.

"Very well, thank you."

"You'll be about again to-morrow, I think." The medical man stared thoughtfully at her for a moment. "Meanwhile, perfect quiet, remember!"

He shook a warning finger.

"And now I am going to take Mr. Alvin away, Miss Morrison."

He left abruptly. Beatrice looked pathetically at Duncan.

"Good-by, dear."

"Good-by. I——"

"You are coming to see me to-morrow, Henry? You haven't been here in nearly a week!"

"I—yes. If I possibly can. Good-by, dear!" said Duncan, and walked out, cursing himself for the hypocrisy of the endearment.

In the corridor he stumbled suddenly against the physician, and the medical man laid a finger on his lips and led the way to the end of the corridor.

"My dear Mr. Alvin," he said, somewhat mysteriously, "you are Miss Morrison's fiancé, I believe?"

"I—er—yes."

"Well, Miss Morrison"—the doctor frowned thoughtfully—"Miss Morrison has neither father nor mother, and her aunt is a trifle excitable, perhaps. I thought that it might be better to speak to you, and——"

"What about?" asked Duncan blankly.

"This—er—illness, you understand. It's rather a risky subject, you know, and we shall have to use a good deal of judgment, but—well, it is not the slight indisposition I have branded it!"

"What is it, then?"

"The indisposition is slight enough, very luckily, but the cause is rather different from what I have indicated. Mr. Alvin, your fiancée has been—poisoned!"

"Doctor!"

"Hush! Don't be worried. There is absolutely no danger now, I assure you, but it is by the merest good fortune. Miss Morrison, I understand, ate little or no lunch."

"Well?"

"There is every symptom of poisoning, and I honestly believe that had she made an ordinary meal, she would now be dead! Rather startling, but"—he laid a soothing hand on Duncan's arm—"not at all dangerous now, I am very glad to say."

Duncan leaned weakly against the wall. Could it be possible that Chambers——

"Have you made any inquiries?" he asked.

"Ah, yes! And I have done it very judiciously, I think. I saw the housekeeper immediately after I had viewed Miss Morrison. No one else has been ill from the effects of that meal, and it is now past five o'clock. Unfortunately, there is no way of getting the food scraps, or we might have something tangible to work on. I believe, however, that the thing was done by whoever served the luncheon."

"Then I'll find out——"

"I have done that, too," said the physician. "The butler attended to the serving, and it being his day off left immediately after. I'll wager that he does not return."

Duncan stared silently at him. The medical man consulted his watch and turned away.

"Those are the facts, Mr. Alvin. I have placed them in your hands because I believe that you may be best fitted to deal with them."

"And you are certain—really certain—that poison was used on that poor girl?"

"I am as certain as if I had administered it myself, and there seems no one on whom to lay the blame, save this man Parker. My testimony, sir, will be at your service whenever it is required, believe me."

He waited for an answer, which the thunderstruck man could not frame.

"Shall we find Mr. Morley, Mr. Alvin? I believe that he is waiting for you."

The doctor led the way, and Duncan followed half blindly. Beyond dispute, he had undertaken a difficult and dangerous part in assuming the name of Henry Alvin!

CHAPTER XV.

NEAR TO THE BREAKING POINT.

In the little reception-room Duncan found Morley, genial and smiling as usual.

Business had taken the secretary out of town that day, and he had not visited the International offices.

The two men chatted with Miss Morrison's aunt for a little, and finally left together, the doctor having forbidden Morley a sight of Beatrice until she should have recovered more fully.

On the street once more, Duncan looked about sharply, and with an object. He was not disappointed.

Several doors down, a man sauntered aimlessly along, obviously not a resident of the neighborhood returning from business. Farther down the block he saw a second man, and at the corner beyond a third one waited, smoking idly.

His surmise was correct. Barrington and Downs had set a body-guard to watch him, and now he had a use for at least one of them.

Duncan excused himself and left Morley. He approached the nearest

man and stared keenly at him; he was rewarded by:

"Want anything, Mr. Alvin?"

"Yes. You saw the house I just left?"

"Yes, sir."

"Take my card and see the housekeeper. Don't let any one else know you're there. I'm not anxious to create any excitement."

"I understand, sir."

"There has been a butler there until to-day, by name of Parker. He left early in the afternoon, and he will probably not return. Find out all you can about him—where he came from and so on."

"Very well."

"Then go to work and find the man himself—and don't stop until you've done it. Is that plain?"

"Yes, sir."

"And when you've found him, don't lose him again, understand? Let me know at once, at the Exmoor at night or at our offices during the day."

The man sauntered on again toward the Morrison home, and Duncan rejoined the waiting Morley.

The evening was fine and cold, and the secretary led the way for a trudge down-town beside the Park. Duncan was not at all averse to a taste of the crisp air, and they fell into a long stride.

"Who was that?" Morley asked casually.

"The man?"

"Yes."

"Pinkerton detective!" Duncan responded shortly.

"Whom you have hired?" asked Morley.

"Not at all. Whom Barrington hired to fend off stray bullets and such little things from my valuable person! There are two more in the neighborhood, I think—and he'll need a regiment of them if this sort of thing goes on much longer!"

"Alvin! What on earth——"

"Morley," said Duncan, breaking in upon the secretary, "what do you suppose ails Miss Morrison?"

"Eh? Oh, overdoing the society game, Henry. Don't worry on that score. She'll be about in a day or two."

"I hope so, but—it isn't society altogether."

"No? What then?"

"Poison!"

Morley stood stock-still and stared.

"Poi—— Oh, nonsense, Henry!"

"Poison administered by Beatrice's own butler, who is obviously a poor man and who received an irresistible bait of dollars from Chambers to do the job!"

"My dear man! You're insane!" Morley took up the tramp again. "Chambers is a rough lot, but—pshaw, he is not capable of that!"

"Miss Morrison's physician is quite positive of the fact itself; and Chambers is capable of anything now that will break off my—my marriage to Beatrice!"

"But not that!"

"I tell you, he will do anything to satisfy his ends! Good heavens, Morley, don't you realize that, all else aside, Chambers is playing for stakes every bit as great as ours? That marriage would mean the eternal ending of all the hopes he is cherishing in the International; it would mean that we had bested him in business and that I had bested him in —love; and—well, perhaps I added a little force to his methods by kicking him through that door!"

"You did, that is true. But—murder! Such a character as Chambers is capable of it, I do believe; but would he do it?"

"If he felt reasonably certain that the thing wouldn't be found out, yes! He must have been in this case."

"But—murder. Oh, I don't know!"

"He came to Beatrice early this morning and requested her to break our engagement and marry him, appearances and her own sentiments to the contrary. I fancy that the scene was as lively as it could have been under the circumstances, and that when Chambers left he was in a new rage. At all events, this man Parker showed him out.

"Later, Parker served luncheon. Later still, he left for the day. And finally Beatrice was taken slightly ill—and the doctor says she had been poisoned, and that only the merest luck saved her life!"

"But still, Chambers, you know——"

Duncan shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"You seem skeptical yet, Morley?"

"I must confess that I am."

"Would you feel any greater conviction at the news that Mr. Chambers was kind enough to send me a dynamite bomb last night—also on the theory that it wouldn't be discovered?"

"A what? Why, Henry, I—I——"

"That staggers you, does it?" said Duncan dryly. "It is the truth, and I am happily able to bring a witness to prove it—always providing that Chambers hasn't made away with him by this time. The maker of the little engine happened to have a conscience; therefore I am here! If his conscience had lagged two or three minutes, you'd probably be standing in the crowd about this time and viewing the ruins of at least part of the Exmoor!"

Morley was shaking his head dubiously.

"It doesn't seem possible—I'll swear that it doesn't seem possible! But if it is——"

"Well?"

"Why, man, you're in bodily danger!"

"I'm painfully aware of that, Morley."

"And if he should succeed next time, and—er——"

"Carry me into a better world," Duncan completed bitterly, "think what it would mean to the International!"

"Yes," said the secretary excitedly, "if you were killed it might only be a step to the time when your uncle's death would finally come out, and then—good gracious!"

Duncan was silent.

"You'll have to be careful, Henry! I'm glad that Barrington got you a body-guard! Lord, if you should be injured now——"

"Say killed!" muttered Duncan. "That is what you mean!"

"Killed, then. If you should be killed, and Fraim's death discovered, too, and all his interests put into the hands of old Grosvenor, his executor, who's as weak as water and would be simply putty in Chambers' hands—great Cæsar!" He stopped for a moment. "You'll keep a sharp eye out, Henry, won't you?"

Duncan walked on for half a block without replying, Morley keeping close to his side and glancing about nervously.

Ahead one of the body-guard was keeping close, and not twenty feet behind the second man sauntered along unconcernedly, one eye upon Duncan and the other on the neighborhood.

"Morley!" said Duncan suddenly.

"Yes, Henry?"

"Did it ever occur to you how devilish pleasant it must be for me?"

"Er—what?"

"This thing of being the tail that wags the International."

"Well, you——"

"The mere fact of my being sent to eternity in small pieces wouldn't affect any of you greatly," pursued the ex-architect sourly. "You'd be reasonably sorry for a day or two, of course, and I presume you'd send along a select assortment of flowers and so on if there was anything left to bury! But the idea of my being removed from the sphere of the International—bah!"

"Henry, you understand——"

"I understand that I am sick and tired of the whole business, from one end to the other! I'm tired of being the Atlas for the whole cursed company and, presumably, for the better part of the world, if the part entails the necessity of becoming a target for any such character as Chambers!"

"But——"

"And if things don't quiet down in the very near future, I'm going to disappear!"

"Henry!" Morley's voice was a positive wail of horror. "Think, my boy! Think what you're saying, Henry! Don't be insane! Don't undertake any new rashness now and ruin us all! We all thought that you had lost your wildness and appreciated the situation! Why, Barrington was saying only a day or two ago that since you have been back, you've looked and acted like a different man!"

"Which is very pleasant and nice of him," said Duncan tartly. "But it doesn't alter my aversion to being slaughtered!"

"But we are going to take all precautions on earth to prevent such a thing. The very moment that it's possible, we'll arrest Chambers and jail him, if we can make a case! Meanwhile——"

"Meanwhile, I'm to be trailed by detectives! I don't like it, and I won't stand it! Damn it, Morley, it's downright degrading!"

"Degrading! Now, my dear boy——"

"For the sake of the International, stand it!" said Duncan, intoning the words bitterly.

"For the sake of us all—yes!"

Morley was holding his arm now. Duncan snorted in anger and remained silent.

A little later he declined very positively Morley's anxious invitation to dinner. He wanted to escape the International and all its concerns for a time.

Glancing into the corridor some few minutes after entering his own rooms, he was more than a little irritated to see one of Barrington's detectives patrolling slowly up and down.

"See here, my man," said Duncan, "you may go off duty, I think."

"What, sir?"

"Get out!" snapped the ex-architect. "I don't need watching here."

The man regarded him stolidly for an instant, then shook his head with some determination.

"I can't do it, sir."

"But I tell you that I'm not going out!"

"It's no use, Mr. Alvin." The man smiled apologetically. "I have the strictest kind of orders from the chief not to lose sight of you until I'm relieved at twelve. When you went to your apartments, I was to stay outside and examine whoever entered."

"And you mean to spend the night there?"

"No, sir. Another man's coming at twelve."

The detective eyed him with a queer kind of respectful defiance. Duncan stepped back and closed the door with something of a slam.

The soft tread on the thick carpet went on monotonously.

"By George, that's—that's the limit!" said Duncan, as he found a chair and dropped wearily into it.

For a long time he stared at the carpet and pondered.

He had been more than a little in earnest that afternoon when he threatened to disappear.

Indeed, at the time he had almost meant to steal away that night, regain his smooth-shaven face, and announce himself to Gregg and his other friends as John Duncan, returned from the imaginary trip!

The complicated situation had gone almost beyond his bearing; he was very nearly ready to break his way to freedom and poverty, be the consequences what they might.

His sacrifice had become too great. Where before, outside of business troubles, he had been forced into the disagreement with Louise Havers and into the detestable hypocrisy of a love affair with Beatrice, he had now passed to a stage of real, imminent physical danger.

Chambers, having gone to such lengths, would hardly pause short of another attempt—and Duncan felt a strong suspicion that the third trial might successfully end all possibility of Henry Alvin's marriage and the consequent consolidation of International interests.

And almost as great was his anger at being trailed. The slow and steady tramp without maddened him. He found himself listening for it and wondering if it would ever cease.

Finally he leaped to his feet with an exasperated oath. He would go out for a while and escape it!

Would he? The tread passed again, and there was an unescapable quality in the sound, which told very plainly that he was not to sally forth unaccompanied that night. His rage grew. He *would* go out, and alone!

He thought hard for a moment. He was alone in the rooms with his man. He summoned the servant finally and directed that his dinner be brought to the apartments. As an after thought, apparently, he ordered the man to go below and see to its preparation in person.

The man departed, and Duncan locked the door quickly. With light step he hurried through the rooms. Somewhere at the rear there was the butler's pantry, and between that and the man's sleeping-room an entrance to the servants' stairs.

He found the door without trouble, jammed on his hat, and turned up his collar—and left!

Not many seconds later he was in the open air, chuckling with angry satisfaction. What a luxury it was to be free, even if only for a little walk!

He hurried out of the Exmoor neighborhood and tramped along until he reached a cab stand. Here he hired a hansom, and commissioned the driver to take him slowly up-town and slowly back again.

He wanted time and an opportunity to think things out in solitude, for he was half inclined to the belief that he should soon throw over his rôle.

The jaunt up-town was accomplished without incident. Well into Harlem the hansom turned and jogged downward again.

Duncan leaned forward after a time and smoked and watched the vehicles passing with absent eyes. Here and there an automobile whirled by; one particularly huge black car thundered along from the opposite direction, and even the hardened cab horse shied a little. They were passing an electric light at the time, and Duncan started forward at the jerk for a view of the machine that had caused the trouble.

He caught a glimpse of a mass of gray fur on the front seat, which passed for a man—and the car was gone again and the horse trotting quietly.

Farther down he started again. What perverse fate had impelled his driver to turn down the very street that held the Havers home and Louise?

Duncan stared moodily at the house ahead, and his eyes did not leave the windows as the hansom came abreast.

But quite suddenly he found other matters for his attention.

Some little distance behind, a heavy chug-chug became audible. Duncan glanced back indifferently. Unless he was much mistaken, the same big black car was coming down the side street after his cab.

For the moment he attached no importance to the episode; then he grew most intensely interested.

Was the car becoming unmanageable? It came almost up with his hansom on the other side of the street, and running at a furious pace. It wheeled abruptly and steered straight for the cab!

In a second or two there was going to be a smash, unless one vehicle or the other made way.

Duncan shouted, and his driver pulled the horse to his haunches and made a frantic effort to back out of the danger zone. The automobile veered a trifle and plunged squarely at the body of the cab!

Then came the crash! Duncan felt the whole vehicle rise suddenly from the ground. For an instant the face among the furs was above him, and he recognized—Chambers.

And there all things seemed to cease. Duncan felt himself hurtling backward. His head struck something very hard, and he felt himself shooting through a haze of stars into unconsciousness or—death!

(To be continued.)

WORDS.

WORDS are mighty, words are living:
  Serpents with their venomous stings,
Or bright angels crowding round us,
  With heaven's light upon their wings.
Every word has its own spirit,
  True or false that never dies;
Every word man's lips have uttered
  Echoes in God's skies.

Adelaide A. Procter.

"HAM" ARDSLEY'S THEORIES.

BY ANNA STEESE RICHARDSON.

The story of a man who was down and out, with a real American atmosphere and dénouement.

ARDSLEY stared out from his hiding-place beneath the last Pullman car and shuddered. Beyond the water tank stretched the immeasurable desert, a sickening white haze palpitating above its alkali wastes.

The man knew what a day on that desert's edge meant—a pitiless official driving him away from the questionable comfort of the huge red tank, nothing to eat, nothing to drink, and nothing on which to rest his eyes save the merciless haze and the penetrating dust which rose in tiny swirls to meet it.

Even when the freight pulled in after dark, he would have only one chance in a thousand to board her, for the trainmen would be warned of his presence in this hell-hole of heat.

Heavy footsteps crunched upon the cinder path. They were coming his way. Perhaps if he clung more closely to the brake-beam the trainman might not spy his long, thin figure.

Even as animals are enabled by nature to blend into their surroundings, so did Ardsley's oil-soaked overalls and coat merge into the greasy iron support on which he was stretched; yet the keen eye of the brakeman detected the presence of the hated tramp.

Ardsley saw that the game was up, and, ashamed and trembling, he crawled from under the car, only to be hurtled into the sage-brush by the toe of the railroader's heavy boot.

A laugh, distinctly feminine, roused him to action. With a sickening sense of despair he staggered to his feet and stood staring stupidly after the Sunshine Limited, now a mere comet's tail on the shining rails.

Then suddenly he remembered the laugh, and wheeled to face a young woman whose beauty penetrated through dust-dimmed eyes to his very soul.

A snug-fitting riding-habit of gray cloth, woven to shed even alkali dust, served to bring out the admirable lines of her girlish figure. A thick braid of rich, brown hair was coiled beneath her gray sombrero. Her face was oval, yet piquant, and the light in her gray eyes suggested wells of tenderness in her nature.

Despite the heavy tan on her face and the firm grip with which she held her pony in check, she was not just the sort of woman Ardsley expected to see springing, like a Western Venus, from sage-brush and gray-white dust.

She was biting her lips when he confronted her.

"I am pleased," he said with elaborate politeness, "to have contributed, if only in the smallest way, to your amusement."

The girl started so suddenly that her nervous pony fairly danced. She had expected instead a whirlwind of profanity and had been regretting her temerity in laughing.

"I couldn't help it," she said half-apologetically. "You looked so funny. You spread out your arms as if you were trying to fly."

"My wings were clipped long ago," he said grimly.

"Clipped pretty close, too?" she inquired shrewdly, eying his tattered apparel.

"Fate has been a bit unkind," he said laconically.

"Fate!" she scoffed. "Fate does not make tramps. It is laziness that does that."

"Thanks for the information, but it was fate, just the same."

"Are you hungry?" she asked sharply.

"I believe I breakfasted yesterday morning."

Again she bent upon him one of her shrewd but not unkindly glances.

"Well, there is a box here for our

ranch, but Pedro is so nervous to-day that I don't believe I'll dare to carry it. Think you could pack it over for me? It's eight miles—rather far for breakfast, but it may be worth your while."

He was about to decide in favor of the day beside the tank, with the freight as a remote chance, when the quiet scorn with which she awaited the expected refusal put him on his mettle.

"Where's the box?"

"Over at the shack," she said with sudden brightening of her eyes. "And you tell Peters I sent word most particularly that he was to lend you a towel and some soap."

Ardsley walked down the track to the little red shanty over which Peters presided in his triple capacity of station agent, telegraph operator, and engineer of the pumps which supplied the great tank. Five minutes later he returned with a clean face, a good-sized wooden box, and the knowledge that the young woman waiting for him on her pawing pony was Neva Carter, only daughter of the richest ranchman in the vicinity, which in that particular section of Arizona means half a dozen counties.

Now that the caked cinders had been removed he was not such a bad looking chap. His features carried no stamp of dissipation, but exposure and privation had left their marks. His long hair was neatly brushed, and, better clad, he might have passed for a man of some parts.

The girl glanced at him approvingly.

"Follow the trail," she said tersely as she indicated where wheel tracks had broken the mesquit. "I must give Pedro a run before he will settle down to business."

With loosened rein Pedro dashed across the *mesa*. Ardsley paused a moment to admire the picture made by the spirited horse and his graceful rider; then, shouldering the box, he struck out briskly in their tracks.

The sun beat mercilessly through the cracks in the crown of his tattered hat, and the box gained amazingly in weight with every step; but he trudged on, his eyes fastened upon the flying figures ahead.

Presently she turned and came back at a gallop. Pedro, now less restive, steadied into a walk beside the man.

"Box heavy?" asked the girl.

Ardsley smiled grimly.

"Heavy as lead!"

"Want to give up the job?"

"No," he replied shortly. "I think I'd enjoy the sense of earning a meal."

"Been tramping long?"

"About two years."

"A man like—like—yourself must have some reason for tramping?"

"Fate!" he said curtly.

"That is the third time you've fallen back on that expression. Haven't you a real reason?"

"It was fate," he persisted. "There was a time when I wore purple and fine linen——"

"And you gave them up for overalls?"

"No; the linen frayed and the purple faded."

"And you were too lazy to renew them?"

"No one would give me the chance."

"Nonsense!" She spoke almost bruskly, but curiosity burned clearly in her eyes.

Ardsley shifted the box to his other shoulder and trudged on.

"You see, business standards are different here and in New York. Behold in me an unsuccessful climber——"

"A what?" interrupted the girl.

"A social climber. My father had a comfortable business, but we lived up to the very tip of his income, often beyond it. My mother maneuvered and scraped to put me through college, and keep me in the style of the rich chaps with whom, somehow, I naturally fraternized. Of course, if I had understood our financial condition I might have done differently. Still, I don't know—I was such a foolish young cub and spent money like water——"

"Your mother did very wrong," said the girl decidedly. "She should have been honest and frank with you."

The man stopped short in the dusty trail.

"My mother is dead. She did what she thought was right according to her training and social light."

The sudden deepening of color in the

girl's face was not due to the shadow cast by her sombrero, and she bit her under lip.

"Mother believed that acquaintances made at college would advance me in a business way when I graduated, and, indirectly, would be invaluable to father's interests. She left nothing undone, even to pawning her jewels, to entertain my chums during week-ends and holidays. The governor went off very suddenly, within two months after I graduated. Then the truth came out.

"We didn't have enough to build a monument to his memory. Even his insurance was mortgaged. And I failed to prove mother's theory. The men in whose homes I had danced cotillions and played billiards were afraid of me in business. They measured me by their own sons. They wanted working parts for their big money-making machines, not good dressers with pleasant manners to decorate their offices.

"The strain and disappointment were too much for mother—and then I took to the road. What else was there? A few men have all the money, and unless you are a small but perfectly proportioned cog in their wealth-grinding machinery, they have no use for you. I could not keep books, nor use a typewriter nor feed a machine, so why should they want me? But I could write a little. I had edited our college paper one year; so I took to the road to prove my theory that you must either have money to make money, or offer your hands and your brains a living sacrifice to the man who knows how to wring money from the labor of others."

"Is the book written?"

The man looked straight ahead.

"You can't dodge the police, steal rides, and write books simultaneously—unless you are a college professor who can afford to hire a bungalow once in so often and write your impressions of the road while they are fresh."

"But you still believe in the theory?"

"Yes. Put a hundred men with money on an island where boats never touch, and in five years two or three of the men will have all the money, and will be paying the others starvation wages. There is nothing in the talk about lots of room at the top."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Carry this box to your ranch."

"Oh!"

Silence fell between them; then the girl pointed to a dust cloud in the distance.

"There's a wagon coming for the box. I never expected you to carry it eight miles, but I did want to see whether you were game. Now, you can do one of three things"—she drew her pony to a full stop. "You can ride on to the ranch and take a job under the foreman of father's round-up, or you can help Red-Eye Pete at the mess house during the day and work on your book at night, or you can borrow enough money to ride on to Allen's Junction on the freight and return the money when your book comes out."

For a few seconds the man was paralyzed by her consummate assurance, and his face flushed dully. Then, in spite of himself, he smiled.

"Thanks for your kind interest in my welfare. I think I will accept one of your offers. I've never been a cowpuncher, but if your father's foreman will stand for my greenness I'll—well, I'll do my best."

"Shake!" said the girl, and leaning forward impulsively she extended her hand.

The dust raised by the approaching team fell upon them, sealing the covenant in true Western fashion.

* * * *

Two years later, Hamilton Ardsley sat in the moonlight on the San Jacinto creek, aimlessly rolling cigarettes and throwing them away unsmoked.

Behind him was camped the Carter outfit, two days out on the round-up. Just before them rose the mountains, and to the south lay the Carter ranch, with its young mistress, just returned from a year's stay in New York, London, and Paris—a year broken in Ardsley's memory only by the arrival of the mail bag.

It had been her prospective return which had made him rush his astonished men away from comforting bunks and corrals to the hills full a week ahead of

time. Somehow he felt that he wanted the girl to fit back into her old surroundings before he saw her.

Ardsley had found old Gregory Carter a ranch king. He was helping to make him a plains autocrat, for it was Ardsley who had suggested building irrigation ditches between the two rivers, turning the desert into a paradise.

Carter had been content before that with large profits from his cattle interests. Now, as a reward for opening up new avenues of money-making, he had placed Ardsley in complete control of the cattle business and was devoting his own energies to ditch building.

A Denver syndicate had bought and stolen and sent down fake claim-takers to absorb miles and miles of alkali-cursed land to the south, and Carter was under contract to turn water upon it by the first of the month. An army of Mexicans, under half a dozen foremen, were working like beavers to complete the work on time.

Carter had said that when he made his pile—the amount being rather vague in the mind of the money-loving plainsman—he would retire, leaving competent managers on the ground, and take his daughter East to live as his means justified. That was why she had taken this preliminary canter among thoroughbreds, as her father expressed it; and further, that was why Ham Ardsley sat at two A. M. by the San Jacinto creek, thinking that it did not matter much, after all, if old man Carter did leave him as one of the managers of his many interests.

He lighted a fresh cigarette and rolled over, propping himself on one elbow. Then suddenly he sat erect.

The steady pung-pung of pony hoofs came to his well-trained ear. An odd premonition of trouble brought him to his feet in a tense, waiting attitude. Then Bill Lampton, Carter's body-servant, as a plainsman might call the favorite employee on his ranch, swung, panting and red-eyed, from his steaming pony.

"Get your horse up an' hot-foot it fur the ranch," he said huskily to Ardsley. "Th' old man's hed a spell. Seemed like he'd just toppled over with th' joy of seeing his girl back, though he's been ridin' like the devil the past few days, tryin' to straighten out trouble among them darned Greasers. An' now hell's broke loose for sure. They won't work—an' Neva, she says you ain't to waste no time——"

Ardsley was already out of sight issuing orders. Shorty Crane was put in command of the outfit until Ardsley could rejoin them. Another man was bringing up Ardsley's pony, resentful and heavy-eyed.

"Don't try to make it back before morning, Bill," said Ardsley to the ranch hand, as he swung into his saddle. "Your horse would drop if you tried to keep up with me—for I'm going to ride like hell!"

Five hours later he jerked his staggering pony to a standstill before the porch of the Carter ranch-house and stumbled, a gray-white figure, panting and quivering, into the living-room.

There, at the table, he and the old man had figured out the whole irrigation scheme. There, on the top of the piano, was the picture of Neva which had seemed to watch them with approving eyes. And there, in the doorway leading to the old man's room, was Neva herself, big-eyed and colorless, though her shoulders did not droop nor her hand tremble.

Travel and cultured companionship had done their work. She was a girl no longer, but a charming woman.

"Is he alive?"

"Yes—he will not die—but——"

Ardsley gripped the table's edge, and the girl stopped abruptly.

"You must have something to eat and drink and a wash before we talk——" In her old, imperative way she was pushing him toward the kitchen, but he withdrew from her grasp.

"No, no! I want to know it all—now!"

She pulled a chair up to the table, and he sat down opposite her.

"It is paralysis. The left side—and his brain. He may live for years." Her voice sounded oddly dry and emotionless. "But I did not send for you to help me bear this."

Ardsley felt a sudden glow that did

not come from the reaction of his hard ride.

"There is trouble in ditch camp. The men have struck for shorter hours and more pay. That was what brought on the stroke, we think. It wasn't that father cared for the money, but he didn't like to be forced by the fact that the men knew he must get the work done on time. And now it's got to be done, do you understand? For the sake of father's name and honor, we've got to finish those ditches and live up to the contract. Can you do it?"

Ardsley sat with his hands plunged deep in his "chaps," his long, lean legs thrust under the table, his damp hair hanging over his red-rimmed eyes.

"They say they are tired of working for a man who will get ten times what they are receiving, and then turn them loose to find work elsewhere. It's the old trouble between the man who conceives and the man who executes."

Ardsley jerked himself to an upright position. The girl was watching him intently.

In the portentous silence which fell upon the room, her thoughts traveled back two years and dwelt persistently on the figure of a trampish dreamer, enunciating theories as he trudged at her pony's flanks.. What if he——

Then she recalled two years of unremitting, practical effort, and took heart.

"Father will clean up thousands on this contract, I suppose?" she asked after an instant.

"Yes, and it means thousands upon thousands more from similar contracts. Why, those scoundrels are crazy! If your father hadn't conceived the idea of building these ditches, the Greasers would be herding sheep and half starving, but now they are getting twenty dollars a month and their board, darned good board, too, for men of their class. What the deuce does Ramsey mean by letting dissatisfaction reach such a point?"

"Ramsey is sick—hasn't left his shack for five days. That is why father was looking after things in the broiling sun. Ramsey wouldn't see the doctor, though father urged him to have one. Says he is clean petered out, working such long hours, and don't know as he blames the men——"

Ardsley stood up suddenly and stared at the girl across the table. Ramsey—the man who had secured the position he had coveted as foreman of the ditch gangs!

Ramsey had been recommended by the Denver Syndicate, the one party to be benefited by Carter's failure to live up to his contract. If the ditches were not finished on time, they reverted in their unfinished condition to the syndicate, and Carter was to be paid only their exact cost in manual labor—not one cent profit, no allowance for the brain which had conceived the wonderful net-work of life-giving water.

Ardsley's mouth set in firm, ugly lines.

"Tell Pete to fix me up something to eat while I have a wash," he said with a sudden assumption of leadership.

Then he stalked over to his quarters, thinking hard and fast.

Just before noon, faithful Bill Lampton rode up to the ranch-house. He found a fresh horse saddled and waiting for him, also a white faced, big-eyed girl in a gray habit, and a stern-faced, sharp-spoken man.

Both were well armed, and Bill extended his hands naturally for the Colt .44 and a barking Winchester, both loaded for action.

"There are three gangs of those Greasers," said Ardsley quietly. "You will cover one, Miss Carter the second, and I the third. I've got Ramsey under guard. Now, you take ditch No. 3, and I'll send out your men. Never drop your gun until six to-night. Then herd 'em back to camp. I'll send up Miss Carter's next, and then I'll drive up my own men. Keep a bead on 'em, and don't give 'em a chance to draw a knife on you."

Silently Bill and Miss Carter rode away to their posts, and Ardsley galloped two miles, straight into the camp of sullen Greasers.

With his gun at an uninviting angle, he explained the exact situation to the men.

They would work according to their

agreement until the ditches were finished. It was only a matter of three more days of hard toil. At the end of that time, they could carry their case to any court in the territory, and he'd be there to answer them.

Just at present the question with him was to shoot or not to shoot. It was for them to say. In the mean time every man could lay down his own arms—or take the consequence.

All of which was set forth not in this cold-blooded English, but in virulent Mexican patois, larded with English profanity more or less picturesque and appealing to the class of men with whom Ardsley was dealing.

All the rest of the day, and the next and the next, Ardsley and Bill and the girl in the gray habit rode up and down, up and down, the ditch banks with guns drawn; and on the morning of the fourth day the sheriff and his posse came upon the scene, having heard rumors of riot and force and bloodshed, only to find the water running smoothly through the finished ways, and a girl in gray, surrounded by an able body-guard of cowboys, paying off an entirely amiable army of Greasers.

And Ramsey?

Ah, what the Mexicans said of Ramsey and his fine plan to help each and every one of them annex some of old Carter's wealth was almost as lurid and picturesque as Ardsley's epic which broke up the first and last Greaser strike in Arizona.

It was a great time while it lasted, but there followed a reaction, when Neva Carter went back to the bedside of her father, and looked in vain for a gleam of recognition in his dull eyes, for even a responding pressure to her handclasp.

The specialists brought from Denver shook their heads. A sanitarium where he could be made comfortable until the end—that was all they could suggest.

Neva shook her head. She must stay here—and carry out her father's ambitious plans, and he also must stay with a trained nurse where she could watch over him and know that he was tenderly cared for. Then the specialists drove away in a cloud of dust, and out of it appeared Ardsley.

He looked pityingly at the girl and cleared his throat.

"It's no use to tell you I'm sorry, but I've got to hike out to-day for the hills. I presume you will send for your aunt to stay here with you, and the nurse will be some company. I've met some really jolly good girls among those nurses!"

She shook her head.

"No, I don't want aunty. I want you. You'll have to send Shorty out in charge of the round-up, and stay here—to run things."

The old assurance was gone. Despite her assumption of authority as head of her father's affairs, her voice was strangely supplicatory.

Under the table, where she could not see the vise-like grip, Ardsley clasped his hands tightly.

"You mean that you want me to run things here—everything—for your father?"

"No," she said quietly. "I want you to run them for me!"

The man rose and walked over to the window. The eight-day clock ticked until it throbbed in his ear somewhat like the beats of a trip-hammer, so intense was the silence. After some hesitation, he said, without turning, quietly but distinctly:

"God knows, I owe you that much service. All I am—all I have to-day, I owe to you—and that is just the reason why I cannot take anything more. Don't you understand? I can't stay here with you—I'm not strong enough—and you can find a dozen men who could run things better—and—well, it would be hell for me."

He felt a touch on his arm and turned abruptly. She was looking straight up at him, a light in her eyes such as he had never seen there before.

"Do—do you dislike me as much as that?"

For an instant he hesitated, then he took her in his arms, and the last of his theories—that financial equality should control marriage—tumbled like a card-house at the foot of the great happiness which he had found.

BLOCK TOWER SEVEN.*

BY JARED L. FULLER.

A railroad story of a signalman's thrilling experiences in ferreting out the mystery of his predecessor's murder.

SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTERS PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED.

A WRECK occurs on the A. & C. R. R., from which Dr. Lester, Captain Payne Howard and his daughter Belle are rescued by Dan Crompton, an employee of the road. Captain Howard is in litigation with the railway company at this time.

It is discovered that Raddigan, the signalman in Tower Seven at Coldspring, is murdered, and that the signals were changed to cause the wreck. There is no clue to the murderer.

Crompton is promoted to Raddigan's position, and takes up his quarters with Mrs. Corrigan and her idiot son, Billy, sister and nephew of the murdered Raddigan. It is not long before he receives a warning of personal danger, and while returning home at midnight is attacked by a couple of men who get aboard a slow freight. He starts in pursuit of them and enters the car where they are hiding. They gag and bind him and make their escape. At the top of a steep slope the train breaks in two. Crompton's car, with several others, rolls backward. At the end of the slope there is a sharp turn, and Crompton lies helpless with the almost certain knowledge that the car will jump the track.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LOST CAR.

DISAPPOINTED in their attempt to corral the supposed tramps who had attacked Dan Crompton, Jim Sousa and his men went back to the freight caboose, fully expecting to find the wounded signalman there before them.

Astonishment quickly gave place to fear when they found the caboose empty.

"The man's fallen overboard!" cried the conductor, aghast.

"Or those fellows did for him before we routed 'em out of that car," suggested the flagman, who was his chief assistant.

That tramps sometimes attack railroad men with murderous intent is an undisputed fact. After a tramp has been thrown off a moving train, or knocked down and beaten in an empty box-car by some brakeman who has a reputation to sustain as a "bruiser," the knight of the road is apt to be at daggers drawn with the entire railroad fraternity.

Usually the 'boes are cowardly fellows; but occasionally two or three bad ones flock together, and then wo betide the railroad employee who falls singly into their hands.

Sousa thought that his flagman might be right, and he set out himself and searched the train from end to end, while the freight climbed slowly up the long grade.

He did not think for a moment to look into the car out of which the tramps had been driven. If they had attacked Dan, Sousa believed they had hidden in that car after wreaking their vengeance on the unfortunate signalman.

He came back to the caboose some time before the engine topped the rise, drawing its tail of cars behind it.

"He's fallen off or been thrown off—God help him!" he declared, in much worriment of mind. "We can't run back to look for him. But I'll stop at Gridiron and report. We've got half a car to unload there, any way."

His men had stretched themselves in their bunks again, and Sousa sat down to overhaul his waybills. He was nodding over these, almost asleep himself, when the break occurred.

**This story began in the September issue of* THE ARGOSY. *The three back numbers will be mailed to any address on receipt of* 30 *cents.*

Drowsily he recognized a different motion to the train. He looked up and listened to the increasing clatter. What was it?

He rose up with a whoop that brought the men in the bunks out of them in a hurry.

"Brakes, boys! Get a move on!" he roared. "The danged train's broke in two!"

Sleepily, and with remarks unprintable, the men swarmed out of the caboose and up over the car roofs. Black as the night was, it was plain that a goodly share of the train had broken off and now was descending the grade with threatening speed.

The men went from brake-wheel to brake-wheel, screwing them down hard and shouting to one another through the rain and darkness. Suddenly the flagman at the rear uttered a stentorian cry:

"'Ware the curve! 'Ware the curve! We're on it!"

On the instant the caboose slung around the turn with a shock that nearly cast him spinning from the train. The others clung desperately to the brake-wheels, expecting that each car as it struck the curve would leap the rails.

But the brakes set at the rear of the train (now the front of the descending string of cars) were beginning to tell on her speed.

When once again all the cars were running on the straight line, the men were able to complete the winding of the brakes. Before all were tightly set, the bottom of the grade was at hand; and when the cars finally ground to a protesting stop, the persistent shrieking of the locomotive following them down the hill was plain in the ears of the crew.

The engineer had run on to Gridiron station, just beyond the brink of the hill, side-tracked the forward end of the long train, and was now steaming back to pick up the cars which he had dropped.

"And, by jiminy," growled the sooty-faced driver to Sousa, who stood in the rain beneath the cab window while the men were repairing the patent coupling between the forward box-car and the tender, "I didn't expect to find half of these blamed cars right side up.

"I reckoned a good part of the train would snap off at that curve yonder—I sure did! Didn't lose a car, eh?"

"It don't look like it, does it?" grumbled Sousa. "But we lost a man down below here," and he repeated the story of the tramps' attack on the signalman, the pursuit of the rascals, and the disappearance of their victim.

"Well, it's tough on the poor chap. But we can't spend any more time here. Tell 'em at Gridiron when we get up there ag'in, an' have the morning express watch out for him."

He got the signal then and pulled open the throttle with a jerk. An hour later they were at the station on the mountain and the train was made up once more, while the crew hustled out the freight billed to this place.

It had stopped raining by this time, and Sousa, with a lantern swinging from his arm, went down the long string of cars, comparing their numbers with the list he had prepared from the waybills. The forward end of the train was now in the rear, although the caboose had been shunted back and coupled upon the extreme tail as usual; so it was not an easy matter to find all the cars.

Sousa wandered up and down the length of the train twice, and by that time the half car-load of freight had been dumped in the Gridiron freight shed.

"All right, Jim?" sang out the engineer, with his head out of the cab window and his hand upon the lever.

"I dunno," growled Sousa. "Wait a minute!" Then he called his nearest men.

"Scatter along here, boys, and see if you can find a car numbered 30-71-11. I'm hanged if I can find it."

The brakemen went off grumbling. It was late, they were wet, and the run had been unpleasant enough to get on the nerves of the most callous.

"You're off your nut, Jim!" sang out the flagman. "We ain't got a car numbered like that."

Sousa went back to the caboose and took a look through his waybills.

"I got it!" he exclaimed. "It's that car we're to drop at Massail. It's billed to the Norwegian Match Co. Don't tell me we haven't such a car, for I know better!"

"Humph!" observed his assistant. "I reckon that's so. I remember the car now. Why, it's the one we drove those 'boes out of."

"That's right!" cried Sousa, leaping to the ground again. "Thunder, who's Jonahed this run? I never knew of so many derned unfortunate things happening——"

His remark trailed off into profanity as he strode along the length of the train again, turning the light of his lantern upon the number of each car as he passed. But No. 30-71-11 was not in the string.

There was hurrah enough then. The brakemen crowded around, and the engineer climbed down and joined them.

The car was gone—had totally disappeared. Everybody knew it had been in the train at the foot of the grade; nobody could suggest a reasonable explanation of its vanishing.

Sousa and the flagman finally wrangled to the point where they agreed that the train must have broken at the missing car. If it was attached to the part of the train that ran away, it was easy to say that somewhere in the darkness and the storm, while careering down the steep grade, the runaway had dropped the car billed to the Norwegian Match Co.

"Y' twitched it off at the curve down yonder!" declared the engineer.

"Why didn't we see it, then?' demanded one of the brakemen. "We were out on the roofs when she took the curve."

"And it was as dark as a stack of black cats and raining great guns," grumbled the flagman. "How would we see if the tail car jumped the track?"

"But I'd oughter seen the wreck of her when I came down arter ye," declared the engineer. "Jackson and I were on the lookout for ye. We expected to find *all* the cars piled up somewhere beside the tracks."

But here Sousa had an idea.

"We don't know whether the train broke at the fore or the rear end of that car for the Match Co. Maybe it remained coupled to the forward end—these cars you side-tracked," and he addressed this to the engineer.

"Thunder! What's come of it, then?" demanded that individual.

"How do I know? It stands to reason if we'd snapped her off down the grade, we'd seen her lying beside the tracks. You've been down and up—both."

"But cars don't fly!" cried the engineer. "We side-tracked them yonder, and Jackson set the brakes, and then chocked the wheels of the car nearest the switch. You're bughouse, Jim!"

"Maybe I am; but I know we've got to find that car. Run this train on to the side track again, and we'll go down and see if we can find it. The company will hold me responsible for the goods in that car, that's all *I* know about it."

After a deal of wrangling, the engineer complied with this order. The remaining cars were shunted back upon the siding, and the locomotive bore her crew and Sousa down the mountain-side again in search of car 30-71-11.

By this time dawn had begun to trace gray patterns along the horizon. There were early trains coming from the east, too, and Sousa knew that he would be up on the carpet for this night's work.

The engineer would not agree to descend farther than the curve, half way down the mountain.

And at this point, although they left the engine and with their lanterns, now paling in the fast increasing light, searched on either side of the tracks, no trace of the lost car was visible.

On the outer side of the curve, which turned to the south, the railroad embankment dropped away to a deep ravine. But there were no marks in the ground beside the tracks, and the tops of the trees which filled the ravine, and which rose to within a few yards of the track, seemed undisturbed.

"This is all blanked nonsense!" declared the engineer, climbing into his cab again and jerking open the throttle on the reverse. "If that car had jumped the rails here, we'd found her all right!"

And he would listen to nothing fur-

ther from the conductor, declaring as his belief that the car numbered 30-71-11 had never been in the train at all!

"Gosh, I don't know but you're right!" admitted the dazed Sousa, as they returned up the hill.

CHAPTER XVII.

"WE HOWARDS HANG TOGETHER."

THE automobile party came home that evening in rather a shaken state. The exhilaration of running smoothly down a well-kept road had made them all forget the danger at the bottom.

When the machine dashed out of the woods and across the tracks so close to the huge forefront of the freight locomotive that its breath seemed fairly to scorch them, the enjoyment that had attended the afternoon's ride was sponged out at once.

Bell Howard was not a girl of the screaming kind, and Mrs. Rodgers, her female companion. was too scared to cry out. The auto shot across in front of the slowing engine, and the chauffeur could scarcely stop the machine before Belle's door.

"Oh, I hope you are not so terribly scared," stammered Dr. Lester, scrambling out with his lame arm and helping Belle to alight. "That wouldn't happen once in a hundred years, you know."

"It will be quite that length of time before it happens again to me, doctor," she declared, and ran to her room, there to gain control of her nerves before seeing her father.

That narrow escape of the automobile shook her more than had the wreck of the Fly-by-Night.

She sat by her window, which overlooked the rear premises of the Howard place and the railroad beyond, wondering how that train had come to stop so fortunately. Knowing that it must have been the fast freight which went through at about the same hour every evening, she was also aware it had never stopped at that crossing before.

Between the back fence and the railroad line were several open lots toward which the rapidly growing suburb of Coldspring was reaching eager fingers of gray brick houses. As her glance wandered over this still waste land she observed a figure rapidly approaching from the direction of the block signal tower, the rear elevation of which, with its blank and windowless wall, was directly opposite her window.

"Why, that's Sade!" she suddenly said aloud, as the figure drew nearer in the gathering dusk. "It's 'Tilda's girl."

'Tilda Armet, who had been a Howard, and had gone back to the Howards with her brood of children when her husband died, was cook and general factotum for Captain Payne's small household; but only upon the agreement that the aforesaid brood should keep away from the premises.

Wilder "loons" never grew than the Armet young ones, and Sade, the freckled, bare legged girl who now swarmed over the back fence of the premises with the abandon of a boy, was the youngest of the tribe, and came the most frequently to see her mother, vastly to the old captain's disapproval.

"When you git so derned fidgety ye can't 'bide without seein' them young uns, 'Tilda," he had said, "you jes' pack up an' git, an' come back when you reckon you kin stay content. But I swear I won't have none of 'em around here, no more 'n I would Jase Howard's spawn."

Therefore, to head off the explosion Belle knew would occur if her father caught sight of Sade, she threw aside her wraps and hurried down-stairs to the kitchen just as Miss Barelegs sidled into the doorway.

"'Tilda," Belle said seriously, "you know what father will say if he finds Sade here to-night. Now, don't let us have words about it. I don't feel as though I could stand it just now."

"She ain't goin' to stay more 'n a minute, Miss Belle," declared 'Tilda Armet. "She jes' come down on a errand for her uncle. She's goin' right back hum, Miss Belle."

"On an errand for her Uncle Jase?" asked Miss Howard sharply, and eying the lanky girl with disapproval. "Did it take her over to the signal tower? I just saw her coming from there."

For she knew about Dan Crompton's trouble with Jase and Ike Howard at the railroad hotel, and about Sade later riding into town to obtain the pistols of the cowardly mountaineers.

"Oh, no, ma'am! Oh, no, ma'am!" volunteered Sade volubly. "I been ter see 'Skeet Merritt, what's goin' ter buy some o' Uncle Jase's shotes — 'deed that's so, ma'am."

Belle knew that the child was a more accomplished liar even than her mother, and she was curious as to what Sade had really been about. But while she was hesitating whether to probe deeper into the matter, Captain Payne himself stepped into the kitchen.

"Jeffers pelters!" ejaculated the captain, his eyes gleaming under his shaggy brows, and at once lashing himself into a passion, as he did forty times a day. "Jeffers pelters, what d'ye mean, 'Tilda, by havin' that bare laiged loon here again? Ain't I told you ter keep 'em away from here? Ain't I told *her* I'd skin her alive if she come ter th' house ag'in?"

He advanced on the Armets, shaking his stick, his voice fairly rattling the window sashes. Sade crouched behind her mother's limp skirt, her face expressive of a mixture of fright and impishness quite indescribable.

"Naow, Cap'n Payne!" whined 'Tilda, standing before her offspring like a wet and bedraggled hen defending a lone chick, "don't yeou be too ha'sh. She ain't meanin' of no ha'm——"

"No harm!" snorted the old man, pointing his stick at Sade's brown and scratched shanks. "Ain't you ashamed of havin' such a lookin' critter comin' inter town this 'er way?"

"Waal, cap'n, they wears 'em out so fast——"

"Ain't she got no shoes an' stockin's?" roared Cap'n Payne.

"No, she ain't; 'ceptin' her Sunday ones," declared her mother desperately.

"Then you put on your bunnit an' take her 'long to Massey's shop an' git her a pair of ev'ry day shoes. Tell Massey ter charge 'em to my account. Start, now!"

'Tilda already had her sunbonnet off the nail behind the door and was hiding a pleased grin behind the voluminous folds of cambric.

"You git her copper-toed ones with leather laces!" said Captain Payne, as the two fled out of the kitchen door.

"And," he shouted after them, "if I see that gal round here ag'in with bare laigs, I'll take er horsewhip an' skin 'em for her!"

Belle said nothing, but finally led the old man back to the front of the house. What was the use? He was likely to fly into just as great a passion over whether he should have a soft boiled egg or a poached one for breakfast.

His daughter was disturbed over Sade's presence in town, however.

She could not fail to have some interest in Dan Crompton after the experience both had undergone when the Fly-by-Night was wrecked; and happening to see Silly Billy later in the evening, she learned something which further set her thoughts upon the signalman at Block Tower Seven.

Billy came to deliver certain of the household wash which, careful housewife that she was, Belle would not trust to 'Tilda Armet. Mrs. Corrigan was an excellent laundress, and "took in" fine work from several of her richer neighbors.

"I—I seen you in Dr. Lester's automobile, Miss Belle," said Billy in his hesitating way, lingering at the door. "My, but you all come near gettin' smashed, didn't ye?"

"Sh!" whispered the girl. "I don't want father to know about it."

"Oh, I won't say a word," Billy returned hoarsely. "But if it hadn't been for *him* a-stoppin' of that train, it 'ud gone plumb inter ye!"

"Who stopped it—the flagman at the crossing?"

"Oh, no, Miss Belle! Our boarder, Mr. Crompton."

"Did he do that?" cried the girl.

"Yes, Miss Belle. An' he's goin' ter git inter trouble for it. The flagman tol' me so. That fast freight had right of way. I guess there ain't many folks likes that Mr. Crompton."

"Why not, Billy?" she asked curiously.

"I dunno. Sade says her Uncle Jase is goin' ter kill him."

"Hush! You shouldn't repeat such things. Sade is a wicked little girl. She doesn't know what she is talking about."

"Well, she says she does!" responded Billy, shaking his head solemnly. "She says he's goin' ter be killed if he stays here. An' she wanted me to give him a letter."

"A letter? Who from—what for?" demanded Belle, quite disturbed.

"I—I dunno," stammered Billy, who always grew incoherent when anybody else became the least excited. "I—I didn't do it, Miss Belle—'ndeed I didn't!"

"Didn't do what?"

"Give him the letter. I wouldn't. She tol' me to leave it with his supper at the tower door."

"Was it this evening?"

"Yaas 'm."

Belle went in and closed the door then. But she was much disturbed. She believed now that she knew why Sade had been in town—and, further, why she had come across lots from the direction of the signal tower.

"She delivered the letter herself," thought the captain's daughter. "Now, what was it—a lure to get Mr. Crompton in the power of those bad men, or a warning? I wish I had been able to get more out of Sade before father came into the kitchen to-night.

"Oh, these Howards! They are bad—bad 'way through! And father seemed angry with this Mr. Crompton, too, when I spoke of him the other day. He says, as bad as some of the Howards are, they always 'hang together.'"

She shook her head sadly, mounting to her room. "If things keep on, some of the Howards may surely *hang* together!" was her added thought.

She dared not discuss the matter with her father; it seemed useless to sound 'Tilda Armet. Belle Howard slept but little that night.

It was before their early breakfast that she saw Silly Billy dodging about the back fence and peering up at her windows. His appearance gave the girl a shock from which she was some minutes in recovering; she knew he was waiting to get speech with her without attracting Captain Payne's observation.

Hurriedly dressing, she went down into the yard, where, well away from the house, she called softly to the boy.

"Billy, what is the matter? Do you want to see me?"

"Oh, yaas 'm," gasped Silly Billy, his face appearing red and tear-streaked, like a beclouded moon, over the top of the fence. "I'se feared to come to the house, Miss Belle."

"What's the matter? What has happened, Billy?" she asked, frightened, she knew not why.

"It's Mr. Crompton," breathed the excited Billy. "He ain't come home. Mother sent me over to the tower. He ain't there."

"What—what—— Don't the man there know anything about him?"

"No'm. He left same's us'al at midnight. He ain't never got to our house," declared Silly Billy, and broke into such wild sobs that he lost his precarious footing on the fence outside and disappeared with an involuntary grunt.

But Belle was so troubled by his information that she failed to see anything ridiculous in either his mishap or in his bobbing up again in a moment like a very lugubrious jack-in-the-box.

"You must tell me all about it—all you know," she said earnestly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A RATHER BLIND TRAIL.

But Billy could really tell her very little—that is, little of importance; although he talked volubly enough of his mother's fright when Dan was found not to be at home in the morning, and how he had run over to ask Markell about the missing signalman, and what Markell had said.

Markell had telegraphed to Coldspring station (this was early, before Bobbett came on duty) and Billy had heard him discuss Crompton's disappearance with the conductor of a freight that was at the moment side-tracked, waiting for the passing of some more important train.

Billy had heard something about a

letter, and that Crompton had seen somebody lurking near the signal tower before he left, and how Markell had given him his blackjack when Dan started home. All this in a jumble that fired Belle's anxiety to the highest pitch.

Poor Silly Billy had forgotten all about Sade Armet and the letter she had striven to make him deliver to Dan the night before; but Belle pieced the two businesses together and at once connected Dan's disappearance with Jase and Ike Howard.

And not that she had any particular interest in Dan Crompton, beyond the fact that she knew him to be a brave man who had, on two occasions, been an instrument in saving her from injury. She was not a foolishly romantic girl—not one to gather a personal interest in a man whom she had never spoken to except on one evening.

She feared, as had her mother, that black streak in the Howards which, in Captain Payne's case, had led him to espouse the Lost Cause, and stick to his belief in the Southern Confederacy when the issue for which that union stood was as dead as Julius Cæsar! With other members of the family—more ignorant and less noble members—the bad blood had shown in law-breakings more than once.

Jase and Ike Howard were the ringleaders of the clan, now living in the hills some thirty miles from Coldspring. She had no fear of them on her own part, but she feared what they might do to a man like Crompton, whom they so greatly hated.

Her mind, spurred by Silly Billy's story, concentrated upon one thought. She would get to the bottom of that note to Dan Crompton; she would know what it meant.

With this end in view she attacked 'Tilda Armet first. But at once 'Tilda dissolved into tears. This was her main defense upon all occasions—the bulwark against which even Captain Payne's wrath surged and broke in vain.

But Belle was not at all touched by these tears; she was a woman herself, and women easily penetrate the foibles and shams of their sex. She managed to get the verbal declaration from 'Tilda that the contents of the note Sade had been instructed to deliver at the signal tower ("if there *was* airy note"—to quote the sobbing 'Tilda) were unknown to her.

Belle knew it to be worse than useless to seek to interest her father in the matter. At breakfast she hid her trouble successfully, but said, as he lit his long and black cigar before going out:

"Send me Jetty up from the stable in an hour, please, father. I am going to ride out the river road this morning."

"All right, Maybell," he responded, in his most affectionate manner.

When the old captain was not in the throes of a wrathful eruption, he was the kindest man imaginable, and never thwarted his daughter in her least intention. The horse came up to the house on the minute.

She left word with 'Tilda, as though it had been an afterthought that she might stop at a friend's for luncheon, and possibly not be home until dinnertime. Then, once free of the town, she set Jetty to her best paces.

She had been over the road before and knew it well. Ten miles out from Coldspring there was a branch wagon road leading into the hills, and skirting the railroad for many miles, passing through the same break in the heights which the railroad builders had found when they surveyed the A. & C. right of way.

Although the way was so familiar to Belle, she had never penetrated as far as the neighborhood where the rocky farms of Jase Howard and his clan were situated. Not even as a child had she been allowed to associate, to any degree at all, with her cousins.

She was not afraid of them, however. She believed her own father was feared by Jase and his crew far more than outsiders feared the mountaineers. Harm could not befall her in this proposed visit.

And from Sade, or somebody else, she was determined to draw an explanation of the note delivered to Dan Crompton the night before; and, if the Howards had to do with his disappearance, she

was determined to know that, too. Belle possessed a good bit of the old captain's doggedness when she embarked upon a project.

There were many farms and ranches along the road, and she was acquainted at most; but she made no stop for luncheon. Indeed, before noon she was climbing the last rise toward the pass, a little to the east of which was the settlement of the Howard clan.

In the heart of the woods, 'way up on the side of the mountain, was a spot where the road she followed (now little more than a bridle-path) crossed the railroad tracks. She was almost at this point before discovering the meaning of the smoke which for an hour she had seen gathering above a shoulder of the hill.

The heavy rain of the early morning should have saturated the forest so thoroughly that a fire would have been impossible. Yet there was evidently a conflagration slowly advancing around the hill.

The breeze was so light, however, that Belle was not in the least disturbed by its proximity, and pushed on without paying much attention to the smoke which, occasionally, drove down upon the path and made Jetty cough and point her ears forward questioningly.

There was a group of men at work near the crossing, and Belle heard their voices even before she came in sight of the tracks. The railroad housed a hand-car and tools here, and a section gang was digging a broad trench about the building and the pile of seasoned ties beside it.

The boss of the gang was a man from Coldspring whom Belle knew, and he came out to the bridle-path to speak to her, and to pat Jetty's arched neck.

"Shure, 'tis a good bit from home ye air," he said easily. "Ye'd better not ride much deeper into the woods, Miss Howard. That fire may amount to something."

"I shall turn back if the wind increases," she returned. "You seem to be afraid it may do some damage here, Mr. Laughlin."

"'Tis better ter be sure than sorry," he declared, with his pipe in his mouth. "But Oi didn't come up here for this special purpose—no indade. Oi'm instructed," he added, with a humorous twinkle in his gray Irish eyes, "ter look for a sartin box-car—'twas lost, strayed, or stolen somewheres on this grade."

"How was that, Mr. Laughlin?" she asked. The section boss always interested her.

"Be the powers, miss, Oi belave th' car tuk to itsilf wings an' *flew* erway. 'Tis nawthin' ilse wull explain ut intirely!" and his brogue grew thicker as he became excited.

And Belle grew excited herself as she listened to the story (as Laughlin had heard it) of the run west to Gridiron of the night freight. Jim Sousa's report had gone up and down the line, and the crew of every morning train either way on the grade had been on the lookout for some sign of the lost car—and for the lost signalman as well.

It can easily be seen what part of the story interested Belle Howard the most. Laughlin did not exactly know how the signalman from Block Tower Seven came to be on the freight; but he knew that it was generally considered that the man had been knocked off the train by tramps, and, whether alive or dead, he had as completely disappeared as had car 30-71-11.

From Laughlin's garbled account, Belle thought she saw the work of her disreputable relatives. She believed that Jase Howard and his son were the tramps, and she felt sure that they had taken some vengeance upon Crompton before being driven from the train themselves.

She prepared to ride on, her mind in a turmoil of questioning, when suddenly the bushes parted beside the way, and a little figure hobbled out to confront her.

Laughlin had gone back to his men, and Belle had already gathered up the reins, when this strange little creature appeared.

It was a boy—perhaps twelve, perhaps twenty—but with the physique of a child of eight. A roughly cut crotched stick served him as a crutch, and aided the locomotion of his withered leg. Indeed, he hopped along beside Jetty with the celerity of a lame robin.

"Hullo, Miss Belle!" he squealed, his head very much on one side, and his wizened face expressing all manner of shrewd speculation. "Whachu up here for? I seen ye—an' heered ye—talkin' with Mike Laughlin"—ending the speech with a chuckle and an indescribable wriggle of delight.

"Say, 'f ye won't tell, I'll show ye where that thar car went. Cross yer heart—hope ter die—'n' I'll tell ye!"

Belle knew the odd little cripple—nicknamed "Pippin," as being in some manner distantly related to herself. He was one of the "loons" at the Howard settlement three or four miles away—and a wilder, wickeder urchin there was not in the entire Howard clan.

"What about the box-car?" she asked him, seeing that his goblin-like features were puckered with importance. "What do you know about it?"

"I know whar it is," declared the strange child—for child he was in body, if not in age and shrewdness.

"Where is it?"

"Cross yer heart? Hope yer may die?"

"Why should I promise?" asked Belle, looking down at him as he hobbled by Jetty's side.

"Unc' Jase—or Ike—would skin me erlive ef I tol', an' then *you* tol' Mike Laughlin."

"Why, what had they to do with the disappearance of the car?"

"Nawthin'. They don't know where it is. But I'm knowin'—nobody else, I reckon. An'—an' I don't wanter go back thar," and his face changed suddenly, and he shivered.

The expression of his features was one of fear.

"What do you mean? Why not?"

"Thar's a ha'nt in that gully. I heered it."

"See here," Belle said seriously, drawing a purse from the pocket of her habit, and selecting a half dollar from the silver. "You tell me what you mean, and all about the car, and I'll give you this."

"And you won't tell Uncle Jase—or Ike?" asked Pippin eagerly. "Though I dunno's I keer much erbout Ike *now*."

"Why not?"

"Ike's hurt his laig. He hurted it last night somehow."

"Jumping from that train," Belle thought. But all she said aloud was: "Well, about the car?"

Pippin pointed down the hill.

"It's down that er-way," he whispered. "Thar's a deep gully b'side th' railroad. I dunno how th' car got thar. Muster jumped clean over the aidge of th' 'bankment right at the curve and went down t'roo th' trees. It's erstandin' right up on its eend."

"How did you come to find it?"

"Thar's a path yander," and he pointed further along the bridle track which she was slowly following. "I went down thar ter look at some rabbit snares I sot day 'fore yest'day. 'Nd I seed th' car in th' gully."

"Are you sure, Pippin?" she asked.

"That's right, Miss Belle. I seen it—an' I heered th' ha'nt," and he shivered again.

"There aren't such things as haunts," she declared gravely.

"Huh! Mebbe ye don't hev 'em down ter th' city; but thar's lots ov 'em up yere," declared Pippin with confidence. "I've seed 'em as well as heered 'em."

"Did you see this one?" Belle asked with a smile.

"Nop! He was inside that thar car."

At that the girl was startled. She looked at his elfin face for several moments in silence. Then she demanded:

"What do you mean, Pippin? That you heard somebody in that overturned car?"

"'Twar a ha'nt," declared Pippin doggedly. "Now, you gimme that fower bit piece"—reaching a claw-like hand up for the half dollar.

"You heard a voice inside the car?" gasped Belle.

"Yep!"

"What did it say?"

"I dunno. I was skeered. It jes' natcherly hollered ter git out—like ha'nts alluz doos. They ain't easy in their minds—never!"

Belle dropped the silver piece into the yellow hand, and Pippin, with a grimace and wink transferred it to his pocket, and hobbled into the bushes

again. The threatening fire seemed to have no terrors for him.

But Belle sat there upon Jetty, turning these mystifying discoveries over and over in her mind, and wondering whether she should believe the strange child or not.

CHAPTER XIX.

"OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN."

AND the condition of affairs suggested to Belle Howard's mind by Pippin's superstitions were correct. Car 30-71-11 was up-ended in the deep ravine, just at the elbow in the grade of the railroad below Gridiron, and the "ha'nt" inside the car was a very vigorous reality.

Being on the tail of the runaway section of the freight train, car 30-71-11 had been snapped off the string, just as the end boy is flung off at the game of "snap-the-whip."

And with such momentum had the runaway rounded that curve that the lost car jumped completely over the edge of the embankment, without touching gravel or tie, and plunged into the depths of the ravine with a velocity and a final crash which quite drove the breath from Dan Crompton's body.

The roadbed of the A. & C. here verged upon the extreme brink of the precipitous wall of the ravine. The thick trees hid its depths.

Through the upper branches of these trees the car dived, the branches closed again behind it, and the bottom of the gulley was completely hidden from observation above.

Indeed, the searching parties did not even suspect the great depth of the pit, although the building engineers of the road could easily have informed them on this point.

Bound and helpless as he was, the signalman was panic-stricken long before the doomed car went over the embankment. He felt, as the train gathered speed, that a wreck was certain.

Even when he heard the rattling of brake chains and squealing of shoes against the car wheels below, he gained no confidence. The train crew were too slow in discovering the accident to reduce the speed in season. Crompton really expected the entire rear end of the train to leave the track.

What really happened was quite as bad for him, however. The coupling between the last two cars broke just as 30-71-11 struck the curve. The forward wheels left the rails, followed by the rear trucks, and we have seen how the entire car landed in the depths of the ravine.

It was some time before Crompton had a very clear realization of its condition—and of his own—however.

He was in darkness, of course. He was bruised, and the wound in his head received that memorable morning had broken out afresh and he felt the sticky blood upon his face and matted in his hair.

He lay in a most uncomfortable way on the boxes and cases with which the car had been more than two-thirds filled. Now, however, having been at the extreme rear of the car, he was on top of the load.

Had he been thrust by the men who had bound him in the other end, this accident would have given him his certain quietus.

The boxes had now heaped themselves together, and both doors were completely blocked.

The cleared space in which he was a prisoner was perhaps four feet deep, very close, and the condition of both his mind and body most unfortunate.

It was easy to guess how the car came to be in this situation; not so easy to figure how he was to get out. The men who had captured and gagged him before being driven from the car by the railroad crew had done their work well.

Even after the tossing about Crompton had suffered, he was unable to discover wherein his bonds had been loosened in the least.

Writhe as he might, he could not seem to stretch the ropes at wrist and ankle, and the gag grew more painful as time went on.

At first he hoped that the freight crew would quickly find the car, and, in seeking to right it, release him from his prison. He had no idea how deep

the ravine was into which car 30-71-11 had plunged.

But time passed and nobody came to Dan Crompton's assistance. He had no idea why this was so; the fact that he was left to get out of the car as best he might was plain enough, however.

"And, any way," he thought, "they didn't know I was aboard here. Sousa and his men evidently thought I had fallen off the train before we started up the incline. By heaven, this is an awful position!"

It was awful because of its discomfort. The box-car was practically new and well built. The drop into the ravine might have smashed the lower end, but this upper part was sound enough. Crompton soon found difficulty in breathing in his close quarters.

With much pain he managed to roll to one of the side walls of the car, and found a very narrow crack through which a little fresh air percolated. He would not smother in here, of course, but his lot was not a happy one.

"They've gone on without trying to right the car," Crompton groaned at last. "A section gang or a wrecking crew will be sent after it. And God knows when they'll get here and whether I shall be in a condition then to make myself heard before they begin to pitch the old car over.

"If they move it with me inside, these cases may shift, and then where'll I be?"

This thought frightened him and he recommenced his struggles. Writhing about soon brought him to a knowledge of the fact that the boxes were bound at the corners with strips of sheet iron, and that the edges of the iron were sharp.

The pain of the scratches he suffered brightened his wits immensely. If those irons caused him such discomfort, surely they could be made to play a saving part, too!

His wrists were tied behind his back. He found one of the sharp strips of iron (*that* was easy enough) and maneuvered until his bound wrists came in contact with it.

This was not so easy a matter as might be thought; the blood ran freely from several deep scratches in his wrists and hands before he brought the linen handkerchief into proper contact with the iron.

He had read (who has not?) of the ingenious captive who saws his bonds apart by similar means; it's all right to read about, but Crompton soon found he had tackled a task of no mean magnitude.

Had he possessed the acrobatic agility of an inch-worm, sawing the linen apart might have been simple; but the manner in which his wrists were tied left him a bare three inches of leeway in moving his hands up and down the small of his back. And that his muscles were already strained to a painful degree, goes without saying.

Every movement of his body, even the slightest, wrenched a muffled groan from his throat. His innate obstinacy —the trait which had made him stick to his situation at Block Tower Seven and refuse to carry firearms—upheld him in his task.

He lost all run of the time, for there were occasions when his consciousness failed entirely. It was like a terrible nightmare; even while he worked at fraying the handkerchief against the iron, it did not seem real to him.

"I'll wake up yet and find Mrs. Corrigan rapping on my door," he thought, in one more than usually sane moment.

But obstinacy won at last. After falling into a dazed condition of mind, in which he quite unconsciously continued to rub the linen against the sharp iron, he was suddenly aroused to the fact that the bonds had given way. He was cheerfully rasping the iron into the flesh itself!

He groaned and rolled over, bringing his almost paralyzed arms around in front of his body. He was some moments in coming to a realization of his freedom.

"Gad, if I don't get blood poison from that iron strap, it'll be a wonder," he thought, sitting up and tenderly rubbing his wrists.

Then he realized that he was able to free himself of the gag, and quickly had the bandage untied and spat out the rags.

He could hardly close his jaws; his neck was so stiff that every movement gave him exquisite pain, and altogether he was as sore and shaken as though he had been scientifically hammered by a trained pugilist.

He tried to rise after a time, discovered that his ankles were tied (he had forgotten them), and tumbled back upon the boxes. When he had unfastened his remaining bonds he could scarcely control his lower limbs. His whole body, indeed, seemed half paralyzed.

The air in the car had become very foul, too. He lit a match at last and looked at his watch.

It was going, despite the shaking up he had had, and pointed to two-fifteen. It was afternoon—it could not be night again, he was sure—and the railroad people had not yet found the car.

"Or, if they have found it, they seem to be in no hurry to right it," he thought. "Had they come near, surely I would have heard their voices. And they would have heard my groans—of course!"

It seemed as though he must get out of the car by his own exertions, and, exhausted as he was, and without tools, how was this to be accomplished?

He managed, after some time, to examine pretty thoroughly the inner walls of the car, or of that part in which he was confined. There were only two or three places through which the least air or light penetrated, and the planks of which the car was built were perfectly sound and bolted to the framework.

He shouted now several times, but the only reply he received was the mocking whistle of an engine, and that, to his amazement, seemed a considerable distance away.

The faint rumble of the train as it passed, so far above his head, finally assured Dan Crompton that this car in which he was confined had fallen a great distance when it jumped the track.

"And God knows whether they will ever get her out," he muttered. "What will happen to me, then? Am I to be confined here for the rest of my natural existence—which won't be long at this rate?"

He knew the car to be up-ended in some sort of a hole. It might be more badly wrecked than he had at first supposed.

A cursory glance might satisfy a railroad inspector that it would be cheaper to let the car lie where it was and make good its cargo to the shippers than to go to the expense of hoisting it back to the roadbed.

Why, this was startling; it actually affrighted him!

It was a possibility not devoid of a certain horror which brought to his brow drops of moisture and set his breath to a gasping key. Locked into this car for God knew how long! The thought was terrifying in the extreme.

He began to wonder what the cargo of the car was. If he had heard Sousa say, he had forgotten, and now lighting another match he looked over the top boxes to satisfy himself how best to open them, or to discover by their marks what manner of goods they contained.

"Matches! Nice prospect—I don't think!" murmured Crompton, after reading the address stenciled on the first box. "Didn't know but I might run up against some canned goods or something else eatable. What's next?"

But all he found were stenciled to the Norwegian Match Company, at Massail. He hauled up one of the cases and packed it away at one end of his narrow pocket, so as to get at other boxes, hopeful of finding food in the car. But every box was marked in the same way.

That is, so far as he could make out. Moving the boxes was very difficult at best. Each had to be dragged up by main strength and packed away next to the end of the car.

He soon got a new idea from this, however, although he found nothing but boxes of matches.

If he dug down deeply enough into the pile (he had begun to take them out at one side), he might reach one of the sliding doors, and so escape. This thought inspired him to greater and more vigorous effort, and despite his weakness and pain he dragged up box after box, packing them securely behind him.

But there began to be forced upon his

notice a growing trouble. The air in the car was bad—had been so since early morning, but now, added to its mustiness, was a smell of burning wood which he could not at first understand.

This tang of smoke in his nostrils grew worse as time progressed. Now and then he breathed in a sudden puff of it, which entered by some tiny crack, and his lungs began to smart while the brown gloom in the car became thicker.

He tried to find some interstice through which he could see, but although there were several narrow cracks, he could behold nothing at all outside. Faintly borne to his ears, however, was the crackling of the flames.

The forest was afire, and the wind was driving the smoke down into this gully. Would the conflagration itself follow?

That was the question which shook him as he turned again to his task of digging out the match-boxes.

Here he was packed in with boxes of matches, the fumes from which would be as suffocating as those from a sulphur spring.

Once afire, the matches would cause his suffocation in short order. Every moment was precious, and he worked madly to escape from his prison.

And to what end? Suppose he were able to reach the side door of the box-car and could force it open (and that was no probable fact), would he not be practically leaping from the frying pan into the fire?

The woods all about were evidently in flames. The sounds of the increasing conflagration grew plainer and plainer. Free of the car, he would at once be swallowed up by the flames and smoke now fast filling the ravine.

These thoughts maddened him, yet he continued his task of moving the boxes. He had sunk quite a shaft into the heap, which now towered over his head threateningly.

"Whether I get out of this or no, I've got to fight for my life," was his decision.

"I'll not give it up yet. I'll fight as long as I can breathe—as long as I can stir one of these boxes!"—and up came another to be raised carefully to the top of the barrier behind him.

He had stopped crying aloud now. There was no good in shouting for help.

The railroad men would keep out of the ravine until the fire was past, and he needed all his strength for this seemingly interminable task fate had set him.

CHAPTER XX.

IN GRAVE PERIL.

THE perspiration poured from Dan Crompton's limbs while he tugged at the boxes, expecting each moment that the pile in his rear would tumble down upon him. The air grew closer and more tinctured with the hot smoke. The fire roared in his ears.

The trees shrouding the sides of the ravine, and whose tops hid the wrecked car from the railroad bed, were all afire. From above, the gully must have had the appearance of a geyser of flame and smoke. Yet down here at the bottom the fire was slow in making headway because there was no draft.

Suddenly, in pulling out a box, Dan was dazzled by a shaft of light which entered from below. It came from beneath the runway of the door. This spurred him to renewed toil. To be so near escape, and yet to fail! God! That could not be.

Panting for breath, tearing his hands upon the sharp-edged iron strips with which the boxes were bound, straining his already overworked muscles to the final point of endurance, the imprisoned signalman kept up the fight.

He saw the edge of the door-frame below him. The door slid upon the outside of the car, and he did not know whether it slid toward the end on which 30-71-11 now stood, or toward the end in the air. If the latter, he knew that all his work had been for naught.

And, indeed, this might be so in either case, for how was he to unfasten the door when the hasp was upon the outside?

This thought brought to his lips a gasping shriek—a cry of despair and horror.

Hark! Was that an answering voice from without?

He halted in his task, his heart thumping under his ribs like a miniature engine, and listened. Then he shouted again, this time with his lips to the side of the door frame.

The roaring of the flames, like a tornado passing through the treetops, dwarfed all other sounds. Dan could not be sure whether he had heard a voice or it were an hallucination of his disturbed mind.

He tore madly at the next box, though he had no idea as to what he should do with it when he drew it out. He could pile no more behind him. The upper boxes were already toppling in threatening manner over his head.

And at this point there came a decided rattle at the door. Somebody without was tearing at the hasp with which it was fastened.

Dan uttered a whoop of joy and dragged up the box he had clutched.

Instantly the door "fell open"—that is, the hasp being unfastened, it rolled back to the full length of its rail and left the way to light and air open to the prisoner.

At the same moment the boxes behind Dan began to topple upon him. He dropped the one in his arms, and those below started to slide out of the widely opened door.

One or two dropped to the ground; others followed. Dan came sliding down with them, and in half a minute the car was vomiting boxes of matches, many of which split open as they landed upon the rocky bottom of the ravine.

With them, out of the interior of the car, was shot the signalman, a box ricochetting from his head and another landing forcibly in the small of his back as he left the car feet foremost. Amid this shower he landed heavily upon the ground.

It was a wonder that he was not fatally injured, and he might have been (for the box-car still continued to vomit its cargo), had not the person who had already played Providence by opening the door run in and fairly dragged Dan out of the way of the falling boxes.

He was too exhausted—too breathless, indeed—to rise at first, and could only lie there and stare up at the face of his rescuer. And, indeed, had he searched his mind through for the identity of the one who would save him, he could never have expected it to be Belle Howard.

It was sure she, in a neat riding habit, caught up at the side to give her limbs freer movement, with a crop hanging from a loop at her wrist, and with gantleted hands.

She was breathless herself, and, in spite of her recent exertions, very pale.

Overhead, the trees were a mass of hissing flames, and the sparks and blazing brands were falling in a perfect shower on the up-ended car. Only the lack of vegetation in the rocky bottom of the ravine—that in some former time might have been the bed of a mountain torrent—had saved the box-car from being ignited.

The heat and smoke driven down into the place were intense. It was certain that no human being could remain long in the vicinity. With the revelation of Miss Howard's presence this fact likewise penetrated Dan Crompton's mind.

"We—we must get out of here!" he stammered, getting waveringly to his knees.

She placed her hand under his arm and helped him to his feet without a word. A great cloud of smoke swept down upon them at the moment, and they stood there, blinded, choking, clinging together until it had passed.

But Dan was sweeping the cobwebs from his brain.

"Where's your horse? Can we get out the way you came in?"

"No. I had to leave Jetty above. The fire is there now," Belle said quickly. "We must run down the ravine, Mr. Crompton."

"Come on, then"—and he began to stagger in the direction indicated.

"You cannot travel," she cried in despair. "What shall we do?"

"If I give out, you run on and leave me," Dan returned. "But I'm not a dead one yet. Far from it!"

He gritted his teeth and plunged on. Soon, instead of her leading him, she was being dragged along the rocky way by the signalman.

The blazing embers fell about them—

indeed, fell upon them—as they progressed. Luckily, the girl's robe was of heavy woolen stuff that did not easily ignite. At first Dan would have been unable to save her had fire caught her garments.

But in a few minutes, getting beyond the thickest of the smoke (although the pungent clouds were being driven down the ravine faster than they could travel) the signalman stopped with a question:

"Where is your horse, Miss Howard? If we can climb back to where you left it——"

"We cannot. And Jetty is not there now," she added quickly. "I left her untied and the fire soon drove her away. I heard her run."

"My God! You've risked a lot to save me!" he gasped, looking at her. "How—how did you know I was in that car?"

"I didn't. I guessed it. You were missed from Coldspring, and I—I feared——"

"You reckoned that Jase Howard and his son had something to do with it?" he demanded, as she hesitated.

She nodded. "Then I heard that there was somebody in that car. A boy—a child—Pippin heard you shouting, and thought you were a ghost."

"Gad!" muttered Dan, going on, and leading her likewise; "I came near being a ghost all right."

They had little breath for useless conversation. He understood but vaguely how and why she came to be the means of his escape from the car. But this was no time for explanations on either side.

Since Belle had first heard of the presence of the wrecked box-car in the ravine, and suspected the identity of its occupant—Pippin's "ha'nt"—the wind had changed and increased in velocity.

Turning down the by-path into the thicker wood, she had ridden as near the edge of the ravine as possible, and then turned Jetty loose, fearing that she might not be able to get back to her in season.

The intelligent mare knew—even before her mistress—that the fire was coming. Ere Belle was half-way down the hillside she heard the mare neighing, and a little later the crash of her hoofs in the brush told of her escape.

Sweeping on to the brink of the ravine, the conflagration had quickly ignited the tops of the trees which made twilight at noon below. Now, as Dan Crompton and the girl ran, hand in hand, along the bottom of the gully, the fire raced with them on either brink.

The sides of the ravine were precipitous, but the cut widened as they progressed. The smoke continued to be driven down upon them, but they soon were out of the range of the falling brands and sparks. They were traveling faster, in spite of Dan's injuries, than their enemy above.

"What shall we do? What lies in this direction?" the signalman panted after a bit.

"The river—it's our only hope," she returned, and then they went on grimly, slipping over the patches of moss, stumbling across heaps of broken slag, tearing through thorn clumps—the girl exerting herself to the last ounce, as well as he.

Dan had forgotten both hunger and thirst, and even minded his wounds but little. He was inspired by the thought that Belle's fate was in his hands. He must keep up to save her.

For, brave and vigorous as she was, the race was telling on her.

If they could escape from the mouth of the ravine before the fire charged down into the lowlands, well and good; but Dan doubted.

He knew little about the territory. He could take advantage of no short cut as the ravine broadened, and so they ran blindly, his eyes straining for the first glint of the river ahead.

"Can we reach it?" she asked him once, more by her look than with her stiffened lips.

As far as poor Dan knew, the river might yet be a mile ahead, but he threw up his head, took a gasping breath, and shouted, "Of course!"

And as Providence had other work for them to do, the river *did* appear shortly.

The fire having swept down the hillsides in charging cavalcades of flame, they ran on in an actual pyrotechnic dis-

play—sparks falling, brands sputtering and exploding like bombs, and vines like fiery serpents dropping unexpectedly across their path from the trees overhead.

They came out upon the bank of the river, that was here not very wide. There was an open glade, which really saved their lives, but they reached the water in a sheet of flame which licked up the grass tussocks and scorched them both like the breath of a furnace.

Belle began to stumble. Desperation nerved Dan for the last few yards, and as his companion pitched forward, and would have fallen into the hissing flames which writhed about their feet, he caught her up, swung her over his shoulder like a sack, holding her with one arm about the waist, and so made the last few leaps to the brink of the water.

There they splashed in together—a headlong dive which carried them away from the bank into the depths of the swift stream.

And here would surely have ended my story had Belle's salvation and his own depended upon Dan Crompton. He had reached the limit of endurance, feeling the breath going from his body and intelligence from his brain, when he bobbed against a cable stretched from shore to shore of the widened river. The shock aroused him. Still clinging to the girl, Dan saw that they had now got beyond the fire.

Indeed, it had almost died out upon the northern bank.

This cable was attached to a small ferry-boat. He managed to raise Belle's body till it rested upon the cable, and then found breath to shout for help.

Fortunately, late in the evening as it now was, the ferryman had seen them coming down the current. Had Dan not shouted, however, he would not have believed them alive and poled out to their rescue.

Once aboard the flat-bottomed craft, Dan lost consciousness completely, but not before he was aware of the ferryman going calmly through his pockets, relieving him of everything of value, including his watch.

The brute did not throw them into the river again, as he might easily have done. Indeed, when he came to himself once more, Dan found that he had been carried with Belle into the ferryman's shack, and that the girl was receiving the kindest treatment from the wife of the thieving Charon.

Life was worth more than money or watch, however. Dan was unable to walk, and the girl, although nowhere near as badly injured as himself, was so exhausted that she was unable to give their rescuers any instructions.

"Send for Captain Payne Howard—she's his daughter," Dan whispered to the ferryman. "He'll pay you for any outlay of money, or for your time."

"And who the devil will take *you* away?" growled the fellow.

"I don't know," murmured Dan. "I've nobody to look out for me——"

"Well, ye can't stay here; we ain't got no room for ye," declared the man decidedly.

"Perhaps the railroad company may do something for me," said Dan, but he didn't believe it.

Railroad corporations are not usually paternal, and Dan could not claim to have received his injuries while in the pursuance of his duties.

Captain Howard's name made an impression upon the ferryman, however, and he found somebody to go to Coldspring. At daybreak there appeared a two-horse, roomy carriage, with the captain himself, and Dr. Lester following behind in his automobile.

The trip to town was a nightmare to Dan Crompton. He went in the auto, after the doctor had taken all the bedding in the shack to pile into the carriage for Miss Howard's comfort. Dan made no complaint. Why should he? Perhaps the doctor did not realize how badly he was injured at first.

At least, he made but a superficial examination of the signalman until he got him home to Mrs. Corrigan's. By that time Dan had little interest in what was or what was not done for him, and remained quite unconscious of his surroundings for three days.

His feet and legs to the knees were scorched until the skin peeled off in flakes, and his other burns, together

with the deep cut in his head made by the sandbag when he was knocked down at the crossing, promised to keep him in his room for some time longer.

He really had a bad time of it, and not so much in body as in mind. Dan Crompton was a dogged sort of a fellow, able to stand many a hard knock, but withal thin-skinned.

Never a word came directly from Belle. When he was able he asked the doctor (who was professionally exact in calling twice a day upon him, but never showed himself particularly friendly), how Miss Howard was, and learned that she was rapidly recovering from her injuries. The signalman was too proud to ask if she had inquired for him.

He was hurt from another cause, too. Bobbett came as soon as Dan was "seeable" at all, and brought him an envelope from headquarters.

In this was a curt statement that "D. Crompton, first signalman Block Tower Seven," was laid off without pay for ten days; cause: holding up train 63 (fast freight) on evening of such and such date—the occasion when Dan had saved the doctor's auto from certain wreck and his party from possible death.

Well, it was no more than he had expected, or would have expected had his other misfortunes not followed so closely.

But who was there to tell Pebble that he was doing Crompton an injustice? No railroad man would care to risk injuring his own position by pointing out an error of the redoubtable Alonzo.

Therefore the days Dan spent housed up in his room at the widow's were anything but pleasant ones. He was not well enough (or the doctor would not allow it) to go back to the tower when the enforced vacation was at an end, so he applied for another week, briefly stating his reason (backed by physician's certificate in proper form), and obtained a grudging consent.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FINGER OF SUSPICION.

CROMPTON and Lester could never be friends, and yet neither intimated in either word or look the reason. But that first night in the Fly-by-Night, coming over from Arkane, had been sufficient to keep two rather good fellows, who might have been much to each other, apart.

After Dan learned that Belle was up and about again he never mentioned her name to the doctor. As far as the signalman learned, she sent no word to him—made no inquiry as to his health.

Mrs. Corrigan was the only woman who "soothed his pillow," if a continual fire of observations upon Raddigan's untimely death, and her own troubles arising therefrom, could be called at all soothing.

It seemed that, although the Benefit, as the railroad men called their association, had paid over to her the sum due, the Chicago insurance company still haggled regarding the payment of the policy on poor Raddigan's life. And this fact made the committee of the Benefit doubt the legality of *their* action, despite the coroner's verdict that Raddigan had been murdered.

"Ter think they'd have th' owdacity ter till me mebbe poor Jim suicided hisself!" cried the widow. "'Tis a shame, so it is! Shure, if Billy was only right in his mind, *he* could till 'em more than ony of thim know."

"What do you mean?" asked Dan, with some interest.

"Shure, the poor bye loved his uncle, an' if he'd be lit, Oi belave he could shut th' vilyan that murdered Jim behind th' bars!" declared Billy's mother. "But Billy's close mouthed, so he is. An' he knows they'd not take his wor-r-d in court."

Having little better to do while he was convalescent, Dan began to think more on the mystery of Raddigan's death than he had at any previous time. Particularly did he try to figure out Silly Billy's exact status in the affair.

He remembered well enough how the foolish boy looked that morning when he came blundering up the tower stairs to find his uncle lying dead in the middle of the upper floor. Dan recalled, and that with ease, every detail of Billy's appearance.

At the time Dan had thought it was the wreck of the Fly-by-Night that had

so frightened the youth, for frightened he was, and had been crying. But now, his wit sharpened by Mrs. Corrigan's remarks, the signalman wondered if Billy was not already informed of his uncle's death at that time?

"It seems impossible. The boy must be sharper than his neighbors suppose if he was already aware of Raddigan's death.

"He had been in the tower that evening. Pebble figured that the murderer of Raddigan must have entered after the foolish boy departed—or was it the coroner who started that idea?

"Any way, I have the impression that it was decided so," Dan thought. "Now, could the boy have fooled us all? He led us to believe that he had recently come from the house here, to learn why his uncle had not come home. Gad! I'll sound his mother on it."

And he did so. It was not easy to do; but the widow only needed to be given an opening to talk about her brother's death, and being a careful navigator, Dan finally steered her around to that phase of it in which he was most deeply interested.

"How came he to go over there to the tower when his uncle was late that night? Did you send him, Mrs. Corrigan?" Dan asked.

"*Me* sind him? Shure, sor, Oi was sound aslape like a dacint woman sh'd be at that hour," she declared. "I knew sorra a t'ing about it till John Kenney came and roused me up. Billy come wid him. Th' bye had been out all th' night long."

From this Dan was confident that Billy had purposely misled those who had first found his uncle dead in the signal tower. He had, in his innocent way, told them that he had "run over to see why Uncle Jim didn't come home," but according to his mother, Billy had been wandering around all the evening and had not come from home at that hour.

"Something foxy about the boy, after all. He must know something more of the murder than he tells—perhaps more than he *dares* tell," thought Dan.

"If he saw it done, or knows who is guilty, he may have been frightened into not telling. That would be very possible, seeing how easily scared he is. If those Howards did it, they would be likely to threaten the boy if they thought for a moment that he was a witness to the deed."

So thoroughly imbued did Crompton become with the desire to get at the root of the murder mystery that he began to sound Dr. Lester regarding his knowledge of Raddigan and his habits. Having so few visitors, Crompton was glad to talk even with a man whom he so little liked as he did the physician.

"Raddigan's death was a sad one," Lester said, shaking his head. "And I understand Mrs. Corrigan is having some trouble in collecting his insurance. The man is dead. No matter how he died, the company should pay the policy at once. The suicide theory does not seem to me to have a leg to stand on. What became of the pistol if the poor fellow did himself to death?"

"There's more mystery than *that* about it," grunted Dan. "Why should he have done it at all—that's more important."

"We-ell, there might have been a possible reason," drawled the physician thoughtfully.

"What's that?"

"The old man was troubled in his mind."

"His life was threatened, I understand," said Dan.

"I don't know anything about that," Lester returned quickly. "I know his eyesight was threatened."

Dan looked up at him curiously, his eyes asking the question.

"A defect of the vision was developing. He was greatly worried about it," Lester said briskly.

"By the way, Mr. Crompton, I have noticed that you do not always see well yourself. I'd like to have you come over to my office when you get out, and allow me to make an examination of your eyes."

"They don't bother me—only when I overstrain them," growled Dan.

"Yes—*only*," repeated the physician significantly. "You'd better take care. Raddigan said that at first."

"What was the matter with his?"

"Why, he had difficulty in distinguishing colors," Lester said, preparing to depart.

"What's that? Color blind?" gasped Dan.

"That was it," responded the physician, and went out.

He left a very miserable patient behind him. Dan forgot to bother with the murder mystery.

Color blind! The fatal trouble of the railroad man—the signalman especially. Crompton was vastly disturbed.

Could that really be what was the matter with *his* eyes? He went over again and again the several incidents which had impressed the fact upon his mind that his sight was defective. The first time was when the big freight engine ran away, and he had been unable to see plainly the signal on the eastern semaphore. On that occasion the headlight of the runaway might really have blinded him so that he could not distinguish the red signal.

But the other occasions when he had not been sure of the color of the lamps, and the discussion he had had with the crossing flagman over the color of Dr. Lester's automobile were not so easily explained away.

"Perhaps the doc has two machines," he thought, and he determined to assure himself one way or the other of that fact.

Silly Billy would have knowledge of this, and although he seldom set eyes on the boy—even while he was confined to his room and had to be waited upon—he caught him sliding a tray of toast and tea into the door one morning, and called him in before Billy could decamp to the regions below.

"Come in here; I'm not going to bite you!" Dan said reassuringly. "I want you to tell me something."

Billy looked positively frightened, and began to rub his eyes with his cuff, and snivel.

"I ain't never done nothin' to you, Mr. Crompton," he said.

"Of course you haven't, Billy," Dan returned cheerfully. "You're all right!"

Billy's weak face immediately broke into smiles. He had evidently found an exhibition of his lacrimose possibilities of avail on many occasions.

"Now, Billy, I want to know about Dr. Lester's automobile. What color is it?"

"I told Miss Belle about it!" exclaimed Billy eagerly, his irresponsible mind going off at a tangent. "I told her you stopped the train and saved 'em that night."

"Humph!" grunted Dan. "That is not the question. Did you see that auto, Billy?"

Billy nodded vigorously. "I seen it."

"A white auto, wasn't it?"

"Oh, no! Dr. Lester's machine is red. I rid in it—he took me once."

"But doesn't he own two?"

Billy shook his head uncertainly, and just then Markell was announced by Mrs. Corrigan, and his entrance spoiled the signalman's cross-examination of the youth.

Billy slipped out of the room as the whitehead greeted the convalescent.

"Well," said Markell, looking after the widow's son, "that's the first time I've set my eyes on Billy for more than a week. He keeps clear of me now."

"Why?" asked Dan curiously.

"If you ask me, I think it's because I sounded him about the letter you found with your dinner-pail that evening, Crompton. There is something deep about that boy—monstrous deep."

"Bobbett told you?" suggested Dan.

"All about your experience? Yes. You're out of luck, my boy—and laid off, too. How are you fixed for the scads?"

If a railroad man has one trait above another, it's open-handedness. Bobbett's first question when he came to see Dan had been as to whether he could lend the signalman money.

"I've enough for now," Dan said reassuringly. "But I'm sorry old Alonzo didn't understand how I was treated, just the same. I think he's just."

"Humph! Why don't you write him?" queried Markell.

"No, no! I don't think he likes a sniveler. I'll take my gruel and say nothing."

"Well, I suppose there are some circumstances which make it up to you," Markell said with a wink. "I hear you saved old Captain Payne's daughter up there in the hills, and she's certainly a corker!"

Dan successfully kept a wooden expression of countenance and dodged the issue promptly. He certainly did not care for Markell to know that he had heard nothing from the young lady since the adventure.

Markell was now filling Dan's position as night signalman, and expressed himself as anxious to give the task over as soon as Crompton could get about.

"The doc says I can come over next week," Dan assured him.

"Well, I've done something during your absence—or, rather, had the master mechanic at Coldspring do something—which I hope you'll approve," said Markell.

He drew a brass key from his pocket and placed it in Dan's hand. "I've got another," he observed.

"What is it?"

"I've had a new lock put on that lower door of the tower. Only you and I have keys. Of course, there's no need to have the door locked in the daytime, but at night——"

"Thunder!" exclaimed Dan, with disgust. "We are a couple of fools."

But he took the key and placed it on his bureau. A little later Markell withdrew.

As he opened the door Dan heard him utter an astonished exclamation.

"What is it?" demanded Dan, hobbling after him.

Markell put his head back into the doorway. His facial expression was curious.

"That jackanapes, Silly Billy, had his ear at the keyhole," he remarked, and then departed forthwith.

Crompton was troubled. Markell's statement as he went out colored his thoughts for the rest of the day. It looked as though Silly Billy was by no means the fool he appeared.

Did he really know more about his uncle's death—aye, more about the mysteries surrounding Block Tower Seven—than was generally supposed?

"What was the rascal listening at that door for?" grumbled Dan. "And did he leave the note the other night with my dinner-kettle, after all? Is he in the confidence of these Howards—Jase and Ike—and is he watching and spying for their benefit? The unnatural young scamp!"

Dan became quite incensed at this thought. He remembered how Billy had "snooped" around the tower on several occasions—how he had caught him digging in the lower room——

"Gad!" Dan cried. "What was he up to? What is buried there that he is after?

"Is it something to do with his uncle's murder? Was poor Raddigan killed for some other reason than revenge? And was the fruit of the crime buried in that lower room?"

This thought—as connected with poor Billy—was truly horrifying; yet it stuck, Dan told himself, "in his crop." He could not get rid of the idea.

Billy had shown his desire to get something out of the tower. And here he was listening at the keyhole just now when Markell was talking about the new lock he had put on the door.

"There's that key," Dan muttered, as he ate his supper, which Mrs. Corrigan brought up to him herself, and looking at the object in question, still lying on his bureau. "What would Billy Corrigan do if he had that key, eh?"

And from that he laid a plot for poor Billy's undoing. He put the key on the little stand by the door, on which Billy usually placed anything with which he was sent up-stairs by his mother. Then he put the tray of supper dishes beside the key.

When Dan called, Billy came up to remove the tray. It was early in the evening, and it was quite light in the room, although Dan had not lit his lamp.

"There are the dishes, Billy," he said carelessly when the door opened.

He watched the boy sharply, saw him start when he beheld the key lying by the tray, and was much disappointed that Billy should depart with the tray without touching the key.

Crompton was imbued with the spirit of suspicion, however.

"I'll give him another chance," he decided, and an hour later shouted at the door for Billy to bring him a pitcher of cold water.

He felt rather mean as he scurried across the room again and got into bed, as though he had already retired for the night. He knew that the widow and the younger children were abed, and believed Billy to be the only one up. He heard the boy come blundering up the stair with the water, and finally the door, which he had left on the latch, was pushed open.

"Bring it here, Billy," he said from the bed, and in the darkness Billy came across the room and deposited the pitcher upon the stand at the head of Dan's bed.

"Any—anythin' more ter-night, Mr. Crompton?" he asked quaveringly.

"No, Billy. I hope to go right to sleep. Good-night!"

The boy was already approaching the door. At the table he hesitated for half a second—just long enough to satisfy Dan that it *was* a hesitation. Then he went out and shut the door softly.

Dan waited until he heard the boy go down the stairs and a little later leave the house.

"By Gad, he took it!" the signalman whispered to himself.

Dan then got softly out of bed, groped his way to the table by the door, and felt all over the cloth which covered it.

The key was gone.

Wrought up to a fever pitch of interest, Crompton forgot his weakness and prepared to follow the boy. Whatever Billy knew of the mystery of his uncle's death was on the verge of being explained, and the signalman told himself that he could not miss the dénouement.

(To be continued.)

ON THE WAVE OF SUCCESS.

BY CASPER CARSON.

An honest toiler's elaborate scheme to make a fortune and how he overreached himself in the very hour of triumph.

IT was the old story: Two loving hearts kept asunder by the cruel mandate of a stern papa, who required more tangible qualifications in a prospective son-in-law than a dower of devotion and a wealth of soaring ambitions.

In other words, old Barnabas Burlingame, head of a trust company or so, and dictator in the affairs of several railroads, did not consider Seth Thurlow, penniless newspaper man, a suitable match for his daughter, and with rather brutal directness of language had just informed the sighing swain to that effect.

It had all come about down at Surfside, the fashionable summer resort where the Burlingames maintained a marble palace under the unpretentious title of a "cottage," and where, also, Thurlow was sojourning in order to recount the doings of society folk for the *Daily Planet*.

And now old B. B., as his associates nicknamed the magnate, had crashed down his heavy heel upon love's young dream, shattering all its anticipations and dispelling its bright illusions.

Can one imagine anything more pathetic?

True, there had been one ray of hope left in the pervading gloom, but it was so small as scarcely to be discerned by the naked eye.

Thurlow had been guilty in his time of some tentative efforts at fiction, and B. B., with malevolent purpose, used these to rub salt into the gaping wounds.

"I'll be fair with you, young man," he had said, chuckling sarcastically, "and I'll give you the same chance that the father did in that fool story of yours, 'The Duke's Ducats,' which Florence gave me to read the other day. Show me one hundred thousand dollars to

your credit a year from to-day, and you can have the girl, and my blessing along with her."

The daughter had clapped her hands delightedly when she heard of this munificent offer.

"Oh, how good of him," she cried. "Why, Seth, any one so bright as you ought easily to earn that little amount in half the time."

But Thurlow himself was by no means so sure. It required no extended calculations on his part to convince him that at five dollars a column, his present market rate, he would have to sling ink at a considerably increased horsepower to come within even striking distance of his goal; nor would stories in the magazines at a cent a word suffice to help him much.

No, he decided emphatically, literature was not the path to lead him to his heart's desire. Bank robbery or high finance seemed the only avocations by which he could attain his purpose, and he was not perfectly sure that his talents and training fitted him to shine in either sphere.

Then, in what direction should he strike out?

It was a serious question, for with the time at his disposal he fully realized that he could make no false essays. He must hit the bull's-eye at the first trial.

Had it been one of the heroes of his pen, he thought enviously, there would have been no such trouble. Opportunities were always turning up to help them out of any hole they got into.

In fact, he had found it harder to keep them "broke" for the time necessary to the exigencies of the story than to rehabilitate them handsomely when the proper moment arrived.

But in actual practise it appeared a very different proposition.

He had no old piece of land to blossom out suddenly with oil wells and gold mines; no forgotten relatives to die opportunely and leave him a fortune, no laboriously worked out invention to spring upon an unsuspecting public. He could not even think of any shrewd trick to work upon the astute B. B., and thus gain credit for great business sense and perspicacity.

"In short, so far as I can see," he finally observed dejectedly to himself, "I have about as much show of cleaning up that hundred thousand as a black man has to be elected governor of Texas."

By this time, too, he had cudgeled his brains until he had brought on a racking headache, so he repaired to a neighboring barber shop in order to seek relief in a good shampoo. It was while he lounged luxuriously in the red plush chair and had his poll rubbed into a foaming lather that the way became suddenly clear to him.

Courcel, the misanthropic little Frenchman who ran the place, was as usual inveighing against the limitations of his lot.

"I 'ave not ze chance, m'sieu," he was saying bitterly. "Ze male branches of my profession, ze shave an' ze 'air cut, to which I am condemn'—— Bah! Zey do not appeal to me. Eet ees always ze same: clip, clip; scrape, scrape. But wiz ze ladies eet ees ver' different. Zare one can consult individuality; one has inspiration to guide him; one can be an artist-t-t!

"Ah, m'sieu," he sighed, "eet ees ze dream of my life to establish a fashionable 'air-dressing parlor in New York. I 'ave"—sinking his voice to a thrilling whisper—"a 'wave' which, if once introduced, would make all ozzer styles of coiffure, even ze pompadour—w'at you call it?—go way to ze back an' sit down. But"—with an expressive shrug of his shoulders—"w'at will you? I 'ave not ze money, nor ze pull to get in wiz ze Four 'Undred, an' I will not waste my wave on *canaille*."

Thurlow, who had been listening hitherto with languid interest, suddenly roused up with such celerity that he sent a spatter of tiny soap bubbles flying out from his head like a nimbus.

"Do you really think this wave of yours would make a hit with swell society, Courcel?" he asked excitedly.

"Make ze 'it? Why, m'sieu, in seex mont' time you see nossing else on Feeft' Avenoo!"

Thurlow had not sat at the feet of press agents and publicity makers for nothing.

Already a well-defined plan of operations was taking shape in his head.

He would boom the "Courcel Wave" until it became the sensation of the hour, and then he would sit quietly back and draw in the profits.

But there must be some great stroke to set the ball rolling, some masterpiece of boom literature to catch and hold public attention. He explained his idea in the rough to Courcel, and then ran rapidly over in his mind the materials which he had at hand.

There was Dottie Delaney, the comic opera prima donna. She was stopping at Surfside for the summer, and he believed she felt enough gratitude for some journalistic services he had rendered her in the days of her obscurity to lend him her assistance.

Yes, she would do for one; but he needed, also, some person of more commanding social position. Ah, if he could only ensnare Mrs. Atherton, the queen regnant of the smart set! Then there would be no question of success.

Perhaps Florence could work it.

Mrs. Atherton was very fond of the girl, and had made quite a protégée of her.

And, with the thought of Mrs. Atherton, a daring conception flashed into his brain. Scarcely waiting to be rubbed dry, he dashed from the shop and sought out in hot haste his feminine allies.

It speaks volumes for the persuasiveness of his tongue that he induced both his fiancée and the actress to submit their treasured locks to the untried ministrations of Courcel, but they did, and it is but fair to the artist to admit that the results were eminently satisfactory.

Others, both of the dramatic and society classes, took up the novel arrangement, but still Thurlow bided his time. Not a word did he allow to appear in print of the growing popularity of the Courcel wave.

At last, however, came the moment for which he had been waiting. The mighty Mrs. Atherton consented to countenance the fad, and despatched an emissary to Courcel's shop to acquaint him with her decision, and command his presence with curling tongs and paraphernalia at her sumptuous villa.

Courcel, with pallid face and trembling knees, but upheld by Thurlow's repeated injunctions, declined the august behest, and sent back word that he was too busy to leave his shop. If madame required his services she must come to him.

Mrs. Atherton was a power in society, but she was also a woman. The barber's refusal only served to whet her curiosity and to strengthen her determination to try the wave. In the end, therefore, it was the mountain which visited Mahomet.

Thurlow had anticipated this decision, and when he saw Mrs. Atherton's victoria halt at Courcel's modest door he lost no time in immediately telephoning to Dottie Delaney, who had been previously apprised of the part she was to play, and who for the sake of the advertisement involved had willingly acceded.

Accordingly, while Mrs. Atherton was asking questions and making her arrangements, the actress, fresh and smiling, also appeared upon the scene.

"Courcel," she said imperiously, "I am in a great hurry, and I want my hair waved at once."

"But, mademoiselle," protested Courcel, "zis ozzer lady ees fairst."

"But I can't wait," insisted Miss Delaney. "Come, I will double the price; I will give you two dollars to attend to me."

Mrs. Atherton, who had drawn herself up with hostile mien, surveyed the intruder through her lorgnette.

"Come, my man, make haste," she said autocratically to the wavering Courcel. "If you are seeking the best offer, I will give you five dollars."

Quick as a flash came back Miss Delaney.

"Ten, Courcel," she said enticingly.

Mrs. Atherton compressed her lips.

This was intensely disagreeable to her, but she would not surrender.

"Twenty," she observed icily.

The battle was on. One after another came the bids in rapid succession, like responsive volleys of musketry, while Courcel in agitation danced about between the combatants and vainly endeavored to make himself heard.

Each woman stood valiantly by her guns, and there came no lull until Mrs. Atherton at last topped her opponent's pile by offering a round five hundred.

Then Courcel was able to break in with an excited wave of his hand.

"Oh, mademoiselle," he entreated the Delaney, "let madame 'ave ze precedence, I beg of you. I will give to you ze five hundred she awards me to be distributed among ze poor, and thereby will you gain much credit."

The sensation was accomplished.

Thurlow well knew that with a story like that to float it, nothing could hold back the Courcel wave from general adoption, and accordingly the next issue of the *Planet* blazed out with a lurid report of the whole affair.

At peace with the world, therefore, and already counting in anticipation the millions he expected to rake in, the newspaper man strolled leisurely down the street the following afternoon, to be confronted, as he approached Courcel's, by no less a spectacle than that of old B. B. himself issuing from the shop.

"Ah, Thurlow," said the magnate cordially, "that was a good story you had in this morning's *Planet*, and it ought to make this wave a tremendous success.

"In fact, it looked like such a good proposition that a party of us got together this morning and organized a company to take hold of it. We first adopted the precaution of having it copyrighted, and then made Courcel an offer to act as our manager. Strange he had never thought of safeguarding the process for his own benefit, isn't it?

"Oh, and by the way," he added, "you will find that we have not been unappreciative of your share in the transaction. I have just ordered a box of good cigars sent down to your lodgings."

Wild-eyed and aghast, the defeated promoter swept cyclone-like down upon Courcel.

"Oh, m'sieu, I am desolated," wept the Frenchman, "but w'at could I do? Zey 'ave my wave taken into camp, as you might say; an' zey offer me a good salary. 'Alf a loaf ees better as no bread, I say to myself, an' I accept."

It was so ridiculous a collapse to all Thurlow's vaulting hopes and glittering imaginings that, despite his chagrin, he involuntarily burst out laughing, and as the joke seemed too good to keep to himself he sat down in the succeeding days and wove a little tale out of its various incidents.

"If you can't win at a game," he said to himself philosophically, "you might as well get what fun you can out of the losing end of it."

He called his book "On the Wave of Success," and as it was a light, amusing trifle, it happened to catch the fickle public, and to his great surprise became in time one of "the six best sellers."

In short, although he did not make anything like a hundred thousand dollars out of it, it nevertheless put him in such good financial position that before the year was out old B. B. had withdrawn all objections to the announcement of an engagement between himself and Florence.

"Come in with me, my boy," said the magnate heartily, "and I'll make a financier out of you."

"Not much you won't," returned Thurlow. "Here is one cobbler that is going to stick right to his last."

THE END.

THE play is done—the curtain falls—
Hero and villain trade their parts;
The rich scenes change to smoky walls;
The lovers e'en forget their hearts.

And so it is with life—a play
Made tragedy or farce at will;
Who knows but as the mourners pray
The dead find changes greater still?

Winthrop Church.

MAROONED IN 1492*

BY WILLIAM WALLACE COOK,

Author of "A Round Trip to the Year 2000," "Adrift in the Unknown," etc.

CHAPTER XX.

A CLUE.

"I SUPPOSE, Mr. O'Hara," began Trenwyck, "that you are familiar with the criminals who infest New York?"

"None better. I am one of the oldest men on the force."

"Have you ever heard of the man called Bill Jenks?"

"Alias 'Featherfingers,' alias 'Billy the Lifter.' I should say I have heard of him. A very clever 'dip,' a nervy cracksman, and the smoothest crook at a con game that ever came up the pike."

"Do you know whether he is in New York at present?"

"I think not. If he is, the Department hasn't spotted him. Like as not he's off for Chicago. Nearly all the strong-arms are heading West to get their pickings at the World's Fair. It has been some little time since Jenks was seen in New York."

"Nevertheless, I am fairly certain that he's in town. He left Cadiz, Spain, less than two weeks ago."

"He's been abroad, eh?" laughed O'Hara. "I'll warrant he gives Scotland Yard plenty to do if he ever strikes England. What makes you think he came here?"

"He stole a thousand dollars in gold from me in Spain."

"Ah!"

"And bought passage to America."

"That may have been a blind to throw the detectives off their guard."

"I am positive it wasn't. Circumstances were such that Jenks did not think he would be followed."

Right there Columbus showed himself. He strode into the room with a brief "Your pardon, gentlemen!" picked up his sword and hat and strode out again.

Trenwyck was not surprised. Columbus was very choice of his trusty Toledo, and always wished to have it by him.

O'Hara stared at the gaunt figure, with its crown of long, snowy hair and odd clothes, as at an apparition.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, giving Trenwyck a queer look. "Is he getting ready for a masquerade?"

"Not at all," said Trenwyck. "He always wears that kind of clothes."

"It's a wonder he isn't pinched for disturbing the peace. All right in his head?"

"Perfectly."

"Then it's a hobby with him, I suppose."

Quite by accident, O'Hara's eyes rested on the don's recent purchase, which lay shimmering on the table.

"Well!" he murmured. "Have you been buying something, Mr. Trenwyck?"

"My friend has been investing."

"And you say he is perfectly right in his head!"

O'Hara picked up the brick, examined it a moment, and then showed symptoms of excitement. "Where did your friend get this?"

"Right here in New York."

"When?"

"Less than an hour ago."

"By George!" said O'Hara. "It is astonishing how things turn out sometimes. Do you know, Mr. Trenwyck, Bill Jenks occasionally peddles this sort of merchandise?"

"He couldn't have peddled that," answered Trenwyck. "My friend knows Jenks, and would have strung him on his sword if he had tried it."

**This story began in the August issue of* THE ARGOSY. *The four back numbers will be mailed to any address on receipt of 40 cents.*

"Nevertheless, this is one of Bill Jenks' bricks. I have handled two or three which were sent in from country districts, and can't be mistaken. The lead is run in the same mold, and you can see there's a break at one corner. The plating follows the break. Ha! This *is* luck—a plum I was far from expecting. Jenks must be in town after all."

"But I tell you, Mr. O'Hara," insisted Trenwyck, "Jenks couldn't have had anything to do with that brick."

"Then it was one of his pals, and if we can get our hooks on one of Billy the Lifter's pals it will be fairly easy to corral Billy himself."

"That may be, and I am very glad if you have secured a clue. It is important that Jenks be found at once, or in the shortest possible time."

"You'll probably never see any of your money again, Mr. Trenwyck."

"The money is the least of my worries. Jenks is supposed to have a small packet of seeds in his pocket or stitched into the lining of his coat. Those seeds are what I want."

O'Hara appeared surprised, but made no comment.

"I should like very much to be in at the capture of Jenks," went on Trenwyck. "Do you think you could notify me when the chase is drawing to a close?"

"Perhaps. If matters shape themselves so that I can, I will do so."

Trenwyck drew a roll of bills from his pocket and stripped off the outer one.

"We are not allowed," began O'Hara, "to——"

"I understand," cut in Trenwyck, "but this is simply given you to spur you to extra endeavors. I should like to find Jenks within twenty-four hours if possible."

"If any one can do it in that time, Mr. Trenwyck, Morgan O'Hara is the man. Trust me to do my best. Now let us have in your friend and see if he can give me any pointers. A description of the fellow who sold the brick might enable me to identify him."

"Don Christopher!" called Trenwyck. "This way a moment, please."

The don neither answered nor showed himself.

Trenwyck hurried into his room and found it—empty!

He tried the hall door. It was unlocked.

"What's the matter?" inquired O'Hara from the entrance. "Has your friend slipped his moorings?"

"It seems so," answered Trenwyck, wild with anxiety. "Where the deuce could he have gone? I've tackled a good many difficult propositions in my life, but keeping track of him lays over anything else I ever set hand to."

Trenwyck punched the electric bell.

"Isn't he able to take care of himself?" queried O'Hara.

"No more than a six-year-old! I hadn't any more than turned my back on him when he went off and bought that brick. You see, he's a foreigner, and knows less about our nineteenth century ways than a Hottentot. Heaven only knows what trouble he will get into."

"Look here, Mr. Trenwyck."

O'Hara stepped to a dresser and pointed to some words scrawled on the mirror with a piece of soap. "Can you read that?"

Trenwyck flew to the dresser and found the following, in Spanish:

SENOR TRENWYCK:

To rest in comfort while that base varlet who deceived me with the spurious ingot is at large, is asking too much. I therefore take my good sword and fare forth. Be not troubled, but rest in patience until I return. COLOMBO.

A boy came to the door as Trenwyck finished reading and translating.

"Have you seen anything of the gentleman whom you brought with me to these rooms a short time since?" asked Trenwyck.

"He left the hotel about two minutes ago," answered the boy.

"Did you see which way he went?"

"He jumped a cable car for downtown. He missed it at first, and was thrown about twenty feet. But he was game. In half a second he was up and after it. The last I saw of him he was trying to murder the conductor."

Trenwyck threw up his hands in despair.

"Do your best to find him, O'Hara," he cried, grabbing his hat. "Telephone every station in the city, and if you get him let me know at once. Meanwhile, I'll see what I can do."

CHAPTER XXI.

AT LARGE IN THE METROPOLIS.

THE proverbial white elephant could hardly have caused Trenwyck more worry than did this energetic don from the Middle Ages. From the moment they had gained these modern times the Genoese gentleman had opened his bag of tricks and had kept them going ever since.

The House of the Weathercock had been turned into a factory of some sort, but, very fortunately, the two sojourners made their 1892 harbor in the early evening, when the factory was shut down.

Tapscott's seeds ran fifty years each pretty accurately. They might vary a few hours, one way or the other, when taken in any quantity, but that was nothing, considering the stretch of time covered.

Arriving in the evening was a capital thing for Trenwyck in another way. It lessened the prospect of trouble at the hands of Zimmerman and the two *alguazils*.

Most of the trains on the Spanish railroad system fly by night, like bats, and on coming down from the Albaycin, Trenwyck and Columbus made directly for the station. Here Trenwyck learned that a man answering Jenks' description had bought a ticket, exactly twenty-four hours before, and started for Cadiz.

The two pursuers followed, and learned in Cadiz that their man had left for New York on a fast steamer in the Mediterranean tourist service. Thereupon they took passage for Havre and thence direct to America.

During these early days Columbus was awed by the modern miracles surrounding him. He was listless and apparently stupefied, and the conversations between him and Trenwyck resembled choice one-syllable lessons out of a First Reader.

Presently, however, the acute mind of the admiral began to investigate and adapt itself, and the trouble was turned on.

Trenwyck was always on tenterhooks to know where the lightning was going to strike next.

He began to wish, long before Sandy Hook was reached, that he had brought Blinkers instead of Columbus. Blinkers had his failings, but they were as nothing compared to the don's.

At last, one beautiful afternoon, Columbus leaned over the forward rail, hunched Trenwyck with his elbow, and leveled his sword at an object they were approaching.

"Prithee, señor, what may that be?" he asked.

He was using English now, was Columbus.

Trenwyck had taught him on the way over, and he had proved an apt student.

"That is the Statue of Liberty."

"What does it mean?"

"It means that we are approaching the land of freedom."

"What is freedom?"

"Equality before the law; the right of one man to live, move, and have his being on a par with any other in the land."

"How do the nobles like that?"

"We haven't any nobles—or, rather, every man is a nobleman in his own right."

"Every man a nobleman? Then, fair sir, who does the work?"

"Everybody works."

"Go to! I am an older man than you and like it not to be guyed."

"I am in earnest, Don Christopher."

"Then, of all the wonderful things you have told me about this land of freedom, that is, indeed, the most wonderful."

Thus they came to the great metropolis, and in something less than three hours after they had landed Columbus had played havoc with an automobile, had had a passage at arms with a policeman, had invested in a gold brick, and was now effectually lost among the cliff dwellings of civilization."

Although Columbus created as large a sensation in these modern times as Trenwyck and the others had created in the past epoch, New York was not Andalusia, and a furore around the corner would hardly attract attention from people in the next block. So, although Trenwyck searched conscientiously well into the night, he searched in vain for Columbus.

Coming back to the hotel, weary and dejected, he retired to his rooms and went to bed.

Columbus, he reasoned, would not be burned at the stake—the worst that could befall him would be arrest and a period of probation in some police station. If that happened, O'Hara would know about it and send word.

At breakfast the following morning Trenwyck started in on his newspaper, and found several paragraphs that undoubtedly referred to the adventures of Columbus.

He bought other newspapers and found other paragraphs, then, arranging them in sequence, he had a fairly connected account of the don's experiences.

The first clipping was to this effect:

Yesterday morning, about ten thirty, a perambulating advertisement in doublet and trunk-hose, surmounted with a cap and feather and begirt with a sword, took a header from a cable car at "dead man's curve." An ambulance was called, and the unfortunate placed inside; but when the vehicle had reached the hospital, it was found that the advertisement had escaped.

The broken feather had molted from the cap and had been left behind as a memento. Certainly it is an odd genius who could so easily forego so plausible a claim to a damage suit.

The obtuse reporter, like many other citizens, regarded Columbus as a walking sign for a haberdasher, or some one. He had no banner imploring the public to visit "Smith, the Clothier," or to give "Lollypop's Lozenges" a trial; but that important fact did not seem to enter into the equation.

On leaving the hotel, Columbus evidently had started down-town. After escaping from the ambulance he was next heard from on lower Broadway:

That some men can attend a masquerade, be out all night, and attempt to stagger home in the broad light of the morning after, is proved by an incident that was pulled off somewhere about eleven A. M., yesterday.

A medieval gentleman attempted to cross Broadway in the vicinity of the post-office, and gave so little heed to the crowded thoroughfare that he had to jump for his life or a street car would have run him down. He escaped the street car, but found himself astride the tongue of a truck, hanging with both hands to the neck-yoke and staring the astounded horses in the face.

The truckman's language—the sort that truckmen have for just such an occasion—aroused the medieval gentleman's ire. He walked the tongue to the wagon, and would have carved the driver with his sword had not the officer on duty at the crossing gathered him in and transferred him to the sidewalk. The gentleman departed without giving his name.

This reporter had grasped the O'Hara horn of the dilemma and considered Columbus in the rôle of a belated masquerader.

How under heaven Columbus could get into the Stock Exchange while looking for the man who had sold him a gold brick was a marvel beyond Trenwyck's ken.

Yet so he had, as witness this:

During the excitement attending the rise in P. D. & Q. stocks yesterday, an escaped lunatic, clad in fearsome attire, dropped from the balcony into the midst of the wrangling brokers. With a shout of "Santiago!" the man in question drew a sword and began laying about him right valiantly.

In just two minutes he had cleaned out the pit. Two officers gave chase to him and ran him down on the platform at the blackboard. While one of the officers in soothing tones explained to the unbalanced gentleman that it was not a free-for-all set-to, nor the violent ward of an insane asylum, but simply the usual methods of the Stock Exchange, the other officer went out to call the wagon.

Suddenly, while the officer was busy with his explanations, the lunatic went

for him amain; and when the officer recovered, the lunatic was gone. P. D. & Q. lost two points during the lull in the trading, and was slow in getting back.

From Wall Street the hardy discoverer must have worked back up-town, for in the afternoon he was trying to propel a bicycle in Madison Square. The wheel belonged to a man who was dozing on a bench, and after Columbus had tipped over a baby carriage, run over a dog, and knocked down a policeman, he bumped into the statue of Admiral Farragut and came to grief. Yet, as before, he managed to escape the toils of the law.

His next field of endeavor was somewhere in the vicinity of the car barns, still farther up-town. A strike of some sort was in progress, and a mêlée between strikers and bluecoats going on.

According to the reporter, Columbus had innocently inquired whether that was another Stock Exchange, one on the *al fresco* order.

The don by this time appeared more or less subdued. He did not mingle in the disturbance, but, after catechizing the representative of the press, had unobtrusively departed.

Here ended the newspaper comment. Trenwyck had barely finished, and paid his reckoning, when a boy called him to the hotel 'phone.

O'Hara was at the other end of the wire. He informed Trenwyck that they had his friend at the Yorkville Police Station, that he had committed assault and battery, and would be among the first of the prisoners to be placed at the bar.

Trenwyck hurried out of the hotel, jumped into a cab and offered the driver a double fee to get him to Fifty-Seventh Street in record-breaking time.

CHAPTER XXII.

COLUMBUS FURNISHES A CLUE.

COLUMBUS was up before the magistrate when Trenwyck reached the station. The trial, however, was in its preliminary stages—the officer who made the arrest was just stating his side of the case.

O'Hara, who was at the door awaiting Trenwyck's arrival, grabbed him by the arm and hurried him forward. The don was a sad-looking object, for every one of his manifold adventures had left its traces upon his clothes and person.

His cavalier garb was ripped and torn and his face and hands were much soiled and bruised.

Yet he still kept his indomitable spirit, and his long white hair and imposing bearing carried evident weight with the judge.

"I picked up this freak on Forty-Third Street, your annar," said the policeman. "He was tryin' to punch holes in a respectable citizen with that frog-sticker o' his. He resisted arrest, your annar, fightin' like a fiend, an' before I could lay him by the heels I had to turn in a call for the wagon."

"Where is the assaulted party?" inquired the judge, frowning.

"He flew his kite, your annar."

"Your name, prisoner?" asked the judge.

"Christofero Colombo," replied the don with dignity.

"New York your home?"

"No, an it please your lordship, for the which I can never be sufficiently thankful."

"Where do you come from?"

"Spain."

"Why do you wear clothes like that?"

"By my faith, it was a goodly garb when I landed yesterday—a garb such as a gentleman may wear in my own times without remark."

"What times do you refer to?"

"The blessed era of 1492, when there were no street cars, no stock exchanges, no strikes, no gold bricks; when a man might valiantly recover his own without jeopardizing his liberty; when there were no policemen but *alguazils* who knew their stations."

His honor looked at the clerk. The clerk coughed, pulled down his left eye and glanced at his open book, while the complaining officer jeered at a comrade and drew a finger across his abode of thought.

"You assaulted a citizen?" asked the judge.

"An you call it so when a gentleman makes front on a lying varlet who has given him just cause?"

"What cause did you have?"

"The knave affronted me with a base ingot affirmed to be of gold, for the which I handed him one hundred of the dollars current in the realm. Upon investigation, your lordship, the aforesaid brick was found to be of the value of a dollar-fifty."

"Have you any friends in the city?" inquired the judge.

"One only, and praise the saints I have not more."

Trenwyck pushed forward.

"Your honor," said he, "I am the friend to whom the don refers."

"You should keep him under closer surveillance," said the judge severely. "Inasmuch as he is a stranger, I am disposed to be lenient. The sword will be confiscated and ten dollars will settle the bill."

Columbus showed fight when the officer tried to take his sword; then, when Trenwyck explained the matter and counseled obedience, he broke the blade on his knee and cast the two halves and the scabbard in front of the judge.

"Wot ye well, your lordship," said he, "an honest sword has no business in these modern times, so it is fitting that you take it from me. Gold is the besetting sin of the period, and trusty steel belongs to the forgotten past. Aye, the yellow metal pulses like life-blood through the veins of this your nation; millions are fought for in your stock exchanges, and others, more humble, fight for an extra quarter a day at your car-barns.

"It dims and degrades the glory of your achievements. By my halidom, if it does not ultimately subvert the entire structure of your civilization, I much misdoubt me. I would not abide in this age for all the gold yet in the bowels of the earth.

"In short, your lordship, I am willing to discover your country, but not to live in it."

Thereupon Trenwyck paid the fine and led the disgusted don from the building.

O'Hara went with them.

Columbus began to talk to Trenwyck in the same vein laid bare by his peroration at the bar, when the detective broke in with a matter of more importance.

"You are sure, are you, don, that you found the fellow who sold you the gold brick?"

"Aye, marry!" quoth Columbus. "Could I so soon forget his friar's face and smooth tongue? Another moment, an the officer had let me, I should have spitted him on the point of my blade."

"Have you any idea where he went?"

"By my faith, I could mark the very house."

"He went into a house, did he?"

"Even so."

"And you could take us there?"

"With little trouble, señor, an I were set down in the same thoroughfare."

Trenwyck was for immediately replenishing the don's wardrobe, since he was in such sorry need of it, but O'Hara felt that this new clue should be followed forthwith. The same cab that had brought Trenwyck to the police station carried the three of them to Forty-Third Street, along which they drove until Columbus pointed out the house in which the confidence man had taken refuge.

Trenwyck's feelings may be imagined, perhaps, better than described when this house proved to be the very one to which he and Blinkers had come the morning they had called on Tapscott. The same maid, in similar curl-papers and soiled white apron, met them at the door.

"There's a man in this house we'd like to see," said the officer, speaking in a low tone, so that their business might not carry to the upper floors.

"You tell me his name," returned the girl, "and I'll tell you if he's in."

"We don't know his name."

"Then you must take me for a mind-reader—which I ain't."

O'Hara swept back his coat and showed the badge pinned to his vest. The maid's demeanor instantly underwent a change.

"We'll have to have your help," said O'Hara, "and it will be just as well if you give us all the assistance you can."

'Sure! Jest say what I'm to do, an' I'll do it."

"This man we're looking for had a little trouble yesterday, and——"

"I've got you now. You're referrin' to Mr. Fitzwilliams an' his friend, Mr. Casey, who are lookin' after Mr. Tapscott's rooms durin' his absence. Come right up—I believe that they are both there."

The maid led them to Tapscott's rooms. O'Hara tried the door and found it locked.

"S-h-h!" hissed the girl, divining the officer's business and ready on the instant with a plan of her own.

"Who's there?" came a gruff voice from the other side of the door.

"Kitty—to do the room work," answered the maid.

The door was unlocked and opened, and the next instant O'Hara had a hand on Bill Jenks' shoulder. There was another man in the room—a man with his arm in a sling and a bandage around his forehead.

"Billy the Lifter and his pal, Charming Jimmy!" exclaimed O'Hara. "Here are some friends of yours, Jenks. I wonder if you recognize them?"

Evidently he did. Columbus also recognized the other man, and Trenwyck was put to it to restrain his hostility.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BLINKERS' CONFESSION.

BILL JENKS was astounded out of his five senses, and gave his captors little trouble.

James Fitzwilliams, otherwise Charming Jimmy, was in no condition to offer resistance, and yielded peaceably. None of the pilfered gold was found, but the seeds—forty of them—were reposing snugly within the lining of Jenks' coat.

"How did you leave the other lads?" Jenks asked, after his discomfiture had somewhat abated and his customary insouciance had asserted itself.

"Very well, and eager to get the materials that will bring them back," answered Trenwyck. "It was a scurvy trick you played us, Jenks."

"I went lame, Trenwyck. I should have lifted those other sixteen. Then this wouldn't have happened. But, say! How are those other chaps going to get the time destroyers?"

"Columbus is going to take them."

"You've got it all worked out, I see. All right! I'm up in the air, but I haven't any kick coming."

"What are you doing in these lodgings?"

"I am hunting for seeds," grinned Jenks. "They're worth up in the hundreds at last quotations. The landlady thinks we are friends of Tapscott's and are here in charge of his rooms until he comes. And, by the way, I was expectin' Byngs, and not you fellows."

"Did you find any more seeds?"

"Not a one. I guess you've got the last of them."

O'Hara removed his men to the station, and Trenwyck took Columbus to a clothing store and replaced his medieval garb with an outfit more in accordance with modern fashions. Columbus did not like the suit, but, nevertheless, thought it might serve pending his return to Palos.

Jenks and Fitzwilliams had a hearing next day, and Trenwyck and the don appeared against them. It was useless to prosecute Jenks for the theft of the gold, as that had happened beyond the jurisdiction of the court, both as to time and place.

But Jenks was punished for stealing the pocketbook, and Fitzwilliams for his finesse in the gold-brick swindle. The don was urgently needed in Spain, and hadn't any desire to stay in New York another hour, anyway. So they closed up their business and took ship for Gibraltar, where they arrived in due course.

From Gibraltar to Granada was only a step, and they covered it without delay. At the Siete Suelos, Trenwyck had forebodings of trouble with Zimmerman and the *alguazils*, but the mix-up did not materialize.

After dinner at the Siete Suelos they

repaired to the Alhambra, and in the Court of Lions—the scene of the professor's absent-minded exploit—Columbus made ready to regain his own era.

Trenwyck had brought a cup and a flask, and the don watched with melancholy eyes the preparations that he was making.

"Providence," said the don, "never intended that a man should live otherwise than in his own times."

"I have come to that conclusion," answered Trenwyck.

"The people of this age have great knowledge, but I question the use to which they are putting a good deal of it."

"Even at that, don," said Trenwyck, "isn't it better to err with knowledge than to bide in ignorance and superstition?"

"There is no excuse for a man to err when he knows better."

"But when a lot of men try to burn a fellow-being simply because he says the earth is round——"

"The Lord made us ignorant and prepared us to receive knowledge by slow degrees. The stake and fagot are evidences of the upward tendency. As I told his lordship, the judge, that time we were mulcted of the ten dollars, while willing to discover your country, nothing could hire me to live in it. Is the mixture ready?"

"Yes. Pick up the satchel of gold and hold it firmly." Columbus obeyed. "I hope that you have the flask for the major?"

"It is in my pocket."

"And the powders for the professor?"

"I have them also, Señor Trenwyck."

"Tell my friends I shall await them at the Siete Suelos."

"I will."

"Then, good-by, don, and good luck to you."

"I am grateful for your many kindnesses, señor. Farewell to you."

And Columbus took the glass and drank, and at that moment a gleam of sun struck downward into the Court of Lions—and the century knew him no more.

It was ten o'clock that evening when four strangers presented themselves at the Siete Suelos and asked for Trenwyck.

When he appeared they fell upon him in an abandon of joy.

"Where's Blinkers?" inquired Trenwyck, apprehension in his voice and manner.

"He's made up his mind to stay a while longer," explained the major. "Possibly he'll sail with Columbus—it is hard telling what he'll take it into his head to do. Gad, but it's good to get back!"

The major sank, beaming, into a chair.

Tapscott then handed Trenwyck a letter.

"It's from Blinkers," he said. "He asked me to give it to you, to which I, of course, assented.

Trenwyck unfolded the parchment and read as follows:

DEAR TREN:

The boys are off, and it's high time, for they've all got nervous prostration waiting for Columbus to get back. I'm not worrying much, for my popularity still continues. If the tobacco holds out, I think now I shall sail with Columbus and see whether he lands on Cat Island or Watling Island. In that way I can help the historians out of a pretty bad muddle. Think you can struggle on without me for a spell?

Don't feel hard about it, old chap, but I didn't make any mistake in fixing up those two drinks at the old tower. Your 'Mistakes of Bonaparte' is the rankest thing that ever got into print, and I felt sure that if you stopped off at that Peninsular Campaign, you'd only write something that would make a bad matter worse. That's the truth, and I'm glad it's out. Yours devotedly,

BLINKERS.

P. S.—Zayda, the Moorish girl, was down from the Alpuxarras the other day to say good-by to Abu Hafiz. He and the other two renegades were neatly garroted. Zayda sends her regards, and is off to relatives in Barbary by the next galley. T. B.

THE END.

THE LAST DANCE.

BY PAUL C. SCHAFFER.

A tale of the second Christmas in the Colonies' fight for independence.

I.

IT was that wretched retreat across the Jersey plantations which wore the souls of the men thin. I could not so much blame them for revolting; God knows, I might have deserted myself had I been built of different timber.

But the Coscardens had supported almost every "lost cause" in English history. It had become proverbial (so my father told us) in the English shire from which we came to the Colonies, that if a Coscarden avowed a cause, so surely that cause was doomed to failure. Yet braver gentlemen than my forebears I believe seldom went to their deaths with a smile.

So I might not desert as so many of the half-starved, frozen, and discouraged rank and file were doing. Patriotism? Aye! Yet patriotism thrives but lamely on an empty stomach.

Through Hackensack, Newark, New Brunswick, Princeton, and so to Trenton we came; driven on like sheep by a flushed and victorious army of redcoats and Hessians—the music of the enemies' bugles as they entered the town often ringing in our ears as our rearguard departed.

Desertion, wounds, illness, and other causes had left His Excellency but three thousand men of all that army which had fought so bravely about New York. Toryism rose, while the rebellion languished.

In some places on the line of retreat well-disposed folk only dared bring us comforts by stealth. We were often forced to take, or to demand, shelter and food that, six months before, had been freely offered us.

It was more the worry over my men's condition that broke me down—more that than my wound, which had scarce time to heal properly since White Plains. It was enough to drive a man mad to follow on behind the poor fellows and see, here and there on the frozen ground, the blood drops from their broken feet!

And no enthusiasm—just dull, dull plodding, with the file officers swearing and driving the privates on like beasts, the torn banners drooping, and the shrill tones of the fife, like the eerie shriek of a banshee instead of a ringing note of encouragement.

And that night, just without the confines of Trenton, when two files threw down their muskets, it went against the grain to drive them like sheep to the pen. We came nigh to having a general revolt in our division, and one of the poor fellows struck me so shrewd a blow that my old wound opened and I fell down in a dead faint.

That is how I came to be quartered upon mine host of the Sutcliffe Manor. The army must needs make some little stand hereabout, any way, for the bank of the river was being scoured in both directions for boats sufficient to take us all across to the other shore, and so put the stream between us and the enemy.

I was not welcome to Master Sutcliffe, and that I knew right well. His proclivities were more than suspected by the patriots—often another word at this time for busybodies and backbiters.

Sutcliffe made no protestations of loyalty to the Colonial cause, more than he expressed favor for King George; he was counted wealthy, however, and that was enough, in the evil minds of some, to make him a Tory!

But that his heart, and that of Mistress Honore Sutcliffe, his daughter, was scarcely touched by the desperate condition of His Excellency and the army was sufficiently proven that at this time of uncertainty and trouble for the Colonial interests, Sutcliffe Manor was the scene of much merry-making.

My colonel, who thought naught of

himself but always of us younger officers, had laid his commands, with the surgeon's, upon me. I was not to move under twenty-four hours. Our troops would be about that time getting away from Trenton, and the rearguard had successfully held off the British troops, and would continue to do so, it was believed.

I should be warned in time if my escape from the forced hospitality of the Sutcliffes should become necessary by any unforeseen change in affairs.

Mistress Honore was not unkind. She visited the room assigned me twice during the day, and, the second time, as I was dressed and walking the floor to take the stiffness out of my joints, she came in with her maid and sat down to question me about the recent battles which I had seen.

I had scarcely thought to have her remember me from the summer before when I had dined at the manor; but she told me, with that pretty uplifting of her eyebrows which is, perhaps, a little affectation, though it may be involuntary—she told me that my name was neither easy to forget nor to pronounce.

"And then, Captain Coscarden," she said, with laughter curling the corners of her lips, "we so seldom see a gentleman—especially among the rag-tag and bobtail of Mr. Washington's army—that we could not forget *you*.

"I remember that you dance very prettily, captain," she hastened on, ignoring the flame which had sprung into my cheeks at this speech. "We are to dance this evening, and many of the maids declare on their oaths that they shall no longer come to my parties if I do not find them men to dance with. They are tired of pairing off with their own sex.

"Come, sir, you are a gallant dancer! You will remain a few hours longer and help us at our merry-making?"

And though my heart was not attuned to anything of the kind, there was a charm about Mistress Honore that I might not resist. When my poor lads were suffering so much from cold and hunger, it was all but brutal for me to do this, however; but of that I did not so much think until afterward.

"With the promise of treading the dance with *you*, Mistress Sutcliffe, I could be encouraged to remain," I said.

She passed me a little card upon which she had planned the series of dances, and with perfect frankness added:

"You may have what you like, sir, only that you be kind to my guests."

Her hand touched mine as she delivered the card, and I found myself looking deep into her eyes instead of at the list of dances. They were violet, darkening to purple when she dropped the lids slowly over them and flushed beneath my steady gaze.

"Examine the dances, sir; do not scrutinize *me*," she observed, a little sharply, and this brought me up with a round turn.

I had been so long in camps and bivouacs that I fear I had lost some of my courtesy—surely much of my ability for repartee.

I dared not take the first dance; that were too bold. But I chose one perhaps half down the list and—the last. That final dance I could not resist, and knowing the plans of His Excellency, I knew I could even then ride hard and overtake the last files before they crossed the Delaware.

Fortunately my orderly had left me a decent uniform, which he had obtained by some good chance from the baggage van when he learned I was to remain behind the troop. I was not altogether marked by that poverty of apparel which had brought upon "Mr. Washington's army" the title of "rag-tag and bobtail!"

Indeed, I flatter myself that I made rather a brave figure in the company, for even the uniform of buff and blue seems brilliant when there are no red coats about!

And the ladies recognized this fact, for I was really besieged with attentions. Sutcliffe Manor was a popular house, and the soirée had attracted the fairest and finest of Trenton's "aristocracy." They were all, I fear, tainted with Toryism.

But, fool or no, my heart was buoyed up with the thought that I should dance twice with Mistress Sutcliffe herself.

And she was—I claim it boldly—the fairest woman I had ever seen.

She would have graced any gathering anywhere. At the governor's ball, which I was once so fortunate as to attend in Tryon's time at Albany, no woman in all that throng could compare with Mistress Honore Sutcliffe.

And my impatience for the dance I had secured with my hostess was only equal to my delight when the moment came. I did not have to search her out; she came frankly to me herself and slipped her pretty hand into the crook of my arm.

"This is ours, I believe, captain?" she said archly, denying me not the glory of my title, although so determined to call His Excellency "Mister."

And at the moment there was a great bustle at the main entrance, voices of welcome, a running together of the guests to meet some person evidently popular in that company. But the music had already begun, and Mistress Sutcliffe and myself had taken our places at the end of the room.

Suddenly I saw a flash of scarlet, and there burst through the laughing, chattering throng a handsome fellow in the uniform of the British light-horse. His eyes were near as blue as Mistress Honore's own, and his hair was a great mop of yellow curls.

He came down the room hastily, with hands held out to greet her, and I do not think he even saw me until he was fairly upon us.

Then his hands dropped and he stared at me, first with a flash of rage that transformed his face sternly, and then the expression gradually melted into one of doubt and half amusement, as though he thought a joke afoot.

My own emotions were variable; I cannot tell you what I thought, only I put from me instantly the suggestion that either Mistress Sutcliffe or her father had intentionally betrayed me. Meanwhile, I heard remarks from our neighbors which explained all.

"It is Major Pitkin," said one lady. "Mistress Sutcliffe's English cousin, you remember? He was here last year."

"In the advance of the British troops," added another.

I know it was not a premeditated affair. Nevertheless the conditions were strained.

Fully a minute the Englishman stared at me, and from me to the lady, before he spoke. And although Mistress Sutcliffe lost not her calm nor her smile, I believe she utilized that minute of silence in gathering her forces for the battle.

"What is this—a masquerade?" demanded the major at length, speaking in a low tone and still eying me uncertainly. "Who is this gentleman, cousin?"

"Let me make you acquainted, Major Pitkin, with Captain Coscarden of the American army," she said, with a courtesy.

I took my cue from her and bowed to him profoundly.

"What? You do not mean—— You are not serious?" murmured the astounded British officer. "Not really a rebel soldier?"

"You are quite correct, major," I said calmly, for whatever my perturbation might secretly be, I could show no less *sang froid* than Mistress Honore. "I have the honor to be in rebellion to the monarch you serve."

"This is preposterous!" exclaimed he. "Is it a trap?"—and he darted a glance at our hostess, which was the one thing needful, it was evident, to put her upon her mettle.

"Sir!" she exclaimed. "We do not lay traps or snares at Sutcliffe Manor. Captain Coscarden is our guest. He was wounded and fatigued, and accepted our hospitality for a time. He will overtake his army later, cousin."

"Not until he accounts to me, mistress!" exclaimed the major fiercely, though still too low for many to hear the words, and he placed his hand upon his sword-hilt.

"Nay, Major Pitkin, you shall reverence the laws of hospitality while under my father's roof. And," she added pointedly, "gentlemen leave their swords and side-arms outside our ballroom, major."

The figures of the dance had been formed, and she turned as though to lead me into its maze. But he strode

nearer and laid a detaining hand, still in its riding gantlet, upon her bare, white arm.

"I'll not have this, Honore!" he burst forth, still in that suppressed tone. "This fellow——"

"Captain Coscarden is my guest; interfere with his peaceful departure if you dare, sir!" she interrupted with a flash in her eyes that I hope I may never see aimed at me, for it would wither!

He dropped his hand, and shrank aside. She continued:

"Captain Coscarden claims this dance—and the last. I will find you one between, cousin," and her tone was sweet as honey again.

The music struck up for a second time, and almost unconsciously I went through the earlier measures with the girl. But my eyes and thoughts were upon Major Pitkin, and when I saw him wheel suddenly and stride from the room, I lost step.

"Fie, captain!" she whispered. "You do not dance with me as you have with my friends. Is your wound troubling you again?"

"It is a fear that I may carry away from here other and more serious wounds, mistress," I responded frankly. "I like not the look on yon Britisher's face."

"Captain Coscarden, he is my cousin, and is, like yourself, a partaker of my father's hospitality."

"I care not for that," I replied bluntly. "These red-coats look upon us of the Continental army as no better than malefactors. He could easily salve his conscience over my capture under a friendly roof."

"Then the roof should never shelter *him* again, sir!" she returned haughtily, and I could see that the suggestion offended her.

But I was determined to put my suspicions before her plainly.

"That would scarce save my bacon, lady," I declared. "Ha, see yonder!"

We had involuntarily removed ourselves from the figure, and here, in an embrasure of the window, we caught a glimpse of Major Pitkin conversing with a man who looked like a groom. The latter had the major's horse by the bridle, and in a moment, as we looked from behind the curtains, the groom vaulted into the saddle, and there came to us above the harmony of the fiddles and viol the drive of the horse's hoofs as they set off down the graveled way.

A glance at my lady's face, and I knew enough to bite hard upon my tongue.

This was not a moment for me to put in an oar. The full significance of her cousin's act sank into her mind, and the violet eyes suddenly blazed with anger.

"We have broken the set," she whispered to me, and drew me into the measure of the dance again. Then, in brief undertones she told me what to do.

I let her plan—for my own rough wish had been to spring through the window, seize the British dog's throat in my hands, and leave him choked there on the ground, to be found by the reinforcements he had undoubtedly sent for.

But as I listened to her whispers, and saw the glow in her eyes, I put myself in her keeping—aye, I would it had been for the rest of my natural existence!—and played the game boldly.

When the music stopped she left me to find my next partner while she disappeared for a moment only. Then, as the British officer came swaggering into the ballroom again, she met him with a smile and offered him the next dance.

"So, coz, you have come to your senses, eh?" he said in my hearing; but I did not show that I heard. Some time, I believed then, I should reckon with him for it all.

I am counted a good dancer, but I must have been amazingly awkward when we were half through this number, for I placed my heavily shod foot upon one of the furbelows of my partner's gown. Then indeed was there a to-do, and two or three of the lady's friends gathered around, darting me poisoned looks.

But I confess my eyes were elsewhere. I had seen the signal at the long window which overlooked the fir plantation that lay west of the house, and my apologies were made perfunctorily.

The naughty spoiling of my lady's gown gave me an opening to slip away,

and I received my sword and sidearms from Mistress Honore's maid, and had already vaulted into the saddle when the hostess herself appeared.

Behind her was the red coat of Major Pitkin, and his face atop it was a deeper scarlet than the coat.

"A pleasant ride, Captain Coscarden!" she cried, waving her lace kerchief to me as she stood there in the crisp November moonlight. "I am sorry haste forbids your remaining for the last dance, sir."

"Believe me, mistress," I said, reining in the eager mare, "*that* is the principal of the two sorrows I feel at this departure. My second sorrow," I added, darting the British officer a meaning look, "I pray heaven I may explain to Major Pitkin at a fitter season.

"Meanwhile," I continued, boldly looking down again into her upturned, haughty face, "the last dance is still mine! Some time, Mistress Sutcliffe, I shall return to claim it!"

I swept off my hat, and the mare darted away under a loosened rein. The beat of hoofs upon the frozen ground announced the approach of the troop the dastard Pitkin had summoned.

It was a pretty race to the river; but we won, the mare and I.

II.

THE rolling river, which we successfully crossed, having destroyed every available boat unused by our own army, saved the retreat. Cornwallis here gave up the chase, waiting for Jack Frost to bridge the stream for his benefit, and quartering the different divisions of his army at Trenton, Princeton, and other points within supporting distance.

Our condition—indeed, the condition of the cause itself—was desperate at this time. The short-term enlisted men were departing daily; but finally Congress awoke to the need and entrusted General Washington with almost absolute power, and took measures to provide for a permanent army.

During the month which followed our hasty crossing of the Delaware, what with reinforcements of some Pennsylvania troops and a part of Lee's division, our numbers were swelled to some seven thousand men.

His Excellency, I know, was never a man to lie idle when a blow might be struck. While Cornwallis waited the ministrations of Providence in the matter of bridging the river, I knew our commander would steal a march upon Providence, were the act possible.

And so I troubled my mind much with the problem of getting over into Jersey and striking a decisive blow at the scattered forces of the British. Yet there was an undercurrent of my thought that had little to do with bloodshed and battle—a desire which beckoned me earnestly across the flood.

Forever was the face of Mistress Sutcliffe rising before my mental vision—just as she looked there in the moonlight when she waved me godspeed the night of the dance.

Kittredge, whose word I knew could be wagered upon, had gained much information regarding the troops stationed at Trenton—one thousand five hundred Hessians they were, and a troop of light horse—and with this I went to His Excellency.

Some there be that call him stiff-necked and proud, a man eaten up with a belief in his own importance; but no simple soldier was yet cavalierly treated by General George Washington to *my* knowledge, and I have been attached to his immediate staff several times.

Sharp he can be with meddlers, but he received my well-intentioned speech most kindly.

"Aye, Captain Coscarden," he said, "this news is timely, although much of it has already been brought to me through other sources. Feel not troubled on that score. In the multitude of testimony the thing shall be established."

Then he added, eying me with sudden sharpness: "But they tell me the river is full of ice, and such boats as we may find will be swamped."

"Well, we may swim then," said I bluntly. "Nothing tried for, nothing won. I doubt if the river will be less free of ice blocks before spring; and if it freezes solidly over, the enemy may step across to see us himself."

"Go back to your company, captain," he rejoined briefly, turning to his papers again. "If the move seems well, you shall have the advance, if *I* have any influence with Sullivan and Greene."

The story of that second Christmas in the struggle for independence has been told often enough, God knows!

Some say it was a sudden and desperate move on the part of His Excellency to throw his army across the Delaware and strike while the enemy slept; but I know it was in his mind for days.

And had he been blessed with generals under him who knew not the venom of jealousy, more—much more—would have been achieved. The wind and ice fought against that crossing, it was true, but the two divisions that failed to reach the Jersey shore might have accomplished their intent had either of their commanders been himself at the head of the expedition.

Nevertheless, Sullivan, Greene, Mercer, and Sterling got their commands over that desperately cold and blustering night of Christmas, '76, their troops numbering in all perhaps two thousand four hundred men. We knew that the Hessians at Trenton were lulled to false security; one of the British generals, indeed, had sworn to keep the peace in all Jersey for the remainder of the winter "with a corporal's guard!"

I was near the commander's boat as it breasted the black flood, and his cloaked figure in the bows, as immovable as a statue's, seemed heroic in my sight. The crossing was not all accomplished in a moment, however; there was a tedious delay while the foreguard waited for the slower divisions.

I received permission to take Kittredge and scout ahead. An item of news which he had brought me, but which I had not passed on to the general, spurred me to seek this privilege of skirmishing.

Through a well informed sympathizer with our cause he had learned that on Christmas night a ball was to be given at Sutcliffe Manor.

I knew no Hessian would be invited there, for the German officers were snubbed even by the Tories as mercenaries. What portion of the light-horse troops might be fluttering about Mistress Sutcliffe, I knew not; but I was determined to spy out the land, and I would save her household and the innocent guests from trouble if possible—and that with a clear conscience.

Unknown to us, news had already gone to the Hessian commander of the proposed descent of our army. A Tory living near our landing-place had first observed a lantern or two undulating upon the river, and had suspected the cause, though he did not know in what numbers we were coming.

He hastened to send a note to the Hessian colonel, who was spending the night over drink and cards, an example most of his troops were following.

Not dreaming that this news of our coming was ahead of us, Kittredge and I spurred on over a road which he assured me was not sentineled. Indeed, the enemy's rank and file had been given much freedom over the holiday, and seemingly not even a dog was on guard.

Nor did we find trouble in approaching the manor house. It was ablaze with candle light, and the music of the fiddles and tread of the dance set my blood to tingling.

A glance through the outbuildings assured me that no troops were quartered here, and a negro boy whom we seized admitted that only one of the red-coats was in the house. It was more of a family party on this occasion than the dance at which I had figured the month before.

Kittredge bound the boy and threw him into a hayloft before setting spurs to his horse on his return to bring up my own company over this road. Sorry as were these hacks we had seized on landing, and now bestrode, I knew he would return within a brace of hours at the furthest, and by that time it would be safe to surround the manor house, whereby I could favor Mistress Sutcliffe and her father in keeping any other command at a distance.

Besides, there was one present who I did not intend should escape me. The boy had called him "De Massar Majah," and I knew him to be Major Pitkin of the light-horse troop.

The rage I had scored against his name had not one jot abated during these weeks, and after tying my sorry steed, I went forward to watch that his capture might be sure. Either he should fight me when the time came, or he should go back with me across the river —if I went myself.

But not in the house—no, no! I'd be as fair to him as he was forced to be to me on that previous occasion.

And, besides, I did not know how tender was Mistress Honore's heart toward him, after all. I determined to tackle him outside the manor, and then net him before he could escape.

To this end I progressed into the fir plantation, and there, coming suddenly around a dark clump of shrubs near the corner of the old part of the manor house, I came plump upon Mistress Sutcliffe herself and the major.

They were pacing the short walk here laid down, for there was but a slight crust of snow upon the ground, and that as hard and dry as alabaster.

She had thrown a hooded cloak over her head, and, muffled in this, stepped forward briskly in her tiny, high-heeled shoes, like the high-bred lady she was; while he slouched at her side with that easy familiarity which marked the coarse nature of the man.

For, despite his good looks, he was much too long trained in barrack and guard-room to hide the stamp of the service.

It was a meeting which none of us had craved—that without doubt. For I had revealed myself quite two hours too early, and it smote me blankly that I might mar the entire plans of my commander by this overt act.

Delay—delay! That was my cue, and when Mistress Sutcliffe laughed and spoke my name in astonishment, I was ready to match my wit with his, if not with hers.

"The same, mistress," I said, bowing, "and at your service. I am come, as I promised, for that last dance."

"Gad, man," cried the major fiercely, his hand on his sword, "you're like to dance that same at the end of a hemp rope. A spy caught red-handed, by the Lord!"

"Not *caught*, major," I interposed slyly, and I took pains to draw my sword just the length from its scabbard that he did his own.

"Gentlemen! Captain Coscarden—Major Pitkin—this must go no farther!" panted Mistress Honore. "How you came here, captain, I do not know; but you must not remain—you must not claim our hospitality to-night. Cousin, I command you to put up your sword."

But his weapon had sprung from its sheath, and he answered her with an oath, putting her roughly aside.

"That is enough, major!" I muttered. "I have the right of any man *now* to spit you through."

"I will call for help!" threatened the girl wildly. "Think what you do! What will my father say——"

But the major was down upon me with a black face and a whirlwind of sharp strokes. Had I not been eager for the fray—as eager as he was himself —and did I not see that only in this sword-play lay hope of keeping him engaged until it would be too late for him to give the alarm, I must have defended myself with desperation.

He was no gentle swordsman. His strokes were like those of a blacksmith, and he hammered at my guard in a way which tried my lighter sword sorely.

His greater heft gave him an advantage. A more unstable fencing ground could scarcely be imagined, and I was on my knees, warding my head from his downward strokes, as often as I stood upright. The strain began to tell upon my old wound, too.

And there, as we swayed and panted, stamping our feet upon the snow-crust, the steel ringing like the clatter from a smithy, the girl looked on with wide eyes and hands tightly gripped before her, infatuated with the fight, and yet so frozen with terror that she could neither speak nor move.

Back in my mind I knew it was a losing game for me. I could not keep up my end until Kittredge and the company arrived. Word would go abroad that we were on this side of the river, and even the careless and drunken Hessian officers would be awakened.

I cursed myself for my precipitation, for exceeding my orders, and for the fact that I was, and likely ever should be thereafter, at a disadvantage before Mistress Sutcliffe.

It is all well and good for a man to be reckless and gallant before his mistress if success crowns his endeavor, but wo to him who takes up the gantlet without counting the cost; and in this case the cost promised to be heavy.

Perhaps we had expended five long minutes in this passage-at-arms, and never a chance had I to exercise that skill which I knew I possessed above my adversary. He seemed tireless, while I trembled in the leg already, and my breath came sobbing from my chest.

Suddenly, with a most vicious blow, he bore me down again. I sought to turn his blade, and, good steel as mine own was, it snapped like a pipe-stem near the grip. I was disarmed and at his mercy—and he knew no mercy! That was plain in the evil smile which wreathed his lips and by the flame in his eye.

Hatless, hissing, cursing as he came, he bore me back and back, with the point of his sword caught in the filigree guard of my bladeless weapon. I felt my slipping feet pounding upon a hollow place in the earth, as though it were a plank hatch, or boarding, and at the moment Mistress Sutcliffe screamed a stifled warning.

All too late. The rotting boards gave way. I was saved from instant death—from being spitted like a sparrow upon his sword's point—by dropping like a plummet into the depths of an old well!

Trapped! Caught like a rat in a cage—like a bear in a log-fall. I fell full thirty feet, bruising myself against the half-stoned sides of the well, and landing at the bottom with a shock which jarred every bone in my body and fairly seemed to loosen the teeth in my head!

The bruising caroms broke the fall and saved my life, however, and the well was dry.

There I was at the bottom, breathless and speechless, while the major raved like a wild man at the top. I heard him bawling for the grooms and servants to bring a lantern and his pistols.

"There's not much choice," thought I, "between spitted on a sword, killed by a fall, or being shot at the bottom of a pit like a wild beast!"

My own pistols were in my saddle holsters; I was unarmed and helpless.

But the rough walls of the well, or cistern, might afford some slight shelter from the madman at the top. So I believed until the lantern came.

Then, when he tied it to a rope's end and had it lowered into the depths while he leaned on the edge with his horse-pistol cocked, waiting to shoot me when the light revealed my situation, even *this* faint hope took wings to itself.

Upon my upturned face gravel and sand continually fell from the sides of the well. I watched the lantern, which gave forth a circle of murky yellow light, descending as certainly as death upon me. The light was thrown upon his overlooking countenance, too, and I read no mercy there.

But a single satisfactory thought remained to salve the horror of my position. All this would delay the alarm reaching the town and any call to arms.

Meanwhile the American army was gathering on the Jersey shore, and the cause might not suffer because of my mistaken move.

Lower and lower swung the lantern, and I watched its light upon the broken wall like a bird infatuated by the baleful glare of a serpent. I counted the inches which must elapse before its radiance revealed me to my enemy. Had I but possessed one of my pistols I could have shot him there where he overhung the pit!

Suddenly there was an explosion which filled the bottom of the well with wreathing smoke and deafened me for an instant completely. The lantern glass was broken into a shower of slivers, the wick went out, and the well was instantly in darkness.

My first thought was that in his eagerness the major had fired at me and hit the lantern instead. I was untouched, except for the falling particles of glass.

Then I heard his voice ring out roundly from the top of the well. With an oath he cried: "He's armed—the

hellhound! He's put out the light. Ha, boys, roll me that boulder. We'll drop that down upon his cursed head!"

And yet this awful threat scarcely brought me out of my state of wonderment. *Who had fired that shot?*

Had the Britisher not done it, whose the hand that had saved me? The imminence of my continued peril was dwarfed before this query.

I stood out boldly from the wall of the well and gazed upward, trying to pierce the cloud of pungent smoke.

And then of a sudden I saw an arm and hand thrust fairly from the side of the well—the side toward the manor house. The sleeve of lace and rich stuff which clothed this apparition was torn and soiled. The hand beckoned wildly, and I heard a voice cry:

"Quick, quick, Captain Coscarden, if you would save your life!"

By the gods, that voice would have spurred me from my grave, I verily believe. And this abandoned well came near to be it, in good sooth!

I saw then the narrow opening in the wall. I scrambled up the crumbling masonry, got my knee upon the shelf, which was some six feet from the bottom, and so drew myself into a black and narrow tunnel.

As I did so I felt the fanning rush of air, heard a dull roaring in my ears, and a huge stone plunked to the bottom of the shaft. The fright of the thing made me scream aloud, and my cry was heard at the top of the well.

Pitkin roared his approval. He believed the boulder had done its work.

But before me in the blackness of the tunnel I heard an answering shriek, and the next instant two soft arms were about my neck and I was fairly dragged into the safety of the cut.

"Oh, oh, you are *not* hurt? Tell me, you are *not?*" she cried and wept by turns, for brave until the matter was ended—brave beyond most women of whom I ever heard—she was helpless in my arms now.

It was unfair. She has often declared to me it was taking an advantage that no gallant gentleman would have taken. But what could a man do—and a rough soldier like me?

I just swept her into my arms and thanked God aloud that I held her so, pressing her sweet body against my own, and whispering assurances of my safety, and soothing words, into the pink shell of her ear.

Finally she commanded me to let her go, and then, when I stumbled blindly through the tunnel; she relented and led me by the hand out of the cellar, from which the passage had been dug long since that water might be dipped up from the bottom of the well in time of siege.

There was much hullabaloo above, for the guests had run out, and Master Sutcliffe himself had taken his kinsman to task roundly for what he proclaimed "a cold-blooded murder."

I waited long enough to see a file of men, who bore glistening muskets in their hands, coming at a double quick along the road, and then knowing that Kittredge had returned, I boldly made my presence known to the excited company.

Mistress Honore had run to her own apartments, and nobody but her father knew how I could possibly have escaped from the well, and he did not suspect his daughter's connivance with a rebel. But I believe Major Pitkin, for that first minute, believed me a specter arisen from the grave.

He made no effort to escape, at least, and my men disarmed him quickly, leading him away to join the negro boy in the hay-mow.

"Master Sutcliffe," I said, bowing before the old gentleman, "your guests may return to their pleasure. No harm will come to you or to them. My men will merely guard the house from all intrusion until morning, or until I receive further orders."

He was ever a courteous man, if his heart did *not* favor the Colonists.

"You are welcome, Captain Coscarden," he observed, "as you have been welcomed here before. You will come within? The company may not be broken up at once, you intimate? Then, friends, we may as well go back to the ballroom. You *will* join us, captain?" he repeated.

"For the last dance, sir—only for

that. Your daughter has promised it to me," I returned, and this time I was not disappointed.

* * * *

It is an old story now how the warning sent to the Hessian colonel was thrust unopened into his pocket while he returned to his game of cards, and so our army approached unsuspected upon the town at daybreak. A few of the light-horse escaped; but a thousand prisoners went back with us across the Delaware after the raid, among whom I saw to it was my own particular captive, Major Pitkin.

THE HOODOO RANCH.*

BY SEWARD W. HOPKINS.

An inheritance that was unexpectedly come by, miraculously reached, and which staggered its possessor when finally viewed.

CHAPTER XX.

IN WHICH I START FOR THE BORDER.

AGAIN in the room usually called a cell, I had ample opportunity for thought.

Though the designation of my apartmen was that of "cell," to be candid, it was more comfortable than any room in the mud hut my uncle, if he was my uncle, had bequeathed me.

The bed was comfortable and clean. The food was good.

Nevertheless, it was a prison, and I was held in durance.

I was in a sort of maze—a whirl of excitement. I cared little who owned the acres of baked grass called the Wallace ranch.

If the fellow who claimed I stole his papers and money wanted that hoodoo of an estate, he could have it. But the longer I studied my own mind the more convinced I became that I wanted Eunice.

I was bound to her by the holiest of ties, and I had promised to protect her. And, so far as my suspicions could go, I believed the very man from whom I was to protect her now had her in his power, along with thirty-five hundred cattle, ponies, and sheep.

With these thoughts in my mind, the imprisonment was extremely irksome. I spent an hour or two walking the floor, trying to get some sort of comfort from the fact that I was in the custody of a decent man.

But this mattered little with my mind so wrought up about Eunice.

"Dick," I said to myself, "you were not cut out for a citizen of a territory so near the Mexican border. You are a nice, soft tenderfoot. You are an easy thing for everybody. In short, you are a fool."

There is little consolation in proving to your own satisfaction that you are a fool. Still, having done so, the thought may spur one to an energetic attempt to overcome obstacles and create new conditions.

Philosophy, in a northern winter by a nice coal fire, is easy and pleasant. But in Arizona, with the hot sand sweeping in through chinks to sprinkle itself all over the floor, the bed, and your clothing, while you remain in a cell, is not conducive to good morality or Christianity.

The more I studied, the more angry I became.

Had I not been the husband of Eunice Bethune, I might have waited patiently for the Territorial court to decide upon my claim to the hoodoo ranch. But the more I thought of Eunice, the more I became in love with her. The picture of De Paro stood out before me like a monster.

I did not care so much for the cattle. I did not know their value, nor did I

* *This story began in the July issue of* THE ARGOSY. *The five back numbers will be mailed to any address on receipt of* 50 *cents.*

consider myself likely to develop into a successful ranchman.

But I wanted my wife.

It took but little more of this train of thought to make me desperate. I examined the window of my cell.

It was an ordinary window, with two bars set in the sides, and no other precaution taken to prevent escape. From the window I could see the diverging streets of Mackinville and the little houses of the inhabitants.

I received my meals as usual, and night came on, dark and disagreeable.

When Banks brought in my supper he had on a new black suit.

"If there is anything you want, Wallace," he said, "let me know now. Jaffry told me to look out for you, and I will. But there is an entertainment in the town hall to-night, what they call illustrated lectures, all about Washington, New York, Philadelphia, and all the big Eastern cities. I am going, so is everybody else. Wish you could go, for Jaffry says he don't like the cut of that other fellow's jib, and I rather like you any way. But you can't go. If you want any reading matter, I can get you that, and lend you a lamp."

"I wish you would," I answered.

"What would you like to read?"

"Well, since I am interested in a ranch or two, I think I would like an able treatise on how to raise good cattle. Which kind of steer gives the best wool, and what kind of sheep is better for sirloin steaks. You might hand out an article on camels. I think the government put a herd down here once as an experiment."

"Nobody ever came here yet except as an experiment," said Banks, laughing.

He was as good as his word, and brought me some agricultural papers. The literary magazine had not reached Mackinville as yet.

From my window I could see the town hall, a long building with a tower, and at eight o'clock some fireworks were set off. They were evidently old stock, for only one out of three proved to be good.

It soon became evident that Banks was right. All Mackinville seemed to be going to the town hall to hear the lecture.

Nine o'clock brought the profound silence usually associated with a graveyard. It was a dark night, and I could not hear a sound, and the only lights visible were my own lamp and the oil lantern hung in front of the town hall.

I felt the iron bars. The wood had been split, the bars put in place, and the wood united again. It was not what could be called an unbreakable jail.

I had grown more desperate as the night wore on, and when all Mackinville was either asleep or in the town hall I tried the top bar.

It was not a very thick bar, and was rusted. I caught hold of it in the center and braced my feet on the window sill. Then with all my strength I pulled.

How long I strained at that iron bar I could not tell. I know that I grew dizzy and my head began to swim from the constant exertion. But I fancied the bar was bending, and I kept on.

Suddenly it bent in the middle and split. One end came out of its socket, and I went sprawling on the floor.

This made an opening large enough for me to squeeze through. The window sill could not be far from the ground, as the cell was on the first floor.

I crawled out, and, taking the sound bar in my hands, let myself down. My toes touched something, but I was not quite low enough to reach the ground. I cared not how much of a fall I got. The thing was, I was free.

I let go the bar, and fell in a heap, unhurt and master of my own actions once more.

I wasted no time. Skirting the town hall, from which now came the sound of the old town organ, I got into Gila Street and started toward the south.

There were plenty of horses tethered in the town hall yard, but I knew that the theft of a horse was a greater crime in Arizona than murder. I did not touch one, but wandered on.

Gila Street was not very long, and I soon found myself out on a dark, sandy plain, with here and there a twinkling little light in the kitchen of some farmhouse, perhaps as a guide to the young folks who had gone to hear the lecture.

I did not feel fatigue, and walked on at a rapid rate. I had scarcely any plans. To escape was the first thing.

I knew, however, that De Paro would not remain in Arizona. He had spoken of Mexico, and being a Mexican himself, that was probably where he had his lair.

Mackinville was not a great distance from the border, and I knew there was no river to cross. So I trudged on and on, with a single star to guide me, and after I had passed beyond the small farms and had got into the big cattle ranges, I felt at ease.

I walked nearly all night. As the morning was breaking, I saw some little huts ahead, and some dark featured children playing.

A grizzled old Indian, or at least I supposed he was an Indian, was standing in a doorway. He looked at me curiously.

"You start early," he said.

"No, it was rather late," I replied. "I have been walking all night."

He nodded as though the fact was to my credit.

"You go far?"

"To Mexico."

"Bad mans there. Steel my ponies. Yes, many bad mans come from Mexico."

"That is why I am going there," I answered. "A fellow named De Paro has stolen thousands of head from me, and my wife as well. I want to kill him."

"De Paro! Ah, he is one devil! I know him. Yes, in Santa Cruz."

"Is that where he lives?"

"Yes, Santa Cruz, in the stone house. Oh, he is one devil. But you need sleep! Come, I give you sleep, and I lend you horse. You will be friend to all Arizona if you kill De Paro. Come."

The odor of cooking antelope came to my nostrils, and I entered the hut. An Indian woman was cooking over an open fire.

"White man go kill De Paro," said the master of the house.

The woman turned, sized me up, and with a disgusted grunt returned to her cooking.

It was evident that I had not impressed her as a hero.

The old Indian was as good as his word. I enjoyed a good sleep, and about noon he gave me a pony, which I promised to return when I had succeeded in my errand. He grunted an approval.

"You kill De Paro, you keep the pony," he said.

With this admonition I started, and Mackinville faded from my thoughts as I drew nearer the border between Arizona and Mexico.

The next thing was to find Santa Cruz.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN WHICH EVERYTHING SEEMS TO FIND A SOLUTION.

As I jogged along on the old Indian's pony, knowing absolutely nothing of my surroundings, except that so far as I could judge I was still going southward, I passed here and there ranches as dry as my own, small villages where I could get water to drink for my horse and myself, and something to eat as well.

It was growing late in the afternoon when I glimpsed ahead of me a row of white tents.

Above one of them I saw the Stars and Stripes. I could not imagine why soldiers should be there unless it was to escort a surveying party.

As I drew near, an officer rode to meet me.

"Where going?" he asked curtly.

"Trying to go to Mexico," I replied, just as short as he was.

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Any cattle, ponies, sheep?"

"I had some. But they have been stolen. I am looking for the man who took them. He also has my wife."

"Well," he said with a grin, "we have no jurisdiction over wives. But we are here to look out for cattle thieves. Those confounded Mexicans are raising the devil! It is a regularly organized gang, with the most daring rascal in Mexico at the head of it. He is just out of a United States prison at Prescott, and has already started in to make trouble. He is in Arizona now."

"I'll bet he is the man I want," I said. "Is his name De Paro?"

"That's the chap!" said the soldier excitedly. "Have you seen him?"

"Yes. It is quite a story. Got any water to drink?"

"Yes. Good spring near the camp. Come on."

We rode toward the tents. I saw quite a company of soldiers, and a tall, sun-bronzed officer in charge.

"This is Captain Mills," said the officer who had met me. "Tell him what you know."

The captain looked at me with interest.

"He is after De Paro, who stole his cattle and his wife," explained the officer.

"Sit down," said Captain Mills.

I soon had a drink of cool, sparkling water.

"We are from Fort Yuma," said the captain. "There has been a good deal of trouble with rustlers from Mexico.

"This De Paro, who has, as you seem to think, rounded up your cattle, is a very rich man. He is a gambler, a cattle thief, and about everything that goes to make up a border scoundrel.

"If he has your cattle, and took them while you were out on the *mesa*, or making your way home through the gorge, he has not had time to reach the border, for thousands of head of cattle don't travel very rapidly.

"I think we will have business with Mr. de Paro before many days have passed."

Captain Mills soon got very busy. He sent out small detachments, each in charge of a lieutenant or sergeant, and formed a line of communication with the camp on each side. He insisted upon my remaining as his guest.

It was the second day after my advent in the camp that we heard firing to the westward.

I was sitting outside in the shade of a small locust tree, and Captain Mills came rushing from his tent.

"Something wrong up the line!" he said. "Want to go?"

We were soon in the saddle, and, followed by about twenty men, we galloped off.

Mills was a terrific rider, and it was all the poor Indian's pony could do to keep up with his charger. We passed sentries and camps, and all fell in as their officers commanded when Mills shouted his orders.

Two miles from Mills' camp we saw a great herd, and several Mexicans.

"That's the man I want!" said Mills, and I was left alone.

The pony was not equal to the spurt made by the cavalrymen.

There was a dash—a skirmish in which many shots were fired, and I saw men fall from their horses. I began to fear that if Eunice was in the gang she would be injured.

I saw Mills ride in among the men, where there was a covered wagon. Where De Paro had kept his outfit was a mystery, but he was well equipped for traveling.

I had got nearer, and I saw De Paro himself, evidently in a terrible rage, ride up and fire at the captain. The next moment the forty-four cavalry revolver began its barking, and De Paro rolled to the ground from his saddle.

The next instant Eunice had rushed from the wagon, and in a moment more I held her in my arms.

De Paro was dead, his gang broken up. Eunice and I were on the border with thousands of animals, and how to get them back to the ranch I did not know.

Captain Mills decided for me.

"You are safe now, so far as De Paro is concerned," he said. "But now you've got your claim to fight. The man you want to see is the United States Land Commissioner at Tucson. I know Baker well. I will give you a letter of introduction. That claim of the other Wallace sounds fishy to me. You are not the kind of man who steals titles."

"He would not need to steal the title to land," said Eunice. "He is my husband, and I have a thousand acres."

"Still, the other two thousand may be a handy thing to own. Now, these cattle will require several men to take them back. I will detail Sergeant Bevens. I'll give you the letter to Baker, and you go straight to Tucson. Never mind Mackinville and your jail breaking. That is not a strange thing in this territory."

Armed with the letter, Eunice and I set off for Tucson. Bevens and his men started with the herds.

We found Mr. Baker to be a genial sort of fellow; he heard my story and laughed at the makeshifts by way of which I had got to Mackinville from New York. He promised to investigate.

During the investigation I remained at Tucson with Eunice, using what little money she had for expenses.

I wrote to Jaffry, and he worked with Mr. Baker.

"There is going to be some fun regarding that ranch of yours," said Baker to me one day. "Do you know who the real instigator of this thing is?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Jones, Jaffry's old partner. He traced you back to New Orleans. He put up the job with Dick Molder, one of the greatest daredevils in the southwest. Jones would have put the job through, but Jaffry held out for you, and that was what caused the split. Your title is good. Jones has skipped out of Mackinville, and Molder is in the jail that couldn't hold you. It is up to you now to prosecute him if you wish."

"Oh, don't let us have any law!" said Eunice. "Let us get home and let us see if my father is still in the hut where you left him."

We were soon on our way, and upon arriving at the ranch found Bevens there with the stock.

This all happened not so long ago, and Bevins is now one of our friends.

He went with me to the hut to find Mr. Bethune.

We did find him, still chained, but fortunately, I guess, for all concerned, dead. We had him buried in Mackinville.

Only a few years have passed, but a great change has come over the Hoodoo Ranch. I raised a little capital and employed an engineer to put in an irrigating plant. Windmills pumped water from the stream that crossed both ranches into great storage basins, and from these diverging canals carried the water to distant points.

Eunice and I are happy, our herds are as fine as any in Arizona, the wool from our sheep the best, and the greatest treasure is Master William Bethune Wallace, whose remarkable speeches and whose wonderful intellect are preserved in the family archives, but would scarcely be of interest to the casual reader.

Mackinville is growing, and is now the county seat of Pima County. The agitation for Statehood is now going on, and I am an ardent supporter of the measure.

People are awakening to the fact that they have a country of vast possibilities, and a future of great value.

It is said that I shall be elected the next sheriff. Eunice does not wish me to run, as there are still dangerous characters to be dealt with.

But I may. Somebody must preserve order and enforce the law, and I have passed through so many dangers unhurt that I am practically invulnerable.

All on account of my inheritance of a hoodoo ranch.

THE END.

IN DAYS OF GALLANTRY.

"I've freshly gathered apples red,
Like morning dews that shine;
I've peaches ripe," the maiden said,
"And clusters from the vine."

The gallant courtier made reply,
"Thy eyes the dews outshine;
Fair maid, no peach's bloom can vie
With those soft cheeks of thine!"

'TWIXT TWO PLAGUES.

BY F. J. KNIGHT ADKIN.

How two brothers came to obtain a monopoly on heat and light respectively, and the clever device by which the resultant disaster was averted.

I.

WHEN Violet entered the laboratory, Paul Benham was stooping over a small retort, under which flickered the blue flame of a Bunsen burner.

He looked up as she shut the door.

"What's been keeping you all this time, I should like to know?"

"A gentleman has come from New York, uncle, and wants to see you. This is his card."

"Wants to see me? Well, I don't want to see him, so there's an end of it."

The answer did not surprise the girl. For fifteen years, since he had quarreled with his brother Peter in fact, this had been Paul Benham's attitude towards the world. He held converse with none except his niece, and only with her because she was necessary to him as housekeeper and assistant in his laboratory and workshops.

He took the card and scowled at it from under his heavy brows.

"Arthur W. Hanson, Attorney-at-Law," he muttered, as he turned it over to read some words penciled on the other side. "He's got to be a pretty clever one if he can swindle anything out of me. What's this? Oh, so Mark is dead, is he? There may be money in it then, or why should his lawyer come all this way?

"Money! Money! And just when I need it most! He says he must see us both together, but I wouldn't sit in the same room as Peter to save myself from hanging. He can keep to his end of the house and I can keep to mine. The attorney shall stay in the hall and talk to us both. Tell him that I'll be over in a few minutes."

The lawyer stood looking out of a window in the rear of the hall.

"Very strange state of affairs," he muttered nervously. "One brother lives at the one end of the house with an old man servant, and the other brother lives at the opposite end with his niece and a maid. I trust they will not behave in any violently eccentric manner. Queer looking machinery they seem to have out there, too."

Beyond the uncared-for garden lay a field of about three acres, connected with it by two gates; at the north and south ends of this field were large buildings surrounded by strange looking structures of steel and iron.

Round the northern building, Peter's workshop, stood what appeared to be pyramid-shaped tanks of armor-plating, each surmounted at the apex by a kind of suction pump. One of these was working, and the lawyer thought he could see a glittering point, like an icicle hanging from a cross-piece.

Along the southern building, which belonged to Paul, was stretched a series of narrow troughs. Above each of these spun a revolving jet of some liquid, bright in itself but encompassed by a cloudy nimbus.

Presently Walter Mervyn, the elder brother's assistant, walked in to say that Peter Benham would see the lawyer at once. Some moments after Violet entered with a similar message from Paul.

Neither brother, however, would consent to be interviewed except in his own side of the house. A compromise, therefore, had to be effected by placing a chair at the bottom of the stairs for Mr. Hanson, while the brothers sat each in his own doorway.

The lawyer glanced apprehensively from one to the other, then took a bundle of documents from his bag.

He unfolded them on his knee, and referring to them frequently, he de-

tailed an account of how the third brother, Mark, whom neither of the others had heard or thought of for twenty years, had gone to California and purchased a small piece of property. Many years later extensive "finds" of gold had been made on this land, transforming Mark Benham into a very wealthy man.

When he died, some five weeks before, he was found to have left no will, and from papers in his possession Peter and Paul Benham, of Hartington, Connecticut, appeared to be his only near relations and therefore sole legatees.

"So," the lawyer concluded as he refolded the documents, "I am able to congratulate each of you on coming into a fortune of two and a half million dollars."

Paul jumped to his feet with clenched fists and shining eye.

"Money at last! Now the work can be completed and I shall have the world, and you, too, Peter Benham, in my grasp, to crush if I choose."

On the other side of the hall his enemy sat motionless.

"Mark always was a fool," he muttered between his teeth, "or he would have left all the five millions to me and helped to set on foot the greatest project the world has ever seen. Instead of that, he wastes half on that maniac. As it is, I shall have to manage with the two and a half."

II.

WITHIN a month the field behind the house was as busy as an ant-hill. On the north side the short, square figure of the elder brother bustled about, directing the foremen of his army of Italian laborers, and even assisting with his own hands in the placing of girders and plates.

A solid concrete bed had been laid down and from it there steadily rose an immense tank, of the same shape as the former ones but covering nearly half an acre.

The work was costly, both in material and in labor, but with the aid of his share of the legacy Peter had been able to set on foot several smaller inventions, which soon poured large profits into his treasury.

Paul's operations, on the south side, though less expensive, entailed a band of about a hundred laborers supplied by an Irish contractor, who superintended the building of a monster steel tower. The younger brother, however, worked no less eagerly than the other; not a girder was placed nor a bolt struck without his approval.

Within five months the main structure of the tower was finished, and on the day the last bolt was driven Paul called his niece into his private office.

"You know what all this building means," he said as he motioned her to a chair.

"Yes, the main point, at least," she answered, "and I have a vague idea——"

"Don't talk about vague idea to me," he snapped. "It means that I am the greatest inventor that has ever lived, and I shall soon be master of the world. It will be necessary for you to carry out directions I may have to give you from time to time, so I will once more explain my system.

"It was first suggested to me some ten years ago when I was working on submarines. I found great difficulty in using searchlights under water, owing to the fact that the light was absorbed by the refraction or reflection of the particles. Working from this, I discovered, or rather created, a liquid which has this absorbing power multiplied seven hundred and twenty thousand times. After several experiments I found that the light of a candle placed three feet from a saucer of the liquid was reduced to merely a glowing spark. Any fool could follow these statements. Can you?"

"Certainly, uncle," answered Violet.

"This done," the old man continued, "it was not difficult to find a method of storing the absorbed light. My only secret in the matter is the composition of the liquid. I have committed the formula to memory and burned all copies."

He rose, and after closing the window shades till not a ray of light could enter, he turned on several electric lights.

On the table stood a small working-model, which he uncovered before he sat down.

"This will illustrate my meaning. The motor power, which is to be supplied to the great plant outside by dynamos, will be conveyed by this crank which I turn with my hand."

He whirled the crank rapidly.

"The liquid, you see, is drawing up the hollow pillars of the miniature tower, emerging at the top in a whirling spray, and returning, condensed and charged with light, down the central tube."

Violet kept her eyes on the whirling machine. Presently its outlines became indistinct. She rubbed her eyes, but instead of seeing more clearly, she found that a kind of twilight, constantly deepening, seemed to fill the room.

With a gasp of fright, she realized the power placed in her uncle's hands and sat back watching him, while the beads of perspiration rolled down his forehead and a sneering smile of triumph lit up his sallow face. Gradually he faded into the gloom and the room was left in absolute darkness. Then the wheel started again.

Slowly the darkness gave way, the electric lamps glowed, grew bright, and finally shone with all their natural luster. Her uncle opened the shades and began a long explanation.

Within a couple of hours she had mastered the intricacies of the machine. Her brain spun as she thought of the stupendous size of the project.

"But what advantages will it bring to the human race?" she asked.

"Human race be hanged," shouted the inventor. "It's done nothing for me, why should I do anything for it? This machine will be a menace that will bring the world groveling to my feet and burying me in its dirty money. To me it will mean power—power unlimited!"

The girl's eyes blazed, but she restrained herself and left the room without a word. Outside she found herself repeating her uncle's words:

"New York is thirty-two miles from Hartington and will come within the fifty-mile radius of the circle which I am capable of plunging into total darkness."

III.

THE progress of the work on the north side of the field made it necessary for Walter Mervyn to make frequent visits to New York.

On the second day of June he was awakened by the morning sun shining brightly into his room at the Regal Hotel. The labor of the last few months had worn him out, so with a lazy sigh he turned over and prepared to take a little more rest while he could get it.

When he awoke again the air seemed to have lost all its sparkle and brightness.

"Clouding over; I suppose it's going to be a dull day," he said to himself as he walked over to the window. "The sky is as clear and blue as possible though; that's hopeful, at least."

By ten o'clock he had had his breakfast and was strolling idly down Broadway. As he walked he kept on glancing skyward; not a cloud floated above the city, but the dullness he had noted was now developing into absolute murkiness.

An hour later the arc lamps along the thoroughfare one by one burst into radiance with a little hiss.

"A real London fog," thought Mervyn. "Our English cousins have got the laugh on us this time."

Lights were lit in every store, and as he mounted to an Elevated railroad station Mervyn noted that the headlights shone on every train. Traveling downtown, he tried to read a newspaper in the dim light, but finally threw it away in disgust.

When he left the station at Rector Street and found himself once more on Broadway everything seemed to suggest that night had come half a dozen hours too soon. His business lay with a large instrument-maker, and as he turned into the shop the newsboys were shouting "Extra!" on every side.

"New York enveloped in fog; meteorological observations," ran the big headlines.

"Nice thing for this city to be guilty of, isn't it?" he said to the head of the firm.

"I'm not so sure that it is fog," answered the other. "The barometer doesn't record it, and the atmosphere gage shows the air to be clear and undisturbed."

"What else could it be?" asked Mervyn, incredulously.

"That I am not prepared to say, but as far as any of my instruments record, either down here or at the roof, it is plain darkness and nothing else."

They walked to the door; above their heads the sun hung like a clear white ball, appearing just as it does when seen through a smoked glass. Around them groups of people stood talking earnestly and watching the lamps and gas-jets grow dimmer and dimmer.

"Just as if the light, natural and artificial, were being soaked up by a sponge," said the instrument-maker at last.

Then the memory of his last conversation with Violet flashed upon the other.

"I'm afraid of Uncle Paul; wouldn't you be afraid of a man who could put out the light of the sun?" she had said.

He had laughed at the time, and told her not to indulge in such silly fancies, but now the remark made him thoughtful. Often he had watched the immense tower slowly growing outside Paul Benham's laboratory and wondered what office it was intended to perform.

If that was responsible for the strange atmospheric conditions, then Hartington would also be in darkness.

He thought of Violet alone with the author of this modern miracle, if, indeed, he were the author. She would be terrified and he would be powerless to help her.

By two o'clock the city was shrouded in darkness deeper than the blackest night. On every side one could hear the wails of women and the curses of men.

Thousands were groping about the streets, unable to find their way home. Some rushed madly along, crying hysterically and colliding with posts and buildings till they finally dropped down, faint and injured, with no one to help them.

Others crawled slowly forward, feeling every turn and corner, anxious only for themselves, without caring what happened to the rest.

As in the days of Pompeii, blind men were looked to for help, and these made small fortunes piloting to their homes those who could afford to pay. Hundreds were made by a few swindlers, who kept their heads, and saying they were blind, offered to conduct people for large sums.

These obtained payment in advance, and having led their victims for several blocks, left them to their own devices.

The civic authorities took action as promptly as possible, and opened all churches and theaters for the accommodation of those who were worn out with walking. Besides this, policemen were stationed at corners, who called out the names of the streets and directed the people when possible.

About six o'clock one evening paper got ahead of its contemporaries and sent out "criers," who, after collecting a certain sum, shouted their news to the crowd.

New York, they said, was on the southern edge of a circle of darkness, about seventy miles in diameter. Outside of this, the atmosphere was normal.

Boston, Washington, the South, and the West all reported more or less clear and sunny weather.

Then followed an appalling list of mishaps. Two trains had been ditched, surface cars had collided, houses had been broken open and robbed, and a great ocean liner was wrecked off the coast.

The long night dragged on without any appreciable change; few went to bed and scarcely any one slept.

About five o'clock in the morning the whole city resounded with relief. A faint light flickered in the air and the arc lamps began to glow dimly.

Gradually the darkness faded, and by eight o'clock the black terror of the night was lost in the bright beauty of a perfect June morning.

IV.

By ten o'clock the newspapers had rushed out an issue, which was supplemented at noon by an "extra." In each

case the whole of the front page was devoted to an announcement as portentous as the happening of the previous night.

The darkness, they said, had been caused by human agency. Paul Benham, an inventor, of Hartington, Connecticut, claimed to be the author of the disaster, and in an open letter to the mayor of New York he threatened to darken the city indefinitely. He offered one alternative—that he should be paid one dollar per aktimeter (a measure of light invented by himself) for the illumination of the area he controlled.

This would represent some two hundred and fifty dollars per week. The city was given twenty-one days in which to decide.

All doubt as to the genuineness of his claim had been put at rest by the evidence of some hundreds of eye-witnesses, residents of Hartington, who had watched the cloud of darkness spread gradually from the summit of the tower standing on his property.

The excitement was intense, but the citizens agreed, one and all, that it was impossible to pay the blackmail. Aside from the greatness of the sum, it was thought that its payment would invest one man with too much power and certainly lead to a revolution.

The matter was therefore allowed to rest temporarily till a plan of action could be formed.

After this announcement came another, to which most of the papers gave but little importance. Peter Benham, brother of the other, stated that unless he received a monopoly of all the passenger traction in New York (to which he intended to apply a motor system of his own invention) he would reduce the heat of the atmosphere to ten degrees below zero, centigrade.

He allowed the city one week to reach a decision.

Most people dismissed this demand from their minds as the raving of a madman, while the rest concluded that it was some scamp who was trying to take advantage of the recent scare.

Both brothers concluded their announcements by stating their means of self-protection. A line had been drawn round the works, and should any one cross that line the plants would be put in motion *instanter*.

For six days the problem was discussed, and on the tenth of June a meeting was to be held in Central Park.

The day promised to be very warm, even for the time of the year, and awnings were hastily constructed for the speakers' platforms. By half-past nine crowds were making their way toward the rendezvous, clad in the lightest of clothes.

The anxiety on their faces formed a strong contrast to the bright gaiety of the light muslins and flannels, though the brilliance of the sun seemed to laugh at their fears.

The governor of the State spoke first, saying that though the situation was serious, he fancied that the matter could be dealt with within the next fortnight. He then warned the people not to be alarmed by a man who he felt convinced was a plain impostor in the matter of reducing the heat of the atmosphere.

The governor went on to say that such attempts at intimidation were sure to be numerous after an incident such as had already happened. As he ceased speaking he buttoned his frock coat across his chest; a slight chill had touched the air.

The mayor of the city spoke next, and sat down shivering, as gusts of cold wind came blowing up from the north.

By noon the speeches were not finished, but the crowd had dwindled considerably.

The sun shone as brightly as ever, but a steady breeze of icy coldness had driven the people to shelter.

One speaker after another tried to talk cheerfully and keep up the courage of the multitude, but no one dared to mention Peter Benham's threat again.

At one o'clock about two hundred and fifty men with hard-set, anxious faces, were all that were left around the speakers. The thermometer had dropped to zero, and the state of affairs could be disregarded no longer.

The governor rose hastily, and bade the remaining few band themselves to-

gether to do all that was possible for the comfort and safety of their fellow citizens in the spell of cold which was coming upon them.

As the thermometer dropped, the frost caused havoc on all sides. Many car and railroad tracks were put out of use by the sudden contraction of the metals, and several factories were unable to generate sufficient steam to work their plants.

The poor were hit much harder by this last disaster. They had no money to buy the necessary warm clothes; the prices of fuel, blankets, and winter necessaries went up with a jump.

Several of the greatest department store owners, however, reversed this murderous order of things, and combined with the larger newspapers to give away thousands of blankets and tons of coal.

Down-town, a curious sight was to be seen. The people, rich and poor, had suffered agonies with the cold till a chemist, remembering that water takes much longer than air to give up its heat, had immersed himself to the neck in the river.

Thousands of others had gained relief in the same way.

At five o'clock, while the air still remained at minus seven degrees centigrade, the water, supplemented with warmth from the incoming tide, retained from forty to forty-five degrees of heat.

All round the Battery were double rows of heads just above water, surmounted by hats of all shapes and sizes.

In the tenement district, scores crowded themselves into one room, shutting doors and windows in an attempt to keep in the animal heat.

Once more the papers told the story of the works at Hartington; but this time it was at Peter Benham's end of the field that the machinery was running at full blast. The pump at the summit of his great pyramid was sucking in the air, and turning it out again robbed of its heat in spite of the great fiery orb hanging impotent in the sky.

The mayor was advised to surrender, and sent a telegraphic message stating that the city would grant any reasonable terms. This was at six o'clock, and in half an hour streams of hot, close air were flowing over the city, and the people were emerging from mansion and tenement to enjoy its warmth.

V.

On the day following the great frost, Violet and Walter Marvyn met secretly, as they had been accustomed to do during the past month.

The girl had grown paler and thinner under the strain of anxiety which had been thrust upon her shoulders, and for the second time in the last fortnight Walter urged her to throw in her lot with his and let him help to bear her burden.

"No," she said decisively, "while these threats are hanging over the country I cannot marry you. I seem to feel some kind of responsibility in having unknowingly assisted in causing all this wretchedness. Please don't ask again till these dangers are past."

"If that is the case," answered Walter doggedly, "I'll find some way to put an end to it all. I've had an idea in my head for some time."

"It is getting more serious every day," urged Violet. "Uncle Peter seems to be making overtures of friendship to Uncle Paul, and if they once begin to work together everything must give way before them."

"Exactly; I know the reason why they have decided to make it up. Peter finds that while his plant is working he must have light, for a thousand reasons, and Paul discovered yesterday that the cold contracted and deranged the parts of his delicate machinery so seriously that he is unable to run it without heat. If they remain enemies, you know them well enough to be sure that each will take the risk of throwing his own plant out of gear to spite the other."

"Then your plan is to keep up the quarrel at all costs," said Violet.

"Yes. There are only two ways to hit them; either through their insane vanity or through their hatred for each other. If my plan succeeds it will strike them in both of these weak spots. What newspaper does your uncle Paul read?"

"The Hartington *Tribune* is the only one he ever sees."

"Good! I thought so. The other never reads anything, either. I know the editor of that paper very well, and can arrange that he will turn out two single copies in which he will print anything I say. I will bring the copies tomorrow and you shall see how my idea works out."

"Very well, I will meet you here tomorrow at the same time."

Walter lost no time, but went straight down to the office of the *Tribune* and arranged the matter to his complete satisfaction.

The next day he met Violet and showed her the papers. In one the following paragraph had been "faked":

RECENT SCARE ABOUT DARKNESS PROVED AN IMPOSTURE.

We learn to-day that Paul Benham's threat to darken New York is an attempt at common swindling. Our informant is Mr. Peter Benham, who proves in his letter that he is the only power to be feared, and that he can break his brother's pretensions whenever he wishes. The public is warned not to pay any attention to the claims of this ridiculous impostor.

This copy Mervyn gave her to be delivered to Paul Benham, and told her to meet him in the town in half an hour's time.

In the other the same paragraph appeared, but with the names reversed, as follows:

RECENT SCARE ABOUT FROST PROVED AN IMPOSTURE.

We learn to-day that Peter Benham's threat to freeze New York is an attempt at common swindling. Our informant is Mr. Paul Benham, who proves in his letter, etc., etc.

He took this paper to Peter Benham himself and then went down into the town to await developments.

Peter put the paper aside till he had finished his simple morning meal. When he picked it up, the first paragraph which caught his eye was the one which Walter had inserted.

A mad rage came upon him. "The dogs dare to doubt my power, do they? And that cur, Paul Benham, says I am an impostor. I will show them whether I am to be laughed at."

He rushed about like a madman, shoveling coal into the furnaces, pushing a lever here and adjusting a valve there. With a rush and grumble, the great fly-wheels revolved and the cylinder hissed and strained.

Within five minutes a slight chill was felt all over the town.

Paul Benham, sitting in his laboratory at the other end of the field, saw his brother's machines beginning to work furiously.

"I feared that the lying hound would not keep faith," he muttered. "Yesterday he agreed to do nothing till we came to an agreement."

Then he noticed the paragraph in his copy of the newspaper.

"I, Paul Benham, am a helpless impostor, am I? And that animal at the other end of the field is the only real power, is he?"

He hissed between his teeth.

"We shall see! We shall see! How will his plans turn out without the assistance of the light, of which I am the sole and absolute owner?"

He opened a glass door in the wall and pulled down two small levers. Instantly the great dynamos answered to his call with a buzz and whir. Coolly and carefully he went round examining gages and adjusting pressures. He smiled wickedly as he glanced out of the window and saw the dusk falling over the midday scene. Inside it was bright enough; he could regulate his own supply of light to any point he chose.

Walter and Violet were seated at lunch in a restaurant, and at the first touch of the chill and the coming darkness they realized what was happening. The former ran instantly to his rooms and brought back two heavy fur coats and caps which he had kept ready in anticipation of what was now taking place.

He just groped his way back in time, as the cold and blackness became intense.

The people were again in a mad panic,

but this time the disaster was twofold and their terror was that of passive hopelessness.

The churches were full of kneeling figures. Once a pistol shot rang out and the people near by found that one poor wretch, rather than freeze to death, had taken a shorter cut.

Walter was in a state of terrible nervousness. He knew that since both plants were running together something must happen.

The two inventors worked like demons, keeping their machines at full speed and never thinking that the end was close upon them. Their hatred blotted everything else from their minds.

Finally the end came unexpectedly, almost by chance.

Along the side of the field ran a wire fence passing around the great steel tower and touching it at one point. The other end passed around the corner, where Peter's immense reservoir stood, and about three feet distant from it.

While the terrors of the darkness and frost were at their height, half a dozen bullocks in the next field, either agonized by the sudden cold or instinctively frenzied with fright, stampeded blindly into this light wire fence, carrying it up against the great steel pyramid. This formed a connecting circuit between the two huge electric machines, and a sheet of blinding light leaped across the space.

With a great shock perceptible as a slight earthquake for a mile around, the two huge erections fell crashing to the ground in fused, twisted masses.

In three seconds the darkened, freezing country was filled with glaring light and suffocating heat, and in a few more the atmosphere assumed its normal temperature once more.

Walter and Violet were the first who dared go near the place some hours later. Both brothers were stone dead. Peter lay across a twisted piston rod, and Paul sat in his armchair with one hand on a lever in the glass-fronted case.

The girl and the young man wandered away from the place of death hand in hand.

Further disaster to the country was averted. The future stretched ahead of them, and the making or marring of its happiness lay in their own hands.

THE NEW YEAR'S WELCOME.

RING, bells, ring! for the king is here;
Ring, bells, ring! for the glad New Year.
He mounts his throne with a smiling face,
His scepter lifts with majestic grace.

Ring for the joy his advent brings;
Ring for the happy songs he sings;
Ring for the promises sweet and true
With which we gladden our hearts anew.

The new born year is a happy fellow;
His voice is sweet, and low, and mellow;
With the Christmas holly his head is crowned,
With the Christmas blessings we'll wrap him round.

Then ring, bells, ring! for the joyous day—
The past is silent, the present gay;
Ring out your merriest, cheer after cheer,
To welcome the birth of the glad New Year.

THE HIGHWAYMAN'S MATCH.

BY EARLE ASHLEY WALCOTT.

A hold-up that did more than deprive the victims of their valuables, and how the score with the robber was settled.

I.

HIRAM BOLTER, D. D. S., was accustomed to make himself agreeable under difficult conditions. That is a part of the diplomatic duties of the modern dentist. But he had never felt his limitations so keenly as in the perverse and delicate circumstances that now entangled him. The day was hot, the stage was crowded, the dust rolled up in clouds as they made their slow progress up the winding mountain road, and Miss Ellinmore was as close to bad temper as it is possible for an angel to approach.

"Oh," she remarked for the fortieth time, "why didn't we get the outside seats? I shall stifle in here."

In some subtle manner she conveyed to Dr. Hiram Bolter the reproach that he was to blame for the discomforts of their position.

If she had been anybody but Miss Grace Ellinmore he would have been resentful, but as there was no more doubt of Miss Ellinmore's identity than there was of Dr. Bolter's ardent admiration for that young lady, he smothered his feelings and felt but a moderate glow of satisfaction when Mrs. Ellinmore, mother to the angel, exclaimed:

"Well, Grace, if you will insist on getting the tickets yourself, you can't blame the rest of us when you don't get what you want."

"I think it's a trifle cooler," ventured Dr. Bolter, in an heroic effort to console. "We are getting into a higher altitude."

"It's the shade. Thank heaven for trees!" said Miss Ellinmore, with a propitiatory smile, as reparation for her implications of ill-temper. "Why, what are we stopping for?" she added as the stage suddenly came to a halt.

Dr. Bolter put his head out of the window, but he very promptly drew it back again.

"It's a hold-up!" he gasped.

And his diagnosis of the situation was immediately confirmed by the appearance of a man who had covered his face with a mask of black cloth and carried a double-barreled shotgun in his hands as an instrument of persuasion.

"Sorry to disturb you, ladies and gentlemen," said the man with the shotgun, "but I'll have to trouble you to get out and line up along the road here. Step lively, please. I've got an engagement at three o'clock sharp with a very particular gent, and he doesn't like to be kept waiting.

"Hurry up, you fellows on top there, and don't make a sudden move, any of you, for this is a bronco shotgun and likely to go off of itself if it gets scared. Just to set your minds at ease, I'll say that my partner's in the brush there, right behind you. Don't shoot 'em, Bill. They're quiet, peaceable folks, and are living up to the best of their lights. Whoa, there; don't start them hosses. This is my busy day, and I can't spare time to notify the coroner if anything should happen."

Dr. Bolter helped the ladies out of the stage to the accompaniment of the highwayman's persuasive words, and they took their places in the line with the outside passengers at the side of the road.

Beside them, with a large gold watch-fob hanging from his vest pocket, was a stout man whose fiery red complexion had turned to a mottled yellow; a tall, thin man, who trembled so violently that he had some difficulty in keeping his hat in place; two over-dressed women, and a drummer who wished to appear jauntily unconcerned, and was making hard work of it.

"Keep your hands up, gentlemen—

and ladies also," said the man with the shotgun. "Bill is mighty particular about poses. He's been spoiled by a course of living pictures at the variety shows, and you'd better humor him just to save unpleasantness."

"I always did enjoy amateur theatricals," remarked the drummer, with an attempt at facetiousness that ended in dismal failure.

"Well, I'm stage director here," said the man behind the gun. "Now, driver, throw out the Wells Fargo box, and be quick about it, too."

And he pointed his shotgun at the master of the reins.

The driver shifted the lines into one hand, seized the box, and tumbled it over the brake on to the ground. The highwayman stooped over it, and his mask dropped forward till Dr. Bolter caught a glimpse of his face.

It was the face of a young man with a straw-colored mustache, a determined chin, and a kindly mouth.

At this discovery Dr. Bolter involuntarily lowered his hands. In an instant he was looking down the double barrels of the shotgun, and he calculated hastily that the weapon must be twice as large as the 16-inch rifle he had lately inspected at the Presidio.

At the sight his hands went up again with a convulsive suddenness that wrenched his shoulder muscles.

"Don't do that again, sonny," expostulated the highwayman. "This yere shotgun came pretty near getting out of my control that time. Give it another scare like that, an' it 'll go off an' take a piece of you along with it. Here, you fat gent on the end there, raise your hands a little higher. First you know, you'll hear Bill bark. He's got a bead on you now."

The fat man shook with a chill, while the sweat poured from his face as a muscular effort brought his hands above his head.

"I can't raise 'em any further," he gasped as they settled back to the level of his shoulders. "They're too heavy to hold up."

"You don't say!" exclaimed the highwayman cheerfully. "Why, I've held up a whole stage, and I ain't a bit tired. You don't know what you can do till you try. You'll find it easier to carry your arms up that way than to pack around a load of buckshot."

The fat man turned paler than ever, and made a desperate effort to clasp his hands over his head.

"There, Bill, don't shoot him," cried the highwayman; "he's doing his best."

Then he turned the express box over with his foot.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, ladies and gents," he continued, "but this box is powerful light, and I've got some notes falling due to-morrow. I'm not so cussed impolite as to suppose that you haven't brought any money along with you. I can tell by the looks of you that you're not the sort to start for the Yosemite with a scheme to beat the hotel-keepers.

"Now, I'm going to call on you for contributions for a poor orphan with only one father and mother. Come down handsome now when I pass the hat. Everything comes handy. Coin preferred, bank notes received thankfully, watches and rings taken at pawnbroker's valuation."

The highwayman passed down the line and relieved the men of their valuables.

"Only one gold watch among all you gents?" he said scornfully. "I'm sure you wouldn't like to have that get into the papers. Now, ladies, it's your turn. I see some of you don't carry your purses in your hands.

"I'll have to trouble you to search yourselves for the missing property, unless you'd rather have me take the contract. I'm a little short yet on the money I've got to have to raise that mortgage."

The women angrily brought out their hoards and passed them over. The highwayman paused before Miss Ellinmore as he finished his collecting tour.

"That's a handsome watch, miss," he observed. "I'm glad you brought it." And he lifted it off the hook by which it swung.

"Now I'll trouble you for that ring. Rubies are going up, and I can credit you with something handsome for it. Don't cry, miss. Ladies' tears hurt my

feelings awful. You can put it in the paper as worth five hundred dollars and I'll never say it ain't."

Miss Ellinmore, with tears of anger and mortification, drew off the ring and flung it on the ground.

"I wish you were dead," she sobbed. "You would have been killed before this if there had been any men here."

She shot a wrathful glance at the trousers-clad members of the party. Dr. Bolter winced at the words and look.

Then she turned to the highwayman again and added: "You are a wicked, heartless creature."

"Sorry to have your bad opinion," he replied, "but I'll have to trouble you to pick up that ring for me. You might get your wish if I stooped that far."

"I won't," snapped Miss Ellinmore wrathfully. "You can kill me if you want to, but I won't be your servant, I can tell you."

The highwayman shrugged his shoulders and ordered the fat man to pick up the ring.

"I always try to humor the ladies," he said cheerfully, "especially when it don't cost anything. Now, hand me that express box, old fellow. That's right. Now, you good people, just take a rest here for ten minutes. Never hurry on a hot day like this. Then get into the stage and drive on. And don't look back—be sure you remember that." Then, raising his voice, he added: "Just watch 'em, Bill, till they git out of sight."

And with this parting injunction he plunged into the brush with his spoil.

II.

Miss Ellinmore looked doubtful. Then she gave a determined shake to her head.

"No, Dr. Bolter, I won't," she said.

"Is that your final answer, Grace?" asked the young man plaintively.

"Yes, it is," she answered stubbornly.

Dr. Bolter, much perturbed, rose from his chair and walked to the door.

Miss Ellinmore sent after him a look of startled regret, which turned once more to determination as he faced about and came back to her side.

"I don't see why you won't, Grace," he said in dogged appeal. "I used to think you—you cared—and if the dentist business had been looking as much like a good living as it does now I'd have spoken three months ago. I thought you'd—well, that you might say yes then.

"But since that confounded Yosemite trip I haven't known what to make of you. You have given me more styles in the glad hand and the marble heart and the glassy eye than I had any idea could be invented. You've kept me on the verge of nervous prostration for more than six weeks, and I made up my mind that I had just got to have it settled."

He turned gloomily toward the door, and then came back again.

"I guess I've got it settled," he said grimly, "but I don't seem to feel any better about it. Say, Grace — Miss Ellinmore, I mean—why do I get the cold throw-down?"

At this apostrophe Miss Ellinmore looked at him with softening eye and kept her reserve by an effort that would have been visible to any one less perturbed than her unhappy suitor.

"Well, Dr. Bolter," she replied, "since you ask me, I'll tell you what is the matter. It is what you call 'that confounded Yosemite trip.' I don't feel that I could marry a man who didn't show any more spirit in front of a robber than you did."

"Why, hang it, Grace—I mean, Miss Ellinmore—I behaved as well as the rest of 'em."

"Well, the rest of them didn't pretend to be in love with me. But you—you—well, you had given me to suppose—— And then to stand by and see that awful man take my watch and money and the very ring off my finger, and never raise a hand! What could you expect me to feel for you?"

"I had both of 'em raised," protested Dr. Bolter. "The trouble was I could not get them down without getting my head blown off, and you wouldn't have accepted me without a head, anyhow."

"Maybe not," said Miss Ellinmore,

"but you ought to have knocked him down when he took my watch."

"I don't think," said Dr. Bolter gloomily, "that the sort of man who would do a thing like that would make a very good family man. I didn't suppose you wanted a lunatic pugilist, Grace, or I shouldn't have hung around you for the last year."

Miss Ellinmore softened still more, and after a pause she said:

"Well, Hiram, if you'll bring me the watch and the ring, why, I'll—I'll——"

"You'll say yes," exclaimed Dr. Bolter hopefully.

"I may reconsider my answer," replied Miss Ellinmore primly.

As Dr. Bolter turned his steps homeward he was compelled to confess that he had received but doubtful encouragement. The pawnshops had been vigilantly watched ever since the robbery had been reported, and not a trace of the missing jewelry had been found.

Furthermore, a highwayman had been caught in the act of stopping a stage near the scene of the memorable hold-up, and had been sent to prison with exemplary celerity, whereupon the thief-takers announced with pride that they had caught the man who had been committing all the robberies and that nothing more could be expected of them.

As for the plunder, they were sure that the robber had buried it somewhere and that nothing would be seen of it till he had served his term in prison. As his sentence was for twenty years, Dr. Bolter was compelled to admit that Miss Ellinmore's last answer bore a very close resemblance to her first.

But fate did for Dr. Bolter what the combined wits of Sherlock Holmes and Monsieur Lecoq could scarce have accomplished.

When he reached his office the next morning a young man with a swollen face was waiting outside his door, scanning his sign with foot on a valise and the air of a traveler in distress.

"Are you the dentist?" asked the young man.

Dr. Bolter confessed his identity.

"Well, I've brought you a present," said the young man, with a dismal smile. "I've got a tooth I'd like to give you. All you have to do is to reach in and take it."

"Take the chair," said Dr. Bolter with professional gravity, after leading the way to the operating-room.

"Thanks," said the young man, with an effort to be cheerful. "It's a little large to pack away, but I don't mind setting down in it for a minute." And he lay back in the modern seat of torture.

Dr. Bolter looked at the face of the young man in some perplexity.

"Where have I seen this fellow before?" he asked of his memory. But his only spoken words were "Open wide."

Memory at first refused to answer.

Then she gave the clue.

"By Jove, it's the robber!" was his inward exclamation, and he dropped one of his instruments and stooped to pick it up as a cover for his confusion.

"That's a bad tooth. I'm afraid I'll have to extract two of them," he said at last. "It's going to be a hard job to dig one of those fellows out."

"Ugh!" groaned the young man. "Will it hurt?"

"You bet it will hurt," said Dr. Bolter enthusiastically.

The young man groaned again.

"You've got a sign out there in the hall, 'Teeth Extracted Without Pain,'" he protested. "That's why I came in."

"That refers to me," said the dentist cheerfully. "I've pulled thousands and never suffered a pang yet."

"Oh," the young man said sadly, "I thought there was some way to fix it up so it won't hurt."

"There is," said Dr. Bolter. "You can take gas."

"H'm!" said the young man suspiciously. "That puts you to sleep, doesn't it?"

"Not a bit of it," replied Dr. Bolter. "I never feel wider awake."

"You're a case," said the young man. "I mean it puts me to sleep."

"Of course," returned the dentist. "That's the beauty of it. You go to sleep, and pretty soon you wake up and say, 'When are you going to pull that tooth? I'm about tired waiting for it.' And then I show it to you in a neat

little box, ready for you to take home to your admiring family. Fact, I assure you. My very first patient put his foot through the window and never felt the pane."

"Say, doc," protested the young man with a chuckle, "that's worse than the toothache. You ought to give gas before you hit a man with a thing like that."

"There's another one coming," said the dentist, "but I'll fix you up so you won't hear it."

The young man shook his head suspiciously.

"No, I'll take it straight," he said. "Go ahead with your assassination."

Dr. Bolter concealed his disappointment, and took up one of his instruments.

"I'll have to lance that gum first," he said; and suited action to word.

"Wow!" cried the young man, pushing the dentist aside. "I didn't suppose it was in your heart to hurt a fellow like that. Gimme the gas. I'll risk it."

"That's right," said the dentist, taking down his cone. "I'll have you fixed in a jiffy."

"No monkey business now, doc," begged the young man with the air of one regretting his decision.

"This isn't a monkery, though you might say it's something in the way of an aviary," said the dentist. "It's a place that has made many a brave man quail."

"Why didn't you wait till I was asleep before you gave me that?" protested the young man.

"Breathe deep now," said the dentist, turning on the flow.

"Nasty smelling stuff, ain't it?" gasped the young man.

"You'll like it when you get used to it," said the dentist soothingly. "The children cry for it. Take it easy now—that's a good fellow."

And with a few ineffectual struggles the young man was fast asleep.

Dr. Bolter's first act was to remove from his patient's pockets a brace of revolvers and a bowie knife. Then he brought out a length of trunk rope from a closet and swiftly bound the young man to the chair.

This done, he extracted the teeth and stood back to await his victim's return to consciousness.

As he looked upon the trussed and unconscious form an idea suddenly occurred to him—an idea so exquisitely humorous that he was shaken as with sobs as he proceeded to carry it out. To the accompaniment of a chorus of chuckles, he mixed a dish of plaster of Paris, and with a deft hand he filled the young man's mouth with the fast-hardening combination.

"I may need an impression of his jaw," muttered the dentist as he contemplated the effect of his handiwork.

Who shall describe the emotions of the subject of these extra-professional attentions when he returned from the mystic land of anesthesia?

Whatever his thoughts, they were beyond his power to utter. The plaster gag reduced his expressions of alarm or indignation to a confusion of gurgles and hisses.

"I dare say you are surprised," said Dr. Bolter, "but you aren't a whit more surprised than I was when you stood me up in that row on the Yosemite road, and took away my vacation money. Yes, I was one of that crowd you robbed six weeks ago last Friday. I have a better eye for faces than you have, but that isn't your fault.

"Yes. I know you're hot about it. So was I. I'm hotter about it now than I was then, too. Why? Well, I don't mind telling you.

"It's because you made a monkey of me before my best girl by stealing her watch and ring when I had my hands so far above my head that I couldn't make a fight for them.

"She told me last night that she did not like my style of handling robbers, and she won't marry me till I get back the ring and the watch.

"Maybe she'd think better of my style if she'd see you now. But you'll admit that it looked pretty blue for my matrimonial chances till you showed up this morning."

Dr. Bolter paused and shook his finger in the face of his irate and squirming patient.

"Now, put it to yourself, and think what I felt. You're a pretty fair-

looking young fellow, except for that plaster in your mouth, and I dare say you're a little sweet on a girl yourself. Think how you'd feel to have a total stranger stand you up on the roadside and wreck your hopes.

"What am I going to do about it? Why, I'm going to ask your gentlemanly assistance in getting back that watch and ring. And if you don't give it, I'll do my duty as a good citizen by turning you over to the police and claiming the reward."

The trussed highwayman made ineffectual efforts to speak. Dr. Bolter interpreted his gurgles as indicating a desire for communication, and brought pencil and paper.

Then he carefully loosed the young man's right hand, and, holding a revolver in significant position, awaited results.

The highwayman scribbled a note.

The dentist seized it and with difficulty deciphered these words:

It's in my valise. So is the rest of the plunder. Take it for your trouble. Let me off this time and I'll shake the road for good.

Dr. Bolter opened the valise. Among the varied assortment of clothing it contained he found a miscellaneous collection of jewelry, from which he selected Miss Ellinmore's watch and ring. Then he closed the valise.

"I don't want the rest of the stuff," he said.

The young man wrote another line:

Send it to owners. Find list in valise. And take this plug out of my mouth.

Dr. Bolter considered the matter.

"I suppose," he said, "that it isn't doing my duty as a good citizen if I let you go, but I rather like your looks, so maybe I'll do it. But there's one little point I'd like to discuss with you first. I'm out sixty-five dollars on my vacation money. If you'll turn that in on account, why, I won't charge you a cent for my professional services."

The young man, with some difficulty, put his hand into his pocket and pulled out his money. Dr. Bolter gravely counted out sixty-five dollars and put it in his purse.

"Keep the rest for your honesty," he said. "Anyhow, it isn't mine."

And he turned to the professional duty of clearing the highwayman's mouth of the plaster of Paris gag.

When the operation had restored him to possession of his tongue, and his limbs had been freed from the encompassing rope, the young man gave himself a shake and looked at Dr. Bolter with visible admiration.

"You're a good one," he said. "Whenever I feel like talking too much, I'll come to you to get cured."

"It has been a very enjoyable morning," said Dr. Bolter. "Must you be going? I'm so glad you came."

"If you'll give me my guns, I guess I'll catch the next train," said the young man.

"I couldn't bear to part with them," said the dentist regretfully.

The young man looked a little crestfallen.

"You're a pretty fly doc," he remarked. "Never mind. I've reformed, and sha'n't need 'em any more. Well, good-by."

Dr. Bolter closed his office and hastened to Miss Ellinmore's house.

"I've got them! I've got them!" he shouted, displaying the watch and ring before the young lady's eyes.

Then with hasty words he told of his morning's adventure.

"Hiram," whispered Miss Ellinmore as he clasped her in his arms, "it was so brave of you to face him in that way; and it was just noble of you to let him go when he was at your mercy!"

DOUBT.

LOVE hath wings and flies from far,
Nor bolts nor prisons may it bar,
One door, one only, shuts it out,
The dark and shadowed one of doubt. *Lisa A. Fletcher.*

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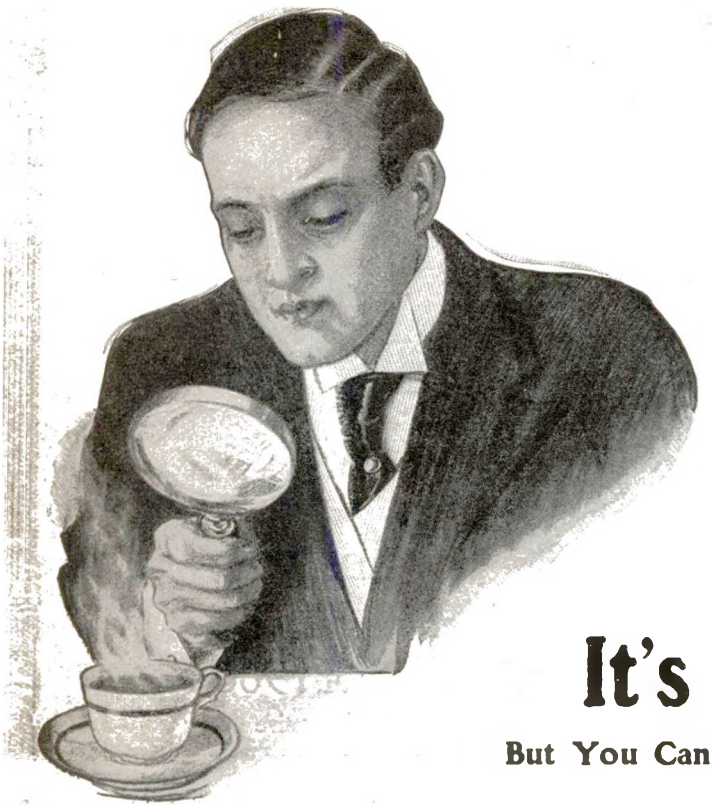

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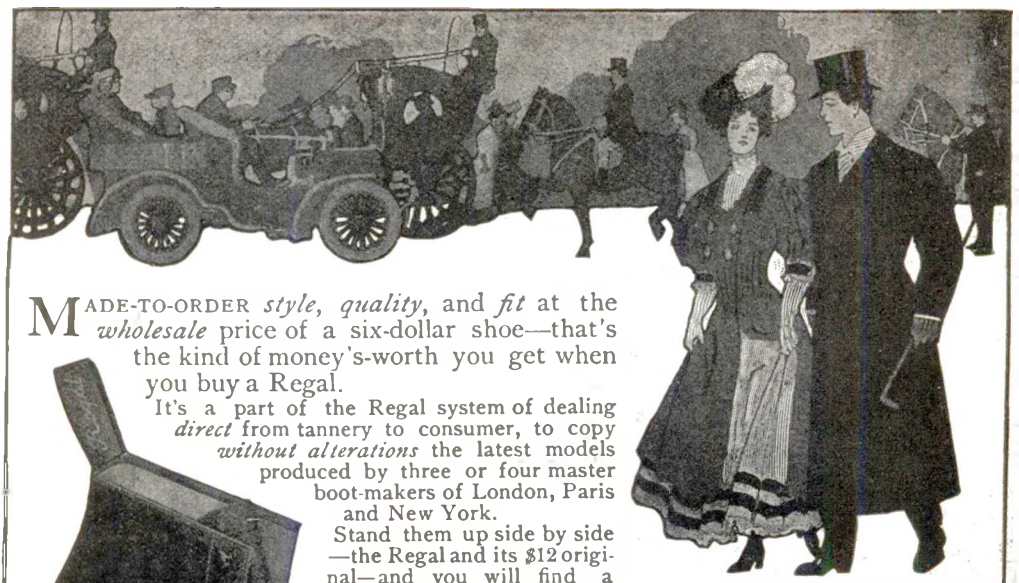

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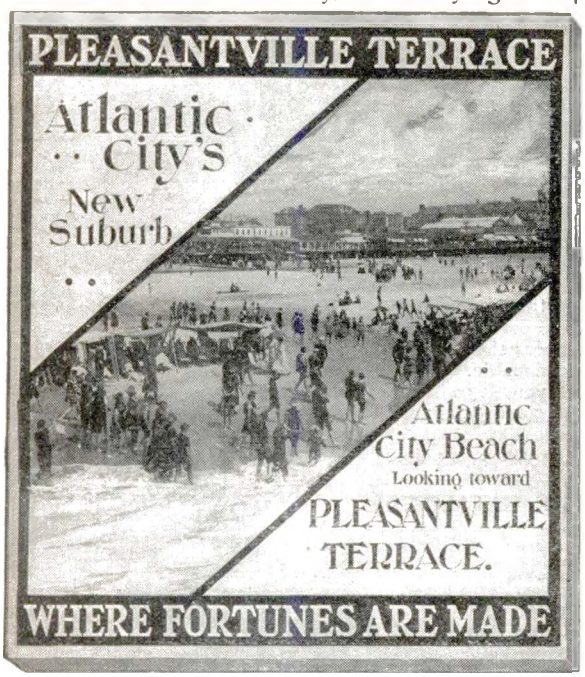

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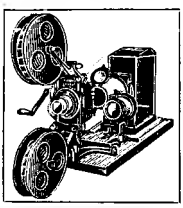

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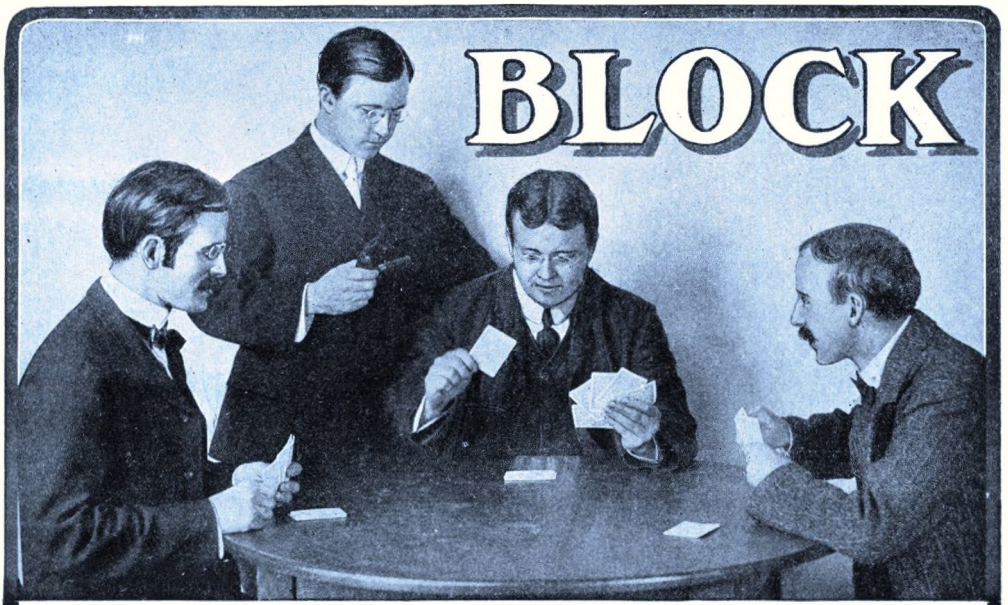

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