ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

The Big Gun

by Richard Barry

A High-Power Story of the U. S. N.

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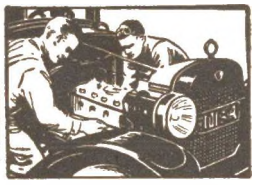

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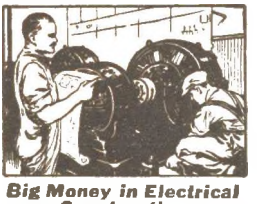

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CLXX | CONTENTS FOR JULY 11, 1925 | NUMBER 2

THREE CONTINUED STORIES

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POETRY

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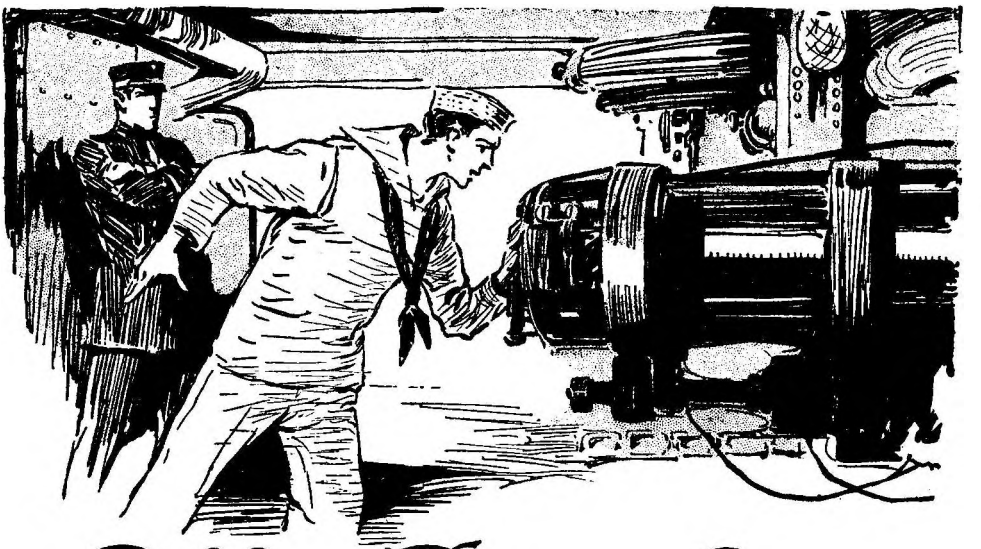

The Big Gun

By RICHARD BARRY

Author of "Jes' Sal," etc.

CHAPTER I.

LINKERSPORT.

LINKERSPORT is a few miles up a small river that empties into the Atlantic Ocean, and the water is salt, except during low tide in a spring freshet, but that is not the reason Cyrus Bullitt, who was born there, and who grew up there, right in Linkersport, went to sea, and made his career on the big ships.

During all his early life and up to his nineteenth year the sea had for Cyrus no particular attraction. It was good for summer bathing on the sandy beach beyond Jagged Point, and for mackerel or flounder if you could borrow a dory. Besides, it softened the severity of both winter and summer at Linkersport, where there were no extremes and where nothing much ever happened.

As for the mystery of the sea, the lure of it, its hinted romance, its beckoning fingers to lands far away, and to people strange and new, it meant nothing like that in Cyrus's young life. He was not that sort of a boy.

Now if the sea had been equipped with a set of mechanical lathes, and a good laboratory with a porcelain kiln, and chem-

ical retorts, and calipers measuring to the thousandth of a millimeter, and an up-to-date library on radio reactions—ah, that would have been a very different matter, indeed! Then Cyrus would have been dreaming by night and planning by day how he could run away and go to sea.

But he would not have run away—not actually. That would have meant deserting his father. He would not have done that. He would have done nothing to hurt his father, who never had spoken a cross word to him, and who had denied him nothing—except the things he could not afford.

Which meant that Cyrus had all that most of the boys in Linkersport had, including a pair of shoes in the winter time. In fact, he had more than most of them because he could make things himself. He made himself a pair of skates from the runners of Banker Harper's sleigh, which was never used after Mr. Harper got a limousine.

One summer there was a bad smash-up on the State turnpike eight miles away. A motor cycle ran through a flivver and was so badly smashed that the owner, an electric lineman out on holiday, said from the hospital he never again wanted to see the "blasted junk." Cyrus salvaged it and made it into a good running machine he used for years.

When the radio came along Cyrus had the first one in Linkersport. Made it himself at a cost of sixty-three cents. That was when they thought they had to have silk-bound copper wires, which was the only material Cyrus could not improvise. He was stumped for a battery for a time, but finally recharged one out of an abandoned flash light.

Some persons would have said Cyrus was poor—seeing his bare feet, his usually ragged clothes, his lack of evident resources, the fact that his mother had died when he was a baby and that he lived with his father in the rooms over the shooting gallery where the two of them did the cooking, such as it was.

But "poverty" was a word Cyrus did not understand during his boyhood. It never struck him that he was poor—not when the world was filled with a multiplicity of persons discarding valuable things like sleighs with runners of the finest wrought steel, motor cycles whose only trouble was that the carburetor was caved in and the wheels smashed and the gear shaft broken, and batteries with nothing wrong except the need of a little new chemical content and some patience, which Cyrus had aplenty.

Enough material is discarded or thrown away in America to make many another nation rich. Ask any junk man. Cyrus Bullitt knew it, too.

But his father died. Then he did realize that he was poor, poor indeed; not in material resource, though that was lacking also, but bereft of the one friend who was always there with a little smile of sympathy in his difficulties and a fine breath of delight in his conquests over disarray.

His father's death made a man of him, if manhood is that estate in which one sees things as they are, and not as they might have been or ought to be. It was time enough, anyway. Cyrus was going on nineteen.

When he came back from the funeral and unlocked the outer door of the shooting gallery he noticed that some one had tacked a piece of white paper on its upper panel. "Notice: Sheriff's Sale," it read, followed by a lot of fine printing.

Cyrus thought some one was utilizing the gallery door for a bulletin board. It was right across from the post office, where usually these public notices were posted. Ordinarily he would have torn the thing down, but his mood was not aggressive, and he let it stay. In fact, he even forgot to lock the outer door, forgot to light up when dark came, forgot to get his supper.

He subsided in the marker's chair, back by the targets, plunged in a mood rather solemn. He was done with crying. That had been finished the day before. Now he was thinking of what he should do, trying to wonder what his father would say if he were there.

The elder Bullitt had expired of a heart attack at night, in his bed, suddenly, a merciful ending, but one which did not

permit the imparting of any dying advice to his only son and sole heir.

Cyrus, however, felt little doubt of what his course should be. Chiefly, it must be one that would force Linkersport to a full realization of the unexampled virtues of the late Mr. Bullitt. Cyrus was far from satisfied with the esteem in which his paternal parent had been held by his fellow townspeople.

He recalled the record of twenty years, as he knew it: the arrival of Andrew Bullitt from the West, where he had been a cowboy or a gold miner, or something; his marriage, in his forties, with Melinda Narwearing, the governess in the home of Mr. Harper; their rather flamboyant start in leasing the American House, where the elder Bullitt continued for some years, where Cyrus was born, where his mother died; the leasing of the Grand Opera House, with Bullitt as manager; then the shift of fortune; leaving the American House; leaving the Opera House; operating a livery stable until the automobile rendered livery stables obsolete; the taking over, only five years before, of the shooting gallery; their life in the rooms above—an idyllic life in its way—and the puttery ways of the gallery, tending the targets, oiling the guns, keeping the markers clean.

Linkersport did not appreciate a shooting gallery, his father had often said. They ought to move to a bigger city, where some of the old American spirit was alive and people knew they ought to keep their hands in by handling a trigger regularly. But enough money came in to pay for the canned goods and the occasional meat they ate. Cyrus never participated in those monthly sessions his father had with the teller in Mr. Harper's bank, but he felt a vague resentment against Mr. Harper, and other prominent citizens, also.

Once these prominent citizens had honored his father; he had been one of them; but not of late. He avoided them; they did not come to see him.

This had been all wrong. Cyrus felt it more keenly than anything else. How could he reverse this condition? How could he make them see what he had seen in that departed spirit, a gentleman of the finest sense of honor, an affection of the tenderest memory, a quality of mind set clearly on a rock above the mutations of life?

CHAPTER II.

OVER THE RADIO.

THESE reflections were rudely startled by the entrance into the darkened room of two fellows. One rudely shouted, "Hello, Cy! How about a string of twenty-twos? Mart says I can't spot him, but I'll show him!"

Cyrus lit the kerosene lamp above the targets and faced Mart Kennedy, the express clerk, and Jim Baggerly, from the drug store. He was about to pass over to them the .22 rifles when a sense of their disrespect smote him.

He stiffened, to them unaccountably, and said curtly, "Sorry, boys, but the gallery's closed to-night. Come around to-morrow."

To their half-ashamed apologies, muttered indistinctly, he bade them good night, followed them to the door and locked up. Then he climbed the stairs to his bedroom with a heavy heart. It seemed to him that somehow Mart and Jim had added another, an unnamable insult to the memory of his father—lacking the decency to wait until at least a day after his funeral before picking up his worn target rifles in play practice.

As he was lighting his lamp, however, a loud and persistent knocking came from the street door. At first he paid no attention, but it was repeated. He descended and opened.

It was Judge Villas, his father's friend. "Evenin', Cyrus," said the judge. "If ye ain't gone to bed thought I'd come in a spell."

"Of course, judge. Glad to see you, sir."

Cyrus led the way to the sitting-room over the gallery. The judge sat down and lit a stogie. "Radio workin'?" he asked, looking toward the corner where the one tube emplaced in an old cedar chest was wired up through the window into a neighboring tree.

"Ought to be," Cyrus answered, moving toward his contraption. "I'll tune in, if you like."

The judge waved a hand deprecatingly. "No." He was evidently distraught and had mentioned the radio only as a means of opening an unpleasant conversation. Finally, with an effort, he revealed the subject which evidently had brought him in.

"I didn't want Clem Newt t' nail up that notice, Cyrus," he half apologized. "Fact is, I held him off a day, until—well, I just wouldn't let him do it yestiddy, but to-day he—ye see, I hain't no choice in these doings. As the duly sworn and certified Justice of the Peace of the Township o' Linkersport I plumb got tew issue a sheriff's notice when it's applied fer, regular, follow-in' the record of judgment and th' due lapse of time. Do you follow me, my boy? Do you understand what I am saying?"

Cyrus began to understand. "Oh, that notice on the door?" he ejaculated. "I didn't read it."

"Hum!" The judge twiddled his thumbs. It would be even harder than he anticipated. After a moment of silence he plunged on, but with an effort.

"It means, Cyrus," he said, "that Mr. Harper has judgment ag'in' yer father's estate an' has levied a sheriff's execution to collect."

"What!" Cyrus exclaimed, as the situation dawned on him. "You don't mean he'll take the gallery from me?"

"That's it, my boy! I'm afraid that's it." The judge wiped his brow. It *had* been hard, but the quick intelligence of his friend's son had spared him too much explanation.

Cyrus clenched his hands, shut his mouth tight, stared straight ahead and said nothing.

"It's a danged shame, Cyrus," the judge went on. "I'm speakin' to ye, now, in my private and particular capacity of friend to Andrew Bullitt, who is gone and can no longer defend himself, an' I'm out of chambers an' without judicial co'nizance, an' I'm here to say that Mr. Harper is a hard man. Very hard. But he said it was his right. There might be other judgments and he could not wait."

"You mean the—the gallery isn't mine? They'll take it?"

The judge nodded his head slowly.

"But my hand-rest for target pistols with the automatic sight—can they take that, too?" Cyrus suddenly trembled with apprehension.

The judge reassured him, explaining that was his personal property and could not be touched for debts owing by the deceased.

"And my motor cycle?"

"No, my boy. That is safe."

"And my radio?"

"No. They can't touch that, nor your clothes, nor any of your personal effects."

Cyrus smiled, for the first time in five days. Indeed, he was pervaded by a subtle satisfaction of which he was unconscious. A major problem, a very weighty one, and one which he had not dared face squarely, was being solved for him.

The judge, enjoying his stogie now, continued, in more amiable mood. "Perhaps I ought to tell you, my boy, I wouldn't trade my memory o' Andrew Bullitt's friendship fer all Mr. Harper's money, an' th' stock o' th' bank thrown in. No siree! I'll tell ye somethin' else. His name ain't Harper, either. His father's name was Hertsky. He's only second generation stuff, new-rich scum. But take Andrew Bullitt. Now there was a man as came down from th' real old days. I suppose you realize as how his great-great-grandfather signed the Declaration of Independence?"

"Father said so once," Cyrus admitted. It meant little to him, but he wanted to please the judge.

"Well, I'll tell ye somethin' mebbe ye don't know," the fount of judicial wisdom continued. "Yer father by rights ought t' had a hundred millions of dollars, mebby more."

Cyrus gasped: "What?"

The judge chewed his stogie a bit to give full dramatic pause to his statement and then calmly resumed. "He never told ye, I'll bet." Cyrus negatived with his head. "No. Th' blow was too deep. He never told anybody, but I knew—in a curious way. I was readin' law in Owsley's office in them days, nigh thutty years ago, when yer father come to Linkersport first. He'd been out West with a Grand Duke of Russia and then he'd bin a partner o' one o' th' Vanderbilts who died 'thout makin' no

mention of it in writin'. That was Andrew Bullitt—th' ekal o' dukes an' N'Yawk financiers, an' his word's good as theirs, an' better.

"But when this here Vanderbilt died 'thout recordin' Andrew's partnership in a property they had together out West wuth 'bout two hundred millions, more or less, his estate dragged Andrew on here into N' Jersey t' th' Federal c'ot, an' they got their agent, Hertsky, father o' th' Mr. Harper we know, t' clap a summons ontew him, an' then take a snap judgment ag'in' him as bein' non-existent. I was in c'ot with Mr. Owsley, holdin' his papers in 'nother case the day they done it.

"'Twas Mr. Owsley explained to Andrew what they done to him. They spent 'bout a year together tryin' tew undo it, but 'twarn't no use. An' Andrew made no holler. He'd had a hundred millions an' he'd lost it. He'd been friend an' partner to a duke an' a Vanderbilt, an' he settled down here an' married yer ma jest th' same an' never mentioned it. He was thet kind of a man—th' salt o' th' earth."

Cyrus wiped a tear from his eye.

The judge coughed and rose ponderously, saying it was time to go. Then he added, as if it were an afterthought, a second purpose in his visit:

"Swartz and Moheim, the butchers down tew th' corner," he offered, "need some one t' drive their cart, an' I though mebby—"

Cyrus looked up quickly, his eyes moist. "Why, judge, I couldn't make enough driving a butcher's cart to pay all I owe."

"You don't owe nothin'—do you?"

"I owe all that father owed.

"Not on yer tintype. Mr. Harper's judgment wiped out all he owed at the bank, an' there hain't more'n a hundred dollars besides."

"But the gallery won't cover the judgment."

"'Tain't yer lookout."

Cyrus shook his head gravely and then said, with slow effort, "I'll pay every cent. Father had bad luck. That was all. I've a long life ahead. I'll turn the scales."

"But," the judge protested, "nobody's lookin' tew you. This ain't China. You jest look out fer yerself. An' think it over. Mebby in th' mornin' ye'll want tew go see Swartz and Moheim. If anybody bothers ye, legal, come tew me. 'Twon't cost ye a cent."

He stamped down the stairs and soon the outer door of the gallery closed with a bang. Cyrus went down and locked it, and then returned and sat under the lamp. The silence and the loneliness became unbearable. He turned on the radio.

He tuned into the middle of a sentence. "—inventive youth of America," clearly came the voice as if speaking to him alone, "should be given every opportunity to develop its ideas. I believe that out of untrained youth will come many of the great developments of the immediate future. Believing this, I intend to offer every possible facility to every young inventor who lacks the tools and appliances to develop his plans. Hereafter, every morning at nine o'clock, in my office in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, I will receive any young man who has a new mechanical idea he wants to see perfected."

Cyrus turned out and sat for a long time thinking. He was no longer either destitute or lonely. He was very much alive with new hope.

Before he went to bed he set his alarm clock for 3.15, after studying a road map of New Jersey. By the new cement highway, only eight miles off, Brooklyn was not quite a hundred and fifty miles from Linkersport.

CHAPTER III.

YOUTHFUL INVENTORS.

CYRUS was dressed the next morning before the first faint stirrings of the earliest dawn. There was no really good reason why he should not have lit the kerosene lamp, but he felt he wanted to do all he had to do and be off before any one in Linkersport was up. He would "run away and put something over on them." Besides, he had to be in Brooklyn well before nine o'clock.

All his spare clothes he made into a bundle. There were some unders, a flannel shirt almost new, his Sunday tie, and his

shoes. The shoes were all done up with the rest before he thought—why not wear them? It was summer and there was no real need for shoes, and his stockings were torn and not fit to take, but it would be easier to carry his shoes on his feet. So he did.

He ate the last of the oatmeal and put all the coffee in the pot, which made it very strong. He drank it all—three cups—and began humming to himself: was it Ulysses who started on his ten year adventuring in the great places of the world, sure and happy because he knew how to see into the core of things as they are?

Fortunately he had cleaned the motor cycle the day before, because he thought he would go to the cemetery in it, not realizing the judge would take him in his flivver. But it had less than a gallon of fuel. He remembered the gasoline under the counter in the gallery used for cleaning the rifles, and poured that in the tank, which made it half full. Probably that would be enough to get him there.

Then, when all was ready, and the first rosy finger of dawn was stirring along the horizon, and the hens next door were beginning to mutter, he went to the work bench behind the targets in his own little cubby-hole and wrapped in a piece of newspaper the automatic sighting device with its hand-rest.

He tied the two bundles, one containing the clothes, the other the device, securely under the saddle, and then, in the dark, went all about the gallery and once, for the last time, through the upstairs rooms, patting each object affectionately. His hand rested an extra moment over the armchair which had been his father's. Then a lump came into his throat and he ran down to the cycle. This was his farewell.

A moment later the *pup-put-put* of the machine rang like a rifle volley along River Street. "Cy's squirt devil," the judge called it. As he passed the Town Hall he could barely distinguish the clock in the tower. It showed eight minutes to four.

He was on the cement road within a quarter of an hour. He passed through Barnegat like an artillery charge before the sun was up. At Forked River the constable sleeping above the fire house heard his exhaust way down the road, looked out, saw him coming, and remarked to himself, "One a them eighty mile cops f'm 'Lantic City lammin' a joy rider; I'll lay odds on him," turned over and went to sleep.

He saw the rim of the sun come out of the harbor at Toms River as he crossed the old bridge, where he saw the first sign of life and had to slow down to twenty miles. He had been making forty-five to sixty. The next he knew the six o'clock whistle was blowing in the medicinal factory in New Brunswick and he was on the edge of the town. Oh, he would make it surely now!

He cut down to forty miles. No use of being overhauled for speeding—not now. He began to think: Would Mart and Jim show up for their string of BB's and be the first to discover his absence? Who would tell the judge? He had left no word, nothing written. It wasn't necessary. He could send a postal to the judge. That would be enough. That, and the message he would have for Mr. Harper—some day.

As he got to Newark and had to slow up through the bad lands beyond, for the early trucks were already thronging the bumpy Belgian blocks, he wondered how Linda Catherwood would take his leaving. Would she miss him at all? Perhaps he ought to send her a postal, too. Maybe not, though. He ought to be back before Christmas, and then it would be nice to have her ask him why he didn't write and to be able to say he didn't know she wanted him to write. That was better, for she *had* been preferring Jim Baggerly.

Christmas was a terrific ways off—fully six months. By that time he would have his patent and the money would be coming in fast. Oh, he ought to get back to Linkersport by Thanksgiving.

There he was at Jersey City in time for the first ferry at seven o'clock. He took the Desbrosses Street boat, by mistake, but despite that he was on Brooklyn Bridge by seven thirty. He barely looked down at the vast river, barely noticed the hurrying throng, of which he seemed a component part. Now, with the end of his journey almost in sight, he became fearful that too

many others would be ahead of him. Why had he slept all night? That was too stupid. There had been a late moon, too, excellent for night traveling.

He entered the Navy Yard a few minutes before eight with a throng of workmen bearing dinner pails. As he was about to pass under the wooden arch a marine sentry stepped from a little house at one side and intercepted him. The marine was in summer uniform of tan linen with a white belt and white shoes. To Cyrus he seemed the incarnation of deft and efficient authority.

" Hold on, boy," the marine sharply commanded. " Where you going?"

The " boy " seemed unnecessary. It rankled. However, Cyrus responded briskly, still under the impulse that he might be late, " I am looking for the office of the commandant of the Navy Yard."

" Official business?"

This was a facer, but Cyrus hesitated the merest fraction of a minute before replying. " Ye-es, I am calling on him—at his invitation."

The marine repressed a smile as he surveyed the bare legs ending in grimy shoes, the boy covered with dust, the battered motor cycle. " Then where's your socks?" he asked.

Cyrus felt the blood suffusing his whole body suddenly and receding, leaving him cold. He was mortified and furious, and a little fearful that he might not get in at last after his long journey. He looked down, aimlessly and confused.

The marine relented. Perhaps something in the wistful intensity of the applicant before him assured him this was neither plotter, tramp nor idler. " All right," he said, pointing to the building just inside and across a spur track, " you'll find it over there."

Then Cyrus saw the lettered sign, " Commandant U. S. Navy Yard," and went forward. He parked his motor cycle by the side of the door. A man with a white skull cap, a blue blouse, tan trousers and tan puttees—a man little older than himself—answered his knock, and replied nonchalantly to his query, " First luff ain't due 'til two bells."

" Can I wait?" Cyrus asked. He knew enough, and just enough, nautical phraseology to know that " two bells " meant nine o'clock.

" Sure. Stick around." The amiable fellow proceeded to polish up the brass handle of the front door.

A refrain ran through Cyrus's head:

" When I was young and charming
I polished up the knocker of the big front door,
And I polished it up so carefully
That now I am ruler of the King's Navy."

He had learned that when he was one of the chorus at the Episcopal church in the production the fall before of " Pinafore." He parked his motor cycle by the side of the building and came back to watch the operation on the door. Finally he ventured to ask, " Are you a sailorman?"

The wielder of the brass polish grunted, " When I hain't been to sea? Naw. I'm a gob!"

Cyrus felt in this, as he had felt in the attitude of the marine, a derision, a subtle sense of superiority. It was as though these men had plainly said: " You are a landlubber and we belong to the navy; we are obliged to tolerate you and to admit that you may be an inferior species of human being, but you cannot possibly expect to come into more intimate contact with a profession raised infinitely above you and your kind."

His attention was distracted now by the arrival of another young man of about his own age, but dressed smartly in a white collar and well pressed clothes and bearing in his arms a large folder from which protruded numerous drawings.

Cyrus was the first, but there was the second "inventive youth of America." In ten minutes there were a dozen. By a quarter of nine the yard was filled with pushing, eager, suspicious, determined boys and young men—of all ages between fifteen and thirty.

When the commandant arrived, at three minutes to nine, he was unable to reach his office by the usual approach, across the spur. He was obliged to gain his desk, clandestinely, by a rear entrance.

At nine o'clock he looked out of his office window, aghast, at a clamorous sea of young inventors.

CHAPTER IV.

COMPETITION INCREASES.

LIEUTENANT-COMMANDER LAYTON, the commandant, said to Lieutenant Worcester, Superintendent of the Yard, who occupied the adjoining office, "Look at that mob! The radio is sure a sounding board of the nation. And quick action! Whew! I was let in for that talk only last night, and said 'any' morning. I didn't mean the 'next' morning. I thought I might get half a dozen boys in the course of a week, but look at 'em! There's five hundred. How'll I handle them? The admiral's coming at ten, and I won't be able to get away from him before twelve. I'd turn them all away and tell them to come back another day, but I haven't the heart."

The two stood at the office window looking out. Most of the crowd were poorly dressed, but a few were evidently spruced up for the occasion. About one in three bore something in his hands or arms.

"Looks as if they had their models with them," said Lieutenant Worcester. "I wonder if any of them has a sound idea."

"Perhaps not," replied the commandant, "but what difference does that make? It's the spirit, the ambition they display. It bucks me up, really, but it's embarrassing, this morning."

The lieutenant shrugged his shoulders. "I'm afraid you'll spend a lot of time fruitlessly," he ventured.

"No," the commandant returned, with conviction. "If out of that five hundred only one shows with an embryo, even if it takes ten years to develop it, the service will be well repaid for any time I give—only I haven't the time now."

"Why not turn them over to an ensign in the draughting room to winnow them out, and then you take the finals at noon?"

"Good idea. Thanks," said the commandant.

He went to the door, opened it and faced the steel filings which his magnetic voice had drawn from the limitless chaff out of the invisible ether. "Boys," said he, "I am delighted that you have responded to my invitation so promptly. If you will go around the building to your right, and enter the second door, Ensign Tenflair will receive you. Later I will have the opportunity myself of meeting you."

The sea became suddenly angry as if disturbed by a fierce seismic upheaval. Every boy wanted to be first, and each jammed his way toward the corner of the building.

The commandant raised his hand. "Take it easy!" he called. "No hurry. Every one will be received. You gain nothing by pushing. But be regular about it. Get in line. The first one here go to the head. After that fall behind, in turn. Now! Steady!"

He closed the door and went inside.

Cyrus had been directly at the door when it opened to let the officer address his audience in person. When the mob started to the side, however, he found himself partially shoved aside, though he did manage to be the second to reach the side door. Ahead of him was the young man in white collar and pressed clothes, with the huge folder of drawings.

"I was here first," said Cyrus, firmly, "and I should precede you."

The wearer of the white collar merely turned his back and the more persistently pressed close to the closed door.

Cyrus laid a hand on him, saying, "Step aside." In a newspaper parcel under his left arm was his device.

As the one in the white collar felt himself being forced away from the door, while behind them the crowd was mounting rapidly, he merely moved his knee up swiftly punching the parcel from under Cyrus's arm. It fell to the ground, the string broke, and there to the gaze of all lay revealed the nest of wheels and eccentrics.

Cyrus kneeled down, retied his parcel, calmly placed it by the wall, reached out and took the white-collared boy by the two arms and set him over several feet. He resisted and in doing so the folder of drawings broke and the sheets scattered.

At this moment the door opened and an officer with an ensign's bar on his sleeve appeared. "What is this?" he called. "No need of fighting over it. Come in—you!" He indicated the young man in the white collar, who had just retrieved his lost drawings.

Cyrus stepped forward. "I was first," he insisted.

The ensign looked over the two boys, and was evidently more impressed with the appearance of the well-clothed owner of the drawings, whom he was already assisting in. "There will be plenty of time," he replied.

"But the commandant said," Cyrus insisted, "that the first one here was to go to the head of the line. I was first."

The ensign looked at the bare legs and the newspaper bound parcel. Already the other had disappeared. "You are next," he decided, "step in here and wait."

In his anteroom separated from the ensign's office only by a partition going part way to the ceiling Cyrus could overhear the quizzing of the one who had managed to precede him, who began explaining his drawings. They attempted to present a scheme for laying out city streets on curves instead of on squares. In a few minutes the ensign had given him the address of an institute in the city to seek, and had passed him out.

Cyrus entered.

"Ah! The scrapper?" Ensign Tenflair greeted him.

"No, sir. I never fight—er, that is, seldom."

"But I saw you—"

"Only if my rights are invaded, sir."

Tenflair laughed. But now that he had a better chance to observe the applicant he became more attentive. He was not more than two or three years older than Cyrus, having just been graduated from the academy at Annapolis, and was serving his first shore duty in the ordnance draughting-room.

"That's fair enough," he lightly answered. "Let's see. What's your idea?"

Cyrus began unrolling his package. "A device to render possible automatic sighting on a moving target," he said.

"What!" exclaimed Tenflair, adding: "Don't show me. Keep it. Come and see the commandant at twelve. Out the rear door. Good day. Next."

In this manner the sheep were winnowed from the goats. By noon the five hundred had dwindled to less than thirty. When the commandant came in from the morning with the admiral in charge of operations he faced this selected list whom Tenflair had detained for him.

"Who's first?" he called.

"I am," said Cyrus promptly.

"Come in." He took the applicant's name, age and address. "Linkersport?" he asked. "Where's that?"

"Down the Jersey coast."

"How far?"

"My speedometer clocked it this morning at one hundred and forty eight and a half miles."

"Speedometer? You came by automobile?"

"No, sir. By motor cycle."

"And you heard me on the radio last night?"

"Yes, sir. One I made myself."

"Good. Then you have a mechanical bent. What time did you get here?"

"Eight o'clock, sir."

"What? You rode one hundred and forty eight and a half miles before eight o'clock?"

"Yes, sir. And I was here first, too. I was ahead of the boy the ensign let in first, only he was between me and the corner of the building when you told us to come around by the side."

Commander Layton smiled broadly. "Good; now tell me what you are most interested in—in the way of an invention."

Cyrus undid his package and spread it on the desk, and proceeded to explain its mechanism. "This will sight pistols," he said, quietly, "so that they will hit moving targets one hundred times out of one hundred—automatically. Only my eccentrics are made of wood—had to whittle 'em myself. If they are cast out of steel, and ground fine, they will work."

The quiet, calm, mature assurance of this boy impressed the officer. As Cyrus was

talking he was surveying the worn clothes, grimed and dusty with traveling; he noted the bare legs, the battered shoes, the lean fingers stained with the marks of tools and grease.

"How do you know they will work?" asked the commander.

For the first time Cyrus blushed, and hesitated. He was for a moment confused, but then said, "Theoretically. My model is not right metallurgically."

"Well—why did you try to invent a pistol sight?"

"Because I work in a shooting gallery, and see what bad shots most people are."

"I suppose you're a pretty good shot yourself?"

"No, sir."

"Well, just how good are you as a pistol shot?"

"I have never fired a gun in my life, sir."

The commander's jaw fell. This was unique. He concealed his great interest and persisted, saying, "Well, if you don't care enough about shooting even to have pulled a trigger though you work in a shooting gallery—how long, did you say?"

"Five years, sir."

"Five years with pistols and never fired one. Why, I thought every boy in America either had a gun or wanted one—"

"I was brought up with them, sir. My father was a crack shot, but he said my automatic sight would be the last kick to put firearms in the discard once it was perfected. He thought it would be a fine thing, too. My father understood the needs of the country, sir. He was a big man, a great man in his way, even if everybody didn't understand him."

"But this invention is yours, I understand."

"Yes, sir. My father is dead."

"Pardon me." Into the commandant's voice came a closer sympathy, and he became more indulgent. He felt he was dealing with a precocity he would not like to curb, however wild it might seem. "You say it would be a fine thing to discard firearms? Yet you claim to invent a device to render them more deadly. Aren't you a bit inconsistent?"

"No, sir. Most people don't know how to shoot any more, and few care to; only professional soldiers and amateur marksmen and bad men. The bulk of the people want their shooting done for them, and wouldn't they rather have it done by a machine that never makes a mistake than by men who are humanly fallible? When I patent my sight I'll offer it to the government, and when the government buys it then no other marksman will be in a position to compete."

The commandant rose and placed his hand on Cyrus's shoulder. "Bullitt, my boy, I must see more of you, but later. First, I must talk with the others and see what I can do for them. If you will go and return about four o'clock I will try then to suggest something that will help you."

"Thank you, sir."

Cyrus lifted his finger to his forelock. He wanted to salute as he had seen a sailor do while waiting during the forenoon, but he doubted if this would be considered proper in a civilian. He backed from the office to wait the appointed hour.

CHAPTER V.

A DECISION—AND AN ENEMY.

IN some tedious manner known best to himself the commandant deleted the thirty. At four o'clock, when Cyrus returned, there were only six others, who, like himself, had been asked to return. The commandant had them held in his outer office and appeared there before them collectively.

"Boys," he said—though Cyrus was the youngest, which made all practically of age —"I selected you from all who came to see me to-day as perhaps the most likely to possess inventive ideas of practical value.

"Your ideas, to be perfected, require tools, materials, and proper drawings," went on the commandant, "and I have kept those few of you who have ideas that could be perfected here in the Navy Yard, that I might speak to you confidentially and frankly. I am more than eager to see each and every one of you bring to fruition the best that is in you.

"Yet I am prevented from doing all I would like to do, beyond the giving of my advice, which I offer to you freely, by the regulations of the United States government, which prevent my offering you the use of our plant here, with its tools, materials, and drafting room. Unless—"

The commandant paused. His hearers shuffled uneasily. Cyrus was trembling with intense anxiety. All day he had been alternately buoyed with hope and cast into despair. Now he would not be able to get back to Linkersport before dark, and he had almost made up his mind that he would have to go back.

"Unless," the suave officer continued, "you were in the service. In that event all would be different. The regulations would not only permit, they would demand, that I extend to you the use of its property. Therefore all I can say to you is this: if you wish to enlist in the navy you will have every facility possible to develop any inventive idea."

He seemed through, and yet added, apparently as an afterthought, yet definitely: "That may prove of use to the government."

There was a swift let-down in the tension. None of his audience looked at him directly. They looked sheepishly from one to another. None dared openly to criticize the officer, but these boys were not of the type that ordinarily go to sea.

"Think it over, boys," the commandant concluded. "It is an important decision, I know."

He withdrew to his private office.

The six gathered in one knot, chatting. Cyrus, aside, overheard.

"It's for three years, nothing less," one protested.

"And surrender everything to Uncle Sam, I bet," another ejaculated.

"And toe the scratch for every small-time bully with a stripe on his sleeve," a third growled.

"And live in the steerage with jacks and roustabouts. Not on your life," the fourth decided, and departed hastily.

One by one the others followed. In a few minutes Cyrus was alone.

One bell struck. It was four thirty. The workmen began filing out of the yard, their day done. Still, there remained three hours, at least, of daylight left. He could get back to Linkersport shortly after dark, and the motorcycle was still parked outside by the office. Only he needed gasoline, and he had no money. He had had no lunch.

While he hesitated the commandant came out.

Cyrus timidly approached him and asked: "If I enlist, sir, how can I get a chance to use the Navy Yard tools and materials?"

"That 'll be easy," replied the officer. "If you can pass the examinations I will see you are placed in the ordnance room as an apprentice draftsman."

This was the final answer to all his doubts.

Thirty minutes later he was in the service of the United States, enlisted for three years. He sold the motorcycle to a second-hand shop on Fulton Street for enough to pay for his ditty box and his uniform, with an extra pair of khaki trousers. That night he wrote to Judge Vilas, told of the step he had taken, and asked to be advised about the disposition of his father's estate, and to assure all creditors they would be paid in full.

He passed the examinations required of those aspiring to clerical appointments, and within a week Commander Layton had him at work in the drafting room, where the officer of the day was Ensign Tenflair.

Unfortunately for Cyrus, Commander Layton was relieved in his duty as commandant of the Navy Yard about this time. He had served his three years on shore and was assigned to command a scout cruiser. Cyrus never had any contact with his successor. He had to look for all opportunity to Ensign Tenflair.

The ensign, who had graduated near the head of his class and who had chosen ordnance for his specialty, that being considered the crack branch of the service, was looked upon, and looked upon himself, as one of the future stars of the navy. He rigidly maintained the traditional gulf between the enlisted man and the officer who

gained his commission through the academy.

More. He saw more than a gulf of discipline. There was a social and an economic gulf as well, and this in his case amounted to a human gulf.

When, on a Monday morning, the new apprentice reported for duty, alive with his new enthusiasm and visualizing an unparalleled chance to be free with the appurtenances he so desired, Ensign Tenflair succinctly assigned him to duty at the outer desk.

And there Cyrus found he must sit all day long, receiving visitors, answering questions, and keeping charge of the time clock with its punch which recorded the entrances and exits of all employees, officers as well as men. He was, in a word, an office boy.

Here, thus quickly, had ended, apparently, his dreams of association with the means to perfect his invention. It was worse, infinitely worse, than tending target in the Linkersport shooting gallery.

One morning Ensign Tenflair was late—very late. He came in a few minutes before twelve o'clock. As Cyrus was about to punch his time the ensign seized his hand and said:

"Make it nine o'clock, that's a good fellow."

"But I can't," said Cyrus; "the punch is automatic."

"Then don't punch it at all. Say you forgot."

The ensign disappeared. The next day Cyrus was called to the office of the new commandant to report the hour of Ensign Tenflair's arrival. He could not lie about it, and, on cross-examination, was obliged to tell the truth. Before he left he told the new commandant of his disappointment in his work, recalled the promise that had been made, and protested that he "wanted a chance to see the big guns work."

"Why don't you apply for assignment to a battleship then?" the new commandant replied. "If you make such an application I'll approve it. Ask for clerical duty. There are some yeomen vacancies."

The application was made and granted, in due time, but before Cyrus could get away from his time clock Ensign Tenflair sought him, after hours.

"You infernal gob!" he exploded. "Why did you snitch on me?"

Cyrus protested: "I didn't snitch. The commandant asked me what happened, and I told him."

"Oh! Just like that—eh! Well, let me tell you something: I'm going to lay for you and I'm going to get you, and get you good, for this. Do you hear?"

"Very well, sir."

Before the ensign could have a chance to effect any such announced purpose Cyrus had left the Navy Yard for good. But Tenflair was to be woven into his life, as the dark motif of his naval career.

The draftman's apprentice was assigned to the battleship Kansas as a yeoman. He sailed, two days later, to join the Atlantic fleet, in the Caribbean.

For three weeks he did not know what his duties were, for he was so sick he could not lace his shoes.

Unable to walk, he was excused from duty by day, and so spent all his time in his hammock, which was slung behind one of the starboard seven-inch guns, in the yeoman division. Here he was "broken," a word used alike for wild colts and for new sailors. As the boson said:

"It takes the starch out of 'em, but it makes 'em men."

His kit consisted of a ditty box, made of oak, and about as big as the boxes used by bootblacks, a canvas bag about the size of those used by golfers, and his hammock, with a blanket. These were his sole worldly belongings. His only hold on life—so it seemed in those retching hours of agony—was to cling precariously to the whitewashed ceiling of the deck while he swung viciously back and forth above the polished brass breech of the seven-inch gun.

But the tropics came—and surcease, for the ship slithered into harmony and poise. Then he could not sleep for the heat and the lack of air; and the first night he found courage to imitate others whom he saw littering the superstructure forward.

As he crept along the rail, blanket in hand, searching for the place he felt he

wanted, he glanced overboard into the sea which spread like glass, and saw the Titan's phosphorus in the wake astern, while ahead, in the new moon, spread a magic carpet.

As he rounded the curving steel of the foredeck, the officer of the watch almost collided with him, and asked sharply:

"Where are you going?"

"I can't sleep in my hammock, sir."

"Your first time in the tropics?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you don't know, but I'll tell you: the coolest place is up close to the underdeck, in your hammock."

Cyrus was abashed. He looked on longingly, with yearning desire, to the indistinct form of the protruding big guns which loomed, forbidding, ghostlike.

"But may I, sir—would it make any difference," he pleaded timidly, "if I went on the roof there?"

"You mean the fo'castle?"

"No; the roof. That little house up above the—the fo'castle?"

"Ah! The sixteen-inch turret hood!"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well."

Like a homing pigeon to its nest, the lad from the Linkersport shooting gallery climbed to that airy perch, high above the sea, thrust out above and beyond the dour battleship. Something sang solace to his soul. He knew not yet how he would reach his goal, but he was near—very near.

He spread his blanket and lay down, keen for each slight breeze. The moon rose more and more, flooding the sea. High-girt Orion jeweled the Southern Cross. He felt projected, as it were, among them, above the battleship and beyond it—over the magic carpet—content, ecstatic, sailing, sailing, sailing into the unknown.

CHAPTER VI.

CLOSE TO A DREAM.

THERE was fourteen inches of armor plate between Cyrus and the big gun that night. The distance to its secrets was much farther, and seemingly as difficult to cover as it would have been to penetrate the armor, as he was to learn presently. He had gone on the battleship to learn about the gun, but although the officer of the watch might relax discipline a trifle during a tropical night, and with a "greeny," life and duty on a battleship are highly specialized.

Cyrus's job was to keep count of the crates of prunes, bags of flour, tins of meat, sacks of sugar and coffee, pounds of bacon, peas, beans, tapioca, baking powder, and spice consumed by the various messes. Chief among these was the "gob's scoffin'," or sailors' table, which fed over nine hundred. Then there was the "steerage," feeding the petty officers and clerical force, to which he belonged. Above this were the higher messes, those of the "Fourth Ward," or the junior officers, and of the wardroom, or senior officers. Finally, there was the individual mess of the captain.

Enough to keep him busy, surely—too busy to pursue the studies that would fit him to complete his invention. Before a month had passed he wondered how he would ever find "the tools, plant and material" he felt he had been promised, with which he could complete his model and his drawings. Yet he made no complaint.

Was he not there, day by day and night by night, only a few feet from the big guns? In the very atmosphere of the secret he desired?

For the officers' messes he kept tabs only on the staples, such as sugar, flour, and dried legumes. Once a month he made an inventory of each mess. Access to each was easy, except to that of the captain. To reach this he had to apply to the captain's orderly, who accompanied him to the captain's pantry and stood beside him, waiting, while he made his list.

To reach the captain's pantry he was led along a passage that opened on the cabins of the captain and the admiral. As the Kansas was not a flagship, there was no admiral on board, and thus the admiral's cabin, together with its anteroom, was vacant, and the door stood always ajar. Inside could be seen a plate glass full-length mirror and a nobly carved oaken chest, the most ornate piece of furniture on the ship.

Just across the passage from the admiral's cabin was the admiral's dining room, also not in use except for certain state occasions in port. At the end of it, as he passed, Cyrus got a glimpse of a shelf of books. He was hurrying along, under convoy, as it were, of the captain's orderly, but he could not forget that shelf of books.

The ship's library, to which he, with all other enlisted men, had easy access, had grievously disappointed him. Nothing but novels and books of travel, and such reading—sterling stuff, to be sure, but of small service to an inventor.

The admiral's dining room was open to all. Officers and men passed through it constantly. Always on duty, of course, and hurrying somewhere, but it did not seem to Cyrus that there could be any great breach of discipline in going there.

So he slipped in at the first opportunity and looked at those books. What a find! A gold mine would have interested him less. A textbook on trajectories; a series of German works on ordnance; English analyses of deep-sea shooting of emplaced rifles; a bound American essay on fire control; and—a French work on ballistics.

He wanted to devour this, but the strange language halted him. There was an English-French dictionary in the library, and now his problem was—how to get the two together. He was too timid to send word to the captain asking permission to borrow the book. He returned to his desk abaft the smokestack, between decks, puzzling over some way to get hold of the book while he also could have the dictionary.

The very next day fortune favored him. The Kansas dropped anchor in Hampton Roads for a ten days' stay close to Norfolk, and all the officers except those necessary to maintain discipline and carry on the watches took shore leave. This left the after part of the upper decks, near the admiral's cabin and dining room, deserted.

Cyrus got the dictionary from the library and ensconced himself in the far corner of the admiral's dining room with the tome on ballistics. Here he became so concentrated in tracing out the meaning of the French words and absorbing the technique of gunnery, which until now he had lacked, that he became utterly unconscious of the flight of time or of the passage of persons.

An unusually attractive person came along: feminine, young, and of course pretty. The gangplank had been down for hours, and the launches had had a chance to ply back and forth, and more than one bit of fluffery was already on board. This one glided along the passageway as if she rather belonged there, not a bit awed by the austerity of her location near the living quarters of the very live captain and the supposititious domicile of the possible admiral.

She went boldly right into the captain's cabin, and the audacious young thing rummaged brazenly in his wardrobe until she came on his dress hat, the long wavy one with the white ostrich feather, which the captain wore only at New Year's receptions or when the President or the Secretary of the Navy reviewed the fleet.

Then she tiptoed—"sneaked" would be almost the proper word—out the captain's door, along the passage to the admiral's cabin, and popped in there. The reason for this effrontery was presently apparent.

The admiral's cabin held the only full-length mirror on the ship, and a very excellent one it was, of beveled plate, in a mahogany frame.

And there, framed in the austere elegance of an admiral's surroundings, this young, pretty, and decidedly feminine person posed and puttered and primped, trying on the captain's dress hat frontways and sideways, and in rakish fashion—obliquely, with the ostrich feather sweeping across the slender left shoulder.

Until a movement across the passageway—the rattle of leaves followed by the drop to the steel deck of a book hastily placed—caused her to look up. Wherewith she screamed—just a trifle—and slammed the admiral's door.

The scream disturbed Cyrus, and bewildered him too. He got the merest glimpse of skirts and a feather in the admiral's cabin. He had a sudden vision of

the conversion of the Kansas to a flagship and the unexpected arrival of a new admiral, with his family, for, being new to the navy, this did not seem absurd. Fear clutched him and he hastily began replacing the books and papers.

However, before he could do much, the cabin door opened and the girl faced him boldly. She was indeed very bold. When she saw he did not wear a uniform, but only the blouse of a sailor, she was even aggressive.

"Who are you?" she demanded, coming forward.

He halted, embarrassed, and replied: "A yeoman."

"What are you doing here?"

"I have to keep track of supplies for the captain's table."

She held the hat carefully behind her back as she demanded insinuatingly:

"Are you looking for them in his bookcase?"

He regained his assurance a bit as he noticed that she was not so very large, nor so very old, probably several years younger than he was. He felt stirring within him a little of the consciousness of class that stirs on occasion within every wearer of the livery of Uncle Sam. After all, she was merely a woman, and he had given an oath to protect the property of the service.

"This is the admiral's bookcase," he corrected.

"But the captain's books," she insisted.

She had him there. He did not know, and so could not deny it; but she moved a little, and he saw the feather dangling from the hat she held behind her.

"What are you doing in the admiral's cabin?" he demanded.

For an instant her eyes—he noted they were of blue, to begin with, but became speedily bluish black with intensity, and of a magnetic force that seemed to resolve him to water—flashed defiantly.

Then perhaps she saw that he, too, was summoning all his courage to bluff his way through a contretemps, and she laughed, which brought the sky-blue luster back to the depths of her eyes. She tossed the hat carelessly on the table and came toward him, looking inquiringly on the sheets of paper he had marked with the translations of the strange French words.

"I didn't know he had novels here," she commented, looking for the title. Then she exclaimed: "Why, it's in French. Do you read French?"

"No, but I have an English-French dictionary, and I'm getting along better than I thought I would."

With this she sat on the table, swiftly as a purring kitten, with a motion that thrilled him through and through, and asked eagerly:

"What's it about? Tell me. A love story, I'll bet."

"No," said he, wondering why he trembled so at her nearness to him; "it's about ballistics."

"Ball-is-tics?" she stammered. "What's that?"

"The science of gauging ordnance. It describes the trajectories of the big guns."

"Oh!" Her disappointment was poignant. "Just guns!"

"Yes, miss." He was extremely shy and respectful. He felt he ought to leave immediately, and yet he did not want to go.

"But what are you bothering about guns for—in the pantry?"

This was a challenge he could not ignore, though he was confused.

"The pantry," he blurted out in reply, "is only a stepping stone." Then he blushed at his own temerity in revealing so much of himself to this stranger with the audacity to beard him in the admiral's dining room, even if he had no really plausible business there.

Perhaps she enjoyed his blushing. Perhaps she noted his square shoulders, the unusual width between his eyes, his dreamy brow, his firm chin. Perhaps it pleased her a great deal to have so stalwart a male at her mercy.

"'A stepping stone?'" she repeated, as if quizzing. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm serving there to get a chance to study gunnery."

"What for?"

He felt the beads of sweat spring to his forehead. She had no right to quiz him thus, but how could he tell her so?

"Why?" she insisted calmly.

"So I can perfect my invention."

"What invention?"

He wiped the sweat from his brow. It was unbearable. She had no right.

"Why—" He hesitated, and was silent. He looked down, almost sullenly.

She hopped off the table lightly, and said, just as if he were an equal: "Pouf! You think because I'm a girl I can't understand about the big guns. Is that why you won't tell me?"

"No." He barely opened his lips.

"Then why?"

He thought now of a good excuse to protect his secret. "Because," he dared, at last, lured to it by the saucy challenge in her merry eyes, "we in the navy are not permitted to talk about the service to outsiders."

This pinged her. The eyes flashed blue-black again. "Oh," she exclaimed angrily, "I'm not an outsider! I'm the captain's daughter."

This flattened him. He was so taken aback he was unable to speak though he opened his mouth to reply. She saw she had whipped him instantly, by an unfair advantage, and relented immediately. The lovely blue came back to those seductive pupils. She laughed, apologetically, while he mumbled his apologies, to which she responded by placing the book in his hands and exclaiming:

"There! Take it! Study it all you like. And I do hope your invention is a great one!"

Diffidently he took the book and said the very thing he immediately regretted as being the height of tactlessness. "But the captain—he might not like it."

She stamped her foot, twirling the dress hat in her hand, crying, "Of course he'll like it. Do you think he won't let his daughter lend one of his books, a stupid old French book on—ball—ball—is—tics?"

She made a *moué* and started off. He touched his cap, humbly.

At that moment in the doorway appeared a young officer, searching for her, an ensign. "Hello, Raby, here you are!" he called in a cheery voice.

"Yes, Percy," she replied, joining him. The voice was familiar. Book in hand, about to withdraw, Cyrus looked toward the officer who had ignored him. It was Ensign Tenflair.

CHAPTER VII.

TWO SCORES TO SETTLE.

THE Commander of the U. S. S. Kansas was Captain Raoul Vosmer, U. S. N. His father was the Commander Vosmer who served under Commodore Porter on the Mississippi during the Civil War; his grandfather was the Vosmer who went to Japan in 1852 as a flag officer under Commodore Perry; his great-grandfather had commanded a gunboat in the war of 1812 and a privateer under Decatur against the Tripolitan pirates.

He was born in the navy, bred in the navy, lived in the navy, and had no hope or ambition outside the navy. If one wanted to know the finest fruit of the American navy he had only to know Captain Vosmer. Being, as he often said casually, in the second century of his service, he wore it like an old glove, easily and well.

There were two Vosmer children, William, the elder, just of an age to prepare for Annapolis according to family tradition, and his sister, a year younger.

When she was a tiny tot and lay in her father's arms while he discussed with her mother an appropriate name—he had just been commissioned lieutenant and was back from the first cruise to foreign waters, where, for a time, he had been stationed as naval aide to the American Ambassador to the Court of the Sublime Porte—he said, "See that far-away look in her eyes? Makes me think of Bessarabia."

"What a charming name!" exclaimed her mother. "Is that Turkish for Elizabeth?"

"No," he laughed, "it's a country I've never seen, but always wanted to. Look! In her eyes! There! So far away—so very far!"

"It's so original and poetic! I wonder if any girl was ever named Bessyrabia?"

"I hope not," the lieutenant mused, "let's begin."

"Only we mustn't call her 'Bessy,'" the mother acquiesced.

"Nor Bess—just Bessarabia." He poked a gentle forefinger into a dimple, asking, "eh—Raby?"

"Oh, Raoul, *please!*" Mrs. Vosmer pleaded. "No nicknames."

"Quite right," he acquiesced. "It must be Bessarabia—or nothing."

For more than seventeen years now the flag of Vosmer determination had flown over Bessarabia, and every attempt to corrupt her to Bess or Betty or Betsy or Bessy or even Beth had been defeated. Yet, within the citadel, impishly, had crept, lodged and become ensconced the roguish—Raby.

She was Raby to everyone, and only Bessarabia for the first few years to her father and mother. Raby, the hoydenish; Raby, the arbitrary and quixotic ruler of the Vosmers.

The rules and regulations of the United States Navy were a second nature to Captain Vosmer—but Raby was his first nature. He hoped they never would conflict.

Beneath his exterior of disciplinary officer those close to him knew his partiality for Raby, knew that if she had asked him to run the Kansas up to New York so she could see a matinee he would do it—were it not in violation of the regulations—or any other little thing like that—unless it would spot the record of one of the most exemplary officers in the service.

None knew it better than his orderly, who stood on duty outside his door eight hours of the twenty-four, and who had been stationed in the passage during the episode of the trying on of the hat, and also during its aftermath of the borrowing of the book.

The next morning Captain Vosmer was at his desk preparing a report to the department on a new experiment in fire control which he wanted tried out, and, finding need for his French text on ballistics, stepped over for it to the shelves in the admiral's dining room.

The orderly saluted as he passed out, and sensed the possible embarrassment to Raby, to say nothing of the dilemma of her father, if it should happen that the captain required that particular book. Moreover, he felt a personal responsibility. He had been there when the book was taken away and had said nothing.

His worst fears were presently confirmed. The captain hunted through the shelves fruitlessly, going over every book a second time, and muttering to himself, "I put it here myself, right here, day before yesterday."

The captain glanced up, saw the intent look on the face of the orderly and demanded, "Who's been meddling with my books?"

The orderly stood a bit stiffer, eyes front, heels at right angles, hands stiff along his trousers tape. He was not sure that the question had been directed to him.

"Orderly!" snapped Captain Vosmer. There was no avoiding this. The marine saluted and pivoted quarter face for a direct gaze.

"Who's been meddling with my books?"

Here was the dilemma direct. Should he deliver Raby to her father, and render both uncomfortable, and perhaps get the worst of it in the bargain, in the long run, or—what should he do?

The captain must have sensed his guilty knowledge. "Think, orderly," he demanded. "Has anyone been at this bookcase since yesterday?"

"Yes, sir. I saw one of the yeomen, sir."

"A yeoman? What business have they got in here?"

"I don't know, sir. I saw one reading here, and making notes from one of the books, sir, and—" here he decided it was best by all means to leave Raby out of it, "I think he took one away with him, sir," he concluded.

"Well, get that yeoman, and bring him to me, immediately—and the book—especially the book."

A few minutes later Cyrus, book in hand, stood shamefaced before the captain. The orderly had said nothing to him, but already he had entered silently into the conspiracy to shield Raby. Was he not man enough to stand responsibility for his own actions? There was nothing unique in this, neither in Cyrus nor in the orderly. The whole ship's roster, from executive officer down to the last deck swabber would have done as much—or more—for Raby.

The captain quickly saw the book was

unharmed, then turned severely on the yeoman. "Who told you to take my books like this, without permission?"

"Pardon me, sir, but I merely borrowed it—for a few days. I meant to return it, of course."

"Borrowed it—eh? How long have you been in the service?"

"A month, sir."

"Ah! In that event we will overlook your —ah—error, but know for the future that books for the enlisted men are in the ship's library."

Cyrus saluted. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." He turned to go.

"Hold on," said the captain, who had been studying him, "you are an enlisted man and you read French?"

"No, sir, but I have an English-French dictionary. Or, at least, I have the use of the one in the library, sir."

"Ah, then your mistake was natural. You thought when you picked this up it was a French novel."

"No, sir. I don't need a dictionary to understand the title."

"You don't mean to say you've read this work?"

"Yes, sir."

"What—in one day—without knowing the language?"

"Yes, sir—at least those chapters I required, sir."

The captain strove to conceal his smile. The orderly was standing stiffly at attention by the doorway, but listening to each word. The captain assumed a mock seriousness, and asked, semi-ponderously, "Well, what do you think of it?"

Cyrus was not looking at him directly. It was, indeed, a solemn occasion. "It gave me some necessary information, sir," he replied, "but I am inclined to disagree with the author's chapter on the revised arc of the trajectory for sixteen-inch shells."

The captain's jaw fell. "Oh! You do?" he remarked, wheeled about in his chair, opened the book, noted on a pad with his pencil two numbers he was seeking, snapped the book shut, and returned it to Cyrus.

"It is evident, young man," said he, without a smile, "that you have more use for this book than I have. I couldn't read it all in a day. There! Take it and keep it as long as you like."

Cyrus saluted and withdrew, clasping the book tenderly, but he was in a cloud of happiness for a far different reason than his successful breasting of a difficult situation. It was the first time that any one in the service had addressed him as "young man."

Ensign Percy Tenflair had met Miss Bessarabia Vosmer the week before at a dance at Old Point Comfort. Just assigned to her father's ship, he lost no time in confining his gallant attentions to the daughter of the captain. Already he had sent roses, candy, a new novel, and an invitation to a theater party, which had been accepted.

As he led her away from the admiral's dining room that day he laughed at her possession of her father's dress hat, and waited outside the cabin for her while she restored it to its dustproof box on the upper shelf of the wardrobe.

To change the subject she expressed her interest in the "sailor who reads French."

"That's nothing," said he, "we all have to learn French at the academy."

"This was an enlisted man, not an officer." She launched into a laudation of the surprised student, though she failed to tell him she had loaned her father's book.

Tenflair inquired as to his identity and said nothing further.

The next day the Kansas weighed anchor and was off for the proving ground beyond the Capes. Bright and early in the morning Tenflair appeared in the tiny office of the yeoman. He was surprised to recognize the former apprentice draughtsman whom he had made serve him in Brooklyn as timekeeper.

"It's you, is it?" he commenced coldly, looking about the neatly cleared desk of the yeoman, who stood at attention during the visit of an officer.

"Yes, sir. It is a coincidence that we are on the same ship."

Tenflair made no direct response. His eyes were critically examining each article on the desk. Presently he spied the book on the rear, under some papers. He picked it up and read the title.

"What's this?" he asked, looking on the

inside cover, where was written in pen "Raoul Vosmer, U. S. N." How did you come by this?"

Cyrus resented both tone and manner. Moreover, he was still shy in the presence of a uniform, and he thought it might be immodest to plead a personal contact with the commander of the ship.

"I borrowed it, sir," he replied, simply.

"Borrowed it from the captain's personal library?"

"Yes, sir."

Tenflair's eyes narrowed. "Look here, Bullitt," said he, "I know you from the Navy Yard. You're inclined to exceed your authority and to step out of bounds. I'm telling you for your own good you had better watch your step on ship. The ways are different here. Discipline is stricter. You can't get away with things on ship you could put over on land. Now, I'll take charge of this book. Maybe you borrowed it and maybe—you took it."

A little later Ensign Tenflair sent word by the orderly he desired a few words with the captain. Presently he was received on the bridge, where the captain was chatting with the officer of the deck. Tenflair produced the book, saying, casually, "Look what I found in the hands of a yeoman."

The captain looked at the book and returned it, replying, "Yes, rather a precocious youngster—I loaned it to him." He turned his back on Tenflair and addressed the officer pacing in the rear of the quartermaster at the wheel.

"Lieutenant," he said, "let's have your glass. That looks like the smoke of a fruit liner off there on the port bow."

Tenflair now had two scores to settle with Cyrus.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GUN TURRET.

THE captain's orderlies are chosen from the honor men of the marines, but they must also be of a tallness and breadth. Not less than six feet up and down and correspondingly broad in the shoulders are qualifications added to an exemplary record.

Yet, with these requirements, a large number of the hundred marines on the Kansas were on the captain's preferred list. They were changed once a month, so that all might have a chance during the cruise to pace up and down in the passage outside the admiral's dining room adjoining the captain's cabin, or at the foot of the ladder on the foredeck, leading to the flying bridge, when the captain spent his accustomed half hour with the lookout.

Thus Marine Serpel, who had been the captain's orderly during the episode of the book—six feet two, one hundred and ninety-three pounds net—a little later could be seen, during the evening watch, on guard outside the seven-inch starboard magazine. His buddy, Marine Beverdy, another tall honor man, was carrying on with official messages and attention.

One evening, just before "taps," Serpel, on guard outside the magazine, apparently a perfunctory service on such a peaceful voyage—for who would want to molest the ammunition, especially when it was behind a locked door of which the keys were held by the ordnance officer?—felt he had to have a smoke—just a puff or two.

No one being in sight he rolled his own, with his left hand, by his side, and managed a light without being seen. Then one deep blissful puff.

A wicked land breeze off the starboard bow chose that moment to swirl around the side. It seized the hastily, ill made cigarette, ripped out its innards, and deposited them, glowing and sparkling, right through the scuttle of the door to the magazine.

Marine Serpel was properly horrified, so much so that it was more than a few seconds before he remembered to toss the empty yellow paper into the sea and leap forward to the magazine door. It was locked, of course. He peered through the keyhole. All was black, naturally. In all probability, he thought, no harm was done. Even if the sparks did get inside, the powder was all in bags and would be difficult to ignite. Moreover, it was probably stick powder and no cigarette spark could affect it unless inclosed.

His duty, neverthelsss, was quite clear.

He should report the incident to the officer of the deck, who would probably have to call the ordnance officer to unlock the magazine. Before that could be done the executive officer would be on the job, and, as fire drill was his hobby the ship doubtless would be drummed to quarters, the guard turned out and the crew brought up with all apparatus.

Following which, the next morning, would come official inquiry, with probable disclosure of the horrid facts. A cigarette smoked on duty by an honor marine! Demerits! Never again the captain's orderly! Perhaps the loss of a stripe!

In this serious dilemma Serpel strove to extend himself enough to see through the scuttle, an aperture about ten inches high and twenty inches wide in the top panel of the door. He could not quite see in, much less wriggle in, as he was only too eager to do.

At this moment, on his way to his hammock laced in repose above the breech of the seven-inch gun, came Cyrus, ready to retire for the night. Serpel's eye fell on him and he saw a way of relief. This lad was six inches shorter and sixty pounds lighter than himself.

"This way, yeoman," he called softly, and Cyrus responded.

In a moment of desperation and anguish Serpel confided what had happened. "If I lift you up to that scuttle," he concluded, "can't you look in and make sure the stump is out?"

"Why not?" Cyrus cheerily accepted this perilous evasion of strict duty, namely, to report, but of which he was ignorant. Though no one ever tells a beginner in the service all the things he must and must not do, ignorance is never admitted as a plea of not guilty when caught in infraction.

Cyrus climbed up Serpel's back and thrust his head and shoulders through the scuttle. The marine handed him a flashlight and he cast its beams into the magazine. Across the room were piles of brass shell casings, on the right were smooth rows of shells, on the left piles of powder bags, and in the center were a few emptied bags. Square in the middle of them had fallen the lighted tobacco. It had ignited and frazzled yarn from one of the bags, which was smoldering along calmly, but surely eating a way toward the center of the pile. It might burn there for hours and perhaps go out eventually, but the merest breeze might fan it into a flame.

Cyrus did not stop to report to Serpel what he had seen. Already his shoulders were through the scuttle. He felt he could get his hips through, too. Then he could drop on his hands to the deck. He wriggled on, inch by inch, while outside the marine, in nervous excitation, was praying no officer would come that way.

Presently Cyrus's heels disappeared. To Serpel it seemed hours, but it was probably only a minute or two before Cyrus's head appeared and he called, softly, "It's out. Stand below now and give me a lift." One stamp of his foot had settled the glowing yarn.

A few minutes later he was in his hammock, waving aside as of no consequence Serpel's protestations of undying gratitude, and assuring the marine no one would ever know from him that a burning cigarette had been permitted to blow through the scuttle of the powder magazine.

To his buddy, Marine Reverdy, however, Serpel confided: "He's the smartest, gamest, quickest thing on the old Kansas. It was as nifty a trick as what Mons Monssen did on the Missouri—goin' head-on into a burnin' magazine—and Monssen got a Congressional order and ten a month for life. I feel like a houn' dawg about it—yet if I write 'er up in report both of us 's likely to get demerits."

"Keep yore mouf shet then," was the opinion of Marine Reverdy.

Cyrus, evidently, thought nothing of it.

Perhaps, however, he was encouraged by the successful secrecy of the exploit of the magazine, which rendered him a hero in the eyes of two marines, though he did not actually know that, to extend the scope of his adventures.

For instance, there was the sixteen-inch turret, focal point of his dreams, center of his desires. He saw it every day, and many times each day. For it the ship had been built, to emplace it properly these thirty odd thousand tons of steel had been as-

sembled in complicated mechanism; toward it, directly or indirectly, pointed the activities of the thousand men and officers operating the floating fortress.

In the turret, moreover and especially, lay the opportunity for perfecting the invention which was Cyrus's sole reason for being as he was, an enlisted man in the navy. When he had slept on its hood that first night in the tropics he had felt assured physically of an ultimate triumph.

Yet each day since he felt farther away from the turret and the great guns which it housed, for no one could enter except the ordnance officers and the members of the gun crews, picked men all, and veterans of the service all.

The French tome " Redaction et Technique de Ballistics " had not solved his problem. The draughting room in the Navy Yard at Brooklyn had not helped him much. Long since he had learned that what his futile model made in the Linkersport target gallery contained was little more than the germ of an idea, and perhaps not that.

Yet the inner consciousness of the inventor was not abashed. In his soul he knew that he had a sound idea. He would stake his life, in fact he had staked his career, or the early part of it, on his certainty that somehow he would invent an automatic sight.

Eleven years elapsed between the time when Edison first conceived the idea of the incandescent light and the moment when it became an established fact, yet Edison once said that when he first saw the lamp in his mind's eye he regarded it as good as finished.

So it was with Cyrus Bullitt and his automatic sight. He possessed the faith of martyrs, and if he was concentrated in his purpose to the exclusion of all else the reason for any mistakes he made must be seen in the intensity of his faith.

He felt he must get at those guns directly. He must get into the turrets, see them, study them. Books, charts, drawings, reports, were not enough. He must measure, feel, know the reality.

He scraped acquaintance with a gunner's mate who had the job of pointer on the starboard gun crew. This man held third place among all the pointers in the service and was keyed to a pitch of excitement over the coming battle practice in the spring in which he hoped to better his excellent standing.

The gunner's mate, unfortunately, however, was unable to grant Cyrus's request to see the inside workings of the turret. Regulations forbade the entrance to the turret, he explained, of every one except the crew. Sorry. It couldn't be done.

Cyrus observed the habits of this gun crew. They opened the door of the turret, a sliding steel affair two inches thick, each morning shortly after " quarters," and from then until fire drill at four in the afternoon the door stood open while they were at work.

They answered the fire and collision calls at four and four thirty. At five the door was closed and locked. Cyrus noticed that often during the last hour in the afternoon the turret would be deserted and the door only pulled to during the fire drill without the key being turned.

Fire drills were held every day; collision drills, every other day. Every man on the ship not engaged in actual operation had his place in these drills, and was expected to participate. The place of the commissary yeoman was in the pantry, where he was expected to make sure that the way was cleared for hose or buckets.

The way, however, was never clogged; Cyrus always saw to that. He wondered if he could not manage to snatch a few minutes, at least, for a clandestine visit to the big guns during the fire drill. The pantry, being forward, was usually inspected first, a few minutes after eight bells. The gun crew served aft, in the forecastle, and were often held until nearly five. The turret was halfway between.

Cyrus saw that by acting promptly he might manage a half hour alone in the turret some day during fire drill. Even if apprehended he anticipated nothing serious as a result. What harm could he do?

His day arrived. A minute after eight bells in the afternoon the great gongs in the mess halls and over the sleeping spaces clanged their harsh summons. Over six

hundred men leaped as to a call to battle. Every one responded except the navigating and engineering forces.

The pantry was as neatly housekept as a model bungalow in a home show exposition. Cyrus stood at sailorly attention by the door. In a few minutes the executive officer poked in his head, glanced quickly about, and passed on. With him were the officer of the deck and a quartermaster.

Cyrus moved to the door and watched the three inspectors disappear into the first oblique passageway. There they would go down two decks to the railing over the wheelpit of the turbines. It would take them ten minutes, or twelve, to inspect the seven turbine decks.

In that ten or twelve minutes Cyrus had ample time to slip along the port rail, back through the next passageway, sidle up to the door in the rear of the starboard sixteen-inch turret, thrust it open, step inside, and pull the steel carefully behind him.

It seemed very simple. He was safe, and alone. The round space, lit only by the light drifting in the aperture through which protruded the two sixteen-inch rifles, held all he wanted to know. If he could learn it all in thirty minutes!

For a moment he stood still, accustoming his eyes to the dark. Gradually from before him the gaunt, huge paunches of the enormous rifles became eloquent of personality. Before he could see anything more he reached out and patted the nearest. It seemed almost like a human entity—this shiny steel center of Titanic intensity, launcher of a projectile that could go ten miles and sink a battleship.

Then, even before he could see else, before he could profit one iota from his foolhardy venture, the door behind opened, and he turned, apprehensively, to greet the entrance of a man in uniform.

"Who are you?" snapped a terse voice.

Cyrus stepped back promptly, saluted, and informed him of his identity.

"Well, out of this."

Cyrus went back on deck, feeling like a boy caught stealing apples in a yard from which he had been previously warned. The officer closed and locked the turret door and then faced him.

It was Ensign Tenflair. His eyes gleamed coldly and a smile of quick content came to him as he recognized Cyrus.

"Who gave you permission to enter the turret?" he demanded.

"No one, sir. I—"

"Are you aware that no one could give you permission except the captain of the ship?"

"No, sir. I—"

"Did the captain give you permission?"

"No, sir. I—"

Evidently sure now that he had no unknown asset with which to deal, Tenflair proceeded with decisive design.

"Reserve your explanations," he said severely, "for the executive officer. You are cited for quarters. I place you under arrest, but release you on your own recognizance until two bells of the morning watch, when you will appear on the quarter-deck. Meanwhile return to your pantry and remain there."

CHAPTER IX.

THE BRIG.

AT the stroke of two bells the following morning a sorry dribble proceeded toward the fore part of the port quarter-deck. Six bluejackets from the forecastle wended their way along the main deck with an attempt at brazen raillery. They had been apprehended the night before, playing penny ante. A petty officer, coxswain of the junior launch, came along to explain why he had neglected to report a missing tackle. Two jackies were up, charged with maltreating the tame bear who was the ship's mascot. Another was charged with being absent from fire drill without leave. A stoker came, charged with sleeping during his watch.

Among this flotsam in the ebb tide of battleship discipline floated the commissary yeoman, chagrined, apprehensive.

The executive officer, Lieutenant-Commander Middleton, was pacing back and forth studying the report sheet just handed to him, and which contained a recital of the cases brought for his disposal. He was to be sole judge and jury in this police court.

It was an average, routine morning. All other offenders, like Cyrus, had been cited on their own recognizance.

Apparently the comparative inoffensiveness of the complaints annoyed executive officer Middleton. He would have liked "something to set his teeth into," but, at first glance, this crop of malefactors merited little more than reprimands and suspended sentences. There was not even an honor man to demerit, which was his favorite form of discipline.

"Judge" Middleton worked through his docket rapidly. He was not patient in listening to explanations. Unless there was a flat denial of the charge he would not consider extenuating circumstances. The penny ante artists were sentenced to "hammocks" at "retreat" for thirty days, without access to the recreation hall during that time, and a warning that repetition of the offense would bring upon them severer penalties.

The neglectful coxswain was reprimanded publicly. The sleepy stoker was condemned to serve two extra watches, under close surveillance. The jackies who made cruel sport of the bear were sentenced to a day each in the brig, but the sentences were suspended with the proviso that they be enforced on a second offense.

Cyrus was the last to come forward in response to his name. Judge Middleton looked to the complaining ensign. There seemed a hopeful gleam in his eye.

"Why, this is a serious offense, Mr. Tenflair."

"Aye, sir," was the respectful assent.

The judge addressed Cyrus, saying:

"Yeoman, you are charged with malicious mischief in entering the starboard sixteen-inch turret clandestinely in the absence of the gun crew and the responsible officers. Guilty or not guilty?"

"Why, sir," stammered Cyrus, "I didn't know there was any harm. "I just—why—I, sir—"

"Don't trifle, yeoman. Answer the question—yes or no. Are you guilty?"

"I was not malicious, sir. I—"

"No comments, yeoman. Answer me now directly, no equivocation, yes or no—did you enter the sixteen-inch turret yesterday afternoon during the fire drill?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who gave permission?"

"No one, sir. I—"

The judge raised a stern finger. "No comments, yeoman," he said, and turned to the ensign, asking: "In what manner had he tampered?"

"I was too soon for him, sir," Tenflair promptly asserted. "I saw him go in and was on his heels. He had just put his hand on the breach of the starboard rifle when I entered and called him; but, sir, if you will permit me—this gob is a nuisance. He has no respect for discipline; thinks he has a right to roam into any part of the ship, even to the admiral's cabin and the turret. He belongs in the pantry, but he won't stay there."

Though sympathetic with the ensign, Middleton halted the *ex parte* comment with a gesture, and resumed the trial with the offender.

"Now, yeoman," he continued, "you sneaked into the turret during fire drill when you knew the crew would be absent. Therefore you must have known you were violating regulations, and no plea of ignorance could be allowed. There can be no doubt you were mischievous. So far the charge is upheld. Now, then, the only question remaining is, were you malicious?"

"I was not *malicious*, sir!" Cyrus stoutly insisted, his eyes flashing.

"A moment, yeoman, and permit me to be the judge. Answer my questions. Why did you enter the turret?"

"I wanted to see how the big guns work, sir." He looked squarely at the martinet.

"Ah! Curiosity!" Officer Middleton seemed not displeased with the forthright manner of his prisoner, and ruminated: "Well, the turret is interesting. You have been in the service only a short time. I can understand how the desire to enter a forbidden place and observe the hidden mechanism might have so aroused your curiosity that you would violate regulations, but we must have a way to make you realize the severity of your offense. Curiosity cannot entirely excuse you."

"It was not curiosity, sir!" Cyrus insisted stoutly.

"What!" Every fiber in the martinet's body sprang to attention. "Not curiosity? Then what was it?"

Cyrus looked to Ensign Tenflair. This officer had been the first to whom he had told his ambition the day he rode from Linkersport to Brooklyn. Why did he not speak up and exonerate him? Then he noted the sneer on Tenflair's lips, and he was filled with a sudden pride that resented either ridicule or accusation. For the moment he made no reply.

"What was it?" demanded the judge.

"For a private reason!" Cyrus at length replied grimly.

"A private reason!" snapped the executive officer. "That is enough, yeoman. If you were frank with me I might help you. But 'a private reason' may be malicious; it may even be treasonable. You are of course conscious that you have given an oath of loyalty to the flag of the United States."

The blood mounted to Cyrus's temples. He clenched his hands instinctively at the veiled insult, but his teeth were tightly closed.

"Twenty-four hours in the brig!" The judge—and jury—concluded tersely: "And think it over! Marine, see to your prisoner!"

The marine who stepped forward to touch Cyrus on the shoulder and escort him away was—Serpel. His eyes closed in momentary anguish as he performed his duty. Cyrus walked obediently ahead of him as he indicated the way along the starboard rail, down the nearest companion ladder, across the main deck, down three ladders on the port side, along the port hull, until they reached the brig.

As they were safe from all sight and ears —along the port hull of the turbine deck— Marine Serpel walked abreast of his prisoner and said, *sotto voce:* "I'm sure daft with misery for you, yeoman."

Cyrus looked up and saw the unmistakable hurt in the other's eyes. No one more than an honor man could realize the degradation in a sentence to the brig. Then Cyrus smiled for the first time. "It's all in the day's work, I suppose," he deprecated; but his voice was dry.

"'Tain't right," Serpel insisted. "Old Stotten Bottle suspended sentences on ev'body but you, an' you wuz sure the least guilty of the lot. They's somethin' mean about this, yeoman. Tell me, has Ensign Tenflair got it in for you?"

Cyrus thought quickly and decided to hold his own counsel. He shook his head. He was too downhearted to trust himself to further speech.

They had arrived before a clear space on the deck. Through open hatches the blue sky could be seen, and the resultant daylight illumined the brig—two steel-locked cells against the hull, and a space in front railed off with chains linked to steel posts counter sunk in the deck.

Cyrus saw only the cells. He blanched and recoiled. The marine saw his fear and its cause, but was quick to reassure him.

"Not the cells," said he; "that's solitary. Just inside the chains—that's all, and that's enough."

Neither cell was occupied, as no serious offender was in duress at the moment. Inside the chains, squatted on the deck, or lying down, were ten or twelve bluejackets. All but two had been incarcerated for drinking liquor. Of the others one was a dope suspect, and the other a chronic sleeper at post.

None seemed to mind the disgrace, for retention in the brig could hardly be called more than that. Except that they were obliged to sleep on the bare deck, with only a blanket, when accustomed to hammocks, and that their rations were cut to two sparse meals a day, these convicts were no worse off than their mates on the ship.

Yet Cyrus seemed to shrivel at the prospect. All his spiritual forces dried within him. The space beyond that chain, apparently so like all other space on the hulk of steel, would be for him a Gethsemane.

Something of his suffering was conveyed to Serpel, though unintentionally. The marine led him with brotherly tenderness to a place inside the chain, but far removed from all other occupants, and said that he would come back immediately with a blanket.

Returning with this necessity and as he

gave it to Cyrus, the marine whispered: "I'm makin' a try to get you outa here before night, yeoman."

Marine Reverdy, serving as the captain's orderly, had the last half of the morning watch and the last half of the afternoon watch. At eight bells he joined his buddy, Marine Serpel, at mess.

"Sick, Joe?" he asked. "Y' look green round th' gills!"

"Yes, Ben," Serpel rejoined, "I am sick. Remember the yeoman I told ye 'bout—saved my numbers th' night I smoked a cigarette near th' seven-inch magazine?"

"Y' tole me."

"They stuck him in the brig."

"Th' hell you say! Who stuck him?"

"Old Stotten Bottle an' young Tenflair."

"Y' mean th' first luff o' th' starboard Big Bertha?"

"Yeah! Say, what you know about him?"

"Nothin' much—only 'at he's a lick-spittle, an' mushy round th' captain's daughter, an amachoor bully, an' too danged smart."

"Yeah," slowly muttered Serpel, "at's him, only y'd better lay off crackin' him up to me. I don't like him."

"'Crackin' him up'? Ain't no friend o' mine."

"He's a low-down, swank-bellied hind heel of a swamp snake, if y' ask me."

"Leave him lay at that. What you goin' to do about it?"

"You're goin' to fix it," Serpel asserted, with a new decision as if he had solved the problem.

"Me?" Reverdy was astounded.

"Ain't you the captain's orderly? When you go back on duty you're goin' to speak to th' captain—tell him what this ornery swine of a Tenflair done to a square young guy that's straight as a string."

"Yeah, bo!" snorted Reverdy. "Watch me! I'm that thick with the skipper, I am! Blow up to the cabin yerself an' tell him!"

Serpel was so upset he did not eat his accustomed hearty dinner. Half through he excused himself and sought his ditty box, whence he extracted the tablet of paper he used on Sundays for writing to his mother. With this he labored half the afternoon, making draft after draft of an epistle. Finally satisfied, he sought his buddy just as that worthy was to go again on duty, and handed him a folded paper.

"Take that, you button-headed simp," he asserted, "an' deliver it."

Marine Reverdy read the inscription. "Why, this is for Captain Vosmer," he objected.

"Yeah," Serpel admitted. "Right smart, ben't ye? C'n read, an' everythin'."

"You want me to hand this to the skipper?"

"Y' got me, buddy, th' first time. An' if y'r sense o' reg'lations 's so strict y' can't do it, then look around fer another buddy—that's all."

"Hold on, Joe—y're takin' this thing serious."

"Y'd be, too, Ben, if y' saw the look in that kid's eyes when I stuck him in the brig."

CHAPTER X.

PRIVATE SERPEL—FRIEND.

PROMPTLY after the changing of the watch at eight bells that afternoon Captain Vosmer, in his office, was handed a note by his orderly. Opening it, he read:

> Deer sir, Captain Vosmer, U. S. S. Kansas, lat. 36 s., long. 17′ 37′′ west, about, I respectfully beg leave to report that the Yeoman Bullitt, a straight young fellow, believe me, sir, is in the brig, and he is innocent before Almighty God I swear it, captain. He is the yeoman you loaned the French book to that day when I was orderly on duty at your cabin, sir. If this report goes beyond my duty, sir, and takes something on me that belongs to another I stand ready and willing to take the consequences, even to the loss of my stripes.
>
> Yours respectfully and obediently,
>
> JOSEPH NAPER TANDY SERPEL,
>
> Private, U. S. M. C., C. M. O. 3 service chevrons.

Restraining an instinctive smile, the captain called to Marine Reverdy, standing, as was customary, just outside his door.

" Orderly," said he, " are you acquainted with Marine Serpel?"

" Aye, sir. He is my buddy."

" How does he come by three chevrons?"

" France, China, and the Philippines, sir."

" And he holds the Congressional Medal of Honor?"

" Aye, sir."

" How?"

" Belleau Wood, sir."

" Division?"

" The First, sir."

" Service?"

" Machine gunner, foot transport, first class."

" Well, if he was a machine gunner with the first division in Belleau Wood and holds a Congressional Medal of Honor, how is it he has no Croix de Guerre?"

The orderly indicated his first human feeling, one of surprised refutation.

" You mean that frog medal?" he queried.

" I mean the French official decoration of the war cross. It was usually issued before ours, or in conjunction with them."

" He's got that too," exclaimed the orderly, " with palms!"

" He's noted everything else about himself in this letter "—the captain indicated the painfully indicted epistle before him— " why did he neglect his Croix de Guerre?"

Marine Reverdy thought intently for a minute. Then his face lit. " Maybe," he hazarded, " he can't spell it."

The captain regarded the accouterment of his orderly. The freshly applied piping on his belt, cap band and canvas shoes was as conscientiously apportioned as the powder on a débutante's nose; the creases in his trousers were of razorlike keenness; his tunic clung to his lean hips without the slightest angle; his aquiline profile could have served as a model for soldierly aplomb.

" You are aware," said the captain after a moment, " that it is essential that an orderly should observe discretion and carefully keep his own counsel. He is not to talk about what he may see or hear while on duty here. Do you understand that?"

Marine Reverdy, eyes straight ahead, replied: " Aye, sir."

" Remind Marine Serpel of that, and—"

Marine Reverdy breathed more freely.

" Go to the brig and bring Yeoman Bullitt here," the captain added.

A few minutes later Cyrus stood before the captain in his office. He had no means of knowing that the audacity of a marine in appealing against all rules of battleship discipline over the head of the executive officer direct to the captain himself had brought about this interview with one whose mere word held the power of life and death over a thousand men.

He only knew that he had been more than seven hours in a durance which, however humane its accouterment, symbolized for him the essence of degradation. The seven hours seemed like seven years of slow torture. For the first time he was glad his father was dead and could not know of what had befallen his adored son.

Captain Vosmer regarded him with official scrutiny divorced from severity. He looked beyond and saw Marine Reverdy just outside the doorway.

" Orderly," he called, " close the door."

Now they were alone.

" Are you not the young man," he asked, " who borrowed my French ' Ballistics '?"

" Aye, sir." Cyrus slowly raised his eyes, brimming with woe, to a level with the keen glance of his commander.

" Sit down." The captain indicated a chair at the side of his desk. The command and the gesture were alike eloquent, and affected Cyrus like a glow of hospitality at the close of a weary journey. He, a prisoner for the brig, told to sit alone in the presence of the captain of the ship!

He removed his round, starched canvas cap, and sat gingerly on the edge of the chair.

" Now tell me, Bullitt, why you are in the brig, and remember that I have no other version of the affair than what you will have to say for yourself."

" I entered the starboard sixteen-inch turret yesterday afternoon during fire drill without permission, sir."

" That might be a serious offense. Were you aware of what you were doing?"

" I meant no harm, sir."

" You told this to the executive officer?"

" Aye, sir."

" And you were sentenced to the brig for how long?"

" Twenty-four hours, sir."

The captain was plainly puzzled. He could not yet see where the punishment fitted the crime.

" What explanation did you give?" he inquired.

" None, sir. I denied it was malice or curiosity."

" And you did not tell *why* you went into the turret?"

" No, sir."

His interrogator seemed to comprehend the situation now. His eyebrows lifted. " Good!" he added, as if a period had been placed on his inquiry. " I can understand why Mr. Middleton felt it necessary to have you reflect on your offense in confinement. You have reflected, of course. And do you see now why it was wrong for you not to tell the reason for your going into the turret in defiance of ship regulations?"

The tone was even and kindly, though judicial.

Cyrus looked at the captain frankly.

" Aye, sir," he admitted.

" Good!" the captain glowed, adding: " Perhaps, then, you will tell me now. Why did you go into the turret?"

" To study the big guns, sir, so that I can perfect my automatic sight for use on moving targets."

" What!" The captain could not conceal his incredulity. " An inventor?"

" Aye, sir."

" Which accounts, of course, for your interest in a textbook on ballistics."

" Aye, sir."

" American?"

" Aye, sir."

" When did your family come to America?"

" I don't know, sir."

" Are there no family records?"

" Well, sir, I know that my great-great-grandfather signed the Declaration of Independence, but I don't know much beyond that, sir. I'm sorry."

" Well, why do you want to be an inventor?"

" To pay off my debts."

" Debts? You are too young to have debts of consequence."

" They are some I have—well, assumed, sir."

The captain was clearly exploring a novel case. He found himself repeatedly looking over this rooky with incredulous amazement. Yet he had a final question to ask before he could reach a decision.

" With your ancestry," he continued, " you might have definite ideas about your duty to the flag. How about that?"

" I feel," Cyrus replied, " that after I have paid my debts, my life and all I can earn or save or achieve should belong to the government of the United States."

" Tell me, now, how you became an enlisted man."

With this audience, in whom for the first time since the passing of his father he felt a sympathy that would comprehend all he hoped to do, he bloomed with confidence. He told of Linkersport, of the shooting gallery, of his father's death, of the voice on the radio, of his ride to Brooklyn in the early dawn, of his interview with Commander Layton, of his enlistment, of his service in the draughting room where he failed to find the opportunity he had sought, of his application for transfer to a battleship, of his efforts during spare time in the pantry to prepare himself with technical knowledge so necessary to complete his invention.

Instinctively perceiving that the bosom of his audience was warm with understanding, he lost his self-consciousness and exclaimed, " You see, captain, I've found out you can't learn what you need from books or from men either. I would never have thought of an automatic sight if I hadn't worked in a shooting gallery. Even if the pistols fired only BB's still they were guns. The same thing holds true up to a sixteen-inch rifle. You've got to get right in with 'em if you want to know how to control 'em, sir."

Captain Vosmer rose and walked to the open port and looked out at the swiftly flowing sea, his back turned on the prisoner

yeoman. He was saying to himself, "I wonder how I could put a spirit like that into Billy!"

Finally he returned and seated himself again at his desk. "Bullitt," he said, "you ought to try for the Naval Academy, and secure a commission. It would be a shorter and better way to realize your ambitions. Why not do that?"

Cyrus felt his pulses thrill. For a brief moment it was as if he already wore the uniform of the commissioned officer. Such was the alchemy of the brain and heart he faced.

Then the chasm between them yawned. He wilted, saying half-heartedly, "I am too poor and I have no political influence; I could not get the appointment."

"Don't be so sure about that," the captain corrected. "Influence is not necessary if you have the will and the merit. In fact, there has just come down a ruling from the Secretary of the Navy which may fit your case exactly. He has announced that he will appoint two enlisted men to the academy next fall, and that they will be chosen by competitive examination."

Cyrus opened his mouth to speak, but no words came forth.

"Get ready for that examination," the captain concluded, "and if I can help you in any way call on me." He turned to his desk as if that terminated the interview.

Cyrus mumbled, "Thank you, sir," twiddled his cap in his hands, rose awkwardly, started toward the door, and then came back, abjectly, as he asked, hesitantly, "But, sir, do I have to stay in the brig?"

"Well!" Captain Vosmer exclaimed, "I had forgotten that!' He called, "Orderly!"

Marine Reverdy opened the door, stepped inside and saluted.

"Notify the officer of the deck," the captain ordered, "that sentence on this prisoner is suspended."

"Aye, sir!" replied the orderly, saluting as he withdrew.

"Now, Bullitt," the captain concluded, "let us see what is in you!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

IN MOURNFUL NUMBERS

FOR every blossom there's a bug,
For every joy a woe;
For every "peach" an ugly mug,
For every friend a foe.

For every gain there is a loss,
For every climb a fall;
For every job there is a boss,
For every dime a call.

For every plaudit there's a jeer,
For every mend a break;
For every smile there is a tear,
For every tooth an ache.

For every tire there is a tack,
For every truth a lie;
For every fortune there's a lack,
For every swat a fly.

Looks pretty dismal? Yes, that's true.
Slim prospect, I'll be bound.
I don't know what on earth we'll do—
But turn each line around!

Walter G. Doty.

Gotham, the Goat-Getter

By GARRET SMITH

"LOOKS like the big town had got the poor little lady's goat!" thought Ferris as the wisp of a girl waited at the Information Desk for her verdict.

"I saw your advertisement for a stenographer. Has the place been filled yet?" She had put the question to the blond and blowsy person at the desk. Her cultivated voice, with its underlying note of weariness, had caught Ferris's attention.

"Tellynminute," bubbled the attendant through her gum, savagely plunging a plug into the switchboard.

The caller, Ferris thought, stood out against the background of the other girl like a fading rose before an egregious sunflower. Tom Ferris wasn't much of a lady's man, but he wasn't young for nothing. He believed he could tell a lady when he saw one. This girl was a lady by all the earmarks and, unless his eyesight was all wrong, a lady in distress.

She was so obviously gently bred, so obviously intelligent, and yet as obviously unused to the big city's atmosphere, as obviously broken by a long and fruitless search for a niche there.

Tom Ferris's honest up-State heart beat in sympathy for her. He looked about the big, glaring room, reeking with August heat and the staccato clatter of typewriters, at the bustling young job-riders, and then back at the girl.

No, she didn't belong. But something

about the cut of her little chin and a light not yet burned out of her violet eyes told him she wasn't yet beaten.

"She's me over again," he told himself. "Bound to lick the big town or die trying. Wonder if I'll be as near done as she is in another week."

The information girl turned from the phone.

"Yeh! Job's fillismornin'," she droned, indifferently. Driving a nail in a sister's coffin left her unmoved.

The applicant stared a moment, then, as she turned toward the door, swayed a little. Ferris started forward impulsively, but the girl pulled herself together at once and acknowledged his gesture with a faint smile and a brief bow. Then she passed resolutely out on her hunt.

At that moment a boy at his elbow said, "Mr. Hale'll see you now, Mr. Ferris."

Though Ferris had come hunting a job of his own, his mind was still absorbed with the strange girl when he faced the man who was to decide his fate. Hale's words brought him back to himself.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Ferris, but I've about settled on another man for that position. As I told you, we like your personality, you've got the ability we're looking for, but you haven't the knowledge of New York and the New York experience we need in this job. I hope you have better luck at the next try."

"Better luck!" Ferris burst out. "I've been hoping for better luck next time for six months now. You're practically saying a man mustn't go in the water in this town till he's learned to swim. Why, there's an army of men and women hit this burg and get jobs every year; why can't I?"

"Well, they either come younger or older. You tell me you're twenty-seven. If you were twenty-one or two I could give you a job that wouldn't require New York experience or breadth of experience, a beginner's job that I wouldn't insult you with now. On the other hand, if you were thirty-five and had a broad experience in a smaller town and had made a record, then you'd be fitted for a big executive job here. You come from Rochester. You have had the beginning of a good business experience there. Go back for five or ten years till you've made a record before you tackle us again."

Ferris's jaw set.

"Thanks, but I can't take your advice. I'll beat this town yet. Good day."

But as he emerged from the building and faced the blazing street, he felt his self-confidence ooze a little.

Lower Broadway in August! A river of sticky asphalt through which rushed purposefully an army of job-holders! A border of towering, forbidding cliffs, every one of whose ten thousand windows meant a job guarded against him! The great city's fetid breath strangled him. A strange sun beat with a brazen hammer upon his alien head. His soul sank.

"Gotham, the Goat-Getter!" he exclaimed. "Will it get my goat too, I wonder?"

Then, even as his thoughts turned back to the girl, his fellow job-hunter, he saw her again.

She was standing gazing in a window next door. As he looked closer he could see she was leaning limply against the pane with a dejected air.

"The poor kid's sick!" he thought, remembering how her steps had faltered upstairs. "Wonder if I can help her?"

He started forward impulsively, then hesitated.

"Hold on, Tommy! You're always putting your foot in things by going off half cocked. She'd probably turn you over to a cop."

At this he noted the window she was studying. It was that of a restaurant! Now he understood.

"Starving to death!" he exclaimed. "The poor kid! She'll be fainting right here on the sidewalk."

He hesitated only a moment longer.

"Tommy," he told himself, "you never picked up a girl on the street before in your innocent life, but here's where you're going to begin. Tactful, though, boy! Tactful!"

He approached the girl now in his best business manner, swiftly mapping out the first plan of attack that entered his head. He wasn't much pleased with it, but it was

the best he could conjure up on the spur of the moment.

"Pardon me," he began. "About that job you asked for upstairs. Remember you saw me up there? Well, there is a job open for you after all. I tried to stop you before you got out, but somebody interrupted me for a moment and you got away. Afraid I'd missed you. Great luck I found you again."

The girl was staring at him, first startled, then doubtful, but finally with a faint blush of hope.

"You mean there was a mistake? The job isn't filled yet? They want me?"

She choked a little and Ferris thought she was going to cry.

"Of course you're wanted. Terrible stupidity letting you get away like this," he hurried on sparring for time to collect other inspiration. "But you see—you see—it's not exactly the job you applied for, something better that—that—I happen to have the decision on. Now—let me think—you see—'"

He glared earnestly at his wrist watch. It told him nothing but the fact that it was twelve fifteen, which he might have gleaned from a glance at Trinity steeple. Indeed he took to studying that piece of architecture next as if it might yield a further suggestion, but it only reiterated the luncheon hour thought. That thought was clear enough. How to go on from there was the puzzle.

"You see—" he repeated inanely.

She saw, all right. He stole a glance at her wondering eyes. He was afraid they were seeing altogether too much. Hope and excitement had given them a sparkle and painted a faint pink on the pale cheeks.

"Gosh, she's a little beauty!" he thought. And the thought didn't allay his growing panic in the least.

Hang it all! He merely wanted to get some food into this girl before she fainted on his hands. He didn't care what she thought of him after that. Or did he? Well, anyhow, the end justified the means. Perhaps she'd be a good sport and see that, after she had a little food.

"You see," he insisted once more, then rushed on desperately. "I've got a lot of appointments, busy as the mischief to-day, got to get a bite and run. Can't go back to the office with you. Got to settle this job to-day, though. You have to eat before long anyhow. Would you mind talking business at luncheon? Right in here is a good place."

He gave her no chance to demur, though he saw her stiffen a little. A strong hand under her elbow propelled the slight little wraith through the door and to an immediate table. She was trying to say something but Ferris drowned it in a flow of cheerful inanities.

She dropped limply into a chair held by an alert waiter. Again she started to speak.

"Pardon me," Ferris interrupted. "We're in a hurry, waiter. Miss—eh—may I make a suggestion? I know the menu. Suppose we have chicken broth and some bluepoints, and we'll decide what else we'll have while he's bringing them."

Ferris had read that a starving person must be fed cautiously at first. These viands ought to be harmless for starters.

"But really," she said with a faint show of dignity, "I don't know even who you are. I shouldn't be lunching with you. I'm not in the habit—"

"Nonsense!" Ferris broke in heartily. "This is pure business. Just an accommodation to me. You needn't worry about my paying for your luncheon. It goes on my expense account. The company pays it. Regular thing taking prospective employees to lunch and talk it over. Of course you don't know me. I don't know you. That's what we're here for. My name's Ferris. You saw me up in the anteroom at Boswell's. Don't worry. If we find we can do business I'll give you plenty of references for myself. Listen, do—do I look like a masher—or something of that sort?"

The girl studied his face for a full moment. She saw a pair of honest clear gray eyes with a hint of troubled embarrassment back of their effort at calm assurance. They went well with the firm mouth and clear, healthy complexion. She seemed to like what she saw.

"No you don't," she assured him with a blush, and a frank humorous smile that only served to torture Ferris further.

The blessed food arrived at this point and gave him another respite. Food, after all, had been his sole objective.

"I'm pretty hungry," he suggested. "Perhaps we can talk better while we eat."

"What else, sir?" prompted the waiter.

Confound it, how was he going to keep this girl from eating too much after starving the Lord knows how long?

"Er—which will you have, tea. or coffee?"

"Coffee, please."

There was a wistful note in her voice which he ignored.

"Coffee for two. We'll call you when we want anything more," he ordered.

Then he proceeded purposely to forget to ask her if she'd have anything else.

"Now for business," he went on after the oysters had disappeared and he had thought out another step in his perilous course.

He had debated paying the bill and brutally telling her of the trick he had played and let it go at that. But it wouldn't do. He'd got to see it through. So far he'd just delayed starvation for her. He must go on stalling in the hope of more inspiration.

"You see I picked you on sight without knowing anything about you but what I saw. I'm a pretty good judge of character and ability, I think. If your references and tests measure up to my present opinion of you, I shall want you. Have you references with you?"

From a much worn hand bag she drew a half dozen nearly worn-out letters. They gave him all his curiosity asked, without the need of verbal questions.

"Ruth Dennison, of Brattleboro, Vermont; high school and business college graduate; three years' experience in a Brattleboro law office as stenographer," he noted ostentatiously on the back of an envelope, adding the names and addresses of the writers of the letters.

His most important notes, however, were purely mental—that for three years she had been the sole support of her widowed mother, who had died and left her homeless just before her march upon impregnable New York. Judging from the date and condition of these letters, she had been hunting a job here in vain for eight months.

"Gosh! Stuck it out two months longer than I have already!" he thought.

"Very satisfactory references, I'm sure, Miss Dennison," he added aloud. "You've had no New York experience, I assume?"

"No," she admitted faintly. "Need that make a difference?"

"Not a bit. Not a bit!" he assured her heartily. "I'm not as much of a believer in this New York experience thing as some people are. Now, in towns like Brattleboro, and Rochester, New York, you get a broader experience while you're in training than you do here, and get on to the ropes quicker. Besides, you're coming to New York at just the right age."

"Which is?" she asked demurely, and giggled at his confusion, a most entrancing musical giggle.

"Just the right age," he managed to say, and laughed with her.

She had a sense of humor, that girl. And pretty! A transforming miracle was going on before his eyes under the influence of the limited food he had cautiously allowed her.

"If you approve of towns like Rochester, New York, so thoroughly, why did you leave Rochester?" she asked, searching him with her clear eyes.

Ferris stared at her, startled.

"How in the world did you know I came from Rochester?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Oh, I didn't," she laughed in delight. "I just guessed it from the tone of your voice when you spoke the name. Of course, your picking Rochester as an example was suspicious, too."

Ferris was perspiring a little more than even the August heat demanded. This girl was entirely too keen. He must wind up this impossible situation before she made a complete fool of him.

"Well, now," he began, all business again, "the important question is, how much salary do you want? I can pay—"

He stopped short. A sudden sensation of intense chill raced up his spine. Mention of paying anything brought back to his mind the damning fact that he had broken

his last bill at breakfast that morning. He had merely noted that he had enough change to wiggle through the day economically. After that, if he didn't find a job to-day, he'd have to figure out a way to-morrow to finance himself a little longer. Thereupon, being a young man who let to-morrow take care of itself, he had dismissed the subject.

Now he was certain the little handful of change in his pocket wouldn't pay even for this meager luncheon.

He looked down the crowded restaurant. Their corner had seemed so secluded a moment before. Now it seemed like a raised platform in the center of a vast hall in which a million people had suddenly stopped eating to gaze at him. He imagined the scene when the waiter presented their check.

"Will you excuse me a moment?" he exclaimed. "I forgot a telephone call I must make at once."

In a telephone booth in the lobby he took stock. Eighty-three cents! His bill would be well over a dollar—perhaps two dollars. This was an expensive restaurant.

Nice little situation, was it not? The more he thought about it, the more awkward it seemed. And the hotter the telephone booth grew. His brain began to feel like his collar and just about as full of good ideas.

He opened the booth door for a breath of air, and with it came an inspiration. A few feet away was the restaurant exit, and no one guarding it closely for the moment. Unnoted he slipped out to the street bareheaded. Around the corner and down to Nassau Street he hurried. There he paused, relieved to find no hue and cry behind him. The very ease with which he had stepped out a few yards and lost himself in this boiling human caldron made him shudder.

But, no, our knight errant was not cravenly abandoning a lady in distress. In a few moments he had found what he sought—the three-ball sign of a pawnbroker, the only friendly symbol many a lone human mite ever finds in the big city.

He had been gone less than ten minutes when he returned to the table minus his wrist watch and plus twenty dollars.

"So sorry," he apologized. "Had trouble locating my man. Now to get down to business again. Let me test your dictation."

He gave her a pencil and the back of a letter and dictated rapidly a fanciful letter he had improvised on the way back from the pawnshop.

She read her notes back to him perfectly without a stumble.

"Fine! You're hired, if terms are O. K. I'll start you at thirty dollars a week, and here's fifteen dollars to bind the bargain. You can just write a receipt on the back of this envelope to make everything businesslike.

"Now, I can't put you to work until a week from to-day. Probably you'll be glad of a little rest from job hunting. Your salary begins now, of course—a little vacation in advance.

"Another thing you may think a bit odd. I haven't any office address at present. I'm helping open a new business, and on account of certain rivals we're keeping it dark till we start. I'd trust you with the facts, but I've agreed with my associates not to tell a soul outside the circle.

"Meantime, here's my residence address. If you want to look me up, see Mr. George Mersereau at Hallowell Brothers. Here's his address. For the same reason I gave above, I can't refer you to my old business associates.

"Now, let me know where to find you, please, so I can drop you word where to come when we're ready."

A little doubtfully she gave him the address of the Y. W. C. A., and they parted immediately at the restaurant door. He turned and watched her hurry down the street.

"Wonder what she thinks! Bet she'd have turned me down if she hadn't needed that money the worst way. Gad, I've got my work cut out for me now! Got to make good with her. Got to get a job for her this week somehow, whether I find anything to do myself or not."

At least a hundred times a day during the next week he cursed himself for get-

ting into such a tangle. He could drop out of it whenever he chose. She had got money enough out of it to give her a week's fresh start. All he had to do was to send her a line saying his business plans had fallen through.

Then each time he would see a vision of Ruth Dennison's eyes and he'd know he had to stick. He somehow couldn't bear the thought of a look of disappointment or distrust leveled at him from that particular pair of eyes. He didn't understand that either at the time.

Not that he wasn't assailed by moments of distrust himself. Looking over the Help Wanted ads in an evening paper, his eye caught sight of a feature story in an adjoining news column. Miss Terese La Fond, the paper's chief "sob sister," was writing a series of articles on unemployment based on her own experience while disguised as a job hunter.

A horrible thought struck him numb. Was it possible that Ruth Dennison and Terese La Fond were one and the same person, that he'd find the story of his misguided but well-meant prank spread out in news print to help make a Gotham August day less dreary and lonesome? He had to know!

That evening he called at the Y. W. C. A. to find out. No, Miss Dennison did not live there. She merely got her mail there. No, they didn't know where she lived or worked.

That didn't look so good! Next morning he called on Miss La Fond at her office and was relieved. She most emphatically was not Ruth Dennison, not by at least fifteen years and a set of facial scenery that was little if any improved by earnest but misguided art work.

But he was having harrowing troubles of his own these days, besides his continuous failure to find a job for himself or the girl. Within four days after he parted with her at the restaurant he had spent the last cent of the little balance left from what he had raised on his watch. His room was paid for in advance to the end of the week. But he hadn't a cent to eat with, and nowhere to get a cent.

All because he had met the girl. First, he had pawned his watch and squandered most of the proceeds on her. Second, through her he had for the time being cut himself off from the possibility of borrowing from his friends. For he had given to the girl as a reference George Mersereau, his oldest and most influential friend in town. Then, to be sure Mersereau wouldn't spill the beans if the girl made inquiries of him, Ferris had called up his friend and prepared him.

But, being ashamed to confess the presumptuous pretense with which he had beguiled Miss Dennison, he let George think also that he was opening a business. So now to borrow a small sum from him, or any of their crowd, would be to confess the whole thing. Ferris suffered from a pride too stubborn for that.

As for his father in Rochester, they had quarreled over his coming to New York, and he could get nothing from home but car fare back and a promise of a good job when he got there. Not that yet! He'd try a little starving first.

And he did starve for one whole day. He kept up his double canvass for jobs, but the old fire of his approach was spent. The next forenoon was the same. And tomorrow morning was the time set for Miss Dennison to report for work. He must notify her not later than that evening as he had promised.

Poor kid! Perhaps she was out of money again by now and blissfully depending on him.

In his desperation he went down to see George Mersereau that noon. He had hoped George would invite him to luncheon, but he had another engagement and could only see him for a few minutes. Unfortunately there was no hope of a job with George. His concern employed very few men, and part of those had been laid off during this year of business depression.

"Come another time and stay all day, Tommy," he invited. "Anything special on your mind? You're not looking so well. Been sick?"

"Been pretty busy and worried," Ferris admitted. "Say, did that little Miss Dennison I called you up about ever ask you about me?"

"She sure did! Oh, boy! Some girl! You lucky dog! I'd have hired her myself if you hadn't. If you weren't a friend of mine I think I'd have taken her away from you at that. As it was I told her you were the salt of the earth. Said I didn't know what your mysterious new deal was, but that you had all kinds of backing in Rochester, and stood ace high with everybody here."

"Thanks awfully, George. Say, listen. Do you mean what you say about hiring her?"

"What do *you* mean? Haven't you hired her?"

"Yes, but the fact is I've got to renig. My deal's hung fire, and I can't put her on for an indefinite time and I can't afford to hold her. Will you take her off my hands?"

"Will I? Will a pup gnaw a bone? That is if she can work as well as she talks and looks. At that I'd pay quite a lot to have her around as an ornament."

"She's as good as she looks. I've tried her."

"Send her around. I've been putting up with a false alarm for months because I couldn't find anything better. When can she come?"

"To-morrow at nine, if she hasn't changed her mind."

"Fine! I'll fire that oil can of mine this P.M. See you and her in the morning. Got to run now."

"All right, old boy, but listen. I warn you now that as soon as I get landed here right I'll get her away from you."

Mersereau eyed him curiously.

"You think quite a lot of that young lady, don't you, Tommy?"

"Don't you?" Ferris asked.

They looked into each other's eyes searchingly for a moment, then both laughed.

"Tut! Tut!" Mersereau chuckled. "A fine pair of moon calves we are over a girl we've seen once each. We both regard her strictly in a business light, of course. All right, Tommy, the war's on. And may the best man win."

But Tom Ferris, at least, felt something deeper than their banter implied, though he tried to scoff at himself for it. He'd made good with the girl and saved his dignity pretty well. What more did he want? He couldn't answer that question.

The question was there harder than ever when he met Ruth Dennison in Mersereau's anteroom next morning. A week of rest and food had completed the miracle his cautious luncheon had begun. He hadn't dreamed she could be so pretty.

But he swallowed hard and gave her briefly the explanation that had satisfied Mersereau. Her expression puzzled him as he talked. He couldn't tell whether she was glad or sorry, angry or not. She seemed to be studying his face and waiting for him to say more.

Mersereau came in at that moment, and greeted her cordially.

"What's the verdict?" he asked. "Have you decided to give us a trial?"

"Why—why, yes," she agreed. "I suppose so. I haven't anything else in mind. I am sorry your plans went wrong, Mr. Ferris. I hope you will get them straightened out soon."

"Thanks. I told Mr. Mersereau I'd be around after you again before long. Good luck to you. I'll have to run now."

And he fled abruptly. That was over. Now he could look after his own affairs. Got to borrow a little coin and stick it out until he landed something. Catch him making a fool of himself over a girl again! Mersereau could have her.

Then he found himself staring in a restaurant window just as he had seen Ruth Dennison doing a week ago. It was maddening, but he couldn't leave it.

The mingled fumes of taxicabs and steaming asphalt acted as ether to his swimming senses. The rumble of the city seemed to be growing dim for a moment. But he pulled himself together and tried to think.

Let's see. Who would he tackle first for a little money? Not Mersereau! His new secretary might find it out. And then some one touched his elbow.

"Oh, Mr. Ferris, I was afraid I'd missed you!"

It was Ruth Dennison herself.

"You forgot I owe you fifteen dollars that you advanced me," she went on, breathlessly. "Mr. Mersereau happened to have it handy in even bills in his pocket and let

me have an advance. So I grabbed it and ran after you."

She thrust a little wad of bills into his hand.

"No! No!" insisted Ferris. "That's yours. And I owe you fifteen dollars more. I hired you for a week!"

"Don't be silly. Anyhow, we can't quarrel on the street. I haven't had breakfast yet. Perhaps you wouldn't mind sitting and talking it over while I eat. Purely a business matter, you understand. The breakfast will be on the house."

There was a merry twinkle in her eye.

Ferris felt himself flushing. That phrase was reminiscent of their other meal together. This time it was he who was being propelled in to a table.

"Now we will go on with our quarrel," she announced as she comfortably settled in her chair.

She held his gaze for a moment with clear eyes that seemed to read all he had in his mind. Ferris suddenly surrendered. He'd got to be square with this girl.

"Miss Dennison," he began with a rush, "I will keep this money, and I'll tell you why."

In a few words he blurted out the truth —that is, all except the suffering it had caused him.

"I meant well, and it turned out all right. I really thought I still had a chance of making good when I told you that crazy story, but I was a clumsy ass about it and you probably despise me," he wound up dolefully.

There was a suspicious mist in the girl's eyes now.

"But I don't despise you," she insisted. "How could I when you saved my life? When you found me I hadn't eaten for two days, and I was just about through. And, what's more, you amused me a lot when I needed amusement most. I wanted you to tell me the truth and thought you would some time. You had better tell the rest of it."

He stared at her stupidly for a moment.

"You mean you knew?"

"I guessed a little at a time. I began guessing when you came back to the table that day with your wrist-watch gone. I guessed some more from the way Mr. Mersereau over-did his assurances about you that day I called on him first. And to-day I guess from the way you look that you haven't eaten much yourself this week, while I've been getting as fat as a little pig on your money."

"Don't rub it in, please," Ferris begged. "Anyhow, I hope we are going to be friends."

"We don't need to be enemies," she agreed. "Now tell your friend, if you feel like it, what you're going to do."

"I'm going to keep hunting for a job. You haven't let old Gotham get your goat, and I'm not going to."

"I am afraid it has got mine," she confessed. "Now that I've got a job at last and the fight's over, I seem to dread this big city more than ever. I think maybe I'm incurably small town folks. Are you sure you aren't? Why don't you go back to Rochester? I would."

Ferris looked thoughtful.

"Not without fighting it to the limit," he gritted. "Of course, I may have to in the end, but not for awhile yet, not till I'm surely licked thoroughly, and I don't yet believe they can lick me thoroughly."

She leaned suddenly across the table toward him.

"Did you mean what you said when you told me you'd want to hire me back as soon as you got settled somewhere where you could?"

"I surely did!" he declared with fervor.

"Suppose—just suppose you had to go back to Rochester after all. Wouldn't you need a secretary or, anyway, at least a plain stenographer up there?"

Ferris jumped to his feet.

"Do you mean it? Would you go to Rochester?"

"Well, I'd have to give Mr. Mersereau two weeks' notice, to be decent, I suppose," she demurred.

"Run right up and do it now while I go down the street and telegraph,' he ordered. "We'll have the waiter hold our table until we get back. Gotham can have our goats, if it wants 'em!"

THE END

The Innocent

By E. S. PLADWELL

Author of "The Fighting Colonist," "The Publican," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

THE advent of Stephen Kane into the fashionable upper circles of urban society was so devious that he often wondered if he would ever get there alive. He had expected to meet well-bred men and well-gowned women in an environment of beauty and graciousness; but before he arrived at this pleasant goal his eyes witnessed a scene entirely different.

White-caps tossed on a darkening gray sea which seemed to move eternally eastward toward bare headlands. Westward, a marching curtain of fog shut out the last of daylight.

A tiny steam schooner, hardly the match of a North Sea trawler, slowly swung in toward land, walking into smoke blown from her own dinky stack. Cold air forced wisps of the oily stuff downward so that it trickled into a bleak little wheelhouse. Stephen Kane's calloused hand reached up and closed the most offending window despite a grin of tolerance from a black-bearded ruffian at the wheel.

"No use o' that, farmer!" grunted the skipper. "You better not soil your hands, seein' how you're goin' into society so soon!"

The young man at the window grinned as his snub nose and sandy hair pressed close to the pane.

"Glad you're keeping me so lily-white!" he drawled.

"Huh! You'll git over it if you mingle with them high-toned city people. I seen a movie once that showed all about 'em. They're terrible!"

The ship swaggered closer to the shore.

The young man peered through the gloom ahead and tried to visualize his coming surroundings; but he saw only a bare hill.

"Here's where you git off!" announced the skipper.

The young man's quizzical blue eyes looked blank.

"Oh! Is this the city?"

"Naw; this is the suburbs. Every time we pick up a hayseed like you clingin' on the keel of a catboat in the middle of the ocean, we like to land him in a place like this. It gives him a nice walk to town. Restores his circulation." The skipper's voice changed to a growl. "We don't want any innocent people aboard here, anyhow."

The passenger smiled ruefully down upon the wrinkled, gray store clothes which covered his tall and well-knit body. His heavy tan boots were dried hard as rocks.

"I'm plumb innocent," he admitted, "but I'm not blind!"

"Well, keep your mouth shut. That's all we ask. Get outa here! I gotta go to work!"

The wheel spun around. The ship swung, rolled, swung again, pitched. Bells clanged down to the little engine room aft. The ship halted and backed.

The passenger stepped down from the swaying bridge and made his way to the base of the little stack where four of the crew were gathered—Dago Mike, Paule, Dutch Heiney, and Portergee Tom—pirates all, but friendly to a shipwrecked man.

Tom jeered. "You want we should send your trunk ashore, Steve?"

Steve laughed, but the crowd grew silent and watched the approach of a sheer-sided hill which loomed high and then fell away. A light appeared in the curve of the cove. A raft or platform tossed near the light. The steam schooner's anchor chain rattled out. Bells rang violently below decks. The wheelhouse window opened and the skipper bawled tremendous orders. The crew descended toward the single cargo mast forward. Lanterns appeared on deck. A winch began to snort.

"Get aboard the cargo, Steve!" bawled the skipper. "Hang onto the lashin's! We'll swing you ashore!"

Steve ran down to the waist of the ship, where dark waters tossed just beyond the bulwarks. The cargo boom lowered. Ropes and tackles creaked. A hook shot down into a black hold. In time the hook returned with a large packing case which might have contained a piano. Steve got aboard.

"Good-by!" roared the skipper. "After this keep in society. Let 'er go!"

The rope tightened. Steve swung high over the bulwarks and then down to uncertain depths. The tossing raft rose toward him. His piano bumped, halted, and began to toss with it. He made a speedy series of jumps to shore, landing in the presence of four burly and hostile men grouped around a lantern.

"He's all right!" came the skipper's wind-blown voice, sticking to its joke. "He got shipwrecked on his way into society."

A mighty hand came across Steve's chest.

"Nobody's all right around here, mister!" growled a husky voice. "You stick here!" Then, through cupped hands to the ship: "Wot did you land this guy for? Ain't you got any sense?"

"I couldn't let him drown!" defended the skipper.

"Sure you could! Wadda you think you are—a Coast Guard cutter?"

"Aw, shut up!" snarled the skipper. "You know better!"

Steve looked about, striving to find a way out of this place. He noticed a figure coming from the landward shadows. Beyond him were vague white shapes like two square houses.

The man came into the lantern light. He was chunky, smooth shaven, formidably hook nosed, and covered by a great gray coat of the latest mode.

"Too many lights on that ship!" he snapped. "What's this talk about? Who is this fellow? How did he get here?"

"Came ashore on a cargo boom," reported one of the toughs. Then, seriously: "Do we croak him?"

The hook-nosed man produced a cigar. His soft white hands trembled slightly.

"No. No need of that, boys. I'll talk to him." He turned to Steve. "Who are you?"

"Stephen Kane."

" Where from?"

" Gray Butte, Arizona."

" What's your business?"

" Rancher."

" What are you doing here?"

" Trying to get to the city."

" What for?"

" To visit my sister. My father and mother both died. I'm a Republican. I can ride a horse and cook hash. We've got a dog on the ranch named Isaac, but he's no good. My mother was a Presbyterian, but my father didn't have any particular religion. He smoked Burley Twist tobacco, but I'm studying cigarettes. I was born at Yuma and educated in the public schools. Age, twenty-five. Anything else?"

" Don't get fresh!"

There was a pause. Then:

" You may be all right. I think so; but we'd better keep a watch on you. Hey, Bill—guard this fellow. If he gets gay, slug him!"

Steve's voice broke out of control. " Say, what makes you bootleggers so scary?"

" That's enough from you. You stand still and mind your own business!"

Steve felt his universe wabbling around him. The steam schooner had been strange enough, but his present environment was weird. Puzzled, he thrust cold hands into his pockets and watched the cargo come over the white line of surf and thence by degrees to the shore. Only the marvelous work of the winchman prevented the ship from slinging its wares all over the place.

The cargo piled up. At length the leader gestured. The workmen, except for Steve's enormous guardian, started inland into the shadows where sudden lights glared out. Motors roared. The two white houses came to life and backed toward Steve. They were moving vans. He saw their sides covered with flaring advertisements.

" Get to work!" commanded the boss to Steve.

" What for? I'm not in this!"

" Get to work!" snarled Steve's big guardian, producing something that glittered in his hand.

Steve resentfully was forced to join the blur of sweating men hauling heavy packing cases into the lantern lit recesses of a great wagon. Vigilantly he sought a way for escape, but no chance presented itself. In time the first van was loaded. The second backed up. Steve glanced seaward toward a shredding fog-bank. The lines of the steam schooner crumbled away even as he looked.

" Get busy!" snapped the hook-nosed boss.

Steve perforce obeyed, working slowly, wondering what they would do to him later. Case after case went into the moving van until it became filled. Wads of old quilts and carpets were roped around the end to give the vehicle a domestic aspect.

Big Bill started tying part of the rope. Steve saw his chance.

He slipped out of the busy circle of men and stole along the right side of the van, leaving it before striking the arc of light from the lamps, not knowing that the shreds of fog distended the glare and threw his body into gigantic silhouette.

" Hey!" yelled a voice. " He's gettin' away!"

The note of alarm made Steve doubly sure about these fellows. He ran like a deer, inland along the side of the hill. A flash of flame leaped at him from the rear. A report banged. Another flash made him duck his head. The wall of the hill forced him to race across the vehicle's lamps. Another shot blazed at him.

Some one leaped out of the van ahead. Steve swerved to the left into unknown lands. He passed the glare of the headlights, but his steps became heavy in a sand dune. He leaped over it toward utter darkness. His leap continued surprisingly downward. He thrust out his arms wildly, touching nothing. Suddenly his legs were almost smashed by the impact of hard ground, which brought him painfully to his knees, but only for an instant. He pitched forward again, this time landing upside down. Sparks danced before his eyes.

" Is *this* the way I visit the city?" he wondered as he struggled to his feet.

An infernal crackling noise made him shake his head. It redoubled. He tried to look around, but his world was pitch dark. Flashes of yellow light spat into the inky haze above him.

" Will they never let up?" he groaned.

A howl of pain came, followed by yells and curses. More shots followed. More yells. A sense of unreality and melodrama assailed the bewildered Steve and heartily he loathed it. He felt about, learning that he had fallen into a bare little gully or dry-wash. The shooting ceased. He climbed upward slightly and stuck his head out of the little crevasse. Three excited flashes whipped out, about a hundred yards away. A bullet sizzled into a sand pile near him.

A lot of men were having a battle!

"Let 'em get it out of their systems!" decided Steve, returning to cover. "I'll wait."

A last shot popped near him. There was a yell. It subsided. Suddenly he heard the shriek of starting motors and then the deep throbbing of powerful machines. He looked out again. The two moving vans were roaring away, their lights yellowing the fog in front of them. The fog closed in. The red tail lights disappeared. There was a faint sound of motors and then silence.

At length Steve climbed out of his crevasse, a victim of weird circumstances, thoroughly resentful. His eyes, accustomed to darkness, could tell earth from sky; but his position was utterly unknown. He stumbled forward, somewhat uphill, trying to find the road where the trucks had gone.

Suddenly he heard a muffled groan. He halted and peered at the ground. Something lay just ahead of his boots. He reached downward, touching warm clothing with his left hand. His right, sweeping lower, accidentally came upon the butt of a revolver. He grabbed it.

"Pass the word!" gasped the wounded man. "Tell 'em the hijackers got us!"

"Hijackers?" wondered Steve. "What's a hijacker?"

The wounded man twitched. Despite the darkness he managed to convey his alarm.

"Who's talkin'?" came a near-by voice, as an indistinct form approached. "Bill! Pete! Is that you, Pete?"

"A spy!" gasped the wounded man. "A spy—the guy that came off the boat! He's kiddin' me! Look out!"

Steve did not wait for the next move of these suspicious men, but leaped to his feet and swung the muzzle of his pistol forward.

"Stay right there! I've had enough of this nonsense for one night! Stick your hands up!"

The approaching man's form became elongated. Steve walked up to him and found a weapon which he stuck into his pocket, somewhat irascibly.

"The next time you stage one of these knock-down-and-drag-out shows please get another audience!" he suggested. "You'd better go home and take your friend with you!"

"Ya-a! You spy! You lookout! I thought there was somethin' queer when we seen you hangin' around the beach! The ship's crooked, too! Everybody's crooked!"

"I believe it!" admitted Steve.

"We should have croaked you, you spy! You tell them other birds that we'll meet 'em some day, and you, too! Do you get me?"

"All right," agreed Steve, turning away. "Take care of your friend. I'm going. I hope you'll meet all the hijackers you want!"

Thoroughly disillusioned concerning his method of reaching his sister and her smart home in the city, he found his road and cannily kept to the wheel-tracks, glancing rearward until he was well away. At times he halted and his desert-trained hearing was put into play; but there was no sound except the muffled booming of the ocean.

He trudged uphill for an age. The fog lessened. He reached a summit at last and descended along the edge of a hill.

Far inland, across a dark void, he saw a moving light which became twin lamps, then disappeared. Later another pair of lamps passed; and then another. Cheered by this sight he walked along cautiously for another hour. At last he saw the lights of a farmhouse as he came around a bend. He reached a dim white fence and went past it. A dog barked. Steve's feet touched hard pavement. A highway at last!

He halted and tried to look backward up the old dirt road, hearing no sound. Far to the southward, along the highway, came two far-away lights, promising a possible ride. His recent troubles were over. Suddenly, as if remembering something, he ran his right hand under his shirt and fondled a

money belt. In an instant he was satisfied that its cargo was fully intact.

His fingers had touched forty thousand dollars in currency.

II.

It was after midnight when Steve passed many parked automobiles in a quiet residential district and halted in front of a house with dark windows. A strain of piano music came from within the building. Steve hesitated; but this was the right address, so he ascended four steps and rang a bell. Shortly he was standing upon a Persian rug in a paneled anteroom. Beyond him an opened doorway shone with golden brilliance, bringing laughter and music.

Awed by his surroundings, he twirled a peaked cap borrowed from a sailor; and then, feeling weights in his clothes, he furtively slipped his captured pistols into a big vase on a stand. A violin and flute joined with the piano in a dash of music. A shadow fell in the doorway. A tall, black-haired young woman, beautifully gowned in shining black, swept into the room and extended her bare right arm. Her voice was a resonant contralto.

"Ah, Stephen! At last! I expected you several days ago!"

"I got shipwrecked," he explained.

"Yes?"

Steve continued, feeling that he had to.

"I met a fellow who wanted me to come up the coast in his catboat. He said he could handle it. He fell overboard. I stayed on the bottom of the boat, yelling for help, till a little steamer came along. Otherwise I wouldn't be here."

They appraised each other. Neither had seen the other for years. She was the older. Their father was the same, but their mothers came from different environments, which reacted on their children. Her costume was exquisite, molded to a tall and graceful form; his was wrinkled and wrecked, hanging on a rangy body. Her high-heeled slippers were of sheer satin; his boots were soaked and out of shape. Her rounded cheeks were olive; his were rough and red. Her parted hair, on a small and well-poised head, shone jet black in the soft light; his sandy mop stuck up in every direction. Her eyes were round and brown; his were blue, peering humorously from lids narrowed by facing hot suns and strong winds. Her hand was long and tapering; his was broad and rough.

She switched on a light and pointed to a lounge. She seated herself beside him.

"It is true, then, about father's death?" she asked.

He nodded toward his shoes. The music became louder. A gust of laughter and applause followed.

"A pity!" she apologized. "My invitations were out before I heard of his passing. I could not stop this."

He nodded again and twirled his cap. His eyes, striving covertly to gauge her, encountered a direct stare which was eager and questioning. He resented it. Of course she was entitled to her inheritance, but his father's last admonition ran through his brain, as clearly as though the crochety old Westerner were in this room:

"That girl's independent and high-falutin' and full of society ideas and none too steady. Most of it came from her ma, of course, but I'm not keen about handin' her a lot of money outright, so I want you to sell half the outfit, convert it into currency, go and see her, and dangle it right in front of her like a prize for good behavior, see? Play her along. If she's all right, give it to her. If she's not, give it to her anyhow. At least I want you to make a try, *sabe?*"

Steve felt lost and helpless now. The thing looked easy enough in Gray Butte, Arizona, but not in the presence of this sophisticated woman! There was music in his ears, scent in his nostrils, and the flash of polished floors in front of his eyes. He sparred for time:

"I understand you're doing concert work. How is it?"

"Only fair, Stephen. It's very speculative, you know."

He stared at the splendid tapestries and rugs in the room. She smiled.

"My mother left me this home and enough to give me a start, but I cannot continue indefinitely, of course."

"Of course."

He studied his awkward feet. Something flashed above his line of vision. His gaze lifted and he sat bolt upright. A slender yellow-haired girl stood like an ivory statue near the doorway, clad mainly in glinting sandals, tassels of beads, and a vivid cloth of gold which hung gracefully from her shoulders and shimmered in the light. She puffed at a cigarette in a long holder, speaking to Paula through the smoke:

"Do I go on now or wait awhile?"

"Go ahead!" ordered Paula.

Other dancers appeared before his vision, one of them in fluffy white, two in Spanish costumes. They gathered near the doorway, talking and laughing.

"Do you do this very often?" blurted Steve.

Paula nodded a negative, causing her large ornamental earrings to jingle.

"Not very. I could not afford it!"

"No; I couldn't, either. There'd be a riot!"

"Oh, this is only a tidbit. Really an experiment. I wish to see how my friends like it."

The girls passed beyond the lighted doorway. There was a yell. Hands clapped. The music swung into a fast dance.

Paula arose. "I must attend to my guests!" Then courteously: "Would you prefer to be shown your room. You must be quite tired."

Wistfully Steve looked toward the lighted door. He was gripped by a great curiosity.

"Well," he hesitated, "if you think I'd better go to bed—"

She was game. Her chagrin was quickly effaced. Nodding, she took his hand and led him through the doorway into a big oak-paneled room, where he blinked amid bright lights and a blur of moving figures. A mass of faces turned toward him, making him realize his horrible impudence; but it was too late.

Paula raised a graceful arm. "My friends, I wish to present my brother, Stephen Kane. He has just arrived from Arizona after perilous adventures, including a shipwreck."

Hands clapped loudly. Steve sensed that he was a very interesting freak, and his face was blank with consternation.

A voice bawled at him through the noise: "Atta boy! Water, water everywhere, and not a bootlegger in sight!"

Steve grinned, but only for an instant. Paula led him around, introducing him to the mass of strangers whose shifting figures were further confused in his brain by the shimmer of lights upon polished floors, polished piano, glinting silver, and stacks of varicolored dishes on a corner table.

Steve was led up to a stout woman in black; a slim gentleman with a huge nose; a sporty looking married woman; a wealthy publisher who looked like a bartender; a pair of pretty blondes in dark blue who shrank from him; a thin maiden with spectacles and short hair; a demure young woman in plain white whose brown eyes were direct and friendly; a handsome, keen-eyed, black-mustached man whose smile was genuine; several others not so attractive; an army major; a bearded man who looked like an artist; a jumble of young men and girls; and finally a great mountain of flesh whose loose, flabby, pinkish, bland visage was belied by a pair of blue eyes with a gimlet stare utterly without expression. He arose ponderously and lifted a wineglass.

"Here's to the shipwrecked cowboy! May he never take water again!"

There was a laugh, but Steve saw Paula's eyes narrow. The stout man gulped his wine and subsided quickly. The little dancer with the golden scarf, standing motionless in a corner, allowed her reddened lips to curl in a slight smile. Steve backed away.

"Do not be alarmed!" came a courteous voice alongside him. "Paula saw a dancer like that in the movies one time, so she thought she'd try it. Rather daring. It doesn't matter, of course; we're willing victims to Paula's experiments. We're used to them!"

Steve turned to the keen-faced man whose intelligent eyes were smiling.

"I'm a lamb and plumb lost!" admitted the man from Arizona.

"But I'm sure you'll like us. We are not so abandoned as we may seem. Mixed crowd, of course. Paula's crowds are always mixed. We expect it. Hello—there's

Rimini, the violinist. He brings people to their feet!"

"Must be good," grunted Steve. Then: "What's a hijacker?"

The other frowned quizzically.

"I don't know what's in your mind, but 'hijacker' is slang for a person who steals liquor from a bootlegger, who naturally has no legal recourse. Why? What brings this up?"

"I heard it to-night for the first time," explained Steve.

"Oh!"

Paula came up and laid a hand on the other's black shoulder.

"I'm glad you are so nice to my brother, Michael!" Then to Steve: "Mr. Hamilton is one of my best friends, Stephen. I hope you will be given the pleasure of his friendship."

Michael Hamilton bowed to her. "A brother of yours, Paula, needs no credentials."

Steve tried to register urbanity, but the great voice of the fat man behind him broke out in a rumbling confidential whisper to somebody:

"Aw, he's just a poor hick that got out of the pasture by mistake. Somebody forgot to mend the fence. To hell with him!"

Steve colored. Slowly he backed away, landing alongside the smiling girl in white, whose hair was glinting unbobbed and nut-brown under the light. She looked like a regular old-fashioned girl.

"I'm getting all confused!" he blurted.

"You shouldn't think that way!" she chided. "Still, perhaps it must be strange to you. Are you going to stay here long?"

"I don't know. What makes you ask?"

She looked down upon her clasped hands. "You might not like it here."

"You've got a clairvoyant mind."

Paula intruded, somewhat agitated.

"Excuse me, Beth. Stephen, I'd like to speak with you."

Wondering, he followed her through the crowd and out to a small alcove near the main anteroom. A surly, blowsy, unshaven fellow in a gray coat stood there, dominated by the enormous figure of the fat man in evening clothes, whose blue eyes were coldly alert though his body was inclined to sway. The eyes bored into Steve's.

"Send him!" ordered the fat man to Paula.

Paula held out appealing hands.

"I wish you would not insist, Steinemann!"

"Aw, what's the difference? All he's gotta do is take a message. I can't reach 'em by telephone, can I?"

"But—"

"There's nobody else. I can't send a guest. Your servants are all women. I can't navigate. This other fella here is leavin' the city. That leaves it up to this guy."

"What's this about?" demanded Steve.

"There's a taxshi outside the door," explained the monster. "I'll give you address to go to. Give letter to a man named Taylor. That's all. Wait!"

The giant waddled over to a desk and scrawled a long note, which was folded into a heavy envelope. A bold address was written across it.

"I don't like this!" protested Paula.

"What you don't like makes no difference!" growled the fat man.

Paula drew herself up to her full regal height.

"You are forgetting yourself, Steinemann!"

"Aw, rats! Society stuff is all right in society, but this is business! Cut out the Ritz!"

"I said you were forgetting yourself!"

The fat man's eyes flared.

"Say!" he bawled, impatiently. "Ain't you got any sense? I'm tellin' you to send this guy out there with this message—see?"

Steve measured the great bulk of Steinemann and decided that nothing short of a fence-post would do; however, he reached his right hand out for a heavy vase. Paula countermanded with an imperious gesture. In amazement Steve set the vase down. The mountain of flesh addressed him.

"Take this message, kid! Beat it!"

"Steinemann!" pleaded Paula.

Steve looked from one to the other. His eyes narrowed as he realized that his stepsister was being bulldozed in her own home.

Why? What power did this fish-eyed fat person have over her? The cattleman decided to find out. He held out his hand for the letter.

"No!" cried Paula.

"Aw, get out of here," said the playful fat man to Steve.

"Stephen!" pleaded Paula.

"Aw, it's all right!" placated the giant. "He'll never know the difference!'

"Thanks," acknowledged Steve, taking the missive. "You're right. I'm plumb innocent."

The fat man's eyes had the steady glint of intense concentration.

"Yeh," he agreed, somewhat heavily. "You are; but what if you ain't? *You* can't rock the boat! Beat it!"

III.

A GREEN taxicab driven by a silent hawk-faced chauffeur drove Steve through miles of streets and finally into a region of railroad yards and manufacturing plants. Rows of shabby houses began to appear.

"Where are we going?" wondered Steve.

"We're almost there," grunted the chauffeur. "It's a tough district."

"That's funny!"

"Huh! There's lots of funny things nowadays, mister! I get 'em every night. Me, I've quit thinkin' about 'em!'

"I'm just starting!" confessed Steve.

The car ascended a dirt road flanked by dark houses. It turned at the top of the hill and drew up to a silent two-story edifice whose entrance was on the second floor, approached by a rickety stairway. The taxi driver flashed a light on the aged front porch. A number showed. It was the right address.

"Wait here," commanded Steve, alighting.

He went up the stairway and rang the bell. Footsteps creaked and the door was swung open. An electric light was switched on. Steve stepped into an odorous hallway with a threadbare red carpet. The door closed. He faced a swarthy man, hastily clad.

"I've got a letter for Joseph Taylor," announced Steve.

"Where you come from?"

The cattleman hesitated, reluctant to use Paula's address; but he told the truth doggedly. The swarthy man nodded and led him along a hallway and down a dark flight of stairs. A smell of alcohol and packing straw assailed his nostrils.

The guide reached the lower floor and opened a door which led into a well-lighted room where two men were standing alongside a rumpled bed. One of them, a slim, shifty-eyed fellow, identified himself as Taylor. He grabbed the letter, opened it, and yelped to the other:

"Now we know why them moving vans didn't come here! Hijackers got 'em!"

Suddenly the reader caught himself and glared at Steve, flicking the missive away; but Steve had seen its last sentence—thoughtlessly written at the end instead of the beginning—"Do not say anything in front of bearer."

Steve gasped, struck by the ghastly coincidence of the whole thing—first the bootleg boat, then the moving van episode, then Paula and her stout guest, and now this message; but a moment of thought convinced him that these happenings were *too* coincidental. He had stumbled across a network so vast that any one might bump into it at any time! A whisky ring!

Taylor tried to belittle the news in the letter.

"Aw, what if we did lose two movin' vans? There's plenty more stuff arrivin'!"

"Sure," said Steve, amiably. "You have to make allowances."

Two pair of heavy feet tramped down the hall from outside.

"Yep," agreed Taylor. "There's profit an' loss in every business!"

The door opened behind Steve. He turned. Two men faced him. Both halted in surprise. One was Big Bill, the burly fellow who had guarded Steve at the shore line. The other was a thin-faced companion. Suspicion flared from their eyes.

"It's the guy that came off the boat!" bawled Bill. "He was hangin' around when they landed the goods! And now he's here! A spy, boys! A spy! Grab him!"

"You're crazy!" cried Steve, backing against the bed.

"Oh, no!" ruled Taylor. "We'll look into this! Give an account of yourself, mister! How do you horn into this so often?"

"Accident!"

"Huh! Well, mebbe you'll have another accident!"

Bill's hoarse voice bawled forth:

"Grab him! Search him!"

Too late Steve remembered the money belt around his waist. Sudden panic made him lash out frantically and try to rush through a door or window.

His right fist leaped forward. It caught Taylor fairly between the eyes, knocking him across the bed. The other three instantly closed in. Steve tried to swing again. The thin-faced man smothered his arm as he leaped forward. The mighty fist of Big Bill descended. Steve saw stars. He staggered toward the door. Big Bill struck him again and knocked him to his knees.

Steve yelled at the top of his voice, desperately trying to attract possible aid from the taxi driver. The cry was muffled by a blow in the mouth. Another heavy blow crashed into his right eye. He yelled again, just as he saw a blackjack lifted and poised over his head. He tried to swing a protecting hand, but his arm was held. There was a shattering concussion. The world split into fragments of sparks which fell apart and then faded out.

He awoke in darkness, groaning from many hurts. At first he had an awesome feeling that this was the end of everything; but his hands lay on wood and the smell of alcohol and packing straw persisted. He arose to his knees, noting that his whole body was in disarray. At length he put a hand to his waist. The money belt was gone!

A hoarse voice boomed from somewhere outside:

"You needn't wait, driver. He's goin' to stay here!"

"Aw, how do you get that way?" scoffed the chauffeur.

"All right, then. I'll tell you to beat it, then. How about that?"

Steve gathered his battered muscles together and managed to crawl to a side window, where he tried to raise the shade. He saw the vague outlines of the taxi out in front. The driver had come from his seat.

"See it in my hand?" snarled the chauffeur. "You pull any of that stuff on me, and you'll be holdin' a harp! D'ye think I slam around town all night without knowin' my stuff?"

"Hold 'em!" yelled Steve.

There was a howl outside and a distant pattering of feet. Steve lifted a chair and crashed through the window.

"Hold 'em!" he implored, climbing through jagged glass.

The driver calmly twirled an automatic.

"Aw, they're gone!" he announced. "We don't want 'em!"

"Find 'em!" raged Steve. "Hurry up—let's chase 'em!"

"Wadda you think I am—a cop?"

Steve reached the taxi and shook both fists wildly.

"They've got my money. They rolled me! Come on—chase 'em!"

"Aw, chase 'em yourself!"

"You—you mean, you'll do nothing?"

"Aw, what's the use? Every time one of you hicks come to town you lose your roll and then yell. I'd be chasin' my legs off. You're the second one to-night!"

"Wow! Ye gods, what a city! Stay here, then! I'll do something, even if I'm shot!"

He turned and raced toward shadows behind the house, where he thought the others had disappeared. He struck a fence, vaulted it, barked his shins against an empty doghouse, dodged between two more houses, swung into a rear street, and then tore around the block. He saw absolutely nothing of his despoilers. At last he was forced to return to the maddening taxi driver.

"It's a good city," reported the chauffeur, taking up the recent conversation. "I'm a booster. You birds come in here and crab at us, but it's you hicks and boobs and bootleggers that raise all the trouble, and then you blame the city!"

"Lend me your pistol!" pleaded Steve. "I want to look into that house."

"Nix. I may have to drag you out again!"

"Sa-ay! Are you like this all the time? Come with me, then."

"Aw, tell it to the police!"

"No!" gasped Steve, remembering Paula's connection with the affair.

"Uh-huh. Old stuff! They always tie you rubes up so you can't holler!"

"All right," decided Steve, in an unsteady voice which whimpered. "You pore, onregenerate, slab-sided mule, stay here, then, and hold your pistol *hard!* I'm going alone."

"O. K. My meter runs along just the same!"

Steve fairly leaped toward the house lest he bite the man. He armed himself with a fence picket and searched the building from top to bottom. There was nothing there except shadows and echoes and the creaks of his own footsteps. At last he was forced to trudge despondently back to the taxi. He hadn't found even a shred of paper for evidence.

"Home!" he growled, entering the rear of the machine. "Make it fast!"

The lights of Paula's house appeared before his vision in an incredibly short time. Well-clad persons laughingly descended the front steps and entered sedans or limousines. Steve was beset by qualms about himself. He jerked a mirror toward him. The dim light from the dash-lamp reflected upon a red-faced horror with tousled hair, a blackish eye, thick lips, and blood on the side of the neck. His shirt was in ribbons, its collar was torn out, his coat was ripped, and his trousers were coming apart.

"My gosh!" he gasped. "Stop here! I'll sneak in the back way."

"Oh, sure!"

The taxi driver, certain of his pay, applied the brakes.

Steve got out.

"Next time you start away from Jay Corners," advised the amiable chauffeur, "put your bank roll in a safety vault—and then don't come!"

For one turbulent instant Steve stood quite still, seeing red. Then the pent-up resentment from a whole night of mishaps was too mighty for his self-control.

Swiftly he jumped on the running-board, yanked the automatic pistol out of its side pocket, threw it into the street, jammed the chauffeur against his wheel, reached up for the taximeter, smashed it over his cap, knocked him under the steering-post, grabbed him by the neck, shook him, bounced him up and down, shoved him to the floor, dumped the seat cushion on top of him, and left him gurgling and clawing for air.

"Now say something smart about *that!*" suggested Steve. "Something witty!"

There was no intelligent reply.

Steve, feeling slightly better, ran up the street, slipped into a little ivy-covered alley beside the house, reached the back yard, climbed some steps, and took an open door which led to the kitchen. A negro woman stood petrified amid piles of dishes and spoiled eatables. Another brought in trays and empty bottles. Steve rushed straight into a dim hallway. Voices came from around the corner, chattering brightly. The party was breaking up. Paula's low voice was bidding some guests good night.

Steve poked his cautious head around the corner. By luck he caught Paula's eyes, which widened at the awful apparition and then recognized some trace of her stepbrother under the mass of bruises. He beckoned and drew back. She controlled herself and continued her small talk, changing not the slightest intonation in her voice. In time the door closed. She glided around the corner.

"Hurry!" she whispered. "What has happened?"

His jaw tightened bitterly.

"I've met your friends!" he blurted. "Your *real* friends! Bootleggers—crooks from the gutter!"

Paula turned white, but her head went up.

"You *dare!*"

"Dare?" He clenched his fists. Words fought wildly for utterance; but still he was not cruel enough to shout in front of her guests. He growled: "You have dared to send me to such a place, and now you ask *that?*"

"I did not send you—"

"Evasion! You're in it up to your neck. You'd better start explaining."

"And are you so moral?"

He stiffened.

"Moral? No! I smoke, swear, drink, gamble—but not under false pretenses! You're a fraud, a fake—"

He did not know how frightful he looked with his tattered clothes, swollen face and tousled hair. But Paula braved him. Her lips tightened as she took a long breath.

"You shall not say these things in the presence of my guests! Michael Hamilton is just around the corner. I forbid you!"

The Arizonian's mouth opened. The statuesque creature awed him, forcing him to choke down his indignation and making him stare at her, wondering what to do! Finally he bowed his head, admitting defeat. But he could not accept defeat. Pure human stubbornness caused him to take a new tack.

"All right. Then I'll give you something else to think about. I brought your inheritance with me. In a money belt. Forty thousand dollars. It was foolish, but I brought it that way. I wanted to carry out dad's wishes literally. But to-night I met your *friends!*"

Remorse struck him. Her eyes dilated with horror. He stopped; and then he concluded doggedly:

"Your friends wanted it, so they took it!"

Her face turned white as ivory. Her eyes closed. He caught her as she fell.

IV.

STEVE felt constrained as he entered the dainty breakfast room next morning. Awkwardly he sank his battered body into a chair and allowed a colored maid to serve him. Paula was pensive, clad in a spotless house gown, toying with flawless cutlery. Steve studied how to approach her. He looked out of the curtained window toward the streaky waters of the Golden Gate below him. The silence became intense.

"Your clothes have been rumpled," suggested Paula, hesitantly. "Perhaps you'd like to buy a new suit."

"I haven't a cent. I'm cleaned!"

She inspected the flashing sides of a coffee pot. Her voice was very clear:

"And you mean to say that you carried all that money with you, in that fashion?"

"Oh, it was foolish. But it looked safe enough a week ago. It was dad's wish. I intended to take a train here. There was nothing to it. I didn't allow for these other stunts. When I took that boat ride I'd half forgotten the money in my belt. Got used to it. The first day I was feeling it all the time. Last night I'd forgotten it. It's natural, I guess."

"But couldn't you have banked it and brought a check?"

"No bank in Gray Butte. When I got here the banks were closed."

She sighed. Her voice broke.

"What are you—we—going to do?" she asked.

"Get the money back. I don't know how. I haven't a plan. I'll have to think up one. Meantime, how about clothes?"

"I think I can arrange credit." Her lips twisted. "I've used it at times!"

He glanced at the dark sideboard, the splendid picture above it, the paneled walls, the heavy blue window hangings, and the beautifully scrolled lamp near the tinted ceiling.

"Oh!" he remarked, slowly. "Then it's all a fake. All false appearances. Like the whole city, I suppose!"

"No! The city is glorious! You stumbled into an evil cross section, that's all!"

He sat back and countered audaciously:

"Now, what sort of whisky does Mike Hamilton peddle?"

"He's not that sort of man! He's honest and decent."

"Your beau?" asked Steve, bluntly.

"Not exactly. Please do not misconstrue me!"

"I can't construe anything!" he raged. "Listen. How does my father's daughter happen to be wrapped up in a whisky gang?"

She winced, looking resentfully at his rumpled figure; but he was her judge.

"I needed money," she admitted, to the coffee pot. "Concert work is uncertain. My funds became low, so low that I did not know which way to turn." She saw him grinning toward her thousand dollar paint-

ing on the wall. "Oh, of course I could move away; drop my friends; drop my work; leave everything that has been dear to me since childhood—drop every hope and aspiration—" She halted. "*Can* you understand?"

"No. Go on."

"Ah, the virtuous viewpoint is so easy to one who has never been tempted!"

"Go on. You were explaining."

She spoke through rebellious lips:

"I was approached by a—gentleman—who needed money. He offered a chance for a sure investment. I did not know exactly what it was, but he proved his case so well that I took a chance with the last of my funds—making sure that I should not know exactly what the investment was. Can you understand?"

"Yep. Too much. Kidding yourself!"

She nodded coldly.

"The investment was successful. I made money. I have always made money, until recently. But I got in deeper and deeper." A grim line straightened her curved lips. "Now they even come to my home!" Suddenly she clutched her napkin in clenched fists. "Can you see the daily, hourly terror—the fear of discovery—haunted—living over a volcano—oh, my brother, why did you tell me last night of the good fortune that might have been mine!"

Steve had nothing to say. Her appeal was too piteous. He watched a freighter plowing through blue waters below him. Something moved outside the window. He focused his eyes upon the front steps. A familiar, sturdy, hook-nosed man in good blue clothing was arriving.

"Who is that?" snapped Steve.

Paula turned and glanced outside.

"That is Joe Hammond, one of the chief lieutenants of the gang!"

"Who is the big chief?"

"Steinemann. You met him." Contempt crept into her voice. "He wanted to get into 'society.' I had no recourse!"

"Of course not!"

The doorbell rang. Paula, with a negative nod to the maid, arose and walked to the anteroom.

Steve hesitated. Suddenly, without Paula's knowledge, he arose, slipped toward the big vase, and quietly extracted his short-barreled pistol. He tiptoed into an alcove. The front door opened. The newcomer was ushered in.

"I didn't want to telephone," he explained, quickly. "I was near here, anyhow. They've traced the moving vans into the Peninsula hills. We're goin' to round 'em up. To-night." His voice became dulcet. "We'll not see *you* suffer a loss! Not *you*, Paula!"

Steve's anger arose. Paula! And so his father's daughter—bearing his name—was subject to familiarities from a gang of cheap lawbreakers! Impetuously Steve stepped forward, holding the pistol. The other man's mouth opened. He threw a sharp inquiring glance at Paula.

"I've heard enough!" roared Steve. "There are some things I can't stand for!"

"Who is this fellow?" demanded the other, recognizing Steve and speaking to Paula. "Your brother?"

"Not exactly," said Steve, truthfully.

"Oh. A spy! He was at the landing last night!"

"An officer of the Federal Secret Service!" announced Steve.

"Stephen!" gasped Paula.

The visitor's face turned purple-red.

"So you're a spy! A spy! I knew it! Well, you haven't got anything on me! You haven't any witnesses—"

Steve cocked his pistol.

"No!" screamed Paula. "Stephen—not that! Heavens, stop this melodrama!"

The last word inspired Steve with a new idea. Deliberately he pointed the pistol toward her.

"Stephen!" he scoffed. "Cut out the pet names, please! Come down to earth! I've worn a mask—yes, I've fooled you, leading you onward, letting you tattle your little secrets in my ear while getting enough evidence to send you and your fine crowd of crooks to the penitentiary! Never mind the endearments now! We'll dispense with them! You're trapped! You poor fool, so you tried to throw me off the trail with your cheap love! Do you think I've been blind all these weeks?"

"Paula!" groaned the reproachful visitor.

Paula looked stricken.

"For Heaven's sake!" she gasped, in a voice that was really piteous.

"Oh, you didn't mean to betray your fools!" declaimed Steve, giving Paula her cue. "You can tell them you were innocent! But you weren't clever enough. This man, for instance, knew his scoundrels took marked bills off my body last night—"

"That's a lie!" croaked the hook-nosed man. "I never saw them after the firing commenced!"

"Oh! So you ran as fast as that!"

"What firing?" gasped Paula.

"Oh, one of the results of your little investments!" said Steve, with biting truth. "There was a battle at the beach between bootleggers and hijackers. Maybe somebody was killed. I haven't seen the newspapers. Perhaps they'll find a 'murder mystery' shortly!"

Paula laid a hand to her bosom.

"Ah, what have I been doing!" she groaned.

"Say nothing, Paula!" commanded the visitor, between tight lips. "Keep mum!"

"Never mind that!" snapped Steve. "Put your hands up! Turn around! I'll see if any of my bills are in your pockets!"

"If I had any bills I'd be far away!" snarled the visitor.

"I believe it," admitted Steve, disappointed at his search. "I suppose you crooks all scatter after you make a killing, eh?" Steve brightened. "You could find your friends if you wanted to, though!"

"Sure I could! What of it?"

Steve appraised him for a long time.

"Well, maybe you'll talk better when you've had a good rest," decided the cattleman, at last. "I'm going to hold you here for awhile. You'll think it over. Paula, get me some clothes line!"

"No!" she gasped, in real alarm. "Let him go, Stephen! This is too terrible! It's dangerous!"

"Go!" he roared. "I told you this mockery is over. Get that clothes line!"

"Hurry!" urged the hook-nosed man, whose eyes sent a message to Paula.

"Oh, she can't escape!" snapped Steve. "There are other men watching! I'm not so easy!"

"This is madness!" persisted Paula.

"Go!"

She went, tossing up her hands. The visitor dropped his attempt at bluster. He licked his lips. Then:

"Couldn't we fix this up?" he suggested.

"No. Not till you get that money back from your men!"

"I'll get it!"

"You bet you will! Do you want to correspond with those fellows right now?"

"And get 'em into your trap? Ya-a-a! You're slick, you are!"

"All right; what would you suggest?"

"How much money did you lose?"

Steve told the truth.

"Forty thousand dollars?" The man's jaw sagged. "You mean the boys got that off you?" His eyes became triumphant. "Ha-ha! So the grafter got soaked for his roll, eh?"

"Grafter?"

"Yeh, grafter! How else would a Federal agent get that much coin, eh? You big bum, you'll not get *that* back without workin' for it! I've got somethin' on you now!"

"That's right," conceded Steve, dazedly. "I made a mistake."

"You bet you did! Ha-ha! And you've got the nerve to threaten *me!*"

"That's enough!" snapped Steve. "Suppose you're all wrong? Suppose I wasn't crooked? Are all Federal agents crooked?"

"Nope. They're not. But they don't drag big bank rolls around, mister!"

"All right. Suppose I'm not a Federal agent at all?"

The man's eyes widened.

"Oh!" He drew back a step. "I see it now! A hijacker! The paymaster, eh?"

"All right," agreed Steve. "What of it? Will you get your men together?"

"Sure." Sweetly. "I'll bring 'em all! They'd like to meet you!"

"One at a time!"

"Oh, no!"

"Go to the devil, then!"

Paula returned with a coil of strong clothes line. She was loath to give it over.

"What an actor!" she remarked, looking at Steve.

"He fooled you!" snarled the visitor. "You poor boob!"

The doorbell rang. Paula stiffened and looked at a wall clock. Her face paled again.

"My accompanist!" she gasped. "A rehearsal! I had forgotten!"

"Where's the stairs—a cellar—a clothes closet—anything?" demanded Steve, pointing the pistol. "Speak quick!"

She pointed to the left and downward. The visitor was about to cry out, but Steve jammed the pistol muzzle against his ear and he wilted. Steve shoved him forward and downward. Paula's head bowed and then, unsteadily, she walked to the doorway, pulling herself together by sheer willpower. Steve shoved his stumbling prisoner down a flight of steps and into a cellar. He turned on a light switch. The other man tensed. Steve saw it.

"Shut up!" he snapped. "You start fighting and I'll drill you!"

The man's eyes glared with malevolence, but his lips trembled and he breathed too hard. Steve grabbed him, threw him, bound him, gagged him, searched about, and finally stowed him away in a dark closet alongside a coal bin. Steve trussed him comfortably on the floor and sprang the bolt upon the wooden door of the closet.

The metallic click sounded like an overt act. It meant that he had crossed his Rubicon—whatever Rubicon it might be. He stood and stared at the shiny thing for a long time.

"I wish I knew what I was doing!" he lamented, plaintively.

V.

If Paula had been ruffled by recent stormy events, all trace of it was gone when Steve returned upstairs to the hallway which led to the front door. The deep-toned chords of a splendid grand piano came from the front room. He peeped through heavy portières and observed the girl with the brown hair playing. Michael Hamilton was in a chair at her right, and behind her was Paula—tall, gracious, stately, unruffled, as though nothing had ever happened!

"Cool!" muttered the ranchman in tattered gray, standing on the polished hardwood floor. "How do they do it?"

Her resonant voice floated forth, beautifully trained, perfectly controlled, running through all the emotions of a splendid Saint-Saëns piece; first cajoling, then wistful, then argumentative, declamatory, vehement, violent, ending in a burst of wild, passionate, triumphant music that made the ranchman from the cow country retreat to a settee in a telephone alcove and sit there, staring at the floor and clenching his hands without knowing why.

He stayed there a long time until her guests departed. Immediately she sought him.

He arose slowly, feeling like a limp dishrag, so full of inner emotions that outward happenings seemed superficial.

"What are you doing with that man downstairs?" she demanded, breaking into his trance.

"Oh, him? I don't know."

"Don't know?"

Steve started pacing the polished floor of the anteroom, speaking frankly:

"I overplayed my hand. I should have stayed in the background. Those fellows didn't know I was your brother. I should have watched this fellow, not captured him. Now I've spilled the beans!"

Paula's face showed her poignant disappointment.

"Stephen! Then you have only interfered to make things worse! Ah, do you realize how one false move can betray me—humiliate me before my friends—lay me open to the vengeance of these ruffians?"

"Well, you got yourself into this!" reminded Steve, slowly.

She made an impatient gesture.

"And you have no plan—no idea—nothing!"

"I'll fight it out somehow."

"Violence?"

"I don't know," he admitted, helplessly. Then his voice became exasperated: "I don't want the puzzle any more than you do! I'd like to leave this place! I want to go home! If this is society, then I want a nice horse corral; but I've got to get your money back! I can't leave you! I've got to fight! Dad would have wanted me to!"

"You are at liberty to go home, Stephen! I know you have done the best you could."

"I can't. I've got to stick. It's a sort of duty. I'll have to turn bootlegger, maybe—learn the names and addresses of this gang — track 'em down, through you or without you. If I only knew enough about you to know your sincerity!"

She held out pleading hands.

"Is terror not sincere?"

"Yes; but—somehow—you don't look *rumpled* enough. I can't understand you. You—you ought to run around more, and throw up your arms, and cry and wring your hands—I can't explain it, but you don't *seem* right, somehow!"

She was forced to smile.

"I fear I lack your dramatic ability."

He stared at her, then gave it up.

"I'll try to study it out. It's getting too thick for my brain!"

He pondered on the matter all afternoon, even while visiting the profane prisoner, who promised retribution. Steve tied him tighter and then visited the down town district, buying a blue suit and other things in a credit store and altering his appearance completely. But the problem remained unsolved. He was still studying that night while wondering whether or not to watch the capture of the moving vans far down on the southern roads. He sat alone in front of a cheery grate fire in the front room, watching the dancing flames.

A clock struck eleven. A neighbor's automobile buzzed away outside. A distant street car rumbled up a hill. Then came a silence which made Steve aware of subdued conversation somewhere near the front wall of the house. Suddenly one of the voices burst forth in crooning song:

"Mary had a little lamb
With flesh as white as snow—"

There was an interim while the singer seemed to be thinking deeply. Then:

"But why should any one give a damn? Thash what I'd like to know!"

"Wow!" whooped a jubilant voice. "Thass good! Thass good! Say it again, Shorty! Hurry up, before we forget it!"

Steve jumped up as if jabbed by a pin.

"My men—Shorty and Slim—up here? And drunk? Good fathers, does this city *float* in whisky?"

He ran to the door and flung it open. The light from the hallway gave illumination to a little green hedge near the side entrance at the right of the front steps. Above the hedge were the upper parts of two figures, one tall and one short, arm in arm, swaying. Both their heads were topped by broad-brimmed hats.

"Come in!" rasped Steve. "What are you doing here?"

The pair huddled together.

"We ain't ready," demurred the taller one. "We wanna be shober first."

"Come in!" barked Steve.

The pair hesitated, turned two resentful faces toward the speaker, but finally rolled around to the front, ascended the steps, and stood together, hand in hand, blinking into the light. Both were round-headed, red-faced, and slightly bleary-eyed. Both were more or less shaven except for scrawny mustaches. Both wore shiny new store clothes off the counters of the Gray Butte Emporium. The taller visitor was slightly knock-kneed. The shorter was slightly bow-legged.

"We was just hangin' around," explained the taller, blandly.

"We wanned to make sure you was safe," added Shorty. "You carried a lota money into this wild — hic — wicked city. We wasn't goin' to come in and shee you till we was shober. Hey, Slim?"

"Yeh," agreed Slim.

"How did you get here?" demanded Steve.

"How *did* we get here?" inquired Shorty.

"Per—pershever—aw, how do I know?"

"Come in," invited Steve, grimly.

The pair consented, trooping past the doorway and gaping at the splendid rugs, tasteful draperies, shining furniture and glittering floors. Their hats came off.

Paula appeared at the head of the inner stairs, bundled in a fluffy white affair full of pink ribbons which was mostly concealed by a cream-white lounging robe.

"What is the matter?" she called, in alarm. "Who are these persons?"

"Cattle off the range!" rasped Steve. "Mavericks! Strays! Angels of darkness—"

"'S' wrong!" corrected Shorty, gravely. "We're lit!"

"They're men off my ranch!" explained the irritated Steve. "They came to help guard my money belt! Ha-ha!"

Suddenly a wild idea gripped him. He grabbed Shorty by the coat lapel.

"Listen! How much money have you got?"

"We got plenny. Leggo. Sheven, eight hundered dollars. Why?"

Steve bawled triumphantly to Paula:

"Order up a bucket of black coffee! We'll get these lost lambs back into condition! I'm going to run a health resort for bootleggers down in Arizona!"

There was a moment of stupefied silence. Then:

"What on earth are you talking about?" demanded Paula, piteously. "Have you gone crazy?"

"Crazy, nothing! These two fellows will take my prisoner back to Arizona! They'll make him decoy the rest there! I can't fight this bootleg gang here; neither can you! All right! We'll play this game on the home grounds!"

VI.

It is no small job to buy a second-hand automobile at midnight in a strange city, especially if one desires a closed car and not too many questions asked. Steve rummaged around desperately, going from lot to lot, until at length he achieved a heavy, rattling old cab with suspiciously white tires and gleaming blue paint, the entire wheeze costing about four hundred dollars. Luckily it carried license plates, so Steve drove it home. Paula made a dubious inspection of the thing and then led the way into the house.

"It's no bargain," admitted Steve, before she could get in her criticism.

"Stephen! Do you know what you are doing? Do you realize that this means kidnaping — violence — toying with the law?"

"Oh!" Steve closed the front door slowly. "You think it would be better to call the police?"

"No! Never! But we cannot go on with *this!* It's dangerous! It invites discovery and retribution! Ah, Stephen, I fear your cure is worse than the disease!"

He stared at her, not without resentment.

"Suggest something better, then!"

"I wish I could! Ah, what a tangled web I'm in!" She faced him squarely. "Stephen! I cannot turn against these men—these bootleggers! I cannot!"

Steve's blue eyes narrowed.

"Oh! Your change of heart, then, was only temporary. It wasn't sincere!"

"Sincere!" Her voice vibrated. "Is a trapped animal sincere in wanting to escape? Ah, it isn't that. I have a deeper sincerity! Can I turn traitor to these men after taking their money—after living on their illicit operations? Is that fair? No! I could not respect myself!"

Steve slumped weakly into an armchair. His sun-tanned face looked weary. He blurted:

"It looks like you want to be pulled out of the fire unbeknownst to yourself!"

She was forced to smile.

"But how can I betray these men? Can I lead them on, treat them like friends, cajole them while trying to stab them in the back? No! How could I start anew with a clean conscience if I have been dishonest in this?"

He caught the appeal in it, but he couldn't give way to it. He considered the red-black-yellow pattern on a glorious Asiatic rug.

"Then you'd leave me to carry on the battle?" he inquired.

She sank into a chair. He noted how carefully each black hair was parted away from an exact line which ran along the center of her well-shaped head.

"Go home, then!" she urged, looking up suddenly. "You've done your part. I'll fight this thing alone!"

"I can't. Those burglars still have your money!"

She said no more. A twinge of compassion smote him. He arose hesitantly and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"We all do fool things and get into trouble some time, sister! It's human nature—even among society people and those who are supposed to be above human cussedness!" He couldn't refrain from that little jab; however: "What you need is a change. Get away from everything. Why not go down to Arizona?"

"To-night? In this deplorable car?"

"No. In a few days."

Her face brightened.

"I might. I hadn't thought of that. I don't know."

Hammering footsteps announced the approach of Shorty and Slim, who halted in the doorway. Steve waved them to seats. Sober but shaken, they made themselves uncomfortable in the nearest chairs. Steve minced no words.

"Are you fellows willing to tackle a dangerous job?" he asked, point-blank.

There was a moment of constraint.

"How dangerous?" qualified Shorty.

"Kidnaping. I've got a man already roped and tied."

There was another large silence.

"I dunno," considered Shorty. "What's the plot?"

"He has to be driven without discovery to Arizona."

"Impossible!" said Paula.

"What's the main scheme?" insisted Slim.

"I want you fellows to bring him to Casey's hole—you know the place, 'way up in the mountains, forty miles from the ranch. I want you to treat him rough. I want you to make him write letters to all his bootlegger friends, asking them to visit him. I'm even willing to have him send railroad tickets. Maybe they're wanting some nice place to hide. I'm aiming to get the whole gang there. Maybe I can't; it's a long shot; but if I do—" Steve closed his right hand. "See?"

"Can we make him act up?" wondered Shorty.

"You can. He's flabby."

Shorty looked at Slim. Slim looked at Shorty. Both began to grin. Steve explained his situation and plans thoroughly.

"You'll have to treat 'em rough," he warned. "But this is war!"

"It sounds real interestin'!" chuckled Slim.

"But suppose we're caught?" inquired Shorty.

"Then run for your lives!"

"It's too dangerous!" exclaimed Paula.

"Shall I let the prisoner free, then, to spread the alarm?"

"No!"

"Then we'll go on with this!" Steve turned impatiently to his employees. "Can you keep sober and attend to business?"

"If we don't," said Shorty, "we'll prob'ly stop a few years in the penitentiary. Safety first!"

"I'll take a chance, then. Make this fellow boost Arizona, see? Make him write like a boom-town circular. Make his friends crazy to join him down there. It's the only way I know to reach 'em. I can't fight 'em here. I'm a lost maverick here. I've got to get 'em on my own ground!"

Steve swung around to Paula. "Who are the fellows that robbed me, the pals of this man, Hammond?"

Paula replied reluctantly:

"Oh, I've met some of them. There's Angelo, Joe Walker, Hymie Baum, Big Bill Kramer, Kid Hink, and Red Kruse. That's all I know."

"That's plenty! It's a wonder they left you the kitchen sink!"

Paula's olive skin whitened. Slim and Shorty stared at her with frank curiosity. Steve saw he had been too frank. Instantly he started toward the door which led to the cellar stairway, giving his men a nod. They followed to the lower floor, where the prisoner was unbound and lifted to his feet. His face was malevolent and his eyes blazed with hatred. The light was switched on and the gag removed from his mouth. He began to chafe his hands.

"You'll pay for this!" he promised, glaring around at the three of them. "You don't get away with *this!* Not with me! Wait till my men come! We'll see about this! Huh! We'll see!"

Steve considered the man judicially.

"Tie him up again!" decided Steve. "He's not ripe yet!"

There was a short scuffle which left the

hook-nosed man puffing so that the gag threatened to strangle him; but shortly he was walking upstairs, outraged and wild eyed, wabbling on legs left free so he could travel to the cab.

Steve covered the man's shoulders with an old blanket and preceded the others up the steps. He opened the door from the cellar and passed through, intending to hold it open; but he shut it swiftly.

Two slouchy men were talking to Paula, whose face was alive with apprehension. Both turned toward Steve. One was of fair size; the other was short and weasel-faced. His slack mouth sagged when he saw the cattleman.

"Who's this guy?" he yelped.

For an instant the cattleman wished he still had his pistol, which he had tossed back into the vase long ago. His plans were going glimmering. The smaller man was the slim-faced fellow of the tumble-down house where Steve was robbed!

Quickly, striving to do the right thing on very short notice, the rancher braced himself against the door. The larger of the two men stepped forward.

"What have you got there, eh?"

"Never mind!" Steve spread himself in front of the panels. "This happens to be a private home!"

"Yeh!" shrilled the smaller man, who had recognized Steve. "But what are *you* doin' here?" His voice arose. "It's a plant! A trick!"

Paula thought she saw a way to avert the storm.

"He's my brother!" she explained.

"Your brother?" The slim-faced man looked from Paula to Steve as his face twisted in a sardonic grin. "Your brother! Ha-ha! Old stuff! And we thought you had *class!*"

Paula caught her breath. Steve jumped forward with all his weight. He swung a vehement right fist that knocked the fellow sprawling against the front wall. Steve followed up, standing over him.

"If my sister has a guardian here, it's because you crooks have stolen what belongs to her," said the cattleman very slowly. "Never mind your insults; you're built that way; you don't know any better; you can't apologize because it doesn't mean anything. Where's that money you took from me?"

"You lie!" snarled the prone crook from habit.

The other man had not helped his pal. Steve saw him sneak toward the rear door, which he shoved inward slightly. The door bulged outward and carried him with it as Slim wriggled his long body through. The other man recoiled. He yelled to Paula:

"Who are these fellows? What is this? A trap, eh? You traitor! You traitor! Stuffin' your house full of cops, eh?"

"No!" cried Paula.

The man shook a bony fist under her chin.

"You fly moll — you four-flusher with the Ritzy front—if you've double-crossed us, we'll knock you so far that—"

Slim grabbed his wrist. The man became desperate. He jumped aside, twisted, won free, calculated for one short instant, and slid for the exit. Slim went after him like a football tackler with both arms outstretched.

The fugitive hurdled his arms by a wild leap, opened the door, and rushed outside. The door collided with Slim. Slim bounced against Steve, who was watching the thin-faced fellow. Steve instantly shoved Slim aside.

"Grab the little man!" ordered Steve over his shoulder. "Stuff him into the cab with the man downstairs! Get out of town! Treat 'em rough! Never mind me! Hurry!"

Steve tore past the doorway and down the steps. He saw his quarry streaking along the street toward a lamp-post and past it. He started in pursuit. The other raced around a corner. So did Steve. He chased the man downhill toward a street with car tracks. A street car rumbled to the crossing, all lights lit. The fugitive dodged in front of it and gained safety by a thin margin. Steve had to wait until it passed; and then he saw the other speeding farther down hill. Steve halted, panting.

"Well, he'll never know where the cab went, anyhow!" soliloquized the cattleman.

Hastily he retraced his steps. As he neared the house he saw the ruby-red tail-light of an automobile moving away, growing smaller with distance until it turned a corner. Steve watched in benediction; and then he went into the house.

The lighted anteroom seemed strangely quiet after the recent scene. Paula was in a chair, clutching a dainty lace handkerchief, staring at the embers of the fire.

Steve slumped into another chair. "And now," he remarked cheerfully, "Heaven help us all!"

VII.

PAULA was very late to appear next morning, and her face was pale and drawn when at last she glided into the dainty breakfast room. Steve, smoking a cigarette, gave her plenty of time before starting any conversation. He watched a steamer running past a yellow-brown bluff as it plowed through the Golden Gate, leaving a mile-long wake of white waters behind it.

"Well," he inquired at length, "what are your plans?"

"Plans?" Her voice was plaintive. "I have only the instinct to flee."

"All right; flee, then."

She nodded, but her big eyes were disturbed. She blurted:

"Ah, Stephen, I almost wish you had never come here! I thought you were rustic, harmless, innocent, naïve. My heavens!"

Steve's homely face wrinkled into a grin as he balanced a coffee cup against his mouth.

"Huh! Do you think a man can run a big cattle ranch by being innocent? Do you think I can manage a crowd of wild-eyed wranglers by being harmless? Lady, you've guessed me wrong!"

"I know it." She hesitated. "That's why I fear for you."

"Forget it. My sins are in a rightful cause. I'm like a knight, or something, battling against sin."

"You are facetious this morning!"

"No, I don't like the job, but I can't let go. Hello, what's this coming?"

A uniformed messenger ran up the front steps. In a moment Steve was reading a wire dated from Fresno, more than two hundred miles away. It was:

> This is hell. Tire blew out, battery quit, front wheel is loose. Slim in the brush while I am repairing car here. Pray for us.
>
> SHORTY.

Steve tore the paper up. The messenger departed.

"Bad news?" inquired Paula, arising from the table.

"Everything is going as smoothly as might be expected," reassured Steve, truthfully. "Hadn't you better pack up?"

She bowed her head meekly.

"I will have to bid good-by to all my friends, of course. It might take a day or two. When do we start?"

"Whenever the starting is good. Maybe I'll stay here till Hammond's letters arrive among his friends. I want to see their effect. You'd better go away first."

"I? Alone on an Arizona cattle ranch?"

Steve looked up sharply.

"Well, it's just as safe as a bootlegger's headquarters! Maybe more so! What more can I offer? Isn't it enough that you're under your father's roof?"

Paula caught her breath and drew her head up. Steve realized that she was already distracted enough. He arose, stepped forward, and slapped an impulsive hand on her surprised aristocratic shoulder.

"Forgive me—sister. Do whatever you darned please. If you want chaperones or house parties, go to it. I'm only trying to help you!"

She turned away and started for the rear stairs, her head bowed, though there was a trace of amusement in her face.

"You are a good man, Stephen!" she admitted, poising herself at the base of the steps; and then, with a queer little shrug, she started up, just as the doorbell rang.

It was another telegram from Fresno:

> This is hell. We had to buy two new spark plugs. Cargo is O. K., and Slim made them write three letters with a fence picket boosting Arizona. The car sounds terrible.
>
> SHORTY.

An hour later the bell rang again. This time it was Beth, greeting Steve with a

smile as they shook hands. She brought her roll of music to the piano rack and doffed her plain gray tailored coat and a white toque. She called upward to Paula, announcing her arrival.

"Do you do much playing?" asked Steve, lounging against the piano sociably.

"Oh, yes. It's my profession, you know."

"Profession? Huh! You look more like a little home body to me!"

Her brown eyes flashed up toward his quizzical blue ones; and then she looked down upon the ivory keys again. He saw that her lashes were very long.

"I must support myself," she explained.

"And you travel around from place to place, hammering pianos?"

"Recently, yes. I used to be with Paula alone, but she hasn't been herself lately." Suddenly Beth reached up a hand and clutched his sleeve. "Oh, take her away, Mr. Kane! You're her brother. Get her somewhere where she'll forget things. She hasn't been right since this terrible business started."

"What terrible business?"

Beth flushed. She touched a little plaintive note on the piano: "Plunk!"

"I wish you did not know!" she murmured, choosing her words. "I wish we had never gone into this terrible thing."

"Great Scott! Are you a bootlegger, too?"

Her hands opened out over the piano keys.

"No, no, no! I refused to touch a penny when I learned what it was. I took my loss; but Paula couldn't afford that. She was in too deeply."

"Could *you* afford it?"

Beth fondled the keyboard. He liked the gloss of her brown hair and the daintiness of her supple fingers; but he liked her reply better:

"I can always afford to be loyal to my friends, even though I may not approve. Take her away, Mr. Kane. You'll never regret it!"

The doorbell rang again before Steve could reply. Paula, in blue, swept downstairs and gave Steve time to disappear behind a side wall before she opened the door; and then he heard the heavy, slangy voice of Steinemann, the human elephant.

Steve peeped out and saw that the visitor was clad in all the splendor that the law allowed. Above his ruddy, chubby face was a shining high hat. His pink chops were shaved almost to whiteness. Under his rolling chin was a speckless high collar and white cravat. At the left lapel of his long black coat was a red carnation. Gray striped trousers, spats and patent leather shoes appeared beneath the coat. With a bow he presented Paula with a long box, presumably flowers. He grinned in a friendly manner, making a little gesture toward his raiment.

"Me, I got class!" he announced. "Look me over!"

"I am quite surprised!" came Paula's voice, truthfully. There was a hesitant moment. Then: "Won't you come in?"

"Yeh; sure. I always like to be among other classy people, hu-hu-hu!"

The mountain of flesh strolled in. The door closed.

Steve felt Beth clutch his arm.

"Let us go into the garden," she suggested. "I do not like this man."

"But how about Paula?"

"Oh, she's safe enough, except for being made ridiculous. We'd better go. It might be more tactful."

"Yes," agreed Steve. "There's going to be a powerful lot of tact needed around here. Let's go!"

Beth led him out of a side door to a small inclosed garden, where a perfect little green lawn was bordered by a pathway, and then by a thick but studied tangle of bushes, vines and flowers, forming little nooks. A high gray Italian wall stood at the rear and sides of the place. A little fountain, framed in moss and water grass, splashed musically from a small arch in the rear wall. Graceful marble seats stood on the pathway or peeped from the deeper shrubbery.

A butterfly flashed in the sunlight. Birds twittered in the brush. The place was calm, peaceful, isolated from the world.

"I love it," said Beth, taking one of the pathway seats. "Can you blame Paula for not wanting to give it up?"

He looked around slowly, and then upward toward the rear of the house. His homely face became wistful.

"It's sort of a paradise with a serpent in it. If we can throw out the snake it 'll be perfect."

He found Beth's gentle brown eyes regarding him with some curiosity.

"Allegory!" she exclaimed. "And your English is quite pure. I always thought that the people of the cattle country had a dialect all their own."

"Did you expect me to flourish six-shooters and bark out swear words?"

"No. But—I didn't know that your men were as well educated as you seem to be."

"I'm not," he replied soberly. "I wish I was. But the old ideas have changed. We have a grammar school in Gray Butte that would knock your eye out. We have a movie theater. We get magazines and news weeklies. There's a radio outfit in the ranch house. The old ways have gone."

"But they must have been wonderfully picturesque!"

"And uncomfortable. Oh, I'll grant that the old days were big days; my dad used to tell me stories that curled my hair. But give me the modern improvements. Why, I can sit on the porch of my ranch house and look at my cattle while the radio tells me the latest Chicago quotations on beef!"

"That doesn't sound very romantic," she demurred.

"All right. I can sit on my ranch house porch and watch the sunset throw gold on the hills while Galli-Curci sings from a corner of the living room. Beat that!"

"That's better." She nodded. "Now I envy you."

"I'd like to have you see it. Hello! Another telegram!"

A messenger slipped through the front gateway. The wire came from far down the San Joaquin Valley:

> This is hell. Burned out connection rod bearing. Will fix it in two hours. Garage man saw our guests, but we said we were taking escaped maniacs home and we got away with it. Shorty is dying of heart failure, and we hope you are the same. SLIM.

"Is it bad news?" asked Beth, studying Steve's face.

"Not yet," said Steve grimly, tearing up the missive.

A loud voice intruded from the front of the house. It was the fat man, pleading passionately to Paula:

"Don't turn me down without thinkin' it over. You've got the class and I've got the coin, Paula, and we'd make a swell team, you and me. I know I look rough, Paula, but I gotta good heart and it's strong for you!"

"Heavens!" gasped Beth, arising from the stone seat.

The mighty bawl grew louder and more intense:

"My God, Paula, I love you! Nix, nix; don't jump up like that, Paula. I ain't an enemy, Paula; I'm a slave! Can't you see how I've watched you, longed for you—gone dippy over you—took every chance I could to get near you because my heart was burnin' for you? Why, Paula, you're the queen of the earth to me! I've seen lots o' queens, Paula; I ain't any spring chicken, I'll admit; but when it comes to class you've got it on 'em all. Gimme a chance, Paula; look me over—"

Steve saw Beth staring toward the house, her lips parted and her eyes showing anguish and amusement.

"The poor man!" she exclaimed, with a little catch in her voice. "The poor, poor man!"

"Well, he's frank anyhow!" admitted Steve, starting to roll a cigarette. "Nothing sneaky about it; he comes right out and tells the whole city!"

"But how terrible for Paula! Oh, I wish it were some one else!"

Steve's eyes were quizzical as they looked into Beth's.

"Oh," he mused. "Hamilton, eh?"

Beth colored.

"I didn't mean it that way. That's not fair to Paula."

"No; still if Hamilton did start something, she wouldn't throw him out, would she?"

Beth was forced to smile.

"I do not believe such a thing ever happened, so I'm not able to discuss it," she said with an air of finality.

"Sure. Your language is vague, but your

facts are plain. Well, Hamilton isn't as bad as this, anyhow. Listen!"

"We shouldn't!"

"All right; try *not* to hear it. He's not a lover; he's an announcer! Whoa! Something's gone wrong."

He began to be aware of a growing silence—a cryptic and monotonous silence which lasted until Steve and Beth were forced to look at each other in perplexity. They became very quiet. Minutes passed. Then came a new voice, high and shrill and passionate, disclosing that a third person had entered the house. The voice yelled unintelligible things. The others started talking. There was a clamor until his tones grew clearer and harsher, dominating every other sound.

"You crook; you double-crosser! You thought you was smart, Steinemann, but we traced you, you big robber! You King of the Hijackers! Aw, do you think we don't know how you played us along, pretendin' to be the boss bootlegger, makin' us put up our coin and then stealin' our stuff? You greasy crook, you double-crossed your own crowd!"

"You lie!" howled Steinemann. "Get outa here!"

"Ya-a-a-a-a! I'm tellin' the truth!"

"Get outa here, you dirty little slob—there's ladies present!"

"Get out, hey? Ya-ya-a-a-a-a! We'll see! I suppose you didn't make us put all our coin in your bootleg game, did ya? I suppose you didn't make us bring that cargo up on the ship, did ya? I suppose you didn't steal them movin' vans for yourself, did ya? Ya-a-a! You traitor—you Judas—you double-crosser, you spy, you sneak, you robber—"

"Steinemann!" shouted Paula in desperation. "And you, whatever your name is—how dare you create this scene in my house?"

"Right's right!" defied the high voice stubbornly. "I'm in the right. We'll get this crook if we have to swing for it. And you, you imitation society jane, how about them spies and snoops you've got hangin' around here? Ya-a-a-a! You crowd of double-crossers, crooks, holdouts—we'll see about you! We'll see!"

A door slammed violently.

Steve was already running, leaving Beth behind. He raced into the house, up the stairs, and into the living room.

Steinemann's flabby face was white as his collar. His soft hands trembled. He leaned against a bookcase, mouth open, eyes stricken, looking piteous and dazed, like a fish yanked out of placid waters and puffing at the gills. Paula was seated on a chair, wringing her hands. Steve came to a halt in front of her. The accuser had gone.

"Where is he? Who is he?" demanded Steve, to Paula.

Steinemann gurgled and managed to point a pudgy finger toward the street. Steve whirled on him.

"Get out of here! I've heard enough from you and about you!" Steve walked to the door and opened it. "Git!"

"This ain't your house!" demurred Steinemann.

"No; it's not yours, either. I've got just about enough authority to tell you and all the rest of your bootleggers and hijackers to get out and stay out! Now, go!"

Steinemann turned appealingly to the woman in the chair.

"Paula! Paula! You ain't gonna let this guy get away with this, are you?"

Paula bowed her head.

"I am!" she replied, coldly.

"Oh." Steinemann's little eyes narrowed. "You, too, eh? Goin' back on a pal, eh? Ah, nix! Nix, Paula! I can't believe it! My God, I couldn't stand it!"

Steve waved the door impatiently.

"When it comes to going back on pals, how about those moving vans?" he inquired, opening the wound. "You got Paula and the others to invest in that boatload of stuff and then you hijacked it! You've got your nerve, coming here after *that!*"

Steinemann's mouth wobbled. He licked his lips. Suddenly he swung out his arms in an appealing gesture.

"What of it? All that I've got is Paula's, if she'll only take it!"

He turned toward her with a glance which registered tenderness combined with uncertainty. His voice broke as he bawled:

"Aw, Paula, you didn't know it, but all them things—everything I've done—was

for you, to make you happy! You didn't know that, did you? I wanted money; power; I wanted to see you rollin' in diamonds, palaces, steam yachts, limousines, where you belong, up among the millionaires, showin' up the flossy dames that couldn't hold a candle to you! What if I did thrown down those slobs? They're only a bunch of bums! It was you I was thinkin' of, Paula; you!" The fat man laid a hand on his heart. "I've had a pain here—a longin'—an ache—ever since I first saw you! Paula, Paula, look up! Tell me you was only kiddin' me, before you break my heart!"

"Oh, get out!" suggested Steve, wearily.

Paula's right arm bent and her head lowered toward it. Her body rocked. There was a stifled cry which might have been a laugh, a sob, or a protest against this degradation. Steinemann started toward her. Steve extended a leg to trip him.

"Enough of this burlesque!" rasped the cattleman. "Get out!"

"Burlesque?" The stout man's little blue eyes became steely as he halted, revealing dynamic brutalities which were far from lover like. "Where do ya get that stuff? You get gay with me and they'll be puttin' you into an ash can? I may be cuckoo about Paula, but that don't give any of her relatives any right to butt in, not with me! You're out! Go back to the alfalfa, where you belong!"

Steve felt wildly desirous of hurling the man through the doorway and down the steps; but Steinemann's figure was so unshakably ponderous that the idea looked like a total loss. To shove this man would be like shoving a barn.

"Oh, take a hint!" amended Steve. "Go home!"

Steinemann's cold eyes flared at the rancher and then turned toward Paula. They began to look bewildered and hurt and defeated. He licked his lips.

"Paula!" he bleated. "Is this the end?"

"Sure!" intercepted Steve. "Slam the door!"

Steinemann whirled on him. Passion—the passion of disappointment—made him bawl forth in a tremendous bull voice:

"Ya! You hick, you buttinsky, you're at the bottom of this! Paula ain't been the same since you came! I see through you now, you schemer, you snake-in-the-grass! Turnin' her against me, eh? Knockin' me behind my back, eh? Say, do you know who you're monkeyin' with?"

"There are ladies present."

"Uh. Oh. I see." The fat man's manner became less choleric and more deadly. "Well, have a good time while you can, but lemme tell you this: I'm one of the big bosses, see? Get that? I'm Big Bill Steinemann, the King of the Bail Bond Brokers, see? I stand in with the main guys, see? Ask about me at the City Hall, that's all. Ask anywhere!" Steinemann snapped his fingers under Steve's nose. "You monkey around me and I'll turn you into a grease-spot! Now, go ahead and light your cigarette in the dynamite!"

Steve turned wearily to Paula, who had Beth alongside her.

"Get me a crowbar!" he appealed. "I can't shove it out so I'll have to pry it out!"

The fat man, with a certain dignity, raised an enormous reproving hand toward Steve and then looked again toward the woman in the chair."

"Paula!" he appealed, softly.

She turned her back on him. He stood hesitant for a moment and then, bowing his shoulders, he crammed his splendid shining hat upon his head and passed slowly beyond the threshold.

"I'll say good-by now," he surrendered. "I'll come back when you feel better. Paula. You ain't yourself!"

The door closed.

Paula bowed her head again in her arms and her body shook with racking sobs. Beth bent over her. So did Steve.

"Humiliation!" she cried, clenching her hands. "I cannot stand this thing! What have I let myself into! What irony! What retribution! I cannot stand it—I cannot stand it!"

There was silence. Paula—the proud and unruffled Paula—broke down and cried like a baby, until even Steve saw that she was only a nerve-shattered wreck, incapable of meeting the situation much further. He turned to Beth.

"Listen! Once you asked me to help her. Will *you* do your share?"

"How?"

"Go away with her. Stay with her. Take care of her at my Arizona ranch. Will you?"

Beth considered, looking at the floor; and then she made a negative gesture.

"I am not free. I need every engagement I can get. If I cancel my present ones they will be hard to find in the future. I cannot!"

His eyes looked contemptuous for an instant. He thought he saw selfishness, the sort which gives lip service and fails in a pinch; but it began to dawn on him that this self-supporting little musician was made practically penniless by the same investments which had trapped Paula. In a flash of understanding he sensed her stark struggle against poverty, so that he was tempted to make an offer of personal aid; but his new and greater respect advised him not to.

"I'm sorry," he said, sincerely. "Then I'm stumped!"

"Let me take her to my room," offered Beth. "That will get her away from here, anyhow. We cannot subject her again to *this!*"

He thought it over.

"Thanks; until to-night," he decided. "Then she'll take the train south." He touched Paula on the shoulder, putting an end to further temporizing. "Come," he said, gently. "Let's end this, then! Go upstairs and pack. Take enough things for a month. You're going to be safe from now on. Safe!"

She accepted the suggestion, arising somewhat wearily.

"And you?" she asked, looking at him with glistening eyes.

"I'm going to stay for awhile."

"Ah, no. That would not be fair!"

"Yes. I'm getting clearer ideas now. As soon as you're gone I'll turn over all my evidence to the Federal authorities."

"My heavens, no!"

"There's little danger. You'll not be implicated. I'm planning to scare this gang out of the city. Have you ever seen a rabbit-drive? The farmers scare the rabbits for miles into a pen. Well, that's my idea. I'm going to scare our rabbits clear into Arizona, into a trap, *and I own the trap!*"

He took her up the stairs and into her dainty room, with its deep blue carpet and ivory-colored furnishings, where he left her with Beth to pack her things. In less than an hour she returned downstairs, walking regally, wearing a beautiful gray tailored outfit and a veiled hat, apparently so placid and composed that Steve marveled at the nerve which could buoy her so splendidly.

Steve had rung for a taxicab. He helped Paula and Beth into it.

"I'll get the tickets and the sleeper," he promised. "I'll wire ahead to the ranch and tell 'em to clean the place. The boys will meet you when you arrive. The train leaves here at seven. I'll see you at Beth's house before six. We're lucky it's only a few blocks away."

He took Beth's hand for an instant, looking into her eyes. "Thanks," he said, simply. "We'll meet again—many times!"

Beth smiled at him. He felt more cheerful.

Left alone in the house, with one apprehensive colored maid belowstairs, he wrote letters and telegrams to Arizona and carried baggage downstairs. Then he started down town in a street car filled with sober folk, mainly women going shopping. He continued to notice this rampant sobriety as he passed through streets teeming with traffic, and lines of attractive shop windows and fine buildings where the business of an active, hustling, breezy city hummed along.

"Shucks!" he admitted, in the railroad office. "The city's all right. The whisky business doesn't amount to anything!" And then: "But it sure looks big when it's close up!"

He bought ticket and berth for Paula, went to a movie which depicted society, and, with impressions thoroughly muddled again, started for home late in the afternoon. His footfalls seemed lonely in the splendid empty house, but he felt at ease in it now. He sighed with satisfaction, took off his coat, sank into an easy chair, lifted his feet into another chair, and unfolded the pink sporting edition of a newspaper.

"Well," he decided, "things are not so bad, after all!"

The doorbell rang again. It was another telegram. He settled himself into the chair and opened the missive:

> Steering gear broke. The damn thing went off a cliff on the ridge road. I hope you choke.
> SHORTY.

VIII.

THERE being nothing to do about it, Steve burned the cheerless message and tried to gleam some intelligence from the newspaper's comic strips; but a restless foreboding assailed him, so that shortly he paced the shining floors and began to potter around flawless furniture, dainty vases, rare pictures, and a hundred other objects which gave him a wonderful education in interior decoration.

"But why didn't she sell some of this stuff and keep out of that other business?" he wondered.

Paula had not told him that the place was already mortgaged. She forbore to explain that the loss of a few of these precious articles would take something from the effect of the whole house, so that she might as well let everything go at once, if it must go. He could not have understood this elusive cultural point. He merely saw what he saw, smoking a cigarette and pawing things over.

He jiggled a fine black Chinese stand full of craven dragons until he remembered that its fragile vase, in solid colors blending from black to blue to soft orange, contained his loaded revolver. He jerked his hands away and started toward a deft gilt framed picture of a California poppy field. The bell rang again. He looked at the great clock with its leisurely pendulum. It was almost six. Impatiently, realizing that he had now wasted too much time, he went to the door and opened it.

Four men faced him, a huddled mob bunched on the top steps like a football wedge waiting for a signal. One was the man whom Steve had chased down the street when Slim and Shorty had departed in their luckless auto!

"Well? What is it now?" barked Steve, in consternation.

The foremost man, a burly fellow in an ultra-fashionable but very baggy brown suit, laid his broad-toed foot in the doorway.

"I wanna see Paula Kane!" he growled.

"She's not in. Get that foot away."

"Is Steinemann in?"

"No. I'm all alone. Good day."

"Oh, no. There's been too much funny business around here, mister; we're goin' to snoop around for awhile! We're going in!"

"What for? I haven't invited you."

"Don't get hard-boiled, now! Get away from that door!"

The intrusion made Steve feel the righteous indignation of a landed proprietor.

"What? Say—since when do they allow gangs to run hog-wild into people's houses? Get out of here!"

The leading man jerked a thumb toward his friends.

"Aw, let's go!"

The four of them shoved forward. Steve tumbled backward though not before his quick eyes glanced hopefully up and down the street; but the charge of the quartet was so abrupt that two pedestrians and one uniformed chauffeur failed to notice any untoward incident on this doorstep.

The door banged shut. The burly man's three associates grouped around him. The person whom Steve had once pursued, a slim and tallish fellow with blue stubble on his jaws, jerked an accusing finger toward the ranchman.

"That's the mysterious guy hangin' around here all week! He's crooked! Make him cough up what he knows, Mike! We've got him where we want him?"

Steve felt tempted to make a rush for the vase which held his revolver, but it was beyond the others and would require patience and technique before the pistol could be fished out of the vase. Regretfully he was forced to face the visitors, standing at bay in front of the stairs.

"You've got a lot of nerve!" he observed. "What do you expect to get out of this?"

"A lota things!" growled the big fellow, whose brow was low and covered by heavy black hair, disclosed when he doffed his battered hat. "Where's Steinemann? I suppose he ain't been here, hey?"

"He has. He went away."

"Uh-huh. He'd better! The double-crossin' crook, we'd rip him apart! Well, boys, mebbe he got away this time, I dunno; but mebbe this bum's lyin'." He barked at Steve. "Where's Paula?"

"None of your business."

The big man's hands clenched and his thick lips tightened as he advanced toward Steve.

"You get fresh with us and they'll wrap you in a box, see? Get next to yourself! We ain't here for fun! We've been bunked, razzed, double-crossed, and flim-flammed, see? We're sore, see? The cops are gettin' onto us and so are the Federal dicks. Get that? We're lookin' for one fat traitor and a smooth society jane that's done a lot of dirty work behind our backs! Get that? We're goin' to send 'em to hell, where they belong!"

Suddenly Steve observed that this fellow wheezed through his nose and slobbered at the mouth, giving a brutish aspect which made the ranchman admit a qualm of unrest.

"You're 'way off!" he protested. 'I don't know anything about Steinemann; he may be all you say; but the rest of it's wrong!"

"He lies!" yelped the slim man. "This is the fella that licked Hymie Baum! What became of Hymie? Where is he, hey?"

"He left here," answered Steve, truthfully. "I never saw him again!"

"Fishy! Fishy! Everything's crooked here! Make this guy cough up, Mike! He's got somethin' on his mind!"

"Wait a moment!" Steve voiced his real amazement. "You mean to say that you fellows can rush into a house like this and do whatever you want?" He looked from one man to another. "Is it plain gall or does somebody give you permission?"

"We'll search *this* house, yeh!" retorted the slim fellow. "We paid for it, ain't we?" He swung a hand toward the fine furnishings. "Booze!" he jeered. "All booze! We done the dirty work, they got the jack! We paid for this house, mister!"

It was largely exaggeration, but the victimized gangsters nodded in unison.

"Well, what of it?" demanded Steve, in desperation. "Does that give you right of entry?"

"Aw, can it!" advised the big fellow. "Come on, you guys. Search the dump!"

"No!" forbade Steve.

The big fellow reached up an arm and shoved Steve out of the way. The outraged ranchman lashed out with an irritated fist, but he was off balance and he did not register except to make the burly man leer.

"Oh, you wanna fight, eh?"

The big fellow's left hand slipped behind Steve's head and his right fist drew back. The ranchman saw it coming and tried to writhe out of the way, but—crash—a thunderbolt struck him between the eyes. His whole body felt the terrific impact, even to his sagging knees. He tumbled backward and landed on the stairs.

"And you've got the nerve to do *that!*" he gasped.

He scrambled to his feet, taking a step upward. The big fellow approached and started a vicious overhand swing which arched his body backward for an instant. In that flash of time the desperate Steve saw an opening, unethical and unorthodox, banned by all the rules of knightly combat, but so tempting that the distracted ranchman could not resist. He kicked. The toe of his heavy new shoe sank into the man's midriff. With a hissing sound like a punctured tire, the fellow went straight backward to the front wall, where he collapsed and lay moaning and groaning, purple faced, writhing in a painful endeavor to get back his wind.

"He don't fight fair!" screeched one of the others.

"How can I?" defended Steve.

"Get him!" yelped the tall fellow.

They charged toward the steps. Steve thought of flight toward the upper floor, but the hurtling mass was upon him. He knocked the foremost back. Another stumbled and grabbed Steve's knees. He won a leg free and swung a knee into the fellow's face. The third visitor hurdled over the others. Steve's free arm lashed out. The other reeled, but struck back. Steve warded him off and shoved him downward.

The trio returned to the struggle. The big fellow, near the door, began to regain

his balance. He was glowering, sobbing with rage and pain. The battling Steve saw the look in the man's face. Suddenly the ranchman realized that this struggle—starting mainly as an accident, brought about by the pique of disappointed crooks—was likely to become demoniac. Wild with desperation, assailed by a pushing, jostling, smashing crowd which surged up the steps and shoved him backward, he longed for the revolver in the vase; but the vase was far away on its table near the door, mocking him with the demure beauty of its lustrous but indifferent colors.

The telephone rang.

"Forget it!" yelled somebody. "Get him!"

"Be reasonable!" panted Steve. "Cut this out!"

The telephone rang again. It kept ringing.

A fist drove in to Steve's waist, making him wince. A leaping fellow, flanking him from the left side, forced him to huddle against the banisters and hammer sideways. He couldn't knock the man through the wall, so every blow made the fellow rebound.

The giant was ambling up the steps now. The battle light was in his eyes. The frantic Steve, battered and bruised, fighting with mouth open and eyes glassy through sheer violence of effort, was urged to a swifter pace. He kneed a man trying to tackle him around the waist. He slammed the man at the wall, forcing him off center and shoving him downward. The third fellow was elbowed away. For an instant Steve was free.

Suddenly he leaped up three steps, longing for a weapon. His hand touched the banister. Inspiration made him grab it with both hands. He pulled while the yelling, snarling mass clawed at him. The banister stuck. He pulled again, testing every muscle of his body. The banister cracked, split at an unsuspected joint, and fell overside before he could get a good hold. A line of square wooden rails stood up starkly from the steps. He grabbed a rail. He swung it wildly upon a bobbing head.

"He's lickin' us!" yelled the tall fellow.

"I'll settle 'im!" promised the giant.

He pulled up rails, one by one, yanking them out of their sockets as he walked up the steps. He hurled his first fistful at Steve, over the heads of the others; and then, coming close with three of them in his hands, he battered down upon the ranchman's head like a feudal warrior slamming away with a sword. Steve's defensive wand splintered under the onslaught. His right arm numbed. The powerful triplicate club beat without mercy. His head wabbled, bowed down, bowed low; and still the furious blows rained upon him until the stairs leaped at his face and circled under and over him, and he pitched sideways off the lower steps to the floor, seeing many fireworks.

Queer pains assailed the ranchman; queer impressions flitted across his disordered brain. Lights and shadows joined with the ringing of his ears to annoy him. He lay blinking stupidly until he was aware of a swaying sensation and ascertained that a big foot was rolling him to and fro. Not kicking; merely rolling. He strove to elevate himself, but noticed that his whole right side was numb. He sank back.

"She mingled with the wrong people!" he groaned.

"You had it comin'!" retorted the tall fellow as he came into Steve's blurred vision. "We dunno what you've done to us, mister; but whatever it is, we're even."

"Forget him," growled Big Mike. "Search the house."

Two of the men followed his truculent lead. The third stayed near Steve, who lay still for a long, long time, trying to classify some of the pains which chased through his body. At last he began to notice his companion's soft, monotonous footfalls on the polished floor of the anteroom. Steve managed to turn his neck. The other fellow stood near the piano, stuffing a priceless miniature into his pocket and then rolling up a magnificent black-gray-gold brocade.

"Hey!" jeered Steve painfully. "Why don't you give the other fellows a chance?"

The man jumped and cast a guilty look toward the doorway. Then he grinned.

"Quit kiddin'! They'll get theirs all

right, all right! They'll take this dump apart."

The news made Steve attempt to arise, but a patronizing glance from the visitor told him the effort was wasted. The ranchman's right arm and shoulder were out of commission. The forearm was a crushed ruin.

He lay back again, thoroughly discouraged and somewhat sick, but his desperate mind caught a new idea.

The vase! The pistol! Less than fifteen feet away!

He started to writhe toward the dragon-table. The other man, examining a deft ivory carving, saw the move and threw a calculating look toward the door, making sure that it was closed, and Steve could hardly reach the knob without agonized effort.

"Wait awhile," advised the visitor. "We'll put you on a couch bimeby. We ain't goin' to kill you. Take it easy."

Steve considered a wild yell for help, but the thick windows were all shut and there were probably no passers-by on the quiet street anyhow. He decided to keep crawling, writhing along silently and gained five feet before the heavy footsteps of the explorers thumped up from the cellar.

"Nobody here but a scared coon woman!" reported Big Mike disgustedly, emerging from a rear doorway. "We've been upstairs and down. We're bunked!"

"Well, how about this guy?" persisted the tall man, pointing at Steve. "He knows somethin'!"

"I dunno," considered Big Mike. "Suppose he won't talk? We can't beat him up much more, can we?"

"No; not very much. S-sh! What's that?"

Something moved beyond the front door. A key was inserted into the lock. There was a click and then a moment of manipulation as the knob turned and the heavy oaken panels swung inward. The uninvited visitors looked at each other. With one impulse they scattered behind curtains or made themselves small against the front wall. One of them produced a blackjack, which seemed to be the favored weapon of the whole gang.

The door came wide open.

Beth walked in. Her startled eyes saw the battered Steve. She drew back in surprise.

Steve made a desperate leap. He butted his head against the dragon-table and made it fall away from him. The black-blue-orange vase trembled, toppled, bounced off the falling edge, tumbled to the floor, and burst into a hundred crashing fragments. A shiny nickeled revolver came to rest amid the ruins.

"Grab it!" yelled Steve.

It all happened in an instant. Beth, at first uncomprehending, caught his alarm and jumped for the weapon, taking it in her gloved right hand just as she saw the forms at the wall. With a little stifled cry, she pointed the pistol. Her arm trembled. There was a moment of electrical tension.

"Nix!" yelped the tall fellow, elevating his alarmed fists toward the ceiling. "Put it down! Drop it! You're too nervous! It might go off!"

"There are four of 'em," warned Steve. "Watch out!"

She backed against the door, facing the whole room. A heavy blue portière moved. She pointed her jiggling pistol at it. Big Mike decided to come forth, waving disgusted hands.

"Stephen," she gasped, "who are these men? Why did they delay you?"

"Burglars," he answered.

"Oh!"

"You lie!" snarled Big Mike. "We gotta right here, see?"

"What?" gasped Steve.

"What a cheap lie!" said Beth.

"Beth!" pleaded the weakening Steve. "Give me your pistol! I'll cover them! My left hand! They're stealing Paula's things!"

Beth, confused and at bay, stood staring at the sullen quartet; and then suddenly she bent and slipped the pistol into the hand of Steve, who was lying on his injured right side with his head near the floor. He took the weapon and held its gleaming barrel upward steadily. Big Mike's eyes narrowed; he spoke to Beth in a hoarse voice:

"You've butted in where you got no business. All right—mebbe we'll tend to you, too!"

"Search 'em!" gasped Steve. "Be quick! We haven't much time! The big fellow first."

Big Mike saw the pistol's deadly tunnel pointed straight at his eyes. Perforce he elevated his arms and, grimacing and grumbling, stood as motionless as his friends.

Beth, though trembling, took an ugly blackjack from under his belt and then examined into the bulge in his coat pocket. It yielded five chastely designed spoons, seven forks, a gold watch, a pair of ornate amber-and-gold ear decorations, three bracelets, a costly medallion, a pair of monogrammed scissors, four delicate Irish lace handkerchiefs, and a dainty little gold-and-silver vase.

"Throw 'em on the floor!" cried Steve in a weak voice. "Then chase these burglars out. Hurry!"

"Burglars?" snarled Big Mike. "Cut out the insults, see? It's *our* stuff, ain't it? We paid for it, didn't we? Yah! You keep talkin' like that and pretty soon we'll come and give you another dose—and this fluffy-haired moll, too."

Steve indifferently pulled the trigger.

The room rocked. A flash of flame streaked under Big Mike's chin and ripped his bulging red necktie apart. He clutched at his throat. His eyes popped and his face turned chalk-white.

"Cut it out!" he gibbered. "Dammit, you might 'a' killed me!"

"I will, next time," promised Steve in a whispering voice. "Beth—make 'em face the wall—search 'em—chase 'em out—hurry!"

"Stephen!" she pleaded. "The noise! The neighbors! Do you want publicity?"

"Yes. I don't care now. Give their names to the Federal officers—the newspapers—go the limit—telephone. Hurry!"

"No!" yelled the tall man.

"Beth—you can't hold 'em long—but tell the newspapers. Hurry!"

"You do that," snarled Big Mike, "and we'll—"

Steve made the big fellow's eyes stare straight into the pistol muzzle. The man wilted. Steve made a little gesture. The chastened gang fell into line like a military squad, facing the door. The frightened Beth delved into pockets that yielded cutlery, scarfs, ivory, brocades, silks, and even a splendid hand mirror. Articles fell to the floor in a tumbled heap until Beth's trembling hand opened the door and pointed toward the darkening street. The men sullenly filed out. The last one, Big Mike, tossed a glance backward, but the bore of the pistol was still leveled straight at him. He shrugged his wide shoulders, slammed his battered hat upon his head, and shuffled down the front steps.

Beth closed the door; she leaned against it. Reaction set in. She took a deep breath and looked upon the wreckage on the floor.

"Ah, why did they do that?" she asked piteously. "And why did they treat you so?" Her eyes widened. "Stephen!"

The pistol was still pointed upward, balanced in his cupped left hand; but his eyes were closed.

IX.

Confused ideas and hazy impressions flitted across Steve's chaotic mind like a flickering movie edited by totally irresponsible demons. Queer personages floated before his distorted vision. The worst was a coal-black creature with thick red lips and kinky hair. Then there was a blonde woman with a square jaw and a masterful manner who soothed and bullied him. There was also a young woman with big brown eyes who flitted in and out for no particular reason, sometimes bringing other phantoms who stared at him through iron bars.

But the most alarming exhibit in the whole weird menagerie was a grave and deliberate personage with a glowing black Vandyke beard, who performed tricks with strange bottles and odors while murmuring "There, there, there," in a seductive voice. Steve soon ascertained that this person was a treacherous fraud likely to make lightning motions and jab things. The victim determined to unmask this rascal and managed to tear away part of the black beard before several other scoundrels bore him down.

He awoke at last to a saner world. The ivory walls began to focus. The bars of his cage were found to be mere bed rails. He attempted to sit up, but found himself weak and bound by an iron-clad splint upon his right forearm. His throat and tongue and eyes felt parched, as if a recent conflagration had burned away the natural moisture, and he pondered upon this miracle until he became aware of a persistent shadow hovering near him. He turned his weary head on the piilow. His widened eyes beheld the coal-black, kinky-haired creature of his dreams.

"You here again?" he protested.

The devoted colored maid laid down a tray of dishes.

"Are you *you*, Mr. Kane?" she asked in a trembly voice. "Or ain't you there yet?"

"I'm here," he reasoned feebly, "but where is it?"

"You're back!" she declared. "Yes-sir, right here in Miz' Paula's room, safe an' sane. Glory! You shore went a powerful long distance, Mr. Kane!"

"Paula," considered Steve. "Paula. Paula. Oh, yes. Where is she?"

"Why, Miz' Paula been Arizona mighty nigh three weeks come Tuesday."

"Three weeks?"

"Yes-sir; Miz' Beth, she run the house. Policemen rampin' around waitin' for you to git awake and give testimonials. Yes-sir. Doctor been here three times every day. Your right arm got infested and you got a mean fever. Doctor says your temper'ment went up to one hundred and five, or five hundred and one, I dunno which, 'most all the time. Your arm busted all to pieces," she continued. "Yes-sir. Doctor, he says—"

The door of the room opened. Beth walked in, looking tired and wan, wearing a simple gray thing which seemed to be giving its last service. She looked at the talkative servant, laying a finger to her lips.

The maid became silent. Steve turned his languorous head and saw Beth.

"Oh, yes," he remembered brightly, "you're the girl that played the piano!" Then he went to sleep again.

Time passed. Came a morning when a batch of telegrams, letters and newspapers was laid upon his bed, and he started catching up with the events of the world. Beth drew up a chair alongside him, arranging things in consecutive order.

The first was a sheaf of old telegrams. Steve was able to trace the journey of Slim and Shorty and their demoniac cab through hair-raising adventures where miracles abounded. The work of rescue on the Ridge Road consumed two days. Repairs took another day. The engine went entirely A. W. O. L. in the San Fernando Valley. After more repairs the errant machine selected a spot to halt in the middle of a busy highway near Los Angeles, where a traffic cop helped to shove the thing into a ditch. The rear axle housing was practically apart. After more doctoring, the intractable car limped onward, only to halt again at Riverside, Palm Springs, and even Yuma. A plaintive letter from Slim completed the sad record. Slim wrote from the ranch:

> We got the damn thing here and we shoved the prisoners into the mine at Casey's Hole under guard. The prisoners are terrible sick and willing to do anything you want, but if you ever make us do another fool stunt like that again, we are going to quit you cold.

Appended thereto was a carbon copy of another letter, written under extreme pressure by Hammond to his bootlegger pals in the city:

> I have found the swellest joint you ever saw, a regular little private hotel in the mountains. The place has been abandoned for years. It is a lulu of a place, full of fruit trees and melon patches. I have stocked it full of canned grub. I get all the magazines and sporting papers and hear concerts every night by radio. This is the life. Any time things get too hot for you, come down here. If you are broke I will send you a railroad ticket. Tell all the other boys about it, but for the love of Mike, do not let the news get away from our gang. It is too good to spoil. We can keep this as a secret hang-out for the whole crowd.

Steve laughed at this picture of the bare old mining claim among the wind-blown crags of Casey's Hole; but Beth next shoved forward the front page of a two-

weeks'-old newspaper. Steve's smile vanished as he read a big headline:

BOND BROKER MURDERED IN TAXICAB

Big Bill Steinemann, Well Known Politician, Member of the "Whisky Lobby" at the City Hall, Is Found Beaten to Death in Abandoned Car.

"So they got him!" gasped Steve. "They meant business. And I thought they were just a pack of poor roughnecks!"

"They were bitter and very dangerous," said Beth. "We have been lucky."

He read on, wading through columns of facts and surmise. Then he read another headline:

NEW WHISKY RING UNCOVERED

Steve read aloud, in surprise:

"Hammond, Hymie Baum, Spider Benz, Kid Hink, Red Kruse, and all the others. The paper says the police are trying to connect them with the Steinemann murder. How did it all happen?"

"I did that," admitted Beth. "When Paula was out of it, I told the newspapers and the officers. Was it the right thing to do?"

"Yes; but how did you know their names?"

"I've heard them. Ah, you do not know of the long nights with Paula, before you came, while she was terrorized by the people she had invited so blindly! I can almost hear her talking now as she paced up and down in this room: 'My friends, Beth—Kid Hink, Big Mike, Spider Benz, Big Bill Steinemann. Ah, what an ironical punishment!'"

Steve sank back in his pillow. He grinned.

"Well," he remarked with satisfaction, "we've got our auto load at the ranch; Paula is safe; Steinemann is killed, and our crooks are being scared out of town. That looks good. What's next?"

"A letter from Paula."

"Only one?"

"She was waiting for your arrival. We did not tell her you were so ill."

Steve took the thing from the envelope and unfolded the scented blue paper, reading to the climax:

> —Oh, my dear, good, generous, competent brother, I know now that your manner of living and mine are far apart as the poles. This place is your home, but I can see no enticement to the eye or soul. Out of my window I can view a chicken coop, a rickety shed, a stack of hay, a rusty barbed wire fence, some sickly cottonwood trees, and beyond that a range of wrinkled mountains, whose colors at sunset furnish the only beauty in a desolate land. It is indeed our father's home; its walls seem to echo tales of his bleakness and indomitable spirit, but I am neither pioneer nor ascetic, merely a woman from another environment who is willing to endure, but cannot pretend enthusiasm. Do not think I do not appreciate your great generosity—but I will be glad indeed when this trouble is over and our lives can be normal.

Steve passed the letter to Beth. "She's losing her nerve."

"She's lonely," corrected Beth, after reading.

He watched her clean profile and gentle eyes which seemed to ask toleration.

"That's right," he admitted at length. "Folks are likely to get that way in a strange place. But would you?"

"I don't know. It's probably according to the friends I'd have with me."

"Me," he suggested.

She threw him a quick glance, not without apprehension.

"Think it over," he added.

She flushed.

"You are a very sick man, Mr. Kane."

"But I mean that—Beth."

He tried to take her hand, but weakness prevented.

"Please!" she urged. "You have too many burdens; too many worries. You have your battles to fight; I have mine. You are generous, but—I cannot accept shelter under such circumstances."

"Shelter? Say, I'm not running a boarding house! I want you to marr—"

Her face was red, but there was a suspicion of a smile. It was the first touch of color he had noted. Suddenly he realized how earnestly she had nursed him. He wondered at what cost!

"Oh, please!" she pleaded. "You are supposed to lie still and get well."

"Some day—" he began.

"Hush!"

There were noises downstairs. The doorbell rang twice. The colored maid pattered up the stairs and poked her face into the room again.

"Gen'leman from the district attorney's office," she announced. "And here's another telegram."

"Send him up," ordered Steve, tearing the envelope open. "I feel like telling everything I know!"

The wire was from Shorty at the ranch:

> The whole herd came down here to-day to visit Hammond's health resort. We have them laid out and tied down. We are waiting for you patiently. SHORTY.

Steve flung the paper to Beth.

"Burn it before the district attorney's man comes in," he requested. "And then wire to Slim that I'm on my way."

X.

STEVE hastened home, despite the doctor's orders. Still weak, with his arm in a plaster cast and a sling, he descended from a local train at Gray Butte and started in a rented touring car upon the fifty-mile journey over sand-flats and mountain cañons toward home.

Familiar scenes brought him a thankful joy. As the car took the descent into the valley where the old white ranch house stood amid its clustered trees, he strove to see the bleakness which Paula disliked so earnestly; but every corner of the place brought reminiscences which made his eyes brighten. When the car halted in front of the ranch house grounds, he leaped out and jiggled the gate's rusty chain happily. Slim was there.

"It's home, Slim—home! Look at the fool dog rushing down the path! Look at the Chink cook waving from the kitchen! Look at the new roof on the barn, and the new white paint on the ranch house! Why, this is *beautiful!*"

He strode up the path, past the sparse shrubbery and the alfalfa lawn, where a big red setter tried to bowl him over. Paula appeared at the front of the rambling old one-storied building and advanced toward him smilingly. It was the same tall and graceful Paula with the wonderful olive complexion and carefully parted hair. She wore a dainty blue dress, so aggressively spotless and flawless that he felt a twinge of resentment at the polite loafing which it advertised. Plainly she was out of place. He caught himself frowning slightly. As she extended her hand he noticed that the nails of every finger were perfect.

"Ah, I am glad you have arrived safely!" came her resonant voice. "I have been shocked at the news of your terrible adventures!"

"They're over," he answered, thankfully, taking her hand. "That is, almost over." He turned to Slim, who was carrying his suit case. "How about those fellows up at Casey's Hole?"

"Oh, they're all right, if they ain't dead or something."

"Dead?"

"Well, you told us to treat 'em rough, didn't you?"

"Great Scott!"

"Aw, I guess they'll live. They're tough."

Steve's alarmed gaze flicked to the corral, the barn, the pump, the wagon shed, and, beyond all these, to the flat pastures. All seemed deserted.

"Where are the men?" he demanded.

"Them? Oh, they're guardin' the prisoners."

Steve went into the living room and tossed his hat upon a horsehair sofa. He sank into a big chair alongside the onyx mantel and under an oil painting of a square-jawed man with beetling brows and a gray mustache.

"Let me get this right," suggested Steve. "You mean you ruffians have committed assault, battery, mayhem and murder on a lot of poor city crooks that couldn't defend themselves?"

The culprit fiddled with the belt of his blue overalls.

"Not exactly," he informed the red carpet. "Those fellows acted mean. The boys lost their tempers. Things sort of went from bad to worse."

"Oh."

Steve's voice was irritated.

"And now we've got the whole blamed circus down here—battles, trouble, grief and everything! And I thought I was using my head!"

"Well, it's them that's sick this time, not you!" consoled Slim.

"Apparently so. I'll look into this tomorrow."

"No!" pleaded Paula.

"I do not intend to halt at the edge of victory!"

His voice was snapped out with a quick turn of the head, so that she was again reminded that this rural relative with the slung arm and the wrinkled blue suit was not the adolescent she had once believed. His face was thin and pale, making the eyes bluer and the lines around them darker. The quizzical expression was subordinated by a latent steely glint, and though he slouched ungracefully in the big chair she sensed more strength and power than she had ever suspected in him before. He was the master, on his own ground. She found herself addressing him very respectfully:

"But, my brother, is there no way to have peace?"

"Sure. Darned quick!"

"Ah, not in that spirit. Why not stop before some one is grievously hurt? Can't there be a compromise?"

Steve frowned. She looked up at the picture above him, gasping at what she saw. The same pair of ruminating blue eyes stared at her sternly from the canvas!

"And I thought you an innocent!" she blurted. "Your father's son! But, oh, must you be hard and cruel, now that you have the victory?"

"I haven't got any victory yet. Say, what in thunder makes you plead so earnestly for these burglars? Is your memory so short?"

"No; but I want peace!" She stood over the center table and gestured pleadingly. "Sick people are irritable. I do not want more tragedy. I want to see an end to it all. What if I do sacrifice most of that stolen money? Money is not everything. Ah, Stephen, I am a refugee, a stranger in a strange land, away from my own environment, my own vocation, my friends, my life! Perhaps it's homesickness; call it what you will. I want peace. I implore you to be careful!"

"I'm going to be careful and I'm also going to be irritable!" he assured her.

But the long horseback ride with Slim next day was less easy than it seemed. Steve's dangling arm and weakened condition made the journey so grueling that he was forced to go slowly and make Slim pitch camp in a sheltered gully that evening.

The howls of coyotes came to Steve's ears. He smiled as he thought of whanging street cars and roaring taxicabs. The hobbled horses munched peacefully nearby. Slim snored. The little camp fire threw a cheery yellowish glare upon a near-by hillside. White constellations of stars shone down. Steve sighed happily.

"This is *home!*" he murmured, going to sleep.

They struck an old wagon road next morning and wound up through a region of loose dirt hills and cliffs. The road swung down through a bare cañon, but Steve and Slim urged their horses up another trail which led to the top of a brushy ridge where they would look downward, ahead, and see an enormous amphitheater with sheer rock cliffs. Steve and Slim turned to the left, riding along the ridge until they struck another edge and started downward on a winding trail which led to a small cañon. At the further end of this was a covered mine shaft and an old wooden cabin.

A man stepped out of a cranny in the rocks.

"Steve!" he yelped. "Welcome home!"

Shorty came bouncing out of the shack at the head of a delegation in overalls.

"We're all here!" whooped Shorty. "Gosh, look at that busted arm! When did ya get in? How you feelin'?"

Steve looked from one grinning ranch hand to another.

"I came to end this holiday!" he drawled. "Why didn't some of you go to work?"

"We thought you'd like us to guard 'em," said Shorty.

"Yes—playing poker and carousing in the cabin! Look at those empty bottles and tin cans! Why, you dog-goned miscreants, you've been having a private picnic!"

"We earned it," contended Shorty.

"Yes; *you* did; but why did these other loafers jump on the band wagon?"

"We had to!" explained a bearded man. "Listen. Them prisoners are mighty hard nuts. Language? Say, you wouldn't believe it. We've sat over the mine shaft for hours, just listenin' and learnin'. They gave us hellfire and damnation in eight hour shifts. Yessir! We tried to treat 'em decent, but they got so ornery we had to wallop 'em. They even tried to bribe us; but we fixed that."

"How?"

"Borrowed them two red broncs from the Joe Jennings ranch. Saddled 'em up and let a coupla pris'ners go ahead and escape. The pris'ners saw the horses and leaped up into the saddle."

"And came down," finished Steve.

"Just then the other pris'ners made a break to escape, but after we knocked 'em back into the mine shaft we collected the two riders and sorter glued their arms and legs together. We haven't had any season of rest, Steve. Ask *them*."

"I will," said Steve.

Shorty and several others lifted a big wooden cover, topped by a ring, which blocked the entrance to the shaft. Steve looked down into a hole slightly deeper and somewhat larger than an ordinary cellar, where candles spluttered on an old table. A ladder ran downward. A warm, human smell wafted upward. Daylight shone upon the haggard eyes and pale faces of many somber men, including Hammond, Taylor, Hymie Baum, Big Bill Kramer. Big Mike, and several others.

"I'm going down," said Steve, with a foot on the ladder. Then, raising his voice slightly: "If anybody starts anything, you can shoot."

"Ya-a-a-a-a!" snarled a passionate voice. "More rough stuff!"

"Not unless you begin it!" retorted the ranchman, starting down.

He found the place not badly equipped. Heaps of bedding were strewn in the corners or rolled on top of hay piles. Suit cases were numerous. Mirrors were lodged in crannies in the rock which comprised the wall. Clothes, shaving outfits, towels, a water keg, packing cases, and a table helped to make the place habitable. Cans of food and heaps of paper plates were all over the place.

The motley crowd stood in a circle at a respectful distance. Finally one of them barked:

"Hell! It's the mysterious guy!"

Steve reached their level and faced them. They had suffered. All were battered. Two of them limped. One had his arm in a crude sling. Three others displayed black eyes and swollen jaws. The hook-nosed Hammond seemed worst of all, making Steve suspect that his companions had punished him for leading them into this trap; but Hammond was the first to speak sensibly:

"Say, you seem to be the main guy. How much longer is this thing going to last?"

"Until you come to terms."

"Well, what's the big idea?"

"I'll tell you. I went into your town and you rolled me for forty thousand dollars."

"Not me!" denied Hammond.

"No. These others. That's why I made you decoy 'em here. They're going to return that money."

Hammond seemed aggrieved.

"That's all right, mister, but how about keeping *me* here, eh? How about kidnapin' me, eh? How about the law, eh? You've butted into a heap of trouble, mister!"

"You'd have a nice case to bring into the courts, wouldn't you?" scoffed Steve.

"Yeh. Maybe you've got us there; but say—do you know who you're monkeyin' with? Do you think you're foolin' with a crowd of babies?"

"Is that a threat?"

"Nope; not while you've got your gang with gats, ready to shoot daylight out of us! I'm only just talkin'. It's a habit. But if I was a poor hick that got tangled up with *this* bunch, mister, I'd make myself scarce and say my prayers!"

"Thanks," said Steve, nodding. "Come to think of it, you *are* a hard crowd. I'd better protect myself. When I'm through with you I'll ship you back to San Francisco in a box car under guard. I'll put you so far away that you'll never come back!"

A mighty hand shoved Hammond sideways. Another hand slapped him across the mouth, knocking him against the wall. Both hands belonged to Big Bill.

"You simp!" he raged at Hammond. "Are you tryin' to put this guy wise? Are you tryin' to get us all cooped up in a box car, maybe in the pen?"

"No!" howled the crowd.

Big Bill turned to Steve and tried to be more engaging.

"Let's cut out the bull. What's your proposition?"

Steve pointed to Bill, Taylor and Baum.

"You fellows took my money. Four of you. I don't know who the fourth man was, so it's up to you three."

"Suppose you get it. Do we go free?"

"Some of you, probably."

"Suppose we tell you to go chase yourself?"

"Fair enough," bluffed Steve. "We can keep this up all year."

Growls issued from many throats. Eyes glared. Some one made a quick motion, but was arrested by another. Big Bill's hands clenched, but an upward glance warned him to keep them at his side.

"We'll dig out!" he threatened.

"Go ahead. It's granite."

Big Bill's choleric face turned purple. His mouth opened and his eyes became murderous; but a voice yelled in the crowd:

"Aw, give'm what he wants! He's got us!"

The battle light faded from Big Bill's eyes.

"Well, wadda you want?" he demanded.

"That money."

"It's in the bank."

"Oh! Then maybe you brought your bank books with you. I'll look into 'em."

Steve held out his hand. He was not to be denied. The long imprisonment and the armed ranch hands above the shaft seemed to have a persuasive effect. Big Bill reluctantly produced a little book.

"You'll pay for this!" he promised.

"I've paid already. And now you, Taylor; and you, Baum."

"My coin's in 'Frisco," explained Baum.

"All right. I'll get a power of attorney to take it. I'll find where you live. All of you. I'll file attachments against the properties of you three fellows, wherever they are."

"What?" roared Big Bill.

"Sure. I want that money back."

"That boy's clever!" sneered Hammond, from the wall. "And you thought he was a boob! Ha-ha!"

Big Bill twitched around viciously.

"That's enough from you!" he howled, catching Hammond by the throat and shaking him to his knees. "You crook, you four-flusher—I'll kill you!"

A shot exploded into the mine. Acrid powder fumes clouded the air. Big Bill jumped back.

"Ya-a-a-a-a-a!" whimpered the helpless Big Bill. "You crooks!"

But Steve took advantage of the moral effect of the shot. He rummaged through pockets and into suit cases, bringing forth bank books, memoranda and other things which might help in his future exploration for his money.

"And now, gentlemen, a few papers to sign," he suggested. "Powers of attorney and so forth."

They signed. The ear-splitting crack of the pistol had shaken their morale. It was a sullen, silent crowd. Steve was glad of it. He stuffed the booty into his pocket and started up the ladder, and reached his friends.

"Hey!" came Hammond's voice. "When do we get out? You were only kiddin' about the box cars, wasn't you?"

"Certainly not."

There was a howl. Then came another voice:

"All right. How soon do we go?"

Steve, with about fourteen thousand dollars' worth of assets under his hand, and possibly more coming when he could file his attachments, gave his reply down the shaft:

"I'll let you get out after I've collected all my money. Then I'll ship you in a freight car to the city, where I'll let the

police and Federal officers look you over. After that, some of you may go free."

There was a loud yell; but Shorty and Slim yanked up the ladder and fastened down the heavy cover of the shaft.

"They're not good sports," remarked Shorty. "They're like a bum horse."

"How?" asked Steve.

"They're fine at the start, but they hate to be in at the finish!"

XI.

STEVE took his time riding home next day with Slim and Shorty, planning to arrive at the ranch on the morning after.

"I'm glad it's all over," he confessed, as he crossed a yellow valley.

"All over, while that gang's here?" asked Shorty.

"Oh, we can handle them. We get some money back, anyhow."

"How much?"

"I didn't expect to get it all. Crooks are flashy spenders. I'll take what I can and forget the rest!"

"You'll have to go to the city again!"

Steve gazed ahead at a blue cañon which cleft a range of gaunt mountains.

"I want to go back to the city. Just long enough to get—what I want."

"Somebody's liable to get *you!*" snorted Slim.

"Possibly," admitted Steve.

Slim frowned at this expression of reckless courage, but ceased arguing. In time the party rode into the cañon, crossed the divide, and camped for the night. Next morning they swung down into the home ranch lands.

Somebody ran toward them, gesticulating. The riders spurred their horses until they met the blue-clad Chinese cook who was wildly excited.

"Miss Paula, she gone!" he jabbered, pointing toward the road beyond the ranch house. "Man take her!"

"What next?" groaned Slim.

Steve dismounted, holding the reins.

"Say it quick!" he commanded.

"Man come automobile, two-three hour ago. Take Miss Paula, run away south."

"What sort of man?"

"White man. Corduroy. Ride in auto, hire from Gray Butte garage. He grab Miss Paula, chuck in car, go 'way. She yell, 'No, no, no!' He say, 'Yes.' She cry. He grab hold, chuck in car; go 'way."

"Wow! Suffering Peter, what in hell have they started now?" raged the despairing Steve. "What's the idea of it? I thought we had this business settled. Why can't they give us a rest?"

"I dunno," admitted Shorty.

Steve mounted. He spurred his horse and galloped ahead toward the ranch house. He left his animal at the gate and ran past the creaking old porch toward Paula's room. He opened the door. Nothing was there except trunks, clothes, small articles, and the dozens of little touches she had given the place in a brave but hopeless endeavor to turn an aged ranch house room into a boudoir for a cultured woman. The stained yellow wall paper with its splotchy red roses writhing around a faded green trellis had been her Waterloo. Somehow the place looked pathetic. He shut the door softly.

"They've gone to Gray Butte," he decided, bending and taking the spurs off his high boots. "Shorty, get the auto."

Shorty acted. In two minutes Steve's new touring car was speeding across the valley. It roared up into a cañon, swung along a tortuous road, screeched up a long grade, leaped over the top, descended along dangerous cliffs, took a downhill road toward a collection of houses, and came to a halt alongside a wooden platform with a little coop of a station.

"Yep; they bought through tickets for San Francisco," informed the aged station agent. "Yep; train left two hours ago. Yep; the woman wore silk or somethin'. High-heeled shoes, patent leather, very nifty. The man? Didn't notice him."

"Was the woman unwilling to go?" asked Steve.

"Wa-al, come to think of it, she did act sorter strange. Seemed subdued like. Scared."

"Mystery!" raged Steve. "I'm sick of it."

He gazed down the long tangent of track which led southward. A new vista of grief and embarrassments opened before him, perhaps leading him into more nets of in-

trigue. He realized how little he really understood Paula or the ramifications of her many-sided endeavors; yet Paula was his guest, under his roof and under his protection.

"What would a fella want to steal her for?" wondered Shorty, alongside Steve. "Ransom?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Possibly revenge. One thing is certain: she was kidnaped under threat of bodily harm. She was kidnaped in a hurry. Otherwise she'd have left a note or something."

Steve walked over to his new car, a big, reliable, medium-priced machine bought recently.

"I'm going to stop this business," he announced to Slim, the driver. "We'll catch that train."

"Catch a train? On these roads?"

"No. We'll beat it. It has to go far to the southward before it strikes the main line. They'll have to change cars. We'll head for Yuma and cut 'em off."

"Yuma!" groaned Shorty. "Say, do you know what you're doin'?"

"Yes. Get into the back seat. We're going to rescue Paula."

But as the telegraph poles flew past on the dusty desert road which paralleled the railroad tracks for a way, Steve admitted more irritation than gallantry toward his stepsister. The sport of the race appealed more than the knightly idea of rescue. He was growing slightly weary of Paula. Still, he had his duty toward her.

The machine raced for long hours through desert lands, streaked down to the Colorado, and finally the weary, dusty, shaken travelers reached Yuma and its railroad station.

"Train left forty minutes ago," said the agent.

Steve scratched his sandy hair.

"Are you sure they'd be on this train?" asked Slim.

"I guess so. The agent says all the up-State locals were on time. That means they've connected."

"Why not wire ahead and stop 'em?" asked Shorty.

"And maybe get publicity for Paula? No!"

"Well, what do we do?"

"Shove ahead!" said Steve desperately.

The machine swept on for countless miles through the Imperial Valley.

"It's a fool chase!" growled Slim.

"Maybe," said Steve wearily.

Suddenly it dawned on him that he was headed for San Francisco. He wanted to go there. Why, this pursuit gave him just the excuse he needed!

"I refuse to be beaten," he announced with new vigor. "Step on it!"

The car neared the railroad. A small station appeared.

"Stop!" ordered Steve. "I'll ask questions."

"Aw, the train's in Los Angeles!" growled Slim.

But Steve went to the station. He was gladdened by the agent's words:

"That train's only a few miles up the line. There's been a freight wreck blockin' the whole system."

Steve jumped back into his car jubilantly. They traveled onward till Riverside hove into sight. Steve sought news.

"The train's thirty minutes ahead," said the agent. The car, with its blear-eyed crew, raced grimly on to Los Angeles and approached the depot.

Steve rushed into the vast arcade. He noted that his slung arm was covered with caked dust and his high-heeled cowman's boots were highly conspicuous in this place of marble tiling and well-dressed citizens, but he had no time to worry. He leisurely approached a colored gentleman in uniform, who finally condescended to speak:

"Yes, sir. Train for San Francisco is just leaving. Over there."

Steve looked through a glass door toward the tracks. A crowd milled around waving farewell to passengers. Dozens of moving forms blurred his vision. He didn't really expect to see Paula; she might have taken another train or she might have eluded her mysterious captor and returned to the ranch. Many things might have happened. He found himself apathetic as he watched the crowds.

The train began to move. Suddenly he saw Paula.

A man's hand clutched her right arm and yanked her up to the vestibule of the last car. Her face was averted. She was writhing her shoulders, but Steve could not tell whether she were struggling against the man or merely striving to get through the passengers in the vestibule.

Steve rushed to the glass door and opened it. He ran across a flagstone area and up to an open gateway where friends of passengers were returning. Savagely he bucked against the human stream.

"Hey!" yelled a policeman, grabbing his coat. "What's the rush?"

Steve shook off his captor, dodging around three chattering women. The train was two hundred feet away and gathering momentum. He raced up the cinder path, gained, then lost.

"Paula!" he panted, coming to a halt. "Oh, hell!"

"Beat it!" rasped the cop.

Dejected, Steve beat it. Slim was in the waiting room.

"Tough luck!" commiserated Slim.

Steve's face was set. He took off his broad-brimmed hat and knocked its dust off against the crook of his arm. His sandy hair was rampant, his cheeks were hollow, his chin was stubbly, and his eyes glared redly.

"I'm mad!" he proclaimed to all the world. "Dammit, we're beaten by an eyelash! I won't stand for it! Dammit, I'm going to solve this mystery of Paula's if we have to battle for the next year! Come on—get a move on! Catch that train!"

Slim groaned.

"What! To-night?"

"Now!"

"But that train's a flyer!"

"Let 'er fly!"

"You'll burn up the auto!"

"Change the oil. Come on!"

They found Shorty at the wheel of the dusty car.

"We'll be pinched," pleaded Shorty.

"Yes; and Paula may be in trouble! Step on it!"

It was dark before they left Los Angeles. The car zipped along the forty miles of turns on the famous Ridge Road, racing to the summit and over it.

"The train's fifty minutes ahead," informed the agent at Bakersfield.

Slim took the wheel. The car roared along the straight roads of the great San Joaquin Valley. The speedometer registered 50, 55, and 60. Trees, fences, wagons and cars flew past.

The car boomed through Fresno and roared past small hamlets alongside the railroad tracks.

A siren shrieked. A motorcycle cop whizzed past and into the light, holding up his hand.

"You were doing sixty-two!" he accused.

"We thought the road was clear!" bleated Slim.

"Yeh. We stay up late for just such birds as you. Well, you'll prob'ly do from thirty to sixty days in jail. We'll get your cells ready. Our judge is one hard-boiled egg!"

The raging Steve produced bail and took a receipt and an arrest tag, all of which consumed time.

The car started again.

"Which one of us goes to jail?" pleaded Shorty.

There was a long silence. Dawn came. Fields became gray and then green.

"But who goes to jail?" persisted Shorty.

"I do," accepted the sleepy Steve. "Speed up!"

"We can't catch that train now."

"No. We'll get ahead of it. We go west. The train has to make a big loop northward around the bay. We'll nail it in Oakland."

The car finally sped along a level plain and then threaded through the streets of Oakland. It reached a highway where a great maze of tracks, signals, and switch towers appeared at the left of the road. The bay was sighted. The highway ran straight toward deep water, alongside the tracks. A long train of Pullmans drawn by a monster locomotive moved leisurely along the mole.

The auto raced past it.

"That's her!" exulted Steve. "We've won!"

The car slid up to a small building and

came to a halt. Steve jumped out. He stood on wabbly legs, rubbing his eyes and striving to throw off the numbness of his brain; and then he lurched along a concrete floor to the vast covered train-shed.

The mighty locomotive came up the track and rumbled toward him until it stopped with its great steam chest just at the level of his shoulders. Baggagemen and porters scurried past. The side of the train became alive with descending figures. Travelers began to pass Steve. Suddenly he saw Paula in a new blue suit—Heaven knew how she got it, but it fitted to perfection—walking serenely down the platform with a fine-looking, dark-mustached man in business clothes and a golf cap, carrying a suit case.

"Mike Hamilton!" gasped Steve.

Paula halted. Her eyes widened with amazement; Hamilton looked at Steve, frowned, and dropped his suit case with a bang.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded curtly.

"What am I doing— What— Say, where did you get your nerve?"

"Nerve?" snapped Hamilton.

Paula held a restraining hand in front of him. Her voice was deep and vibrant, trembling with excitement.

"No! Michael, dear, let *me* speak to him! Please! Ah, please let me handle him!"

"Let you handle me!" bleated Steve.

"Please, Michael! The poor boy has been bewildered, perhaps misled. He is not evil, really!"

Steve tried to catch his breath.

"No," he gibbered! "but I'm likely to be!"

Hamilton turned to Paula.

"I see no reason to bandy words with this rough relative."

"Ah, but he is my brother. I cannot let this breach widen if I can stop it, dear. Let me speak with him. After all, is it not better to have peace?"

Hamilton's fine eyes regarded Steve without warmth.

"I see no reason to court this fellow's favor, but if you desire it, my dear, I will yield."

Steve clenched his fists, but Paula came straight in front of him, laying a gloved hand on his shoulder.

"Let us have peace!" she pleaded. "Come! Let me speak with you!"

He hesitated, but curiosity won. He allowed her to lead him to a quiet corner of a deserted waiting room. Suddenly she threw her arms around his shoulders and arm sling. Her head was laid back and her lips were smiling, but her eyes were moist.

"Ah, my dear, good, kind, noble-hearted brother, how can I ever make amends to you? How can I ever thank you for the happiness you have brought me? How can I ever hope to match your fineness, your generosity, your steadfastness, your greatness of soul? Oh, my splendid brother, I owe everything to you!"

Steve tried to draw away slightly.

"What started *this?*" he wondered.

She kept her arms about him.

"I realize you could not know. I will explain. I was quite unhappy at your ranch, although it was no fault of yours. I did not like it, my brother. I was moody and depressed. Naturally I corresponded with all my old friends, including Mr. Hamilton. Without realizing how it might read, I wrote, among other things: 'I am staying here against my will, a prisoner beating my wings against the bars, unable to reach the freedom I long for, guarded by a strong-willed brother who commands men whose manners and usages I cannot approve.' Plain enough, you see; true enough. But poor, dear Michael read my letter in a different light—"

"Great Scott!"

"And nothing would suit his knightly soul but to come and rescue me. Every fine impulse, every bit of friendship and affection was aroused by my call; and he came to me—came to me when nothing else would seem to stir him."

Steve did not know what to say.

"We were married at Phœnix while changing cars," she added.

"Well, I'll be darned," summarized Steve.

His sleepy, reddened eyes stared at her, dazedly at first, and then sternly.

"But was it fair to cause me all this

trouble? Couldn't you have left a note at the ranch house? Even a word to the cook?"

Her soft arms still lingered about his shoulders.

"Ah, brother, I am sorry, but I dared not stop for anything. Could I tell Michael it was all a mistake? Could I make him feel foolish after he had dashed for hundreds of miles to my rescue? No! I didn't have the heart!"

Steve tried to regain his mental balance.

"Have—have you done it since?" he inquired.

"No. I hope I never will! I do not want to make his worthy deed ridiculous. Would you? Give me your help. Aid me. Do not make a fool of him."

Steve looked at her keenly, with her arms still about him.

"Are you sure that *you* will never make a fool of him?" asked the ranchman deliberately.

"No! Never! Oh, Stephen, I know that you have measured me by the elemental yardstick of folk who live simply; I know that you have not always understood me, nor I you; but do not judge me too harshly, my splendid brother of the mountains and the plains. Once I was drawn into a very indiscreet thing; but I have suffered for it. Do not judge me by that mistake alone. Let me prove my worth in my own environment as you have proved your worth in yours."

He read her sincerity. He drew her close and kissed her.

"May it be that way, then!" he agreed, gently. "Good luck to you!"

Hand in hand they walked out of the waiting room and toward the handsome fellow pacing the concrete walk. Paula approached him first.

"My brother is not unreasonable, Michael," she announced. "Come. Shake hands. After all, we are in the same family now. Let us be friends!"

Steve extended his hand.

"Under the circumstances," he announced, with the proper amount of reluctance, "I suppose there is nothing to do but agree to it."

They shook hands, though somewhat stiffly.

Paula and Michael, bowing and smiling with varying degrees of warmth, raced for their boat to cross the bay. Steve returned to his weary employees in the car.

"Where's Paula?" demanded Shorty.

"She's gone home, safe under guard."

"Safe already? Gosh, you sure work fast."

"Oh, I'm trained to it now. Start the car."

They went to San Francisco on the auto ferry. The valiant machine was taken to a garage. The blear-eyed trio managed to gain entrance to a decent hotel and fell into their beds and slept till the next morning. Then they bathed, shaved, and bought new clothes, appearing shortly as respectable citizens.

Steve let his companions explore the town. He hired a taxi, ignored Paula's home for the time, and rode to a house on a side street. A grim landlady ushered him into an old-fashioned parlor and went upward to announce his presence. Shortly Beth came downstairs, dressed in her old gray street suit, carrying a roll of music. He saw that her face was still pale, but her brown eyes twinkled at sight of him.

"Paula told me you had pursued her across two States," said Beth, shaking hands. "It must have been quite thrilling!"

"Yes," he said inanely.

"Sit down," she invited.

He seated himself, trying to gather from her face some idea of the lone-handed battle she had been waging during the absence of Paula, her best "customer." But Beth did not seem as tired as formerly. Perhaps she had not been nursing any battered cattlemen lately.

He deserted his chair.

"Listen, Beth," he pleaded. "One time you told me I was too busy, too sick, too burdened, too charitable, and all that. Well, that day's gone. I want to take you down to Arizona with me."

She seemed startled.

"I'm not charitable," he explained. "I'm not even sick. I didn't chase Paula across two States. I didn't care a hoot

about Paula. I made that wild ride just to get near you!"

She looked out of the window. There was nothing in sight except a row of houses opposite, yet her gaze seemed to see distant skies.

"Come on!" he urged, taking her fingers in the only useful hand he had left. "I need you, Beth. I've had a rough time. It wasn't *my* rough time; it was wished on me. But I had to stand for it, and I want my reward. Come to the ranch and help civilize me."

She did not reply. He saw only her rigid profile, with the light of the window painting golden strands on her brown hair.

"Besides," he urged somewhat helplessly, "I want *you* to be charitable this time. I want you to help get me out of jail."

She turned quickly.

"Jail?"

"Yes. You see, I was arrested for speeding. The judge gives 'em from thirty to sixty days. If I can only get you to make me happy, we can send my men home by train and then get down the San Joaquin Valley on the nineteenth, early in the morning, and let the judge marry us before he opens court. He wouldn't send me to jail after he'd just married us, would he? He's hard boiled, but he can't be *that* hard boiled!"

Beth's head bowed. A pink glow in her cheeks reddened. Her voice was very low: "And would you marry me just to keep out of jail?"

"No. If you want, I'll take thirty *years* in jail, and then marry you afterward!"

Her face was still shielded from him, but he saw she was smiling.

"In that case," she agreed, "I'll try to get you free."

The night of the eighteenth was beautifully clear. Toward midnight Steve's car returned in a ferryboat to the eastern side of the bay, dodged the traffic of a mighty city, and climbed up a long, curvy road which led into high hills and up to the mouth of a tunnel shored with timber and lit by many lamps. He stopped the car at the top of the grade.

Below him lay a great plain where the lights of nine cities joined in a vast illumination. Beyond that was the blackness of the bay, and beyond that San Francisco, standing out like a diadem of a million jewels against the great void of the sky and the Pacific.

"My, but that's beautiful!" exclaimed Steve. "A city of diamonds! I didn't like it at first; I got in the wrong way; but I'm a little more tolerant about it now."

"You struggled for that which was right," reminded Beth.

"And won a rich reward," he finished. "Look! Beyond this tunnel are the Contra Costa hills, and then the big valley and maybe jail; and then home! Our home!"

Beth nodded.

"Where you go, there also will I go!" she quoted.

"Let's go, then!"

He slammed the big car into gear, stepped on the throttle, and rushed through the tunnel and over the hills and far away.

THE END

THE RIVER

THE surface of the river
Is ashimmer in the moonlight,
And the glory of its gladness
Is entrancing in its calm;
And my pulses throb and quiver
To behold the lovely river,
And my heart and soul's abandoned
To the moon-lit river's charm.

James S. Ryan.

Flight to the Hills

By CHARLES NEVILLE BUCK

Author of "The Battle Cry," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PREVIOUS PARTS

WADE MURRELL, a Kentucky mountain clan leader in his later twenties, driving homeward from North Carolina, finds a girl semiconscious in the dark road. She is Cynthia Meade, a New York actress with a small part in a movie being made in an Asheville location. Jock Harrison, a New York man about town, has been shot and Cynthia fears a murder charge; Harrison had been pursuing her. She appeals to the mountaineer to aid her flight, and he agrees after she declares she is a good woman. Lesher Skidmore, leader of a rival clan, spreads a poison-tongue report about Cynthia, but Murrell's mother, known as Aunt Erie, welcomes the girl. Loutish schoolboys stone Cynthia for a lowland wanton, and Murrell severely beats the ringleader and the schoolmaster. Cynthia wins her enemies by garbing herself demurely and singing the mountain ballads. Caswell Harley, ambitious to go to the Legislature, offers the girl a secret love. She upbraids him tigerishly. Next she encounters Jock Harrison, who had recovered from an apparently mortal wound. He believes she shot him, and has come for revenge.

CHAPTER XX.

WHEN AMBITION IS DEADLY.

CYNTHIA did not accept Wade's invitation to spend that evening dressed in shoddy finery while the handsome stranger, who had given the name of Stacy Carroll, "sparked" with her before the big fireplace. Neither did Wade himself stand on sentry post outside the door to protect her from prying eyes.

Instead, the girl maneuvered with every instinct of a shrewd wariness to block the hospitable but dangerous effort of her hosts to throw her alone with their other guest—and she succeeded. In that effort to vary and amplify her entertainment she read their kindliness of motive and could not explain to them its unwelcomeness.

Yet Cynthia carried the situation with a skill which, during the first evening, proved adequate, and Harrison, as he bowed to her adroitness, reflected that he could afford to play a waiting game. For

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a few days it would pay him to let his affairs drift unhurried on the slow moving tide of self-establishment amid new surroundings.

Eventually it was with Wade himself that Cynthia found herself standing by the creek bed in the light of a moon that was striking out all colors except lights of silver and platinum and shadows of cobalt and black-green.

"I felt a bound ter hev speech with ye," the man was telling her, "because it come over me afresh that I wanted ter thank ye fer what ye done. Hit was a right parlous matter ter ondertake—ter stand up thar afore thet crowd an' sing. Albeit ye sounded light-hearted, I knows ye felt contrariwise. Thar was peril aplenty, an' albeit I hain't overly timorous I listened at ye with a chill of fear erginst my heart. Ef ye hedn't kept them folks right interested—ther kittle-pot of dire trouble mout hev boiled over." He paused, and in the moonlight his face was granite gray and sober. "But yit hit was ther only thing ter do—an' ye done hit."

"I had to do it—or try," she told him. "Because I was the cause of the trouble."

"An' yit ye didn't do naught ter start no trouble—save only ter come hyar. Lesher was jest makin' an excuse of ye—him an' his pack."

Abruptly the girl laid a hand on his arm.

"Wade," she demanded, "are you sure that the meeting settled things? Did it really prove anything?"

"Hit proved," he assured her, "thet Lesher Skidmore fared back home with full knowledge thet ther Murrells hedn't fell apart yit. Hit proved thet ther strivin' ter blackguard me because—of you—hed done failed."

"Listen, I don't want to horn in," she said quickly, lapsing under excitement into the febrile, slangy form of expression that had been her only form before she came here. "I'm not trying to be a little Miss Fixit or anything like that—but you say I've done something, and if I can do anything more to help—well, I want to go the limit—that's all."

"I'd love right well ter hearken ter anything ye wants ter tell me."

"Are you sure that there aren't still Murrells who are really Skidmores in spite of their names—Murrells that are still trying to fox you and cross you?"

"I was kinderly hopin' thet was over with now."

The impulse to warn him was warring in her mind with the almost equally potent fear of inflaming in him fresh intensities of anger. Dubiously she hesitated, and he demanded bluntly: "Hev ye heered anybody slurrin' me in a fashion thet I've need ter know erbout? A man in my fix ought ter sleep with one eye open—or he's liable not ter wake up at all."

"I've been wondering," she told him. "It's hard to tell whether repeating things will do good or harm. I don't want to stir up trouble and yet I don't want to let mischief-makers get away with their stuff. Will you promise me to keep cool even if I tell you something that's got a right to make you red-headed?"

"I've done held my hand afore now, Cynthy—an' ye've done seed me do hit. Lesher Skidmore's still alive."

"All right, I'll risk it. I think you ought to know. A kinsman of yours told me this afternoon to ask you why—if you were a fighting man—you weren't in the war?"

The man had been standing at pliant ease in the moonlight. His eyes, as they had dwelt on the girl, had been soft and rather wistful. It was as if after stress his spirit had relaxed in the softness of moonlight and night breeze to a sort of languor. Now, as though a high voltage had been sent through his nerves, he stiffened to a hard tautness.

His chest heaved and caught its breath deep, holding it there. His hands closed not spasmodically, but with a slow rigidity that would have crushed anything they had held, and across his temple the whiteness of his scar was a luminous smear.

The silence seemed to the girl to hold interminably, and she wondered whether the friendship that had grown between them could survive the deadliness of fury with which the man was wrestling in a quiet torture.

It was as if she had spoken the forbidden

word; had trampled on the ark of decent silence in his holy of holies. Then his voice came in slow words of even measure pitched to an absolute monotone of mortal affront.

"I wasn't in ther war," he said, "because endurin' of thet time I was in ther penitenshery."

She saw that the hurt of the question struck him to the quick of his feeling, but she saw, too, that his sense of affront did not extend to her; that he absolved her of any but an innocent connection with it.

She came closer and took both his tightly shut hands in her own.

"Listen, Mr. Man-of-the-mountains," she broke out tumultuously. "I don't need to know anything about that. I only repeated the question because I thought you ought to know. As far as that goes I might be in the penitentiary myself right now if it weren't for you."

"I reckon," he said shortly, "thet whoever told ye ter ask me thet question hed a rather fer *you* ter do hit then him. Hit's a matter I don't suffer men ter tattle erbout overmuch. Hit's a matter thet'll be sottled some good day—an' when hit's sottled, either me or Lesher will stretch dead."

"Lesher!" she exclaimed wrathfully. "So that was one of his little stunts, too, was it?"

She let go of his hands. They had relaxed out of their tightness now, and the man drew back a step and stood with the stiff preoccupation of eyes looking into a past of evil memories.

"Afore we goes any further," said Wade slowly, "let's you an' me thrash this thing out—an' then, ef we aims ter be friends, don't let's neither of us ever talk erbout hit no more."

"We don't have to thresh it out, Wade. I don't need any explanations from you."

"None the less, thar's some two-three people in ther world I wants ter stand unslurred afore," he declared grimly. "An' you're one of 'em."

"Of course," she said, "if you feel that way."

"They held a special session of ther High Cote down hyar one time ter clean up old business," said the man. "They brought a fotched-on jedge an' a prosecutin' lawyer from down below—an' some siv'ral newspaper scribblers. Lesher Skidmore hed done pledged hisself ter keep ther old feud grievances outen ther matter—an' us Murrels j'ined with him fer a peaceful term of cote. We 'lowed hit would look seemly afore ther world an' hit wouldn't do us no master harm hyar at home.

"Then Lesher, keepin' well outen sight hisself, turned round an' got me indicted fer his brother's death—albeit thet killin' come erbout in open battle y'ars back—an' they convicted me. They 'lowed they wanted ter make a sample of somebody thet wasn't jest small fry."

He paused, and his eyes glittered.

"Thar was still one way I mout hev saved myself. Ther Murrells was ready ter bust down ther jail house an' take me away from Lesher's high sheriff. They craved ter blast up ther settin' of ther cote with gunpowder an' fer me ter take leg-bail back in ther hills. But stid of doin' thet, I sent fer Lesher an' he come ter see me thar in ther jail-house."

He paused, and then he went on again:

"Lesher, he swore he hedn't tuck no part in ther business, an' I knowed he lied an' told him so. Ther town was full of Murrells armed with rifle-guns an' spittin' fire talk. They was waitin' fer ther word from me ter fo'ce ther jail-house, an' in them days thar warn't no backsliders amongst 'em. But I knowed hit would mean a lavish of dead men—an' I concluded thet hit wouldn't do.

"Settin' thar in ther jail-house, Lesher an' me made a compact. I agreed ter go down thar ter Frankfort-town an' sulter in ther penitenshery fer ther rise of two God A'mighty long y'ars. Seemed like hit was more Christian then ter buy my freedom with a lot of blood. Lesher pledged hisself ter keep ther truce hyar at home—an' we both tuck solemn oath that whensoever ther day come round thet him an' me could fight out our own grievance ter ther plumb death without draggin' in our kith an' kin we'd do hit.

"I'm still waitin' fer thet day ter come—an' I'm waitin' with a fever in me. Lesher, he's seekin' ter git me kilt some other fashion afore hit comes. Leastways, thet's ther seemin' of hit."

"But it's over now," the girl argued. "It's over and you're on top after all. Men trust you."

"Hit kain't nuver be over whilst he lives," Wade told her in the clipped syllables of grim obsession. "Hit kain't nuver be over whilst I reecollects thet ther boys went in ther army an' wore tin hats—an' I stayed back an' wore them prison clothes. Hit kain't nuver be over whilst I reecollects thet I sont word ter ther Governor promisin' ter come back an' finish my term, with extry time tacked on, ef so be he'd let me out long enough ter fight acrost ther ocean-sea. It kain't nuver be over whilst I reecollects thet wunst when I besought an officer ter aid me, he 'lowed ther country hed free men enough ter fight hit's battles, an' didn't need no criminals."

"But, Wade," she protested in a groping effort to comfort him, "lots of men that went and fought bravely enough have come back sick at heart. They can't see that anything has been gained by it all."

He waved aside the weak attempt at solace.

"I hain't argyfyin' with them thet holds erginst warfare," he told her. "I'm holdin' erginst hit right hyar an' now—es hard es I kin. But hundreds of thousands of men thet was built fer peace an' naught else was dragged out by ther scruffs of thar necks an' throwed inter warfare—men with white faces an' weak bodies. Hit hain't no marvel thet some come back home cussin' an' damnin' things God never meant 'em ter tackle.

"But me, I was borned an' reared fer fightin' an' seems like a rifle-gun is kinderly part of me. I reckon I wouldn't hev hed no lamentation ter make anyway hit went. Hit was men iike me thet hed a license ter go—an' thar wasn't nothin' master gained thar in ther penitenshery nuther."

"If it's any satisfaction to you," said the girl in a low voice when he paused, "I may mention that I bawled out this busybody that made the wise crack about you for fair, and handed him a couple of wallops on his map to boot. I forgot all about being maidenly—but I don't think he got much pleasure out of his gossip."

Wade Murrell nodded.

"We've done talked it out now," he said. "Es fer ther man thet told ye ter ask me, I kin look over hit, because I've done give ye my pledge, but I'd love right well ter know who's slurrin' me."

"That," she declared, "was why I started this conversation. It's your bright young cousin who wants to go to the Legislature. He tells me he has Lesher Skidmore's support, and he says after he's squeezed the Legislature dry he means to go to Congress." She paused for a contemptuous laugh, then added: "I believe he's even got one eye cocked on the White House. He certainly hates himself, that boy!"

"Cas Harley!" Wade uttered the name rather in meditative than in angry surprise. "I'm right glad ter know hit, ef he's plottin' with Lesher. I hain't nuver give him no master thought afore now. Folks 'lowed thet he was tricky, but they hain't nuver 'lowed he was ter say dangerous. Hit's norated thet Cas is so monster vain thet ef any man wanted ter git rid of him all he'd hev need ter do would be ter stick a peacock feather in his coat tail. Then he'd straightway strut hisself ter death."

Suddenly and almost hysterically Cynthia laughed.

"Can you beat it," she exclaimed. "Here I come to these mountains and all in the world I'm looking for is a place to hide. And I find myself stirring up commotions, and saying who shall go to the Legislature and who shan't!"

"I guess Cas won't go," commented Wade dryly. "I'll see ter thet. Men goes ter Frankfort-town from these hills fer jest two reasons—ter set in ther Legislature or ter sulter in ther penitenshery. I've done a'ready been thar fer one of them reasons. Hit would be a kinderly pity ter hev ther wrong man in *both* jobs."

"Then you won't 'fly mad,' as you call it, and have any row with him?"

"No, I won't need ter do thet," he assured her gravely, "but he'll hev ter refashion his hopes fer ther future. He won't be no statesman—an' I'm right glad ye forewarned me betimes."

They stood for a brief while in silence, listening to the little sounds that went into

the orchestration of the night. If sounds have color, these were all in harmony with the blue and green and silver from the moon's palette. At length, Cynthy heard the man saying quietly:

" We faults ther laws fer bein' unfair an' yit, right oftentimes, we lets men like Cas Harley go down below an' help ter make our laws. Save only fer you we'd hev fell inter thet same error ergin."

He paused, then turned toward her with more of impulsiveness in his voice than was usual.

" Ye hain't been hyar long an' yit ye've done a'ready wrought some right needful changes hyarabouts. Ye've done aided in gittin' ther new school an' ye've done quieted down a hateful threat of warfare. Ye've done been ther cause of one scallawag bein' turned outen ther old schoolhouse, an' now ye're forewarnin' us from lettin' a rascal go ter ther Legislature. An' you're a gal—an' a furrin' gal."

Cynthia looked down at the shimmer of moonlight on still water.

She wanted to declare to him, in the humility of confessional spirit, that the girl who had done these things was not at all the girl who had climbed over the high wheel of his wagon that night outside Asheville. She felt the need of admitting that the girl whose portrait he had just sketched was a counterfeit playing an enforced part, but a counterfeit with a new yearning to make the imitation genuine.

Perhaps, if Jock Harrison had remained dead, she might in the end have accomplished it. Through the centuries the most fascinating dream of alchemists had been the transmution of base elements into precious metals. It had remained one of the impossibilities, but Cynthia had begun to hope that human metals might be different. Then Harrison had come, and in Harrison's hands she would be inert clay again.

She had always been plastic, and until now no sculptor had sought to mold her contours toward any expression of an ideal. Here she stood as the clay on the studio turntable.

Wade Murrell, the rude visionary, saw in her the material of nobility. Jock Harrison's cynical eye saw in her only the makings of a plaything and caricature—and she herself saw no way to prevent Jock Harrison from elbowing his way to the sculptor's place and taking possession of both clay and modeling tools.

Together, she and Wade walked slowly back to the house.

From the opening of the dog run they could catch the red glow of Carroll's pipe bowl. As they drew near the pipe was removed and the lips that had held it began a low whistling of a jazz fragment.

In the dog run itself Cynthia turned with an abrupt haste to her own door and Wade, with a word of greeting to his other guest, passed on to that of the main room. Carroll nodded and said pleasantly:

" Miss Stokes, we have missed you both."

From the safety zone of her own threshold the girl turned and paused with her hand on the knob.

" Oh, it's you, Mr. Carroll," she exclaimed lightly to hide the heavy despair that chilled her heart. " To tell you the truth, I'd forgotten you were alive."

Wade had disappeared, and the newcomer lowered his voice as he stepped forward.

" After all," he answered equably, " why shouldn't you? It isn't your fault I am, is it?"

But the bedroom door had slammed in his face, and he heard the heavy handwrought bolt shoot home.

" Godfrey-mighty, Cas," observed Lesher Skidmore, as the would-be statesman " lit down " from a white mule at his door. " Ye're wearin' a woebegone face like es ef ye'd done buried yore last friend. What ails ye, son?"

For a moment or two the scowling young man stood overwhelmed with his sense of catastrophe and anger, then he found words.

" Yestiddy," he announced explosively, " Wade Murrell rid up ter my stile. He didn't even light down an' come inside. He jist hollered fer me ter come out."

" Well, an' ye went out, I reckon, didn't ye?"

The visitor nodded moodily.

" He sot thar on his ridin' critter an'

looked down at me, an' his eyes, they was too quiet an' innocent like not ter be harborin' guile. I seed that right away."

"All right. Go on."

"He said kinderly softlike: 'Cas, does ye still aim ter run fer ther Legislature nex' election?' an' I says, 'I reckon so, Wade,' an' he says, 'Well, I've done been studyin' erbout hit, Cas, an' I've done concluded ye'd better put by thet notion fer good an' all.'"

Lesher's voice was velvet soft.

"What answer did ye give him, son?"

"I asked him fer why should I put hit by, an' he said, still speakin' soft, 'I went down thar ter Frankfort-town once, an' hit was a right grievous mistake. I've done concluded thet fer you ter go now would be a still bigger mistake.' Them was his words."

"What did he mean by 'em, son? What hed ye done ter bring on a hardness betwixt ye?"

The younger man flushed painfully.

"Ter give ye ther full straight of hit, Lesher, I'd done kinderly made a fool of myself with thet hussy thet he's harborin'. She kinderly led me on an' I aimed ter keep hit quiet."

"Afore God A'mighty," stormed the Skidmore leader in a transport of explosive rage. "Air ye sich a plain damn fool es thet? Don't ye know she's Wade's wench? Don't ye know hit means warfare ter monkey with another man's woman? Does ye reckon he fotched her cl'ar from Asheville-town an' stud at bay betwixt her an' his whole damn pack only ter let ye make free with her? All right! Ye've done made yore own bed an' now I reckon ye've got ter lay in hit. Ef ther Murrells won't stomach ye fer ther Legislater, thar hain't no sense in my seekin' ter aid ye."

The angered intriguer spat contemptuously and shrugged his heavy shoulders. Yet he was both infuriated and bitterly disappointed. Here was a man who could help him as no other could, because while ostensibly a Murrell in good clan standing, he was actually Lesher's secret agent. Traitors to the fealty of the clan were few and hard to replace. Yet as a Murrell outcast Harley could be of no use to him. Not only the ambitions of the traitor, but the success of his own schemes had suffered a crushing blow in this abrupt development.

"But, Lesher," urged Cas desperately, "ther wench give me ter think thet she was kinderly sick of Wade. She give me ter think that she was hurtin' fer companionship with somebody thet wasn't a fool."

Skidmore snorted. "An' even atter thet, ye 'lowed ye hed a chanst," he made scathing comment.

Harley pleaded. Into the fabric of his being had been woven a pattern of ambition. To have it ripped ruthlessly out would be worse than death. To save it whole he was ready to pay the usury of desperation. Lesher let him unbosom himself, giving no intimation of sympathy, and when the aggrieved fool was talked out the Skidmore leader had his response ready, but it was a response which required preamble.

"Thar hain't no manner of use in yore comin' ter me unless ye kin fotch Murrell strength along with ye," he said grimly. "Ef hit's jest Skidmore strength alone thet's ter be figgered on, hit'd pay me better ter run a Skidmore fer ther Legislater out an' out. Hit looked like ye kinderly stud in second place over yon, next ter Wade.

"I 'lowed thet ef ye was ter stand in fust place 'stid of second, me an' you could kinderly pull in double harness—but ye've got ter git inter thet fust place fer yoreself. I kain't man-power a disable fool up ter leadership amongst my enemies. Now ye've done up an' asked fer destruction an' pears like ye're goin' ter git hit—all over a fotched-on strumpet."

"Ef Wade would jest sicken an' die," moaned Cas Harley bitterly, "I reckon, even now, I would stand in fust place over thar."

Lesher gave him a quick contemptuous glance. "All right, then," he demanded with diabolic directness, "Why don't ye see ter hit thet he does sicken an' die?"

Harley's eyes widened. "What does ye mean, Lesher? Am I ther Almighty Lord ter call down mortal ailments on a man?"

"Oh, hell!" came the disgusted retort. "I'm a palaverin' with a man thet haint' got ther gumption ter hit a copperhead when hit hisses at him. Thar hain't nairy

bit of sense in wastin' my breath on ye nohow."

"But yit, Lesher, ye'd love right well ter see Wade die yoreself—and, despite thet, ye suffers him ter go on livin'."

Skidmore stood and looked his visitor disdainfully up and down.

"Ef a Skidmore bullet deadened him," he said sharply, "thar'd be hell ter pay. Ther war would bust loose an' carry off man atter man. Ef a bullet from ther la'rel-bresh deadened him—mankind would lay hit up erginst ther Skidmores whether a Skidmore done hit or not."

He paused a moment to let his words sink in. "But ef a Murrell was ter pick a quarrel with him, and hed ther guts ter draw quickest an' shoot straightest in ther open sight of witnesses, an' slay him in self-defense, I reckon a jury would let thet man come cl'ar."

Cas Harley winced at the audacity of the suggestion, and Lesher saw the wincing.

"As I stands hyar and eyes ye up an' down," he said, "I sees a man thet stands risin' of six foot in his socks. I sees a man thet don't look no fashion puny. I sees a man thet admits his own self he's got ther makin's of a President in him an' ther qualities fer leadin' ther whole United States, an' yit thar's somethin' missin' outen him. He don't dast ter hit at one snake thet bars his pathway ter Frankfort-town."

"Hit would hev ter be face ter face—an' afore Murrell witnesses, wouldn't hit?" faltered Cas Harley.

"Hit would undoubtedly, shorely hev ter be done thetaway. But yit a man thet knows what he's aimin' ter do kin be ready, an' with a fightin' feller like Wade he's got a license ter figger thet almost airy move is a move ter ther holster. I hain't nuver heered self-defense called no crime."

CHAPTER XXI.

A PLASTER SAINT.

UNDER these clear mountain lights Jock Harrison showed an altered aspect from that which Cynthia had seen back there in New York. Except for the occasional glint of sardonic purpose that came into his eye when it met hers, and hers alone, the girl might have been beguiled into thinking and hoping that he had actually changed.

But she warned herself that he was only ingratiating himself with her protectors, strengthening and consolidating his position against the day when she might appeal to them against him. It filled her with a futile fury to see how easily he, of whom she had thought as a New Yorker with all the New Yorker's insistence on life's smooth and brittle finish, fell into his place here in a land of opposites.

He had come fighting no head tide of preconceived prejudice, and his gift of adaptability carried him easily into the confidence of men given to slow friendships. He mingled with ragged mountaineers and talked of their interests as if he were a brother in blood, and in the same wise they accepted him. He drank with them in their own hidden stills, but no man ever saw him affected by the fiery nectar with which they plied him.

When self-esteeming marksmen offered demonstrations of swiftness and accuracy with either "rifle-gun" or "pistol-gun" the stranger was generous in admiring praise—but, to their amazement, he usually capped their performance with one almost as good. The word went abroad that whatever might be said of Wade Murrell's female protégé, there was no gainsaying that his new guest was a he-man, "up-standin' an' straight-gazin' an' not afeared of nuther hell ner high water."

Cynthia watched his progress through apprehensive eyes. It did not matter that along Little Flinty this man was winning a quick popularity, but it did matter tremendously and dangerously that Wade Murrell, slow and cautious of judgment, was being drawn to him; was being won by him.

"He's selling himself to Wade," she mused in an agony of apprehension—and Wade Murrell was her last defense.

They were sitting about the breakfast table now, and the morning mists were dissipating into brilliant color. Although the same roof had sheltered them for a week, the man and the woman from the lowlands still maintained the distant formality of

strangers. Harrison had patiently sought the opportunity for five minutes alone with the girl, but she had always evaded him, and the duel that they were waging with such deadly earnestness had never betrayed itself by any outward ripple on the tranquil surface of appearances.

That perhaps was the coy method of city folk. Neither Wade nor his mother questioned it, although it puzzled them. Once a stranger is accepted in the hills he is wholly accepted and no bars of reserve are kept standing against him. For a newcomer it is wholeheartedly one thing or the other: Welcome, or Begone!

"I hain't usin' nuther ther mule critter ner yit ther pacin' mare terday, Cynthy," suggested Wade slowly. "I 'lowed mebby you an' Mr. Carroll might love ter ride up ter ther summit of Old Shaggy. Ye kin git a right far-flung look out from up thar—an' nuther one of ye hain't seed hit yit. On a cl'ar day ye kin gaze plumb acrost ter Cyarliny."

Carroll nodded his head receptively.

"If Miss Stokes will go with me," he declared, "I'll be delighted. I'm sure you're anxious for a view as distant as North Carolina, aren't you, Miss Stokes?"

"I've seen North Carolina," she answered briefly.

"So have I," he smiled, "and doubtless we shall both see it again, yet to see it from a mountain top is a different thing. For my part, I shall prefer the long view to the close up." He turned toward Aunt Erie and added in casual explanation: "I spent some weeks in a hospital in Asheville, and it wasn't pleasant. One who has been sick or imprisoned in a town thinks in terms of hospitals or prisons." His eyes came back banteringly to the girl. "But from the top of Old Shaggy, Miss Stokes, we shall see only the violet mists of enchantment."

"Thank you," Cynthia declined with quiet decisiveness, "I don't think I'll go. I'm finishing a 'kiverlet' and I'd rather spend the morning by the loom."

"At the loom." The man raised his eyes and a repressed merriment seemed to possess him. "Pardon me, Miss Stokes, but isn't there an element of humor in that? Unless you are vastly unlike most city girls of to-day, I'll dare say you never saw a loom until you came here—except, perhaps, those tricky little affairs that one encounters in the arts and crafts places about Greenwich Village."

"No, I never did," she said listlessly. "But I like it. It's good stuff."

"An', la! but she jest natch'rally tuck ter hit like a gosling takes ter ther creek," announced Aunt Erie admiringly. "She's makin' a Star of Bethlehem kiverlit an' hit's plum purty."

"Fine," commended Carroll. "Star of Bethlehem! The Virgin and the Child! That's beautiful symbolism, but I was thinking of how easily we all change when we change our environment—and of how little we change in anything except outward color. We're so many chameleons."

"I don't know what they be," announced Aunt Erie; and the man turned deferentially toward her.

"They are those little lizards," he explained, "that are gray when they stretch out for a snooze on a gray twig—but they turn green when they take a nap on an oak leaf."

"Land sake, yes, I knows them things as well as I do hoptoads!" the old woman said. "But I didn't nuver hear ther long name fer 'em afore now. I reckon hit's jest a high-soundin' book word."

"There's another long name that explains why they do it," said the man. "It's called protective coloration, and it means a method of hiding. But under all the changes of color, the lizard itself doesn't change; it's still a lizard—and some of them are poisonous."

"I've heered tell some was pizen—ther leetle hatefuls!"

Cynthia wanted to rise up and fling her tin coffee cup into the face of this man who sat so calmly baiting her. This method which he appeared to delight in perfecting, the device of talking in a fashion that meant one thing for them and another for her, had become unendurable torture. It was like the infamy of letting water fall drop by drop, upon the head of a chained victim until it wore away the skull and bit fatally into the reason. Yet she sat so tranquil of outward seeming that only one

of those seated at the table could see the smoldering resentment that lurked deep in her eyes.

"Well, I'm sorry you won't climb Old Shaggy with me," observed Carroll philosophically, "but I suppose a woman's place is at the loom. What are you doing this morning, Mr. Murrell?"

"Me, I'm aimin' ter split me out some cedar fence rails fer ther new clearin'."

"Then, if you don't mind, I'll let Old Shaggy wait until Miss Stokes feels more receptive—and to-day I'll split rails with you."

Cynthia wanted to burst into derisive laughter. In her mind's eye, she was seeing this man sitting in the tonneau of his car leaning on his walking stick with his chamois-gloved hands indolently crossed. Well, she could frame sentences that had double meanings, too, and it was with an almost dreamy wickedness that she observed:

"Speaking of lizards—there are several kinds. The lizard on the fence rail and the lounge lizard aren't exactly the same thing—if you get what I mean."

As if in corroboration, she heard Wade saying dubiously:

"Hit's right slavish work fer a man thet hain't stronged hisself ter hit by degrees."

"Try me," said Carroll, pushing back his chair. "You're the boss, and you can fire me when you get ready."

Time in these immemorial hills of Appalachia is not as time in other places. In a range that was hoar with age when the Andes and the Alps were yet sea bottom, centuries and minutes shrink through long perspectives to a kinship of measurement, and even to the short-lived men who inhabit their lights and shadows time is not all of the clock and calendar.

Wade and Stacy Carroll had been strangers a week ago, yet when, with the coming of noon, they threw themselves sweat-drenched on a mat of pine needles at the edge of the high clearing, each felt that an old acquaintanceship stood between them. Not once that morning had the lowlander flung down his maul in surrender to complaining muscles. Not once had he cried quits, and now his breath came with as rhythmic and deep a regularity as that of the man who had been reared close to the soil and its hard exactions.

To Wade Murrell he seemed a proven man, and as the hillsman lay gazing at him he thought that had he too been able to walk variously in the broad places of the world—had he too been able to feast his hungry mind at the banquet tables of experience and knowledge—he might have hoped to be such another.

This traveler could paint pictures with words, making them glow with color and sing with effect. He could speak lightly and yet strike a deep note of underlying meaning.

Wade himself, bred of the bone and blood of stoics, envied this articulate power. He himself knew only the retreat into silence when, most of all, things cried out in him for utterance; retreat into silence that ate like an acid—or action which was often forbidden.

He had been born with the brand of reticence upon him, as though a stern angel had attended his birth with a finger tip pressed to its lips, and because of that racial taciturnity there were times when the spirit in him was an eagle caged, beating and lacerating its wings against invisible but metal-hard bars.

Somehow, in the presence of this companion he seemed himself to become articulate, and the need to speak grew imperative. Suddenly he found himself exclaiming with an almost savage vehemence:

"Hit must be a right joyous thing fer a man ter hev ther gift of words. With us pore, benighted folk up hyar ther deepest thoughts thet comes ter us jest clutters up inside us—like logs jammed behind a splash-dam. We hain't got no means of lettin' 'em free ter ride ther tide."

Carroll smiled.

"And yet," he said, "the vigor of your mountain speech seems colorful and trenchant to me."

Wade shook his head doggedly.

"We're a silent, yea an' nay kind of folk, when hit comes ter talkin' right out from ther heart," he declared, rising on one elbow to point off into the sky. "Does ye see thet eagle soarin' up yonder? I

knows whar he hes his nest at. Hit's up on a rock clift thet lifts straight over a plumb gorge."

"Yes," said Carroll, "I see it."

"Wa-al," announced Wade, with a mirthless laugh, though his eyes were smoldering with banked fires of feeling, "thet eagle he kain't sing no song—all he knows is ter scream. Looks like as handsome an' es strong a bird es thet ought ter hev some better means of speech then thet. But in all ther ragged nestses of all his old gran'sire eagles, from ther days of ther flood right on down, his kind hes been too busy searchin' the world fer food an' fightin' foes fer aught else. He's done hunted an' fit twell thar hain't nothin' left in his heart save love fer his freedom an' his nest, an' hate fer all else besides. Even his love is right fierce an' savage."

"Your mountain eagles," said Carroll slowly, "aren't the only birds that can hate, my friend. Your hates are just a little franker and they call for more direct action, that's all." He paused and fumbled for his pipe, and then he made abrupt announcement: "I myself have a matter of personal wrong that I mean to avenge—and for the time being it has the power to eclipse other and perhaps more important matters in my mind."

"You!" Murrell sat now with his hands locked about his updrawn knees, and his eyes were full of surprise. "Ye don't look like a man harborin' no deep grievance."

"And yet," responded the lowlander slowly, "I have a deep grievance—and I mean to harbor it until it's punished."

"I reckon this enemy hain't no mounting man, is he?" The question broke off, and the inquirer was quick to apologize. "But don't answer thet. I hain't got no license ter question ye. I don't suffer men ter question me."

Harrison smiled. It had obviously not occurred to Wade that the enemy of whom he spoke might not be a man, but a woman, and Carroll made no correction.

"That's all right," he assured his companion. "I broached the subject myself. This enemy was a friend. We had quarreled, but not seriously. We were standing together in my room. I turned my back. The supposed friend shot me from behind—didn't even pause to see whether I was dead or alive; left me lying there and beat it."

"Afore God! Ther damn craven!" Murrell breathed the words low and indignantly. "But yit in ther big towns ther police jails folks like thet right speedily, don't they? Thar hain't no lar'el hills an' timbered crags thar whar a man kin take leg bail an' hide out, is thar?"

"The police didn't solve this riddle," smiled Carroll. "They didn't know who did it—and I haven't told them."

"Ye didn't tell 'em?" Wade repeated the words, and into his eyes came understanding and with it a dawning admiration.

"Ye didn't tell 'em because hit war yore own business. Yes, I reckon ye're right when ye says all ther eagles hain't in ther hills—an' hit don't skeercely satisfy no eagle to tote his grievances ter ther barn yard an' tell 'em ter ther watchdog, does hit? He loves better ter trust his own beak an' his own claws." The mountaineer paused, and then he said grimly: "I aims ter be a godly Christian, but I hopes ye gits ther craven thet betrayed ye, Mr. Carroll."

"I mean to," declared the other.

They sat looking off from the high slope, where they had been working, to the heaped-up crests that were violet against far distances, and Wade Murrell's face showed a brow gathered into wrinkles of deep thought.

"I've done told ye," he said, "thet I hain't got no master gift fer words, an' so sometimes I feels like as ef flood tides inside me was gittin' outen thar banks—an' didn't hev no outlet. I've done been studyin' a heap since ther gal come—an' I've got a bound ter counsel with somebody. I reckon she must be hurtin' sore from lonesomeness hyar amongst us."

"I imagine," suggested Carroll lightly, "if she didn't like it, she wouldn't stay, would she?"

A sudden shadow clouded the mountain man's eyes, threatening retreat once more into silence.

"Thet's her business," he said shortly. "I hain't asked her no questions, an' I

hain't suffered nobody else ter pester her with none—but I 'lowed thet when *you* come mebby she'd welcome right gayly a chanst fer a companionship—of her own sort."

" She has seemed quite casual with me," acknowledged Carroll, " but perhaps she is too reserved for sudden intimacies."

Wade shook his head, wondering vaguely why his companion should smile so humorously.

" I'd love ter see thet gal git whatsoever she wants outen life," he went on. " I fotched her hyar—an' hit don't pleasure me none ter know thet she's done met up with treatment thet sprung outen sorry ign'rance."

" She's had good treatment from you," suggested the other. " You've held her safe —even when it threatened to break down your own influence."

" So fur es thet's consarned," announced Wade, " I'd hev done thet much fer any man or woman thet I suffered ter tarry under my roof. But none of them things didn't rise outen no fault of ther gal's—hit was all jest enemies of mine seekin' ter hit at me an' ter hurt a woman along with me."

" The pretext was an old one for hitting at a man's reputation," mused Carroll. " That of pretending to think you'd brought a light woman with you, and that she was your mistress."

" Thet's what my enemies give out ter each an' every—an' I reckon I don't need ter tell ye hit's a damn lie from start ter finish."

" You don't have to tell me that your motives are entirely—even quixotically—honorable," smiled Carroll; " and yet I'm wondering whether, after all, there isn't one germ of truth in the story."

Murrell stiffened, and his eyes were for a moment again points of inwardly lighted flint.

" What does ye mean? A lie's a lie, hain't hit?"

" I don't mean the lie, Murrell. I was only wondering whether you weren't, after all, being drawn into a feeling that had the makings of love in it for this young woman."

Wade arose and stood for a long half minute with his back turned. His eyes were half closed, but through the narrowed lids they were burning with an intenser yet a softer fire. Finally he jerked his head into a nod of affirmation and wheeled again to face his companion soberly. Under their bronze his cheeks were paler than they had been a few minutes ago.

" My love fer her hain't ter make," he declared vehemently. " Hit's done made an' come ter full ripeness. But I hain't said no word ter her—an' I don't nuver aim ter say no word ter her. She don't know hit ner suspicion hit, an' ef God gives me strength ter keep on bitin' my tongue hard enough, she hain't nuver a goin' ter know."

Carroll refrained from any reply. The thing had gone further than he supposed, and yet it was not so strange. The little Circe had sung her alluring song to other and more experienced mariners, and perhaps not all of them had, like himself, recognized the tune for a carnal enchantment devoid of soul. Even he, recognizing that so well, had not stuffed his ears with wax like Ulysses and sailed on unscathed. But it was a God's pity that this fine, simple fellow—this strong barbarian, with a touch of the saint about him—should have become enmeshed.

Carroll only nodded, and the other man went on. The " splash-dam " that had held his emotions painfully walled up so long had broken at last, and the tide was spilling through with the head rush of a cataract.

" I'd done gone on this fur without nuver knowin' what hit was ter burn up with a fever fer no woman—but then I hedn't nuver seed no woman like her afore. Now I lays awake night-long, an' my arms they aches fer her; ef she breshes me with her fingers, hit's like es ef a hurricane hed done shook me; an' when I hears her voice speaking low under the skies atter dark, ther stars don't stand still in th'ar places no more—seems like they runs sets in heaven—" He broke off and wheeled chokingly away, overcome both by the gusty sweep of his emotion and shame for his unwonted abandonment to its expression in words.

Carroll had risen and now he stood near, his own face strained of expression.

"Cut it out, man!" he exclaimed brusquely. "Get this thing under control and keep it there. Strangle it—don't let it beat you! You don't know how big you are, boy! Don't let a woman you know nothing about snare you. I've been through the mill, and I know. But you—well, you're different—and it would come near killing you."

"I sometimes wishes hit would kill me," declared Wade Murrell. "Then I could rest plumb easy. But why should *you* forewarn me?"

"Only," said Carroll very quietly, "because I distrust most women—and where the man and the woman come from different lives—think different thoughts—I might almost say worship different gods—"

He broke off short, and Murrell nodded in wretched understanding.

"Thet's why I don't aim ter nuver let her know," he said. "Thar hain't no bird thet eagles need ter feel ashamed afore—but yit they kain't mate save only with other eagles—an' eagles is wild." He paused, then went on: "But I've seed this gal when every drap of blood in her veins was eagle blood; I've seed her standin' betwixt me an' a man thet was shootin' at me from the black-dark la'rel; I've seed her standin' up an' frontin' men thet was like ter break out inter bloodshed—"

Once more he paused, and once more his expression changed. Its hot impetuosity altered to the quiet of reverence.

"I've seed her showin' herself ter be ther pattern of bravery an' ther pattern of gentleness. She's eddicated—an' I reckon she's highborn. I knows God didn't fashion her fer me—an' so I aims ter hold my peace."

"You think"—Carroll found the words hard to say—"you think she's too good for you, this girl?"

"I think she's too good fer any man," came the instant reply, and it came like a challenge. "I knows, though, some day some man 'll git her, an' I hopes ter God he's good ter her. Hit won't be me—an ign'rant hill billy. God didn't nuver will hit ter be me."

Once more he paused, and then he added: "Thet's fer why I've done kinderly sought ter throw ther two of ye tergither. I reckon she's hurtin' with lonesomeness, an' ye've got all ther world ter talk about; ye've got ther same sort of blood in yore veins. I didn't want her plumb obleeged ter be kinderly shut in with no man but me. Hit's her due ter hev better comp'ny."

Carroll had listened to that description, had looked at the portrait painted in the high colors and bold strokes of idealization, and at first it had been hard not to break into ribald laughter. No, he told himself, that was hardly true—no man could laugh at such pent-up feeling or at such sincerity.

Here the counterfeit had been fully accepted as the genuine. The crass and vulgar imitation had been set on a pedestal and canonized, and this inherently decent fellow believed himself unworthy to lift his eyes to the plaster saint!

Too good for any man—brave and gentle! This little Broadway chicken, who had laid her blighting spell on him too, but laid it only in the allurement of the flesh and without successful disguise. The little gold digger who played with me and whose idea of morality was the highly technical one, dictated only by caution, of "watching her step."

As for bravery and gentleness, she was such a poltroon that she could step over the bleeding body of the man she had shot and go away without a word. She was so cheaply vulgar that to any eye less guilelessly ignorant than Wade's she was a burlesque.

Now she was vamping a man whose very bigness grew out of his naïve innocence of the world. It was a bigness which she could in no way understand. She was playing a part before simple people—and she was getting away with it. The baneful little crook!

For such a meretricious character the penitentiary was the proper place—that or an apartment in New York where she could be as carefully watched and as ruthlessly controlled as some deceptively beautiful panther may be controlled by the whip of the lion tamer.

Carroll's determination was stiffened; and yet, as he looked at the man before him, he thought, less in fear than in pity

and genuine admiration: "I must go slow. He'd try to make a grease spot of me if he knew why I was here, and it would be a pity to quarrel with him. There has been pity enough already—but she's run amuck too far."

To his companion he said quietly: "After what you've told me, I don't know that I shall even feel free to try for Miss Stokes's friendship."

"I wants ye ter do hit," declared the other earnestly. "I don't aim ter speak no word—an' even if I did, hit wouldn't be no more then fa'r ter give ye a good half of ther road."

CHAPTER XXII.

REACTIONS.

WHEN the afternoon was half spent, the sound of maul on wedge, which had been drifting down to the log house, was drowned in the continuous and sullen roar of sky batteries drawing near. Black thunder heads, rimmed with the sickly fringe of green that proclaimed wind, blotted out the sun and carried a streak of sullen anger across the sky. A livid brilliancy of lightning gashed the spreading cloudbanks, and the rumble lifted its volume to a cannonading, while the advance guard of the wind bent the trees and called out a moaning protest from the lashed forests.

"I reckon we'd better make a run fer hit," declared Wade, with an eye on the sky, although he smiled as if, in the impending fury of the elements, he found a sort of Valhalla of delight. "Hit's comin' on ter storm. 'Pears like hit 'll be a gully washer an' a trash mover—not no gentle drizzle-drozzle."

Before they had made the journey down the mountainside they were leaning into a wind of hurricane force, and gazing with distended pupils through a murky gloom of sheeted rain and hail that whipped them with the sting of rawhide. The valley was a well between the solid darkness of the slopes, and its murk was made intermittently livid with a ragged whipsawing of lightning.

Into the house, when they succeeded in reaching it, they ran as two men might run into a fort from the pursuit of enemies, and all the rest of the day they listened, like animals in a den, to the assaulting pound of wind and hail and rain.

But the setting sun tore out scraps of cloud from the west for shreds of color to peep through, and because the air was chilled and sharp a heap of pine knots roared up the chimney.

Cynthia was sitting, after supper, in a split oak chair at one corner of the hearth. In a rude semicircle the others lounged, too, and talked in a desultory fashion with frequent lapses into silence. The girl sat with her elbows on her knees and her fingers locked under her small chin. Her gray-green eyes did not stray from the back of the fire pit, where foolish little lines and patterns of soot sparks played behind the logs. They were eyes full of brooding and reflection.

She did not look at the other chairs, and she did not notice that one silence had stretched and prolonged itself. She was not conscious that Carroll had risen and moved over until he stood behind her—between her and the door.

At last, though, his voice quietly pitched and ironic, broke through her insulation of aloofness.

"So grafting and cheating—trying to murder a man and leaving him to bleed to death—these weren't enough, were they? You had to come here to deceive and vamp simple folk who took you in and protected you."

With a start that made her heart miss a beat the girl looked up.

Except for herself and Jock Harrison, the room was empty. She realized what had happened. Aunt Erie and Wade Murrell had slipped quietly away to leave them uninterrupted together. Their obtuse hospitality had refused to grasp the fact that she studiously avoided being alone with this man as she would have avoided deadly contagion.

Now she appeared trapped. The thing that for more than a week she had successfully maneuvered and contrived to avoid had happened at last, and her face turned

ashen with dread and anger as she came to her feet and commanded tensely: "Leave me alone. Get out of here!"

"Your vocabulary is losing its color, my dear," he laughed at her. "In the old days there would have been a fierier eloquence. You would have said: 'Get-the-hell out of here, you big bum!'"

"Get out—get out—get out!" she repeated monotonously, with a sense of numbed despair. She could not banish the sinking terror of one who stands on the scaffold alone save for the executioner. There was no up-leap of the old spirit, which had always been ready to meet combat half way.

"I should have been able to protect myself," Carroll went on with a hard steadiness. "I knew your type at least. But these people are simple and generous. They are easily deceived. The penitentiary was intended for such public menaces as you—that, or—"

Cynthia caught at her breast as if to hold and steady her palpitating heart with her tremulous fingers.

"Wade Murrell!" she screamed wildly, and it was like a shriek out of nightmare. "Aunt Erie. For God's sake come here!"

They could not have been far away, but it was Wade who first came eruptively through the door, and his face, for once, was almost as startled as her own—startled, but doubly dangerous.

"What is it?" he demanded.

He saw the girl leaning against the wall near her chair, her eyes wide and terrified, but he saw Stacy Carroll as composed as if there had been no outcry, and his quick eye took in the fact that the man stood half the width of the room away from the girl herself.

It was Carroll who answered, and his tone was reassuringly steady.

"Miss Stokes," he volunteered, "has had a fright. I tried to reassure her, but she heard some sound outside—or thought so—and she was convinced that an enemy of yours was lurking about." He paused and then he went on: "It was a sort of waking nightmare. I fancy that since that other night when she saw you shot at, Murrell, her imagination has been overkeen. One has to be raised to it to take these things calmly."

He looked over at the girl and his eyes were full of warning. Already Cynthia had begun to wonder what she would say; what explanation she would give. Already she had seen in her imagination the catastrophe that would spring from the unleashed wrath of Wade Murrell should she tell the truth. Impulse had cried out and now judgment repented. Slowly she nodded her head.

"I guess it was just nerves," she said, as her spread fingers pressed her hot temples. "It sounded like a foot breaking twigs—but it sounded too cautious for an honest noise."

"I'll slip out at the back," said Wade, "an' take a kinderly look round. Don't woorit yoreself, gal. I'll be heedful."

Aunt Erie, who had been only a little tardier than Wade, sat down again philosophically in her chair and nodded. One could not afford to take alarms too seriously when they came so often.

"I reckon," she said, "ther sort of life we leads up hyar seems right full of dire perils fer them thet hain't borned ter hit."

Cynthia felt suddenly and vastly ashamed. Carroll had laughed at the Joan of Arc idea. It was certainly no Joan of Arc he had just seen.

"It's the sudden thing," she said defensively. "It's the things that don't give you a moment to brace yourself." Into her voice came a note of wildness. "It's living under—the same roof with fear."

Carroll found it impossible to sleep for some hours that night, and when the cabin was quiet, except for Aunt Erie's snores, he opened his door and sat moodily on the threshold. The starlit skies, freshly scoured by the storm, were diamond-bright, and he breathed deeply air that still tasted pungently electrical with freed ozone.

Somehow the game had changed and become sordidly depressing. Somehow matters stood in altered aspect and his mind was troubled.

"God knows," he mused, "a woman who is capable of murder doesn't call for much sympathy—and yet I feel a damned brute."

He could not escape the thought of how slight and childish she had looked in there, sitting with the curve of her small chin on her hands and with the firelight dancing on her face. Her defenselessness had been disconcerting, too, when she came to her feet with terror burning in her eyes.

"Bosh and nonsense," he mentally exclaimed, contemptuously. "It's just because I was fool enough to fall in love with her—if one can call it love. Yet, if there wasn't a trace of anything better than passion in that love, it was because that was all she could call out. I'd rather have had the real thing—spirit as well as flesh. The vulgarity and ignorance could have been cured. I'd have worked with her and developed her, but you can't put a moral backbone into a moral invertebrate."

He arose and shook his head.

"Yet," he admitted dismally to himself, "I felt a brute when she didn't spit fire at me and blackguard me—in the old way—when she just stood there and looked piteous. The hardest of them can be so damned soft."

The next day when Carroll came back from a morning of rail splitting Cynthia was nowhere to be seen. Aunt Erie said she had gone off on some expedition of her own and might not be back for several hours.

"All right," laughed Carroll. "I'm out of a job this afternoon, and since Miss Stokes wouldn't go with me, I think I'll climb Old Shaggy alone, but I'll do it on foot instead of horseback. I'll take the steep trail."

It was stiff going up the sheer front of the mountain that raised its head loftily above its neighbors; stiff going that sent a man's blood pumping vigorously through his veins and burned into muscular fatigue the restlessness of new doubts.

To one who had lived in shoulder touch with orderly multitudes it was an education, too. Here, looking down on a wildness that seemed to cry defiance on man's amendment, one could realize how sporadic must be man's effort to overlay this lawlessness of untamed ages with his own prim, ethical miniatures.

Here were leagues of matted forest and acre upon acre of rhododendron thickets through which a bear could hardly worm its way. Here were glimpses of cliffs poroused with caverns that opened chamber upon chamber, and of gorges that gathered up and held mighty handfuls of shadow.

No wonder that in such a country a man could "take leg-bail" and hide out. A battalion, it seemed, might disappear in such a place and remain indefinitely concealed.

Stacy Carroll began to wonder whether one could draw a sharp line between the counterfeit and the geunine in human affairs. The colors and spaces of that high cloud-land seemed to impart themselves to a man's thoughts and to change with the course of the sun. Here he seemed to be divided into two identities. One of them was sitting on a moss-covered rock and looking with a cold impartiality on the other, who had hitherto been himself. And the man on the rock felt like shouting at the other man, who had been himself: "You poor counterfeit—you flawed reflection of uncertain values! Who are you to sit in judgment?"

Finally, he rose from the place where he had rested and went on. It was half way up the mountain that he hitched his way around a sharp abutment of stone, holding to the jutting root of a wind-crippled pine, and saw on a rock shelf fifty yards away the seated figure of a girl.

"Now how the devil did she get here?" he asked himself, a little piqued that Cynthia had made the ascent upon the accomplishment of which he had been rather pluming himself. His second thought was: "Now we can finish the little interview that was interrupted last night."

He smiled as he reflected how footless it would be for her to shout to Wade or Aunt Erie for rescue up here, almost in grasping distance of the lowest trailers of cloud.

The opportunity for which he had been waiting had seemed to drop from the sky—and yet unaccountably, with the end at hand, he hesitated.

He had made it plain to the girl from the first that all he needed, or asked, was five minutes alone with her. In that five minutes

he could not only say his say but pronounce his judgment. She herself would need little time for words. She would have no choice except the choice he would offer her of the penitentiary or absolute surrender.

That she had understood him had been plain from the desperate and adroitly resourceful warfare she had waged to avoid that moment.

Now it had come, and instead of pressing forward he stood debating uncertainties newly born in his brain.

What that impulse of indecision was, or out of what it grew, he did not know. He only knew that he crouched down behind the angular boughs of the twisted pine and let himself fall into the weakness of reverie.

"I refused to confide in the police," he told himself, "because I wanted the settlement to come about in just such a way as this. I paid a lawyer to trail this runaway vixen. I spent weeks in a hospital bed. I followed her across the mountains of three states. I've bided my time. Now, I have only to close my fingers on her—to see how her new, heroic virtue stands up against the alternative of going to jail. It is no longer mere revenge. Now, it's a matter of protecting Wade Murrell from my own disillusionment as well. It's justice."

Yet his hesitation held him.

He was looking at her as she sat on a shelf of jutting limestone at the foot of a spruce, which the hillsman calls a he-balsam. It was a tree that had hung to its precarious rootage through generations of storm. About her the grass waved high and green—and she, in her gingham dress, with a new wistfulness in her wide eyes, remained motionless, staring ahead of her.

She was small and childish. Suddenly it flashed on the man how young she was. This was not the same girl who had left him lying in his hotel room in Asheville. His memory flashed back to those scenes, and he saw that girl again. She had been clad in sleazy finery, designed, one might have said, for deliberate and provocative immodesty. Her face had flared with a gaudy contrast of paint and powder. Her lips had defied him sneeringly through scarlet splashes that exaggerated nature. From her tongue had poured the abuse of a gutter child.

That girl had been the pert little Broadway flapper and hard as agate. She had, none the less, in her fashion, enthralled him—or the animal that was in him—by a beauty that showed glowingly through all her grotesquerie. She had challenged him by the sharp and mercurial quickness of her impish mentality. Vulgar had been the appeal and vulgar had been his response.

But this girl seemed otherwise. The paint was gone, and the color of cheek and lip and eye were delicately gorgeous—instead of crassly bizarre. The sneer no longer flawed the gravity of her eyes. This girl under the he-balsam was slight and graceful, and somehow as dewy in her freshness as if she had never bloomed near slime.

A sudden thought of protective pity jerked at the man's heart and, because the habit of the cynic was strong upon him, he smiled at himself for harboring it. But it persisted against his efforts at disdainful repudiation.

Was it possible that this strange, almost mystic countryman, this fellow who was strong alike in battle and in prayer had, by the very sorcery of his idealization, wrought a transfiguring change in her? Was it possible that being falsely shrined by simple believers might have converted an unworthy idol into something like reality?

In spite of all he knew about her—a mental dossier of moral inertia and homicidal activity—he began to doubt himself. The Hamlet trace that is in every thinker attacked his certainty. The picture she made as she sat there, unconscious of his presence, argued for her with memories of youthful dreams when faint fragrances and subtle suggestions had still exercised a power upon him.

"I'm a damned fool," he told himself. "But the mood is wrong—the environment is wrong— A man can't play raw melodrama on a stage set for Peter Pan. Another time—not now."

He turned and climbed behind the shelter of his sandstone angle to another perch where he was out of sight, and sat down again with his pipe and his thoughts.

There, with the picture, whether a true or false portrait of girlish simplicity, removed from the actual field of his vision, he was inclined to laugh at his sentimental relapse.

"If she'd had the germ of fineness in her," he told himself. "Even if any of this outward improvement were real or permanent, God knows I could cancel out all the past. I'm not a mere libertine. But it can't be genuine. What she did to me she'll do to this country boy. She's posing as an angel-faced ingénue now, and when she tires of being the angel, it will be too late. The least I can do is to save Wade Murrell."

But after a moment he shook his head. Again his being seemed to separate into two distinct entities, and one of them stood in conflict with the other. It was as if Stacy Carroll was facing Jock Harrison, and as if Stacy Carroll had also begun to look on matters from an angle at which Jock Harrison laughed.

"You lie, Harrison," said Carroll. "You are not a fool. Your brain is sound enough to face logic. You pretend to have shifted from the attitude of a man with the one purpose of avenging a personal wrong to that of the altruist protecting his fellow man."

"That is no pretext," the Harrison mentality argued. "It's genuine enough."

"It's a lie," contradicted the Carroll mind. "It's a lie seeking virtuous disguise. It's the hokum of casuistry. Back of it lies the flaming passion for this woman that you can't overcome. You advised Wade Murrell to strangle the infatuation. You can't strangle it yourself. If the girl has improved, it only makes you want her the more. If she hasn't improved, you claim her as one who has forfeited her freedom. Right now your blood is in a fever of desire. You are hungry to conquer her—to possess her."

The man arose.

"I'm not getting anywhere," he told himself dully. "I can't make up my mind—but that only proves that this thing needs more thinking over before I act. This isn't the time to confront her."

It was Cynthia who started down the mountain first, and from his concealment Harrison saw her go. For a few moments, he stood where he was and noted the light grace with which she swung herself from foothold to foothold down a steepness that might have held a genuine peril for one less sure of foot and eye.

"I'll keep you in sight, young woman," he commented to himself. "And if my doubts crystallize into certainty, I'll still claim my five minutes' talk."

It rather amused Carroll to realize that he could make his way over these hills with so fair a counterfeit of the woodsman's craft in holding to cover and avoiding noise. He seemed to drift like a shadow behind the girl, always out of sight.

But when he saw her leave the rocky, thicketed mountain side and start into the clearing where Wade Murrell's ax had been ringing, his face hardened.

"So that's where you're going," he reflected. "You rise from maiden meditations and go to vamp the simple hero. The simple hero has resolved to hold his tongue—but you may find a way to make him speak!"

Carroll halted in the laurel, and his eyes grew merciless again.

"Eavesdropping isn't quite my line," he told himself, "but this time I resort to it—and if she tries to break down young Murrell's resolution, then, as God looks down on me, I'll put her where she'll be harmless—and I'll waste no further time on sentiment!"

Wade had thrown down his ax and come forward to meet the girl, and her eyes were smiling on him. Carroll edged forward, and from the higher rock behind him their words came back to him as if from a sounding board.

"I'm right glad ter see ye," the man said simply.

As the two drew closer together, their voices fell and Carroll lost their words. He cursed under his breath, because their faces were earnest and he thought he might be missing something that he needed to know. But side by side, after a few minutes, they drifted nearer to his hiding place, and once more he was able to listen in.

Wade was finishing some sentence and

the other man caught the words: "—kinderly amazed thet ye didn't want ter climb Old Shaggy with ther furriner, Cynthy."

The girl turned and stood soberly looking into her companion's face.

They were so close together that the hillsman must have felt the intoxicating stir of her breath on his cheek, and Carroll saw him steady his muscles as a man may brace himself against a buffet of gusty wind—or passion.

"Listen, Wade," she declared. "I wish you'd stop trying to throw that man and me together. I wish you would."

The mountaineer opened his eyes in surprise, and Carroll reflected: "Here's where I hear something pleasant about myself. Here's where she starts to tear pages out of my reputation."

"I was only seekin ter hev ye freed from lonesomeness, Cynthy," Murrell explained. "He seems ter be a right upstandin' man —an' he knows ther same life *you* does."

"I'm not denying that, Wade," she agreed thoughtfully, "but you knew when you brought me here that I came to hide."

The highlander's eyes flashed dangerously.

"Ye hain't got no cause ter suspicion he's a spy—hev ye?"

She shook her head.

"It's not that," she assured him. "But he comes from outside—and when he leaves he goes back to the outside world. It's natural that anybody finding me here would wonder why I came. I can't be alone with him—and refuse to talk about myself. You can forbid your own people from asking questions, because that's your mountain code. But not to answer natural questions to outsiders, is pretty much the same as confessing something."

"Clever," reflected Carroll. "I'll say that's a damn clever line to take. So he knows she's a refugee from justice!"

"I'm right sorry, Cynthy," came the contrite apology. "I meant well, though."

Wade paused, and then slowly, awkwardly he went on:

"I 'lowed thet a gal like you mout hev need of companionship. I'd done seed what a fine, high-minded gal ye was. And I 'lowed thet ef my benighted eyes could discarn them qualities in ye, a man like him thet knowed ther world, thet could reecognize all them lavish gifts, he'd jest natch'rally be bound ter appreciate ye, an' mebby, by an' by, hit mout lead on ter makin' ye both right happy."

The girl laid a hand on the man's arm. Her eyes were soft.

"I'm not looking for happiness from any man, Wade," she said. "If you mean happiness that comes from love-making, I'm done with that. I'm off it for life. I do find happiness in friendship, like the kind you give me—" She paused, then added slowly: "I find it in a friendship like yours partly because you're Wade Murrell, and partly because I know there's no danger of its leading on to—"

Again she paused, and then falling with entire naturalness into his own vernacular, she added. "Because there's no danger of its leading on to sweet heartin'."

For an instant the mountain man looked as if he had taken a blow in the face, then he forced a smile and said with gallant mendacity: "No, gal, thar hain't no danger of thet. Looks like nuther one of us hain't no master hand fer sweet heartin'."

Once more the girl laid a light hand on his arm.

"Wade," she declared, and her eyes were suddenly tear-misted, "there's one thing I want you to know. You must know it. When I came here I was just what I looked like. I was a flip little smart Aleck. If I'm anything better than that now, it's because being here has changed me, because you've changed me. And there's another thing I want you to know, too. I want to go on being the changed person."

"Hell!" exclaimed Carroll to himself. "This eavesdropping is a disgusting business." He drew back very quietly and went away.

"There goes your specious excuse of protecting Wade Murrell," he told himself. "You can scrap that virtuous pose. She's not trying to vamp him, after all, it seems. Now you must decide this question fair and and square on the basis of your own passion."

He walked along in deep thought and kicked savagely at the clods along the way.

"I never wanted her as I do now," he admitted. "I want her even if I can get her only by force."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BREAKING POINT.

LESHER SKIDMORE'S farm lay only a few miles from Little Flinty and the house of Wade Murrell, and yet it was far enough away to dominate a stretch of country so inhabited by Skidmores and Skidmore connections that the clan head was loosely ringed about and surrounded by stalwarts of his own blood.

In the house itself, which overlooked the waters of Hard Times Fork near the mouth through which it emptied into Big Flinty, Lesher was just now dwelling alone. The Skidmore leader was a widower and childless, and a widowed sister kept his house for him, but in these days she had adventured on a long journey to visit a married daughter in far-away Oklahoma.

Even mountain concepts of tidiness had gone to pot in this womanless abode, and the petty feudal despot was living in "sich a plumb mess thet everything was kerflummixed erbout stanchways an' si-godlin," if the whispers of neighboring housewives could be trusted. Also, if one took his information from the same source, there was other and even more regrettable demoralization under that roof.

It was intimated that Lesher, who not only led, but domineered over the fighting men of the Skidmore clan, bowed in a sort of hen-pecked obedience to the older sister who kept his house, and now that her keen and shrewish eye no longer raked the place like a cold search light, a sense of expansive freedom enveloped the man.

Now not only were things left lying in disarray where they fell, but the big jug, that ordinarily reposed under a concealing pile of fodder in the barn, stood blatantly and unabashed on the kitchen table and the tin cup beside it was rarely dry.

Lesher Skidmore was on the loose, and strangely enough, his most constant companion in dissipation was not a fellow Skidmore but a backsliding Murrell.

Cas Harley went over there, not openly along the road that followed the creek beds of Big Flinty and Hard Times, but by a short cut through the "la'rel hells," and his customary approach to the place was from the rear. Usually, he came at night when Lesher was sitting in pleasurable realization with his shoes off before the fire and with the jug at his elbow.

Since such a precaution obviated complications, it was understood between these two that the note of a whippoorwill, thrice repeated just back of the house, should stand in lieu of the lifted voice asking admittance—a voice which others might also hear.

It chanced that Harley, besides his advantages of education in a school "down below" and his vaulting ambitions for statecraft preferment, was gifted with a power to make a fiddle sing, and in these periodic sprees, when Lesher's spirit was soaring free and untrammelled, he loved nothing more than to sprawl at ease in his chair with the tin cup often replenished and his eyes on the crackle of the hickory logs, while his minstrel fiddled for him.

Through these evenings Cas Harley officiated as the vassal musician, seeking to clinch into effectiveness the strength of this friendship, and teasing music from the rosined catgut until the Skidmore chieftain's head dropped sleepily on his chest. When he had roused himself several times, each time with a glassier eye, and had finally stumbled over to pitch like a dead man on to his unmade bed, Cas Harley, who never drank, would sit by the fire awhile with his thoughts.

Then Harley, hating the whole degraded squalor of the scene, but choking back his disgust and playing his game, would lie down on the bed of the absent sister and sleep until morning.

The superabundant vigor of Lesher Skidmore made it possible for him to rise with the sun, after a debauch that had been almost night-long, with a clarified eye and a steady hand, and in the morning there were rehearsals back of the barn.

In these rehearsals, young Cas, aspirant for membership in the body of the State's lawmakers, was being trained for murder.

The lessons were conducted with a forty-five caliber revolver, and Lesher, who was himself a pluperfect magician in the legerdemain of speedy draw and accurate firing, officiated as tutor.

His pupil was being prepared for the pretended quarrel when, in assumed self-defense, he was to "blow down" Wade Murrell, and since the prospect was one for which his spirit required much steeling, he needed a course of intensive training.

One of these mornings was much like another. Lesher would rouse himself out of a stupefied sleep, wash his unshaven face and—presto—arise with a phoenixlike renewal of energy. But that energy was not addicted to menial tasks, and it was Cas who made the coffee and fried the eggs.

It was Cas who started the day—though he had no liquor fumes of which to rid his brain—with the ill-temper of the man who is tyrannized over. When Cas had done such chores as even this shiftless regime made essential, he was led out with the holster under his armpit and his more military work began.

"Out West," Lesher told him, "they draws a six-gun an' throws hit up—an' they shoots as they brings hit down ergin. Myself I calls thet damn folly—hit's jest p'int-blank wastin' one full up an' down swoop of a man's gun-hand."

Cas nodded dully.

"Es fer me," went on the master, "when I draws, I lays my fust finger out along the bar'l. Hit's with thet finger I does my gun-aimin' when I heve ter shoot suddint-quick. Hit'd amaze ye ter note how nigh as good as a man's eye his pointed finger is."

Again Cas nodded. Everybody knew that without being told, he thought.

"But I don't raise no six-gun up an' drap hit down ergin," resumed the lecturer. "Hit's on ther come-up thet my gun cracks, an' gin'rally, usually when I shoots at somethin' I hits nigh round about hit. Look hyar, let me show ye!"

The man, who had been so drunk last night that he had no memory of when he had stumbled to bed, went over and set a flask on a stump. "Now," he said, "when I've tuck some siv'ral steps, shout, an' when ye hollers, then I'll whirl an' shoot." With his hands hanging at his side and his revolver in its case, he strolled casually away from the target. His gait seemed careless and slouching. His whole attitude was indolently relaxed.

"Shoot!" yelled Harley, and the walking man spun on his heels, his right arm and hand flashing with a speed that the eye hardly followed. The glinting blue steel thing flashed upward and outward with it, and on the rise barked three times so quickly that the reports seemed blended into one continuous sound.

From the stump to which the marksman's back had just been turned, came the splintering of glass.

"Thet's ther fashion ye wants ter do hit," said the demonstrator calmly. "Wade Murrell, he kain't better thet shootin'—an' ef a marr knows ahead of time what's comin' off, Cas, he kain't handily equal hit."

Cold blooded? Yes, but that was not what disturbed young Harley.

Desperation had spurred him on, and he had been an apt pupil. A stopwatch might have shown the margin by which he lagged behind his preceptor in the celerity of his performance, but it would have shown it in fifths of seconds. It had required an absolute and supreme determination to force Cas to the undertaking, but that state of mind he had attained.

He had passed through the stage of blood sweat that had brought his resolution to the sticking point, so now it was no longer any hesitancy on that score, either, that disturbed him.

He was beginning to distrust Lesher Skidmore.

"Lesher's done been treatin' me like his nigger slave," he grumbled to himself. "And what means have I got of knowing that when I've done kilt his man fer him—he hain't goin' ter desert me an' laugh me ter scorn?"

That was the thorn that was festering in him while matters went forward at the house of Lesher Skidmore, which no one save the two of them knew or even suspected—unless, indeed, the intended victim had suspicions of which he did not speak.

Night after night, Lesher was more and more contemptuously dictatorial. Morning after morning, he ordered Cas about his servile tasks with a less disguised and a more disdainful tyranny.

"Ye aims ter go ter ther Legislature, Cas," Lesher observed one morning with a ugly leer, "an' then ye aims ter go ter Congress, and' finally, ye aims ter be President of Americky. All right, son, thet suits me, but now, damn ye, git me my breakfast right speedily an' chop me some firewood an' feed my mule-critter—or ye won't nuver be no great statesman, an' moreoverly I'll plumb kick ther seat outen yore pants."

Disguise had been cast aside. Cas Harley had sold his soul, and Lesher Skidmore owned him.

Cas knew this and his spirit boiled in him, but he dissembled his fury and pretended that the whole matter was a huge jest.

"All right, ye big blow-hard," he laughed. "I reckon you an' me, we understands one another."

"I hopes we does," retorted Lesher dryly. "Hit's right needful thet we should."

But to himself Harley said: "Wait till I've collected what I want from you. Then it 'll be me that'll do the kicking—and I'll kick you to death."

Things like that can't go on long without bringing up somewhere. It was on an evening when an ugly streak proclaimed itself through his drunkenness that Lesher precipitated the eruption.

Cas was tired that night when he gave his whippoorwill call and let himself in to fiddle for his master. He hoped Lesher would drink himself to sleep early, because he himself could hardly keep his eyes open, and as soon as he looked at Skidmore his hopes rose.

Usually Lesher left the jug alone until nightfall. Now, he was already as far advanced as midnight usually found him—yet, for all his thickness of speech and his bloodshot puffiness of eye, he did not appear drowsy. Instead, a nervous restlessness possessed him.

"Howdy, Cas," he greeted. "Sot ye a cheer an' commence fiddlin', damn ye. What made ye so tardy? Ye've done kep' me waitin' an' I hain't in no mood ter be kep' waitin'."

Cas forced a laugh.

"I hain't none tardy, Lesher," he declared. "I reckon hit jest seems thet way ter ye because time hangs heavy on ye when I hain't hyar."

"Time'll hang heavy on *you*," announced the other thickly, "ef ye don't git thet fiddle ter screechin' right speedily."

There was a dangerously ugly look in his red eyes—a sort of mad dog truculence, and the unsteady hand wavered over to the loose-hanging holster. Even when unsteady that hand on a gun was too perilous, and Cas made haste to seat himself and unlimber his instrument and his bow.

To-night the tyrant was tensely fretful. Nothing suited him, and with a disgusted wave of the hand he would halt one favorite tune midway and call for another selection.

Harley raged inwardly as his bow scraped the strings and his fingers worked industriously on the frets. It was borne in on him that should he hesitate now, until he had soothed this inflamed beast to sleep, he himself would die. It was borne in on him, moreover, that he had sold himself into a peonage to this man, who was the enemy of his blood, and that no escape offered itself.

To his own people he had been a traitor, and now to his enemy he was the helpless victim who could be destroyed with a word.

Finally, it seemed to Cas that his tired fingers could no longer nurse the frets nor swing the bow. The soul-sick weariness that filled him had become insuperable, and yet, though it was well past midnight, no prospect of rest appeared. Lesher, growing drunker and drunker and still drinking unbelievably by the cupful, was wide awake and ever more and more insistent in his clamor for music.

At length Cas let his bow rest on his knees.

"Lesher," he said slowly, "I've jedgmatically got ter rest a spell an' smoke me a pipe. I'm plumb spent."

Skidmore got unsteadily to his feet. His bloodshot eyes were embers of madness.

"Spent, air ye?" he demanded furiously. "Wa'al why shouldn't ye be spent? What else air ye good fer? I hain't wearied yit. Albeit ye're fiddlin' like a fish, I aims ter hev more of hit since I kain't git me nothin' better. Go on an' fiddle till I bids ye stop, ye damn moon-calf!"

But Cas arose and laid down his instrument.

"I'm done fer ternight, Lesher," he insisted.

Skidmore was rocking drunkenly before him. It looked as if he would fall, and Cas hoped he would, but he kept his feet.

While from the waist down he seemed incapable of coördination, his right hand, with a strange precision, made a gesture that brought it out before his chest armed, with its finger nursing a pistol trigger.

The voice leaped and quavered with the maniac's uncensored violence.

"Don't ye know what ye air, Cas Harley?" it demanded. "Ye're my nigger slave. Ye're my white nigger. Go on an' fiddle, white nigger, till I tires of listenin' at ye!"

Young Harley looked down the muzzle of the pistol, then he sank into his chair, and with sweat on his forehead and stealing down in cold drops under his armpits, he scraped his bow on the strings while murder ate at his heart. Lesher, too, sprawled again in his seat.

Never before had the session been so interminably long. The night had worn itself out and dawn was graying the east when, from Skidmore's relaxed hand, the revolver slid to the floor. Weakly, gropingly, Lesher gained his feet and staggered weavingly to the bed.

Upon it he threw himself, while his lips, stirring thickly, shaped the words "Whi-nigger!"

Cas Harley was insane now. The night had eaten with a corrosive madness into his brain and terror had made him a lunatic with the single thought of killing his persecutor.

He arose deliberately from his chair and looked at the unconscious figure on the bed. Although he was a teetotaller, he poured himself a tin cup brimful of the fiery liquor and gulped it down like water.

Slowly a smile spread across his face.

He retrieved the weapon that his torturer had dropped. The fire, which he had recently replenished at the profane command of his master, had taken a fresh lease of life and leaped into carmine brilliance. The room was light-flooded.

With the revolver in his hand, Cas Harley walked over to the bed. He thrust the muzzle against the breast of the man who lay stupefied. He jabbed the man's ribs.

"Wake up, damn ye," he shouted wildly. "White nigger, am I?"

The man in the bed grunted stupidly as Cas pressed the trigger. The house was filled with a crashing noise and a little stench floated about the room, the stench of saltpeter.

Exhausted, drunk and crazed, Cas Harley did not at once think of flight. He went callously back to the bed he had been used to occupying and dropped sleepily down on it.

But in an hour he was awake again, and a cold realization was chilling him to the marrow. On the other bed sprawled a dead man; a dead man whose death half the country would rouse itself to avenge. He was the slayer, and he was a Murrell.

The short-lived satisfaction of vengeance oozed out of him. He faced a desperate future. He would be hunted down and killed like a scurrying rabbit, or hanged by the neck till dead.

Those were the alternatives—the only alternatives unless—

He stopped and mopped his clammy forehead.

He was a Murrell. Wade knew he was a traitor, but Wade had never yet surrendered a Murrell to Skidmore vengeance without a battle. He could pretend that he shot in self-defense. He could flee for sanctuary, and for a time at least, unless all clan traditions were violated, he would be harbored.

If the war broke out afresh, as it undoubtedly would, his own affairs would be merged and lost in its composite furies. Yes, the one thing to do was to flee to Wade Murrell and demand the clan's rightful protection for one of its number.

Carroll, returning to the house after a long walk, knew before he had come near that the woman who stood by the stile talking to Aunt Erie was no mountain woman. His ingrained sense of social values made that proclamation as soon as he saw the way this other woman carried her shoulders and head, and he took off his hat as he came up.

"I don't need to be told that you're the Saint of Doe Run," he said. "I've been here two weeks, and I've heard about your work. May I introduce myself?"

"I know who you are, too," smiled Anne Purviance. "Aunt Erie has already told me about you."

A half hour later Anne sat on the stile where some of Lake's hollyhocks still held up bravely colored heads, and Carroll leaned against the fence. For a little while, like one who is thirsty, she had made him tell her all about things that were going on in the world outside. Their talk ran of plays and operas and painters and singers—the gossip that takes tingling life from human lips and that becomes cold in newspaper print.

Instinctively she liked the distinction of his manner; the catholicity of his information and interests.

Soon the topic veered and they were talking of the Murrells—and of Cynthia.

"Can a fellow like Wade," he inquired with a seeming of detached interest, "fail to be smitten by the beauty of this new type. And if he is smitten, how will it end?"

Anne Purviance shook her head in grave anxiety. "I've thought of that," she responded, "and I've wondered. Of course, it would be a pity. No permanent happiness could come of it. The city would call to her. The hills would hold him. Indeed, these hills could hardly do without him."

"Besides that," ventured the man with the candor of one speaking to a companion who stands on the same social plane, "for all the bravery they attribute to this girl, for all her physical allurement and her quick wit, I'm afraid she's a little vulgar, while the man, for all his crudity, has intrinsic dignity."

"It would be a disaster if it ran into sentiment," declared the Saint of Doe Run, "not because of any fault in the girl, but because there's no common ground on which they can meet. I imagine Wade knows that. He'll guard against the danger."

"It's a pity," declared Carroll, "that she came to upset things."

"She hasn't been altogether upsetting," Anne reminded him. "She has no idea of it herself, but in some ways she's been constructive. She came into an atmosphere of persecution—and she's won her way. She has grown and changed greatly."

"Will the change last when its novelty ends, Miss Purviance?"

"I think," said Anne slowly, "it will last, if life gives her a chance. I doubt if she ever knew a man until she met Wade Murrell who wasn't predatory. As for myself, I believe in the girl, and I think I know as much about her as any one here."

The man lifted his brows.

"I should say," he remarked, "that you'd qualify as a judge of character. This girl has seemed a bit of a mystery to me and consequently interesting. She reminds me strongly of a girl I once knew—so strongly that it almost gives the illusion of that other girl's presence—and that girl was a rotter. She took a shot at me one day and didn't stop to see whether I was dead or alive. I'm glad to have such a report from one who knows this girl's real name."

He used the expression figuratively, yet experimentally, and for a time the woman sat on the stile looking at him. Behind her grave eyes trooped a procession of conjectures weaving into final conviction.

When she spoke her tone was unchanged, but her words were rather amazing.

"I wonder," she said, "whether I can't guess your real name, too. Weren't you called Harrison at one time, Mr. Carroll?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

AMUCK.

JOCK HARRISON was gifted with a self-poise which usually carried him through surprises, with no betrayal written in his face. When Anne Purviance put that question it required all his school-

ing to maintain the front of a man who had not been jolted into absolute amazement.

He stood looking into the eyes of this woman who, in spite of her corduroy and flannel attire, was trained in worldly wisdom, and he smiled his acknowledgment of the home thrust.

"Astonishment is a weak word," he confessed. "I hadn't supposed Cynthia Meade would unbosom herself to any one. Did she happen to tell you that she shot me and left me for dead—without even sounding an alarm?"

"No," answered Anne Purviance with unbroken composure. "She told me—and she convinced me that she did not shoot you, but that the case was so circumstantial that panic seized her and she ran away. She had no doubt you were dead. She listened for a heart beat, but throughout her terror she believed that if you were alive to speak you would exonerate her."

"She lied to you, Miss Purviance. There can't be much question that she did her best to murder me."

"I believe she told me the truth, Mr. Harrison. You've paid me the compliment of calling me a judge of character, and I'll stake my judgment on her innocence."

"I can't, in politeness, contradict you," he said dryly.

"You see in her a light and criminal girl," declared the woman. "And I think she's a good bit better than that. She sees in you a man whose instincts are all predatory, and I fancy you are a good bit better than that, too. I'm not quarreling with either view. I see in the whole situation the working of a vicious code and nothing more."

Even in the face of a surprising discovery, Stacy Carroll's attitude did not veer to the weakness of self-defense. His smile was cynical, but not at all that of a discovered wrongdoer.

"Codes are slowly and strongly built, Miss Purviance," he suggested, and I suppose the one you refer to is that which permits men to divide women into two classes—and treat them differently."

"Yes," she said, "that was what I meant."

"Neither you nor I made that code, and neither of us can undo it," he said thoughtfully. "We both know it exists. None the less, it's disconcerting to a man who thinks of himself as a gentleman to have a woman on your side of the line catch a glimpse of his affairs on the other side. The reticences of life constitute a good proportion of its decency."

She nodded and there was no flare of indignation in her retort, but perhaps for that exact reason it had a bite which he did not altogether escape.

"I'm not accusing you of monstrous evil, Mr. Harrison," she answered. "I recognize you as a gentleman, but I was thinking of a line in a play of a few years back—'Common Clay,' wasn't it? A character was made to say: 'I'm a gentleman. I prey only on the daughters of the poor.'"

Harrison emptied his pipe and his lips twisted to a wry smile.

"In principle I agree with you," he told her. "Unfortunately, nature intervenes and nature is strong. I believe our whole conception of gentility goes back with a sort of worship to Arthur and his Round Table. Arthur invented chivalry, yet if I remember aright, Arthur's most 'parfait gentle knight' was a paramour of Arthur's queen—and Galahad, whose 'strength was as the strength of ten because his heart was pure,' well, he was Lancelot's son."

"I'm not denying," she said in a low voice, "that the code is old. I only say it's bad to the core. And as I recall my reading, Lancelot failed to find the Holy Grail—because of his sin!"

Harrison was looking at this woman with a keen interest. After a moment he spoke again.

"In a novel or play, Miss Purviance," he reminded her ironically, "I would shrink guiltily under words such as you have spoken and hide my diminished head in shame. But life is tougher fibered. Perhaps there isn't even any new note in your argument. All that you say I've thought for myself, but I've had certain misgivings of late that you are—well, perhaps crystallizing. May I talk candidly?"

"Certainly. It's the only worthwhile way to talk."

"Very well. If this girl has a chance to make something of herself I won't interfere. The fantastic thought struck me not long ago that perhaps Wade Murrell had achieved the impossible. It occurred to me that perhaps he had so edited and rewritten a human document as to infuse a touch of the genuine into the counterfeit.

"I am in love with this girl as a man might fall in love with Phryne or Circe. That is to say, she can set my passion on fire, and she does. A man does not marry a Phryne or Circe, though he may want her damnably. He doesn't want her as a wife. A wife calls for certain qualifications which a Circe or a Cynthia Meade never has."

"Perhaps Cynthia has acquired some of them now. Perhaps she's in the process of acquiring others."

"Perhaps, but it's too uncertain. Until now I've been strong in my belief that she tried to kill me. That gave me a mortgage, and I came to foreclose it. You tell me that you believe she's innocent of that particular crime. At all events, she's entitled to the benefit of every doubt—if there *is* a doubt. You also think that with a chance, she may make something of her life. Very well, I'll go away. That's the best I can offer. I don't even dare talk to her first."

"All she asks is a release from the terror of pursuit."

Harrison nodded slowly and his face was sober.

"I take it that neither you nor I are sentimentalists, Miss Purviance," he said. "We live facts and we talk facts, but don't make any mistake. The sort of love I admit for Cynthia Meade may not be a noble passion, but it's strong and its roots have gone deep into me. It's a hell. It's not so easy to give her up. We can't rewrite the code you object to. But if you believe she can be promoted from the plaything woman to the respected woman I'll take myself off. When I'm gone you may tell her that I've wiped the slate clean."

"You couldn't do better," Anne Purviance assured him, "unless you could stay to help her."

"No, thank you," he announced grimly. "I know how much I can concede. Unholy fires, if you choose to call them that, are not cool fires. Passion can't be exorcised and wiped out at a breath. A man may key himself to a good resolution, but if he lingers in the danger zone he may also break down. He can't be sure that he will always stand unshaken against squall-like gusts that may strike him unaware.

"As for me, I think the anchor lines might part. I can't answer for myself if I stay, Miss Purviance, but I can undertake to go. This girl and I met on the quicksands of passion. I doubt if we could set our feet on quieter highways, and walk them sedately. Old memories would come and new resolves would go up in smoke."

"I wonder," mused the woman quietly, "whether Wade Murrell hasn't rewritten a paragraph or two in your own human document, Mr. Carroll?"

"Nonsense," he almost snapped. "I'm too old a bird for that." He broke off and added as if finally closing the topic:

"Don't tell her this, but before God, if Cynthia Meade had been able to meet me on a different plane—on the other side of the line you object to—I'd come to her humbly enough, offering her not a half love, but a whole love—and I'd give ten years of my life to have it possible."

"Are you sure — even now — it isn't possible?"

"Horribly sure. Well, that's that, and now we've talked enough about me." His manner changed and he laughed. "If you don't scorn tainted money I'd like to have a part in building your school."

Down the road toward them came Wade Murrell. He was carrying his coat over his arm, and the pistol holster that he usually wore under his left armpit was missing.

Wade halted at the stile and Anne Purviance said to the lowlander: "You haven't been here as long as I have, Mr. Carroll, or you'd notice the fact, with pleasure, that Mr. Murrell comes outdoors these days without his pistol strapped to his side. It's a mighty welcome sign of confidence and peace."

Wade smiled, too. "Sometimes," he said, "I goes abroad all day now an' fergits ter tote hit along with me. I wouldn't hev

done thet afore Cynthy sung at ther schoolhouse."

"Speaking of Cynthy," commented Carroll, whose eyes were on the graveled highway, "there she comes now and, by God, something's wrong! She's running as if hounds were after her."

Murrell wheeled and started forward, but the girl had appeared around the bend, close at hand, and she came forward stumbling with exhaustion, her face hotly flushed and her eyes wide.

At first she tried to speak and failed. She could only lean panting against the rail fence while Wade fanned her with his hat and said quietly: "Take yore time, Cynthy. Ye're safe hyar, an' thar hain't no tormentin' haste."

"But there is!" she broke out in the staccato vehemence of exhausted breath. "I came to warn you."

Again she had to pause and gasp. Her heart was palpitating with the unaccustomed run over broken and rocky ways. Her stockings and skirts were wet from plunging pell-mell through the creek.

"Enoch Wade," she rushed on, "told me to come here. He's hurrying to other houses first. Cas Harley has killed Lesher Skidmore, and they think he's running here for shelter. The Skidmores are after him."

The announcement came in broken spurts of short-breathed violence, but a volume could hardly have held between its covers a more burdened story of catastrophe.

Wade Murrell stood holding the girl's eyes with his own. His face had seemed to freeze into an icy misery. His hands closed slowly and rigidly into fists. His painfully built structure of peace had collapsed in a breath. His efforts had crumbled, and his face was like that of a man who has come to his house, eagerly anticipating welcome and comfort, to stand dazed before a square of smoking ruins and to taste in his nostrils the stench of formless ashes.

His enemy was dead—killed by a kinsman—and like a rabbit scurrying and doubling ahead of harriers, that kinsman was fleeing for sanctuary with pursuers hot on his trail.

"Seek ter catch yore breath, gal," he pleaded, "an' exzact ter me what words Enoch spoke. I've need ter know enough ter go on, an,' like es not, thar hain't much time. Ye says Cas kilt Lesher?"

Anne Purviance had instinctively caught at Carroll's elbow, and from her lips had come a sound like a low and despairing moan.

Cynthia moved forward. Her young strength was giving her back breath for utterance, and she nodded her head.

"Enoch didn't know the details. Cas Harley had been over to Skidmore's several times lately. He was there early this morning, before sunrise. The two were alone. There was some quarrel. The Skidmores say Lesher was lying in his bed when he was shot. Some one saw Harley leave the place. The Skidmores sounded the alarm and formed a posse."

"An' what did ye say Enoch's doin' now?"

"He's gathering the Murrells together. The Skidmores would come here, he said, to take Cas away. They guessed he'd make for your house. Enoch's trying to get some of your own people here first."

Wade nodded slowly. "Yes," he said, "they'd think thet, ther Skidmores would. I don't see why Cas hain't got hyar a'ready ef he's comin' in sich tormentin' haste. He knows a short cut hither. Hit's right steep an' la'relly. One man thet knowed hit well could slip through quick, but it would slow down a crowd. He ought ter be comin' outen ther woods right up thar by thet big gum tree tol'able soon now." He turned and pointed up the timbered slope, then he added: "An' thar he *does* come, unlessen my ears is lyin' ter me."

The others heard nothing, but they turned and their eyes remained held by that curtain of heavy green. A macabre fascination kept them straining toward it, and presently they could hear a slight rustle and saw the laurel branches part cautiously.

Having peered warily out and seen that only Murrells as yet were gathered below, a human figure broke from the cover and came leaping, sliding, stumbling down the steep grade of the cleared ground. A little avalanche of loosened stones came with him. It was a figure that the briers had tattered and the dirt begrimed until its shirt

hung on a steaming, bloodied body. The flesh of its legs showed through tears in the trousers, and as it ran, fear-driven, it waved a heavy revolver in its right hand.

This man did not look as though he would be the Honorable Caswell Harley within the year, or as though his future included debates in the National Congress. He was, just now, a maddened animal in flight for his life, running for protection to the man whose place he had sought to usurp, whose life he had conspired to take.

Carroll stood with his hands thrust into the pockets of his jacket. His face was quiet and almost expressionless, and that of Wade Murrell was unreadable back of its fixed frown.

No one spoke as the desperate man ran stumblingly forward and halted with heaving chest before them, the revolver still swinging in his hand.

"Ther Skidmores air atter me, Wade," he broke out explosively. "Me an' Lesher, we quarreled, an' I hed ter kill him. Hit war self-deefense. I hed ter do it, but now ther Skidmores air atter me."

"What war ye doin' at Lesher Skidmore's dwellin'-house so soon in ther mornin', Cas?" inquired Wade quietly.

"I went thar ter hev speech with him, but ther Skidmores air atter me, an' I'm a Murrell. Hain't thet enough fer ye ter know, Wade?"

The Murrell leader slowly shook his head.

"Not quite enough, Cas," he answered. "I hain't bat-blind. I knows thet ye've done been consortin' with Lesher right often hyar of late. Hit wouldn't amaze me ef ther two of ye hev been plottin' erginst me—but es ye says, ye're a Murrell."

"Why would I be plottin' with Lesher, Wade?" There was a terrified whine in the voice.

"Mebby ye did hit because I told ye ye'd hev ter lay by yore notion of goin' ter ther Legislature. I kinderly 'lowed ye'd done turned ter Lesher ter back ye up." He paused, then went on evenly: "I hain't got no jedgmatic way of knowin' what passed betwixt you two, but I suspicions thet Lesher sought ter hev ye slay me. Hit would be a right easy way out for him—havin' me kilt by a Murrell."

"Thet's what he sought ter hev me do, Wade," the other declared incautiously, blundering headlong into a pitfall of admission. "But I gainsaid him."

"Fer why did ye gainsay him, Cas?"

"Fer why? Because we're both Murrells. Because we've got ther same blood in our veins. Wasn't thet reason enough? Moreover, I ain't no murderer."

"Ye're lyin', Cas," came the biting reply. "Ye're lyin'. Ye'd done agreed ter git me, for him, an' ther pair of ye cavilled an' fell out over ther terms of ther bargain. But still I don't aim ter let no Skidmore mob take ye away from me."

"Thank God, Wade. I knowed I could deepend on ye."

"Right now," went on the steady voice of the Murrell chief, "Enoch Wade's roundin' up our men. Ef so be ther Skidmores gits hyar fust, I'll aim ter hold ther fort twell they comes."

"Thank God," panted the fugitive. "Us Murrells, we always stands tergither."

"An' when they all gits hyar, Skidmores and Murrells alike," went on the other, ignoring Harley's observations on loyalty, "I aims ter give 'em my orders. I aims ter tell 'em no Skidmore gang kain't take ye off an' slay ye in the woods. I aims ter tell 'em thet a posse made up even-steven of Skidmores an' Murrells air a goin' ter take ye ter ther jail house. An' atter thet, both ther Skidmores an' Murrells alike air a goin' ter turn in an' try ye fer murder—an' convict ye—an' hang ye! I aim ter show all men thet murder is murder, whosoever does hit."

Cas Harley had stood growing livid as he listened. Astonishment had altered to unspeakable terror as the intent of this other man developed through his words. Now, like a wild beast, he lurched forward shaking with an ague of fury, and leveled his weapon at his kinsman's breast.

"I always knowed ye wasn't no true Murrell," he shouted in demoniac fury. "Ye aims ter hang a man thet's got yore own blood in his veins. Ye aims ter send me unshirted inter red hell; but, afore God, I aims ter carry ye along with me." His voice had risen to a shriek and his eyes were hot with the fever of madness.

"I hain't got no weepon on me, Cas," commented Wade quietly, holding the eyes of the man who threatened him with the steady authority of his own, but the other was outside the frontier of reason now—immune from the influence of sanity, and he only laughed.

"Ye're dead right when ye says I'd done agreed ter kill ye, an' now, albeit my plans went wrong, I still aims ter kill ye anyhow. Ef I'm goin' ter hang, I might es well git all my enemies first. I aims ter kill ye right hyar an' now, afore ther eyes of ther dam strumpet ye fotched hyar with ye. I aims ter send yore hypocrite soul howlin' down ter hell ahead of me. I aims—"

There was the roar of a weapon, and the convulsive shrieks of two women, but it was not Wade Murrell who fell. He still stood as he had braced himself to take his death.

It was Cas Harley instead who was turning around slowly and wilting into a rag-like shapelessness. It was Cas Harley who, within the space of seconds, lay dead on the ground.

"I'm sorry," said Stacy Carroll quietly. "But I was afraid to wait any longer. I shot from the pocket. It seemed the only way."

From beneath the homespun pocket flap of the lowlander's coat a tiny thread of vapor stole through a small and powder-burned hole, and as he spoke he withdrew his hand, still holding the squarish automatic pistol whose single staccato utterance had reversed the terms of an inevitable tragedy.

In those last few moments, before the shot had sounded, Wade Murrell had given up all thought of continued earthly existence, and had lifted his head to face his execution. The two women, paralyzed by their helplessness and awaiting the horror of murder, had seemed in a ghastly fashion to have become already accustomed and inured to the hideous idea. They felt that through a long while they had stood there waiting.

To all of them, too, had come the flashing conviction that it would not be Wade alone who would die. When this maniac had begun to shoot, his homicidal thirst would not be slaked until his pistol was empty and others of them had fallen.

Now all that was left of the human beast that had run amuck was a lifeless heap on the ground, and Wade Murrell turned his eyes slowly to those of the lowlander.

"I'm right obleeged ter ye," he said. "I was p'int-blank expectin' ter die, an' I 'lowed thet when I drapped he wouldn't stop thar—he'd have sought ter slay ye all."

"This child, here," declared Anne Purviance in a low, shaken voice, "tried to jump between the two, but I held her. I knew his bullet would go through two bodies as easily as one."

Cynthia Meade said nothing, but now that the moment had passed she sat down on the roadside embankment and covered her face with her hands.

"Claiborne's Fort," the house of the ancient fire-eater of the Skidmores, was made the rallying point of excited clansmen on the morning when the leader was found dead in his bed. It was old Jase Claiborne who lashed the armed and bewildered men, first mustered by the alarm, into a blaze of militant ardor.

"Thar hain't no need of palaverin' now. Thet time's done past an' gone," shouted the white-haired firebrand almost exultantly. "We've done kept ther truce an' ther damn Murrells hev done busted hit. A Murrell slew Lesher in Lesher's own bed an' he's done run yappin' ter Wade fer shelter. Thar hain't naught now ter do save ter go over thar an' git him, an' when they bars ther door ergin us thar hain't naught ter do save ter beat hit in an' burn ther house down over 'em." The old man paused, but his eyes were blazing as he yelled his peroration. "An' albeit I'm right old, I aims ter go along with ye."

They had to thrust him back by force, and they left him grumbling and cursing behind them, whose hot pace his old legs could not hope to hold.

Though quieter councils had in a measure prevailed, the ranks of the man hunt, which had spread from combing the woods, were to converge about the place which they felt sure would be the destination of the

assassin. Wade Murrell's house was to be their objective, and when they reached it they looked for battle.

The Murrells would not be resting idly at their homes on such a day, and just as the Skidmores were rallying over here, so the Murrells would be gathering and "greasin' rifle-guns over yon."

It would be an advance guard of pursuers, in all likelihood, that would clash first with an advance guard of defenders.

At Wade's stile there would be a curt demand for the surrender of Cas Harley in the name of the law—made by a Skidmore, who held office as a deputy sheriff. There would be as curt a refusal, based on the plea that this was not a genuine posse, but a clan mob.

Then the fighting would begin. The truce would be definitely ended—and some of those who went over would not come home.

But when Troy Lesher, the deputy, with three or four men at his back, peered cautiously through the laurel for their first view of the Murrell abode, they drew back again and looked at each other in amazement.

Wade himself and two or three of his more peace-loving kinsmen stood there unprotected in the yard. The doors and windows stood open—not barred, as might have been expected, for siege. There was no show of ready weapons.

Half suspecting some trap of a new and crafty devising, the deputy stepped out into the open with his hands wide of his body.

"I'm Troy Lesher, ther depitty sheriff," he shouted, "an' I wants Cas Harley for murder. Is he hyar?"

Unarmed, Wade Murrell walked forward to meet him.

"He's inside, men," he called out as he went, "but he lays dead. He sought ter slay me a lettle while back, an' Mr. Carroll shot him. Won't ye come in?"

"Hit's a lie," bellowed a voice from the shelter of the woods. "Don't go in thar, Troy. He's seekin' ter lure ye inside an' holt ye fer a hostage."

Wade Murrell stopped dead in his tracks.

"Ef ye come hyar ter find out ther truth," he declared, and his voice had altered to a challenging hardness, "hit's a right easy thing ter do. Hit's a pity ter spill blood when ther cause is done ended."

He paused, then added: "But ef ye jest come hell-bent on warfare, I kain't holp it. Ye kin hev hit either way ye wants. Cas lays dead inside my house, an' I invites ye ter come in an' see fer yoreselves. I don't aim ter fotch him out ter ye."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

THE COMPENSATION

COME, kiss and forget! Why care?
All the world can take, we can spare;
At loss of its favor why fret?
We are sure of each other yet;
Oh, what may our love not dare?

The wreath that but one could wear,
The wealth that we never could share,
For these should our eyes be wet?
Come kiss and forget!

Forget all we bore, and must bear;
Where love is, what place for despair?
Our hearts to God's music set,
Can either ever regret
The price of the harmony rare?
Come, kiss and forget!

Stokely S. Fisher.

Hopalong Cassidy's Pal

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

Author of "The Coming of Cassidy," "Hopalong Cassidy Returns," etc.

XI—THE CONVALESCENT

HOPALONG had spent so much time in bed the last few weeks that he welcomed the dawn, and usually was the first person up and dressed, which involved him in numerous and almost unending arguments with Buck and Rose, especially the latter. It seemed to Hopalong that he had, in her mind, slipped back into the infant class, to be coddled with easy chairs and pillows, and watched entirely too closely.

It was becoming downright irksome, and more than once an edge had grown on his temper which he had been hard put to conceal. He could swear at Buck, but he could not swear at Rose, and not for worlds would he have offended her or hurt her feelings; but when the day came that found him leaving her ministering care to go back to the bunk house to gamble and squabble with the boys he would be grateful beyond words.

He rubbed his eyes, pushed the blanket downward with energetic feet, and slowly sat up, pivoting to let his legs slide over the edge of the bed. The cold floor felt good, and the early morning air had just enough tang in it to make him dress with a degree of haste.

A glance out of the window, craning his

This series began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for May 2.

neck to peer up past the eaves, told him that the day would be clear and bright. Holding his boots in a hand, he walked softly to the door, opened it a little, and listened. Buck was beginning to stir.

Reaching the kitchen, Hopalong pulled on his boots and lifted a lid of the stove. The ashes had not been dumped, which meant that Rose had left to Buck the nightly task of loading the stove for breakfast use. It took only a few minutes to clean the fire box and build up a scientific blaze.

Scientific blazes were a hobby with Hopalong. Buck, despite all the wordy instructions wasted on him, still persisted in throwing in big chunks of wood and then standing on one foot and hoping that the match would take; and when Hopalong built the fire Buck stood on one foot and growled with impatience.

First there must be a crisscrossed layer of very fine shavings; then a crisscrossed layer of heavier shavings, with the wood of each succeeding layer increasing proportionately in thickness. It was a fine art, not to be slighted; and never did such a scientific foundation betray the trust placed in it. The touch of a match sent a roaring through the stove, and by the time one could go to the wood box and return even the top layer was blazing.

Hopalong had just struck the match when the floor boards of the dining room creaked protestingly and Buck stuck his head in at the door. He blinked, yawned, and rubbed his eyes. Then he fixed them on the stove.

"I could 'a' had two fires goin' by this time," he remarked with before-breakfast frankness.

"You shore could—if they both didn't go out," replied Hopalong.

There sounded a brisk crackling, a tentative hiss, and a growing roar. Little puffs of blue smoke shot through the chinks between lids and stove top, and then the warmed chimney tried to suck stove and all up through the roof. Hopalong stood erect.

"I might 'a' had two fires goin' by this time, or mebby three, if you'd raked out th' ashes last night an' got things ready."

Buck lifted his head from his dripping hands, blew resoundingly, and groped for the towel.

"Huh!" he said. Then he moved toward the slab of bacon and picked up a knife.

"Get away from that smoked hawg!" said Hopalong, grabbing the slab. "You cut bacon like you oughta cut steak, an' cut steak like you oughta cut bacon. Get a bucket of water if you've got to do somethin'."

"Gettin' well right fast, ain't you?" demanded Buck, senior owner and foreman of the Double-Y. He spread his feet, jammed his knuckles against his hips, and stared with frank directness at his companion. "Gettin' right back into yore old form, ain't you? Reckon everybody oughta like their bacon all dried out, don't you? Shore, I'll get a bucket of water, an' for a couple of pesos, Mex, I'll heave it all over you!"

"You ain't goin' to get nothin' for nobody," retorted Hopalong, dispensing with the bacon slab. He reached for the bucket and opened the door at the same time; and then turned his head and grinned at Rose Peters as she entered the kitchen.

"That's right, Hopalong; if it is not too heavy for you," said Rose, eying the bucket dubiously. "Buck, the wood box is empty. I'll have breakfast ready soon."

"Come on, Blear-Eye," said Hopalong, grabbing Buck's belt. "Get some wood. You'll warm up an' get near human when you see that sun."

Buck shuffled after his old friend, blinked at the rising sun, and grunted.

"You gimme that bucket," he ordered, grabbing one side of the pail. "You ain't got no business drawin' water till you get plumb well."

Hopalong bridled, and closed his grip on the other side of the handle. Then he yanked. Caught momentarily off balance, Buck went sideways, lost his grip, recovered his poise, and looked with disgust at the bucket swinging in his friend's hand.

"You shouldn't do that, Hoppy," he chided. "A sudden strain like that might open up them wounds an' put you on yore back again."

Hopalong took a quick step forward and shoved his face within a few inches of his foreman's.

"I'm gettin' damn sick of bein' pampered like a sick pup!" he hissed. "Them wounds won't open up agin if I strained 'em enough to put *you* on *yore* back. An' if you reckon I'm still an invalid, you just grab holt of me; that's all, just grab holt!"

"Now, now, now!" reproved the foreman earnestly. "You've been an awful sick man, Hoppy."

"An' I'll never hear th' end of it, neither, I reckon," growled the other. "Go get that fire wood an' let me alone."

He had been a sick man, hovering on the edge of the Great Divide, with only his steel constitution and cast-iron stubbornness to save him. Shot full of holes, he had lost an almost fatal amount of blood; but by some miracle past understanding the wounds had not been infected; he had been given the best medical treatment and nursing that it was possible to get, and he had pulled through by an eyelash.

Rest, sunlight, fresh air, and plenty of nourishing food had done their work. Every day that passed now found him making surprising strides toward his old-time fitness. He could almost feel the strength return, and the last week had tempted him to perform grave indiscretions from the sheer pride of energy, and the fact that they had done him no harm was the best proof of his condition. Like most men unaccustomed to disability, he had an ingrained contempt for weakness if the weakness was his own.

Breakfast was over, Rose was clearing up the kitchen, Buck pawing around in the drawers of the old-fashioned walnut desk for the account book, and Hopalong lounged in the kitchen door gravely smoking an odorous corncob pipe, a gift from an admirer in the South.

He was watching a piebald chunk of equine meanness in the breaking corral, a horse that as yet had not been ridden, despite the several attempts to that end. He wondered how he could arrange things so that he could slip down there and show the piebald that it had an entirely unwarranted idea of its own cussedness. It would have to be done when no one was looking, or the protesting squawks would be heard all the way to Twin River.

"Now what you think to do?" inquired Rose, glancing out of the window and following his gaze before he could shift it. She saw the piebald, and had heard Buck's high-pressure opinion of it, so she did not connect it with Hopalong's thoughts. Why should she connect it, when such a thing as breaking a reputed man-killer was the very last idea that should find a warm welcome in that red head? Besides, Rose had always credited him with having a lot of first-class, uncommon sense.

"Oh, he's figgerin' on bulldoggin' a couple of steers," growled Buck from the front room, "or mebby bustin' that pop-eyed, man-killin' pet of Skinny's," he added as an overwhelming broadside, not for a moment realizing that he had hit the nail on the head. "Where in hell is that account book?"

Hopalong stiffened a little at Buck's lucky shot in the dark, and glanced at Rose.

"Ah-h!" she whispered, her eyes wide open in amazement. She shook her head fiercely, and calmly replied to her peeved husband. "You put the book on the top of the desk, so you could find it again," she said, and turned to Hopalong. "You mus' not do that!" she whispered.

Hopalong relaxed and laughed at Buck's growls; and then leaned forward to peer intently at a moving dot far off on the north range, oblivious to Buck's little ironies.

For nearly half a minute he studied this dot, and then turn lazily in the door.

"Hey, Buck! Betcha th' cigars that th' Kid brings in another prisoner before night."

"There ain't no doubt a-tall *now*," retorted Buck, "that yo're yore own self again. Rose, he's shore well; an' bein' sick didn't do him no good a-tall. Yo're just as loco as ever, you Siwash!"

"After th' last couple of weeks with you, mebby I'm a little locoer; but there's somebody comin' across our north section that rides like Mesquite, only he's too big. I'm bettin' it's him, an' somebody else, ridin' double."

"An' I'm bettin' you got some more of

them hallucerations that Tex said you had once before," growled Buck; but he was stepping briskly toward the door. "Hum! Looks like him; an' then agin, it don't."

Down at the bunk house Skinny Thompson stepped out of the door and looked idly around. For a moment he gazed steadily at the distant newcomers and then glanced at the ranch house. Seeing Hopalong and Buck in the kitchen door, he ambled toward them, a grin on his freckled face.

"Here comes yore pet bob-cat, Hoppy," he called. "Looks like he's draggin' somethin' home with him."

"We'll know who it is when it gets a little closer," replied Buck.

"Closer?" repeated Skinny. "What's th' matter with yore eyes? Goin' blind? That's Mesquite, Mesquite's cayuse, an' I'm gamblin' that th' other feller is Tom Short."

"When you figger on bustin' that piebald, Skinny?" carelessly asked Hopalong.

"Just as soon as my breakfast sets good," answered Skinny. "I lost me a breakfast once by bein' in a hurry to bust a mean cayuse," he explained.

They talked idly while they watched the double riders approach, and it was not long before there remained no question about their identities.

When Mesquite passed the corral he carelessly raised a hand in salutation, and in a few minutes more pulled up near the kitchen door. The man with him let loose of the cantle and slid gratefully to the ground, sighing with relief as he arranged his wrists to lie more comfortably in the rope which bound them, and all the time remained sullenly silent, scowling at the little group. No one paid any attention to him.

"What did you do with Red an' Lanky?" asked Buck with great interest, as Mesquite dismounted. "Did you tell 'em what I said?"

Mesquite smiled.

"Forgot all about it, like I warned you I might. I reckoned they figgered that Shanghai and his friends would think th' town was too dangerous, an' take to th' hills to hide out till things got quiet," he said. "They suggested that they take th' open country around Big Moose, an' that I take th' town. Said they knowed all that country right well, an' that I didn't; an' that I could learn th' town a lot quicker than I could learn th' hills." He chuckled. "Suited me, plumb center. I wanted to hunt by myself. They rode north an' I rode west; an' *this* is what I grabbed in the dark th' very first night I struck th' town."

All eyes now turned to the prisoner, who was uneasily watching Hopalong, the man he had tried to murder.

Buck looked at the man with little interest.

"I got a friend of yourn picketed in an old shack, with Pete Wilson settin' in front of th' door," said the foreman, who also was sheriff of Twin River County. "We don't dare take him to town for fear he'll be lynched some dark night. Come over here, so I can take them cuttin' ropes off yore wrists an' put on somethin' that'll be more comfortable."

Skinny forgot himself and stood erect, and bumped his head against the eaves of the house. He stepped from the wall, took off his hat and punched the crown back to its full height.

"Pete is a one-track man," he observed, wrinkles of amusement playing on his leathery face. "You tell Pete a thing an' he forgets everythin' else. Buck told him that there was nine big buckshot in each barrel of that scatter gun, an' that if he didn't set right close to th' door some of 'em would scatter so wide they'd mebby miss his man when he fired. He is to pull trigger at th' first suspicious move.

"When Pete got th' hang of Buck's remarks he moved up close to th' door, so he wouldn't waste no lead at all. Pete thinks a hell of a lot of Hoppy; an' he feels kinda put out that we wouldn't let him go off gunnin' for you an' th' rest of yore gang." He paused a moment to let his remarks sink in, and his voice hardened a little when he continued: "You're goin' in that shack. You an' Eades will be chained together. Unless you want to collect a couple loads of buckshot at about a dozen feet, you'll set damn still. Fur's I'm cornerned, I shore hope both of you make a break."

Buck instinctively tried the handcuffs,

found them securely locked and stepped back, waving his hand. Skinny glanced upward, found that he was clear of the eaves and stood erect again. He waved a hand toward the bunk house.

"Step right along, Short; Pete'll be tickled near to death to see you."

Having started his prisoner in the general direction of the waiting and cold-eyed Pete, Skinny paused and turned.

"Kid, you got 'em comin' rapid. I snickered at you th' night you started out; but I'm eatin' humble pie now. You can count on me any time you need me; an' I'll give you my brand new mouth-organ if you blank Red and Lanky on this man huntin'." He gently scratched his head and swung around to follow the shuffling prisoner. "Yes, sir; if Red an' Lanky manage to capture one of them coyotes they'll get so swelled up that there just won't be no livin' with 'em."

The three friends watched him go, and talked idly for a few minutes. Then Buck remembered the account book and the entries he had to make, and went into the house.

Hopalong, his eyes fixed hungrily on the mean piebald in the corral, started toward the inclosure, Mesquite by his side. They reached the gate and rested their arms on the top bar, both content to enjoy the other's company in silence. After awhile Hopalong sighed and faced his companion.

"Kid," he said in a low voice after looking carefully around to see that no one was near enough to overhear him. "I'm all healed up again, an' gettin' plumb fed up on bein' pampered like a baby. I been thinkin' about you purty hard, off havin' a good time chasin' them damn ambushin' skunks, while I had to set around an' be nursed plumb strong. You ain't got no idea what I've been through, kid, ever since I got outa bed."

He sighed again and shook his head.

"What you say about waitin' around here till after dark, when I can sneak away without bein' seen? Me an' you'll go up to Big Moose an' sift that town through a fine-mesh sieve. What you think of that, huh?"

Mesquite's face softened, and then grew hard. He shook his head emphatically and replied:

"You ain't ridin' off with me till th' doc says you can."

"Holy maverick, kid! I ain't seen him for a couple of weeks!"

"Then you better see him right soon, for you don't go ridin' around lookin' for trouble till you get *plumb* well."

"Why, I ain't never been no better in all my life than I am right now! Don't you reckon *I* know when I'm feelin' all right?"

"I know that yo're itchin' to bite off more than you can chew," reported the youth; "but you ain't goin' to bite it off with no help of mine. I'm goin' back to Big Moose, an' I'm goin' right soon; yo're stayin' here till th' doc turns you loose."

"But you can't get Shanghai on his own range without me, kid," said Hopalong earnestly. "Red an' Lanky won't get him; but I know how to."

"All right then; I reckon I'll have to chase him off his own range," retorted the youth. "I'm goin' to get him, an' I don't care where it happens. All of which ain't interestin' you none at all; you don't ride with me till th' doc says you can."

"You ain't treatin' me right, kid."

"If I thought that was true, Hoppy, I'd ride off an' never come back. There ain't no man on earth that I'd rather be with ridin' into Big Moose, or any place else, than you. I want to get th' other two coyotes an' clean th' slate; but if you want me to stay here with you I'll let 'em slide, an' take a chance on gettin' 'em later. But you can't go with me to-day."

Hopalong looked at the suspicious piebald and gravely winked one eye. He dragged his arms from the gate bar, slouched dejectedly and started slowly toward the bunk house.

"All right, kid," he said in weary resignation. "I reckon I got to play baby awhile longer. Come on; I get tired standin' up so long," and this time he winked at the bunk house door.

"What'd I tell you?" demanded Mesquite. "If you get tired leanin' against th' corral, what would happen to you if you tried to ride up to Big Moose, with a

fight waiting for you, mebby, if you got there?"

"Mebby yo're right, but I shore hate to admit it," growled Hopalong. "When you figgerin' on goin' back up there?" he asked, knowing that his companion had gone without sleep for a long time.

"After I get some rest," answered Mesquite. "I'll turn in till noon, get somethin' to eat an' pull out right after."

Hopalong nodded and turned toward the kitchen, where the cook was making a din with dishes and voice.

"I'll stop some of that damn noise for you," he said. "You take my bunk if you want. Wait till I clear it off for you."

He removed the belt, gun and saddle which covered the bed, growling about the man who had put them there. He carried the saddle to the door and placed it close to the wall, where Skinny would trip over it if he followed his usual habit of swinging on the door casing and shooting himself along the wall to his bunk. The belt he slung around him and buckled loosely.

It was Mesquite's belt and Mesquite's gun. His gaze settled on the belts and guns which his young friend was hanging on their pegs, and his eyes shone a little.

"How you like that pair, kid?"

Mesquite flushed from pride and smiled.

"First rate, Hoppy," he answered. "I was never so proud in all my life as when you let me know that you was lendin' 'em to me. When you want 'em back again, just say th' word."

"I loaned 'em to you to get them fellers with, kid. When you've got 'em all you can give th' guns back to me. Yo're th' only man that ever wore 'em, except me." He looked around the room, did not see what he sought and again started toward the galley. "Turn in now. I'll choke th' cook, an' go out an' set with Pete, an' help him watch th' prisoners."

Pete was glad to see him, but did not take his eyes from the two men sitting in the shack, except for one quick glance.

Pete Wilson was a little slow-witted, but he was doggedly faithful to Hopalong. In his eyes Hopalong was the greatest man that ever had lived, and a man who could do no wrong. A contented grin slid across the sentry's face and he shifted his cud to the other cheek.

"I been sorta hankerin' for 'em to make a break," said Pete, patting the ten-gauge affectionately. "Got *two* barrels here, one for each of 'em; but buckshot ain't hardly big enough. I wanted Buck to lemme load her with pistol bullets; but he said these here was big enough."

"Single ball would 'a' been better," said Hopalong gravely, as he sat down on the ground and tucked his legs under him.

"By gosh!" said Pete with keen interest. "That's right! Get me a couple shells with them."

"Ain't got none."

Pete shook his head sadly and chewed in quiet reflection.

"Where'd Skinny go?"

"Round to bust that piebald. You'll hear it purty soon."

"Them fellers in there got any water an' grub?" asked Hopalong, glad that the pestiferous Skinny was going to be very busy for the next few minutes.

"Yeah, they have; but they been sorta leery about reachin' for it," explained Pete, carefully shifting the double-barrel. Both hammers were at full cock, and this fact seemed to be of intense interest to the men in the shack.

"Turn that lead sprayer a little to th' left, an' let 'em drink an' eat," ordered Hopalong, also interested in the cocked hammers. Pete handled weapons with that nonchalant carelessness which always intrigues the interest of every one within range.

"Pete," said Hopalong in surprise, as he gazed at the belts slung around the guard's waist, "what you wearin' two guns for? Ain't one gun an' that there ten-gauge enough for watchin' a couple of men that are handcuffed together?"

"Well, I just put 'em on in case I needed 'em," answered Pete, grinning cheerfully.

"There's one of 'em you don't need near as much as I'm goin' to," said Hopalong. "Where'd you get that extra one?"

"It's one that Buck took off that gang that Mesquite rounded up in Twin River. Want it?"

"Reckon I do," answered Hopalong,

drawing the weapon from its holster and balancing it in his hand. "Why, this is a dead ringer for my own guns. Feels right natural. Gimme th' belt till I see how she hangs."

He removed it and then slung it around his own waist as he stood up, let out two more holes in the strap and patted it to a comfortable fit.

"Feels right good again, wearin' two guns. Pete, I want you to do somethin' for me, an' keep yore mouth tight shut about it. Mesquite's ridin' away close after dinner. I want you to go out an' wrangle me my best cayuse, an' picket it in a hollow or draw where I can find it right handy. You do it between now an' noon, an' I'll sit here with that shotgun an' hold these fellers down."

"But Buck said for me to stay right here," protested Pete as a matter of duty.

"You gimme that shotgun, go up an' tell Buck that I'm takin' yore place while you ride around an' limber up for a couple of hours; but don't you say why I'm relievin' you. Then come back here, get these Colts an' my Sharps, an' take 'em with you an' leave 'em near th' cayuse."

Pete surrendered the double-barreled weapon and walked to his horse, picketed near the kitchen; and when he returned a few minutes later he collected the guns and went on his way. Two hours passed and then he rode up again, dismounted and held out his hand for the shotgun. Once again seated in front of the door, he chuckled and leaned closer to his friend, telling where he had left the horse, and adding that he had ridden it "a mite" to take the edge off its meanness, in case Hopalong might not have recovered enough to exert his full strength.

Noon came and passed, and Mesquite roped a fresh horse in the little corral and made ready to depart. He smiled sympathetically at the wistful expression on his friend's face, made a couple of foolish remarks to hide his own feelings and loped northward in the general direction of Big Moose.

Hopalong watched him until he had shrunk to a pin point, and then wandered out to the same corral, his eyes on an old mare. This animal had long since lost its speed and stamina, and was practically a pensioner. It seldom failed to insist on getting rounded up with the saddle horses, after a pitiful show of independence, and could not be kept out of the caviya without considerable effort.

Every morning it was collected with the others, driven into the horse corral and turned out again every evening. Day after day it went through this performance, was sworn at by the wranglers in turn, who secretly had a deal of affection for it, and once in awhile some grinning puncher would throw a saddle on its old back and pretend to be half scared to death during the sham pitching which ensued.

Up at the ranch house Buck Peters peered through a window and saw the convalescent wander toward the corral. The rope in Hopalong's hand aroused a surprising amount of suspicion in the foreman's mind; but it disappeared, and a grin passed over Buck's face as he saw the rope settle over the head of the old pensioner. He grinned still more when Hopalong led the old timer to the bunk house and put a saddle on it. When Hopalong mounted and rode slowly toward the ranch house Buck drew back from the window and wandered to the door.

"Hello!" he said in simulated surprise as Hopalong drew up. "You must be feelin' purty strong to take a chance on that man-killer."

Hopalong grinned foolishly.

"Honest, Buck," he replied, "it's been so long since I sat a saddle that I just has to get th' feel of it again." He patted the scrawny neck, and then thumbed it, and pretended to be frightened by the sudden show of anger. "Bad cayuse, Buck, plumb bad."

"Ain't none worse, I reckon," chuckled Buck, whose eyes had taken in the empty rifle scabbard and the total lack of gun belts and Colts. "Look out she don't bust in a couple of ribs for you. Where you goin'?"

"Figgerin' on dashin' up to Big Moose an' shootin' up th' town," answered Hopalong, grinning.

Buck doubted if the old mare could

carry his friend to Big Moose in two days, and again the lack of weapons reassured him. Hopalong would not ride very far.

"If you run acrost Red an' Lanky, tell 'em to get th' hell out of there an' come back here, where there's plenty of real work waitin' for 'em."

"I'll do that very thing," replied Hopalong, grinning again.

"I ain't got no time to waste standin' here foolin' with you," growled Buck, his mind on the account book. "Reckon a little ride will be a right good thing for you. Take some of th' meanness outa you, mebby."

"Then you better straddle a cayuse an' ride with me," retorted Hopalong. "All th' same, Buck, you ain't got no idea how good a saddle feels."

"Want to borrow my gun?"

"Got a better one of my own any time I want to carry it," retorted Hopalong. "Don't hardly believe I'll run up ag'in' no wild Injuns. Who's ridin' th' north range to-day?"

"Billy. He's ridin' it if he ain't asleep in th' shade of his cayuse."

Hopalong wheeled the mare and urged it forward.

"So long," he called.

"So long," grunted Buck, and turned back into the house to tell his wife that Hopalong had more sense than he had suspected, and that he seemed tickled half to death to feel a saddle under him again.

Hopalong rode north, following slowly on Mesquite's trail; but several miles from the bunk house he turned aside, followed down a dry-wash, and after a few miles more he dismounted near a high-strung horse which had fought Pete with unbounded enthusiasm, and which now eyed the newcomer suspiciously. Ten minutes later Hopalong Cassidy, astride a real horse, with his rifle in its sheath and two gun belts sagging heavily from his hips, rode northward again, driving before him a docile old mare whose gentle gait made him swear fretfully.

II.

THE few lights of Big Moose spotted the dark with pin points of sickly yellow, and Mesquite paused on the brow of a hill to look down upon them before taking the slope. As he stared down on the town he thought sadly of Hopalong's desire to be with him, and determined to get through with his tasks as soon as possible. He had wasted part of the afternoon in order that he would not reach the town before dark, and now he was eager to put matters to the test.

On the old wagon road several miles east of the town a horseman rode at a lope through the darkness, bound for Big Moose and whatever might await him there. He knew the town well, far better than did the man he was following; and he pretty well knew most of the permanent inhabitants.

More frequently now he was shifting his position in the saddle, resting one set of muscles by throwing the strain on others; stubbornly refusing to admit how tired he was, and trying to ignore the physical weakness which taunted the strength of his spirit. Having gone this far, he would not quit until he had accomplished his purpose, and so he shifted again and set his jaws and pushed steadily onward.

After what seemed to be an interminable length of time this rider reached the top of a hill south of Big Moose and drew up, swaying a little. He rested while his gaze passed over the dark collection of shacks below him, pausing here and there as lights held his attention.

He ached all over, and his arms seemed to be made of lead. After a few minutes he dismounted, tied the horse to a stunted tree, and started down the slope, stumbling a little now and then.

When halfway to the bottom he stopped to rest, and a hand dropped to a gun belt as the hoot of an owl sounded from the opposite edge of the town. The cry was very well done, but to his ears it sounded suspicious. His life had been crowded by many experiences which had taught him not to take things at their face value. The saloon was now of secondary interest, and he pushed on through the dark, as straight as he could go toward the place whence that hoot had sounded. If it was a warning signal, it had not been given about him, since

it was too far away; but he could guess whom it might concern.

Mesquite was moving in the darkness in the general direction of the saloon which had proved to be so interesting on his former visit. In his haste to get the work over with, he was not as cautious as he might have been, and the hoot passed almost unnoticed.

Before him lay the littered square in front of the saloon, which was foolish to cross from that direction. He worked around this open space and then approached the building from the north, and tried to find a serviceable crack among the scores of them in the flimsy shade which blocked the window in the wall on that side of the building.

There were cracks enough to let a glow of radiance through, where the sizing had been abraded by years of service; but not one of them was wide enough or open enough to give him a glimpse of what lay behind. He did not realize how vividly he was outlined against that luminous yellow square, how plainly he was silhouetted to a keen-eyed watcher.

The ringing notes of a distant whippoorwill made no impression on his consciousness, and after a moment he slipped along the wall, turned the corner, and stopped beside the rear door, his hand cautiously feeling for the latch. Slowly he moved it, ready to surge against the planks and send them swinging inward when the bar was free.

He had no way of knowing that things had happened swiftly in that room; that the first hoot of the owl had sent a dozen men scurrying to agreed-upon positions, half of them watching the front door, the other half the rear. With the sounding of the whippoorwill all eyes had focused on the rear entrance and now were intently watching the almost imperceptible rising of the latch and its home-made bar.

Neither did he, nor they, know that the owl would hoot no more that night; that the whippoorwill had felt a gun butt crash against its head and was now bound and gagged. Neither he, nor they, knew that an almost exhausted man was dragging himself toward the littered square, desperately eager to get to the front door of that saloon.

Mesquite, the latch raised as high as it would go, hurled himself against the door and sent it crashing back against the inner wall, following it like an angry cat, both guns breast high and balanced for action. Then the light was blotted out, he found himself half suffocated in the folds of a blanket, his guns torn and knocked from his hands, and he was fighting for his life in a snarling pack of thieves.

The hands on throats, wrists and ankles were too many; and the rope which bound him, coil after coil, made him helpless. Mercifully the blanket had been torn in the struggle, else he would have died from suffocation.

Realizing that he was only wearing himself out and that he might need all his strength later on, he ceased to struggle and lay inertly against the wall.

Foxy Joe, his right hand against the side of his face where a bullet had left a bloody furrow, turned furiously to the man whose plan had been carried out.

"It's all damn nonsense, takin' that pup prisoner!" he snapped angrily. "We could just as well 'a' riddled him when th' door opened an' saved ourselves a lot of trouble. Lookit what *I* got, an' all for nothin'," he continued.

"An' made signs of a killin' for them damn punchers to see?" growled the bartender. "They'll be up here, every damn one of 'em, when they find he's missin'. An' *I'll* be th' one that 'll have to answer their questions. Too bad that bullet didn't go a couple of inches more to the right!"

"That so?" snapped Foxy Joe.

"There ain't no use startin' a row," urged another. "Put him on a hoss an' get it over with."

"Where you takin' him?"

"Any place out in th' brush far enough west of town."

The exhausted man outside was crossing the square, staggering and resting, crawling and resting, stirred to frenzy by the sounds of the shots. He rested again, gritted his teeth, and went on a few yards, his eyes fixed vengefully on that door. Let him reach that and touch its latch, and he would

show what price was paid for killing a friend of the Double-Y.

"Get a rustle on," said the bartender anxiously. "As soon as you shoot him, scatter far an' wide, an' watch out what kind of tracks you leave. Hell's goin' to bust loose up here, shore as shootin'!" He stepped forward to oversee the handling of the prisoner, and he did not catch the slow and silent movement of the front door; did not see the crack slowly widening. "Come on! Move lively! Ain't you got no—"

"Han's up!" came a low, snarled order, whereat the trussed and bundled man at the base of the wall started to struggle furiously and to shout.

The answering movements were spasmodic, some of the postures ridiculous and contorted. Foxy Joe turned as white as his dirty face would permit, and seemed to have trouble with his breathing. The bartender instinctively reached toward his belt, and his whole upper body followed the downward swing of his arm, to crash on the floor and slowly straighten.

Through the smoke swirling around the door the startled crowd saw a man leaning against the sill for support, one knee on the floor. His face was working with rage, which now began to lessen as the meaning of the struggling figure near the wall drifted through his consciousness: Mesquite was not dead. The newcomer's elbows were fast against his sides, to seek what support they could obtain; and, as though this was not enough, the arms moved until the wrists rested against the hips. In each hand was a Colt, both wabbling a little.

First among the crowd to sense the significance of that huddled posture, those hip-steadied wrists and the wavering guns was Foxy Joe, who believed that another few seconds would find him dead. His well-founded fear of that gunman was overcome by the desperate situation in which he found himself and the signs as he read them; and the rage and fear of a cornered wolf blazed in his eyes.

In a jump he had gained the shelter of a rigidly erect friend, and thus bulwarked reached for his gun; but as his elbow flashed out past the barrier another roar filled the room and was echoed by a shriek. The shock of the heavy bullet spun Joe sideways and he grabbed the falling gun with his other hand.

Another roar from the door drove him backward in a stumble. He dropped his gun and leaped toward the window, diving at it head first, careless alike of glass or sash. He struck it alive as another shot crashed out, and he was dead before his feet flashed through the ragged opening. A shaky laugh came from the sagging man in the door, and there was not a hand in the room that was lower than straining muscles could hold it.

"Untie him," said Hopalong, fighting with all his will to keep his consciousness until Mesquite was free to dominate the situation. "Untie—him, damn—you!" he grated.

The command was quickly although somewhat bunglingly obeyed, and Mesquite, aflame with rage, leaped to his feet and knocked down the two men nearest to him; and then, controlling himself, hastily disarmed the unresisting crowd. He seemed to be greatly interested in the weapons as he handled them, and his frown increased until he chanced to glance at the bar. Two worn and battered Colts lay on it, and when his eager hands closed on them his exultant laugh rang out loudly and clearly.

"All right, Hoppy!" he shouted. "I got 'em!"

He balanced the weapons in his itching hands and searched the line for an excuse to use them; but none offered, and he backed the cowed crowd against a wall.

The man in the door was now down on both knees, and his two guns sagged almost to the floor. He swayed a little and stiffened, and smiled reassuringly at his suddenly anxious and understanding friend.

"I'm all right, Kid," he said. "Just a little tired, that's all. Just a little tired, an' mad as all hell." He paused a moment, and continued: "String a rope through th' trigger guards of them guns, an' we'll get outa here." Again he paused. "Till to-morrow, Kid; till to-morrow."

In a few moments Mesquite threw the

rope over his shoulder, sagging a little from its weight, walked briskly to the front door, slipped an arm under one of Hopalong's, and then faced the crowd again as his friend sheathed his guns.

" I'll remember every face in this room," he snarled. " To-morrow we come back again, an' we come a shootin'; an' for a lead dollar I'd start th' shootin' now!"

The crowd remained silent, not being able to think of anything to say. It watched the two punchers fade out of the little square of lamplight on the grounds outside and listened to the slow footsteps dying out across the square. Perhaps in its collective mind it saw a hard-riding outfit pounding northwestwardly through the night somewhere on the Twin River-Big Moose trail—an outfit keyed to vengeance.

"—— ——!" said a voice, breaking the tense and punishing silence; and with the sound of that curse the crowd came to life. It stirred, it leaped, and by three exits sought the infolding safety of the sheltering night and the added safety which horses and growing distance might provide.

Hopalong Cassidy had not quite bitten off more than he could chew.

THE END OF No. 11

NEXT WEEK: "FOX versus FOX."

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SWIMMIN' IN THE BRANDYWINE

COME on in, the water's fine;
Put your clothes right there with mine.
Nothin' like old summer time
'N' swimmin' in the Brandywine.

See that sunfish dart away,
Lis'en to that old blue jay;
There's a crow a callin', too.
Gee! but I like June—don't you?

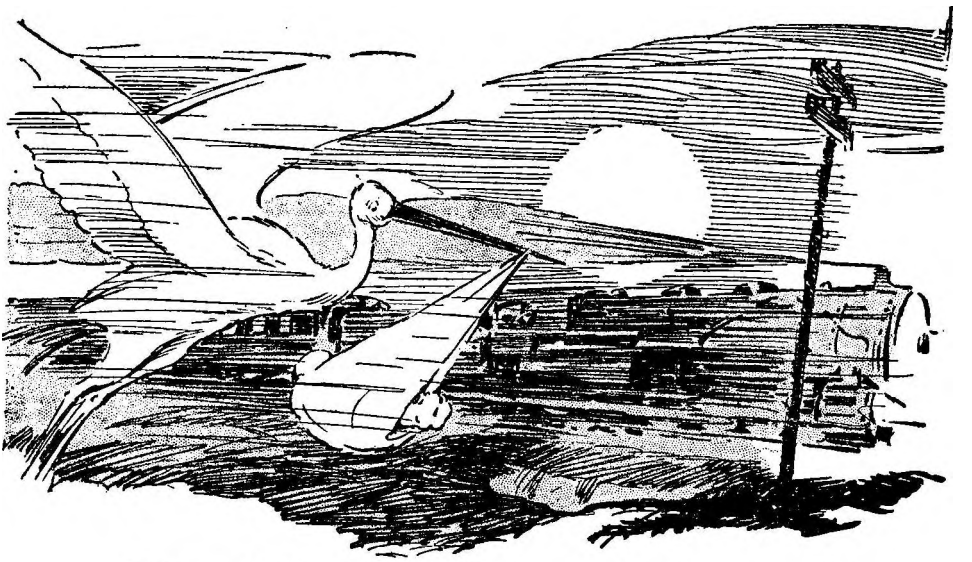
Look out, Bill! I'll dive in first.
Gosh! I tho't my lungs 'd burst.
Sumpin' swum against my heel;
Wonder if it wuz an eel?

Wish those clouds would blow away;
Seems they hate a sunny day
'N' are always tryin' to
Get between the sun 'n' you.

Bet I'll beat you gettin' dressed;
Glad these stockin's ain't my best.
Never mind about your hair,
I told ma 'n' she don't care.

Hurry up or you 'n' I
Are goin' to miss that cherry pie.
Surely does make me feel fine,
Swimmin' in the Brandywine.

Marvin Wesley Bilderback.



The Call of Shining Steel

By DON WATERS

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I AND II

ZEB WHITE, a farm youth, gets a job firing a locomotive through the influence of Jim Brown, a railroader. His visions for an engineer's berth give him hopes that he may win the hand of "Itchy-Witchy," a farmer's daughter, so called on account of her peculiar name inherited from her Welsh forbears. He takes Jim's place one day while Jim is sleeping off the effects of liquor, and the train is wrecked. Zeb is injured, but finally recovers and returns to duty. He feels that he is making progress with Itchy-Witchy, but his home conditions worry him. His father has been caught moonshining and sent to jail. His mother and sisters, mountain-bred, mistrust the city where he has brought them to live, and return to the mountains. Zeb risks his life once more for his old friend Jim Brown—this time to save his job as well as his life, for Jim, raised to be an engineer, all but lets his boiler blow up through negligence. Zeb rakes the fire and before the superintendent next day takes the blame for the burned boiler. He fears that his railroad career is over.

CHAPTER XV. (*Continued*)

FOR A FRIEND.

A SILENCE, strained and tense, followed his words. He stared defiantly from one to the other of the amazed faces before him. His heart felt as heavy as lead, and yet he stood unflinching, shoulders squared, head thrown back, listening for the sentence that would mean the end of his ambitions.

For a full minute not a sound came from the three men who watched. The boiler maker sat, staring straight up into his face. Zeb noticed his expression of amazement. The shop foreman with incredulous eyes,

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as though his ears had betrayed him, looked in consternation at the figure in carpet slippers and bandaged hands opposite. The superintendent hunched forward over his desk, a half-smoked cigar held upright part way to his lips, wonder written on his face.

Then as Zeb watched, the superintendent's eyes wrinkled, his expression changed into a grin, he threw back his head and laughed. The other two men joined him.

"Haw, haw, haw!" they roared. "That's good. Best one I ever heard!"

Zeb felt a slow surge of anger creeping over him at their heartlessness. Here he had thrown his job away, pitched his hopes and ambitions to one side in those few words and they laughed at him.

Finally the laughter stopped, the superintendent stood up and patted him on the shoulder.

"Zeb, I understand why you made that statement. I respect you for it, but it's funny just the same."

"What's funny about it?" Zeb sputtered.

"Why, Jim Brown not ten minutes ago told us just what you did—word for word. I believe him. The evidence is all to substantiate his statement. Jim Brown is no longer in the service of the company. And Zeb," the superintendent's voice became serious, "I want to thank you for taking the chance you did last night. It probably was the means of saving life, not to mention company property. Lay off as long as you want to. I'll see you get paid for all the time you're out. I'm sorry. It's all I can do for you, but I hope I may be able to show my appreciation later."

Zeb murmured: "Thank you, Colonel," and hurried from the room.

He was afraid if he stayed there, he might make a show of himself.

Jim was done. He knew that as long as the present officials were in charge of the division, his friend would never get his job again. He was sorry for him. He had certainly been a steadfast friend and it was indeed hard to realize that just after his promotion to engineer, not three months ago, Jim Brown should be bumped off.

As Zeb crossed the street, the thought ran through his mind—"One less. I'm up on the list now."

Instantly he hated himself for it, loathed the fact that he would advance by Jim's misfortune.

In perplexity he searched his mind to discover some way he might help Jim. He was willing to do anything possible, for he foresaw that his friend would slide rapidly down now that the one thing which served as a check on him was gone.

He entered the boarding house, climbed the stairs to his floor and opened the door of his room. Inside sat Jim, heeled back in a chair, his feet propped up on the dresser, calmly smoking a cigarette.

"Heyho, Zeb! I sure pulled the prize boner last night, and they didn't lack a thing of knocking my legs out from under me this pleasant a. m."

"Jim, I'm sorry. I—I tried to help you, but I couldn't."

Jim threw the cigarette down half smoked, got up and faced Zeb.

"Listen, you old son of a beehive! I know you did. I heard all about how you stayed with the jack and drew the fire. Sorry you got burned, but don't give a fiddler's cuss about their old boiler. I'm excommunicated from the pay car for life. And, kid, I'm sorry as the devil it all occurred. I might have got you in dutch."

"What do you aim to do now?" was Zeb's anxious question.

Jim lit another cigarette before answering.

"Well, I was figuring. Ring has a chance to move uptown and start another chop joint. I was talking to him. He'll sell his bean foundry cheap here. I had started to soak some dough down to buy it when this happened. I got about a third laid up and pitched a drunk to celebrate with the well known results."

Zeb studied for a minute, then made his offer.

"I've got a good pile in the bank. You go down to Ring's and make the arrangements. I'll stake you to what money you need."

To Jim's eager words of thanks, Zeb merely waved a bandaged hand.

"Cut out the gratitude. I owe you it. Run along now. I want to soak these fists."

Jim hurried from the room, whistling

blithely, and Zeb sat down to unwind the bandages and dress his blistered hands. There was a chance that Jim would do something with the restaurant. He was well known and liked, and if he would not drink too heavily, he could make it pay. Zeb hoped his friend would make a go of it, for he dreaded to think of his being one of the poolroom loafers.

He little knew how hard Jim was hit. His attitude while he was in the room rather puzzled Zeb, his careless spirit, his casual whistle, his nonchalant manner—all were forced.

If Zeb had looked down the hallway at Jim's retreating figure, seen the despondent slump to his shoulders, the worried look on his face, the dragging footsteps, he would have realized how heavy-hearted Jim was. For it is no slight thing for a man to be bumped off. An engineer is at one time the most fortunate, the best paid and the most precarious worker in the laboring world. For his job lies between the confines of one division, and the turn of chance, the whim of fortune, often deprives him of it. There are hundreds of railroads, thousands of railroad divisions in this country, yet to any of the others, he is a new man who must begin at the bottom of the list.

Jim realized this fully, yet as he walked down the street, it was not his job nor the future that was on his mind. Passing the hotel, in front of the depot, a traveling man on the porch heard him mutter: "What a damn fool I was! It might have cost the kid his job."

But Zeb knew nothing of this. That evening he went down to the restaurant and wrote out the check that made Jim the owner. Although his burns pained him considerably, he went to bed early that night and slumbered soundly, since he felt that he had repaid a bit of the debt he owed Jim Brown.

Zeb was laid up for ten days. The blisters on his hands and feet broke, burned like liquid lead and gradually healed. He marked up before his hands were thoroughly well and worked for a few days with layers of bandages under his heavy gloves.

One day soon after, he was in the washroom. He had finished cleaning up and was changing his clothes. For a long time, he had been "bucking the extra board" and had almost forgotten that his "age" was piling up. Casually he glanced at the list tacked on a locker door. It surprised him to see that his name was but ten from the top. He stood for a regular run now. He was through bucking the extra board.

He finished dressing and crossed the tracks to the call office. After talking for a few minutes with the call boy, he made up his mind to the job he desired. A "younger" man was on the West End freight. Zeb exercised his right, "bumped" the other and marked up for the job.

It was better, this regular run. Zeb knew when he was due to leave and return and the irregular hours and uncertain runs of an extra fireman became a thing of the past. He had climbed another rung on the ladder.

Yet he was not entirely satisfied. Even though he had a good run, he was not contented for he didn't own it. He had seen how easily a man might lose his job and how pathetic he became once it was taken from him. He often looked at the coal chute, the cinder hoist, the massive turntable, the fast passenger engines and the immense freight moguls, company property, all worth money. The very engine he fired was worth more money than he would earn, in all probability, during his entire lifetime. He, too, was company property, and yet had no value in their estimation. A misstep—an infraction of the rules and the company would bump him off, then what? The question presented itself over and over again.

As he made his daily run, his thoughts turned more and more toward the farms that lined both sides of the right of way. He watched the farmers plowing their fields with their tractors that turned the furrows faster than a man could follow on foot. He saw them reaping their grain, gathering their corn, and when his engine banged over a road crossing, sometimes a machine was halted to let them pass, a farmer and his wife in front, a couple of rosy-cheeked children in the rear seat. They seemed a contented and prosperous people.

Gradually the conclusion formed itself in

his mind. They were the people with a good, solid foundation. They owned their jobs, their living depended on basic principles. The soil was the real source of wealth and stability. His job was precarious, fleeting, depending on too many chances. His life was unsettled, casual, a room at either end of the division, a meal wherever the chance afforded. Those men who worked their own land were far better off. He would save his money, buy his piece of earth and if the day came when the railroad cast him off, he would not become one of the pool-room loafers.

And here was the answer to his silent questions about Itchy-Witchy. She was oftener in his mind now and always coupled to the idea of a home far from the railroad and what it meant. But she had her own farm; her father's place was far better than any he could hope to acquire for many years.

Yet Zeb felt that when the time came for her to choose between the home she had been reared in and the one he would offer her, there would be no hesitancy on her part—she would choose his. Such is the egotism of youth.

CHAPTER XVI.

HOGHEAD ON SIXTEEN.

AT last it had come. Five years of swinging a scoop, of rocking a shaker bar, of jerking at the fire hook had brought their reward. Zeb was promoted. The ordeal of his examination that he had hoped for and yet dreaded was come and gone and he had passed first on the list of a dozen firemen. He was an engineer.

Now for the right hand side of the cab, for the rattling Johnson bar and the brass brake valve handle! Impatiently he waited the morning after he had come back from his examination in the master mechanic's office, impatient for the call boy to batter on the door of his room and send him out on a run.

Business was good, better than it had been for years else his promotion would not have come so soon. He had but five years "age" and he realized that it is seldom a fireman is promoted so young. Zeb was but twenty-three, although his age was down on the company books as twenty-six.

He sat down and wrote a long letter to Itchy-Witchy, telling her of his good fortune. He decided to put the unspoken question that hung between them to the word. He walked out, dropped the letter in the box so it would go out on Sixteen in the morning. Then he went home, turned in to bed, but sleep would not come.

The thoughts of that letter and what it meant to him, banished all sleep, and Zeb tossed and tumbled for hours, wide awake. Finally he fell into a fitful slumber only to be awakened with a start. The telephone bell was calling insistently down the hallway.

Hastily he went to the phone, lifted the hook, answered the question and heard the welcome news.

"White?"

"Yes. Well?"

"You're marked up for Sixteen."

He hurriedly dressed, went down to Ring's, ate a hasty breakfast, and crossed the tracks to the roundhouse. The 937 was marked up for the run. Zeb found her under the coal chute, taking on fuel. He clambered aboard, sat down on the engineer's seat box, and mechanically wiped off reverse lever handle and throttle grip with a piece of waste.

A great contentment stole over him as he cracked the injector, then opened it wide. The rumble of the coal falling into the tender when the hostler swung on to the gate rope sounded like music to his ears.

An old engineer whom Zeb had fired for passed below, looked up, and grinned.

"Well, kid, I suppose you'll run the wheels off her to-day."

Zeb laughed back. "No, Jerry. I'm a thinking no one ever broke any speed records on the West End."

"Not till they lengthen out the tracks a bit between stations," was the other's rejoinder.

The hostler slid down over the coal.

"You take her over, Zeb?" he queried.

To the nod of assent the hostler added:

"You just got twelve thousand pounds of coal. I looked at your sand. It's O. K., dome plumb full; all you gotta do is highball."

In a few minutes Zeb's fireman showed up, and on coming into the cab he exclaimed in wonder:

"Why, I'm darned! Whatcha doing on this run, Zeb?"

"Oh, Petey Dink laid off for a couple days, so they run me."

"Glad of it," was the reply. "The old man is sure getting crabbed these days. He's got a farm down on the main line somewhere's near New River. All he talks about is plowing and planting these days. Wish he'd get a leave of absence and go to farming. He worries me dizzy. Why, he's so busy watching the cattle in the fields and the clodhoppers along the right of way, that if I didn't keep track of him he'd run right through an open switch every day."

Zeb laughed. "How long is old Petey Dink been a running?" he asked.

"Oh, he's been promoted for over thirty years now," was the reply.

"Well, kid, when a man drives an engine for thirty years, don't you think he's due a change?"

The fireman considered. "Zeb, I guess you're right. Thirty years is a long time. I never thought of it that way. God, sometimes it seems ages ago since I grabbed a scoop for the first time, and it ain't but three years."

A thoughtful look came into his eyes. He turned and kicked a coal board into place. "God, Zeb, but I've seen and did a lot in those three years." He glanced into the oil rack on the tender. "Hey, Zeb, not a string of waste here. They forgot to put any on last trip, too."

Zeb looked at his watch. "Kid, slip over to the storeroom and get some. I'll take her over to the depot."

The fireman dropped off as Zeb opened the throttle and the 937 slowly moved down the shop track toward the main line. He ran her to the switch where a waiting brakeman lined the rails up for him, reversed and backed down to the coaches. He drew a shovel full of hot coals out of the fire, placed his tallow pot on it to warm up the heavy oil, and, filling his long-spouted can with the thick black liquid, he got down from the cab and began to oil around.

A few drops on the links, a streak on the guides, a little puddle in the valve stem cup—carefully he examined the engine's mechanism. As he oiled, he thought over his letter to Itchy-Witchy. He'd only be on this run for a trip or two. Then when the regular man came back, he'd lay off, go out to see her, and tell her the things he could not write. Perhaps she might even meet him at the station on the return trip. If he did—his heart thumped fast and furious at the thought.

A voice at his back caused him to turn around. The superintendent stood beside him.

"White, I'm a little dubious about running you on a passenger your first trip. Play safe, even if you have a delay," the "old man" cautioned him. "But don't have a delay if you can help it."

"Colonel, I'll sure do that," Zeb earnestly replied. "You know I don't want to make a gom of it."

The old man removed his cigar from his mouth.

"I guess it's all right. We're short of enginemen now. You keep your nose clean and you'll have plenty of work. They'd give me the devil if anything happened and they found out I run a man on a passenger who'd just been promoted."

Zeb's answer was lost in the fireman's words who came rushing up at this time, breathless.

"Say, wouldn't it jar the markers off a hand car!" he began. "Why, those measly guys in the storeroom wouldn't even give me a bit of waste without an order. Tried to find the roundhouse foreman. Been running my heels off, couldn't locate him. Nothing doing unless I git an order signed by him," he ejaculated.

There was a long-drawn-out from the conductor: "All a-a-b-board-d!"

"Well, we haven't time to fool with it now, anyway," Zeb replied. "Let's go."

"Luck to you," called the superintendent as Zeb turned away.

Zeb climbed up into the cab and opened the air ringer valve.

The " gong-gong " of the bell sounded. Kicking open the relief cocks, he pulled the throttle and Sixteen got under way. Slowly at first, then faster and faster, the big driving wheels revolved, the engine passed the crossing, the gates stemmed the tide of traffic, the bell in the gateman's shanty rang insistently, the loose boards rattled. Sixteen was on the rails, a cloud of dust following her.

Zeb waved a hand to the gateman, jerked the throttle open a couple of notches, eased the reverse bar back toward the center, and Sixteen picked up speed, swept down the yard, passed the limit post and thundered across a bridge around a curve and on to the West End Division.

Zeb listened to the blended noises of moving wheels and oscillating rods beneath him. Five years of riding engines had tuned his ears so that he could pick out each individual note from among the hundred notes that chorused all about—that dull thump when the drivers passed a low joint in the rails was a loose shoe; that little scarce heard " cling-cling " was a worn rod bushing; that soft beat like the flutter of a calling partridge was the steam alternately shoving against one and then the other piston face.

A road crossing whistle board flashed by with its two long and two short black marks painted on the white background. Zeb reached up his left hand and, without looking, pulled the whistle cord. Two long, two short blasts blared out. In a half minute he thundered past the road. An automobile full of people stood waiting for him to pass, warned of his approach by the whistle.

The engine ran on. Station after station approached. Zeb shut off the steam, applied the brakes, made his stops easily without jar or backlash, like a veteran. It was ridiculously simple, this running an engine. The job itself did not amount to anything. It was the slow, arduous schooling an engineer goes through, the process of elimination, that made the job, not any call for skill in it itself.

He blew for a station and looked at his watch. He was on time to the minute. He shut off and applied the air. The train came to a stop. He looked back. A couple of hand trucks of baggage and express was being unloaded from the cars behind, the evidences of summer visitors. They were coming into the mountains more and more each year now. He saw a sleek varnished canoe carefully slid on to a truck. There were tennis rackets, golf clubs, two or three dogs in their fancy shipping crates, all the accessories for the games of grown-ups.

Lord, he'd never had a vacation, never known what it was to go off on a care-free trip of a couple of months and have all the money to spend he needed.

He saw the conductor swing his hand, heard the " All aboard!" and got under way. His heart thumped a bit. He smiled as he noticed his hand on the throttle shake. He had a queer trembly feeling running through him, for the next station was Ecclefechan.

He realized that what he had set his heart on had come to pass, and he wanted to have an audience of—one to see him pull into his own town, to know he had won out. A feeling of elation thrilled him. The fireman looked across, astonished, as Zeb began to sing:

> " Oh, the red light is the danger light,
> The green light cautions slow;
> The white light shows the clear rail
> As down the track we go!"

Zeb usually was so serious that his exuberance surprised himself. He was happy. Wonder if he would see Itchy-Witchy? Probably not. She'd get his letter, though. He'd see her on the way back and speak a few words to her. Then he'd lay off and come out to see her, not for one day, for several. Maybe even a week. They'd have a grand time together, tramping over the hills and enjoying each other's company. He'd forget the railroad for awhile. There was something else on his mind that was even more important to him than his job on the road.

The engine rolled around the curve. Ahead lay the town of Ecclefechan. He glanced over at her house that stood under the shade of a half dozen large white oaks. A flutter in the yard attracted his atten-

tion. He looked again. Yes, it was Itchy-Witchy. Dinner time. She probably was seeking her father to call him for his meal. She disappeared around a corner of the house, and he saw her again coming down the path toward the railroad.

Zeb looked ahead, his mind again on his job, then back to where his train, snakelike, bent into a crescent, following. He closed the throttle, his hand moved the brake valve a fraction. Sixteen slowed down and stopped.

Zeb looked up the hillside. There was a bare patch, dark red, newly plowed, where his father had broken the field below the house. A feeling of pride swept over Zeb. Five years ago he had come down from that place, an ignorant boy with nothing but a burning ambition to lure him forward. Now he was an engineer, pulling a first-class passenger train. Those years had been well spent. Hard working years, they were, but even the work had improved him. Zeb White was a tall, well knit man, broad and square across the shoulders. Even through his jumper, those swelling muscles could be seen. His eyes were far-seeing and bright; his jaw was square. There was character written in that firm mouth; there was a touch of softness in its whimsical corners, a flashing glint of tenderness in those sharp black eyes. The railroad had made a man of him, a man of whom any woman might be proud.

He glanced back to the mail car. They were slinging out the sacks of mail. Hope she'd get that letter; hope she'd meet him here on the return run. The bustle and stir behind him along the train settled down. The baggage trucks were being hauled clear. Belated good-byes from friends to departing ones floated up to him above the steady thump-thump of the engine pumps and the low rumble of the burning coal in the fire box below him.

"All aboard!" the conductor's call rang out followed by the signal whistle, and as Zeb opened up, Sixteen moved away.

He made the run to the end of the division, ate at the terminal hotel, anxious, impatient to return. The minutes dragged by. He glanced at his watch a dozen times in the two hours that Sixteen lay over to return as Seventeen. At last the minute arrived.

Zeb was seated on his seat box, his hand on the throttle, his eyes looking back for the high sign since he desired, most of anything, to make a good run back to Ecclefechan and, if possible, make up a few minutes. For deep down inside of him, a warm glow presaged that those few minutes would mean a lot to him and to—some one else.

He brought his train to a quick, smooth stop, as quick a stop as was possible, without chattering the brakes or sliding the car wheels, started and accelerated at each station with a sure increasing throttle, letting the steam follow the pistons, just heavy enough to turn the drivers to their limit of traction and yet feeling that place where another notch on the throttle would spin the wheels. Zeb knew his business well, and at every look at his watch, his satisfaction increased. Twenty seconds, a full minute, a minute and a half he gained, and as Seventeen pulled into Ecclefechan, he was a full four minutes ahead of schedule. The train stopped, the end of the tender beneath the water spout.

Zeb spoke to the fireman: "Fill her up," and climbed down.

The station lay behind and ten feet before him, standing beside a baggage truck, stood Itchy-Witchy. In half a dozen hurried steps Zeb approached, feeling in his pockets for a bit of waste to wipe off his hands. Then he remembered—there wasn't a thread of waste aboard the engine. A clean white linen handkerchief soon was a greasy wad of cloth as he rubbed it over his hands.

She said: "Why, hello, Engineer Zeb White! Aren't you the grand one, though?" Pointing conquettishly to a smear of black oil on his cheek, she scolded: "When you're greasy, don't you come near me!"

Zeb laughed. "Bud," he began, "Bud, did you all get my letter?"

She colored, looked down at the cinder walk, swinging a shapely foot in an aimless little half circle, tipping the cinders. She nodded her head in assent.

"And will you—will you, Bud?"

She nodded again, voicing a low "Yes."

She looked up at him, all the instincts of woman love written in her violet-blue eyes. Zeb felt as though he were transported to another world, far from the shining rails and rolling cars that he had known for so long. Neither ever knew how it happened. Her arms were around his neck; her voice, soft and low was in his ears, and in little sobbing gasps she was half crying, half laughing: "Oh, Zeb, I love you, I love you!"

The fireman from the back end of the tank almost fell off the edge of the tender in astonishment at the sight.

The conductor from back along the train shouted, "All aboard!" three times with no response. Finally he started ahead to see why Seventeen held the rails. Three cars back, he stopped and grinned behind his hand. He motioned to the fireman, still standing on top of the tender, by reaching his hand high above his head and bringing it down rapidly twice.

The fireman slid over the coal. "Boot-boot!" the whistle tooted, and in another half minute Zeb was aboard, a sheepish look on his face, and Seventeen was again in motion.

Itchy-Witchy heard the lifting crossing blow as the rear car swung around the curve, and she knew that Zeb was happy. She reached up a hand to her soft, pink cheek, looked at the streaked fingers, black with engine oil, the mark of the railroad.

Then, turning and walking across the tracks, she spoke to herself: "Zeb White, next time—I want your face to be clean."

In another minute she added: "I don't care whether it's clean or not, just as long as you—" her sentence remained unfinished.

CHAPTER XVII.

WEDDING BELLS.

WHEN Zeb got in from his run that evening, as he walked across the yard after washing up, he again repeated in his mind their conversation. Although his talk with the woman he loved had been brief and hurried, still many things can be said in a few minutes.

A voice hailed him as he rounded the end of a string of cars. He turned to see the chief caller beckoning for him to wait.

"White, Petey Dink's marked up for Sixteen in the morning. Guess he's got his 'craps' all in now. Do you want to take out a ditcher on the main line? Roadmaster says it's a week's job, but you know it probably will be two or three if they claim a week."

Zeb considered. "Tell you what I'll do, Jake. If you promise to relieve me in a week, I'll take it out."

"All right, Zeb. Five thirty in the morning," and the caller started to walk away.

Zeb called out after him: "Remember, just one week now! I'm laying off then for ten days."

The other stopped amazed. Zeb had never laid off for more than a day before unless he was hurt.

"Ten days! Ten days! What for?"

Zeb smiled and walked away without answering his question.

But a few minutes later in the superintendent's office, when the "old man" asked the same question, Zeb answered: "Well, Colonel, I'm going to get married, so just have some passes made out for me and the little lady, will you? I've never seen Niagara Falls. Neither has she. I had thought of going out home and just taking it easy, but there's no excitement up there. So we'll take a trip."

The superintendent arose and clasped Zeb's hand.

"Congratulations, White, and my best wishes. All I got to say is, she's got a damn fine man. Am I invited to the wedding?"

Zeb shook his head. "Colonel, I suppose I'm sorter of funny, but there's not going to be any big wedding. She's not much for formal doings, a few of her relatives and that's all. I think it's better than making a big stew over it."

The superintendent laughed. "Well, perhaps you're right at that. I'll telegraph for the passes now. They will be here inside a week."

Zeb thanked him and went to his room to sit for an hour studying a picture of Itchy-Witchy that stood on his dresser. He

remembered Jim. He'd have to let Jim know. He walked down to his restaurant and as he ate supper, Jim sat opposite him talking.

"Zeb, old head," he said when he heard the news. "She's a fine and dandy girl, but at—"

Zeb held up his hand. "Now, cut out the salve, Jim. I know what you're going to say, but if I was twice as good a man, I wouldn't be half good enough for her." He changed the subject. "How's things going, Jim?"

"Oh, fine. I've made more money this month than I've ever made before when I was firing." There was a touch of regret in Jim's voice.

"What's eating you?" Zeb questioned. "You've got a good place here. You're making money. What you grouching about?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Zeb. Your talk of marrying has set me thinking. Here I am, no one much to care about me—"

"Except me," Zeb broke in.

"Yeh, I'll take that back," Jim replied. "You've stuck. You've been my friend, as good a friend as man ever had. Yet, Zeb, there's something lacking, and that's a woman."

"Sidewheeler?" Zeb questioned dubiously

"Oh, Sidewheeler's all right, but I'd never marry her and, Zeb, she wants to marry. Now Jake, the caller, is crazy about her. He'd marry her in a minute, and she'd play square with him, too. I feel pretty small at times because I know if I'd just quit jollying her along, she'd be Mrs. Jake in a month."

Zeb looked at Jim steadily for a long time before speaking. "Jim, don't let any quixotic notions of sticking to Sidewheeler be a bar to either her or your happiness. If Jake wants her, let her go. There's other women, better women, who'd be proud of you. For instance." Neither spoke for a brief space. Zeb puckered up his lips and whistled a bar of "Annie Laurie."

Jim shot a quick glance at him, an expression of surprise on his face. "Why, Zeb, that woman's a queen. She's too damn fine for such a drinking, fighting mess as I am."

"Oh, I don't know," was Zeb's answer. "You don't have to drink nor fight, Jim, unless you want to."

"You're right, old scout, I don't have to. I ought to cut out that rough stuff, but I've been at it a long time till it's got to be a habit."

It was on the point of Zeb's tongue to say: "Why don't you cut it out? Make something of yourself, Jim. There's a future for you," when he stopped himself. He had never tried to reform Jim. He felt it was beyond him, and a second later he was glad he had not started a temperance lecture. The door opened and an engineer came in, glanced at Zeb, winked his eye at Jim and nodded his head in an almost imperceptible little twist toward the rear room.

"Excuse me," and Jim jumped up to follow the other back towards the kitchen.

When he returned in a couple of minutes his breath was heavy with the scent of corn whisky. Zeb stayed but a short time and went out. There was doubt and heavy uncertainty in his heart about Jim. The temptation for drinking was always before him, and Jim Brown, good fellow that he was, could not refuse that temptation.

As he closed the door behind him he glanced back to see Jim in the center of a knot of men, laughing and talking, little knowing the worry that Zeb was having over him. He walked a few steps, stopped, his forehead wrinkled in studious furrows. Then he quickened his pace.

He had made up his mind to see Sidewheeler, to try and induce her to stay away from Jim. It may have been the reaction of his own very recent experience, it may have been the desire for his friend to know the warm glow of pleasure that thrilled him when he thought of the woman he loved, but whatever the motive, he wanted Jim to have a woman to care for him. Not Sidewheeler, though. Jim must have a better woman and must part from Sidewheeler for good. He'd work it somehow. He'd buy her off. He'd offer her so much money she'd leave and never return.

Zeb little realized that when a woman

loves a man there is not enough money minted to buy her off. But buoyed up by the hope that he was on the way to helping Jim, he walked blithely towards the depôt. He glanced into the fruit store, then across the street to the druggist's. Both places were empty. He wandered out through the depôt on to the waiting platform. In a dark corner, leaning against the grating that separated the depôt from the passenger tracks and unmbrella shed, he saw her.

"Good evening," he began.

She cast a glance across the tracks as though looking for some one before answering.

"Hello yourself!" Then, noticing the concern in his face, she said flippantly, "Well, let's have it. Get it off your chest before it sours on your stomach. I'm listening."

Zeb scarcely knew how to start, but blurted out, "Jim, it's about Jim."

"Say, what you trying to hand me? I'm through with Jim. He's dead and planted deep as far as I'm concerned. You needn't try to square him. I know you and he are thick and he's probably trying to find out why I ain't been around for a week."

Zeb stood ill at ease, first on one foot then on the other. This unexpected turn of events had completely nonplused him. He opened his mouth to speak. She waved her hand at him and he noticed the sparkle of a diamond on the third finger of her left hand.

"Depart John Alden, from. Hasten back to Miles Standish and tell him his goose is burnt black, his pies mashed." And she dismissed him with the words, "Please, Mr. White, don't bother me with Jim Brown any more. He's run through the derail, turned over and wrecked his train. He's off the board and right of way. I've got a regular guy now and I will stick to him. Good-by."

Zeb left hurriedly without looking back. If he had, he would have seen Sidewheeler's defiant look melt, her flippant manner wilt, and down her cheeks a slow trickle of tears course in steady drops. He might have heard the low words, "Oh, Jim, you're the only guy I ever loved and now you're gone forever!"

But Zeb was never to know the heart wrench that she had given herself, for a minute later she had wiped away the tears, powdered her face anew, and when Jake came hurrying up she met him with a smile and a laugh. Life on the fringe of the railroad had taught her that a smiling face and a breezy manner were better, far better, than tears and sighs even if they covered a sore and broken heart.

He went to his room with a feeling of relief, and, sitting on the bed, he reviewed events that had passed and gone. The warm moist spring evening had a softness, a feeling almost benevolent about it. Through the open window the sounds of engines popping off over at the round house welled in, muffled and yet distinct. A low rumble told of an engine taking on coal. From up the yard could be heard the regular beat of a switch engine.

These things came to Zeb's ears, an undertone of familiar noises that he had become so accustomed to that they were scarcely perceptible at any time and now they were but as things well known, things heard from a great distance. For there was a flood of memories singing through him that carried him back to the days when the noises of the railroad fell harsh and strange on his ears. His injury when he had lain pinned helpless in the rising creek, that seemed ages ago. Itchy-Witchy—the time she had carried his message, that was in the long, long past. Funny about the railroad. It was a man's game. He knew a hundred men, knew them well and in the same time, what a few women he had met. The nurse, Miss Annie, it was so strange that he could not think of her without connecting Jim's personality to hers.

He remembered a half dozen times in the year after his injury when he had gone out to see Miss Annie. Jim had accompanied him several times. With him her air had been one of friendliness, but Zeb had felt rather than understood the relationship between her and Jim. It was like the sword play between two expert fencers—a rapid feint and parry, a glint of phrases that met, were guarded and met again. Jim was trying to break through her guard—with small success.

Once he had admitted to Zeb as they rode back from a visit: "Say, kid, Miss Annie is one of the few women I can't outthink. She's sharp as a ticket collector. Lord, you can't put a thing over on her. I'll bet when she falls in love with some guy she'll be worth more to him than sand on a wet rail. Phew! She's some jane, some jane."

And to Zeb's query, "Jim, why don't you—" Jim had interrupted with a laugh: "Not a chance there for me. That girl's not tying up with any likker head. Some successful guy with a pile of jack is going to cop her. And more power to him and to her, too," he added.

Now Zeb looked again at Itchy-Witchy's face smiling at him from out its silver frame and voicing the thought he could not keep still, "Gee, but I'm a lucky guy," he turned in for the night and slept soundly till the call boy awoke him in the morning with the order, "Six o'clock on the main line ditcher. You got the 728 fer a jack. She's on the cinder pit now."

For the next week Itchy-Witchy, Jim, his mother, and all the affairs of his every day life became secondary. His mind centered on his job. To keep up the minor repairs on the engine, pump packing, tightening up rod wedges, setting up shoes, clearing tank strainers, little jobs that took up all his spare time. For Zeb was very careful about his engine, and the slightest thing wrong gave him much concern till he had repaired it.

There was a lot to do on the seemingly loafing job on the ditcher; there always is a lot for a conscientious man to do on the railroad. There were the train orders to study so as to get as much time in on the job as possible without delaying traffic while the ditching crew cleared mud and debris from beside the right of way. And in making the run ahead to a siding to let a passenger or freight through, in backing up to the job again after a train had passed, Zeb's mind never left his job for a minute.

He had to be careful, for on the flat cars behind him a hundred careless track laborers must be looked out for. His mind occasionally filled with thoughts of Itchy-Witchy, fleeting, momentary flashes of memory, driven away in a brief minute by the ever present work in hand. Zeb's job came first. He little knew it, but the habit of railroading was fast gripping him.

Only at night, when he had done for the long day, sitting alone in the boarding house beside the railroad, did he relax. Then the warm glow of affection stole over him and Itchy-Witchy's face was before him, often followed by his mother, the nurse, and Sidewheeler, four women each differing from the other. Yet through all their differences ran one deep and unvarying quality, a virtue that transcended all their other virtues, the desire to love and be loved. And several nights, tired and sleepy, Zeb turned in, a dim vague inkling of the driving force that impels men and women to do the grand things in life opening before him. For out of his love for Itchy-Witchy came the knowledge and realization of other loves.

The week passed. Jake, true to his promise, sent another engineer to relieve him, and Zeb rode the first passenger back. As usual, he went to Jim's restaurant. The place was crowded. It seemed to be always busy since Jim had taken it over. Zeb was pleased at the popularity of the place, yet as he looked at those fellows at the table ahead with the bottle brazenly in the center, when he listened to their boisterous language freely peppered with lurid oaths, he shook his head. The place was run on a free and easy basis. It reflected Jim's characteristics perfectly. Perhaps he was too straight laced; perhaps Jim knew better how to get along with the men of the road.

Jim came out of the kitchen, saw Zeb and crossed over to his table. Zeb motioned him to bend over and whispered a few words in his ears.

Jim straightened up, clapped Zeb a thump on the back that drove the air from his lungs. "Sure, I'll be the best man! Going out this morning? You bet I'll go with you!"

At Jim's words, easily heard over the din, the buzz of conversation stopped. There was a general turning of heads, a craning of necks.

Jim, in spite of Zeb's low remonstrance, "No, no, Jim; keep it quiet," shouted,

"Boys, my friend here, Zeb's, getting spliced to-day! Whoopee! It's a grand event! Let's have a drink on it!"

Some one passed a bottle. Jim turned it up and swallowed deeply. There was a bedlam of voices, all wishing luck to Zeb, who, embarrassed, hardly knew which way to turn. He wished fervently that Jim had kept quiet. Then he reflected, it was nothing to be ashamed of, and sooner or later every one would hear of his marriage. It is hard for a railroader to have a secret, and well Zeb knew this.

He got away from the noisy crowd as soon as he could, and with the words "See you on Sixteen" to Jim, he hurried out.

A few minutes before Sixteen left Jim met him and the two sat in the smoking car. As the train took the crossover on to the West End Division they noted unsual signs of activity. Pile after pile of newly hewn cross ties were stacked in neat heaps along the right of way. Heavy new rails lay end to end on both sides of the road bed. A half mile out a steam shovel fluttered its exhaust while the big toothed bucket bit chunks out of the red clay bank of a narrow cut.

Jim spoke: "Widening the right of way. There's something doing on the West End. Wonder what?"

They flashed by a work train that waited on a passing track for them to go by.

The conductor came through and saw the two.

"Hello, White! Hello, Jim! What you guys riding the cushions for all dolled up?" Looking at Zeb he winked roguishly and added, "Say, boy, I've heard a few rumors. Are they true. Are you going to marry that pretty little blue-eyed girl out at Ecclefechan?"

Zeb nodded.

"Well, luck to you! I've been married for ten years and here's something straight—when a man gets a good woman life means something to him. Why, I hardly can wait to get home at the end of the run now, and I remember when I was your age I never went home till every other place was closed for the night."

He laughed. "Things change in ten years." Pointing out through the window to where Sixteen was flashing by a long string of work cars on the siding, he remarked: "There's changes been going on right here. Crushed stone ballast, ninety pound rails, and new bridge steel. Mark my words, this is about through being a wooden axle division. And, say," he continued, "I just read an official bulletin this morning. It's not posted yet. Ecclefechan is about done."

"What?" Zeb queried in surprise.

"Yep, it's so. They're renaming it Junction City. Heard of the new coal road, haven't you?"

They both nodded.

"Well, she ties in at the West End there. It's her terminal. Junction City will be some place too, when they start moving freight through it."

The conductor moved down the car. "See you guys later," he said, and left them to talk over the news.

Jim was enthusiastic. "Boy, there's a big future ahead for you," he began, then he stopped, a look of sadness crossing his face. "I'm frankly envious of you, Zeb. You've got the woman you want. You stand for a good run, but me—I'm in a hole."

"Why, Jim, you're making more money right now than I am."

"Oh, I know, Zeb. But—'It's gone, let it go. God bless it!'" he hummed. "I'll never wheel a drag again."

Zeb looked out of the window. He couldn't find words to fit. Jim was out of it. He wondered how it felt to be a railroader and to be banished from the road. He came to with a start. A familiar curve was sweeping in an arc before him, a stone walled field flanked the railroad, a rock house nestled against the slope of the hill behind.

He looked again. On the door step stood a woman. Itchy-Witchy was waiting. His heart pounded fast as he led the way to the end of the car.

Ten minutes later he had greeted her. She was a vision of loveliness, a white, fluffy bundle of youth and vitality who, much to Zeb's embarrassment, greeted him with a hug and a kiss, heedless of her relatives, who crowded around.

She introduced Zeb and Jim to them, and most of them were strangers to the two railroad men. They went in and sat down in the big front room. Zeb listened to the conversation. It hinged about the changes going on around the railroad. Some of the older ones were opposed to renaming Ecclefechan.

He heard one say: " It's a good old name, that carries the tang of home in it. Junction City! Bah! Sounds like freight cars a smashing together."

Zeb turned to Itchy-Witchy. " Girlie, what do you think of it?"

" Well, Zeb," she answered, with a squeeze on his arm, " if I'm to be a railroad man's wife, Junction City suits me. It sounds carbangy enough, I guess."

He caught her by the hand as the preacher entered the door and led her towards him, whispering, " Here's the fellow that'll take the ' if ' out of that."

A few minutes later they were married. There was a buzz of congratulations. Amid the confusion Itchy-Witchy disappeared and Zeb, watching anxiously, saw her returning to the room soon after dressed for travel. As he made his way towards her, her father stopped him.

" Lad, be good to her. She's all I have."

Zeb reached over and shook the old man's hand. " David, I—I—" words failed him, but the look in his eyes gave the promise.

He joined Itchy-Witchy at the door. There was throwing of rice as they hurried down the path together towards the station. The front end of Seventeen's engine came into sight and the train drew up and came to a stop in front of the station with a squeal of brakes.

As the engine passed, Zeb automatically glanced up to see who was on the run today, but he never saw who was engineer. Itchy-Witchy turned towards him and Zeb momentarily forgot engines and engineers, even the railroad, for the melting softness of those violet eyes drove the power to think away from him.

As they went up the car steps a few old shoes thudded against the side of the coach. They found a seat and she waved good-by till the crowd at the station was hidden around the curve. Then she nestled against Zeb's shoulder, a look of contentment and trust in her face.

Jim came through carrying their suitcases, set them down and, muttering " Going up in the baggage car," he left.

They did not see him again till they stopped at the terminal. He helped them aboard the through train when they transferred, stood around, silent and ill at ease till leaving time, and then with a " Good luck to you, Zeb," he held out his hand.

They shook hands, these two men who had been fast friends for five years, who had been within an arm's reach of death, who each owed the other a debt of gratitude. A simple and sincere hand clasp, a smile in their faces, a word of well wishing on their lips, yet each had a little secret doubt in his heart.

Zeb wondered how the woman he loved and had just married would react to Jim who, as he dropped Zeb's hand, was thinking, " Lord, the old son of a gun! Wonder if he'll give me the air now?"

Each knew that a new relationship had begun, each wondered how it would end.

" All aboard!" the conductor called.

The porters picked up the stools; the vestibule doors were closing, yet Jim and Zeb stood.

The porter behind Zeb finally spoke, " Cap'n, we're leavin'," and as the car got into motion Zeb turned, climbed aboard.

" Good-by, Jim," and " Good luck, Zeb."

Jim watched the train till it was out of sight, then slowly walked out on to the street and back to the restaurant, a forlorn feeling weighing him down.

CHAPTER XVIII.

JIM BROWN AGAIN.

TEN days later the newly-weds returned from their honeymoon. It was five o'clock in the morning when they got in, and Zeb engaged a room at the hotel across from the depôt. During their trip they had talked over their plans. Zeb was going to try for a run on the West End. There was a layover freight that made Ecclefechan every night and came back in the morning. He had decided to

see if he could pull the engineer off it. If he succeeded he could have his nights at home.

Itchy-Witchy was willing to do anything that Zeb suggested, even live in town, but, as she explained: "Father is getting old, and, Zeb, although I hate to say it, he will not be with us long. I can make his remaining years comfortable for him. He likes you, and there is no reason why you can't stay with us."

This arrangement satisfied Zeb, and after getting her settled and comfortable Zeb left to go down and see Jim. When he arrived at the restaurant he stopped aghast. An excited knot of men were gathered inside. The place was in a wreck. Broken chairs and dishes cluttered the floor. A smashed window had sprayed broken glass across the sidewalk. A puddle of fresh blood led from the door out across the sidewalk to the curb.

Zeb pushed his way in. "Great God, what's happened? Where's Jim? Who's hurt?" he yelled frantically.

From one and another of the men who surrounded him he gleaned the story. A crowd had been in the place all night drinking, and when Jim came down in the morning they were in an ugly mood. The waiter and cook had been driven into the kitchen where, behind the locked door, they cowered in comparative safety from the barage of plates and cups that were hurled at them every time they opened the door to escape. When Jim came, at first he tried to calm them, but they were too far gone to be calmed. Failing in this he bodily threw them out one by one, none too gently. Then as he stooped over, picking up some dishes from the floor, unseen one returned and struck him a blow over the back of his head with a heavy coffee cup. Jim was badly hurt, unconscious. He had just been taken to the hospital in an ambulance.

Zeb dully heard the words—"He's hit hard. Shouldn't wonder if that crack finishes him."

Zeb heard no more. He rushed out into the street, hailed a passing automobile and, to the astonished driver, shouted: "Drive me to the hospital as quick as you can wheel her."

To the words "I don't want to be arrested for speeding," Zeb pulled out a crumpled wad of bills, "Here, burn it up, fellow. If you're caught this will pay your fine."

There was a clash of shifting gears, a quick acceleration that settled into a high pitched whirr, and madly the machine whizzed through the streets, just beginning to be active with early morning traffic. Rounding the curve on two wheels with blaring horn the machine spurted up the gravel driveway in front of the hospital and stopped with both rear wheels skidding.

Zeb rushed up the steps three at a jump, flung the door open, and, to an amazed nurse who met him in the hallway, he blurted: "Jim! Where's Jim?"

She gazed at him, wild eyed, in surprise. "Jim who?"

"Jim Brown! He was just brought in hurt a few minutes ago."

"Oh," she answered, "he's up on the third floor. They just carried him up. But I don't think you can see him."

Zeb never paid the slightest attention to her. Without even a thanks, he turned and mounted the stairs in long springing jumps.

At the head of the hall on the third floor he cast a quick look up and down the corridor. A door opened, a nurse came out with a bowl held in her hands. Zeb ran towards her. As he neared he recognized her. It was Miss Annie.

"Where's he?" he asked in a hoarse voice. "Where's Jim?"

She pointed to the door she had just come out of. Zeb flung it open and stepped into the room and stopped. His breath seemed to be choked off; his blood frozen. Jim lay unmoving on the bed, a white helmet of bandages crisscrossed his head in compact layers. His eyes were closed, his face was white. It had the lean calm look of death about it, thin lipped with blue eyelids and a sharp pinched appearance. He tried to voice Jim's name, but his throat muscles were paralyzed. He was unable to speak.

Finally, after an effort, a harsh dry whisper welled out: "Jim, oh Jim!"

A movement across the bed attracted his attention, and for the first time he noticed

the head nurse, who had been standing there ever since his entrance. He turned an appealing glance to her and found voice.

"Miss, is he bad hurt? Will he—will he?" He couldn't lift his courage up to complete the sentence.

She smiled a little, then in a calm, reassuring voice, she answered: "Don't worry. He's gotten a nasty blow on the head, but there's no immediate danger unless complications set in. In fact, the doctor who has just left does not even believe his skull is fractured."

The relief in Zeb's face at her words made her turn quickly and leave the room. In the hallway, she met Miss Annie hurrying back. There was a suspicion of tears in her eyes, a huskiness in the older woman's voice, as she said to the other: "I've seen many a sight since I came here, but never anything like those two. Why, Damon and Pythias, David and Jonathan were mere acquaintances. Talk about the love a woman has for a man, it's mere affection compared to the love of two men."

Miss Annie was surprised at the outburst. Birth and death, agony and suffering, all the human woes and pains that are a part of the every day work in a hospital left the head nurse, quiet and sympathetic, deft and assured. But this concern one man had for another was a new experience, and she was touched deeply by it.

Miss Annie entered the room. Zeb arose from the chair where he had sat gazing into Jim's face, as though by the very intensity of his stare he might absorb Jim's troubles.

"Miss Annie! Oh, I'm so glad to know you are still here and will look out for Jim."

"Why, Mr. White, I look out for any one here who needs attention. That's my work."

"I know that," said Zeb quickly. "But I want you to be extra solicitous now. If there is anything he needs, anything he wants, get it for him. I've got the money and I'd spend the last cent on Jim Brown, because—well, I can't just explain—because Jim's my friend."

"I know, I know," she answered. "Well, don't worry. He'll receive the best attention possible. You remember," she added, "I, too, know Jim Brown, and I, too, like him."

Zeb grabbed her hand. "God bless you, little lady. I'm trusting you to do the best you can."

She replied gently: "All right. Now you run along and let him be quiet."

"When can I see him?"

"Not for a day or two."

"But I must see him. I can't wait a day or two. He might want me."

"He'll sleep a couple of hours now till the hypodermic we gave him wears off. Perhaps if you happen to be here then, you might see him. You are not supposed to, but—"

Placing her finger to her lips, she turned toward the door, beckoning Zeb to follow. Once out in the hall, Zeb pulled out his watch. Whew! Just half an hour till Sixteen left and he and his bride were due to go out on it. He had forgotten all about Itchy-Witchy absorbed as he was in Jim's state. Now it came back to him in a rush. She was waiting at the hotel, waiting for him to return, anxious, worried probably, at his long absence.

He caught the street car on the corner and nervously bit his lips at each stop it made on its seeming endless trip on the few miles from the hospital to the depot. Once up in the room, he found her crying.

"Oh, Zeb, where have you been? I'm worried sick. I imagined all sorts of things happening to you."

With his arms around her, he comforted her and told her of Jim's misfortune.

When he had finished, she replied: "Zeb, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll go home on Sixteen. You stay here over the day till you know how Jim's going to come along. See the superintendent about the run you spoke of and get everything straightened out. I'll be waiting for you."

To Zeb's reluctant consent, she added: "No, it's all right." She smiled bravely. "If I'm going to be a railroad man's wife, I might as well get used to waiting, for I foresee I will have a lot of it to do."

Zeb carried their suit cases down and with a sinking feeling in his heart, saw Sixteen pull out. He hated to see her go,

yet he was torn between the two conflicting emotions that milled and twisted through him.

Inside a half hour after Sixteen left, he was back at the hospital, sitting beside Jim's bed, watching him as he struggled back to consciousness. A flutter of his eyelids, a movement of his hands, a turning of his bandaged head nervously from side to side and Jim moved like a man coming back to life. Then with a convulsive heave, he sat up and gazed around wildly.

Zeb spoke: "Jim, how do you feel, old man?"

Jim turned a blank face on him and grasping the head of the bed in his hands, pulled himself upright. There was delirium in his eyes, madness in his voice when he shouted: "Get out, all of you, get out! No more boozing in here! Yes, I drink, but I'm through, and you guys can't touch it in my place!"

His shout rang through the hospital: "I'm through, I'm through!"

There came the patter of hurrying feet in the hallway. Miss Annie entered the room.

"There, there, Jim, take it easy. Don't shout so. You disturb every one."

"But I tell you I'm through. I've taken my last drink!" Jim yelled. "Great God, woman! Can't you hear me? I'm off the booze."

Both Zeb and the nurse tried to quiet him, but their efforts were useless. It was not till Jim had been given an hypodermic that he was stilled, and finally relaxed into a fitful state of coma.

Zeb sat, torn by sympathy, watching Jim for an hour till the effects of the drug slowly wore off. When Jim reawakened, he was sane, and noticing Zeb, his eyes lighted up.

"Hello, Zeb, old timer," he greeted. He felt up to his bandaged head and grinned wanly. "That was the only fight I've tried to stop, and see what happened to me."

He wet his lips. "God, my tongue feels like some one has been using it for a foot mat. Whew, but I'm dry." He reached up and pushed the bell button. In silence, Zeb watched him.

In a few minutes Miss Annie entered. Jim glanced up at her and smiled in recognition. "Well, well, if it ain't my old friend Annie Laurie." He laughed: "Annie, so you're still here?"

"Yes, still here, Mr. Brown."

"Been here a long time, haven't you?"

"Yes," she replied proudly. "Seven years now."

"Well," considered Jim. Then with a grin: "I've only been here a short while. You're better acquainted than I am. Skip out and see if you can rustle up a regular drink for me."

"Why, Mr. Brown," she exclaimed shocked, "I'm ashamed of you! Not over an hour ago you swore you were through drinking for good and now you are asking for one."

Jim looked around at Zeb for confirmation of her words. Zeb nodded his head.

"You sure said that thing, Jim."

"I must have been crazy when I said that," he said ruefully. "But I'm not crazy now, and it goes. I guess I've about got old enough to graduate from the rum hound class."

He reached out his hands. Zeb grasped one.

"You, too, Miss Annie," and Jim, holding to their hands, repeated his promise. "I'm of it for life. 'Good-by, booze, forever more.' My boozing days are done and o'er," he sang.

Outside of the day when Itchy-Witchy had promised to marry him, Zeb had never heard words that he thrilled at as he did at those. The one bad habit that was getting his friend was a thing of the past, for Jim's word was good.

He glanced at the nurse and the look in her face puzzled him for a second. Then he recognized it. He had seen that expression before in other women's faces. Itchy-Witchy had it when she looked at him. He had noticed it in his mother's. At times he had seen it in Sidewheeler's face when he had mentioned Jim's name to her. Now he knew that Miss Annie had the same feeling as the other women. She was much more interested in Jim than even Jim realized.

She colored, walked out of the room and

Jim lay back on his pillow, his eyes closed and in a short time, he fell into a peaceful slumber.

Zeb tiptoed from the room and went down the corridor out into the street, a song of joy singing in his heart. Jim was too discerning, he knew, to long remain in ignorance of what he himself strongly suspected.

He went up to the office to find out about a run that would give him his nights at home and he learned other things that were good to hear. Dropping in to the trainmaster's office, Charley Keene, after congratulating him on his marriage, informed him that the old man wanted to see him.

Wondering what was up, Zeb entered the superintendent's office. The old man shook hands with him.

"Well, White, now that you're an old married man, I expect you have your heart set on a regular run that will bring you home every night."

"Colonel, you're a good guesser. How did you know that was what I wanted?"

The colonel smiled his knowing smile. "I've been here for thirty years and have seen a hundred or more men get married. And without exception, they fan up here first thing for a run that will give 'em time at home. It's natural and I like to see it. A man that has a contented and happy home life, is pretty apt to take care of his train. The best men we have are the fellows who own their own homes and have a woman waiting there for their return. By the way, White, I promised to keep you in mind and give you a boost first chance."

Zeb wondered what was coming. The superintendent leisurely lit his cigar, puffed a few times then continued:

"Well, here it is. Mark up for the West End Division—exclusively."

"Why, colonel, if I do that, I automatically cut myself out of a main line run. There's just a few trains out there, and they are not very desirable. I wanted one for a while, but I have my heart set on hauling the Limited some day and it's a main line run."

"Yes, that's so, but here's a bit of news. The West End in five years will be a bigger division than the main line is now. In fact, I haven't a doubt but that it will be the main line."

He took a few steps across the room, looked out the window and continued: "Mark up for it now, Zeb, and you'll stand first on the list. I've got nothing to do with the West End after the first of next month."

For a second the significance of the words did not sink in, then Zeb understood. The West End had been made a division to itself and he, Zeb White, had a chance to become the "oldest" engineer on that division. To think his ambition would so soon be realized! It almost took his breath away.

His eyes were shining. "Colonel, I'm grateful, very much so. Thanks. That's all I can say." He wanted to say more, but the words would not come.

He turned to leave. What it was, he never could explain, but something tempted him to turn and say to the other, even as his hand touched the door knob. "I'm sure pleased, and I know two other people who will be."

"Two?" the colonel asked, puzzled. "Who's the other besides the wife?"

"Jim Brown. He's in the hospital now."

"Yes, I've heard about Jim. It's a shame, too. What does he want to get drunk for? Jim's a smart fellow, well liked, and I know, from experience with him, his word is as good as gold. But the booze—" The colonel shook his head.

Zeb replied, and there was a ring of pleasure in his voice: "Well, he's given his word; he's off it for good." Then a great resolve came to him. "Colonel, can't you—won't you—put him back if he lays off the drink?"

The colonel studied. "No, White—that is beyond me. Jim's off for good. I'm sorry, but—" He hesitated. Zeb was all attention as the superintendent added: "There's a chance for him, though."

"A chance for him?" Zeb asked eagerly. "What is it? I'd give anything to see him set right."

"Come and sit down and I'll tell you about it."

Seated across the flat topped table, Zeb

listened as the superintendent outlined Jim's chance. He had been watching Jim's restaurant and had seen how popular it had become. Jim knew how to make a restaurant pay. There was but the drinking against the place. Down below, in one corner of the depot, the station restaurant, a place of clean white linen, of soft lights and gleaming silver, would soon be without a manager. The Frenchman who had the lease on it was going back home to the old country.

" Frenchie was a good cook, and he made enough money in the five years his lease had run to retire," was the superintendent's comment. " It's a gold mine for the right man; but," he cautioned, " the place has got to keep up its reputation. Will you vouch for Jim?"

" Colonel, I'll back him up to the limit. I'll go on Jim's bond for any amount I am able to rake up."

" Well, I would, too," the superintendent acknowledged. " When he gets out, tell him I want to see him up here."

Zeb grabbed the superintendent's hand. " Colonel, by God, you're—well—colonel, I'll never forget your consideration."

" Oh, that's all right, White. I'm only too glad to be able to do something for you."

The telephone rang, and their interview ended.

As Zeb went out the door he heard the superintendent say: " And by the way, Jake, mark White off the main line. He's signed up for the West End Division. No, the West End alone."

Zeb hurried down the stairs and back uptown. He hardly could wait till he returned to Jim and told him the good news. He burst into the room. The nurse was sitting beside the bed. Zeb fancied he saw her jerk her hand out of Jim's as he came in, but the movement was so quick he was not sure. Once inside, however, he became certain of one thing: Jim was not wasting any time. Miss Annie's confusion gave her thoughts away, and Zeb forgot momentarily the news he had hurried so to tell.

He looked from one to the other slowly. Miss Annie colored under his glance. Not Jim, however.

Turning to her, he said with a grin: " Ain't it awful? You just can't keep a thing from him. Don't ask any questions, Zeb, old horse, but this little lady here is a going to be Mrs. Brown as soon as my dome shingles over. So, isn't it, Annie?"

She blushed and answered saucily: " Say, Jim Brown, you're a fast worker. Give me time to think."

" Time! You got the rest of your life to think it over after the preacher says ' for better, for worse, come high, low, jack or the game.' "

CHAPTER XIX.

ENTER A NEW RAILROADER.

THE station dining room under Jim Brown's management —or rather his wife's—is far famed for its wholesome food and its quiet air of serenity. Every through train has at least a half hour layover for meals, and so far has the excellence of its cuisine spread that there seldom is a vacant seat at any of the tables.

But no matter how crowded the place may be, there is always room for one man. Zeb White in overalls often is seated when some retired business man, fuming at the delay, must wait. For every evening a half hour before the Eastern Mail pulls out Zeb comes in to dinner. And the diners marvel at the consideration shown this man in overalls. They little dream of the bond of friendship between the manager and the engineer.

One evening, Zeb, who had finished eating, spoke a few words to the pleasant faced, efficient looking woman who sat near the door, and with a glance at his watch, remarked:

" Well, Miss Annie, I'll be moving along. It's just ten minutes till leaving time."

" Zeb, how's the wife?" was her reply.

His face clouded, a worried wrinkle appeared on his forehead.

" I hope she's O. K., but you know, Miss Annie, you never can tell. I haven't heard to-day since I went through this morning."

" Zeb, I'm going out to see her to-morrow and may stay till—till it happens. I'd rather enjoy a spell of nursing again."

Zeb shook her hand. "Fine. I wish you would. It would be a relief to know you were there. I'd feel a lot better. I'd lay off the run, only things are so brisk now that the men are hardly getting their eight hours rest between calls; but I've put in my bid for a layoff, and as soon as an extra man shows I'm going to stay around home for awhile."

She laughed. "Oh, Zeb, quit your kidding me! That's another verse of the same song you've been singing for the last three years. It 'd hurt you worse than a dose of rat poison to see some one else take your run out for two nights, one right after another. I really believe you think as much of that old engine as you do your wife!"

He shook his head and grinned rather sheepishly: "Oh, you know it's not that bad, but," he added proudly, "I'm willing to bet a thousand dollars I got the best jack on the railroad."

"Sure, Zeb, I know that. I was only joking. But"—her voice had a ring that hinted at more than her words stated—"seriously, you should spend more time around home just now. That girl needs you."

"Yes, you're right," he assented, and, turning, waved his hand to a tall, well set up man in evening clothes who slowly paced between the tables.

"So long, Jim. Good night, Miss Annie." And he went out.

Scarcely had he left when a call boy entered with a railroad telegram in his hand. Going up to Jim Brown, he said:

"Here's a message just come through for White. It's in care of you."

"He's just gone out to his engine," said Jim as he idly glanced at the green sheet of paper.

One look, his expression changed from curiosity to concern, and he hurried to the front.

"Get ready, Annie," he frantically ordered. "Let's go out there. Look at this. While you're getting your things on, I'll telephone and find out what I can."

She glanced at the telegram and quickly called the head waiter over and ordered: "George, look out for things. Jim and I will be gone for awhile. Perhaps all night."

She did not wait to hear his answer, but without wasting a moment she got on her hat and coat and followed Jim swiftly toward the train.

The last passengers were hurrying aboard; the baggage and mail trucks that were drawn alongside were almost unloaded. The engine was beginning to pop. It was like a spirited horse, pawing and stamping, impatient to begin the run.

Jim, still in his evening clothes, hatless and out of breath, ran up to the engine even as Zeb climbed into the cab. In a quick leap Jim was aboard. Without a word he handed Zeb the telegram.

Zeb read it, turned a startled face to the other, and his voice trembled when he muttered: "Great God, Jim! What will I do? Not a chance to lay off. Must make the run, and she is—she is—"

"Don't worry, old man. It may be all right. Probably not as bad as it seems. I telephoned, and her condition remains about the same. Annie is going out; she's back in the train now. She'll do everything possible."

The air whistle in the cab whistled a keen little fluttering shrill, the signal for the Eastern Mail to start. Jim made a move to get off the engine, but Zeb clutched his arm fiercely.

"Jim—oh, Jim, don't go! Come with me! Ride out with me to-night!"

"But the rules, Zeb—"

"To hell with the rules! Come on out!" There was a piteous appeal in Zeb's voice.

"All right. Let her roll," was Jim's eager comment. "I'll fire."

He grabbed the scoop from the astonished fireman's hands with the words:

"Boy, watch me and learn how to stoke a jack."

There was a deep coughing rumble as the drivers slipped on the rail, a grating as they chattered on the sand, a gong-gong of the bell, and the Eastern Mail swiftly accelerated. Down the yard she rolled, gathering speed every minute. The block signals at the crossover trembled, changed from red to green, blinked again and showed the white light for a clear track. With a jolting side thrust, the engine took the switch. The train followed, and deep-throated, regular, the exhaust beat on the

evening air as the Eastern Mail, with spinning drivers, flew over the track.

Jim's white collar was soon wilted, his shirt front, the sparkle of a diamond showing through the coal smears, was scorched and grimy. The hand on the steam gauge climbed up to the 175 mark, passed it and three pounds over, the pops opened. The beat of the exhaust was drowned out in the roar of the escaping steam.

Jim handed the fireman the shovel.

" Keep her there." He pointed to the gauge and stood up behind Zeb.

For a minute he remained tense, his eyes ablaze, his breath coming fast. Then he reached across Zeb's shoulder, grasped his hand that held the throttle, and pulled it back another half inch. Zeb looked around, nodded his head, moved off the box, and stood beside Jim, who slid into his place.

On the deck below them the fireman hunched over his scoop, bit deep into the coal on the tender. The fire door banged open, and he shot scoop after scoop of coal into that scarlet bed, that with a pop and a sizzle changed the gleaming black lumps into brown bursts of smoke and glowing embers almost as soon as they struck. The train behind slung around the curves, galloped up the grades, and pounded down the hills faster than ever cars had rolled on the division before. For Zeb had an impelling motive far stronger, far more pressing than the time-table, to run by to-night.

The pops closed, the fireman with white face showing through the grime, climbed wearily on to his seat box. His shoulders sagged. Never had he fought a fire so steadily nor so hard as now. He was beaten.

Zeb stepped down on to the shovel sheet, his lips formed the words " Highball her," and he motioned ahead to Jim and grasped the shovel. With an easy swinging pitch and a heave that told of long practice, he swung the shovel back and forth between the coal gates and the fire door. Heavy, heaping scoops of coal he handled seemingly without effort. The shovel became a thing alive in his hands to swing in a short arc, bury itself in the coal pile, and shoot squarely through the door with a lift and a twist that sprayed the coal over the fire like wind-blown sand.

The steam that had begun to drop climbed again. The fireman turned amazed eyes on the gauge. He did not believe it possible to keep her hot with the bar halfway down the quadrant and the throttle open to the last notch. But Zeb, like Jim, was a veteran. He had gone through the same hard school, and all the tricks of firing that he had learned were displayed to-night. Keeping the water in the boiler till it scarcely bobbed in the bottom of the glass, alternately Jim and Zeb stoked, getting every thermal unit from each lump of coal, every ounce of force from each foot pound of steam.

When the dispatchers laid out the running schedule for the Mail, they thought that it was as fast as their motive power could haul that train. But as Zeb passed station after station he shot a glance at his watch at each one. The schedule was fast, but the Mail was faster this evening. Minute piled on minute, till a quarter of an hour separated the train from its time on the time-table. Junction City was the first stop. They were halfway there now.

Back in the second coach behind the mail and express cars a woman sat anxiously gazing out the window. As the landscape grew dim before her in the fading dusk, by the way an occasional light bobbed past in the blurr, she knew she was riding fast—far faster than she had ever ridden before. She had watched for Jim at the terminal and when he had not appeared again she knew that he was up in the engine with Zeb. He probably was handling the train part of the time, and she was glad of it. For his one regret was that he would never again drive an engine.

Hitherto she could not understand what it was about railroading that was so appealing, but now the continued fast pace of the train was beginning to thrill her. Now she began to feel dimly a little of what lay behind Jim's often voiced desire to be on the road again.

Just this morning he had said wistfully: " God, I'd give a thousand dollars just to feel a throttle hot in my hand, to

put my feet on a boiler head, and horse a Johnson bar up the quadrant to the center, to hear the exhaust *cut-a-ta-chu, cut-a-ta-chu,* roar out on a jack, rolling sixty miles an hour!"

And she had answered: "You're well off now, making money, more money than any engineer. Forget it."

Well, he was having his wish now, but it worried her. Those two up ahead together might throw caution to the winds and become reckless. They were driving the train far faster than sixty miles an hour to-night.

The conductor, passing through, saw her. "Why, Mrs. Brown, where you bound?"

"Going out to Junction City," was her reply.

He looked at his watch. "Whew, Zeb's hauling 'em to-night!"

A station flashed by. He caught a glimpse of it. Consternation was in his voice when he said:

"Great balls of fire! We're twenty minutes ahead of schedule, or my watch is stopped."

He glanced at her wrist watch, showing below the sleeve of her coat, and reached up for the whistle cord to signal the engineer a slow signal.

She grabbed his arm.

"Don't!" she begged; and to the question in his eyes she said: "Sit down here and I'll tell you why."

Wondering, he seated himself beside her and as she talked he nervously watched the scenery sliding past.

When she had finished he remarked with uncertainty: "Well, if he doesn't get any faster, I'll let it go. But," he added anxiously, "great God, as it is, the rear coaches are liable to whip clear off into the fields on some of these bends!"

"Don't worry," she replied. "I know Zeb. He never will run his train in a way to imperil the lives of passengers."

"I guess you're right," the conductor admitted. "But he's sure wheeling 'em to the limit to-night."

Up ahead in the engine it was drive and fire, turn and turn about, with Jim and Zeb. The regular fireman sat on his seat box and tended the water, for he felt helpless before these two past masters in the art of shoveling coal. And the Mail never slackened pace. Up hill its exhaust took on a louder note; down hill it eased off. The whistle blared out at road crossings; the safety valves seated but once or twice.

Fast as they ran, still it seemed slow to Zeb. He glanced at his watch every five minutes, and the chill dread tugged at his heart at each look.

"What if I'm too late to ever see her alive again? What if she is slipping from life now?"

Well, he was doing his best. He knew the Mail would never again make the time it was making to-night. Wish he had spent more of his time with her! Bitterly he regretted that last Brotherhood meeting when he had opposed putting another engineer on the Mail runs. If they had, he could have every other day at home. Now he worked every day. He resolved that if things came out all right he'd sanction that extra man. It would mean less money, but money seemed a worthless thing to him now.

He glanced up at Jim. There was a look about him he had not seen for many a year now. Jim was transfigured; the light of battle showed in his face; the thrill of speed had gripped him once more. With set jaws and hard eyes on the track ahead, Jim, the staid and respectable, had for a brief time gone back to Jim, the roughneck.

Lurching from side to side, "grass picking," the big locomotive plunged forward, a massive mechanism heeding the urge of the men who drove her for speed—more speed. Dusk had fallen, and spread its soft mantle over the country side through which the train roared. A quiet time when the activities of the day slow down, when cattle slowly follow each other homeward, when the last rosy tints of the sunset spread a soft peaceful glow over a hushed land.

The Mail tearing through the increasing darkness, showering hot sparks along the right of way, her lighted coaches illuminating a parallel path along the track, with screeching whistle and roaring pops, seemed unreal, a nightmare come to startle a peaceful land.

Night fell and still the Eastern Mail roared along. The lights of Junction City flashed into view around the curve. Zeb shut off and for the first time since leaving the terminal, the beat of the exhaust was stilled. His left hand jammed the throttle shut, his right shot the air into a hard service stop. With fire streaking from squealing brake shoes, the train slowed down to a chattering halt.

Before the engine had stopped, Zeb flung himself off. Stiff legged, leaning far backward, holding the grab irons with both hands, his right leg stretched out, his left angled on to the engine step, he swung slowly forward. One hand left the grab iron and with a heave and a leap, he swung back and let go.

His feet pattered on the crossing boards, and still running, he turned and headed for the stone house that lay across the wide field. But a few feet behind, Jim followed. The doctor met him at the door.

Breathless, Zeb gasped out: "How is she, doctor? How is she?"

"Fine, doing nicely. The danger is all over and she's resting easily," were the comforting words. "Just dozed off, probably will awaken in a few minutes."

"Can I see her?" was Zeb's next question, relief and gladness lighting up his face.

"Not right away. In a short while."

Annie came up while the three men stood impatient outside the door. Hurrying past them, she entered. Zeb and Jim were ill at ease, anxious, waiting for a long five minutes that seemed an eternity until she came out with the joyous news.

"Come in and see her, Zeb. She's asking for you."

He went in and closed the door. Ten minutes passed, five more and yet Zeb stayed in the room. Over on the engine, the fireman looked at his watch. Two minutes more, and the Mail was scheduled to leave. Nervously, he glanced toward the lighted house across the fields. One minute more till leaving time and Zeb had not yet shown up.

He blew a short hoot on the whistle. It echoed across to the room where Zeb sat on one side of the bed, holding Itchy-Witchy's hand.

He jumped up and leaning down, kissed her.

"Girly, I have to go. They're calling for me. I can't delay the Mail."

"Zeb, won't you stay!" came her weakly worded request.

"I'd like to. I want to, but Bud, the Mail's waiting. I have to go," sorrowfully. "Good-by. I'll be home to-morrow," and he raced out of the house.

Hurrying down the path, he almost stopped once, half turned back. His heart lay back there, back with the wan, weak woman whom he loved. The field through which he passed was quiet and placid. Life out here without thrills or danger seemed bereft of strife, a very desirable thing to Zeb at that instant.

Then as another toot from the whistle sounded, he jumped and looked at his train. The long string of lighted coaches headed by the big engine, his engine, gave him a feeling of pride. Her headlight was lit, a hard cold beam of glaring white light that bored a hole through the darkness ahead. His steps unconsciously grew faster and he began to run. His heart lay back there but his duty lay up ahead.

When he arrived at his engine as he swung on to her, it was in time to hear the "All aboard!" signal. He opened her up and regretfully looking back, saw the lights of his home disappear. But his job held him in a grip that had been years in the forming.

The firemen spoke: "How is she, Mr. White?"

"Fine, fine," was Zeb's reply. "Couldn't be better. Had a hell of a time, though. And he—he—say! He's got a chest on him like a spike keg, a back like a wrestler, and lungs! You ought to hear him. Sounds like an eight-hundred running away down Red Marble mountain squalling for hand brakes."

"Who?" asked the fireman puzzled.

"Who! Why, my son! He's a husky little tyke. He'll make a crackerjack engineer some day."

Zeb reached up his hand for the whistle cord to blow a road crossing. A grin spread over his face and he broke a third company rule that night—first time when he had

ridden Jim in the cab, secondly when he left his train while on duty, and now by unnecessarily blowing his whistle.

Long continued, rising and falling, vibrating far across the hills, penetrating into distant valleys, the big steamboat whistle on the engine rumbled out.

He grinned over at the fireman and once more reached for the whistle. Again—whoo-oo-oo! whoo-oo-oo! who! whoey!

When the echoes had ceased reverberating, he laughed.

"Yep, I'm going to make a railroader out of Jimmy!" he said gleefully.

CHAPTER XX.

LURE OF THE RAILS.

ECCLEFECHAN, the town beside the railroad, with its quiet sounding name, its trim stone houses, its rock-walled fields, is gone forever. Junction City, modern and bustling, has taken its place. Only in the memory of a few of the old timers does the quaint little Welsh village that nestled at the foot of the hills where the valleys converge, remain.

There is an enormous paper mill below the high wide concrete dam that spans Big Hungry Creek. Above the city, a tannery stretches its piles of tan bark over the meadow where once the black Welsh cattle grazed. Strings of acid tank cars wait in long lines on the tracks beside the creek where once Zeb White used to fish for brook trout.

Across from the brick depôt, a round house with thick clouds of heavy smoke hanging over it, stands squat and ugly, a semi-circular building whose every line shows it was constructed for utility and not with any idea of beauty. A score of big locomotives rest between their runs on the converging tracks that spread out fanwise from its gaping doors, smoke and steam idly trickling upward from their stacks.

Steel towers, high skeletonlike structures, one after another rear their height along the tracks, each supporting its long sagging spans of high tension cables. The little single track road that at one time served to care for all the traffic of the place, it, too, is gone. A double track, four wheel-polished rails, swing around in sweeping curves into Junction City. Day or night, the rumble and noise of one train scarce dies down before another comes racketing along to a clattering halt at the crossover.

Time has brought its changes. The farms are gone. Industry has raised the value of the land around Junction City till it is far too expensive to grow food upon. Back further and further up into the hills, now being denuded of their timber by Junction City's half dozen saw mills, by its acid and paper plants, the farms retreated higher and higher up into the mountains. All but one. Across from the depot, a level stretch of turf shows green in the summer, dun brown in the fall. Zeb White holds the farm in spite of the many offers he has had to part with it. These have mounted year by year as anxious business concerns cast envious eyes on its desirable location.

To each offer, Zeb White gives the same refusal: "No, it's not for sale. I don't need the money. Besides the wife has the say so and she wants to keep it."

His words are not idle boastings for Engineer White has the best run on the division. The Eastern Mail is the crack train and although Junction City has outgrown the days when Sixteen was an event, still there is a crowd at the station each evening to watch her come in and depart.

Just at dusk in the summer, in the gathering darkness of fall and spring, when winter's early nights have fallen, each evening there comes the long drawn out station blow of the Eastern Mail from down the track. Scarcely have the echoes ceased resounding when the glare of her electric headlight casts its beam on the poles along the right of way. Then with a banging thunder, it clatters across the junction frogs, thunders around the curve, the big superheater passenger engine swinging the dozen all steel coaches easily in her wake. There is a clanging of crossing bells, a lowering of gates across the roads, a hurrying of mail and express trucks, as she pulls up and stops before the station.

Zeb White's name in gold letters is emblazoned on the panel under the right hand cab window. He is proud of his engine,

proud of his record for he has never had a delay, he has made the mid-division stop on time, never a minute late, never a minute early, save one time.

Zeb still vividly remembers that nerve-racking ride when Jim and himself broke the running schedule for the Mail.

As the Mail pulls into Junction City, Zeb looks across to where two figures stand before the door of the old fashioned farmhouse, the only one left inside the corporate limits of Junction City. There is a grin on his face as he sees the tiny lantern his son holds, raise up, swing in a little arc. He blows his whistle, toot toot!

Those two are not the only ones who always give Zeb a salute. Bill White never misses the Eastern Mail. That wave from his son's gloved hand, followed by the good natured: "Howdy, pap," as the engine slows down, is like wine to his soul.

"Yep," he says grandly at every opportunity to a waiting passenger, "Yep, I ought to know him. That's my son, Zebbe. I brung that air boy up right, brung him up to work and he shore larned his lesson. He's jest done had me and maw a new house put up, a stone one."

And to the rejoiner, "Treats you well?" Bill White replies, "Wal I reckon as how he orter, seeing as I allus did my best fer him."

Zeb has an amused tolerance for his father. He can't do much for him yet he does what he can.

For as time goes on, the impulsiveness of youth that fired Zeb has changed into a more complacent tolerance. Men are what conditions make them. His thoughts run back to Jim.

Yes, conditions make men, the element of chance plays its part, too. He looks back over the long string of chances that made him, put him where he is and marvels a little. Men have come and gone on the railroad, victims of chance, helpless pawns in the game.

Just a short time ago, he met Petey Dink, who by all rights should have been on the engine of the Eastern Mail.

To Zeb's question, "How's farming?" he answered: "Zeb, I've quit farming. I'm no farmer. I just saw the colonel and he says I might get back again," a ring of hope in his voice.

"What's the matter with farming?" was Zeb's rather surprised question. "I thought you were doing fine."

"Fine! Hell, man! The hail beat down my wheat just as I was fixing to reap it, the chickens got the pip and all died in a week, and the blooming mule, the son of a gun, choked to death trying to swallow a frozen turnip. Farming's no good. Zeb, I'm a railroader. I'd quit in the middle of a furrow to listen to an engine blow and I spent most of my time hanging around the station. It gets you and once it gets you, you needn't try to do anything else."

His words recalled to Zeb another's similar phrase. Sidewheeler, in the almost forgotten past, had said that very thing. His own desires for a farm, for more time at home, were becoming feebler each year.

He envied the men whose time was their own, whose jobs were their own. Yet, to drive a crack train was Zeb's ambition and it had been fulfilled. Life ought to mean more, still he thought philosophically, it could mean a lot less.

To feel the surge and lift of that hundred ton of coördinated mechanism below him, to jerk her throttle open and get the instant response like a spirited horse at the touch of a spur, to look back on a curve and see a string of coaches following, to know that there were half a thousand lives, a million dollars worth of property hanging on his nerve and judgment—there was a sense of command, a feeling of power in driving an engine that made Zeb feel a little superior to every one who never had experienced that thrill.

Yes, Sidewheeler was right. "It gets 'em all."

The Mail was roaring along through the night. Zeb reached up, blew a crossing blow, looked ahead to where the rails scintillated and glistened.

Shining steel stretching out, out into the dim darkness ahead. It had him, too. He had heard the call of that shining steel years ago. He heard it stronger than ever to-night. He would hear it always.

THE END

Peterson Pride

By KARL W. DETZER

MINNA PETERSON pushed open the door of Johnnie Clause's general store and stepped inside. A bridal train of snow blew in at her heels. It was mid-December. The store, which was also the Cathead village post office, blurred opalescent with pipe smoke, that lifted in clouds and lay like muslin swaths along the ceiling.

At the tobacco counter a handful of fishermen discussed small matters with momentous sighs, grunts and reflective silences. Casper Clause, whose son Johnnie had deserted the lakes for business, bit tight on his pipe when he saw Minna enter and blinked his single eye. He shook his head, set flat on his shoulders as if he never had possessed a neck; the others took his warning and nodded.

" 'Ev'n', Mis' Minna," he said.

" 'Ev'n', Casper. 'Ev'n' the rest of you boys." Minna slapped the snow from her mittens. " Mail in yet? Well, no wonder, all this weather on the road. Seen Robin?" she asked.

" Why, not exactly," Casper Clause grumbled as if muffling a lie might make it less a lie. " Was you lookin' around the shanty? He was there a bit ago, 'fore dark."

" I've been there," answered Minna. " He must be up the beach or something. I thought he'd be all petered out after that big haul he made to-day. Most men 'd be! Seven hundred pounds of trout in one lift of the nets, and with a blow comin' on! What 'd you lift to-day, Ernie?"

A lean, spare fisherman in stained yellow slicker and wilted sou'wester looked up uneasily. No trout that ever came to his nets bore a more impassive face than Ernie Jaynes's, no dogfish an uglier. His eyes were set close, on either side of a nose that seemed to have continued growing after the rest of his slivery body had stopped; as he looked at Minna Peterson his little mouth drew down in a chilly sort of smile.

" Why, Mis' Minna—we pulled just four hundred pounds Four eighty—four eighty-six to be particular."

" Robin always does keep ahead of you, don't he?"

Minna's voice had the pride of a child. Her cheeks shone astoundingly clear with a glow like Michigan holly, in the smoke of the Clause store. She was small, with a positive chin, her mouth turned up at the corners ready to laugh. She was twenty, three years married to Robin Peterson.

Cathead village had decreed that Minna should marry Nels Nielson when she was seventeen. She was orphaned, unusually pretty, a woman grown. Nels Nielson had the name of a steady man. He was saving, fearless of weather, and besides held commission to carry the mails from Ottowa Island to Cathead. That meant six hundred a year, in addition to passengers and the fruit crates in cherry season. There were girls aplenty along the Michigan coast who envied Minna Peterson the chance to catch Nels Nielson.

And then Minna, with a perversity which no one ever suspected, ran away one Saturday afternoon and was married by the justice of the peace at Cedar Bridge to Robin Peterson.

" You'll have to lift twice a day," she told the fisherman in Johnnie Clause's store, " if you're going to keep up with Robin!"

She waved her hand and a rampageous wind slammed the door shut after her.

" And if that ain't a damn shame!" exclaimed Ernie Jaynes under his breath.

" Where is he at?" Walter Cook wanted to know.

" In my shack," Casper Clause said, " drunk as the devil on Saturday night. We might go down, see if the wind ain't like to straight him up."

" I'll go to hell yet, lyin' to that girl," Ernie Jaynes growled. " Seven hundred pound! He ain't lifted seven hundred pound in a month! And me tryin' to be small—"

" How much did you lift to-day?" asked Johnnie Clause.

" Half a ton. Your dad took nine hundred himself. And now we got to go stir out that derelict!"

Minna Peterson ran down the street past the butcher shop and peered in its frosty window. Where could Robin be? She halted a moment before the pool hall next door. The entrance swung open and two men came out. Minna looked past them into the warm lamplight. Robin was not there.

The west wind spurted across sand hummocks from Lake Michigan. There the sun hovered over Ottowa Island, and immersed the turbulent waters for a moment in a sinister and prophetic aura. For the minutest fraction of time it glared through a breach of cloud banks, like some unwelcome, portentous omen, then dipped its head; night took its place on the upper Great Lakes.

Minna Peterson shivered and started on toward home. She felt the sharp, lashing bite of new winds in the gale that had been making all day. To-night would be a night of turmoil, she knew deep in her sea-loving heart; distress signals would fly before morning, flares burn at the coast guard stations; a night of uneasy watches up and down the coast, a night of panic, a night to brand men cowards or mark them heroes, and drown them together, each as deep and wet as the other.

She closed the door to her own house behind her, chucked wood into the gluttonous kitchen stove, and set about preparing supper.

It was five by the alarm clock on the wall. The house shook in the exasperation of the winds. The kettle hummed, and the fire crackled under it.

Minna made biscuits. Robin liked hot breads. Whatever he liked he should have! What other woman on all the coast didn't envy Minna such a good looking man? They were all jealous of Robin, all those louts in the fishing fleet!

II.

Old Casper Clause, who never doddled over a necessary job, led the way down toward the beach. His slicker bristled out behind him in the wind, and he walked with a flat-footed waddle, blurted wholeheartedly, and sought no shelter. Ernie Jaynes trudged behind him.

Ernie bent like a sickle when he walked, his emaciated head pushed forward. In the rear Walter Cook puffed enormously,

bundled round by oilskins, his sou'wester pulled low and buttoned under his chin; he was shapeless as a barrow of fish, a bulky shadow plodding unhesitatingly through the lesser darknesses of the dunes.

Net reels flung about hilariously near the docks, squeaking in an ill-tuned chorus. Shore ice crunched. Hard, high breakers drummed the sand. The nine dingy shanties of the fishing fleet, each with its warped dock in front and its ragged icehouse behind, huddled about the entrance to the harbor.

The first of these belonged to Robin Peterson. All of them were dark. At the second, Casper Clause, letting his one good eye do the work of two, fitted a key to the padlock, jerked at the hasp, and stepped in. Ernie Jaynes and fat little Walt Cook followed.

"Lock the hook," Casper ordered. "I'll burn the lamp."

He touched his match to an old ship lamp, chained to a beam of the dirty ceiling. It sent down a rich yellow light upon the tidy, ill-smelling cleaning room of the shack.

Empty kegs were heaped in a corner, empty fish barrows in another. A stack of recumbent net buoys, their flags hanging limp, lay under strings of wooden floats, like fat, shellacked sausages. The room once had been whitewashed.

"Hell and high water!" said Casper Clause. "Will you take a look at that?"

The husband of Minna Peterson sprawled on the floor, his head pillowed on a fish net. He awakened, startled; arose, awkwardly passed a hand across his forehead, and settled unsteadily against the wall.

He was a small man, cut to a neater pattern than most of his fellows of the coast. Minna liked small men. All her life, until Robin drifted down from Grand Traverse way, she had known only big ones, awkward fellows, with long arms and heavy hands and a way of squeezing you half to death if they had to touch you. Robin Peterson was spare without excessive thinness. His eyes were blue, the pale kind of blue.

"What's the fuss?" he asked of the silent, disapproving circle.

"No fuss."

"Then why you stand round like a pack of missioners? I need a drink of water."

Casper Clause waddled toward a bucket in the corner, unhooked a dipper, and carried the drink across. Robin Peterson swallowed it in one gulp.

"Minna, your woman, she's been lookin' for you," Ernie Jaynes said.

"What for?"

"Supper, I guess."

"Devil with supper!" Peterson slipped on his feet. "I don't want no supper!"

Casper Clause dropped the dipper with a clatter to the floor and reached his rheumatic fingers toward the younger man's throat. They fastened in like so many anchors, pinched, and then cast away.

"They's times, Peterson, you ain't fit the chokin'!" he growled. "Now, home with you, or by the Mackinac, I'll smack you the whole way! Get out, out my fish shanty!"

III.

Minna Peterson had finished with her biscuits when footsteps sounded on the snowy back porch. She wiped the last flour from her round, red hands and ran to open the door.

Robin would be tired to-night. Lifting nets on the 12th of December! She wrenched the door in toward her, against the wind that strove to pull it out.

Robin had found it hard work walking. The gale had been in his face, and weakened his legs at the same time it blew the liquor out of his head. He crossed unsteadily to the tin bucket and poured out a drink of water.

"Why, Robin!" Minna said. And then, simply: "I been waiting supper."

"And runnin' up and down the town askin' where I'm at! Listen, Minna—I'll take care myself and don't you go talkin'!"

His cold face flushed. Minna's own became unnaturally white and they ate in silence, Minna looking straight at her plate, Robin at his.

She had lived all her life on the fishing coast; twenty years, long enough to recognize drunkenness in all its forms and stages. It held no terror for her; her father had sailed the lakes, and her uncles,

all of them decent men, and had they not taken what they called a nip whenever they wished it? Of course, Robin was different. Why else had she married him?

She looked across at him when she thought he would not notice. He showed fatigue under his pale eyes. A soft pity went through her. For Robin to work so hard, in such weather, out there on that icy lake that he must come home drunk! Of course he was different from those other men! They couldn't even feel the cold!

" Robin," she ventured, " it must've been awful out there to-day. I thought of you every minute. I couldn't wait, hoping you'd get through and get in—" She paused. He did not answer. " The biscuits are not bad, you think? I told Ernie Jaynes he'd have to stay out nights if he was going to haul in as much as you do!"

Robin looked up suspiciously.

" Better do your tellin' at home," he advised morosely.

He went to bed abruptly at eight o'clock, leaving Minna awake by the stove. She felt lonely in the kitchen by herself. At nine she arose despondently and polished an old brass ship's lamp, a task that she had planned to do next day. It was unthinkable to go to bed.

Outside the windows the wind ranted with a stubborn, maniacal fury. A hard night on the lakes! Minna thought reminiscently of a time when she was a very little girl, and her father, a big man like Casper Clause, put on his slicker at three o'clock and took out his sloop rig alone to help a little shingle schooner having trouble. No gasoline engines those days.

Well, Robin was like that. Go if needed! The alarm clock pointed to one when she climbed the stair to the chill little room above the parlor. It was still snowing. Robin awakened, asked the hour, and went back to sleep immediately.

Minna was just making coffee next morning when Mrs. Casper Clause, her woolen skirts whipping in the wind, ran up the path to the kitchen door. Minna saw her approach and lifted the latch. Snow stood boot-deep on the level and heaped up into three-foot ridges across the dunes.

" Hear 'bout last night?" Mrs. Clause asked. She shook her skirts by the kitchen stove and stood, panting, while chunks of snow melted on the floor. She was a heavy, short-winded old woman. " Steamer got lost over Pyramid way, couldn't see for storm—did get on the bar—"

Minna poured two cups of coffee deliberately and set them on the back of the stove.

" All the men, Casper and Walt Cook and Ernie and the Hedges boys, they took Walt's boat and run out to her. No need. She got off without no trouble—only looked bad for a bit."

Minna Peterson felt a dull numbing throb in the muscles of her throat. " All the men!" She swallowed, but could not dislodge the thing that choked her. " All the men!"

There smothered over her a strange and intangible blanket of anger that was not anger, of heart-burning animosity toward Mrs. Clause, of despairing and inconsolable misgiving.

" All the men!"

All the fat old loafers in Johnnie Clause's store, his mother meant. There was a fine son for a fisherman's family. Selling sugar! Robin had no guts for a loutish job like that, thank Heaven! Still, she wished he had gone. Every man was needed in a storm like last night's. She knew.

For the first time a tiny, uncomfortable doubt clouded her admiration, her pride faltered.

" Steamer got off safe," she said, wiping the snout of the coffeepot with unnecessary caution. " There wasn't any need going out."

" Who could tell that?" asked Mrs. Clause. Her eyes were intent upon Minna's colorless cheeks. She had always said Minna Peterson had no cause to be so uppish. " Couldn't tell—just everybody went."

Minna spun about.

" Robin would of gone if it wasn't for me!" she cried. " Said all along he better go down and see what's doing! But I—I wasn't very well-like. I told him he couldn't, said he had to stay with me, just made him stay! Still in bed he is, never got there till after one o'clock."

" No. We see your lights when we passed on our way home," Mrs. Clause agreed.

Minna stood a long time looking out across the untracked snow after Casper Clause's wife had gone. Again she felt the swelling in her throat. The night had hurt her somehow. It had brought a momentous trouble into her untroubled life, as intangible as it was absorbing, illogical, intuitive. She could not understand it.

Robin had hurt her silly pride. That was all. And what was pride? Certainly old Mrs. Clause could boast of no pride.

Look at her landlubber, Johnnie! Compare him with Robin! Yet doubt arose like a mist upon the face of water, doubt that her husband still stood high-headed about his fellows, doubt of his absolute superiority.

"All the men!" And he lay home abed —sleeping a drunken sleep, all evening while other fishermen labored splendidly upon the lake.

—As the drifts piled higher and the blasty winter wore on, Robin Peterson snored many nights in his own or some neighbor's fish shanty. He staggered home on blustery mornings, wearing a sorry face, his eyes paler than ever. Each time Minna helped him with his boots, made him hot coffee, and when she heard him tumble into bed she climbed the stair quietly, brought down his clothes, sponged them, pressed them out, and laid them back upon the chair beside him.

She put on a gay, familiar front before Mrs. Casper Clause and the other women of the fleet. She told of Robin's diligence at the workbench in the cellar, and displayed the towel rack he made for the kitchen. She scrubbed her house until it shone; baked, cooked, lived excitedly hunting duties for her hands. Even alone in her kitchen she sang.

But the nights were bad. She lay awake and told herself fiercely that Robin Peterson was the best husband in Cathead village. As for those other women—again and again she asked herself—what had they to boast about? Casper Clause—what a homely brute he was, with his one eye and no neck! And Ernie Jaynes's nose! And that fat Walt Cook, with his wheezes!

Nels Nielson? Well, he was a good enough fellow and not so bad looking. He saved his money. But to think of being married to him! To think of being the wife of any one except Robin, good old waggish Robin!

She began to listen when she heard him mount the porch. Did he stamp his feet or drag them? Did he grip the latch or fumble for it?

IV.

Ice hugged the lake shore that spring through a blustery March far into April, and still floated determinedly in the wash the 1st of May. For two months the men of the fleet had been busy at their boats, patching ribs, scraping, calking, painting, tuning up the engines, mending nets, cutting fresh buoys, splicing ropes.

Casper Clause was the first of them all to light a fire under the big tar kettle upon the sand. Soon there was a racket of hammering about the flat-faced gasoline boat drawn upon the ways at Ernie Jaynes's shack. The others, in dungarees, labored daily at this task and that. All except Robin Peterson.

"How about the boat, Robin?" Minna asked in March, and twice again in April, and once more on the 1st of May.

"Boat's good enough. No need to do anything to it."

"She'll leak."

"I can bail," her husband countered.

When the season did open, with a luxury of warm winds out of the southwest, Robin Peterson came down one noon from the pool hall and went heroically to work upon the broad, thirsty seams of his boat.

She was not a graceful craft, this Kingfisher; she lacked care and white lead, oakum and attention. Three days Robin labored, sweating in the sun while other fishermen sat comfortably in the shade. But the third day, with the work unfinished, he tossed back his yellow hair, left a paint brush in the pail, and stalked up the untidy street of the village. It was nine that night when he came home, a dissolute, soggy wreck of a man, and Minna put him to bed.

He had blustered about Johnnie Clause's store half the evening, forced a quarrel with a visiting coast guardsman, had been beaten

for his trouble, and cast out into the muddy street.

Cathead village is no prating moralizer, but it knows a man's place at the opening of fishing season. There is a time for everything, including drunkenness, according to the sand-bitten creed of the lakes; and the opening of fishing season calls for steadfast sobriety, for devotion to boats and nets, for labor unsweetened by any of the rugged vices that appeal to weary men.

They are a simple people, these unlearned and bewildered children of the five sweet water seas. Minna Peterson was one of them. Narrow distances, blunt encroaching shores hem in their vision; for them there is none of the mysterious and boundless magnitude of the salt oceans, only the positive mastery of unbending weathers, the certitude of labor, the dogmatic march of the seasons, and the inevitable authority of death.

Men and women on a salty coast may point their fingers at a beckoning horizon and say: "There lies China, there the Indies." On the Great Lakes, wives of fishermen are denied even the comfort of such glamour. They know that beyond their horizons lie merely other villages, unintelligible and uninspired as their own. Only the faults of the sea are their heritage, its passions, its loneliness, its animosities, stripped bare of the sorcery of salt.

Minna Peterson had ridden out to the fishing banks with her father in the stout-hearted days of canvas; later, with Oscar Lindstrom, who had been her mother's brother, she learned the obstinacy of a gasoline engine, the crank antics of a tubby boat in a headlong sea. Gill nets held no mysteries for her, nor pond nets either. She knew without mistake every ragged pennant that marked the buoys of all the Cathead fleet.

"Robin," she said that May morning when the sun shone crisply into the kitchen window while she prepared breakfast at the stove, "I'm going out along of you to-day. I can lend a hand, better than any boy you can pick up."

"You!"

"Me. And we'll beat the others again, like you did last season."

She spoke grimly. He winced and gave his attention to the plate before him.

"We'll make a try of it, anyhow," she amended.

"The nets is pretty snarly."

"Then we'll have to fix them."

Cathead village heard that afternoon that Minna Peterson had gone out upon the lake with her husband. They made a good haul, so ran the talk, Robin's first lift of a late season. But good haul or bad, who was Minna Peterson to fly at the throat of all the conventions of the fishing coast?

Casper Clause's wife nodded to her distantly that night when they met in front of the post office.

"Good ev'n' to you, Mrs. Clause," she cried. The older woman paused, made to go on and then turned slowly. "Did you hear of our catch, Robin's and mine, this morning? Nine hundred pounds! Not bad for a slow season, you think?"

"I've heard worse," Mrs. Clause grumbled. "They's things worse'n a big haul."

Minna walked home like a queen on parade. Did any one else have a wish to cut her, she gave them little chance. Even the next day when Robin again lay drunk in the cleaning shack and the Kingfisher floated at the dock, she faced the fleet proudly, eye for eye, and talked spiritedly of the boat, of the probable tonnage for the season, of Robin's skill with contrary gasoline.

She played her part proudly until the first day of June. That morning, which is set aside as a fisherman's holiday all along the coast, the boats stayed in harbor, and the men of the fleet labored joyously uptown, opposite the post office, constructing a rough, out-of-door dance pavilion.

Of cedar saplings and Norway pine they built the sides, and stacked balsam bows on top for a roof. This, in the language of the lakes, is a "bowery," a civic institution. On the first of June is the great affair of the season.

Minna had met Robin Peterson at a bowery dance. At another Nels Nielson had pleaded that she marry him and settle down upon Ottowa Island, had pleaded with an exasperatingly short vocabulary and all the fire of an oil-skinned cavalier.

She had looked forward to the day. Early in the morning, while Robin boiled up nets, she patched and made ready his Sunday suit. Robin could dance, drunk or sober! Wasn't he the lightest-footed of them all? Every bowery night he made those peg-legged old roustabouts envious!

Wouldn't the women watch them, even to Casper Clause's briny old wife, and Ernie Jaynes's two pickle-faced sisters? Wouldn't Nels Nielson ask her for a dance, and then another and another, and wouldn't she refuse after the first, only to prove that she was the proudest woman in Cathead village?

She saw Nels Nielson at four o'clock. She had run down to the shanty for more gasoline to clean a last spot from Robin's coat, and finding Robin not on the beach, had come up to the bowery to look for him. She did not find him there either. But working on the platform was Nels Nielson.

Six months it had been since she talked with him. What a pity she thought it when that Nels Nielson had never married, how slow and red-faced and big-handed and ugly he looked beside her blue-eyed Robin! He seemed less pitiable this time. There was a fresh, windy color in his skin, a hardness she had learned to recognize as one sign of sobriety.

He had come over from Ottowa Island early in the forenoon, she heard, to carry home a boatload of children who had spent the winter in the convent school at Cedar Bridge. They were expected down at noon. But at noon, and at two o'clock, and again at four, the children had not come. He telephoned; the truck had broken, it would get there by five.

"It's makin' me late for the dance," he complained to the men on the floor. "They's a little blow comin', too. Five o'clock! And me thinkin' it was a holiday! It 'll be dark afore I get to the island, can't get back here afore ten!"

"Kids," Casper Clause commented, "is a mean crew to handle in the dark. Specially when they's a bit of wind on."

Nels Nielson laughed.

"I'll handle 'em all right. They's only ten. I'll pen 'em all down under cover."

"And try to come back?"

"Sure!" Again he laughed. "Think I'd miss the whole dance for a mess of kids and weather?"

Minna slipped away. There was a gay carelessness in his voice. She walked hastily around the pine arbor to avoid a meeting with Mrs. Clause. Some one followed her beyond the heaped up piles of boughs. She turned and stood face to face with Nels Nielson.

His carelessness had gone. In its place was a curious, sad defiance, and Minna felt a hot rush of blood redden her own cheeks. She started back; then called herself a coward and stopped.

"Minna—" he said.

"You can have the second dance, Nels," she answered lightly.

Her attempt at recklessness failed. He came a step nearer. For a long, quiet moment they looked at each other.

"Minna, are you unhappy?" he asked.

She was caught unawares. Tears came into her eyes and she tried not to let them fall. He was different somehow, stronger than he ever had been. About his lips she saw a new, soft, gentle line. They were firmer lips than Robin's. His eyes were a deeper blue.

"Minna—" he said again.

And angry shame came over her. With a hard spurt of will she rushed past him and down the hill.

Why should Nels Nielson break up her pride? Why should he guess she wasn't happy? Dare to say that she wasn't? Who was Nels Nielson to act so slightingly toward Robin?

She slammed the kitchen door behind her, and upstairs flung herself down on the bed. An hour she lay there, thinking hard thoughts of the man she had just talked to, knowing all the time, bitterly, that every thought was a lie to herself.

She dressed at last, conscious of her pale cheeks, wearily prepared supper and sat down to wait for Robin. He had not yet come when the meal was ready. Twilight fell, and neighbors lighted their lamps. She put on her shawl at last and crept with a queer foreboding down through the sand to the fish shanties. Recklessly, she crossed

the planking above the dam, not waiting for the iron bridge.

Over in town gay gasoline flares already lighted the bowery. Lafe Beaty was scraping his famous fiddle in impatient anticipation. A flat-chested parlor organ, carried down from the Methodist mission house, emitted unharmonious gasps.

Minna Peterson stopped in the sand by Ernie Jaynes's fish shanty and clenched her hands with a disappointment that was almost childish. They should go anyway to that dance, Robin and she! She would forget Nels Nielson!

A pair of men strode toward her from the river dock. Minna edged backward behind a net reel. She was embarrassed to be found here by the harbor hunting Robin. She looked down at the finery of her new white dress, conscious of its absurdity, conscious of the obstinacy of gossip and the fragility of pride.

"Nielson only just got started," Casper Clause was saying. "I'm glad it's not me haulin' a pack of young 'uns over to Ottowa Island in the dark."

"Nels don't worry. Not the worryin' kind. Steady, but no fuss." This was Walt Cook. "How's Peterson?"

"That drunk hog! Ought to get drowned, his own good and hers. She's a uppish gal, never lets on—"

They passed out of hearing. Minna Peterson drew a deep breath. All the softness of womanhood drained out of her soul, in a single and horrid minute, all that was left of a great faith, all her comfort and content.

"That drunk hog!"

She leaned against Ernie Jaynes's shanty, weak with misery. A gritty, bitter taste filled her mouth. She was surprised to feel tears.

She wiped her cheeks, determined to be rid of womanish infirmity. A drop of rain fell on her hand. Lightning flashed a menace in the northwest and the first messenger of a summer wind drove across the dunes. Nels's little blow was coming, all right. No doubt about that.

Minna stopped at Robin's door and felt for the padlock. It gaped open its jaws, gossiping to the world of her sodden, unrepentant husband inside. A light burned from the ceiling, a sulky, smoky lamp with the chimney uncleaned; she could see that much through the crack.

Should she face him now? Or was she too much ashamed? Indecision triumphed. Along the insecure planking of the wharf she felt her way toward the fresher air of the wash. There was a stanch and sympathetic companionship in the unfettered water. It would rain hard in a minute. Already lightning splintered out of the north and uneasy catsqualls disturbed the lake. Near Minna's feet a startled gull rose screaming from the old breakwater, an unseen, cackling omen.

The rain came down, with the fresh fury of a summer storm. Minna winced when its cold, wet sheets first washed her hot face. But she did not move.

She could see the small white light of Nels Nielson's mail boat far out on the lake, with its cargo of children for Ottawa Island. Nels Nielson, who had wanted to marry her! In the shanty behind lay Robin Peterson, dissolute, disgraced, her husband. And to-night she had thought they would go to a dance! She had come in a white dress searching for him. How the town must laugh at her high-headed pride!

The wind whined and whipped at her skirt. Nels Nielson's boat still swam in the dark off shore. It looked to be drifting to Minna, swinging south and no further away. She saw dully its bloodshot port light, now its starboard green. The boat certainly was drifting.

A flash toward the heavens roused her. What could Nels Nielson be doing, lighting so great a lamp? She forgot her own disgrace for a moment. With fascinated eyes she watched the lake. The port side light still shone red. But above it, overwhelming—that couldn't be a lamp!

It was fire! Nels's mail boat afire with ten children!

Her wet finery tripped her as she ran back toward the boathouse. She flung open the door. Upon the nets lay her husband snoring. She fell on her knees beside him.

"Robin! Robin, I say!" She pummelled his chest, slapped desperately at his face.

"Robin, honey! They's a boat on fire! God, Robin, Robin, wake up!"

Robin Peterson snored steadily. His slicker and sou'wester' lay heaped beside him. His muddy boots sprawled near his bare feet. The lamp smoked in the rising wind. It flickered and went out.

In its last gust Minna Peterson gave a horrified look at her motionless husband. Then she pushed herself up, kicked off her own wet shoes and slipped into his boots.

"They's a fire, Robin!" she begged. "Please, please, Robin! Come along with me!"

She was in the sou'wester' and slicker. Once she turned, calling again. Robin did not answer. Minna rolled shut the door, snapped the padlock, jerked out the key.

It was dark in the cabin of the Kingfisher. With shaking fingers she found the fuel valve and switched on the spark. She dropped the priming cup twice. Then it rattled successfully against the cylinder petcocks and she tried her strength on the flywheel. Robin did that generally. With a hard jerk she turned it over.

Her arms had steadied when she cast off the lines. On the small deck aft, with the tiller between her feet, she leaned her elbows, fisherman fashion, upon the roof of the cabin, and watched the breakwater light swing past.

The open lake set her boat to capering idiotically. Only once she glanced shoreward. The lights of the village were falling away. The storm had drenched out completely the festive flares in the bowery. Already high spray dimmed the breakwater lamp. The flame ahead shone brighter.

V.

MINNA had watched two boats burn at sea in her life. Each time, drugged with sleep, she had run down to the shore in the deep of night and stood by with the other women, paralyzed in her soul by that one elemental fear common to every sailor and woodsman. Fire. The precarious antics of small vessels in heavy seas were nothing. One could manipulate those. But what could any one, no matter how brave, do with fire?

This was gasoline consuming the mail boat. Out of the snubby bow decking where the petrol tank was built, braids of purple flame shot up into the empty, wet sky and reaching aft, chewed ragged vents in the cabin roof. Their roar outplayed the patter of rain.

Minna listened. She could not hear the children. But in another moment she saw them. They were crowded at the stern, a close, terrorized, uncountable mass of heads and arms. Minna swung the tiller over and pointed into the wind.

For the first time since she put on Robin's boots and left him snoring on the floor, she felt a cold satisfaction in her own kind. These were not common children. They were children of the lake, as she was herself; sons and daughters of coastguard surfmen, of light tenders and fishermen. They might scream and cry at fire, but they would know how to get into her boat.

She maneuvered the Kingfisher in an incautious circle and nosed its bow amidship into Nels Nielson's white launch. A small boy with long, thin legs leaped into the air as the two crafts touched and dropped clawing upon the deck of the fishboat.

"One!" said Minna Peterson through her teeth.

Two girls tried it next. The smaller of them slipped, hung precariously overside and the boy yanked her back.

"Three!" Minna counted.

The force of the wind, the pressure of the fish boat's propeller, flung the burning launch away for a moment. Minna gasped, and again felt her cold satisfaction. The first small boy, with a twist of his wrist, had thrown her bow line into the huddle of children. Some one caught it. Once more her boat crawled within reach.

"Six!" Minna Peterson cried. She leaned forward on her elbows. "Seven! Ten!" She waited. Where was Nels Nielson? Big stupid! Would he monkey all night below?

"Nels!" she screamed. "Nels!"

A queer terror possessed her. She screamed again, over and over, till her shout was a whisper that the wind sucked up. No one answered, no one at all.

Fire spurted out of the ports. On the

short bow of her fish boat, the children from Ottowa Island were crowding through the hatch into the engine compartment. The one boy remained.

Minna noticed dully that he had tied a rag around his left arm. He sawed with his jack-knife till the bow line snapped. The Kingfisher plunged, and thundered once more into the planks of the mail boat, while a mighty, choking heat scorched Minna Peterson's face.

She understood.

"Help you, mister?" the small boy forward cried.

"Go below!" Minna answered him.

She screamed Nels's name again. His boat was flame from bow to rudder there in front of her eyes. Nels Nielson had died. He had died afloat, on duty. Well, worse could happen! She heard herself laugh, and was shocked at the sound. Was she going mad?

She straightened her knees and kicked over the tiller. In a close, reckless circle she drove her boat around and around the blazing craft. It was settling lower.

There was nothing she could do. It angered her, this helplesslness. The mail boat listed, with a lurch to starboard; flung about senselessly, like a torch in the hands of a drunken juggler. Minna Peterson laughed out loud again and thought of the snoring Robin.

This time she knew she was mad. Why should she laugh? Find anything brave, anything splendid in this wicked, blazing light? How could she dare see in its crimson plume a brief, floating monument to Nels Nielson and to all the thousand men before him who had died by fire at sea? Well, Robin Peterson had done that to her pride. Made her mad.

The mail boat listed another degree and spun in a complete circle. With no warning it dipped its bow under a black wave and sank. Its going was an anticlimax. Sudden darkness, wind, rain, an eddy of water. That was all.

Minna turned the bow of her own boat shoreward. She saw the sudden flare of a coast guard patrol on Ottowa Island. The coast guard was too late!

The breakwater light cast a listless glow through the dwindling rain at Cathead. Minna Peterson steered toward it, her eyes fixed, her mind uneasy with astounding thoughts.

She edged past the broken piling at the harbor mouth, swung to the left and thumped alongside the fishermen's wharf. The water was quiet here. She lifted the trap, reached down with tired, cold fingers and flung off the switch. The engine coughed. Minna Peterson threw a pair of half hitches over a piece of cedar piling and stepped ashore.

"Go up there," she bade the children who tumbled out of the hatch, "up there where you see the lights and find Casper Clause. Tell him you have to get home 'fore your folks go crazy. Tell him what happened. Tell him Robin Peterson went out alone and saved you."

She unlocked the fish shanty and slammed the door behind her.

"So you're awake!" she chided.

Robin Peterson sat up dully on his pile of unboiled nets.

"What you doin' in my boots, Minna?" he wanted to know.

Minna Peterson took off the boots and threw them on the floor beside sou'wester and slicker. She faced her husband.

"I ain't had your boots. There they are, on the floor. There's your oilskins, just where you threw 'em. You're drunk, Robin Peterson. And Nels Nielson's dead. Drownded. But do you know what?" She spoke each word grimly. "You took out the boat, Robin Peterson. Your own boat, the Kingfisher. And you got ten kids off the mail boat, and you brought 'em in here. Understand that? You got ten kids, all but Nels, and the mail boat burned."

"I did not," said Robin.

"Ten kids," Minna Peterson repeated. "Of course, you did it drunk! You didn't know you were out! You're always drunk. Cathead looks for that. Maybe now I've give 'em something else to look for in you! They'll believe in you awhile maybe, savin' a boatload of kids. I've give you a push, Robin Peterson!"

She ran out of the shanty in her bedraggled white dress and slammed the door a second time behind her.

Lights were gleaming uptown. Minna stood and looked wistfully at them. She had lived all her life in Cathead. Then she turned toward the right along the pier.

She walked slowly, but with no indecision. Down the creaking wharves she tramped, toward the breakwater of rocks and cedar poles at the harbor mouth.

The rain had slackened. The pier head light glowed down mistily upon her, pinkening the soiled white dress, for a moment lending a flush to her cheeks, brushing a yellow luster across her flying hair. Her lips were open, as if she might be smiling. She strode on, toward the end of the breakwater, out of the light. Ahead lay the lake, dark, enduring, masterful, heedless of women's anxieties.

A stiff current ran westward out of the harbor mouth, sucking at the piling, breaking the course of rollers, carrying with it a burden of sand and sticks, dead leaves, pieces of old boats, all the refuse of a careless world ashore. Beyond the bar the lake lay sixty fathoms deep.

Robin did not go home immediately. He sat on the floor with his ill-smelling nets and thought the matter over for a while.

Funny, Minna acting that way. He remembered nothing about a fire. But there lay his boots, there his slicker. Certainly they looked wet. He arose shakily and poured another drink. Too bad, drinking so much. Minna made such a fuss. Well, a man deserved a bit of a spree after saving ten kids.

He wandered home at last. The house looked empty, no light in the kitchen. Minna must be in bed. Well, she wasn't any more tired than he. He stumbled up the stairs, trying to think what it was he'd forgot.

Oh, yes, that bowery dance! Minna must be over there skylarking yet, she wasn't in bed. He sat down on the edge of a chair and pulled off a boot. She'd get home all right. Funny, he couldn't remember going after those kids. He was very sleepy.

THE END

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WHITE COAL

(*Hydro-Electrical*)

DEEP thunders in the gorge,
The white-fanged rapids rage:
And—miles below—men forge
Plowshares and swords of life
Wherewith in twain to wage
The arts of peace and strife.

Under the drifting clouds
The rapids toss their manes;
While—miles below—the crowds
Toil in the turbined mills,
And count their minted gains
Born in the woodland rills.

With clamor and with foam
The rapids seethe and sweep—
While—miles below—a home
Of industry aspires,
And while the world's asleep
Paints heaven with its fires!

Olin Lyman.

The Wild Bull of Montana

By SAMUEL G. CAMP

ALONG early last September I and the other five per cent of the family, namely, my well-known wife, were on surprisingly friendly terms, business wasn't so worse, and, all in all, you might say I was sitting pretty. But, while I am by no means superstitious, nevertheless, I had my fingers crossed. What I mean, something seemed to tell me that things couldn't go on like that. They never do.

And they didn't.

One evening when the wife arrives back at our little gray home in the West Eighties, it's plain to be seen that she is in a state of no little excitement. So it seems she's joined out with some women voters' organization or other, and from now on, she makes known in clarionet tones, she is positively going to take an active personal interest in public affairs. And just to prove it, she promptly starts radiocasting the correct answers to each and all of the political crossword puzzles then confronting the one hundred per cent American public.

"Sign off!" says I, cutting in with old world courtliness. "Listen. This is important. Have you told anybody about this except me? That from now on you're positively gonna take an active personal interest in public affairs?"

"Why, no," says the little woman.

"Well, then," says I, "do me a favor and keep it dark for just twenty-four hours."

"Why?" demands the frau, suspiciously.

"Because," I replies, "when Wall Street gets wise to it there'll no doubt be the greatest boom in history, and I want to get in on the ground floor."

"You and your comical strip stuff!" snaps the dear girl. "If you and the rest of the men had taken some interest in some-

thing besides baseball, box fights, and the like, things wouldn't be like they are now."

"And you wouldn't be voting," says I. "But all that aside, why not, just for the present, take an active personal interest in dishing up a few eats? Dinner's an even hour late at this writing, and I got a business conference in just thirty minutes."

"Business conference!" snorts the bitter fraction. "The sort that's held in a couple of ringside chairs!"

With which the lady of the house and lot hangs her hat on the floor, drapes her coat over the chandelier, and sails out into the kitchen.

Such is life in the big leagues.

Well, as a general rule, a person's political affiliations is something which runs in families like other forms of insanity. And, all by luck and chance, the wife being of the same party as yours truly, why, in spite of the missus taking an active personal interest in public affairs, I guess we would of pulled through till the country was saved again on November 4 without rendering ourselves no more objectionable to the neighbors than usual, if—

But, of course, there's always an "if."

Anyways, one night the wife once more shows up thirty minutes late for chow. So, of course, I am fit to be tied, even if the news she brings with her hadn't been of a kind which, without further inducements, I would of cheerfully tossed off a beaker of cyanide, or maybe bit the hand that should of fed me and didn't.

So it seems my highly talented helpmate had been taking such an active personal interest in public affairs that this political sextet, of which she is one of the original members, has actually gone to work and put her on a regular committee, no fooling. A committee that was supposed to busy themselves with hiring speakers for what you call rallies, and the like.

"Fine!" says I with all the enthusiasm with which I might of received the glad news that I had, at the most, six weeks to live. "Onwards and upwards! Keep it up and you'll have Ma Ferguson looking like a regular Alice Sit-by-the-Fire. What's more, I am now gonna heap still further honors on you. That's to say, I take great pleasure in appointing you a committee of one on—er—refreshments. I got a business date—"

"And listen," interrupts the wife, without so much as a word of acknowledgment in regards to the fresh honors I have thrust upon her. "Do you know, Jim, when they put me on that committee, the first thing I thought was: 'What a chance for Horace!'"

For dear old Rutgers!

"Horace!" I yelps. "Flyin' catfish! D'ye mean to say—"

But at this extremely critical point, in the event that he is a perfect stranger to you—which I only wish he was equally so to myself—just a few kind words in regards to one Horace J. Hooper.

Horace, then, I regret to say, is a relative of mine by what I call the fortunes of war. That's to say, he's the wife's brother. In the case that you are personally not posted in respects to these sometimes baffling marital relationships, if I know what I mean, will say that, according to the best legal authorities, this makes Horace occupy the highly responsible position of brother-in-law in relation to myself. Or in other words, as I lose no opportunity to point out, Horace is merely a relative of mine by law as distinguished from justice.

Now, from the foregoing, you have no doubt been able to grasp the fact that I have personally got about as much use for this synthetical relative of mine as a fish has for a lifeguard. At any rate, we'll say so.

However, owing to the fact that my various and sundry reasons for objecting loudly to Horace are much too humorous to mention, why, for the present, anyways, I will merely say that I chiefly take exception to Mr. Hooper on the grounds that he occupies the same relation to language that Edison does to electricity. Or in other words, while, of course, language existed before the advent of Horace J. Hopper into this dizzy world, nevertheless, there is positively no disputing the fact that Horace is the bimbo that put it to work.

All of which is just another way of saying that my charming wife's delightful relative, Mr. Horace J. Hooper, is the undis-

puted long distance heavyweight champion windjammer of this or any other age. This baby broadcasts from any angle, I mean to say, with all the ease and celerity of a greased pig negotiating a slippery slide.

Talking comes as natural to him as falling does to Niagara, and try and stop either one of them! In fact, while a few conservatives will no doubt accuse me of drawing the long bow, it is the positive truth that Horace begun talking at the fairly early age of three minutes, his first words being "Ladies and gentlemen!" and if he's ever stopped since then, you needn't pay me a dime!

Consequently, no doubt you can easily picture the enchanting prospect any time it looks like dear old Horace is once more going to be among those present in our quivering midst. The wife, you understand, always insisting on Horace stopping with us whenever he visits the big town; and these visits, in my entirely unprejudiced opinion, being much too long and likewise all too numerous. Which, if it was left to me, Horace would drop in on us exactly once in a blue moon, and stay the full length of time it would take an unusually rapid talker to say "Knife!"

"D'ye mean to say," I says to the wife, "that you're gonna try and take advantage of your position on that committee to ring in a personal relative, like Horace, as a speaker in the campaign?"

"I don't mean to say nothing of the sort," says the missus with asperity. "I already done it."

"How do you mean, you already done it?" I demands.

"I put the matter up to the other members," replies the wife, "and they were all for it. It's hard to find good speakers anyways. So then I called up Horace in Albany, and he'll be here to-morrow. You know the job he was on was only temporary, anyways."

"Sure," says I. "No matter what kind of a job that baby gets, it wouldn't only be temporary."

"Oh, is that so?" she comes back, sweetly. "Well, I notice he's always been able to make plenty money enough to support himself."

"For the six months per year, or maybe less," I puts in, "that I haven't personally myself staked him to a room and board."

Well, of course there was more of it, but as it probably wouldn't serve no particular purpose, I'll spare you the details. Though I might add that the best any competent judge would of given the wife was a draw.

II.

WELL, in spite of a promising looking train wreck in the papers that morning, Horace shows up as advertised. And then, as they say in the subtitles, came a time during which I suffered in silence. Or, that's to say, while I personally lapsed into an almost total calm—try and treat yourself to a few choice remarks with Horace hitting on all six—my little job of suffering was neatly done to the skilled accompaniment of Mr. Hooper on his throat.

Coming down on the train, Horace had made what you call an intensive study of the various party platforms, and so forth, with the results that inside of a surprisingly shore time—the surprise being on account that a time which seemed so long could be so short—I was positively fuller of campaign issues, and allied topics, than Houdini is of tricks. In fact, I already got plenty politics, don't think I haven't! Which is not saying that I wasn't right in line to get plenty more.

For, as time goes on, or during maybe the next three weeks, and Mr. Hooper warms to his job—however, owing to the fact that there's others to entertain you, I will conclude this part of the evening's performance by simply saying that, all in all, I was personally no fit subject to be at large; a menace to public safety, what I mean, and especially to one Horace J. Hooper!

At that, though, I might say that there was one time, anyways, which, if Mr. Hooper ever again gets as near to the well-known Pearly Gates as he was right then, it will only be a miracle that saves him from crashing in. And for that matter, the missus wasn't so far behind him.

Meaning the time when, right in the face of the fiercest kind of opposition, the frau

carries her point in regard to I and her tagging along with Horace, the demon spellbinder, on his evening soap box tours.

For smiling out loud!

Well, of course, the only reason I let her win it was to keep peace in a family where—well, try and find it!

Anyways, such was the highly enjoyable state of affairs, and no relief visible to the naked eye, when, all by luck and chance, a curious turn of events led me into the faint hopes that maybe, after all, there was a way out.

If there's no objections from the gallery, however, I will first take up briefly a little matter, or you might say affair, which, owing to one thing and another, seems to of escaped notice.

Well, I have used the word affair advisedly, having in mind the one which, some little time after Mr. Hooper's longed-for arrival, I wholly without intention discovered to be going on between a certain Miss Muriel Montrose and, reading horizontally, actually Mr. Hooper himself! Likewise, I was making no secret of the fact that, at the time, Miss Montrose was playing what is sometimes called a bit, in a musical production cleverly entitled, "Lucy, Louise, and Charlotte," which was just then enjoying what the press agent freely admitted to be a phenomenal run at one of our leading playhouses.

Needless to say, I was positively dumfounded over the above epoch-making discovery, and the more so on account that so far as my experience went, this was Mr. Hooper's absolutely first appearance before any audience in the rôle of a squire of janes, as you might say.

So, anyways, having, of course, Mr. Hooper's best interests at heart, I lost no time in taking up the matter with him.

"How come?" says I, sternly. "How did you happen to meet up with this, now, Miss Montrose?"

"I was properly introduced to her by a friend," replies the witness, proud and defiant.

"Simple but ingenious," I admits. "No doubt," I goes on, "she comes of a prominent Southern family that lost their fortune in the Civilized War?"

"On the contrary," says the witness, tartly, "I believe she said her people were quite prominent in Chicago. Montrose, of course, is merely a stage name. The family name is—er—Green, I believe. Or possibly Jones. Her father is—well, something in leather."

"Bootlegger," I suggests promptly.

"And very well to do," says Horace.

"Why not?" says I.

"And as for Miss Montrose herself," says he, "she is undoubtedly a most talented young lady! Most talented! I have no doubt that some day she will be one of our very brightest stars."

"Fresh from European triumphs," says I. "Listen. Is the wife wise to this?"

"You mean my sister?" he asks.

"Unfortunately," I replies.

"Certainly she is," says Horace.

"Does she approve?" I asks searchingly.

"Positively!" says Mr. Hooper.

"So that's all settled," says I.

Later on I asked the wife why, if she was wise to how Horace was choosing his girl friends from the chorus, why she hadn't said something to me about it? So she says I know as well as she that Miss Montrose is no chorus girl, she's a real actress. And what is more, she personally herself had lunch with Horace and Muriel one day, and Muriel seems like an awfully nice girl. So she says the reason she didn't say nothing to me was because she knew I'd have a whole lot of slurring remarks to make, on account of Miss Montrose being an actress, and she is positively sick and tired of hearing me razz Horace, and that's that.

So I says, very well, I accept her apology and didn't pursue the subject further.

III.

Now in respects to a possible way out of what I will here term my difficulties—the same being a very polite way of referring to the situation—well, one afternoon I am strolling gloomily through the shopping district, watching the world go buy, and trying to listen to none other than our old friend Horace, who, I probably don't need to say, is with me solely on the account that I have been unable to shake him.

So during this delightful ramble I have been sort of turning things over in my giant intellect, and have just about decided that the only thing for it is to hire some competent gunman to pass out Horace as neatly and painlessly as possible—though in these last respects I am not disposed to be finicky, and the operator may use his own judgment —when along comes Mr. Eddie West, gentleman, sportsman, and an intimate friend of mine.

I might say, by the way, that at the present writing, for reasons best known to myself, I am not quite so strong for Eddie as I might of been at one time. Though, of course, I am not denying that he is one of the best.

Anyways, since there seemed to be no way out of it, I stabbed Eddie in the back, you might say, by introducing him and Horace. Also, I informed Mr. Hooper that Mr. West was by way of being one of our leading box-fight impresarios. After which, so's in order to prevent Mr. Hooper from crashing in—when all communication between I and Eddie would of been permanently cut off—I made all haste to ask Eddie how things are going with him.

" Never better," replies Mr. West cheerfully. " As the matter of fact, I'm on a winner! Listen. If right at this minute, see, I ain't personally myself the sole manager and proprietor of the world's next heavyweight champ, I will positively refund your money by return mail!"

" No!" says I, properly impressed. " Well, whatta you know! Jack Dempsey the next, eh?"

" I'm a Chinaman," says Eddie, " if the facts is not precisely as stated!"

" Fair enough," says I. " Who is the bird?"

" The Wild Bull of Montana!" replies Mr. West with pardonable pride. " How's that for a subtitle, what? The Wild Bull of Montana! I wrote it myself!"

" Eddie," I admits, " on the square, you got Rudyard Kipling writing advices to the lovelorns. The Wild Bull of Montana! Not so bad!"

" Not so bad is right," agrees Mr. West modestly. " But, listen. You boys going some place, or merely on your way? What I mean, why not step along to the gym and catch this lad of mine's stuff? He's good, what I mean!"

" Let's go," says I. " But maybe Mr. Hooper would rather be excused," I adds, with a hopeful look at Horace.

" Delighted!" says Mr. Hooper promptly. " Possibly I might even put on the gloves for a few moments with this—er— Wild Bull person," he goes on, with a fallen arch look. " You know, some years ago I used to be rather handy at the game—not bad at all, if you know what I mean—and lately I've really been feeling the lack of exercise."

Well, if that wouldn't hand you a laugh, then neither would Sir William Rogers, the royal favorite! For, while Mr. Hooper stands a even seventy-two inches amongst his feet, and likewise carries plenty of weight, nevertheless, if that bozo's an athlete, I'm a diving Venus. But for that matter, it is perfectly safe to say that this winsome and demure relative of mine would not hesitate an instant over taking on Bill Tilden at tennis, Johnny Weismuller at swimming, or Paderewski at the piano.

" Sure!" says Eddie, with what certainly looked to me like a sly grin. " Glad to have you. As the matter of fact, you'll come in handy as as a match in a cigar store. It's like this, see. Just now I'm shaping the Wild Bull for a tangle with Kayo Pohlson. There's one tough egg, but if the Wild Bull don't take him inside a couple rounds then Man o' War wasn't a race horse. And for a fact, you got no idea of what a job it is to keep the Wild Bull in sparring partners. Why, only yesterday he busts a nose for one bimbo and an arm for another, and— well, anyways, if you feel like you needed a little light exercise, why, sure!"

" Well," mumbles Mr. Hooper, all of a sudden appearing sort of nervous, for no transparent reason, " I—well, that's to say, we'll see."

Well, while Mr. Hooper is making a bum out of the Hon. W. J. Bryan, on the ways to the gym:

" Listen," I manage to whisper excitedly to Eddie. " If this cuckoo puts on the mitts, and the Wild Bull slaps him for a row of hospital cots, I'll—"

"Nothing stirring," breaks in Eddie. "This jobbie won't put on the mitts not with nobody, not this pleasant afternoon. Wait till he sees him!"

"Who sees which?" says I.

"Wait till this gill sees Clarence!" says he.

"Who's Clarence?" I asks.

"The Wild Bull of Montana," says Mr. Eddie West. "That's who he is in real life, see—Clarence Brown."

IV.

WELL, in respects to Mr. Eddie West's promising candidate for the heavyweight honors, I certainly wished you could of seen him for yourself. Because when it comes to the attempt to give you even the faintest idea of Mr. West's remarkable athlete, why, I am now signing off until seven thirty, when the program will be resumed.

Of course, I might say that Clarence stands a even inch taller than Big Jess, and as you no doubt know, Mr. Willard is no dwarf. What is more, it might be said that Clarence's extremities, or what might be aptly termed his hands and feet, was somehow vaguely reminiscent of, respectively, hot water bottles and violin cases. Likewise it is probably safe to say that had a six-ton truck run full tilt into Mr. Brown's pan, the former would of come off by far the second best.

As luck would have it, we found the Wild Bull already in the ring, doing a neat bit of shadow boxing. So for quite some time I and Horace was positively lost in admiration. Or maybe I might better say we was actually struck dumb. And when you stop to think what this last meant in the case of Mr. Hooper, no doubt you'll be willing to admit there must of been a good reason.

Clarence! Like, for instance, calling the Shenandoah "Cutey"!

"Well," says Eddie, "what d'you know?"

"I got only one criticism to make," I replies, snapping out of it.

"What's that?" asks Eddie.

"He ain't original," I answers. "He's a out and out steal from a play the missus drags me to."

"What play was that?" says Mr. West.

"They called it 'The Hairy Ape,'" says I.

So, anyways, about then the Wild Bull starts to work on a sparring partner. Well, it wasn't only a couple of minutes before the Wild Bull was out of work. So then another bozo climbs into the ring. This bird lasts almost an entire round. After which a third jobbie totters into the squared circle. Well, as a actual fact, this last bimbo goes out just when the first one is coming to.

Hot cay-nine!

"And that's that," says Mr. West. "Yes, we got no more sparring partners to-day. Unless—" He turns inquiringly to Horace.

Well, I wished you could of seen him! Believe it or not, Mr. Hooper couldn't of been worse scared had his family physician advised him that he was seriously threatened with lockjaw.

"I—er—thanks," says Mr. Hooper faintly. "But I just remembered a pressing business engagement. Possibly some other day."

And without another word Mr. Hooper goes away from there!

"Say," says Eddie, when Horace had faded out of the picture, "who is that big blimp, anyways? Excuse me if he's a relative or something."

"He's a relative," I replies, "and you're excused. In fact, go as far as you like. I'm listening."

So then I take Eddie into my confidence in respects to this curse that's wished on me at the altar, so to say, namely, Mr. Hooper. And, what with one thing and another, Eddie being a good scout and always willing to lend a helping hand, the upshot of it was, I and Eddie goes into executive session.

Well, for a while it looks like we're up against a game which is absolutely unbeatable. But then something which has certainly all the earmarks of a regular idea comes to the versatile Mr. Eddie West. Skillfully nursed along, this inspiration of Eddie's finally blossoms into something which—well, anyways, being then in the act of going down for the third time, I

would of certainly grasped at it, had it looked not one-half so attractive as it actually did.

Now, as for this little frame-up of Eddie's—you see I am cheerfully giving Mr. West the entire credit and not trying to detract from his laurels in any way, shape or manner—well, so's in order to save later explanations, I might say here that it was based on the following facts, or you might say propositions, viz., and to wit:

First, on the undeniable truth that, as regards by far the major share of the fickle public, the so-called presumption of innocence, as respects practically all our most popular crimes, works with what you might call the reverse English in respects to people that makes their living on the stage. That's to say, take any actress—like, for instance, Miss Muriel Montrose, and she is presumed to be guilty as charged until she proves herself innocent, and even then there's a lot of people that will have to be shown.

And, secondly, that in view of the impression, which was no less than terrific, made by one Clarence Brown, known as the Wild Bull of Montana, on Mr. Horace J. Hooper, who, it was only fair to presume that, using Clarence as a sort of triple-threat man, so to say, it was possible to stampede Mr. Hooper in practically any given direction; and that what's more, once on his way, Mr. Hooper would be in no tearing hurry to return.

And I am still of the firm opinion that, purely as theories, both of the above propositions was absolutely sound.

But however that may be, at breakfast on the morning after my world conference with Mr. Eddie West, Mr. Hooper being in the act of inhaling a three-minute egg, and, therefore, temporarily mute so far as articulated speech was concerned—anyways, I took the occasion to ask him would he care to join me at the Hotel Doughmont for lunch.

Well, the immediate results of this apparently harmless question was twofold—consisting of an elegantly hand-embroidered look of suspicion from the wife, and a prompt acceptance from Mr. Hooper.

So a little later I am in the process of going quietly away from there, when right out of a clear sky I am confronted with a unlooked-for difficulty in the shapely shape of the missus.

"What's the idea of this all of a sudden inviting Horace out to lunch?" demands the little woman harshly.

"Why, nothing," I says innocently. "Can't a guy take his own brother-in-law out to lunch without being subjected to a series of cross word examinations in respect to his motives? Why wouldn't I take him out to lunch?"

"Why would you?" comes back the frau promptly.

"Why," I says, "I suppose because he's a right guy and I want to treat him right."

"Right guy!" snaps the wife. "How long since? You got something up your sleeve, and I know it!"

"Woman," says I, "you wrong me. On my honor as a British officer, I am using positively no apparatus whatsoever."

And with the last word—for once, anyways—I closed the door gently but firmly behind me.

Well, Mr. Hooper shows up promptly at the Hotel Doughmont, where I was already waiting for him in the lobby. So we're on our ways to the restaurant when, by previous arrangement, I am loudly paged for a phone call. So I says for Horace to wait here and I'll be back in a jiffy. So a few minutes later I report back in a state of breathless excitement.

"Listen!" I says to Mr. Hooper. "That phone call was from Eddie West. This morning, see, on the way to the office, I happened to meet up with Eddie and his little friend the Wild Bull of Montana—name's Brown, you remember—and so I dropped the remark that I was lunching here with you. So Eddie calls up to say that Brown has found out about you and Muriel—somebody must of tipped him off this morning—and, anyways, the Wild Bull is right this minute headed for the Doughmont, so Eddie says to get going, on account the Wild Bull is sure out for trouble, and what's more, if you take his advice you'll leave town for a while."

"But—what—I don't understand!" stutters Mr. Hooper. "This man Brown—what's Muriel to him?"

" Positively nothing, so it seems," I says, " except his wife!"

Well, you could of easily pushed Mr. Hooper over with a chocolate eclair.

" Look!" I says.

And, looming amongst the common herds like a Ferris wheel amongst a flock of kiddie cars, here comes Clarence!

Just for an instant Mr. Hooper regards the steadily approaching Mr. Brown with a glassy and likewise popeyed gaze. Then Mr. Hooper starts hastily for the nearest exit. Well, not being the sort that would desert a friend under fire—and especially as I had it in my mind to see to it that Horace's next stop for any length of time was no nearer than, at the least, Chicago—I followed.

But just before we reach the exit, something happens that—well, maybe I and Eddie should of remembered that the Hotel Doughmont was quite a popular resort with the ladies of the theatrical profession. Because, anyways, Miss Muriel Montrose enters, smiling.

" Greetings, Horace," says Muriel, planting herself between Mr. Hooper and his goal. " Why—what's the matter?"

Horace's expressive countenance, see, being just then the battlefield, you might say, of a large number of conflicting emotions, all of them unpleasant. In fact, practically any competent alienist, observing Horace at the moment, would of promptly recommended that he be put under immediate observation. And for that matter, I might of appeared a trifle nervous, say, myself.

At any rate, in response to Muriel's greeting there's a sort of gurgling sound in Horace's throat, but his ordinarily silver tongue positively refuses to function.

And in the mean time Mr. Brown continues to approach.

Horace makes a feeble attempt to pass Muriel, which results in the lady grasping Mr. Hooper firmly by the arm and once more wanting to know what it's all about.

At about which time Mr. Brown arrives.

" Clarence!" exclaims the bewitching Miss Montrose. " I haven't seen you for ages! Clarence," she goes on, turning once more to the much bewildered Mr. Hooper—which he had very little on me—" Clarence, you know, is—well, what he calls a box-fighter. So we don't see very much of each other, because he thinks it might interfere with my stage career if people knew I had a brother that was a prize fighter."

" Why," she says to Clarence, " I don't believe you've even heard that I've changed my stage name to Muriel Montrose!"

" News to me," says Clarence. " If I had, I wouldn't be here, and there's others that wouldn't likewise!"

And he follows this with a look in my direction which—well, anyways, starting slowly, but gradually gaining speed, I personally proceeded to fade out of the picture.

Brown! You might remember that Mr. Hooper once remarked that that he believed Miss Montrose's actual name to be—er—Green. Well, he was perfectly correct, except the color.

Well, of course, Horace relates his strange experience to the wife, and leave it to the missus to put two and two together and act accordingly. However, there is little to be gained by going into these intimate family matters.

And finally, just one little incident which maybe might be of some interest. On the day following the events I have described I somewhat nervously once more visited Mr. Eddie West's gym, on account there was a little matter of business which I wished to take up with Mr. Clarence Brown. Well, I found Clarence busily engaged in pulling a set of chest-weights out of the wall by the roots.

" Mr. Brown," I says, in the mildest of manners, and keeping a eagle eye on the nearest exit, " now in respects to the fifty iron men which you received from myself as the return for taking part in yesterday's performance—well, seeing the show was a flop—"

" Try and get it!" growls the Wild Bull of Montana. " Just try!"

Well, I was only going to suggest that he do the fair thing, anyways, like, maybe, splitting with me fifty-fifty; but—use your own judgment.

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