ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

A Serial in Six Shots

Brass Commandments

by Charles Alden Seltzer

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CXLII | CONTENTS FOR MAY 20, 1922 | NUMBER 6

FIVE CONTINUED STORIES

ONE NOVELETTE

SIX SHORT STORIES

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, 280 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, and TEMPLE HOUSE, TEMPLE AVENUE, E. C., LONDON

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

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

Wonderful Clay Brings New Beauty to Every Skin!

Almost at once the complexion becomes clear and beautiful through this amazing scientific discovery.

SCIENCE is giving new complexions for old through a marvelous new discovery! Dull, coarse, blemished skins are being transformed into exquisite softness and smoothness—almost at once. Years of scientific research and experiment have finally revealed the elements which, when combined in certain exact proportions, remove the dead scales on the surface of the skin, clear the pores of every impurity, and leave the complexion as clear and charming as a child's.

The skin is provided by nature with millions of tiny pores with which to expel acids and impurities. When dust bores deeply into these pores, the impurities remain in the skin. The result is not always noticeable at first. But soon the complexion becomes dull and harsh. Suddenly the face "breaks out" in pimples and blackheads. And if the impurities are still allowed to remain, the complexion becomes ruined entirely.

The New Discovery Explained

Certain elements, when correctly combined according to a chemist's formula, have been found to possess a powerful potency. These elements, or ingredients, have been blended into a soft, plastic, cream-like clay, delicately scented. It is applied to the face with the finger tips—just as a cream would be applied.

The name given to this wonderful discovery is Domino Complexion Clay. The moment it is applied, every one of the millions of tiny pores in the skin awaken and hungrily absorb the nourishing skin-foods. In a few minutes the clay dries and hardens, and there is a cool, tingling pleasant sensation as the powerful clay draws out every skin impurity. You will actually feel the tiny pores breathing, relaxing, freeing themselves with relief from the impurities that clogged and stifled them.

Allow Domino Complexion Clay to remain for a little while. You may read, or sew, or go about your household duties. All the while you will feel the powerful beauty clay doing its work, gently drawing out impurities and absorbing blemishes. A warm towel will soften the clay, and you will be able to roll it off easily with your fingers. And with it you will roll off every scale of dead skin, every harmful impurity, every blemish. A hidden beauty will be unmasked—beneath the old complexion will be revealed a new one with all the soft, smooth texture and delicate coloring of youth!

Special Free Examination Offer

In order to enable everyone to test this wonderful new preparation, we are making a very special free-examination offer. If you send in your application now a jar of Domino Complexion Clay will be sent to you at once, freshly compounded and direct from the Domino House. Although it is a $3.50 product and will cost that much ordinarily, you may pay the postman only $1.95 (plus a few cents postage) in full payment. And despite this special low introductory price you have the guaranteed privilege of returning the jar and having your money refunded at once if you are not delighted with results.

Our Guarantee Backed by Million-Dollar Bank

We guarantee Domino Complexion Clay to be a preparation of marvelous potency—and a beautifier that is absolutely harmless to the most sensitive skin. This guarantee of satisfaction to every user is backed by a deposit of $10,000 in the State Bank of Philadelphia, which insures the return to any purchaser of the total amount paid for Domino Complexion Clay if the results are unsatisfactory or if our statements in this announcement in any way misrepresent this wonderful new discovery.

Mail the Coupon NOW!

Don't fail to take advantage of this free-to-your-door introductory price offer. No matter what the condition of your complexion may be, Domino Complexion Clay will give it a new radiant beauty—for it is a natural preparation and works *always*. You won't have to wait for results, either. They are immediately evident.

Just mail the coupon—no money. Test for yourself this remarkable new discovery that actually lifts away blemishes and reveals a charming, beautiful new complexion. Don't delay. Clip and mail the coupon now. Domino House, Dept. 435, 269 South 9th St., Philadelphia.

DOMINO HOUSE, Dept. 435
269 South 9th Street, Philadelphia, Pa.

Without money in advance, you may send me a full-size $3.50 jar of Domino Complexion Clay. When it is in my hands I will pay the postman only $1.95 (plus few cents postage) in full payment. I retain the privilege of returning the jar within 10 days and having my money refunded if I am not surprised and pleased with the wonderful results. I am to be sole judge.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....State.....

If you wish, you may send money with coupon.

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Classified Advertising continued on page 6.

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Without cost or obligation, please explain how I can qualify for the position, or in the subject *before* which I have marked an X:

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Occupation.....

Persons residing in Canada should send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada.

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NEVER before has the demand for cartoonists been so urgent or their earnings so great! Newspapers, Magazines, Advertising Agencies, Movie Industries—thousands of high-salaried opportunities are right now open to the new cartoonist in this fascinating field.

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YOU can now easily learn in your spare time at home to draw the comic strips, political cartoons, caricatures and animateds, which are in such big demand. No matter what your experience or education has been, this original method quickly teaches you to draw splendid salable cartoons.

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Learn more about the amazing opportunities for you in this fast-growing uncrowded field. An intensely interesting booklet has just been prepared which is crammed full of valuable information about Cartooning—stories of the famous cartoonists, history of cartooning, details about every branch, a thorough explanation of the method which enables you to enter this field and thousands of other equally important facts. Sent without obligation upon request. Write TODAY.

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MORE COMPANY, Dept. 453 St. Louis, Mo.

Classified Advertising continued from page 4.

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Treat yourself at home for:

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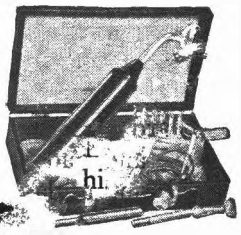
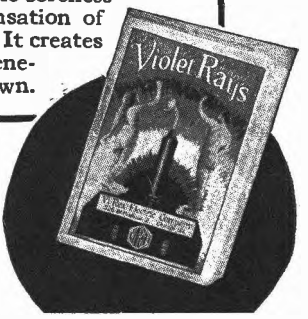


The Violet Ray, as used in the treatment of the body, sends a spray of mild, tiny currents through every part and organ; flowing through each infinitesimal cell, massaging it, invigorating it and re-vitalizing it. It leaves no soreness after use, only a delightful sensation of relief. Vi-Rex is *not a vibrator.* It creates cellular massage, the most beneficial electrical treatment known.



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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOL. CXLII SATURDAY, MAY 20, 1922 NUMBER 6

Brass Commandments

Part I

by Charles Alden Seltzer

Author of "Riddle Gawne," "Beau Rand," etc.

CHAPTER I.

FLASH LANNON COMES HOME.

FIRST he saw the shipping pens, then the runways and the corrals. Afterward, somberly, he stared at Bozzam City, and thought the cattle pens more attractive.

For Stephen Lannon was in no pleasant mood. His home-coming was a sacrifice to what he considered his duty. He would much rather have stayed East, but his coming had been made mandatory because of a telegram he had received from his foreman, Tom Yates, bearing the brief message: "Come home immediately."

He had answered the foreman's telegram from New York, advising that he would reach Bozzam City the following Thursday, and instructing Yates to have Ben Perrin meet him at Bozzam City with the buckboard. He had arrived a day ahead of time, [illegible] no expectation of seeing Ben Perrin, [illegible] unless he decided to hire a horse and [illegible] to the Bosque Grand.

He stood motionless on the station platform after the train had steamed away, his soul seared with contempt and derision as he stared at Bozzam City's ugly shanties. Bozzam City at this minute seemed as diverting as a pile of bleached bones in a desert. He knew it as well as he knew his own name. He might have left it only yesterday for all the changes that time had made in it. In five years not one new building had been erected. More stale than the dead, dry dust that covered it, it seemed to exude foulness. It stretched its loathsome length beside the railroad tracks like some repellent monster, the grimy windows of its shacks staring with sinister steadiness into the white sunlight.

He turned from the town, dropped his traveling bag to the platform beside him, and gazed around him at the valley—"Lannon Basin"—named after his family. Sixty miles eastward the gleaming rails over which he had traveled entered the valley; seventy miles westward the train that had brought him would have to travel before it reached the first low range of hills in that direction.

There had come no change in the valley; it was as he had left it five years ago. Nature's face was unaltered. The thirty miles of wilderness that stretched northward to the serrated hills that thrust their peaks into the serene blue of the sky still seemed so close that they appeared to nod to him. The brilliant sunshine that poured down upon him was the same as when he had stood on the station platform five years before, waiting for the train that was to take him eastward to new scenes and into a new life. Salient features of the land were the same then as now. Minaret, bastioned tower and cathedral spire loomed high above virile, bright green grass; dead lava beds and frequent stretches of white, dry sand were as familiar to him as the bold summits of the Capitans, southward, their bases submerged in a blue, tenuous haze. Trails, dim or unseen by the unpracticed eye, were so flagrantly visible to him that they seemed wide as wagon roads.

He stared into the far reaches of the valley, southward, reminiscent, his gaze saturnine. This was the land of his youth; the valley which had been his domain by virtue of a ruthless will and a cleverness with the six-shooter that had effectually discouraged encroachment. Again, in memory, he rode Polestar into the yawning gulf of distance, over the grass plains, across the desert stretches, into the hills, while the *sahuaro* nodded to him in friendly fashion, the *tinajas* tinkled soft welcomes and the breezes pressed against him, fragrant, and articulate with the secrets of the great waste places.

He was home again! Home again, still contemptuous of Bozzam City, though susceptible to the lure of the beauty of the valley, and still the possessor of strange, violent passions and the fierce unrest that after his father's death had made even the mighty valley seem like a prison.

Wild, untamed, intractable, he had been when five years ago he had stood on the platform at Bozzam City waiting for the train that was to bear him eastward; and the few citizens who had lingered to see him off had given him the tribute of their polite respect. Now, at twenty-seven, he was back again, after having submitted to five years of tortuous refining in the crucible of civilization.

He had not banished the violent impulses that had characterized him in the days before he left the valley; but he had learned to govern them; he had found the virtue of deliberation. And because he had fought to master himself, certain lines of his face had changed. His chin now had a bold thrust, advertising a tenacity that had come through five years of determination to achieve self-control; his eyes had become a deeper, softer blue, where before they had been pale and agate hard; his mouth had now an expression of cold whimsicality, where in other days it had betrayed wantonness.

He was twenty-seven and looked thirty. The clear, bronzed skin of his face was healthy and firm; his big shoulders were those of an athlete; and his step was light, as having finished his inspection of the valley, he picked up his bag and walked toward the door of the station, where he saw the agent leaning against one of the jambs, his head surrounded by a halo of tobacco smoke from a short-stemmed corncob pipe.

As he passed the west wall of the station he saw two men watching him intently, with frank curiosity. He knew both, but it was evident they did not recognize him. His Eastern clothes, his matured manner, together with the atmosphere of sophistication that lingered about him, made a disguise that the curiosity of the men could not penetrate.

One of the men was Lemuel Clearwater, who owned the Star ranch, some miles west of Bozzam City on the Elk River. He was big, smooth shaved, prosperous looking. The skin of his fat, round face was abloom with health, his eyes were clear and keen.

He was ponderous, but muscular, and his shoulders bulged the sleeves of the gray woolen shirt he wore. He stood with legs asprawl, his back against the wall of the station. A careless thumb was hooked in the cartridge belt that encircled his corpulent waist; a wide-brimmed sombrero sat well back on his head, disclosing the fact that he was bald and not ashamed of it.

The other man was Ed Bannack. He was dark, slender, and of medium height. He was younger than the big man, and his countenance was not so pleasant to look upon. He had steady gray eyes, a long nose that seemed to twitch inquisitively, and his mouth seemed always ready to droop into a sneer. He was arrayed in a dark woolen shirt, sombrero, leather chaps, boots. A cartridge belt encircled his middle, and a six-shooter hung on his right hip.

Lannon's swift glance at the men provided him with these details of their appearance. He liked Clearwater; he had never been an admirer of Bannack.

As he passed them on his way to the door of the station he say Bannack nudge Clearwater and chuckle sneeringly. Clearwater looked doubtful, as though not quite certain that the provocation to laugh was sufficient.

The agent was a stranger to Lannon, and while he waited for the man to reply to his query regarding the probable arrival of his trunks, Lannon meditated upon the ironic fugacity of fame. The former station agent had been proud to know him, and had shamelessly betrayed his pride on the station platform on the day Lannon had gone eastward; and at that time there had not been a man in the valley who would have confessed that he hadn't heard of Lannon. But the present station agent delayed a reply to his question the better to inspect him, while Clearwater and Bannack, thinking him a stranger, seemed to consider him deserving of their not too silent ridicule.

"Trunks—eh?" said the agent finally. "We-ll, I dunno. It's likely they'll come in on number six. Mebbe not till tuhmorrow mornin'. You come in for the barbecue?"

A malicious mood was upon Lannon. The look he gave the agent was so steadily truculent that the latter began to have doubts concerning the accuracy of his conclusions.

"Did I come in for the barbecue?" said Lannon. "I'll think it over. If I did I'll come back and tell you about it. If I didn't, I suppose I can stay here just the same?"

"I reckon," conceded the agent, his mouth popping open.

"All right. I didn't want you to worry about it."

Lannon turned, walked a little distance, and came to a halt in front of Clearwater and Bannack. He ignored Clearwater, but gazed with level eyes at Bannack.

"Bannack," he said, "it's unmannerly to sneer at a man when you think he isn't looking at you. If you do it again while I'm in town I'll sure make you hard to catch."

Bannack essayed a sneer. It was a dismal failure. He was held by Lannon's gaze as though by a magnet. He reddened, coughed, writhed; but words would not come. In the end he was forced to lower his gaze. He stood, staring blankly at his feet while Lannon turned and strode off without looking back.

It was not until Lannon had reached Bozzam City's street that Bannack or Clearwater moved or spoke.

"Sufferin' wildcats!" ejaculated Clearwater, then. And—"Gawd Almighty, them eyes! They near froze me!"

"Flash Lannon!" said Bannack, thickly. He was pale; his eyes bulged as he stared after the retreating figure of the man who had so unceremoniously humbled him.

"Hell!" exclaimed Clearwater. "I'll be damned if it wasn't him! Sufferin' cats! Now what do you think about that?"

CHAPTER II.

"... GET OUT OF HYEH!"

LANNON made his way across an open space beside the shipping pens flanking a spur and gained a board walk that paralleled the fronts of Bozzam City's shanties on the south side of the street.

Several ewe-necked ponies stood at the various hitching rails he passed. All bore saddles with the familiar ox-bow stirrup, and all were dust-covered, drooping, drowsy. Farther down the street was a canvas-covered wagon. "The Cross-in-a-box is in for supplies," was Lannon's comment as his gaze went to the brand on the disreputable looking horses. "I wonder how old Grammus is making it."

At a little distance out on the plains east of town Lannon saw a rider. He was astride a black horse, gayly caparisoned. The rider looked like a Mexican vaquero, for he wore Mexican chaparejos of yellow leather, studded down the seams with lumps of turquoise stones set in silver; his boots were spurred with silver, and his bell-crowned sombrero was bespangled with the same metal. Other bits of attire, which seemed to betray the nationality of the rider were a short, close-fitting black velvet jacket with wide, bell-like cuffs, silver buttoned; a brown sash, glistening boots, their tops hidden under the wide chaps; a neckerchief of bright yellow and a long, lead-tipped quirt, dangling from the left wrist.

The rider was not far away; and Lannon distinctly heard his voice as he greeted a man who stood in a doorway at a little distance down the street:

"*Buenas dias, señor!*"

"You're comin' in plenty of time!" shouted the man who was standing in the doorway.

"One must never be late for *la fiesta,*" responded the rider, this time in English, with a mocking lilt in his voice.

He came on toward Lannon, who now observed that the Mexican costume was an affectation. For though the rider was dark of face, his features were unmistakably those of the white race. In addition the rider had yellow hair, blue eyes, and lashes that were faded to a light straw color.

"Campan!" yelled a voice far up the street, behind the rider. "Campan!" came the voice again. "You ol' son-of-a-gun, come back hyah!"

The rider did not answer; did not seem to hear. For at that moment he was abreast of Lannon, and he was devoting his entire attention to the latter, his eyes glowing insolently, his lips parted in a smile of contempt.

Lannon had glanced briefly at the rider just before the latter came abreast, and he passed on in ignorance of the other's insulting scrutiny.

In front of the livery stable Lannon paused. He was on the point of hiring a horse to ride to the Bosque Grand, but the agent's word, "barbecue," appealed insidiously, flaunting its promise of diversion. He went on again and turned in upon a wide, paved gallery that extended across the front of a two-story log building with a big door in the center above which was a gilt sign in rambling letters:

BOZZAM CITY HOTEL

The structure had been Bozzam City's first building. In fact, it had been erected before the coming of the railroad, and its former owner, Lafe Hollowel, forced out by the encroachments of civilization, had sold the house and packed all his belongings clear out of the valley over the Capitan Divide, "whar no damned railroad can't never come!"

Lafe had not waited to watch the defamation of his erstwhile ranch-house, nor, in the memory of any of the people of Bozzam City, had he returned for a glance at the railroad he affected to despise.

To Lannon the old building was a familiar landmark. The Hollowels had been neighbors and had been very friendly toward the Lannons. Lannon paused at the big door and glanced back over the gallery he had crossed. Many times had he enjoyed its shade, its restful atmosphere. The presence of various chairs scattered here and there on the gallery gave to the historical spot a hint of the use to which it was being put, and he did not have to strain his imagination to visualize the boarders sitting in the chairs, filling the place with small talk.

And now as he stood in the doorway he was again impressed with the ugliness of the town; by the dilapidated appearance of the buildings; by the refuse and rubbish that lay everywhere, and by the at-

mosphere of foulness that seemed to hover over it all.

He found himself wondering why he had treasured a mental picture of the spot during the years of his absence. But when he looked beyond the gallery and the town at the mountains shining in the distance, and saw how the shimmering sunlight touched with glory the rugged crests of some remote buttes and spread a rose veil from horizon to horizon and from the slumberous earth to the farthest reaches of the vast arch of blue sky, he knew that the picture he had treasured had not been of Bozzam City but of the clean, pure land that surrounded it.

Strange emotions gripped him as he turned to enter the big doorway of the hotel. And then a voice, coming from the interior, smote his ears and brought him to a halt on the threshold.

The voice was a girl's. He was certain of that, for it had the unmellowed flavor of an adolescence not long achieved, a sharpness that somehow expressed the arrogance of youth, and a vitriolic quality that spoke eloquently of temper.

"Darn you, Dave Devake, you quit devilin' me an' get out of hyeh!"

CHAPTER III.

"I'M APOLOGIZING TO THE LADY."

LANNON stepped inside, to find himself in the well-remembered "big" room, which extended clear to the rear of the house, where another door, as large as the one through which he had entered, opened into a *patio*. A huge archway at his right disclosed another big room, in which in the old days there had been an enormous fireplace.

Lannon halted in the archway and glanced into the room. The big fireplace was still there. Above it, surmounting a rough plank mantel shelf, was the mammoth deerhead which old Hollowel had always proudly exhibited; in front of it was the crude, home-made horsehair lounge, upon which Lannon had sat many times. But the walls which had once been graced by personal treasures, intimate and valued —by hanging powderhorn and rifle, and interestedly splotched by the skins of various animals, each having a history—were now desecrated by multicolored lithographs, calendars advertising a "new" soap, a pain killer, pills, a new brand of whisky, a corn cure.

At Lannon's right as he stood in the archway, and extending almost across the front of the room, was a counter with a wire wicket in its center. Behind the counter was a window which looked out upon Bozzam City's one street. Also behind the counter was a wall clock. Standing just beneath the clock was a girl, undoubtedly the girl of the voice.

Her eyes were ablaze with wrath. They did not seem to see Lannon, but they flashed dark lightnings at a tall, slender man who stood close to the counter, his back toward Lannon. Lannon could not see the man's face, but even if he hadn't heard the girl speak his name he would have known him as a gambler who had frequented Bozzam City's resorts in the old days. Devake was smooth, suave, cunning, bland, cruel.

The girl was not tall, for merely her head and shoulders showed above the top of the counter; though she seemed taller because of the imperious way she held her chin as she looked at Devake. A pugnacious self-reliance characterized her. She was not afraid of the man who faced her across the counter.

Her pallor, even if Lannon had not heard her voice, would have told him that her wrath was genuine. Her black hair was in bulging waves and coils. It curved glossily against her white forehead and drooped gracefully at her temples, framing the smooth oval of her face and accentuating the velvet texture of her skin.

She was startlingly beautiful, and Lannon had some difficulty in believing her to be the owner of the voice which had uttered the threat.

"Deviling you?" said the man banteringly. "I was just telling you the truth, Glory. You're the best looking girl in the valley."

"If I was I reckon I'd know it, Dave Devake!" declared the girl. "And if I

didn't know it I wouldn't want a chromo like you to tell me about it. I want you to get out of hyeh!"

Devake laughed.

"Plenty of time, Glory—plenty of time. I've been wanting to have a talk with you, and there ain't any one around now. You ain't fooling me any with your high and mighty airs. It's been hinted that more than one—"

Lannon's shoulder struck Devake, and knocked him off balance. Before he could recover and turn to confront the force that had driven into him, his arms were seized from behind; he was whirled by a power that seemed irresistible and his back jammed against the counter. Then he found himself staring into Lannon's face.

For an instant Devake stood motionless; then he straightened, got his feet squarely under him, and began to raise his right hand toward the gun in the holster at his right hip. His face was bloated with rage, his eyes glittered with malignance.

But his hand had moved only a little distance upward when it slowed, stopped, the fingers spread wide. The poisonous red went out of his face, leaving it pale. The malignance faded from his eyes, and his mouth began to open.

Experienced, wise, cunning, Devake had instantly noted that the newcomer was a "tenderfoot"—that he was apparently unarmed. And though Devake's hand was not more than a few inches from the butt of his own six-shooter, and though he knew many words that, spoken now, would have brought on the violence he craved, he did not utter one of them, nor did his hand move any farther toward his gun.

He stood rigid, motionless, his legs asprawl, staring into Lannon's eyes. What he saw there seemed to fascinate him. Swimming deep in Lannon's eyes was a whimsical wantonness, a sneering mockery, a cold contempt, and a chilling confidence—and an arrogance that must be founded upon a complete knowledge of the man's ability to take care of himself in any crisis. More; there was a lusting eagerness somewhere in Lannon's eyes, a passion that Devake had seen in the eyes of gunmen of his time—"killers" seeking provocation.

Strangely, Devake was seeing Lannon in a different garb—in the trappings of a cowboy. Lannon's Eastern clothing had vanished. Leather chaps seemed to adorn his legs; soft-topped boots with high heels had replaced the gleaming shoes; a brown flannel shirt enveloped Lannon's big shoulders; a blue neckerchief sagged at his throat; a wide-brimmed felt hat, pulled well down over the eyes, had been magically substituted for the black derby. Two guns, suspended from a cartridge belt that crossed his waist loosely, were sagging at his hips, the holster bottoms tied to the legs of the chaps with rawhide thongs.

The mental picture was real, vivid. Although Devake's memory did not serve him well, he was certain he had seen the stranger before; he was sure he was not really a stranger, but a familiar figure that elusive memory would not or could not identify.

Devake's vicious impulses had fled. He now wished nothing more than to go peaceably on his way. He felt cold, shaken; his muscles were numbed, his brain atrophied.

To his astonishment Devake discovered that his mouth was opening, and that words were issuing from it. A voice, which he did not recognize, said thickly: "I'm apologizing to the lady."

And then he felt himself walking across the room. He went through the archway, passed over the gallery and into the street, and made his way down the board walk, strangely thankful for the heat and the sunlight.

Lannon watched Devake cross the gallery. The girl still stood behind the counter. She said nothing, though Lannon saw that she watched him speculatively, as if she was as yet unable to comprehend what had happened.

Lannon did not offer any explanation, though he had readily accounted for Devake's strange actions. No miracle had been worked. He had known Devake in the old days. He was convinced that Devake had recognized him. That was all. Devake had merely decided not to force trouble.

Lannon crossed the room and seated

himself on the lounge. Leaning against the high back, he stared reflectively into the dead fireplace.

A bit of the old life had flashed out at him in the well remembered room. What had happened to the girl might have happened anywhere, even in the East. But it seemed to him that civilization's methods would have softened the process; that vice would have hidden its face.

He sat long, drawing his contrasts. A sound disturbed his reflections, and he looked up to see the girl standing at the end of the lounge at his left, silently watching him.

She had evidently been standing there for some time. Her eyes, while aggressive, held a certain wistfulness, and her flushed face told him very plainly that she was thinking of what Devake had said to her.

"You didn't believe him?"

There was a taint of bitterness in her voice, strangely mingled with a repressed fierceness. She had almost gulped the question at him.

"Devake? Certainly not! Why should I believe a man who insults women?"

"I was hoping you wouldn't. I'm square. Just because I'm running this hotel while dad's away ain't no sign that I'm what he almost said—what a lot of folks think."

"If you're square in your own mind you ought to be satisfied," said Lannon. "If you expect people to accept you at your own valuation you are going to be disappointed."

"Stranger, you've got sense," she said, her eyes kindling. They were brown eyes, deep, velvety, with shades of meditative thought swiftly moving in them. He looked away from them once, then back again quickly, probing them, fascinated by their eloquence.

"I've been thinking that myself. That's why I don't care a darn what they think!" There was fierce defiance in her voice.

Lannon felt his senses assailed by an intangible glamour, a strange sensation of pleasure which was like no other that he had ever experienced. He had found satisfaction in looking upon other women, but this was a feeling that went deeper, that was more exhilarating, that stirred forces within him which seemed to have been dormant. He had felt it with his first glance at her, and the thing was growing upon him.

He was certain that her appeal to him came through her startling frankness, her genuineness, the honesty that shone in her eyes, her instinctive reaching out for the hand of fellowship and faith, like a child seeking sympathy.

She sank to the arm of the lounge, straightened her skirts and stared into the fireplace. When she again spoke it seemed she had conquered the emotion that had thus far oppressed her. She smiled faintly, without guile, when she discovered he was watching her.

"How did you do it?" she said.

"Do what?"

"Make Dave Devake crawl that way. Why, he just sneaked out as though he was scared you'd bite his haid off. And he had a gun! You didn't. You ain't got one anywhere on you, hev you? In your pocket or in a sling under your coat?"

"I have no gun."

"It beats me! Ain't you scared of Dave?"

"I don't seem to be."

"I reckon you don't. I expaict it ain't hard to explain though. You've got a sort of chilling eye, stranger; and mebbe Dave saw something in you that is a heap worse than a gun. Devake ain't nobody's fool. But Dave ain't the sort to forget. He'll come back hyeh and run you out of town."

There was pity in her glance, now. He had defended her, he had been gallant to her. But he was of that soft and not uncommon type of man contemptuously termed "tenderfoot" by the rough, seasoned men of the West, and it was inevitable that Devake would return to exact vengeance for the indignity offered him.

"I reckon you would hide, though. You could keep out of sight till number six comes in. And if I went to the station with you Devake wouldn't dare shoot you."

"Thank you. I'm staying in town tonight. Here, if you have room."

"There's plenty of room. But Dave'll kill you, stranger!"

"I think not. Anyway, I'm staying."

She sighed, but her eyes were bright as they searched his face.

"You've got grit," was her tribute. Then for a time she sat silent, idly swinging a dangling foot, turning it this way and that, inspecting it. Twice she glanced at Lannon's gleaming shoes, comparing them with her own.

Presently Lannon turned and caught her looking at him. She blushed, got up immediately and went behind the counter, where she stood with her elbows on its top, her chin in her hands watching his head, which was visible above the back of the lounge.

"Glory," Devake had called her, reflected Lannon. To his knowledge he had never heard of her. Obviously, therefore, she had come to Bozzam City after he had left to go East to school. He was curious.

As a type she was not new to him. Hollowel had had a girl like her, self-reliant, courageous, aggressive. Environment had shaped her character, of course. This was peculiarly a man's country, and any girl in a family where males predominated must of necessity be somewhat influenced by the masculine atmosphere of the home and must inevitably adopt masculine mannerisms. Lafe Hollowel's girl had been so much like her brothers that Lannon had often wondered if she were not a boy masquerading in female attire.

But whatever the masculine influence in Glory's life it had not robbed her of those graces which are so essentially feminine. Her language was strongly flavored with the tang and idioms of the southwest, Texas he supposed, but her personality would have been the same no matter what the imperfections of her language. There had been a suggestion of careless indifference to appearances in her action in unconcernedly draping herself on the arm of the lounge. But the thing had been done with a serene unconsciousness of sex, quite as though the thought of her doing anything unusual had not entered her mind.

He had seemed to ignore the movement that had taken her away from the lounge to her present position behind the counter; but he knew she was there and that she was watching him, for her reflection was in a small mirror that hung on the wall almost in front of the lounge.

"Town is pretty quiet to-day?" he suggested.

"Always is. Except by spells. I reckon to-night will be a spell."

"Barbecue?"

"Yep. Who told you?"

"The station agent."

"Jim Johnson is a fool!"

"Agreed. Any other fools in town?"

"Plenty. I reckon I'm one for staying hyeh."

"Not much business, I presume?"

"Oh, it ain't that—so much. There's a living hyeh for me and dad. We couldn't expaict much more than that, anyway. It's the darned men. I reckon Bozzam City's got the meanest men in the country!" She paused and then went on bitterly. "They think all women are alike."

"Women aren't. You don't mean to tell me that all the men of Bozzam City are like Devake?"

"Mostly. Them that ain't like him are worse."

"Bad men, eh?"

"Yep. And more drift in. On sprees. Mostly they hang around the saloons. When a bunch comes in and starts to raising the devil I shut up the house and keep them out."

Watching her face in the mirror Lannon saw that her lips were twitching, that she had caught the lower one between her teeth and was biting it nervously as though in an effort to keep back words that were trying to surge through. Her eyes were gleaming mistily.

She was fighting a mental battle. Something she wanted to tell him was being held back because she felt she had no right to confide in him, a stranger. But he saw her resolution weaken; saw determination stiffen her lips and glow in her eyes.

"Stranger," she said steadily, "you're from the East and you must know a lot of girls. How do Eastern men treat their women?"

"As ladies, I hope."

"You speak as though you ain't sure. Ain't you ever kept company with a girl?"

"To be sure. I've known quite a few girls."

"Well; how did you treat them?"

"As ladies, of course."

"And were *all* of them ladies?"

"I hope so. I shouldn't want to think otherwise."

"You wouldn't, of course. I reckon it's a mighty hard thing to get at. I expaict I'll hev to speak right out. I'm asking you straight if there's anything about me that would make a man think I ain't a lady?"

Lannon turned and looked at her. "What makes you say that?" he asked. "There is no question about your being a lady."

She blushed, but her eyes were steady and probing, searching his for signs of insincerity.

"I ain't much on grammar, stranger."

"That has nothing to do with the question."

"I don't wear clothes like a lady wears." She made a gesture which seemed to invite him to remember the coarseness of her attire, which consisted of a brown woolen blouse with a low, turn-down collar caught together with a flowing, blue silk tie; a skirt which fell just below her knees which had impressed him as a strictly utilitarian garment of uncertain material; woolen stockings which had been darned in many places, and shoes which he had observed were small and well shaped.

"I believe the quality of clothing one wears does not enter into the question at all," declared Lannon.

"And I'm living hyeh, among a lot of men, running this hotel while dad's away."

"Which does you credit."

"And in spite of all that you still think I'm a lady?"

"I haven't doubted it for an instant."

"Then, stranger," she concluded, her eyes unwavering; "why do men — like Dave Devake and a good many others — come in hyeh and act toward me as Devake acted a little while ago? Is there anything about me that makes them feel that they've got a right to act like that toward me?"

"There are men like Devake everywhere," said Lannon.

"They ought to be killed, darn them!" Little spots of brown and fire gathered and glowed in her eyes. "I wish dad would sell out and get out of hyeh. I'm getting mighty sick of looking at the chromos that drift in hyeh. According to report there ain't been a regular, honest-to-goodness man in this section of the country since Flash Lannon pulled up his stakes and went East. I've heard so much about Flash Lannon that I'd give a heap to see him. Folks hev talked about him so much that I'm half in love with him."

Lannon turned and gazed into the fireless grate.

"I've heard of such things," he said.

"Heard of what things?"

"Of women falling in love with men they have never seen. But I suppose that sort of love doesn't take."

"Why not?" she challenged. "Why shouldn't it take? If the man that a girl loves without seeing him comes pretty near being what she's made of him I don't see why she couldn't keep right on loving him."

"That's just the point. When you see this man Lannon you might be disappointed in him."

"I reckon that might happen, but I don't think it will. Folks hev told me what he looks like. They say he's handsome. That wouldn't be anything in his favor if there was nothing to go with his looks. But according to what folks say about him there's a heap more to him than looks. You can most always tell what sort a man is by thinking a little about the folks who talk about him. If a man is pretty generally run down by men that don't amount to much themselves, and praised by men who do amount to something, you can come pretty near to figuring your man has got something about him that makes him pretty decent."

"I take it that Lannon has enemies as well as friends?"

"Plenty of both. Men like Devake and Bannack and some others hev done a lot of talking about Lannon. Now and then I've heard them. Seems like Lannon had done some mighty plain talking to those men. I've heard them tell what they'd do to Lannon if he ever comes back to the valley."

"What have Lannon's friends said to that sort of talk?"

"Just laughed—sort of sticking their tongues in their cheeks."

"Well," said Lannon, meditatively gazing into the fireplace, "if I were you I wouldn't let the things people say about Lannon influence me too much. During a man's absence his friends are likely to give him extravagant praise, while his enemies are apt to tell the truth about him."

She gave him a defiant glance, which he caught in the little mirror.

"According to that, Lannon's friends must have been a pretty poor sort, for they didn't praise him any. I told you they'd laugh and stick their tongues in their cheeks when some one talked about Lannon. But why didn't Lannon's enemies get even with him while he was hyeh?

"Just plain scared, I reckon. They'd talk big when Lannon wasn't around, but let him come within a dozen miles of them and they'd have business somewhere else!

"Lannon was a terrible fighter, stranger. My dad, who used to come over hyeh from Lazette, saw him more than once. That was more than five years ago. Lannon wasn't more than twenty-two or three years old then, but dad said his age wasn't a heap visible when he was looking at a man who'd done him a wrong."

"So you've been here five years?" said Lannon.

"A little more than two years. Lannon was about six feet tall, according to dad. He was built in proportion. Dad said he never saw a finer looking man. He used to ride a big, silver horse he called Polstar. And dad says that when he was on that horse there wasn't a handsomer man—"

"You lived in Lazette?" questioned Lannon, quickly.

"About thirty miles south of Lazette," answered Glory. "Lannon's folks lived at the Bosque Grand, about thirty miles south of hyeh on Bear River. But Lannon's dad was the first cattleman in this valley, and he mighty near owned it. It was named after him. According to what I've heard, Flash Lannon grew up sort of wild. Not vicious, you understand, but just full of the devil. I've heard folks say that when he was eighteen there wasn't a man living within a hundred miles of the valley that would face him when he was stirred to anger. When Flash was twenty a man he'd bested in a gun fight sent a Texas gunfighter into the valley to kill him. Flash heard the gunfighter was looking for him, and he rode into town hyeh—which wasn't as big as it is now—after sending word to the gunfighter that he was coming.

"A number of men saw the meeting, and they'll tell you to this day that they never saw any gunplay like it before or since. That gunfighter never went back to Texas. Flash shot him three times while he was getting his gun out, after giving him his chance."

"When do you expect your father to return?" questioned Lannon. He was hugely embarrassed by the girl's talk about himself, was hoping he might divert her thoughts, and was aware that he could not now reveal his identity to her. She had said too much. Later, after the edge had worn off her embarrassment over the discovery that she had praised him while under the impression that she had been talking to another, he would tell her and apologize for not revealing himself. He had let her go until now, because never in his life had praise sounded so sweet to him.

"Dad won't be home for another week," she said, answering him. "Stranger," she added, her eyes shining, her color high; "don't it stir you to hear about Flash Lannon? If he was hyeh in this room I reckon I'd sure kiss him for the enjoyment I've got out of listening to folks talk about him. Folks say there never was a man like Flash Lannon!"

"Perhaps you are estimating him too highly, Miss—" He paused.

"Stowe," she supplied.

"I should say there must be something of the demon in a man who goes about shooting other men offhandedly," he said, not looking at the girl.

"That's the Eastern viewpoint, of course," she replied quickly. "Back East there's laws for everything. Out hyeh we've got to depend on custom because there ain't nothing better. And it's the custom out hyeh that when one man tells

another he's coming to shoot him at a certain time, he's got a right to do it if the other man don't keep out of his way. And if a man hears that another man has threatened to shoot him, he's got a right to shoot the other man on sight. You see, it's as fair for one as for the other, and justice has no right to complain. But justice complains if after telling another man to leave town the man follows the other man out of town and kills him. That's murder.

"Flash Lannon has never violated our code out hyeh. He's always obeyed the sort of law we hev. Nobody ever accused him of taking an unfair advantage."

"Well," laughed Lannon, "I surrender. I wonder if you would mind telling me which room I'm to have? I'd like to wash up and have a look at the town."

"Sure," she said, quickly; "I'm a boxhaid for keeping you sitting there listening to my raving about Flash Lannon. I reckon you can hev the room right over the big room. It's the best we've got. You want to register right now?"

"When I come down, if it's just the same to you," he said. He was already on his way toward the long hall, his traveling bag in hand.

"You'll find the stairs at the rear of the big room," she called to him. He turned to thank her, and saw her leaning on the counter, her elbows on its top, her chin resting in her cupped hands. She was watching him speculatively, the shadow of an admiring smile on her lips.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're entirely welcome," she returned gently.

CHAPTER IV.

GLORIA'S SCORN.

WHAT meant the faint but growing thrill that possessed Gloria Stowe as she listened to the sounds of the stranger's retreating footsteps? How could she account for the strange tumult that was going on in her bosom? It was something like a sensation she had experienced when one morning in her early youth she had awakened to find a long-wished-for ruby ring on her finger, a present from her dad. The feeling was the same, except that it was now more intense, even if more elusive. For it assailed her, and she could not define it; it was intangible, as enchanting as a forbidden dream.

After a time she walked to the mirror on the wall near the lounge. By standing on the tips of her toes she was able to gaze into the glass at her reflection. She saw her scarlet cheeks, eyes that had a shamed, velvety look.

"Shucks," she whispered. "Why, he didn't say more than half a dozen words to me. Just treated me like—like a lady. And hyeh I'm trying to fall in love with him!"

Did real ladies permit themselves to think the thoughts she was thinking at this minute? She doubted, and a grave thought assailed her. If she permitted the stranger to see that she liked him when she had known him not more than an hour, would there not be some justification for Devake's attitude toward her? Was there really something about her that made men think their advances would be encouraged?

Fiercely, her face paling, she fought the thought, blaming her ignorance for her inability to discover just how she should act toward men in order to convince them of her right to be treated as a lady. Some consolation she found in the stranger's words: "If you're square in your own mind you ought to be satisfied."

But that consolation was not complete enough. What satisfaction was there in being a lady if men would persist in thinking her otherwise? She wanted the respect that she knew was due her.

"And I'll hev it, darn them!" she declared. "If a stranger can treat me like a lady the rest of them hev got to!"

And then she went again behind the counter, where she stood, listening to the stranger moving about upstairs.

So absorbed was she in her thoughts that she forgot to think of time until the savory odor of cooking was swept to her on a slight breeze that came through the long hall. Then she ran out into the kitchen to where the Chinese cook was stoically working in the heat from a red hot stove.

"Do your best to-day, Ching Loo," she said earnestly; "we've got an Eastern guest."

"Alle right," grinned Ching Loo. "We got plenty heap for one tenderfoot."

Walking back through the big hall toward the office, Gloria paused for an instant, her face flushing. Dismounting from a big gray horse in front of the hotel was a tall, handsome girl of about twenty. The girl wore a brown riding suit which fitted her snugly, and which betrayed a graceful, slender figure; high, soft riding boots encased her legs; a wide brimmed beaver hat sat jauntily on her head; a brown blouse of rich material showed between the lapels of her riding jacket. Dark tan gauntlets covered her hands, and as Gloria watched her she dismounted, hitched the horse to the rail, and removing the gloves, flecked some dust from the bottom of her skirt with the fingers.

The girl was Ellen Bosworth, daughter of James K. Bosworth, who owned the biggest ranch in the valley, not even excepting the Bosque Grand.

Gloria had seen Ellen Bosworth many times, but always from a distance. And word of Bosworth's enormous wealth and power had reached Gloria's ears through the medium of rumor's countless tongues. Even discounting by half the stories of Bosworth's wealth and power, he still must be a rich and influential man, in the East.

And Bosworth spent most of his time East, visiting his ranch perhaps once or twice a year, when Bozzam City would gape in astonishment at the vast number of trunks and boxes belonging to him, which would be pyramided on the station platform until hauled westward to his ranch, to return to the station platform some weeks later.

Gloria's interest had never been centered upon Bosworth. His wealth and power did not interest her. She never neglected to watch Ellen. For Ellen, despite a certain fastidiousness, was Gloria herself—should the magic of time and wealth ever provide her with the opportunity.

She thought, when visualizing herself in Ellen's station, that perhaps she would not be quite so stiff and proud as the other, and she might smile more and not seem so unconscious of the admiring stares of strangers; nor would she be quite as aloof and haughty. Ellen was just a trifle too arrogant, even for a lady. And there was no doubt of her being a lady!

Gloria was behind the counter when Ellen Bosworth entered the big front door. Gloria had watched her from the front window, behind the desk; and though Gloria fought hard to repress the excitement that had seized her, she was breathing rapidly when Ellen appeared in the archway between the office and the big hall.

Ellen's gaze about the office was slow and intent, as though she were searching for something that would dissuade her from staying longer. But to Gloria's astonishment, Ellen smiled engagingly when she spoke.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "You are Gloria Stowe, are you not? I've heard of you. I've come in to attend the festivities at Benson's, to-night—the barbecue, you know; and I've been wondering if you could give me a room to-night and furnish me with lunch and dinner to-day, and breakfast to-morrow. I don't come to town alone very often as a rule, but father was so very busy that he simply wouldn't come with me. I promise that I won't make the slightest bit of trouble."

"I reckon we can accommodate you, ma'am; the house is nearly empty. There's only one guest hyeh at present." Gloria smiled at the girl she had thought arrogant, and who wasn't arrogant at all!

"It's mighty near noon, Miss Bosworth," she added. "I'll tell Ching Loo you are hyeh."

"Thank you."

Miss Bosworth looked at the lounge. She was standing near it, gazing into the fireplace when Gloria reappeared; and she followed Gloria upstairs and into a surprisingly well furnished room.

Ellen Bosworth moved about the room as though she was quite accustomed to staying at hotels; and to Gloria's amazement she acted much as Gloria felt she herself would act if she were preparing to occupy a strange room. She glanced with interest at the bed, which was neat and clean

and billowy, with a spotless white counterpane; her gaze roved from the lace curtains of the windows to the old-fashioned but shining dresser that stood between them. She inspected the carpet, the chairs, and then looked out of the window into the street.

Then she took off her hat, laid it on the bed, and walked to the dresser, where she gazed critically at herself in the mirror.

"It's a very nice room, Miss Stowe," she said. "I consider myself very fortunate in getting it. Father said the Bensons wished me to stay there for the night. But I have attended barbecues before, and I know what a racket they make at them—sometimes all night. And I shan't stay all night, you know."

At a stroke Ellen Bosworth had granted Gloria equality. There was no taint of patronage in her manner, no suspicion of haughtiness; and Gloria went downstairs a few minutes later with an entirely new conception of her guest's character. Silently Gloria entered the office. Then she walked to the front door and back to the archway again, where she paused and moved her lips wordlessly, mentally repeating Ellen Bosworth's speech and endeavoring to emulate her manner.

She moved to the lounge as Ellen had done, and stood for an instant gazing into the fireplace. Then she went to the little mirror on the wall and removed an imaginary hat and coat, striving to imitate Ellen's movements as she had stood before the glass in the room upstairs.

There had been an ease and grace in Ellen Bosworth's movements that Gloria could not duplicate, though she removed the imaginary hat and coat several times in the attempt. As she frowned into the glass in a vain endeavor to define exactly the word that would best express the indefinable and intangible something that had made Ellen's ordinary action so nearly regal, she became aware that the stranger stood in the archway looking at her. Lannon's face was entirely expressionless at the moment, but Gloria saw the amusement swimming deep in his eyes, and she knew he had witnessed at least part of her pantomimic performance.

She faced him courageously, though her cheeks were flaming.

"You saw me?"

"I couldn't help it. You see—"

"I'm not blaming you, stranger. You must hev thought I was loco. But I ain't. I was practicing being a lady."

"You have only to act naturally to be that, Miss Stowe."

"Shucks, stranger; there's other things. I can't describe them. Like putting on a hat, for instance—or taking one off. Or in standing a certain way when you talk to anybody. When I do it, it don't seem the same as when—as when other girls do it."

"It's merely a matter of training, I think."

"Mebbe. But there's something else, too. I think it's in the way a girl feels. If she's been treated like a lady I expaict she'll try to live up to the way she's been treated. Seems to me—"

She paused and held a warning finger to her lips.

"Sh-h!" she said. "She's coming!"

Lannon heard a step on the stairs, then in the big room opposite; and Ellen Bosworth was standing in the hall, looking at them.

For an instant the silence that had preceded Ellen's appearance continued. Lannon had bowed to her, and had turned again to Gloria with the intention of continuing their conversation. But the girl, wrongly construing his look as a mute suggestion for an introduction to Ellen, flushed and spoke haltingly.

"Stranger," she said, "this is Ellen Bosworth, of the Lazy J. Her dad is James K. Bosworth, of New York. I don't know what your name is, stranger, so you'll hev to introduce yourself."

"I am delighted to know you, Miss Bosworth," said Lannon. "I have heard a great deal about your father. He is a wonderful man, and I never thought the time would come when I should have him for a neighbor. I am Stephen Lannon, of the Bosque Grand ranch, about thirty miles south of here on Bear River."

Ellen Bosworth's eyes brightened with interest.

"Why, how remarkable!" she exclaimed.

"We've all heard of you, out here; have talked of your deeds to others. We've felt quite proud of you, while perhaps fearing you just a little. And to meet you in this manner! It is really astonishing."

She noted the steadiness of his eyes, the firmness of his chin, his big shoulders, the correctness of his clothing, the easy grace of his movements. There was approval in her glance.

Perhaps she detected the glint of cynicism in his eyes, aroused through his dislike of effusiveness; and, perhaps to punish him, she went on, her voice flavored with slight mockery:

"So you are the terrible 'Flash' Lannon —the man who once held this wild country in the hollow of his hand? I can hardly believe it!"

Lannon looked into Gloria's eyes. Deep in them swam reproach and shame. They were strangely dotted with little flecks of contempt and scorn.

She met his look steadily, though her face was flaming; and he knew she would never forgive him for the thing he had done.

He spoke to Ellen Bosworth, but he still held Gloria's gaze when he said: "I was once a fool, Miss Bosworth, and I suppose I've never got over it."

"What a startling admission!" laughed the girl. She stepped aside, exhibiting a polite indifference to the little drama that was being enacted before her, though keeping a mental picture of the faces of the two characters for future analysis, especially noting the tragic expression in Gloria's eyes. Lannon, big, magnetic, handsome, had been making a conquest of the girl, she supposed.

There came a musical clinking of spurs. Campan—he of the tight-fitting velvet jacket, the Mexican chaps, turquoise studded and silver spangled—strode in through the big front door and came toward Ellen. He made a sweeping bow as he saw her, and the bell-crowned sombrero touched the floor.

Campan had evidently been giving some attention to his person since he had passed Lannon in the street some time before. His velvet jacket was spotless; boots, chaps, cartridge belt and leather holster were shining; his face, bronzed and bold, was abloom with health disclosed by the art of a barber; his tawny hair was smoothly parted; his light blue eyes were bright, hawklike, with a gleam of cool assurance.

"Miss Bosworth!" he said. "*No esperaba yo encontrarle a Vd. aqui!*"

"Don't lie, Campan," replied Ellen. "You certainly must have seen Silver standing in front of the hotel."

She extended a hand and with a contemptuous smile watched Campan kiss it Then she drew it away and held it behind her. "I like you better when you are natural, Campan," she said. "The Mexican manner doesn't become you."

"*Gracias, señorita,*" returned Campan, mockingly. "It pleases you to be cold toward me. It was not always so when I was foreman for Señor Bosworth."

Though Campan's voice was low, so that Lannon and Gloria, standing at a little distance, could not hear, Ellen reddened and glanced swiftly toward the others. Then she looked back at Campan, her eyes flashing with rage.

"Campan," she said in a low voice, "if you ever speak to me in that manner again I'll have father run you out of the country, as he ran you away from the Lazy J."

Campan laughed smooth and easy. His faded blue eyes were agleam with insolence. He seemed unaffected by the cold fury in the girl's voice.

"Señor Bosworth is well, then?" he asked. For an instant as he peered into Ellen's eyes his own glowed with passion. "Señor Bosworth would have to be pretty powerful to run me out of the country now, my dear Ellen," he whispered, his voice now unflavored by the rounded labials of the language he had been affecting. "One day he will regret having sent me away."

Miss Bosworth did not answer. She deliberately turned her back to Campan and walked toward a table in the rear of the dining room around which the Chinese cook was hovering.

Lannon, too, was walking toward the table. He was a little distance ahead of Miss Bosworth, for when Gloria, after staring straight into his eyes with steady hostility

for several seconds, had contemptuously turned her back on him and walked behind the counter, he had decided that his offense was unforgivable. And he had started for the table an instant before Ellen turned away from Campan.

He faced Ellen across the table, and he carried on a desultory conversation with her. He was barely conscious of what he was saying to her, or of what she was saying in reply; for he was watching Gloria and Campan.

Campan was standing at the counter—leaning familiarly on it, talking to Gloria. Lannon could hear both voices plainly. Campan's loud salutation, "Hello, kid!" had contained a disgusting hint of proprietorship. And Gloria's, "I'm sure glad to see you!" while somehow odd and strained, seemed to suggest a free fellowship based upon a secret intimacy.

Lannon watched Gloria's face. It was still aflame. Her eyes were very bright and held a reckless gleam. Lannon felt that if Gloria still wished to know why men she met refused to grant her the respect and deference due the good and pure of her sex, she had only to glance at herself in the mirror on the wall near the lounge. But perhaps she saw her reflection in Campan's eyes, for she suddenly made a frightful face at him and slapped his cheek resoundingly.

"There, darn you!" she hissed. "Don't get so fresh!"

Campan laughed lowly.

"Don't sling your eyes on me like that if you don't want me to get fresh," he said. "But I wasn't meaning anything special, Glory," he went on placatingly. "Good Lord, if a man can't take a shine to a girl without her thinking he's getting fresh! Why, shucks, you're a lady, kid, and I'm telling it right out in meeting!"

"Campan, you're a liar!"

"I ain't!"

"You sure are. It ain't been more than two hours ago that a man was in hyeh, showin' me that he thought I wasn't a lady."

She glanced furtively at Lannon, whose face had turned red.

"You're telling me who this man is, Glory. I'll sure bust his head a few!" threatened Campan.

"You won't bust anybody's haid for *me*, Campan. I'm able to take care of myself, and don't you forget it!"

For an instant her eyes darkened and held a fierce gleam, then she laughed harshly, recklessly.

"Campan," she said, "I reckon I know what you came in hyeh for!"

"Shucks—of course you do. I came in here to see you."

"Campan, you're fibbing." She deliberately winked at him. "I'm betting you came in hyeh to ask me to go to the barbecue with you."

"You've hit it," declared Campan.

His voice was vibrant with a queer note of triumph. He felt Gloria was striking at Ellen Bosworth; he imagined that the latter had in some way incurred Gloria's wrath, and that he was being used as a weapon. But he was not looking for mysteries; he had no interest in Gloria's differences with Ellen Bosworth; he was satisfied to take Gloria on any terms.

"That's settled," said Gloria. "I'll be ready about dusk. Now get out of hyeh!"

Campan laughed and strode out, bowing with extravagant politeness to Ellen Bosworth as he passed through the big hall, and grinning with curling lips at Lannon, who did not look at him.

CHAPTER V.

"GET RID OF LANNON RIGHT NOW!"

CANDLES, wax tapers and kerosene lamps illuminated the Benson ranch-house. For a space of perhaps fifty feet the ground in the vicinity of the ranch-house was bathed in the effulgent glow of light that issued from many windows. Beyond that was the dead, flat darkness of the desert night.

Strains of music from a fiddle floated out of the Benson windows; a piano was being thumped; voices mingled, masculine and feminine, gayly hilarious; feet were scraping on the floor of the big room, from which Benson had removed the carpet and all of the furniture.

Figures draped in white flitted past the open windows—women arrayed in finery treasured for just such occasions as this; men who felt more comfortable when arrayed in flannel shirt and overalls, spurred boots, and neckerchief were resplendent in holiday attire, and enjoying themselves, even though they felt awkward and were painfully conscious of their starched collars.

As for that, some starched collars were already being surreptitiously removed; for the edge of formality was beginning to wilt in the heat, and the whisky barrel in the bunk-house had gurgled often.

The Benson kitchen yielded the flavors of many delicacies. Outside a steer was roasting—whole—surrounded by many of Benson's guests and an important-looking gentleman in a white apron. The glowing fire illuminated many expectant faces. In the horse corral were ponies that had traveled steadily for two days to reach this spot in time; there were others that had come from distances nearly as great, and many that had started only that morning. Still others were from the ranches that lay within a radius of fifty or sixty miles; and some were from Bozzam City, whose lights were visible about two miles to the northeast.

Buckboards, spring wagons and buggies were scattered over the level around the stable and the corral fence, where their owners had left them after having brought their women and children.

"My turn next year," said a grizzled man who stood at the fire watching the roasting steer. "You'll hev to start the day before to git thar in time to do any feedin'."

"Feedin' ain't as important as drinkin', Colson," chuckled the man who stood beside him on the left. "If yore brand is popular all the trails to yore place will be a heap cluttered before you c'n kill yore steer."

"I reckon Benson's brand will do," said Colson. "The boys is hangin' around thet barrel like a swarm of flies."

"I'm seein' mostly the same mugs starin' into the cups," said another man. "Bozzam City fellers, most likely."

From where the steer was roasting the bunk-house was visible. Through its open door the brightly illuminated interior could be seen, together with those inside.

"Lem Clearwater, Ed Bannack, Dave Devake, Dakota, Slim Lally, Tulerosa, an' Campan," said a tall man as he scanned the faces in the group. "They're sure pourin' it in."

"So thet's Campan," said Colson. "I was thinkin' it was him, but I wasn't sure. Feller with the yaller pants with the jew'lry on 'em?"

"Yep."

"What's he allowin' to be doin' these days?"

Nobody answered Colson. Instead, level glances were directed at him, for perhaps there were friends of Campan at the fire.

Colson flushed. "I reckon I've strayed off my range," he said lamely.

There was a silence, during which the men around the fire watched the man with the white apron as he prodded the roasting steer with a huge fork.

"Well, I reckon we c'n licker up a little, boys," he suggested; "them other fellers has gone."

Ed Bannack, Dave Devake, Campan, and a tall, slim puncher with a hook nose, high cheek bones and truculent, squinting eyes, were moving toward the ranch-house in the darkness. The men who had been with them in the bunk-house had left them and were walking toward the fire where the steer was roasting.

"It's hot in there," said Bannack, indicating the house, as they approached. "I'm hangin' around here for a while."

"Too damned many kids," sneered Devake. "Why in hell can't folks leave their damned brats to home?"

Back a little distance from the house, where the glimmering light from within would not shine in their faces, the four men halted. They could see the dancers in the big room, and also a group of men and women standing in a doorway, looking on and awaiting their turn.

The men outside saw Gloria Stowe dancing with Benson. The girl did not seem to be enjoying herself, for she moved mechanically and her face was set and white.

"Looks as though she's sorry she come," said the slim puncher with the high cheek bones and the truculent eyes.

"She come for spite, I reckon, Tulerosa," said Campan. "Curious about her. She would never have anything to do with me—wouldn't let me come near her. To-day was different. I blowed in the hotel about noon, thinking to devil her. But mostly I reckon I wanted to get a look at a tenderfoot I seen going in there when I struck town.

"Going in, I bumped into Ellen Bosworth. She's as stuck up as ever. Pulled that high and mighty stuff on me. Well—that ain't the point. I'll 'tend to her one of these days—and old Bosworth, too.

"The tenderfoot was there. Strapping-looking yap with a cold eye. I reckon he's somebody where he come from. Him and Ellen Bosworth grubbed together while me and Glory was talking. Glory was fussed up, venomous as a scorpion, though she didn't want me to know it. Spoke of a guy that insulted her; asked me to bring her here. Something's gone wrong."

"I reckon I'm the one she meant insulted her, Campan." This was Devake. He met Campan's swift glance steadily and went on: "I was in there telling her I'd taken a shine to her. I didn't know you was interested."

"Devake, I reckon you wasn't spoiling nothing for me. Glory Stowe is for the man who gets her—and she's worth any man's time."

"It was the tenderfoot who spoiled things for me," said Devake. "Bumped ag'in' me, knocked me off balance, and jammed me ag'in' the counter."

Campan laughed harshly, incredulously. "That ain't supposed to be safe, is it, Devake?" he said, peering intently at the other. "Why didn't you sling your gun on him?"

Devake shook his head. "I don't seem to know. I wanted to go for my gun, but something appeared to hold me back. I ended out in the street, wondering how I'd got there and feeling sore of clammy, as though I'd just climbed out of an ice box."

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed Campan derisively. "Devake, I reckon you're needing a doctor. You'd better go back to the barrel!"

The gambler scowled and shook his head uncertainly.

"It never happened before," he said. "Seems I've seen that tenderfoot before, but I can't place him. Sure as hell I've seen them damned eyes of his before!"

"Tenderfoot!" ejaculated Bannack uproariously. "Haw, haw, haw! Thet's too damned good to keep! Tenderfoot! I been listenin' to you damned fools shoot off your gab, waitin' an' thinkin' thet mebbe you'd wake up. You, Devake! You ought to know thet tenderfoot!"

Bannack came closer; he stuck his face close to Campan. His eyes were wild and fierce with suppressed excitement.

"Git your thinkin' caps on, you guys!" He grinned derisively into their faces. He expanded with importance.

"Talk, you damned fool!" commanded Campan sourly. "You're ready to bust."

"I'm talkin' fast enough!" declared Bannack. "Whar's your brains, anyhow? I'll name him. Thet tenderfoot is *Flash Lannon!* Does thet name mean anything to you?"

Campan whitened, stiffened. He stepped back a little, crouched, and stared at Bannack. Yellow pin points of flame danced in his eyes.

Devake cursed incoherently. His eyes were staring, his face was ghastly. Campan moved closer to the house. He peered into the big room and watched the dancers. When Lannon and Ellen Bosworth passed the window Campan started so violently that his whole body seemed to tense. An instant later he rejoined the others.

"It's him, right enough!" he said hoarsely. "He's older and bigger and he's got them damned dude clothes on—but it's him!" He wheeled on Bannack. "How long have you knowed it was him?" he demanded fiercely.

"Since he got off the train this mornin'," replied Bannack. "I was with Lem Clearwater on the station platform. I did not know then thet he was Flash, an' I was tellin' Lem thet before night I'd run momma's boy out of town. Them's the words I used—momma's boy!

"I reckon he must hev seen I was talkin' about him, for after he'd gassed with Jim Johnson he come back an' stuck his face into mine.

"'Thet ain't no way to sneer at strangers, Bannack,' he said, usin' my name free as you please.' 'If I see you doin' it agin I'll sure make you hard to ketch!' Them was his words."

"Why didn't you throw your gun on him?" muttered Campan.

"Why didn't Devake throw his'n on him?" queried Bannack. "I reckon for the same reason thet I didn't throw mine—it didn't seem to be the sensible thing to do!"

"He wasn't packing a gun," said Campan.

"He wasn't packin' none when Devake run into him in the hotel," pointed out Bannack. "Nor he ain't packin' none now. An' I reckon he looks just as soft an' easy as he looked this mornin', when I thought he was momma's boy just broke loose from her apron strings."

"You reckon he's figurin' to stay here?" said Campan, after a silence.

"Looks to me like school's over," replied Bannack. "Jim Johnson was tellin' me that about a week ago he sent a telegram to Lannon from Tom Yates, tellin' Lannon to come home right away. I knowed we'd run into hell soon as we started monkeyin' with the Bosque Grand stock. You guys wouldn't let well enough alone. When Tom Yates tells Flash Lannon what's been happenin' durin' the last few months there's goin' to be hell to pay!"

"Quit your damned croaking!" warned Campan. "I reckon the time to get rid of Lannon is right now!" he said. "You guys keep close and back my game."

He strode toward the ranch-house, the others at his heels.

CHAPTER VI.

"THE THIRD TIME I'LL KILL YOU!"

GLORIA STOWE was dancing with Campan. Campan was a graceful dancer, as light on his feet as a feather; so strong that he whirled her from the floor without effort in the swings of the quadrille. Gloria went mechanically through the steps of the dance as she had gone through several others, and none could criticize her for not seeming to enter into the spirit of the evening, though her thoughts were not of the dancing or of Campan. It seemed her body was in the Benson ranch-house while her mind was still in the hotel office.

How readily Lannon had revealed his identity to Ellen Bosworth? No hesitation, no evasion. It seemed he had instantly recognized Ellen's right to know him.

Why hadn't he treated *her* that way? Why had he kept silent while she had related to him stories of his own greatness; while she had confessed that she had half fallen in love with him without having seen him?

She didn't love him at this minute. He was nothing like the ideal she had created, which her imagination had shaped and molded — the romantic figure of her dreams, invested with fire and life drawn from her own heart. The Lannon she had pictured was a reckless-eyed young man, bold, ardent, vibrant with passion, though gentle to women and straightforward and honorable. That was the Western Lannon.

The Eastern Lannon was nothing like that. He certainly was not reckless. Instead, his eyes seemed to express a serene and somewhat cynical deliberation, as though their owner was in the habit of considering all things trivial until demonstrated otherwise. He was cold, alert, quiet, imperturbable. Of course under the quietness could be felt the edge of an iron-like self-control, which had been revealed to her when he had been facing Devake in the hotel office; and there was a consciousness of power in his manner, a latent, ruthless force. But even though he was different to the man of her dreams she had felt the magnetism of him, a subtle force that had drawn her. But he had fooled her, had led her on, had amused himself with her; had considered her so negligible that he had not even bothered to reveal his identity to her even after she had declared her love for the Lannon of her dreams!

She hated him, now, even though she

was aware that he was not entirely to blame. He had had no right to amuse himself by encouraging her to talk about himself, but she had no doubt that her own unconventional impulses, which had led her to confide in a stranger, had given him a wrong impression.

Once as Campan released her hand and passed her to the next male dancer, to the command of the fiddler's *"Alemande, left!"* she became aware that Lannon's hand was reaching for hers. She refused the grasp and flashed him a glance of hate as he passed, even though as her gaze met his she saw his eyes glow with regret.

"Hypocrite!" she breathed, almost into the ear of the next male dancer, who, obedient to the voice of the fiddler, had grabbed her around the waist and was whirling her in a dizzy circle, as other men were whirling other women.

"What you sayin'?" demanded her erstwhile partner.

She didn't even look at the man; she was watching Ellen Bosworth, who was gyrating in Ed Bannack's arms. How graceful Ellen was! How calm and dignified even in this violent dance!

Presently she again found herself dancing with Campan. How she loathed the man! But she had felt a vindictive joy when Campan had entered the hotel. Fiercely she had yearned for an opportunity to show Lannon that she didn't care, that she was indifferent to his slights. And when Campan had so quickly acted upon her bold suggestion that he escort her to the barbecue, she had seen Lannon glance at her with cold disapproval. That had been a delicious moment!

But there had been no delicious moments since. So far the evening had been one long-dragging period of torturous agony, of passionate self-reproaches, of hideous jealousy. She got little satisfaction out of the knowledge that Lannon knew she had come here with Campan. She had seen Lannon watching her at times when she knew he was not aware that she was looking at him, and she had seen that he was studying her, appraising her, condemning her! And in her heart she knew there was cause for his condemnation. For Campan had a bad reputation in the valley, and by being seen with him she was provoking talk which would do much toward destroying her own reputation.

When the quadrille ended she found herself standing against the wall near the big door that opened into a three-sided *patio*. Campan left her, pleading that he needed air, though not inviting her to take it with him. She saw him go out of another door with Ed Bannack, Devake and another man whom she knew as Tulerosa; and she knew well enough that the whisky in the bunk-house was what attracted them.

Most of the men had been outside several times, and the evening was not more than two hours gone. Once when the fiddler was forced to send for men to make up the necessary number of couples for a dance he had betrayed his knowledge of what had lured the men from the dancing:

"Thet bar'ell won't hold out long at this rate!"

There were few men in the big room now. These were married men yielding to wifely domination.

"No; you ain't goin' out there again, Henry," Gloria heard a woman say. "I'm goin' home about midnight an' I don't want no drunken man drivin' me."

The heat had grown oppressive. The fiddler, seated in a chair on an improvised platform at the farther end of the big room, was tuning his instrument. A mother was haranguing a child. The curtains of the windows hung motionless. Men were mopping the perspiration from their faces; women were fanning themselves with handkerchiefs; the big swinging lamp suspended from the ceiling of the big room was vitiating the atmosphere.

Gloria moved closer to the pig door that opened upon the *patio*. A cool breeze fanned her cheeks and she gratefully turned to it, glancing into the court.

Benson had placed four bracket lamps in convenient corners of the *patio*, and though they glowed dimly in contrast with the bright illumination of the big room, there was still light enough to show Gloria the floor of the *patio*, and the benches which Benson had placed about for the convenience of his guests.

The open side of the *patio* faced the big door in which Gloria stood. The four lamps outside revealed the rugged outlines of the walls of the ranch-house, some open windows, several doors. The black darkness of the desert night drew a somber curtain across the open side of the court, illuminated by countless coldly glittering stars.

Refreshed by the cool breeze, Gloria moved to the side of the door and leaned against the wall. A woman standing near her spoke to her, but she answered mechanically, for she saw Lannon coming toward her. She stared past him to the other side of the room, where she saw Ellen Bosworth talking with a tall, picturesque young cowboy.

Lannon did not seem to see Gloria. He strode to the big doorway, glanced out, turned his back to the *patio* and stood on the threshold watching the fiddler.

Gloria's hatred of Lannon leaped within her like a living flame. He was adding to his other crimes against her by completely ignoring her. How conspicuous he was, standing there! How cool, easy, assured! The other men in their civilian clothing were rough, ill-dressed, uncouth. They seemed like wild men in their unaccustomed garb. They were nervous, ill at ease. Lannon wore his clothing unconsciously; he looked as though it belonged to him, had been made for him.

Gloria granted him the tribute of her admiration as she watched him with covert glances; there was about him an intangible something that impressed; a greatness that made itself felt despite the hatred she bore for him; a compelling force that was not to be resisted. But beneath her admiration was a malice, a wild rage, an eagerness to stir him out of his cool, easy imperturbability, to strike a spark of passion in him, to rouse him to the point of betraying the primitive impulses that lay behind the smooth, hard mask of his cold placidity. She wanted to test him; she fiercely hoped that before the evening was much older Devake or Campan or Tulerosa or Ed Bannock would clash with him. She wanted to see him humbled, punished, his greatness destroyed. Two or three times during the dancing she had seen Campan and Devake and Tulerosa watching him with odd intentness; and once she had noted a cold sneer on Ed Bannack's face. Devake, she knew, would strike sooner or later. Devake was not the man to forget or forgive.

She looked full at Lannon, smiling into his eyes with contemptuous scorn. She had felt that he was staring at her. Her gaze fell quickly, for she saw a heavy Colt behind Lannon, the muzzle denting his coat at a point just above the hips, a rigid arm behind it. Vaguely outlined on the floor of the big room, extending across the threshold from the *patio,* was the shadow of a man—the man who held the Colt.

Lannon returned her gaze and she saw derision in his eyes, and cold contempt. It was plain he felt she was linked with the death behind him, that she had known he was to be attacked from that direction. His glance did not accuse her, however; it merely said that he might have expected nothing more from her.

She moved to the jamb and saw men in the *patio*—Devake, standing rigid behind Lannon, holding the gun that was pressed against Lannon's back; Campan a few feet distant; Tulerosa and Bannack near by.

She heard Devake's voice, directed at Lannon's back. Devake was so close to Lannon that he might to all appearances be merely whispering to him. That, Gloria divined, was to mislead any one in the big room who might chance to look toward the door.

"Just move back easy, Lannon, slow like, as if you was doing it natural," said Devake. "If there's any interference I'm blowing you apart."

"Certainly," returned Lannon coldly; "anything to oblige."

Two or three steps backward he took carelessly, slowly, as though while having grown tired of the dancing, he was still interested in what was going on in the big room. He still held Gloria's gaze with a cold, dersive smile.

Then his face seemed to disappear, as though it had been blotted out in the darkness. Came to Gloria's ears the sound of scuffling feet on the stone floor of the patio; she saw a whirling blot of figures just be-

yond the doorway; saw one man go reeling headlong toward the farther side of the court, to fall in a heap near the wall; she saw Campan draw his gun, heard its thunderous report; saw its crimson lance flame shoot upward and outward into the star-dotted wall of darkness on the open side of the patio.

In the glare of a bracket lamp were Campan and Lannon. They were close together, locked, straining. Tulerosa and Bannack were running around them with drawn guns, evidently trying to shoot Lannon, but baffled by the man's swift movements.

The men were cursing, blaspheming, and the high heels of their boots striking the stone floor of the patio made sinister music. Half a dozen times the light from the bracket lamp flickered on Campan's gun, and once more the patio rocked with the thunderous report of the weapon, the three walls throwing the sound back and forth in diminishing crashes. This time the red flame streak was shorter, smothered.

Behind Gloria had grown a press of human bodies, mostly women, who shrieked at what they saw in the patio. Gloria had made no sound. She stood at the door jamb, holding tightly to it, watching with blazing eyes and sinking heart.

She felt a commotion behind her, felt a plunging body force its way through the press behind her, and come to a halt at her side on the threshold. A big, thunderous voice boomed; she saw a tall, bold, bronzed man standing beside her, crouching, with two heavy guns rigid in his hands.

"Drop them guns, you buzzard's whelps!"

The newcomer was terrible in the cold rage that gripped him. The moving blot of men in the patio split up into three units. Two figures still struggled under the bracket lamp, but two others moved a little distance and stood, their guns sheathed, their hands raised, staring into the muzzles of the newcomer's guns.

Rapid, like lightning flashes, had been every movement in the patio; and it seemed to Gloria that a dozen pulse beats would have sufficed to mark the time that had elapsed since she had seen Lannon backing out of the doorway, until now, when she saw him, close to Campan, drive a clenched fist upward to the other's jaw.

The sound strikingly resembled that which might be made by slapping the surface of water with a flat board. Campan's head seemed to thud against the wall of the ranch-house; another flame streak stabbed upward over Lannon's shoulder. And then Campan slumped to the patio floor and lay flat on his back, his face upturned under the bracket lamp, his heavy pistol lying close to his outspread fingers. Lannon turned to face the door. A strange light leaped to his eyes when he saw the tall man with the big guns who held Tulerosa and Bannack to his will.

"Perrin!"

"Shore, you're right, Lannon," said the tall man. "It's me. Stand right thar an' I'll give you the straight of this hyar affair. It's mighty short an' sweet. I struck hyar not fifteen minutes ago, turned my hoss in the corral, an' busted for the whisky barrel. Gettin' close to the bunk-house, I saw these hyar pizen skunks thar. They was just comin' out, an' I didn't want to meet 'em. I slipped around a corner an' heard 'em talkin'. I heard 'em say they was goin' to frame Lannon—was goin' to plant a gun on him after shootin' him. Thet meant you, though I knowed you was not due till to-morrow.

"I seen them skunks go toward the house, an' I went in to the barrel an' got my drink. Not until after I'd got the drink did it strike me thet mebbe you'd got in ahead of time. Then I busted in hyar lookin' for you. An' hyar's them skunks tryin' to salivate you!" Perrin's voice rose; the big guns in his hands moved convulsively. "Damn yore hides, I'm goin' to bore you!"

He stepped into the patio, crouching; the guns steady, rigid. Behind him women screamed. Tulerosa and Bannack were backing away, staring as though fascinated at the terrible figure that menaced them.

"Perrin, I'm thanking you. You showed up just in time. But I'm finishing this deal myself. Let those two sneaks off, and put Devake on his horse. I pick Campan as the man who framed this deal."

The light from the bracket lamp shone in Lannon's face, which was pallid, the lips curved in a bitter smile. The lamplight showed dancing flecks of yellow fire in his eyes.

"You're right, boss," answered Perrin. "Campan's the man. An' he's the guy which is headin' the damned outfit which has been raisin' hell in the valley. Take care of him if you want to. I'm doin' as you say about these hyar skunks!"

Perrin moved forward. A dozen men, sweeping toward him out of the darkness of the open side of the patio, surrounded him and his captives. Other men carried Devake. All disappeared into the black void outside the court.

There were many other men slipping out of the big door into the patio. Women, too, pressed forward, driven by curiosity.

Lannon watched Perrin and the other men escort Tulerosa and Bannack out of the patio; he saw more men carry Devake away. Then he turned, stooped, and reached for Campan's gun, which was lying just beyond the latter's reach on the stones of the patio floor.

Something bumped into him; a hand flashed out and seized the weapon. Lannon straightened, to see Gloria Stowe standing rigid and defiant before him, the gun gripped tightly in both hands as though she feared he might attempt to take it from her.

Her eyes were deep pools of scorn and contempt. Those were the emotions he saw at first. But as he continued to hold her gaze he saw something more, swimming deep—a wanton light that expressed hatred, cold mockery; that challenged his manhood.

As he stood looking at her Campan began to get to his feet. He stood, leaning against the wall of the ranch-house, his legs asprawl to hold his balance, his hands hanging at his sides, his chin on his chest as he dizzily watched Gloria and Lannon.

Her gaze unwavering, her lips stiff and white, Gloria "broke" Campan's gun. Three empty, smoke-blackened shells she selected from the six that fell into her hand, tossing them one by one to the floor of the patio, where they rang and clinked metallically. Three loaded cartridges, the brass shining in the light from the lamp, she still held, and looked at them with a strange smile as she handed them to Lannon. The gun she held behind her.

"Stranger," she said tauntingly, "you have made your play. According to your reputation, you've got nerve. Folks say you used to run this valley. You've got no gun now, but I reckon you can get one. Hyeh's three shells to help you fill it. You can't kill Campan now, because his gun ain't loaded, and I've got it. But I reckon Campan won't pull his freight out of the country just because you've come into it. He'll be facing you some day when you've both guns in your hands. I've been wonderin' if a man who will try to make a fool of a girl will have the nerve to face Campan on an equal footing!"

She laughed jeeringly, stepped back a little, breathing fast; the heave of her bosom and the throbbing of her throat told Lannon of her passion.

Lannon laughed, stepped close to her and whispered.

"I'm giving Campan my answer," he said. "Listen!"

He walked to where Campan stood, now more erect. Lannon's face was set and white, and he held the three brass cartridges in the palm of his right hand until he saw Campan's gaze drop to them.

"Campan, here's three shells from your gun—loaded. Gloria Stowe gave them to me. Now listen—hard! I'm giving them back to you, one at a time, when you've got a gun on you. But I'm giving you a chance. You can leave the country or you can quit wearing a gun.

"The first time I meet you when you've got a gun on you I'm going to spoil that smooth mug of yours so that no girl will ever want to look at it again. The second time I catch you wearing a gun I'll cripple you; and the third time I'll kill you!"

He stared hard at Campan, dropped the three brass shells into a pocket of his coat. Then he walked to where Gloria stood, bowed to her and passed on, striding toward the door that led into the big room, men and women stepping out of his path as he went and staring silently after him.

On the threshold of the doorway he paused and stood for an instant, holding hard to one of the door jambs, swaying oddly back and forth.

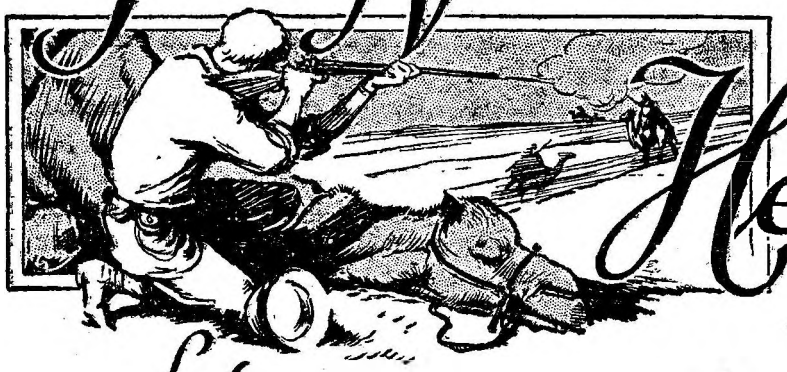
Then, slowly, as though tired, he sank to a sitting posture, his hands on the floor at his side, bracing his body, his chin sagging to his chest.

Benson reached him first; his voice boomed loudly.

"Hell's fire!" he said. "He's shot! Bored plumb through!"

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

The Necklace of Heaven



by S. Gordon Gurwit

Author of "Other Men's Wives," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

AT twenty-one, Tom Harcourt received his modest inheritance. By the time he had graduated from Harvard—which was exactly two years later—he had spent half of it.

After his graduation, he occupied a chair and a desk in the famous law firm of Graham, Cootes, Levy, Watshoff and Graham. It was dry, musty, indoor work, not at all to the liking of the crack college athlete who was regarded as one of the best and fastest halfbacks of his day, and who, despite his two-hundred pounds, could cover a hundred yards in ten and one-fifth seconds.

He had pictured the law as an exciting occupation — crowded court rooms, and exciting murder trials — but instead, he searched abstracts of title and filed briefs.

Then he met Beatrice Foster, and Tom fell desperately in love with her.

When the war came, they parted very tenderly and swore eternal love for one another; but what Tom failed to note was that the lovely blue eyes could flash electrically, and at times held the avarice of a Harpagon.

When he returned, he found her married to a rich, elderly gentleman, who had made a fortune in "war-brides." To his astonishment he found that he did not greatly care; he felt no heart-break. There was some natural pique and some cynical amusement; then he easily and promptly forgot about her.

Yes, the two years in France had made a difference. He looked with distaste upon resuming his interrupted career of the law. The indoors, somehow, was unthinkable.

Then Fate—most capricious of all coquettes—took a hand.

He received a letter from his former room-mate at Harvard, whom he also counted as his best friend. The letter was

post-marked: "Cairo, Egypt." It apprised him of the facts that his friend was in Cairo managing some of the tobacco farms that supplied tobacco for his father's enormous cigarette enterprise; that the country was "Great!" That it was fascinating, and wound up by saying, by way of a joke, that if Tom was tired of the law and would come to Egypt, he could get a position in his friend's office, and wouldn't they—just *couldn't* they—paint old Cairo a vivid scarlet together!

The gypsy drop in Tom's blood stirred. He went to the window of his hotel room and looked down upon Broadway, with its crawling, ant-like thousands. The disagreeable dissonance of the great commercial mart was repugnant to him, with its jarring over- and under-tones.

He had some money, and he pictured Cairo. The very name called up all the coloring of Harun-al-Rashid; the red-hot afterglow of African skies; grave Arabs dropping on their squares of carpet to pray; henna-tipped fingers drawing the envious veil close; shadowy Orientals gliding into the open doors of the mosques, while mauve shadows wove a picture of Islamism.

Egypt! Where history was cradled! Where the sun had once looked down upon the iron brood of Hamilcar and the legions of Scipio; where Herodotus had mused under the shadowy foliage and Cleopatra had wandered under the palm aisles of her rose gardens—the Phœnicia whose loveliness had once flashed in the sea-mirrored sun with its feathery palms over jeweled arabesques and mosques of snowy gleam; where once verses of the Koran had been traced by reverent hands along porphry cornices and capitals of jasper.

Egypt! The land of eternal mystery—still untouched by the march of progress; still dim, Oriental, alluring. Under the arid soil, the legions of two thousand centuries; Carthaginian and Byzantine, are dust, side by side, and above is still the same land with its subtle allure.

Tom stirred uneasily. Broadway had faded from his sight. An insistant call was in his blood—the still, small voice of heredity speaking in his veins—the roving blood of a great-grandfather who had sailed the seven seas in his Yankee clipper. Here, the bleak, cold Northern winter was coming. He hated its dirty slush, its searching rawness. The land of the lotus called—and he answered.

He arranged his affairs, made his few adieus and stepped from the bleakness of New York to the insidious sunshine of Cairo.

For six months the two friends lived together and steeped themselves in the colorful life about them; then Tom's friend was recalled by his father to take charge of the New York office, and Tom, who had invested his capital in a cotton venture, went down the Nile to inspect it. It proved a fiasco. He lost every penny invested.

He returned to Cairo to seek a position in his friend's office. He found that the new manager could not find a place for him. Pride forbade him to take the matter further, so he obtained a position bossing a gang of natives on a tobacco plantation. This lasted several months.

Then began a period of infrequent employment. He drifted from place to place, and as the months went by, he tasted deeply of what we call, with beautiful generality, "Life." It was a very illuminating postgraduate course.

His existence was frugal; he never had much money, but it never occurred to him to go back to the States and resume his profession. The taint of Oriental life was in his blood. The past was forgotten. He had eaten of the lotus.

Thus we find him sitting in front of the Café Chantant in Algiers, jingling his last few francs in his pocket in a blissful, contented lethargy, while he eyed the fantastic confusion of its streets; the incongruous blending of many races that touched and mingled, but never assimilated.

The sun was sinking, and from the minarets came the shrill call of muezzin—he heard it as in a dream, the repeated *"La 'laha ill' Allah—"* while from the cafés came ribald chansons. The Moorish and Bedouin beauties, eyes gleaming through *yashmak*, rubbed elbows with staff officers a-glitter with crosses. Hawk-eyed Arabs in white *bernouse*, that sometimes revealed the gleam of jeweled dagger hilts;

desert patriarchs, majestic as Moses, read papers; cafés and cigar stores were filling; music came from the dance-halls; here and there a tourist sought the bazaars. In the distance the Kabyl Mountains lay in a purple haze, topped by the azure of the heavens. Then, swiftly, the sun sank, and the star-studded African night fell.

Tom fingered his francs. They were few, but something would turn up. Something always did. And one must eat. He was hungry, so he entered the café and ordered a humble meal of sheep's liver and *cous-cousou.*

And while he ate, Professor Anthony and his daughter, together with several other white sightseers, entered the café in a party, took seats and ordering refreshments, watched the Kabyl girl who danced upon a raised plaform.

Then, that capricious coquette, Fate, seeing the stage set to her satisfaction, doubtless smiled and left the participants of the drama to work out the conclusion.

II.

Bess Anthony—the professor's daughter—noted Tom first. His breadth of shoulder, sun-tanned face and flaxen hair compelled interest. She turned to her father and called his attention to the young man who was eating and reading his *Presse* so absorbedly.

"Either English or American," she said; "and evidently a resident. Perhaps he can help you, dad."

Professor Anthony, a small, keen-looking, shriveled man, adjusted his glasses properly and looked at Tom.

"Yes—perhaps," he answered. "He reminds me of my younger brother, Arthur. Twenty years ago, Arthur looked like that—he was a handsome youngster—bless my soul! How time flies! I wonder what ever became of him."

"Haven't you ever heard, dad?"

"No—never a word. He simply left home and disappeared. When that young man finishes his dinner, I'll go over and see if I can get some information from him."

The girl regarded Tom with a naïve, direct look that was still innocent of the eternal war of the sexes. She thought him handsome. He was. You've seen his type in the lobby of the Ritz or the Plaza, or perhaps on the avenue.

And at that moment, Tom looked up and saw the girl. His fork stopped halfway to his mouth and his eyes grew round with a rare amazement. The girl was undeniably lovely, gracefully molded, and the kittenish witchery of adolescence gave her an indescribable charm. At his direct look, her eyes dropped and an auroral flush tinted lip and cheek faintly.

"Well—I'll be eternally—" began Tom, to his soul, and failed miserably. "I'm dreaming! I'll wake up in a minute and find it was a mirage. It *can't* be! They don't make 'em so beautiful any more!"

Whereupon he lost his usually fine appetite and looked at her whenever the opportunity offered without directly being rude and staring. Several times he surprised her eyes upon him. Experienced amatory diplomatist though he was, skilled tactician in many an *affaire du cœur,* a vague pulse began to thrill somewhere in his being. Later, when her father arose and walked toward Tom, that young man experienced a sinking sensation, for he anticipated a rebuke for staring.

Professor Anthony halted at Tom's table, looked over the top of his glasses and said, pleasantly:

"Pardon my intrusion, sir, but could I presume upon you to give me some information? You are a resident, I take it, and possibly you can help me out—if you will. Allow me to introduce myself."

He extended a card which informed Tom that the owner was Professor B. A. Anthony, and there was a line of degrees after the name strung out like a caravan.

Tom arose with alacrity, his heart pounding at the thought of possibly meeting the girl. He gave his name, they shook hands, and he motioned the professor to the seat opposite.

"Entirely at your service, professor," he said. "I'm not exactly a resident, but I know the country. If I can serve you in any way, command me."

The professor shot him a keen look.

"May I ask if you are English?"

"No," smiled Tom, "American."

"Indeed? I'm delighted to meet a fellow countryman, sir!"

Again they shook hands briefly.

"I am," continued the professor, "as you can see from my card, an archaeologist. I intend to go up-country, near Insola, and I wanted to hire some young white man to accompany me. Do you know of any perfectly trustworthy person whom you could recommend? One who has lived here for some time, knows the country, and, preferably, who knows some Arabic?"

"I do," answered Tom, promptly. "You're looking right at him!"

The professor smiled slightly, his keen eyes searching Tom through and through. Finally he sniffed, and the smile deepened.

"If you're in earnest," he said, "I think you'll do. What qualifications have you?"

"These," Tom told him: "I'm an attorney—Harvard—and I can argue with any natives in three kinds of bastard Arabic. Outside of that, I need a job, and I can shoot straight with either hand!"

The professor's eyes twinkled.

"You'll do," he said. "I'm glad I happened to talk to you this evening."

Tom glanced for the briefest instant at the girl.

"Not half as glad as I am," he answered.

"Would you care to tell me," went on the little man, "how you happen to be here? You see, if we are to be together, something definite—"

"Certainly!" laughingly interrupted Tom. "Gladly, sir." Swiftly, he sketched his career, named his family, his arrival, his investments, his losses, while the professor nodded understandingly. "But," wound up Tom, "we two can't go alone. We'll need a guard—several men. Some of the desert tribes are always on the warpath."

"I believe we'll have to go alone," said the professor, quietly. "I have information regarding the ruins of an ancient Saharan city, hidden by the sands. I don't want to attract attention to my search until it proves successful, then I can bring men out. Of course, if there's danger, and you wish to retract—"

"Professor!" interrupted Tom, sternly. "Take another look at me. Do you think you want to finish that sentence?"

Again the professor's eyes twinkled. He reached across the table impulsively, and again they shook hands, this time with a better mutual understanding and respect.

And so it was settled. The girl was to stay in Algiers with some friends and await her father's return. Professor Anthony thought they would be gone for three or four months.

They began to assemble the necessities for their caravan, and sent them on to D'Jillab, where they were to buy their camels and start the journey. The days were filled with preparation and plans; and at night Tom and the professor would talk. A great friendship and mutual liking grew between them.

"Once," the professor was saying, "there were forests and rivers, lakes and cities where the desert now is. Now they are all gone—under the shifting sands. A few, perhaps, are partly uncovered, and I hope to find one of them. The cities are of great antiquity. The desert has a fascinating history—it hides many things. Egyptology furnishes us with a clew—"

But Tom was not listening. His eyes were glued upon Bess, who sat by the open Moorish window, her great, amber-tinted eyes dreaming over the slopes of the hills where terraced gardens and white cupolas thrust high lights from out their wild-olive shadows. She drank in the languor of the African night, moon-bewitched, as her eyes wandered over the heights where Italian pines and feathery palms grew side by side. She felt Tom's eyes upon her, and it seemed to her that he must hear the beating of her heart, so loud it was.

Tom sat in silent worship. A week he had known her, yet he loved her with a passion that startled even himself. He had known other beautiful girls before, girls whose eyes had looked into his with charming naïveté, the look of a child in which, somehow, there lurked the wisdom of the ages and the boredom of satiety.

In Bess he found a girl innocent of all emotion—the ideal he had subconsciously erected. He wanted to be the first to gaze upon a feminine heart that was like a deep,

unruffled lake; to be the first to drop the pearl of life and knowledge to the crystal depths; to awaken her from her adolescent sleep. He used to tell himself that once—just once—he wanted to look into a girl's eyes and find dreams in them—not just a pretty masquerade or assumed naïveté. And Bess was more than he had pictured.

When they parted to go to D'Jillab the girl's eyes were wet as she kissed her father.

"Take good care of yourself, daddy dear, please—for my sake," she whispered tremulously. She gave her hand to Tom silently, and bravely met his eyes, so that he saw, deep in their brown glory, enough to thrill his soul. He suddenly bent and kissed her hand as a knight of other centuries saluted his queen; then she fled to her room.

The professor cleared his throat noisily, and laid a hand on Tom's arm as they left the house.

"I suspect," he said dryly, "that you'd better take good care of yourself, too."

Tom said nothing in answer. He could not; he was too exalted, and his heart was in his mouth at the time.

At D'Jillab they bought camels and crept out into the tawny desert, where they traveled day after day in the blinding, yellow heat.

The professor consulted his maps and took their bearings, and was cheerful and uncomplaining. Unused to the hardships and the country, though, he suffered greatly.

Two weeks later, nearing their objective, on the borders of a waterless oasis, they met a wandering tribe of Zoukieff Arabs, who greeted them.

"*Es-solâm 'alechum, sidi?*" called the leader.

"*Es-alechum solâm,*" answered Tom.

The Arabs approached and demanded *bakshish.*

The professor calmly and coolly refused. Whereupon the Arabs threatened, and the professor got his rifle.

"I can't speak their bastard Arabic, Tom," he said quietly; "but you tell them that if they molest us or try to plunder us, I'll shoot!"

The Arabs understood his gesture if not his words. They shot first, and the professor crumpled up and fell, a bullet in his shoulder. The next shot killed one of their camels.

With a furious oath Tom threw himself down behind the camel and opened fire. He tumbled the chief out of his saddle, and the accuracy of his fire kept them from rushing him.

Then began a siege that lasted all day, each side firing at intervals. During the night Tom managed to pack the professor upon a camel and make their escape. He took all the water they had—a canteen full—and left the balance of their caravan to the Arabs.

They traveled all night, following the stars, the professor at times delirious, for there was no more water, and his wound was swelling and turning purple. In the morning Tom redressed the wound, and they pushed on, striking back toward D'Jillab. As the furnace heat of the day came it began to look dubious, and a dreadful fear clutched at Tom's heart, for the professor was again delirious and raved about his little girl and his wound; and if he died who would take care of her?

"For God's sake, hold on a bit longer!" Tom begged desperately. "The camel is twitching the slits of his nose as if he smells water. Hold on, professor—we'll find it and rest a while, then we'll make D'Jillab."

The little man looked at him blankly, and Tom's heart was torn with agony, for even in so short a time he loved him as a son loves a father.

Toward noon the camel guided them to a circular group of date palms and stopped in their meager shadow.

The professor became quieter as Tom helped him from the beast's back. He seemed rational and sat down upon a stone to rest.

"It's the end, Tom," he said slowly. "I feel it. I can't go on. You alone will make it. Better not handicap yourself—"

Tom interrupted him fiercely, the professor smiling faintly at his undoubted devotion; then a change came over the little man; he grew delirious again and babbled of water and lakes and his wound, until

a violent hemorrhage sent him off into a spasm of coughing.

Driven to desperation, Tom shot the camel and cut into him like a madman to obtain the water cells of his stomach. There was little fluid in them, but it helped the wounded man, and he closed his eyes in a fevered sleep.

Tom threw himself down and lay inert, chained by the overpoweringly sultry oppression.

As far as the eye could see, it was all a parched, boundless, unendurable glitter of burning sand and brazen sky. Shimmering heat devils danced everywhere. As he lay his brain raced with plans he knew to be futile, and he shut his eyes in a vivid fury as a mirage began to form of a palm-fringed lake.

It was maddening—a fantastic mockery of the savage desert to rack the souls of the sufferers in its insatiable clutches.

Eyes closed to keep out the torturing vision, utterly exhausted, frantic with thirst, Tom dozed fitfully, and was awakened by the professor's voice, excited, normal:

"Tom! *Tom!*"

III.

DAZED, he sat up. The professor was pointing to a stone covered with strange, faint markings. His eyes were round and staring.

"The camel knew!" he said faintly, his face twisted with pain, though his eyes glowed excitedly. "There's a hidden well here—says so on the stone—lots of them in the desert—dig directly under that big palm—toward me about two feet—that's ancient Berber writing—"

Tom's incredulous stare was followed by swift action. He dug feverishly for hours in the spot where the professor had indicated, and after torturing toil—for the sand was as mobile as water and ran back into the excavation—he found the well, covered with crossed palm trunks, over which were laid hides and rugs, and over all, the sand. It lay in a depression, and had been covered with sand for centuries, every wind adding its strata of covering.

But there was little water in it. He managed to get enough to appease their thirst and to bathe the professor's wound, which was flaming with fever. Then they both lay mute, motionless, stricken, the professor's restless eyes searching the stones again.

"Queer!" he muttered, forgetting his grievous hurt in the scholar's frenzy. "Queer! According to this, we are the first to uncover the well since the sixteenth century! Think of it! What's this? Great heavens, Tom! Dig at the foot of that third palm tree—quick! There's treasure here!"

Again Tom, excited, using the stock of his carbine, began to shift the sands, and was finally rewarded with a small cedar chest, bound in copper, which he broke open with his rifle.

It contained two strings of matched pearls—but such pearls! Big as robin's eggs, with the soft irradiance of opalescent waters, round and perfect, untouched by time or surroundings—a princely fortune; gems fit for a maharajah; for the crown of a Cleopatra! There was also a parchment, which the professor seized avidly.

"'*The Khalifa's Necklace of Heaven,*'" babbled the professor, greatly excited at his find. "So it says here, Tom— '*Bestowed by the Khalif of Zïr upon Eadmée, his wife*'—she is buried here, too, Tom—'*as a token of his undying love. No other may wear the Necklace of Heaven but Eadmée, the Rose from the Garden of Allah, for this would be displeasing in the sight of Allah. There is no God but God, and Mohammed is His prophet.*'"

The professor had another spasm of coughing, then continued excitedly as Tom held him:

"Tom, my son, we've found the most famous necklace in Arabian history! This story of Eadmée and her Necklace of Heaven has been known for hundreds of years—it's a legend. One string for you, boy, and one for Bess! You must make it now, Tom—you must! This will be Bess's heritage—there is very little else, and you'll look after her, won't you—"

His throat convulsed with an agony that seemed to tear his frame asunder; his tortured chest struggled for breath, and the hemorrhage came. Frantic, Tom did what he could and watched the little man smile

bravely when it subsided. The hemorrhage seemed to relieve him.

"Now," whispered the professor, "it's over. Lay me down, Tom. I'm exhausted. Perhaps we'll be able to push on later at night, but I don't think so. The bullet struck my lungs, Tom. But promise me, Tom, that if—anything happens, you'll push on and give Bess her necklace? If I fall, don't wait for me—it will be useless. You love her, don't you? You'll take care—"

His head dropped, but he determinedly, bravely held it up; his eyes smiled into those of his comrade in their adventure, while his hand sought Tom's.

"Our Father—" he murmured, then sighed. Slowly the smiling eyes closed, brave to the end with a heroism unsuspected in the undeveloped, shriveled body. He was dead.

For hours Tom could hear or see nothing, nor bring himself to leave. The broken, useless body of his friend was dear to him still; it was the last remains of the bravest and best beloved friend he had found in this country. He had a wild idea that he would carry the professor's body back to D'Jillab; but out of his great grief sanity came to him.

He buried the professor by the side of Eadmée, the Rose of Allah's Garden, and set a stone to mark the spot; then, putting both necklaces in his pocket, he took up his carbine and stumbled off across the sands toward the north. His senses were wheeling in a disordered riot; he was numbed with grief before the tragedy that is always new.

Three days later, more dead than alive, a trading caravan found him and brought him to D'Jillab. He did not rest a moment, but sold one pearl to a native gem merchant—for he had no money—then he set out immediately for Algiers and Bess. The native gem merchant examined the pearl with sharp, amazed eyes that glittered at the bargain he had driven; then he closed his bazaar and followed the mad Roumi, whom, he suspected, had more of the big pearls.

"As Allah is great," he muttered into his beard, "I believe the dog of a Roumi has found the Necklace of Heaven—for he came from the desert, and there are no pearls such as he had but those of Eadmée. If this should be—" His eyes glittered dangerously. "An unbelievable fortune! I must find out! Sacrilege! The eater of swine!"

IV.

WHEN Tom reached Algiers, gaunt, weary, heartsick, it was night, the blue, luminous dusk of the Mediterranean shores. He went at once to the house where Bess was staying with friends, and in the ancient Moorish court, seated near the oval fountain with its maiden-hair fern and arum lilies, he told her, as gently as he could, what had happened.

She cried out once, then went deathly white, the wan moonlight showing her anguish and heartbreak. Finally the tears came, and she sobbed as women have sobbed over their dead since time immemorial.

And somehow her head found his shoulder and his arms went about her as he murmured encouragement and sympathy. It was some time before he could proceed and tell her the rest of the story—of the hidden well; the cedar chest with its pearls. He gave them to her, all of them save a few which he retained to sell so he could realize some immediate funds. He told her of her father's wish; that they each keep one necklace, but he proposed to give her most of his, so her future would be free of any suggestion of financial worries.

"Your father would have wished it," he murmured. "He guessed that I love you better than life—or my hope of heaven. One string you will keep intact, and the balance of the other you can dispose of readily. I'm going to take you back home to the States, Bess; I'm going to see you safely home. Some day I hope you will let me ask you—a certain question, dear, and let me take care of you always."

"Perhaps—some day," she said, her voice trailing upward and breaking with the sweet, wistful grace note of a child. "Not too soon—after—after—" Her lips trembled piteously.

She looked so weary, so stricken, so hurt, that Tom's heart was bruised in her anguish.

It was nearly midnight when he left her; then she insisted that he retain one necklace, as her father had wished.

"Mine I shall keep always as a last gift from him," she whispered.

And when Tom swung out of the courtyard bound for his lodgings a silent native figure slipped out of the shadows of bougainvillæa that clung to the arcades, and followed him.

"Dog of an unbeliever!" grated the shadow as he followed Tom. "Now I have heard with my own ears and seen with my own eyes. The Roumi has the Necklace of Heaven! First to recover his—the girl's will be easy!"

In the week that followed Tom did not see much of Bess. She was grief-stricken; her loss was too new to even allow her to find any solace in his devotion. She begged to go home as quickly as he could take her, and he assented at once. They prepared to sail on the first steamer available at Gibraltar; first to England, then home, for few direct passages could be had.

Tom decided to part with another of his pearls, as he needed the money. His first sale had brought him little, but he took what he could get so he could return to Algiers.

Now he wanted to get a fair price, so he would have some available money to see him through to the States. He went to Tunis to make the second sale.

And always a native figure followed at his heels, but he knew nothing of it. A few days after his return from Tunis he found an elegantly dressed, ruddy-complexioned Englishman waiting for him at his lodgings.

"Mr. Harcourt?" he inquired pleasantly.

Tom nodded, puzzled, and the stranger went on:

"I'm Charles Martin, sir—of the firm of Trowbridge, Williams & Martin, London. I happened to stroll into my friend's bazaar in Tunis—Ben-Ali Dushoff—and he showed me a pearl that he'd bought from you and gave me your address here. He thought you might have others. I'm looking for fine pearls for my firm."

He tendered his card, and Tom eyed it. "Why—I don't know," he answered slowly. "I have—two others like the one I sold." He did not care to confess ownership of the balance.

"Ah—may I see them? I'm prepared to offer you the highest prices per grain for good pearls, sir."

Tom showed him two pearls, and the expert radiated.

"Why, sir!" he exclaimed, as he examined them and weighed them in his hand. "They're marvelous! Perfect, too! Finest I've ever seen. These two are worth at least five thousand pounds apiece."

"What?"

"I'll give you ten thousand pounds for the two," smiled the other, noting the astonishment on Tom's features.

"Sold!" said Tom, catching his breath. If two were worth fifty thousand dollars, what were the balance worth?

"Good! I naturally haven't that much money with me," went on Martin, "but I'll send for it. How long will you be here, sir?"

"Why," answered Tom, "we'll be here for a few days only; then we go to Tangier, where we are taking ship at Gibraltar for home."

"Well," said the other, his eyes sparkling, "here's fifty pounds deposit on the two pearls—that's so I have an option, sir. I'll go with you to Tangier and I'll wire immediately to have the draft sent me there so we can complete the transaction before you sail."

"Done!" said Tom, accepting the deposit. "Wait a moment and I'll write you a receipt."

And so Martin went with Bess and Tom to Tangier, a lively, chatty, shrewd man, interesting, suave, a graduate of the world and its ways, and one of the greatest scoundrels unhung in northern Africa. He played only for big stakes, and he played carefully.

V.

Across the narrow strip of water sounded the sunset gun of Gibraltar, its echoes

bellowing down the Straits; the weird dusk fell swiftly, faintly illumined by a wan moon that would later dip an eerie, white veneer upon Tangier.

As the evening fell, the lighthouse above Tarifa flashed into being suddenly, like a live topaz. The narrow streets of Tangier grew livelier; the lights in the bazaar flared up, seemingly all at once, as if called by the wand of some master magician; white-robed figures in flowing *bernouse,* picturesque *tarboosh* and *jillab* began to populate the winding streets.

On the *Socco Chico,* in front of a squalid little bazaar, sat a cadaverous figure, dressed in the garments of Europe. He wore no collar, and his shirt was open at the throat. Chair tilted against the white wall, he viewed the white-robed strollers from beneath shaggy eyebrows that failed to conceal the restless, ratty eyes.

The Barbary night crept on, tawny, mysterious, a faint breeze springing up from the Mediterranean that held the taint of drench and brine and bilge water. The cafés and coffee houses blossomed brightly forth along the Paseo de Cenarro, garbed with diadems of jeweled lamps. From the interiors of the larger cafés came music—barbaric music, yet pleasing and rhythmic to European ears—the shrill wail of haut boys, the plaint of a *shibabah,* the thrill of muted Berber drums.

A native figure separated itself from the passers-by and stood before the European. "*Sidi,*" the native murmured, "a word with you."

The European stirred instantly, arose, and answered: "Come inside, Saad."

He led the way into the bazaar, the native following.

"There is much work for to-night, *sidi,*" went on the native in an excited whisper. "The Sidi Martin is with a Roumi who carries many pearls. They will be in the Café d'Or on the Paseo de Cenarro soon. I saw the pearls with my own eyes in a bazaar of the Sok Attarin, in Tunis. I have been near him since he sold me the first pearl when he came out of the desert at D'Jillab. I would have had them ere this—but he is big, like a tree, and crafty. So you are to get the Sidi Walters."

"I see, Saad. Anything else?"

"The time is short. He has planned to sail from Gibraltar to-morrow. We must strike at once—to-night. He is one of two Englishmen who went searching in the desert for ruins of ancient cities, and they found instead the tomb of Eadmée—and her Necklace of Heaven!

"You have heard, *sidi?* It is an old story and a true one, for I heard him tell the girl, and saw the pearls with my own eyes. One Roumi died, but this young one came back.

"Where thousands have searched and failed and died—you know, *sidi,* the spot was hidden by centuries of shifting sand—this blundering fool succeeded. Him we will strike to-night; tomorrow, the girl. That will be easier with him out of the way. She is watched so she will not get away. She has half of the string. But it must be done quickly, *sidi*—the pearls are of fabulous value—"

The European whistled and his eyes glittered in the light of the hanging lantern.

"Go at once to the Sidi Martin and bring word that the Sidi Walters will be ready," he instructed the native. "It must be a big haul if Martin is in it."

The native departed swiftly, while the white man dressed, left the bazaar and walked hurriedly down the street.

He turned into a dimly lit native coffee house and surveyed the room. In a corner he spied the object of his quest—a broad-shouldered, flaxon-haired colossus, who was sipping black coffee with evident relish.

To this giant the older man repeated in English what the native had told him, and in a low voice added:

"A chance for a real clean-up, Walters, my boy! Martin has him in tow, which means it must be big. And Saad saw the stuff with his own eyes and bought one of the pearls for a song. It's a fortune for all of us. It means home again, Walters, *home*—and fixed for life!"

The giant's jaw tensed and his lips came to a thin line.

"A chance to go home," he said, low. "God! I've been waiting for it for many years, but it somehow never turns up!"

He turned to face his companion. "You're sure, Thompson?" he questioned. "He actually has the Necklace of Heaven?"

"Saad saw it, and Martin saw two of the pearls—actually has an option on them to buy them. He's posing as a pearl buyer to keep near the fellow." He laughed. "Trust Martin! He's a shrewd one!"

"I don't quite like this, though," hesitated the giant. "It's rather a dirty job—and I have to do all the dirty work—"

"Oh, forget it!" broke in the other. "We'll be on deck and give you a hand. He's a big fellow—that's where you come in. It's better not to have too many people around; he'd suspect something. But you alone could turn the trick—and man!—a fortune and *home* for a night's work! You have done more for less!"

The younger man drained his coffee at a gulp.

"What's my share?" he demanded.

"One-quarter," he replied, still in a whisper. "We split four ways—got to give Saad a square deal. He's a handy beggar, and it was he who dug this up. Give the Roumi the knife, if you have to, but it would be better just to bag him and ship him out to-night with Kedde's caravan—he's leaving up-country to-night."

Walters rose, his hugeness dwarfing his companion's figure. His brows were lowering and ugly.

"I'm with you!" he announced briefly. Then: "I'll go up to your place and clean up so I can meet them, and you can explain fully just how we'll work it. Where did you say they would be? The Café d'Or? All right. Come on!"

An hour later Walters, freshly shaved, in clean, neat European clothes, looking like a prosperous English tourist, shouldered his way through the crowds in the *Socco Chico* and entered the Café d'Or. His keen eyes swept the crowded room in an instant, and he spotted his quarry.

He noted that Tom was a younger man, almost as huge as himself. He was laughing at something his companion was heatedly expounding.

Walters surveyed him briefly and smiled. No mean quarry, this strapping fellow! It promised to be an interesting evening. Martin, who sat with Harcourt, had about him a nervous keenness that suggested the wariness of jackals. He noted Walters standing in the entrance, and an imperceptible signal passed between them.

Walters selected a vacant table near his friend, and as he was about to sit down started with excellently simulated surprise as Martin exclaimed:

"Well—of all things! Bob Walters!"

Walters turned, stared incredulously, then swiftly crossed to the other table, a smile making his face pleasing and attractive.

"Martin!" he gasped, shaking the other's hand. "Well, I'll be damned! Never dreamed of seeing you here! Why, it's two years since I saw you in—Alexandria!" He wrung his friend's hand. "This is a pleasant surprise!"

They had both risen, and Tom smiled sympathetically at the enthusiastic meeting between two old friends.

"This is Mr. Bob Walters, Mr. Harcourt," said Martin to Tom. "An old friend of mine. Allow me to present Mr. Harcourt, Bob. By Jove, but I'm glad to see you again, old fellow!"

Martin was evidently jubilant at the accidental meeting. Tom and Walters shook hands, and they all seated themselves at the same table.

"Tremendously pleased to run into you like this, Walters," continued Martin. "Harcourt, here, is bound on sailing tomorrow for England. I've told him what a gay old town Tangier can be—if you know the ropes—but he won't stay and see the fun. Can't you convince him to stay for a while? You know all there is to know about Tangier. Tell him what a high old time we plan here usually. I'd like to have him with us."

"Well, I know of some Kabyl girls," said Walters, smiling reminiscently. "White as the fairest English girl, but far more beautiful—if you're interested in that sort of thing. Glad to show you around."

Tom colored warmly and shook his head.

"Sorry," he said. "Even white Kabyl girls can't keep me here."

Then the conversation drifted upon va-

rious topics, and with the camaraderie of men of the world they ate their dinner and drank and laughed and became very well acquainted. Later, rallied again upon his determination to return to prosaic civilization, Tom merely smiled. Martin and Walters tempted, but made no impression when they tried to induce him to visit some of the livelier water-front cafés.

"You're bound on hurrying back to civilization," complained Martin, "and you won't even spend the last evening interestingly. You're a peculiar chap!"

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," he said, "but I can't stay. I've my reservations made; and besides, I have a young lady with me who is going, too, and is anxious to get home. I have to look after her." He smiled. "My fiancée," he added. "We are both homesick for the States."

"Oh—are you an American?" asked Walters. "I thought you were English. What part do you hail from?"

"That little village by the sea—New York."

"I'm an American, too," volunteered Walters slowly.

"Are you?" exclaimed Tom. "By George, I'm glad to meet you! Yes, I'm anxious to get back, but we're not going to New York; we're going to the little home town of my fiancée, in the Middle West, where I'm going to make my home hereafter."

"Some day," said Walters, "I'm going back to a little town in the Middle West, too, and perhaps we'll meet again. What town are you going to?"

"A little jerkwater town," laughed Tom. "You probably never heard of it—Penhallow, Illinois."

"Penhallow?" repeated Walters.

Tom nodded.

"I once knew a chap, I think, who came from that town," said Walters. "May I ask what your fiancée's name is?"

"Anthony," replied Tom—"Elizabeth Anthony. She's the daughter of Professor B. A. Anthony, who was with me in the desert, and—" His voice grew grave; then he continued: "He was the famous archæologist."

"And he died in the desert?" queried Walters with interest. "It's a queer yarn! Would you mind telling me of your experiences? They interest me."

Tom sketched his meeting with the professor, the trip after the hidden city, the attack and the death, and left out all mention of the finding of the pearls and the grave of Eadmée.

He concluded: "Perhaps you gentlemen will understand now why we're anxious to get back home, Bess and I, and you'll see why Kabyl girls don't interest me when I show you—this!" He took a leather wallet from his pocket and drew out a small photograph. "That's my fiancée," he said, handing the photograph to Martin, who took it, opened his eyes wide, and smiled.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "A perfect beauty! You know, Harcourt, on our way here from Algiers, I tried to see her face, but that heavy mourning veil foiled me. I'm sorrier than ever now that I didn't actually see her. You're to be greatly congratulated, young man!"

He turned his head to hide the crafty smile.

Walters took the photograph next and examined it intently, then with a smile he handed it back.

"As beautiful as only an American girl can be," he said quietly.

"Well, I'm sorry you won't stay in Tangier for a while," smiled Martin, "but I'm glad you took dinner with me, anyhow. I have advice that my draft will be here by morning, so we'll finish our little business."

They arose, and Martin flashed a warning glance at Walters, whose eyes were inscrutable.

"I'm going back to the hotel," said Tom as they left the café. "I don't care to leave Miss Anthony alone for long, if I can help it. The truth of the matter is that if she hadn't denied herself to me for dinner, we'd have dined together again, as usual." He laughed. "Don't take that as any reflection on your hospitality," he added. "I didn't intend it—"

Martin waved his hand in interruption, smiling.

"I couldn't blame you for your preference," he said.

Walters said nothing; he measured the young man's figure with appraising eyes.

Martin suggested driving to the hotel in an *araba,* but Tom and Walters decided that they'd rather walk. The night was perfect, the streets kaleidoscopically colorful and interesting.

"I'll be at the hotel until ten to-morrow morning," Tom told Martin. "If there should be any delay about going through with our deal, Mr. Martin, I'll have to give you back your deposit."

"Oh, everything will be all right," hastily answered Martin.

They left the *Socco Chico* and entered a winding street that was darker and narrower. The plan of action was well understood by the conspirators.

"Let's take this short cut to the road," said Martin. "I want to get out among the lights! This will put us on the new Marshan Road, and you'll be a step from your hotel."

The street became very narrow and dark. Martin and Walters kept up a running fire of conversation, and presently Martin lagged behind. The street was too narrow to walk three abreast, so Tom and Walters walked ahead.

Martin's hand crept to his pocket, and came out with a short, blunt object, while a dim, Oriental figure slid out of the deep shadows and crept up, a deadly strangler's cord in his hand.

At the same moment, as if sensing the danger, Tom turned.

Walters thrust him forward and shouted: "Run! Follow the street till you come to the Marshan Road! *Run!*"

Then he whirled upon his companion, and caught Martin's descending smash from a section of lead pipe on his arm.

Tom stood mute, bewildered for the moment, and saw Martin and an Oriental figure hurl themselves upon Walters, who felled the native with a terrific blow and held the other at arm's length, as helpless as if held in a vise.

"Run—you damned fool!" cried Walters again to Tom. "It's a plant—to get your pearls! Run—for the girl's sake! Quick!"

It had all occurred in a second of time, but the mention of Bess brought action. In a flash Tom realized what it was all about, and thought of possible harm to the girl.

He ran. Up the pitch black street, turned up another, stumbled upon a musty-smelling, kneeling camel, and was loudly cursed by his owner, who seemed to be kneeling near by; on till he heard again the thrilling of *mekhanzis* and caught the reek of the water front and the flare of the lights of the road.

Walters held Martin at arm's length for several seconds, then thrust him against the wall. The native, Saad, staggered to his feet, and both of them regarded Walters, standing with legs wide apart, his two huge arms ready at his side.

"You dirty welcher!' gasped Martin hoarsely. "Do you know what you did? Are you crazy?"

Saad edged toward Martin, his eyes blazing like a cat's in the darkness.

"Dog of a traitor!" he cried. "As Allah is mighty, I swear by the law and the prophet that you shall pay for this!" The sibilant Tamazirt made the threat sound like the hiss of a snake.

Walters watched them both alertly.

"Careful with your threats," he answered from between his teeth. "You'll stay here till he's clear! If you try any funny moves—you know *me*—I'll break the both of you beyond recognition—with my hands!"

The fury of his tone, his huge bulk, cowed the two others.

Martin recovered his equilibrium quickly, however. He shook his shoulders, smoothed his coat and straightened his collar and tie. A crafty half smile crept over his keen features.

"Well," he said presently, "I don't pretend to understand your game, Walters. I was assured that I could depend upon you. You've double-crossed me, but this isn't the last trick in the game. I want to—ah—*suggest* that Tangier won't be big enough for both of us by morning."

"Anything you start," replied the giant quickly, "you want to make sure you'll finish. If you don't I'll finish it for you!"

"Very good! I'll consider that as an open declaration of war!"

"Consider it anything you like—and be damned!" flared Walters. "I'm not afraid of you—I'm no Hartâni slave to be frightened by words! By morning those young people will be gone. And let me tell *you* something, Martin: I'm not low enough to turn a trick like that on a fellow countryman or woman. I've gone down pretty low, but not as far as that!"

"There's a boat leaving Gibraltar at ten to-morrow," answered Martin indirectly, his voice icy. "If you're not on it—"

A low chuckle from Walters suddenly cut him short.

"That's a promise!" Walters said. "I'll look forward to wringing your neck! I'm staying in Tangier!"

Martin shrugged.

"All right," he replied. "Come, Saad." He turned abruptly and walked away, followed by the native.

Walters stood for several seconds in his tense attitude, then his arms relaxed.

"Which means, I suppose, 'Watch your step,'" he told himself. "Well, I may just as well finish the job!"

With a tread remarkably light for so big a man he glided down the dark street and made his way to the road.

VI.

Tom burst into the hotel and immediately sought Bess. The dark-eyed native maid met him instead.

"Where is your mistress?" he asked.

"Gone out, *sidi*, about half an hour ago."

"Out? With whom—where? Did she say?"

The maid didn't know.

"A letter came for her," she explained, "and she left in an *araba* with a Roumi—an elderly man." She had seen them from the window. Did the *sidi* want the letter? Here it was. The mademoiselle had forgotten it on the table when she went out.

Tom snatched the paper from the girl's fingers and read:

> Bess:
>
> Have been hurt. Mr. Thompson, who brings you this note, will bring you to me. Please come at once. I am at his home in el Maadi.
>
> Tom Harcourt.

A blaze of bitter blood surged into Tom's face, while a vitriolic rage began to hiss in his heart. He strove to keep control of his whirling faculties and question the maid further, but she knew nothing more. He ran down again to the clerk's desk.

"Did you see Miss Anthony go out?" he demanded, pale, his eyes glistening like a madman's. "When did she go? Who brought the letter that was sent to her room?"

The clerk endeavored to answer the feverish bombardment of questions as best he could.

"A resident brought the letter," he explained—"a Mr. Thompson. I've seen him before. I think he keeps a bazaar in the *Socco Chico*. He came in, and I sent the letter up to Miss Anthony. She came down almost immediately." She had left a package with him to be put in the hotel safe, and then he had pointed out Mr. Thompson to her. The two had talked for a few seconds, after which they had left in a waiting *araba*.

"Well," asserted Tom tensely, "she's been abducted!"

"She's been—what?" exclaimed the easy-going English clerk in astonishment.

"Abducted!" repeated Tom, his face rigid with misery. "Now, give me the address of this Thompson, and let me see the package she left with you."

"If that's the case," went on the clerk, "you'd better see your consul at once and have him get in touch with the police." He turned and gave Tom the paper package Bess had left behind.

A swift examination disclosed the fact that it contained the pearls.

Did she, then, have some suspicion regarding her trip to his supposed sick bed? Or was it just an act of precaution.

"Put these back in the safe," Tom instructed the clerk, "and here's a package of mine to put with it."

He resolved to leave his own share of the pearls behind also. There was no telling where his search for Bess might lead him, and the events of the night had taught him the value of caution. Martin and his aids, apparently, would stop at nothing to get the pearls.

Faculties racing, it suddenly occurred to him to wonder at the actions of the man Walters, who had turned upon his cronies and had given him the opportunity to escape the trap set for him. The circumstance presented a blank wall that his cogitation could not surmount. It was an inexplicable act.

He thrust it from him with impatience. There was more immediate and necessary work to think about. Bess was, undoubtedly, in their hands. What would they do to her? What might they not do when they found that she had left the pearls behind?

"See your consul," the clerk was saying. "He should be able to help you."

Tom jumped into a waiting *araba* and gave his destination to the grinning native. In twenty minutes he was sitting opposite the American consul and was telling the story.

As he neared the part of Bess's abduction he came to his feet and told the balance as he paced back and forth across the room.

"We've got to do something, and do it quick!" he fumed. "God knows what can happen to her in the meanwhile!" His clenched fists, the lines of agony around his mouth and eyes, told the consul how vividly the young man was suffering.

"We'll do everything possible," he assured Tom. "Don't lose your head! I'll get in touch with the police and we'll look up this Thompson at once."

"But before the police get into action I'm going alone," declared Tom. "I can't wait! She's—"

"Then I'll go with you," declared the consul quickly, interrupting him. "My influence may be of use if there's any trouble."

"My *araba* is waiting," flashed Tom. "Hurry—for Heaven's sake!"

During the brief ride Tom squirmed in an agony of apprehension. Countless imaginary happenings sped across his mental vision, and it was a struggle to remain seated when he wanted to jump out and run as fast as his feet could carry him to the bazaar in the *Socco Chico*.

At length, after what seemed to Tom an interminable ride, they stood before the little curio bazaar.

The door was closed and locked.

The consul knocked sharply, then in silence they waited. There was no response. After a short interval he knocked again, more sharply.

A very light-colored and comely Sudanese negro woman, with the three parallel marks of a slave across her cheek, opened the door and looked out in fear.

"Where is your master?" demanded the consul in Tamazirt.

"Gone on a journey, *sidi*," answered the woman. "He left by camel not an hour ago."

A furious, smothered curse escaped Tom. "Let's search the place," he declared. He had a smattering of Tamazirt, and he turned to the woman. "No lies!" he exclaimed. "Or, by Allah, I'll choke it out of you! Where did he go?"

"I do not know, *sidi*," protested the woman. "This is the truth. I do not lie!"

"Who was with him?" demanded Tom. "Wasn't there a Roumi girl?"

"That I do not know, *sidi*," whimpered the slave. "The camels were in the rear, and it was dark. I saw but the Sidi Thompson and Martin, and there was the man Saad. Perhaps, under the *mahmal*—I do not know."

The woman evidently was telling the truth, as no amount of questioning could shake her simple story. Tom and the consul searched the place, but it disclosed no clew. While they searched the police arrived in response to the consul's request.

To the French officer in charge Tom repeated as much of the story as he thought necessary, the officer making rapid notes of names, places, and circumstances.

"I'll do my utmost, sir," the Frenchman promised deferentially, as he noted the presence of the American consul. "The girl will be found. I'll send search parties out everywhere. Perhaps they hide in Tangier; but if they have taken to the desert it will take some time to overtake them." To himself he added: "If ever we do!" But he could not cast any discouraging obstacles before Tom, whose acute suffering was evident.

"Can't we search now—to-night?" Tom demanded. "Can't I do something? Good God, man, I can't sit by and wait!"

"I'll do everything possible at once," promised the officer, touched by Tom's haggard misery. "Go to your hotel and try to get some rest. You'll hear from us. Searching Tangier at night would be wasted effort, but I'll have the roads in all directions watched, and I'll send out some patrols. More than that we cannot do until morning."

A blank despair clutched at Tom's heart. He was helpless to aid Bess, and the thought of her in unscrupulous hands drove fanged spears of agony through him.

"I'll detail some men to search for this Walters," the officer went on. "I can't account for the way he acted. Perhaps if he's broken with his companions, and we can pick him up, he can furnish us with a clew.

"I don't understand Thompson's actions, for that matter. We've suspected him of shady transactions for years, but could never definitely connect him with any. He must have thought it worth his while to come out so much in the open and stake everything on one throw."

"Had he obtained the necklace my fiancée had," answered Tom, "he would have been amply compensated. It's very valuable. I wish to Heaven they'd have obtained the necklace and let her alone!"

"I'm sorry, sir," sympathized the police officer. "The whole force is at your disposal. Rest assured we shall do everything."

Tom thanked him mechanically and left with the consul.

"Well," asked the consul as they rode back toward his office, "what are you going to do now?"

Tom emerged from his haze of bitter thoughts.

"God knows!" he answered wearily. "I seem to be so helpless, and she—she might—"

"Don't borrow trouble," interjected the consul kindly. "Perhaps it will all come out better than you expect. They'll find she hasn't the pearls, and they may let her go—or try to bargain for them. Then we'll have a chance at them! Cheer up! Try to get some sleep. You can depend upon the police here—they are a very efficient lot of men."

"Yes!" agreed Tom sarcastically. "And this sort of thing goes on right under their noses!"

The consul shrugged.

"This is the Barbary Coast, remember," he offered, "and the police could use ten times as many men as they have. Shall I drop you at your hotel?"

"Yes, please," agreed Tom dully. "I don't want to seem ungrateful—I'm thankful to you, believe me; but I'm—I'm—"

"I understand," interrupted the consul. "Well, call upon me for anything in the world I can do. I'll be glad to do it. Good night."

"Good night," echoed Tom.

Once in his room, he paced the floor hopelessly—paced and thought until his mind was in chaos and his control at an end. Sleep was out of the question. He couldn't sit in the room and wait. Finally, with a muttered curse upon all things African, he slipped his automatic pistol into his pocket, and sallied forth into the streets.

He determined to search through every questionable coffee house and café with the object in view of possibly finding again the huge Walters. It looked like searching for the proverbial needle in the haystack, but any sort of physical action was preferable to him than simply sitting and waiting for the police to report.

VII.

He walked through the bizarre, fantastically illuminated streets as in a strange dream. He scanned the polyglot passers-by with a sense of reviewing page after page from "The Arabian Nights." The strange faces, the mysterious garbs, the confusing babble of many tongues, the pungent, exotic smells, the very atmosphere, gradually filled him with a sense of impotence.

There seemed to be no chance to penetrate this Oriental surface. Mystery, intrigue, any unutterable violence seemed

possible and plausible in a fantastic atmosphere like this—and at night! Tom began to appreciate the French police officer's counsel of waiting for daylight. It seemed utterly useless to look for one man in these dives and alleys, through crooked streets, and along the water front.

In the half light of the moon-flooded city the grotesque shadows brooded with menace. As he walked swiftly from place to place, up one street and down another, he kept his hand firmly upon the little automatic in his pocket. The feel of cold steel was like the touch of a stanch friend. As the hour grew later and the street lights diminished, the Café Chantants and the coffee houses grew livelier.

Bursts of fiery Oriental music came from these places of amusement. The notes of the hautboys grew wilder and shriller; the muted drums snarled savagely.

Tom had finally gravitated toward the water front, and had visited one café after another without result. In one or two places he had been eyed insolently and speculatively, but his unusual height and bulk had been discouraging to the enterprising adventurers.

In all the world, perhaps, there is no more vicious place than the water front of Tangier—specially so at night. It is the original Barbary Coast. Port Said and Suez fade into insignificance before it; the replica—imitation, rather—in San Francisco, is, in comparison, like a girl's boarding school.

Tom sensed the racial enmity, saw the corruption, the iniquity, the Lesbian immorality; he knew he courted danger here, but he was in a black mood that ached for physical contact. Had he seen Martin in any of the cafés he would have strangled him regardless of odds.

Driven on and on by the seething whirlpool within him, he visited one place after another, and at last the fates were kind to the intrepid searcher.

He entered a dimly lit café and peered around. Grave natives of various coffee hues were watching a white Kabyl girl dancing upon a raised platform. Tom saw no sign of his quarry, and was about to leave when a huge Arab stalked past him.

He squeezed Tom's arm in passing, and walked out into the street.

Tom whirled and followed. Why, he did not quite know.

The native stopped after walking some distance, and Tom came up with him. Then the native turned, and Tom saw—

Walters!

An inarticulate cry left his lips as he stepped forward. Walters, seemingly, expected an attack, and threw his hands up as if to ward off a blow. Tom saw the motion, and took it to mean that a blow was coming. He sidestepped, and with all the strength within him drove a heavy blow full into Walters's face.

Walters went down in a heap, while Tom felt as if his hands had been crushed. He stood over Walters, a fierce elation beating in every vein.

"I've got you!" he whispered hoarsely. "You'll not get away—I've got you covered. Now, you do as I tell you, or by the gods, big as you are, I'll beat you into a jelly!"

Walters raised himself on one elbow and fingered his jaw gingerly.

"Great Cæsar!" he gasped. "Do you always pack a wallop like that?"

Tom was slightly nonplused by the man's irrelevance, but he was too angry to be sidetracked.

"Plenty more where that came from!" he answered grimly. "Now, get up and don't try to run. I've got you covered through my pocket, and so help me—I'll kill you if you make a break!"

Walters rose to his feet slowly and stood regarding Tom with a strange look. There was no apprehension, no rancor—just a questioning, puzzled regard that finally disturbed Tom.

"You forgot," said Walters calmly, "that I let you get away to-night when the others would have cooked your goose!"

"I don't forget anything!" snapped Tom. "You probably had your reasons—selfish ones, no doubt—but I'm in no mood to quibble. I've been looking for you ever since, and now I've got you. You're going to march straight in front of me direct to police headquarters!"

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll put a couple of thirty-eights through your legs, my friend, and I'll carry you there. Perhaps the thirty-eights will loosen your tongue. Come on, now—march!"

Walters's eyes flashed. He made no move, except to shake his head slightly.

"Listen," he said, still calmly. "I've something to tell you first; then after I finish we'll go—if you want to. Here it is: To-night, when I learned that you and your fiancée were fellow Americans, I—I—couldn't go through with it. You know what happened. I broke with them, and as a matter of fact they threatened to kill me for it if I didn't leave Tangier by morning.

"Secondly, I'm tired of playing that sort of a game, and intend to go straight. You can believe it or not—let my action to-night speak for me.

"Thirdly, I'll tell you anything you want to know without going to the police. They couldn't *make* me talk if I didn't want to. Now, I like the cut of your jib, and if you are having trouble with Martin or Thompson or Saad, tell me quick, and I'll help you."

There was a quiet ring of sincerity in the giant's voice that could not be mistaken. Tom eyed him sharply, but could see no indication of treachery. Still, he was not to be taken in again so lightly. He kept the man covered and told him so.

"Oh, hell!" ejaculated Walters impatiently. "Don't be silly, youngster! Do you think I'd care about your popgun if I wasn't acting squarely? I've been shot before—and I'm still here. Don't waste time. Has anything happened? Did they get the pearls?"

Tom's impulse was born quite suddenly. He advanced to the giant's side. "You're—talking straight?" he asked, looking into Walters's eyes.

"Straight as a string, man! This was my first attempt at anything like—well, like this, and I couldn't go through with it. I acknowledge I've been in some pretty shady business—that's why I don't care to visit the police—but I never turned highwayman until last night—and you know what happened."

"You say you'll help me?"

"Absolutely! I'm in a bad fix myself. If I don't get them they'll get me, sure. They're probably the most desperate characters on the whole Barbary Coast."

"And you don't know what happened," continued Tom, "after I ran out of that street?"

"All I know," answered the big fellow sincerely, "is that I held them both while you got away. After that they threatened me, and I dressed up this way so they couldn't spot me so easily. And there were other reasons which I can't explain now. One of them was the police."

The man spoke with such freedom and sincerity that Tom concluded to take the chance and trust him further.

"Do you know," he went on bitterly, "that they abducted my fiancée while I was having dinner with you and Martin?"

An ejaculation of surprise and anger came from the giant's lips, and he stepped back a pace.

"The dogs!" he grated suddenly, a furious vehemence ringing in his voice. "The dirty dogs! That's Martin's little trick! I had no idea that was in the play—he didn't tell me. Well, that settles it for me! When they go making war on my countrywomen I'm on their trail! Look here, have you any money?"

"Some," answered Tom.

He was a bit taken aback by the other's fierceness.

"Enough to buy some camels?" he demanded.

Tom nodded.

"Then come on," directed Walters. "I know where they took her!"

"You do?"

"I believe so. They went out into the desert to-night. I think I know where they will go. Better tell me the whole story."

Tom told him the entire story, and as the minutes sped by became more and more convinced that he could trust the man—nay, more, that here was a powerful ally sent by a providential hand.

Walters nodded when Tom had concluded.

"I know most of that, of course," he said. "So they didn't get the pearls?

Well, they're in a safe place. No one will try to get them out of the hotel safe. But when they find that the girl hasn't the pearls—why—damn them!" He paused and seemed to consider for several moments; then:

"Look here, Tom Harcourt," he said. "You do as I tell you, and let me help you, and we may get her away; but if you don't, I want to tell you that the police will never find her! I happen to know this crowd of cutthroats!"

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"We've got to start after them at once! It won't do to call the police in—they'd want to send a force, and that wouldn't do—it would be reported to Martin at once—oh, he has spies everywhere!

"We've got to go alone and work up on them at night—some way—I'll work it out later."

"Well?" demanded Tom.

"It's a desperate chance. They're desperate men. I guess you know that by this time! Life don't count here on the desert the same as it does on Fifth Avenue. It's a primitive country—it's kill or be killed! Are you game for it?"

"You talk like a fool!" exclaimed Tom, impatiently. "I'll do anything, I tell you. I'd rather die a hundred times over than have Bess harmed. I'd kill the entire cutthroat population of Africa to get her back unharmed. Don't waste time. What do we do first?"

The giant chuckled suddenly.

"Good boy!" he exclaimed. "Silly of me to question you. Well, first we need two camels. You'll have to buy them—I'm broke. Two Bisharins for preference—or at least a couple of Mulaids—they're the best riding and the swiftest. We'll start at once. You get the money. I know a camel dealer who'll supply us."

Tom hesitated slightly.

"Of course you'll acknowledge that I've a right to question your motives," he said, after a moment. "Suppose you tell me why you're doing all this for me—all at once—outside of the fact that you've split with your—your—"

The giant winced noticeably.

"The fact that we're fellow countrymen," he answered simply. "I don't blame you for being suspicious of me, but—won't you try to forget what happened to-night, and take the word of a fellow American that I have no selfish motive save an honest desire to help you?"

A flood of new hope entered Tom's heart. He felt, somehow, that Walters, despite his former unsavory affiliations, was honest in his statement.

"We'll shake on it," said Tom, "to our better understanding." And he held out his hand.

Their fingers locked in a bone-crushing grip.

"I—I—owe that much to any fellow countryman or countrywoman," said the giant, huskily. "Now, come along. We've a long chase ahead!"

VIII.

Bess had suffered from a severe headache. It was the result of her weeping and heartache at the loss of her father.

It became so bad that she decided to take her meal in her own room instead of with Tom, as usual. He acquiesced with her desire and announced that since they could not have their dinner together, he would accept Martin's urgent invitation.

Then the note had come from Tom, telling her of an accident, and she had met Mr. Thompson in the lobby of the hotel and had hurried to Tom's side. It occurred to her that it would be best to leave the pearls in the hotel safe than to carry them on her person; some premonition urged her to leave them behind.

During the ride in the *araba,* Mr. Thompson had seemed to be so solicitous, so friendly, and so sorry that Tom should be incapacitated by a fall, that she could not suspect anything so brazen and melodramatic as an actual abduction.

When she arrived at the bazaar and had entered, she was given little time to think. A pungent, sweet-smelling handkerchief had been thrust under her nose, her arms held by strong hands while her consciousness gradually slipped away from her.

After that she recalled nothing. There was a vague, indeterminable period when

she was half-conscious of motion; harsh cries in which the exclamation, "Bâlek!" seemed to occur most frequently, and there were strange aromas.

When her mind returned, she opened her eyes upon darkness. She lay upon something soft and furry, from which she recoiled, and there was a hush about her that was uncanny. She cried out with fright, suddenly, and sat up, her heart drumming against her ribs.

Where was she? What had happened? Then, little by little, it all pieced itself together, and she caught her breath sharply and grew rigid with fear.

As her eyes became accustomed to the blackness about her, she made out a triangular doorway in back of her through which a star-gemmed sky shone; then she caught the unmistakable musty smell of camels.

Weak, dizzy, she stumbled to her feet and called out in a quavering voice.

Almost immediately a native, clad in the usual flowing *bernouse,* carrying a lantern, entered, turned up the wick and smiled to her. It was the man who had been with them on their journey from Algiers—Martin!

"Well, you're all right again, I see," he observed pleasantly. "Glad to see you on your feet."

"Let me out of here!" she cried. "Where am I? How dare you—"

He waved his hand in lazy interruption.

"You can go out if you wish," he said, rather to her surprise; "but you'll find yourself in the middle of the desert! That's where you are, young lady. And as for 'How dare I'—I want those pearls!"

"Then it was all a trick!" she panted. "Tom wasn't hurt—I see now—" A vivid terror overcame her, a violent nausea as her eyes took in the pale stretch of sand through the door. She ran to the opening of the tent and looked out upon a vague star-lit world, silent, mysterious. Another tent was pitched near, and there were several vague shapes of camels resting under some drooping date palms. Heart racing, trying hard to conceal her fear, she turned again toward Martin. He smiled.

"We're two days from Tangier," he told her, "by the fastest sort of travel. That means many miles. No use trying to get away—it's impossible. And there's no one to listen to you scream, except my men; no one knows of this oasis, so please act sensibly. Tell me, where did you leave those pearls?"

"Where you'll never get them!" she flared suddenly, angered. "Thank Heaven I had sense enough to leave them behind!"

"I'll get them!" smiled Martin imperturbably.

"You'll gain nothing by bringing me here," she stormed. "Don't you know that Tangier will be turned upside down? The police will—will—"

His confident smile stopped her.

"Your friend Tom will either give up all those pearls," he told her, "or I'll keep you. Fair exchange—pearls for a pearl! Candidly, I'd rather have the actual pearls—though you are an unusually nice little girl. If your friend Tom thinks as much of you as I imagine he does, he'll be glad to exchange the pearls for you. If not—"

His eyes lit up suddenly with a luster that caused the girl's flesh to creep and struck a chill to her very marrow.

"You'd have saved yourself a lot of trouble," he continued, evenly, "if you'd have had the pearls with you. As it is, it will take longer; but I'll get them—and maybe something else into the bargain!" He laughed softly, and the sound froze the girl's soul with a dread foreboding.

"The police will settle with you!" she whispered faintly.

"The police!" he mocked. "You're not in the States, remember! The police here are a farce—I know! Besides, we're where no police will ever find us. Better sit down and write a note to your friend Tom and tell him my proposition. I'll see that it's delivered, and that he's guided back here—"

"I won't!" cried Bess. "I won't!"

"You certainly will," he went on calmly, though an undercurrent of ruthlessness rang in his level voice. "There are more disagreeable things than parting with your pearls, young lady! I'm sure your friend Tom will think so—and so will you, after a moment's thought. I might be inclined

to turn you over to our native friend, Saad —after I'm through with you. He's expressed a very fervid desire for your company—"

The girl cried out suddenly, and he stopped.

Outside, in the hush of the midnight desert, she heard the cough of a camel; something screamed far off in the eerie wastes, and she shuddered. She could do nothing, she realized. Her puny strength was of no use.

"Well," asked Martin, "will you write the note?"

She nodded, dazedly, her eyes dilated, her breast heaving. No price was too high to ward off the unthinkable, unutterable violence Martin spoke of so glibly.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "I'll get you pen and paper. And I'm bringing you some clothes—native clothes—I want you to put them on. Please raise no objections. I want you to look like a native girl in case —by any rare chance — some one should happen to stumble upon this oasis."

He turned and left abruptly, while Bess crept to the door in an agony of heartbreak. No prospect of help loomed here—just the blue-white stretches of moon-drenched sands. The two tents looked pitifully small and forlorn in the great wastes. Far to the south she thought she caught the loom of a mountain range, inky black against the midnight sky.

Vainly she cast about for some avenue of escape, some method to outwit Martin; but her isolation, her lack of any weapon, forced the conclusion upon her that she was helpless.

Naturally brave, she quickly began to recover her self-possession, and paced the tent like a little caged, velvet leopard, ready to sheath its claws in its enemies at the first opportunity. The same blood that had run in her father's veins ran also in hers.

She resolved, all at once, to comply with Martin's demands. It would serve no purpose to oppose him now. She would do as he told her, and wait for morning. Perhaps an opportunity would come.

She was quite calm when Martin returned, and he eyed her in silent approval.

She wrote the note to Tom, at Martin's dictation, in which there were several suggestive phrases calculated to wring the heart of her fiancé when he read it; and then she accepted the Keshan silk garments Martin offered her.

"I'll get this note off at once," he asserted. "When you get up in the morning, change into these native clothes. You can feel free to go out of your tent if you like—no one will molest you—until we hear from Harcourt," he finished, significantly. "But don't go far, you'll get lost. There's some water in that canteen. Those hides will serve as your bed and I'll send you some *cous-cousou* in the morning."

She made no verbal answer, simply inclining her head, and he walked away.

From the door she saw him hand the note to a silent man, and almost immediately after a camel arose and lumbered away, bearing the native.

Martin was losing no time in dispatching the note to Tom.

She let the flap fall over the door, and lay down again upon the skins. She was very tired, but sleep was impossible. She was afraid to close her eyes.

The oil lamp cast flickering, Rembrantesque shadows through the tent, and her faculties were lured constantly to the borderlands of sleep—then she would start up suddenly, striving to keep awake.

Hour after hour she lay thus, until the oil in the lamp gave out. Startled out of her semiconsciousness by the sudden darkness, she rubbed her eyes and went to the door.

In the east a faint, pink flush was dawning. The air was cold and penetrating. She shivered and returned to her bed of skins.

Another day! She must watch carefully. Her own clothes were soiled and wrinkled. She slipped into the silks Martin had left, drank a little water, and weary, heavy-lidded, she waited, wondering what the day would bring her.

IX.

THE same dawn looked down upon two huge camels that lurched southward.

Upon the leading camel sat Walters, in *bernouse* and turban, burned to the color of leather by his many years under the African sun. He would have passed as a native anywhere, if one did not see the northern curly hair that no African sun could darken.

Tom rode behind, similarly attired. He slumped forward in his seat, for he was infinitely weary, and the camel's motion for the past two days and nights had fatigued him, unused to it as he was.

"Getting light," called Walters, over his shoulder, as he slid from his camel. "Better slow up and take a bite. We're pretty near the oasis I mean now, and we'd better go cautiously."

Tom rode up, and at a word from Walters, and a tap upon their knees, the obedient beasts knelt.

"Poor devils!" exclaimed Walters, as he watered and fed them. "They're fagged out! We've pushed them pretty hard."

Tom did not answer, but stood looking around at the desolation of the scene. As far as the eye could reach lay the tortured sand dunes, broken here and there by an occasional very scanty growth of tamarisk or a dwarfed date palm. He shivered in the bitter cold of the Saharan dawn. Soon it would be blistering hot again. He hated the country. Its blank sterility tortured his eyes, and a painful sense of impotence grew in his heart.

They had not met a soul once they had struck the desert, and Walters explained it thus:

"This is a trail no one uses, for it leads nowhere—just to the oasis. The regular trading caravans only ply between trading points, and there's nothing south of us except the Sahara, the Atlas Mountains, and the balance of Africa."

Now, as he looked about him, he was reminded of another spot in the tawny wastes, where Professor Anthony lay in his shallow grave by the side of Eadmeé, the Rose from the Garden of Allah. And now Bess was lost somewhere out upon the same sinister expanse.

They both ate rapidly, for they were hungry; and then they sat for a few minutes smoking. Both were sore and weary, as neither had slept more than a few hours since leaving Tangier.

"We'll have to go slowly now," said Walters. "We may make a turn around any of these sand hills and come flush upon the oasis. If they're there, it wouldn't do—can't tell how many of them there might be. We'd have to fight for it immediately, and the girl might get hurt. We'll go slow to-day and watch carefully."

Tom nodded, and for perhaps the twentieth time surveyed his companion with curiosity. There was now no doubt in his mind of Walters' honesty of purpose in espousing his cause. Walters' eagerness to rescue Bess and punish her abductors seemed nearly equal to Tom's own. And Tom was grateful, for he now realized that without Walters' help, he would have had little opportunity to help the girl.

"If," he added mentally, as his eyes strayed across the endless sands, "I ever get an opportunity." It all seemed so hopeless, so futile. The desert expanse seemed so limitless.

A sharp exclamation from Walters startled him out of his reverie.

"Look!" whispered Walters, pointing toward the south. "A camel! I'll bet it's some one we're looking for! Don't move—we're fairly well hidden here—and hand me that rifle!"

Tom looked and silently passed the rifle to Walters. He saw a dromedary coming toward them, winding in and out between the larger dunes.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Wait!" answered Walters, tersely. "When he sees us he'll either come up or run. If he runs it's a sign that he's not quite honest, and I'm going to pot the camel and investigate."

They lay in a tense silence watching the approaching beast. Suddenly he stopped, and the native upon his back leaned forward. Then he wheeled the camel and began to flog him.

"We want him!" cried Walters, coming to his feet and bringing his rifle to bear. He sighted carefully and fired.

The native swayed in his seat; then he fell upon the sands. The camel ran undecidedly a few paces and stopped.

"Come on!" cried Walters, starting forward. "I must have shot high—I meant to get the camel."

Together, as fast as they could go in the soft, clinging sand, they raced toward the fallen man. As they neared him the native raised himself and tugged at a heavy pistol hung at his waist.

"Stop that, Saad!" cried Walters fiercely, in Tamazirt, as he recognized the native. "Stop that—or I'll finish you!"

The threat had its desired effect. The native watched them approach, his beady eyes malevolent and glittering like two highly polished shoe buttons. Tom noted that on his left shoulder the white *bernouse* was stained with blood.

"Leave him to me!" exclaimed Walters to Tom, in English, after he had disarmed the native. "I know best how to deal with his kind."

He turned to Saad, who still sat in silence, eying them both with the venomous regard of a cobra.

"Saad," began Walters, reverting to the harsh Tamazirt, "you know me. You can't expect any mercy. You won't get it." His voice was low, and the dangerous ring in it impressed even Tom.

"Now tell me where the others are, and where the girl is—and tell the truth—or you'll fill the bellies of jackals to-night! What are you doing here? Now talk—and quick!"

For several heartbeats the native regarded both of them in silence, his eyes shifting swiftly from one to the other; then, without comment, he handed Walters the note that Martin had entrusted to him. It was addressed to Tom.

Walters handed it to Tom, who read it in ominous silence. The blood drained from his heart as he read the heartless alternative Martin proposed if the pearls were not immediately forthcoming in exchange for Bess. A furious curse died in his throat and a dusky pallor showed under the tan of his skin.

He handed the note to Walters, who read it in turn, and when he had completed it, looked at Saad with such a cold, terrible hatred that the native dropped his defiant eyes.

"That settles it!" declared Walters. "They're at the oasis, all right!" His eyes strayed to the dromedary Saad had been riding. "This is what we'll do," he resumed swiftly, turning to Tom.

They withdrew from the native a few feet, and Walters planned their course of action in swift, sure sentences.

Tom remonstrated once or twice, but the giant patiently argued him away from his objections. Finally they agreed.

X.

THAT same evening, immediately after the sun's sudden descent, and while the oasis was still bathed in the lurid afterglow, Martin recognized Saad's dromedary approaching the oasis from the north.

A curse left his lips as the consciousness that something had gone wrong with his plans pervaded him. Saad was not expected to return for several days. This meant that something untoward had occurred. As the camel came nearer, the hunched figure swaying and leaning forward, Martin saw that the *bernouse* was blood stained.

A premonition of impending danger filled him. He drew his pistol and raced forward to meet the approaching camel.

"Saad!" he called. "What happened? What—"

And suddenly an astonishing thing happened: the figure upon the camel straightened up, leaped to the sands and launched itself full upon the startled Martin.

But although he was taken unexpectedly, he recognized the huge bulk of Walters. He brought his automatic up and fired blindly. The next instant Walters' huge fist had landed full in his face, lifting him off his feet and dropping him in an inert, senseless heap upon the sand.

Pausing only to pick up the automatic, Walters ran toward the tents.

The sound of the shot had brought out Thompson. He realized the menace in the big, flapping figure that was approaching, and opened fire, Walters replying in kind.

For several seconds the pistol duel raged; then a lucky shot by Thompson hit Walters and he dropped. He threshed about,

shouting and growling, trying to regain his feet and seemingly unable to do so.

Thompson's triumphant shout died in his throat, however, when a sudden shot in his rear caused him to whirl with reptilian swiftness. He saw another native-clad figure running toward him and firing with threatening accuracy. Bewildered, believing the camp surrounded, he ran to one of the camels, cut the beast loose, and flogged him into a lumbering gallop.

The darkness fell swiftly, and he disappeared within its enveloping mantle, seemingly unhurt.

Tom raced to the tents, his automatic thrust forward. A cold determination lay in his heart, a deliberate conclusion: if Bess were harmed, he would kill whoever else he found in camp who had had any hand in her abduction.

The first tent was empty. He ran to the second. Here, as he tore away the flap and plunged within, he saw Bess, dressed like a native girl, standing in the center under the light of the hanging lantern.

Pale, round-eyed, her hands clasped to her heart, she, in turn, stared at the wild native figure that had burst in upon her. A little lyric note of fright escaped her as she stepped back a pace. Then, as Tom came under the direct light, the girl swayed suddenly toward him with a tremulous cry that plucked at his heart strings and contracted his throat.

For a moment he held her in a crushing embrace; then he turned toward the door again, fearing an attack from the rear.

Cautiously leading her out, he saw that the abductors had fled. Evidently there had been only Martin, Thompson, and Saad.

But where was Walters?

Holding Bess by the hand, they both ran toward the spot where Tom had seen the pistol duel, and they came upon Martin. He was still unconscious, and his face was horribly distorted. He looked as if his jaws were broken. The girl turned away with a shudder.

A little farther on they came upon Walters, unconscious, the blood flowing from a wound in his head.

In France Tom had been taught the trick of carrying a wounded man. He shouldered the giant, though he sagged under Walters' great weight, and marched toward the tent where he had found Bess.

"They're gone," he called to the girl, who walked by his side and tried in some measure to help support the unconscious Walters. "Let's get him back in the tent. I'm afraid he's badly hurt. There's a light there. Thompson won't come back—and Martin's out of the running."

"Who is this?" she asked.

"A real friend," answered Tom. "Without his help I'd never have found you."

Together they laid the big fellow upon the pile of skins, and Tom took the lantern down in order to make a closer examination.

He found it to be a deep scalp wound that had robbed Walters of consciousness.

"Any water, Bess?" he asked, turning to her.

For answer she thrust the canteen into his hands.

He bathed the wound and tore several strips from his *bernouse* to make bandages. Finally the man opened his eyes, sighed deeply, and looked around. His eyes fell upon Tom, and then lingered upon the girl.

Tom breathed a sigh of intense relief. He had come to like Walters suddenly with a great affection.

"Why didn't you shoot first?" he demanded severely, to hide his own agitation.

"Didn't know how many there might be here — couldn't trust Saad altogether. So I thought I'd use my hands on Martin and then sneak into camp and surprise them. But he shot, and that brought Thompson. Anyway—" He paused and stared at the girl. "Bess!" he said, and his voice was so peculiar that Tom and the girl exchanged puzzled glances.

"Fever!" muttered Tom.

Walters heard. A queer smile came to the corners of his lips.

"No, Tom," he said. "It's not fever." With some difficulty he reached into his *bernouse,* fumbled around, and finally brought out an old-time photograph. It showed two little boys with arms around each other. One was a small boy, with

glasses; the other was a rangy youngster, and inscribed at the bottom was:

Benjamin and Arthur Anthony.

From Mother.

Bess cried out when she saw it, the blood rushing to her face, wave upon wave.

"Why, I have one like that at home! I've seen this before! That's d-daddy and uncle Arthur who ran away from home!" She stopped, her eyes seeking Walters. "How did you get this—where—?" Then a clairvoyant thrill stopped her. "You—you—"

The giant slowly nodded his head.

"I'm—I'm—Arthur Anthony," he whispered, and turned his eyes from Tom, while the dusky red of a great shame stained his face. "I'm the one who ran away. God knows—I've not been very good—but perhaps I've repaid in part.

"I recognized the names that night in the café, and gave Tom a chance to get away. I was ashamed to claim any relationship. I wanted to get home and work my way back to respectability first—"

"But—but—I don't understand!" cried Bess, looking from Walters to Tom in utter bewilderment.

"Tom will explain to you," continued the giant, weakly. "Tell her—everything, Tom. Don't spare me. We'll be leaving here in the morning, and perhaps—Bess—you'll forgive—"

The girl sobbed suddenly.

"Why, Uncle Arthur!" she managed to say. "You're all—all—I have l-left, now—" She bent forward and kissed Walters—or, more properly, Anthony.

A pained fire crept into the giant's cheeks and he closed his eyes for a moment.

"Thank you—for that!" he whispered, huskily. "Now you two go out and tie up the camels. We'll need them to return to Tangier in the morning. And, my dear, Tom will tell you—what you want to know."

Tom had been a bewildered and naturally interested spectator. Now he squeezed the hand of the injured man and walked out upon the desert with Bess.

Long into the night they talked in low tones, while he told her of all that had occurred, of his meeting with Walters, of how much they owed him. And he lied like a gentleman in places.

While inside the tent, a world-weary adventurer, surfeited with roaming and the lure of far places, heard them; and a glad content came to him as he pictured a return to the little, clean, mid-western town he had longed for so eagerly, where he would spend the balance of his days.

(The end.)

TO MY WIFE—A CURIO HUNTER

FROM very, very tender years
You loved things old and hoary;
You used to gather antique bits,
Each with a doubtful story.
Your coins, your very rusty dirks
Displayed with jubilation,
Your ancient helms, and dented shields
Built up your reputation,
So, when I muse upon your craze
With morbid introspection,
I wonder—did you marry me
To crown your life's collection?

La Touche Hancock.

The Gusher

Part II

by Garret Smith

Author of "After a Million Years," "Between Worlds," "Treasures of Tantalus," etc.

WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED

MERTON DIBBLE returns home from service overseas to the farm his father left him. The title of the farm is not clear, for Merton's hated stepmother, a grasping woman who caused his beloved father's death, is also a claimant. But she has disappeared, and one of Mert's first tasks is to locate her. This he finally does through a lawyer, and at the same time discovers that some crooked oil men, with whom his stepmother seems to be associated, are invading Goar Valley. Because his father had been robbed by oil men Mert decides to oppose the promoters, by force if need be, and organizes a gang of ex-soldiers to help him. His life is made miserable by the persistent attentions of a girl named Violet Worthington, who, with her invalid father, is boarding at the next farm. Mert is a woman-hater, judging all women by his stepmother, and he will have nothing to do with Violet. After one destructive raid on the oil-well machinery, Mert plans another. In the midst of it a girl screams, throws her arms about his neck and holds tight. He tries to shake her off, and as he drags her into the light she pulls the mask from his face, and recognizes Mert. As he sees that it is Violet, a State constable leaps on his back.

CHAPTER VII.

THE STAR WITNESS.

AS the constable leaped on Mert's back and flung his arms about his neck the girl scrambled to her feet and stood for a moment staring into the face of the man she had helped capture. Then with a little shudder she turned and fled into the house, slamming the door after her. The struggling men were left in darkness. For a moment the young Night Rider was in despair. He had been clearly identified by the girl. He was in the strangle-hold of his adversary. It was a hopeless case. He could only make it worse by resisting arrest.

But as he felt the bony wrist of the constable cutting off his wind the old fighting blood suddenly boiled, the spirit that carried him through many a tight place in France when his life had for the moment seemed a thing cheap and easily discarded. An uncontrollable madness seized him.

He reached up and locked his fingers together at the back of the constable's neck. Bending over he drew down, relentlessly, while the clutch of the other sawed tighter and tighter into his throat. His breath was cut off. He was racked with the acute torment of strangulation. But at the same time the muscular neck of the other man was beginning to bend to his clutch. He must break that neck or throw its owner over his head before his strength left him.

For a moment that seemed an hour they swayed back and forth in silence excepting for the constable's heavy breathing and

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Mert's choking gasps. The officer's companions were rushing to his assistance and were almost upon them.

Then Mert felt the clutch on his throat weaken a little. It was now or never. Summoning all his remaining energy he heaved forward suddenly. His adversary's feet left the ground. His clutch on Mert's neck broke and the officer described a wide arc over Mert's head, breaking free and falling heavily on his back.

Mert stood for a moment while he regained his breath. Then he lunged for his adversary again in the pitch blackness. But the other had already regained his feet. They clinched now face to face with no advantage to either. A moment each struggled for a lead, then tripped in the long grass and fell.

They were now on a short sharp slope leading away from the house and ending in a rickety lath fence at the top of the steep bank of a ravine. Just as the first two of the constable's fellows arrived, almost stepping on them in the darkness, they hit this fence, broke through it and dropped some fifteen feet to the bed of the swift little brook at the ravine's bottom.

Mert was on top when they struck. He heard his antagonist groan and felt him go limp under him. The fugitive staggered to his feet and stood up in the edge of the stream, listening to the shouts of his pursuers on the bank above. At that moment he remembered the dynamite bomb that was still in his pocket. By one of those freaks of high explosives the vicious stuff had survived the rough and tumble, but Mert, at the thought of what might have been, was suddenly weak with fright.

But he heard a call for a lantern. Some one was already tentatively feeling his way down the bank. There was no time for thinking of past dangers.

The shock of his fall had shaken him out of his rage and restored his power to think. He gave attention to the injured constable just long enough to make out his groans above the babble of the brook. He felt him stir feebly. A moment before he would have killed the man joyfully. Now he was deeply relieved to find him alive.

He beat a rapid retreat down the stream just as a man with a lantern appeared at the top of the bank. The stream was shallow and he walked in its bed to hide his trail. The babble of the swift water over the pebbles drowned the sound of his going.

It was a scant ten rods from where he started to the point where the brook debouched into the Senabaugua River. He reached it before his pursuers had recovered from their confusion.

Mert had planned his getaway well. He had gone to Senabaugua that afternoon and had supper at the home of one of his gang who lived with an elderly father and mother given to retiring early. After supper several other members of the gang drifted in for a poker game. When the old people had retired, all but two of the party slipped out the back door and presently were on their way to Goar Valley. The two who remained artfully kept up a noise like a full-sized party throughout the evening. All but Mert rode their horses to the rendezvous. He took no chance on having his horse betray him.

Instead he borrowed a canoe belonging to one of the gang and paddled to a point near the mouth of the little brook from which he was just fleeing. Here, when he came out on the river shore leaving his pursuers behind him, he found the canoe and paddled swiftly but silently away in the darkness. A little out he paused and dropped the bomb overboard into deep water. An hour later he rejoined the poker party to which meantime the rest of the gang had returned.

Mert told his story amid the general consternation of the party.

He had just finished when there came a sharp rap at the door. Their host opened it and was confronted by a State constable.

"Is Mert Dibble here?" he demanded peremptorily.

"Right here," Mert replied, feigning surprise when he saw the officer. "What do you want? Anything happened in the valley?" he asked.

"No. Nothing serious, but no thanks to you. You tried hard enough. We got you with the goods, so don't try any stalling. And don't any of you pull any rough stuff, because we got the house surrounded."

And to the stuffy little village jail they went, despite all protests. When they were herded into the little court-room in the morning for a hearing before the local justice of the peace their spirits fell. A brief sizing up of the group before them made it evident that the odds were heavily against them. While the justice of the peace, Lewis Cramer, was a kindly old soul inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to the sons of his neighbors, he was over-awed by the presence of District Attorney Pomeroy whose home was in the county seat and who had no local prejudices. On the other hand his failure to indict anybody in connection with the other raid had made him determined to let nothing slip this time.

Violet Worthington was there, as they had of course expected. She sat with down-cast eyes, looking pale and agitated. The constable with whom Mert had fought was present, too, bruised and bandaged, but seriously injured only as to his feelings.

Ranged against the wall in the back of the room was a motley assemblage whose presence in a court of justice could mean only one thing—that they were there under compulsion, for the Hookfingers of the Senabaugua hills were no friends of the law, nor would their not unnatural aversion for it allow them to foregather out of mere curiosity where law was being dispensed.

In the forefront was Sam Goar, leader of the tribe, rangy and stooping of figure, his sallow narrow face and hard brown eyes under black overhanging brows expressive of low cunning. A cast of the right eye added to the viciousness of his countenance. Sam Goar by some freak of nature was the only one of the Hookfinger tribe gifted with any mental acuteness. He had a common school education, and dressed in marked contrast to his followers in neat, clean and whole garments, in keeping with his illicit prosperity. Likewise the common mutilation of the tribe had passed him over lightly. His disfigurement was confined to a missing thumb on his right hand. He had a habit of gesturing when he talked so that digital lack was in glaring evidence. He seemed rather proud of it than otherwise.

Back of this sinister leader were a dozen or so of his slack-jawed, lack-wit fellow-tribesmen, built on the same general plan as Sam, but lacking his keenness, and arrayed for the most part in tattered blue jean.

One or both hands of each of these men bore the tribal index, bent and twisted fingers that had the effect of being the mutilated claws of unclean animals.

The State constable in charge of the guards at the Flanders farm testified that he and his guards had driven off the Night Riders after a sharp skirmish. The men had fled toward the hills on horseback. He and a half a dozen other guards had gone in pursuit, but were not sure which way they turned until they came to Sam Goar's shanty. He hailed them as they passed and told them that a party of horsemen had ridden by his place in the direction of Senabaugua about fifteen minutes before.

The constable stopped a moment at Goar's place and telephoned back to the Flanders farm to see if there were any clews and learned about the fight between the constable and an unknown member of the Night Rider band whom this constable thought was Mert Dibble. Inquiry at the Dibble house showed Dibble was not in and Martha had told them he had gone to the village for a poker game at the Tanner home. Miss Worthington, who had torn the Night Rider's mask off, was in hysterics as the result of her experience and would make no statement.

So the constable rode on into Senabaugua and arrested the group at the Tanner home. He said further he had reccognized Mert Dibble's voice shouting to his men.

Sam Goar corroborated this testimony. Each one of his followers in turn who lived along the route likewise testified to hearing horsemen pass.

Everything was pointing to one conclusion when there was a stir at the door and Firewater Joe poked his head into the room.

What other witnesses have ye got?" asked the justice at this moment.

" I seeum fellers ride by too down on reservation," Joe shouted. " They go like hell toward lake. I think mebbe they go down Sagwah town, no good Indians mebbe so.

I hear 'nother white man want make well in Goar Valley, hire Indians smashum Mis' Flanders's well."

This was a pure improvisation on Joe's part, but it created a sensation. The district attorney usurped the justice's function by cross-examining this volunteer witness. Joe stuck to his story, but retreated into his native taciturnity when asked to amplify it.

The injured constable, called next, said he knew Dibble well by sight, and in the momentary view of his back he got before the light was shut off his antagonist appeared to be a man of Dibble's build and bearing. He admitted he had not seen his face.

Then Miss Worthington was called to the stand. When she came to the tearing off of the man's mask she faltered and stopped.

"Who was the man?" encouraged the justice.

She stole a glance at Mert Dibble, who was eying her stonily, braced for the inevitable.

"No one I ever saw before," she half whispered.

District Attorney Pomeroy glared at the girl.

"Describe him," he commanded.

Violet stole another look at Mert Dibble, a longer one this time. It semed to Mert she was fixing the details of his features more firmly in mind. She included his tall slender strength, rather long fair face and light brown hair and then said:

"He was short and stocky, round-faced and swarthy. His hair was black. I thought he was an Indian."

CHAPTER VIII.

VIOLET WORTHINGTON'S DILEMMA.

VIOLET WORTHINGTON left the court-room, pale and trembling. As she pressed through the crowd at the door a quiet stranger, standing in the rear of the crowd, without giving her more than a curious glance, slipped into her hand a folded piece of paper, unobserved by those around him. It was the same mysterious stranger who had trailed Mert Dibble to his train on his return to Goar Valley.

Back in her room at the farm she read the stranger's note, which ran:

> Must see you down by the river to-night as soon as you can get away safely.

She was still thinking of this command when she joined her father, who had been thrown into one of his bad spells by the uproar of the night before and had as yet been told nothing of the facts about it. She found the invalid better and sitting up in bed again.

"What was all the tumult outside last night?" he asked. "It woke me up so suddenly that it seemed to knock me out."

"Some hoodlums had a quarrel with the well drillers and threatened to wreck the machinery. The guards fired at them and drove them off. There was no damage done.

"Daddy," she asked after a little silent thought, "would you like to hear a queer story I read in a magazine I picked up while I was waiting for Mrs. Flanders? I'd like your opinion about the way the heroine acted."

"Why, yes, dear. Your old dad's ideas about literature aren't worth much, though."

"Well, this comes pretty close to life, and your ideas about that are worth a lot. The hero of the story seemed to hate the heroine and he seemed so brutal about it that she hated him, too. Then one night she caught him running away from the police. He'd been suspiciously near a bank that had been robbed and the police got after him, but it was dark and they couldn't identify him. The girl got in his way when he was running and stopped him. She clung to him so hard that he couldn't throw her off without hurting her. Instead of doing that he ran a risk of being caught and sent to State's prison rather than be rough to her. He was caught afterward largely because of the delay she caused, but they couldn't hold him without the girl's identification, and when she came into court she couldn't bring herself to betray the man who could have been brutal so easily, and yet had rather go to State's prison than do

so. So she perjured herself and said the fugitive was a man she had never seen before."

"Well, from the strictly legal standpoint she did wrong, of course. But from the human standpoint I can't help admiring her impulse and her courage in acting on it."

Violet looked greatly relieved.

"But look what she did afterward," she went on. "She needed some money awfully badly to help her sick mother, more than she could earn. Some people wanted to buy a business block the young man owned, but he hated them so and believed they were crooks who would cheat him, he wouldn't sell although he would have got a good bargain out of it. So they hired her to trick him into selling his property, and she did it and got the money she needed. What do you think of her, dad?"

"Well, I'd say she showed fine generous impulses in the first case, but didn't live up to them in the second case. Still she may have needed the money so badly that she's excusable. But if her family were any good they'd rather starve to death than have her mix up in anything like that."

"Dad," she said finally after the talk had drifted to other matters for a little, "I've been thinking, you're so comfortable here couldn't you let me go back to town to work again? I'd be with you over the week end. We're going to need money before long."

The old man's brow clouded.

"Poor little daughter," he sighed. "You'd be better off without your useless old father. Do whatever you think you must. I'll get along all right."

The Flanders family retired about ten that evening, and a little later Violet slipped out silently and went down the yard and crossed the road to the wharf. She made out the dim figure of a man sitting on its edge.

"Sit down. I want to talk to you," he commanded.

She obeyed a little hesitantly, keeping well away from him as she did so.

"Well," he sneered. "You did a nice piece of work this morning, you and that cursed Indian."

"What do you mean?" she asked coldly.

"I mean we had the gang that's bedeviling us sewed right up in a sack. We had their leader, this young Dibble, right where we wanted him. If we'd got him indicted we could have put the screws on him and made him sell his place. And then you spilled the beans. When the Indian made it look as though the gang might have belonged on the reservation and you swore it wasn't young Dibble that you caught, the district attorney had to throw up his hands.

"That old hick justice wouldn't hold the gang for a minute when it was only the word of a bunch of Hookfingers against them; and the district attorney admitted he hadn't any evidence to warrant it. They let the pack go, and now the district attorney is on a wild goose chase for a bunch of Indian Night Riders. What are you trying to do? Double cross us? Now we've got to have a show down. How about it?"

"Why are you so bent on getting the Dibble farm?" she countered. "Why not be content with the other farms you can buy? They may be as good."

"Not likely. All the geological sharks and rod fakers agree that the Dibble tract lies right over the center of the oil pocket. This well we're drilling may hit it and may not, but over on the other place it looks like a pretty sure thing. It's a gamble, of course, but the odds are the best on the Dibble place. First thing we know young Dibble will wake up and sell to somebody else if you don't act quick."

"But if you buy him out will you treat him fairly? I won't go on with this unless I'm sure there won't be any trickery."

"We've given you all the assurance you need of our honesty. The question is now, why did you lie down on the job this morning?"

Violet swallowed hard. She was glad the darkness hid her face.

"Do you mean to imply I perjured myself in court?" she demanded, putting all the indignation she could assume into her voice. "I didn't identify Mr. Dibble because he wasn't there to identify. That's all."

"There! There! Don't go up in the air. I'll have to take your word for it. The

question is, are you still with us? I've got a scheme laid out for you if you are. Remember, there's a thousand bucks in it for you anyhow, if you land him, and ten thousand if the well goes big."

Violet was silent for a minute.

"I'm not sure whether I want to go on with it. Let me think it over till to-morrow night, and meet me here again."

She returned to the house in a very unsettled frame of mind. All the next day she debated the problem. And all the time she could not help wondering, and hating herself for wondering, what attitude Mert Dibble would take toward her since she had saved him from a term in prison. If he came over as she would expect any gentleman to do and make some acknowledgment would she be able to go on with the plot against him?

Of course she could not know that Mert, back at work on his farm, was carrying on the same debate with himself. He knew what he owed to the girl. He couldn't in the least understand her action in defending him as she had. He realized, though, that he should have the grace to go over and thank her, but he didn't know how to do it. He didn't want to let himself stop hating her. At moments he hated her the more for putting him under obligations to her.

Evening came with the debate still undecided.

Meantime Violet waited for him till it became evident he was not coming, and then settled down with a fixed purpose until the family retired. As before she stole down to the wharf. The oil agent was there.

"I'm ready to do what you want me to do," she said simply.

CHAPTER IX.

SAM GOAR PLAYS IT BOTH WAYS.

SAM GOAR'S place on the Mountain Road was a story and a half inn-like structure, clap-boarded and newly painted. There was a well-tilled garden-patch at the rear of the house, and beyond it several log outbuildings, in the blind cellar of one of which, well-founded rumor had it, Sam ran his illicit still.

The house's innlike appearance did not altogether belie its character, for Sam usually had several more or less dubious looking boarders during the summer who came out there for the hunting. Sam's other ostensibly respectable occupations were securing woodsmen for the lumber companies and trading horses, a considerable bunch of which were always grazing in open weather in the stump-lot beyond the outbuildings.

Early one evening, a few days after the abortive Night Rider raid on the Flanders oil well, the dapper young Mr. Haslip of the Flowerville Oil Development Company stepped out of a Senabaugua livery rig in front of Sam Goar's place. Goar unlimbered his lank form slowly and slouched through the front door. A moment later he admitted his caller into a bare little room with drawn shades, lighted by a dim oil lamp.

"Well, Sam," Haslip began, "are you sold out to the Dunsmore crowd or do we still get a look in?"

Goar ran his thumbless hand through his thatch of iron gray air and assumed a poker face.

"That depends on how much you fellers want to put up fer a peek," he allowed cautiously. "I ain't denyin' there's some competition fer peekholes these days an' that the price has riz."

"Well," Haslip admitted, "I see the point, you old scalawag. I think we can afford to monopolize the peekholes. I judged Dunsmore had slipped you something when you went down to court the other day and swore you heard Dibble's voice among the Night Riders that went by your place the night before. Sort of spoke out of turn, didn't you? Got your evidence thrown out. Wonder they didn't arrest you for perjury."

"I said I thought I heard his voice," Goar corrected him. "That ain't perjury thet they kin prove. Mebbe I did think so. Ol' Judge Cramer ain't no mind reader."

"Well, that's no matter. Let's get down to cases. How much is the Dunsmore crowd paying you, and what are you supposed to do for it?"

"They ain't payin' me to run an' tell you all about 'em," demurred Goar cautiously.

"Listen," whispered Haslip, tapping his host's lean knee. "Whatever they're paying you we'll double, but provided only that you produce the goods. How about it?"

"Might be arranged," Goar conceded.

"First thing then, has Dunsmore got options on any other land or oil rights excepting the Flanders place?"

"Nope. He ain't workin' it that way. He thinks he's got 'em buffaloed by tellin' 'em to lie low an' see how this well works out. If she's a gusher he'll hook 'em all into his company an' skin 'em. If she ain't he'll make her seem like one long enough to hook 'em jest the same. He aims to keep progress at the well secret till he knows jest how she's comin', then hop in an' clean up quick. Only land he has real faith in's the Dibble place. How he's figgerin' to git that I don't know. He ain't let me in on that. Young Dibble's got the idea, somehow, all you fellers is crooks an' he won't deal with ye."

"Yes, the Dibble place is the one best bet. We've been after that for years and may get it yet. One thing I want you to do is to dope out some new scheme of swinging Dibble. Another thing is to get a spy in next to the Flanders well, and not only tip me off the minute they strike anything, but keep any message from getting in to Dunsmore in Flowerville as long as possible. Now another thing. Suppose you go to each farmer who's itching to get rich quick, and tell him in strict confidence that his particular farm is the one Dunsmore has spotted as the most likely to produce oil. Tell him he has commissioned you to take an option on it secretly that will give him the inside drag later on. Then get the option in your own name, explaining that there must be no evidence of Dunsmore's connection with it. Then you can transfer the option to me and leave friend Dunsmore out in the cold, holding an empty bag. See?"

Sam Goar saw, with the aid of a liberal advance payment.

When Haslip departed as inconspicuously as he came, neither he nor Sam Goar noted the patient presence of Firewater Joe behind a tree near the one to which the city man had tethered his horse, nor knew that a keen Indian ear had been plastered to the keyhole of the side door leading into Goar's sanctum during the entire conference.

Both would have been considerably disturbed had they listened an hour later to a pretty complete report of their conference delivered to Mert by his faithful spy.

Toward noon the next day Firewater Joe strolled up the steep winding road leading to Sam Goar's place. The Hookfinger chief as usual was resting on his veranda, tilted back against the wall in his favorite splint bottomed chair and sucking at his inevitable corncob pipe.

"Mebbe so you likum little hoeing in garden," Joe said.

"Sure, Joe. Go to it. Hoe's leanin' 'gainst the fence as usual."

Joe went around the house, found the implement, and selecting a row of corn after some consideration, began hoeing in a rather sketchy and unenthusiastic fashion. Presently he dropped on his haunches, yawned and looked inquiringly about him. Then still gazing dreamily off into space, he cautiously slipped a bottle out of his hip pocket. Around its neck was wrapped a dirty bill. Beside one of the hills of corn he slyly scooped with his hand a shallow hole and buried the bottle. Then he arose and went around the house past the front veranda.

"Pretty dam hot hoe garden. Go get drinkum water, rest little," he remarked to Sam Goar in passing.

"Go to it," the proprietor acquiesced, apparently uninterested.

But after Joe had disappeared in the underbrush on the way to the spring up the hillside, Sam unlimbered himself and slouched around into the garden for a moment to inspect his helper's work.

A little later Joe returned to his hoeing, pocketing the bottle as he picked up his hoe. Now the dollar was gone and the bottle was full of red liquor. Thus did Sam Goar keep his garden cultivated and reap a goodly revenue out of it entirely

apart and separate from the returns from vegetables raised therein. The penalty for selling liquor to Indians was particularly severe.

By the time Joe had finished his row of corn he decided he was through for the day.

"Too dam hot," he explained to Goar for the benefit of any chance listeners.

"Mebbe so you wantum some other nice work done not so hot," he said hopefully after a pause.

Sam Goar was doing some thinking.

"Come to the side door after dark tonight," he directed after a moment.

That night after a long conference with Goar, Firewater Joe departed with a commission from the Hookfinger chief to get himself employed in some capacity or other at the Flanders well and report to Goar anything he could pick up as to the progress of the drilling. And within a week Joe had fulfilled the first part of the assignment by getting a job with the drillers as general handy man.

So it came about that Firewater Joe went Sam Goar one better. Whereas the latter was merely serving two opposing masters, Joe was serving three, the two fighting oil factions and Mert Dibble, who was fighting them both.

CHAPTER X.

"PINE TREES GROW TALL."

SINCE the Night Rider raid on the Flanders well the guard around the place had been doubled, and as the drilling progressed the farm was more and more carefully picketed, so that a stranger had no more chance of getting in range of the well than he would of passing into an army encampment unchallenged. Even of the hired guards only a trusted few were allowed around the well itself. The derrick stood back in the woods entirely hidden by tall trees. Any spy seeking to get information as to progress of the work or its ultimate success would have a hard time of it.

So it came about that Firewater Joe, though hired on Sam Goar's recommendation to Flannigan, the boss driller, as being discreet and absolutely with the Dunsmore crowd, never found his duties taking him in sight of the well. He had been hired to run errands, principally canoe trips with supplies and mail between the farm and the village.

But under cover of darkness it was amazing to what extent Indian cunning could go in getting desired information. Dodging from tree to tree and crawling through the brush on his stomach, Joe managed to make a close inspection of progress each night with the aid of an electric torch furnished by Mert Dibble. So each night Mert received a full and accurate report of the distance made during the day, and Sam Goar got an equally full and perfectly inaccurate report, which he passed on to his second employer, Haslip of the Flowerville Company, with such further modifications as seemed expedient to him.

Goar meantime had not been personally idle. Before beginning the execution of Haslip's commission to secure options on as much farm land as possible, he sent for Dunsmore, his first employer and dupe, who like all with whom Goar dealt, preferred to come to him and come in the dark.

"I been gittin' a line on the Flowerville Company crowd," Goar said when the oil man was safely closeted in his little side room. "Haslip was in town last week. One o' my men is planted at the Senabaugua Hotel. He spotted Haslip an' listened from the next room to him talkin' to another city feller. They're plannin' to snoop 'round an' git options on oil rights to as many places as they can around the valley while you fellers is drillin'. Then if they git wind you struck ile, they'll sew up these options on ye an' make ye come to terms with 'em. Now here's what I kin do. They been talkin' 'round among some o' the farmers tellin' 'em you fellers is crooks an' persuadin' 'em to tie up with 'em. They ain't actually hooked any options yit. You advance me the money to buy up options an' I'll slip 'round ahead o' their man that's goin' to start out after 'em next week. I'll take the options in my name as a blind. Anybody I find leanin' to the other crowd I'll tell 'em I'm representin' that crowd. If they're for you I'll tell 'em I am, too. See? We git 'em goin' an' comin'. See?

Goin' an' comin' an' returnin' back, as the feller says. I'll tell each sucker he's the only one we're lettin' in on the inside an' fer him to keep his trap shut. That'll git 'em."

Dunsmore was a little reluctant at first to put so much responsibility into the hands of Goar, about whose integrity he had no delusions; but he estimated that the Hook-finger had everything to gain and nothing to lose in this instance by playing square and getting a good bonus for delivering the goods. He was careful to keep Sam in the dark about the progress of the well. Anyhow, the situation was critical, and there seemed nothing else to do. It would not do to tip the other crowd to his move by openly taking options in his own name and perhaps starting a ruinous competition prematurely. On the success of this first well depended how much he was willing to pay for options. Once let it be a success and that fact became known, and the price of oil rights would go sky high. It would be well to nail down as many options as the amount they were willing to risk would pay for. Then precautions must be redoubled to keep secret the success of the well if they did strike oil, until they could secure the rest at the same moderate price.

Dunsmore went out to the Flanders farm to inspect the well. He found there encouraging signs that the well might yield something worth while.

"See here, Flannigan," he said to the drill boss when they were alone. "It's more important than ever that we keep it dark when this comes off if it's big. Every day you keep it from the public after she blows, there's a hundred dollars bonus in it for you. If she's a flivver, you understand, we must keep that dark, too. I'll manage to let a pretty substantial rumor leak out in case that she's gone big, and while the public still believes it, we can unload our options and get out from under. We'll just let the other crowd hold the bag in that case.

"Now here's the dope. I've got to be in Flowerville this next week. If she blows big in that time, send me a wire hot foot. Have that Indian runner of yours right on hand ready to shoot it down to the village. If she's big, wire: 'Pine trees grow tall.' If she's a flivver, say: 'Maples are budding.' Got that?"

And in the meantime, Sam Goar, the double-faced emissary of the rival prospectors, was making hay while the sun shone, making it in large and imposing piles. Each farmer he approached knew he was a crook, and that he was being let in on a shady deal of some sort; but the point was, as Sam represented, he was being let in exclusively, inasmuch as the oil people had learned that his was the particular location they most wanted. And Sam knew his men well enough not to approach anybody whose conscience was too immaculate.

As a result, every day or two Sam displayed to each of his rival employers in turn a bunch of options, and promptly from each received a roll of bills with which to pay for those options. In the course of the week a good half the oil rights of the valley had been thus tied up in the name of Sam Goar.

Toward the end of the week Firewater Joe rushed to the nightly meeting with Mert in unusual haste and in a state bordering as near on excitement as the stoic Indian ever attained.

"Oil runnin' good," he reported. "Boss Flannigan he get ready shoot well to-night, mebbe midnight. I got be ready then take telegram to village. I bring him to you first. Now I run tell Sam Goar well no dam good, an' they mebbe drill week more then give 'em up."

Midnight came, and Mert, listening in the far edge of his woodlot near the Flanders line, heard a dull muffled rumble like distant thunder in the direction of his neighbor's woods. He knew that Joe's prediction had proved true. The well had been shot. He hurried to the appointed place for meeting the Indian, and waited with feverish impatience to learn whether the well had been a success. In spite of bitter inherited antagonism to the oil men his imagination was fired with the thought that perhaps less than half a mile away a fortune was even now spouting into the air. If only these oil men weren't crooks! If he could only find an honest prospector, he might—but the thought died half formed.

He had barely reached his stand by the river when he heard the hurried dip of a paddle, and a moment later Joe grounded his canoe in the shallows by his feet.

"She go big," the scout reported. "I crawl into bush by derrick an' she mos' pour oil all over me. I come out pretty fast, you bet. She fly up top derrick. Mr. Flannigan he give me this paper go to telegraph office."

He handed Mert a sealed envelope which the latter opened without a qualm.

"Pine trees grow tall," it read.

Mert thought a moment and then began to chuckle.

"I reckon, Joe," he said, "that we kin git the most fun out o' this, an' do the most damage, by lettin' everybody know about it. I'll fix this telegram and the operator 'll do the rest. You better fix yourself right by telling Sam Goar some time to-morrow you made a mistake. Somebody played a trick on you about the well. Don't want him to think you been trickin' him, 'cause you want to use him some more."

Then Mert took a pencil from his pocket and imitating crudely the scrawl of the oil boss, added to the cryptic words, "Pine trees grow tall," this addendum, "She's spoutin' clean over the derrick."

CHAPTER XI.

THE OIL STAMPEDE.

WHEN Mert Dibble, moved both by a whimsical impulse and a desire for revenge against the tricky oil promoters, spread broadcast to the world by his addendum to Flannigan's telegram, the fact that oil in paying quantities had at last been struck in Goar Valley, he was unaware of the fact that Sam Goar had in his pocket all the most desirable options, and that his trick was playing admirably into the hands of that wily old scamp. Mert had seen that his fight to keep the crooked oil men out of the valley had been lost. He had hoped as a last resort to upset their plans and cut into their profits sadly by giving publicity to the fact that the trial well was a success. This would compel them to compete at once in their race for further oil rights against a money-mad public. Further than that it would tip off the farmers as to the real value of the rights they had to sell and give them a better chance at a square deal with more honest prospectors.

That there might be honest oil prospectors Mert Dibble was willing to concede. He was subtly, half-consciously influenced by the proof that there actually was oil in paying quantities under Goar Valley. The men of his father's generation conceded neither of these points. The experience of their neighbors over the hills with the crooked prospectors had made them believe that even if they had oil to sell they would be cheated in the selling. The experience of the one farmer in their valley with a dry well had proven to their satisfaction that there was no paying oil in the valley.

Mert had been brought up to believe these two propositions, and had begun his fight along those lines. Now, while he saw the error of the disbelief in the presence of oil, he had tangible proof instead of mere prejudice that these particular oil men who were exploiting Goar Valley were crooks and wreckers. The warning of his stepmother, Firewater Joe's reports of the plot with Sam Goar, the evident intention to corner the oil rights of the valley by fair means or foul—here was proof positive.

From now on Mert Dibble's fight centered on defeating a gang of crooks and giving his neighbors and—perhaps—himself an honest deal if, as seemed inevitable, his beloved valley must become a region of derricks instead of peaceful farms.

And in his belief that in altering Flannigan's telegram he would start something, he was entirely correct. When the bored and drowsy night operator at Senabaugua station read the remarkable telegram handed him by Firewater Joe, he suddenly was wide awake. He lost no time in getting the wire off to Dunsmore, then sent several wires to fellow operators of his at different points along the line, close friends to whom he had previously given the tip that there might presently be something doing in Goar Valley that would interest them and their friends to the extent of investing some of their savings.

Then he routed out others of his intimates around town by telephone and gave them the glad news.

It so happened, too, that the night operator who received the message in Flowerville was numbered among the pals of the Senabaugua man. It happened, too, not unnaturally, being a friend of the first man, that he was not given to splitting hairs in matters of honor. But he was less altruistic than his brother operator in Senabaugua. He had not the slightest intention of giving his rich information away.

On receiving the original tip from his friend down the line, he got in touch with a number of gentlemen commanding money and anxious to command considerably more of it, and arranged that he should for certain prices, based on the carrying power of the traffic, tip them off in advance if he got any positive information.

Consequently the rush message to Dunsmore somehow got sidetracked in the office for a considerable time, and failed to reach that eagerly waiting prospector until the middle of the forenoon. And by that time several automobile parties from Flowerville, representing a total of no mean amount of liquid capital, had already arrived in Goar Valley, and were making frenzied bids for positions on the ground floor of the oil boom.

And as usual, when confidential information is issued to a considerable number of persons, there were numerous leaks. Long before the arrival of Dunsmore and Haslip the news of the Flanders gusher was public property in town and country through a radius of some two hundred miles around Goar Valley.

All Senabaugua invaded the valley, and together with neighboring farmers, thronged about the redoubled sentry line that surrounded the Flanders farm, hoping in vain to catch a glimpse of the marvelous gusher. They were joined in steadily growing streams by residents of the outlying farms and villages. Trains into Senabaugua from both directions were adding to the mob.

The automobile parties from Flowerville, inspired by the telegrapher's expensive tips, formed the nucleus of the capitalistic group and those best able to talk big money. Standing on the seats of their cars, they were trying to shout each other down in frenzied bids for farm land or the oil rights thereto. Goar Valley real estate began to soar unbelievably. Those who had been wheedled by Sam Goar into selling options on their places in advance stood by in stunned silence while their more fortunate neighbors sold out at prices ranging from ten to a hundred times those at which the wily Hookfinger chief had struck his bargains.

Toward noon a new element was added to the frantic tumult. A swart paunchy man with a voice like the bellow of a bull, stationed his car a little way from the bidders for oil rights.

"Now you got some money, what ye gonna do with it?" he roared. "You fellers that's sold yer land or yer oil rights ain't through yet, not by a jug full. Ye ain't even begun to skim the cream offen the milk pan yet.

"There's a rich deposit of oil under this valley, as yonder gusher proves. No man knows which way that vein runs. It may run under your farm, under yours, under yours. In that case you're in luck. But it may not. It can't run under all of 'em. A lot of you're goin' to get stung with dry wells just as sure as God made little apples.

"Now here's a chance to come in out o' the rain, a chance for all to share in a sure thing. I'm authorized to promote a drilling company to combine all these oil rights. These gentlemen who have bought your rights are not drillers. They're speculators. That's all right, too. They'll come in with us and let us handle their rights. Now we need capital for that. You men here have the capital. It's being paid to you. Why not use it to become partners of the men who have bought your rights, and share in their profits? Why not?"

But at this climax in the paunchy gentleman's eloquence there was a dramatic interruption. Two big motor cars roared up, one close behind the other, and stopped in the edge of the crowd. Out of the first leaped with ludicrous lack of his customary dignity Dunsmore, the independent oil operator and proprietor of the Flanders

gusher. A scant hour before he had received the belated and garbled telegram informing him, after it had scattered the news broadcast, that his Goar Valley experiment was a success.

Behind him as he worked his way through the crowd came the dapper little Haslip, his rival, representative of the Old Flowerville Oil Development Company. His information through the deluded Sam Goar had also been delayed. They had arrived after the harvest in oil options had already been reaped—reaped, it is true, at vastly greater expense than they had hoped to reap it for themselves by their policy of secrecy. But it was immediately evident that each still believed that he held options on a good half of Goar Valley and at a low figure, the options the double-dealing Sam Goar had obtained.

The two racing rivals arrived just in time to hear the peroration of the fat corporation promoter. They were confronting the orator as he roared: "These gentlemen who have bought your rights are not drillers."

"Whadye mean, not drillers?" Dunsmore demanded. "I'm a driller, and I hold options on half the land in this valley."

At that Haslip bristled.

"You hold options? Where did you get options? I have everything on sale up to this morning nailed down tight, a good half the rights of the valley. Ask Sam Goar. He was my agent in the matter. Where is Sam Goar?"

Dunsmore's expansive face had grown for a moment more purple than ever. Then it suddenly went white.

"Sam—Goar!" he gasped. "Oh, good Lord!"

The rumor of Sam Goar's strategic position spread through the crowd and reached the ears of the other speculators from the city. Consequently when Dunsmore and Haslip leaped into their cars almost simultaneously a few minutes later and started for Sam Goar's place, the rival cars were a part of a considerable procession.

When the roaring gasoline cavalcade wound its way in low gear and with boiling radiators up the last steep loop of mountain road and stopped in front of the rambling inn, its proprietor was sitting in his easy chair, backtilted and smiling sardonically as he rammed a charge of tobacco into the old corn cob pipe with the forefinger of the thumbless hand. It was as some ancient spider might have awaited the arrival to his web of an unusually promising swarm of flies.

The harried speculators leaped from their cars and surrounded the graceless old scamp, all shouting at once, the burden of the tumult being constantly rising bids for the options they understood Goar possessed.

"Yes," he drawled finally, "I got options on half the oil rights in Goar Valley to sell to the highest bidder. I want to talk to these here two gentlemen a minute first, as they both been to see me before. Then I'll be back an' we'll have a little auction."

He led the way to his den, Dunsmore and Haslip following. The two rivals had suddenly turned thoughtfully silent. After their first burst of wrath it dawned on each that he couldn't afford to have a frank talk before the other.

"Now, listen a minute, you two," Goar sneered after he had enjoyed the situation silently for a little. "I heard each o' you fellers sayin' somethin' out there about ownin' options, near's I could make out in the hubbub—somethin' about furnishin' me money to pay fer 'em. I ain't got any record o' no such transaction, an' I figger you ain't either.

"Each o' you fellers tried to beat the hard-workin' farmers here out o' a fair price fer their oil rights. You each tried to get me to do some dirty work fer you, as I could prove if I wanted to. You wouldn't want to air none o' that in court, an' it ain't necessary. I got these options in my own name, an' you ain't neither o' you got a smidgin o' proof that I didn't buy 'em with my own money fer myself. Now, if you want a chance at 'em, fer the best figger ye kin git, jest waltz back there on the porch an' join the auction."

"I'll put you in jail for this, you old scoundrel!" Haslip fumed.

But Dunsmore was a better sport. His

sense of humor was reasserting itself. He chuckled.

"Not this trip you won't, Haslip. I think for the present we better take off our hats to Sam, and then, as he advised, waltz."

CHAPTER XII.

TRIAL BY FIRE.

RELUCTANTLY, still glaring alternately first at Dunsmore, then at Sam Goar, Haslip followed his rival's advice. Dunsmore in the lead, they returned to the veranda. But as Dunsmore reached the door he paused a moment in deep thought, eying the group waiting expectantly to bid for Sam Goar's oil rights. Then he turned back to his companions.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I've thought of something. Let's return to the council chamber.

"Now, then," Dunsmore went on when they were again closeted, "we are all three practical men. At least Sam, here, has proved he is. He has proved he's too practical to have playing against us. As for you and your company, Haslip, you know I haven't had any love for you fellows since we split over your policy in handling that Dibble woman.

"If you'd taken my advice and been square with her I don't doubt we'd be drilling on the Dibble farm at the present moment.

"But that's all by—a dead issue. We might just as well make up our minds that those Dibble wills got lost or destroyed, and drop the woman as of no further use to either of us. Now we are cutting our own throats by keeping up the fight against each other.

"As it stands we have the lead over you at the moment because we have a real well. But we can't afford to waste our energies fighting you when we could gain more by combining.

"It would be cheaper to combine forces behind the scenes and make Sam, here, realize that there is something good in it for him—good enough in the long run to make him see that it would pay him to sell his options to the combination at a fair rate, part cash and part stock in the company. Fix it so Sam would have everything to gain and nothing to lose by playing honest, and then watch him like hawks. Hey, Sam?"

"Might be arranged," Sam conceded.

"I'll take it up with my directors," Haslip granted at last. "I'd rather see you in Hades, Dunsmore, to be frank, but business is business."

"Your choice of alternatives is a wise one," Dunsmore laughed. "Now, one more idea. We fellows have got ourselves discredited here, and we better go under cover. Besides, we're being fought tooth and nail by young Dibble, and he's a dangerous boy. I don't know how he did it, but I'm certain he engineered the fixing of that telegram of mine so as to spill the beans all over the table. I'll get him yet.

"But, meantime, we can throw him off the scent and mollify these farmers we want to use by seeming to get out from under. We'll take the tip of that fly-by-night promoter who seemed to have 'em on the run this morning.

"We'll organize a new company under cover and buy the whole works, we apparently going into retirement. I'll look up that promoter this afternoon and see if we can use him. Then while we're trying out other wells here and there, we'll keep after the Dibble place."

"I don't understand yet why the young lunatic won't sell with the offers we've made. Is he just holding out on us for a bigger stake?" Haslip ruminated.

"I'm afraid you don't understand sentiment, particularly in the cramped rural mind, Haslip," Dunsmore remarked. "The young fellow is ingrown. He doesn't care a hang for anything in the world but the old place, and he's sworn to keep it just as his father left it.

"I'm engaged in a little project through a trusted agent to shake him out of his state of mind and give him an interest in life that may make him want some of the filthy lucre. It's best not to go into that here."

"If it's the old place that sticks in his crop, it's a pity one of those young forest fires they always put out so promptly

around here couldn't sweep down and overrun his joint, wipe it out. That would knock away the foundation of his sentiment and make him darned glad to sell," Haslip commented flippantly.

Dunsmore looked at him sharply, then searchingly at Sam Goar.

Sam merely smiled faintly and looked thoughtfully away.

" Well, we've no time for joking," Dunsmore hastened to say, as if the subject were closed.

But Sam Goar was still thinking.

" You see," he said presently, " I've often thought a leetle mite of a fire up on the side of the hill opposite Dibble's might spread an' do that identical thing. They's a neck o' the woods, all pine an' like tinder this time o' the year stretchin' down from the mountain straight across one side o' Dibble farm next to Flanders's an' runnin' right up through the wood lot to the house an' barns."

Dunsmore looked Gore in the eye again searchingly.

Sam had now assumed a poker face.

" Well," the former sighed again, " Providence isn't arranging forest fires for our benefit this season. If He would, though, I'd promise a large sum of money to His favorite church."

Again he searched the poker face of Sam Goar. Then the subject was dropped for discussion of details for the consolidation scheme.

After the conspirators had departed, and the other seekers after options had been told it was all off, Sam Goar paced the floor of his den for some time in deep thought. Finally he seemed to have made up his mind about something. He returned to the veranda chair and alternately dozed and smoked until supper time. Several times he stepped out into the road and looked at the sky and noted the direction of the breeze.

Early in the evening he told his wife he was going to do some figuring in his den and then go to bed early, and must not be disturbed. Sam usually slept on a narrow cot in the corner of this sanctum of his.

As soon as the pitch blackness of a cloudy woodland night had settled down Sam rose, fussed around his room for a bit in apparent aimlessness, then put out his light and sat down hard on his creaking cot. A minute later he arose, tiptoed to the door, opened it softly, and stepped out, closing and locking the door behind him.

Outside he stood listening. The breeze that had blown fitfully from the south all the afternoon had freshened with nightfall, as he expected, and now swept down over the mountain in a half gale.

Sam slipped out to the road swiftly and silently, and advanced stealthily along the winding way, walking in the grass at the side so as to leave no tracks, stopping at frequent intervals to listen and make certain that he came on no chance passer unawares.

Some half mile on beyond his place he slowed down and felt his way along the underbrush beside the road until he came to a narrow path leading down the steep slope. Down this he went silently as a panther on the hunt until he came to a point where a clump of young pines grew in a hollow in the hillside.

Feeling about in the darkness till he located the branches of one of these low-growing trees, from the deep pocket of his coat he drew a brown paper package full of greasy rags and loosened up the package. This mass he lodged in the little tree where the dry pine needles were thickest. Into the midst of these rags he thrust a small package of loose gunpowder from which hung a foot of fuse.

Crouching low and covering his hands with the tail of his coat, he struck a match. Cupping it in his hands so as to hide the light, he carried it to the fuse. Then while the tiny spark sputtered up the fuse Sam climbed the path to the road as swiftly and silently as he came. At the top of the path he waited until a tiny flash followed at once by a brighter glow told him his fuse had worked.

Then he hurried for home.

A half hour later Sam, back in his room and undressed, heard swift footsteps across his yard. Some one hammered on his door.

Sam feigned a loud snore in answer. The rapping was repeated louder than before.

Sam stirred heavily, and then in a drowsy voice demanded who was there.

"Tom Goar, Sam. Woods on fire. Better telephone town."

"Gosh-all-hemlock!" Sam Goar shouted, jumping up, lighting the lamp, and admitting his cousin, who lived in a cabin just above the spot where Sam had started his fire. Then Sam, still in his night shirt, called his wife and registered another witness to the fact that he was undressed and had just awakened from a sound sleep. Finally he telephoned to Senabaugua and to several of the farmers in the valley before stopping to dress.

When Sam stepped out of his house the success of his incendiary efforts was more than apparent. What he saw beyond and below him was a great wall of flame cutting its way down the mountainside in an ever widening path as it advanced. The sky that had been pitch black when Sam sneaked back to his house, a half hour before, now glowed a blood red.

Sam hurried to his barn, mounted a riding horse, and galloped off to put himself in evidence as one of the fire-fighters.

Down in the valley Mert Dibble was one of the first to awake, and looking from his bedroom window he saw a wave of fire rolling down the mountain a scant mile away and directly toward the belt of woods running through his farm to his very door. He, too, dashed to the telephone and began sending out the alarm.

By the time the fight was organized the blaze had nearly reached the valley floor. For an hour the fighters worked madly, scraping back the forest carpet of pine needles and dead leaves, hoeing and chopping their way through the underbrush to establish a fire line.

Mert Dibble had taken command, and was everywhere at once. Let a man falter, he was at his side encouraging him by his example. Now he dashed back to trample out a smoldering fagot; now he leaped in and hewed away a clump of bushes where the flames curled over his head. He had forgotten himself completely in the joy of fighting again. His clothes were smoldering. His skin was blistered. He breathed the scorching air in short gasps.

But little by little they were forced back till it became evident that they could not save the woods on Dibble farm, and must center on saving the buildings themselves. So, concentrating their forces on the narrow neck of woods just below the Dibble buildings, they cut and burned before the fire reached them a swath so wide that, with a little vigilance during the next hour, the buildings would be safe.

Then they relaxed a bit and watched the flames slowly die from lack of sustenance. As they watched no one noticed the little tongues of flame obscured by and partly hidden the other side of the fire wall that were licking their way across a stubble field that separated the Dibble woodland from that on the Flanders farm in the center of which was the oil well. The well had been capped late that afternoon, thus checking further waste of oil. A heavy log had been chained over the cap to anchor it down.

But the leaves and soil around the well for many rods were soaked with waste oil. Through the fence crept the tongues of flame from the stubble field. For a few moments they ran here and there through the leaves of the wood lot or crackled into bonfires in the scant underbrush.

Then they struck the oil-soaked area. There was a flash of vivid flame that appeared to rise simultaneously from all parts of the wood lot. For the first time the watchers at the Dibble farm saw the destruction that threatened the Flanders property, including the famous gusher. The jaded fighters picked up their grub hoes and started to dash across the fields.

Mert waved the men back.

"The well's going to blow any minute now. She'll fire burning oil all over the valley, darn near. Get 'way back."

He was barely in time with his warning. There was a terrific roar and a volcano of flame leaped up high above the tree tops, mushroomed out and spread broadcast a shower of liquid flame, some of it falling a quarter of a mile away.

The crowd watched, fascinated, while the great geyser of fire slowly subsided a little until it became a steady blaze of oil and gas some fifty feet high, like the flame of a

giant candle lighting the valley as if it had been noonday for a mile around.

Suddenly a woman's scream rang out in the watching crowd. It was Mrs. Flanders.

"The house! The house! Violet's in there with her father!"

The group faced about. Already the Flanders house and outbuildings were enveloped in a mass of flame. They had been deluged with the burning oil. But even before the rest of the group recovered from the stupor of the first shock Mert Dibble was racing across the fields toward the burning building.

He stopped for no preparation. The first door he came to he smashed in and entered, to be met by a blast of dense smoke. Alternately shouting and holding his breath, he felt his way through the choking blackness to the stairs leading to the room of Thomas Worthington as he remembered it when he had visited him there.

He found the stair door and opened it. He was driven back by a burst of flame. Three times he made a dash for it and was each time worsted. His breath was going. His clothing was afire. A third time he got halfway up.

Then the burning steps gave way under him; he felt himself dropping.

Then merciful unconsciousness.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

Lure of the Moon Flower

by Rebecca Traill Hodges

THE Christopher Culbertsons, of the Christopher Culbertson Coffee Company, were enormously rich. They were the sort of rich who ride in one of these elongated motor cars, a wooden-faced chauffeur exposed to the free fancy of the elements at the wheel, and the sheltered occupants of the snug interior trailing on a whole half block in the rear. In spite of such drawbacks they were quite human.

The Culbertsons boasted, among other much-to-be-desired things, a huge summer mansion, known as a "cottage," right by the sea, with its own broad private bathing beach, two devilishly impossible children, Genevieve and Christopher, Jr., the elusive parasites commonly called "house guests," and a young brother-in-law.

The latter asset, Fred Hammond, after an apprenticeship served impartially in front-line trenches and across barbed-wire strewn vistas, was hustled off to Central America at his sister's behest, to fill the post of manager on one of the famous coffee plantations. Needing a change of climate and a job about equally bad, he had jumped at the chance. In consequence, what was most to the point, he had succeeded, much to his employer's surprise, far beyond the wildest hopes.

Now, after due time, and according to the well-known custom of combining business with pleasure, young Hammond was on a leave of absence, away from the native heath of the coffee bean and the banana. This vacation of two months or so he was spending mostly with his sister Marion and her family at the aforementioned Culbertson summer home.

This arrangement was very satisfactory all around. The pair of young imps, his niece and nephew, Fred discovered, to his great joy, had been packed away with their governess on a camping trip. This was hard on the governess, Fred chuckled to himself with glee, but a great institution for the rest of humanity.

Marion Culbertson adored her brother. She always had, on up from the mud-pie era through the various stages. Certainly she had hardly any fault whatsoever to find with him now. Good looking, debonair, and blessed with the most ingratiating smile and manner, what more could a sister ask for?

"He gets better all the time," she confided to her husband one evening as Fred's contagious laugh came rolling in from the open porch where he was holding down the job of entertainer to two young creatures of the flapper variety. "He's like cheese or wine, you know."

"My dear"—and Christopher Culbertson tapped the ashes off the end of his cigar and smiled blandly at his wife—"don't tell anybody else that speech. Fred could never live a remark like that down! Cheese!"

"There's just one thing about him that worries me," she went on, paying no attention to the advice or adviser, "and that is that he isn't married. I'm doing my best for him, though. Just see the rafts of girls we've had here at the house! Every single eligible thing in petticoats or one-piece suits!"

And she surely had! No merchant displaying his wares could have been more eager to please. The house had literally dripped girls of all ages and sizes and previous conditions of servitude. The exhibition had been conducted with diplomacy and finesse.

It had been a howling success as far as the two men were concerned. Both Christopher and Fred agreed openly that they were having the time of their lives. Never had such charming, eye-filling specimens had the unmolested run of the Culbertson house for so entrancingly long a period. It was a joyous experience. Whichever way one looked or turned there appeared an engaging young nymph. Life, in consequence, was one delightful thrill after another.

Marion sometimes questioned whether perhaps such strenuous methods were wholly advisable — husbands were so funny about things—and a pretty girl is a pretty girl! But she consoled herself that the present state, so fraught with unpleasant disadvantages, could not last forever, and Fred was worth 'most any effort; so she took another grim breath and went at it again, keeping a blind eye on Chris's flirtations.

Of course there was safety in numbers when the man in question was one's impressionable husband. But a bachelor brother's case was different. Things don't progress rapidly in the matrimonial direction when a perfectly normal male is most evidently having a corking good time of it, Marion sighed futilely, with all the bunch, impartially.

The more the merrier, was Fred's very apparent motto. He loved them all, every one of them, from the bobbed-hair flappers on up through the list to that young and merry widow, Agatha Baird. Each one had her own copyrighted type of charm, and it was a difficult but glorious job, Fred often remarked, to be called upon to do any eliminating. Sometimes one star seemed to be in the ascendancy and then another. But why worry a man so? Let well enough alone.

Of course wives as wives had their advantages. A good-looking girl to sit at the head of his table was not to be despised. There was little Jane Drew, for instance, she of the black locks and dimpled knees. He knew they were dimpled—any one who was not blind could see that for himself. And then that red-headed Marguerite was some winner herself. She sure was pos-

sessed of the most provoking combination of slimness and curves and satin-skinned loveliness any man could wish. Besides, there was the widow—some girl!

He didn't believe, however, he'd want to marry a widow. You would always wonder and wonder, whenever you kissed her, whether it would be you or the other man she'd be thinking about.

After all, he groaned, it was the dreadful finality of the whole performance that got you. Marry one of them, and forever after you were done for. It was all right to smoke with a girl on the terrace—but it would be terribly stupid to have that same girl forever at your heels. Besides, he had not quite made up his mind whether he would want a wife that smoked. Of course everybody did it—even Marion; but your wife— He decided that he must have a hidden, old-fashioned strain still lurking in him.

"There's one point you've never seemed to touch on," Fred remarked one day, as he and Marion and Chris were in undisputed possession of the porch. "And that is, how do you know that any of these girls would have me, in the first place? Of course I know I'm a very desirable parlor pet, but even I sometimes wonder if all these dozens of lovely females would jump for me as you say they would."

He grinned across his sister's head at his brother-in-law.

"You don't realize," he continued, twirling his tennis racket, "how hard it is to stay modest and shy and retiring, dear sister, in the midst of such plenty. According to you, all I have to do is whistle. Then watch the scramble."

"Don't be silly," she retorted. "Every single girl I've had up here likes you—and they're the pick of the country, too. Oh, you are so provoking, Fred Hammond. Why don't you choose one of them and get it over with? If you don't, you deserve to get tied up with some terrible half-breed Spaniard down there in Central American wilds. Well, I've surely done my share," she sighed with a shrug. "Although, of course, as far as that goes, I don't think any one is good enough for you."

Both men hooted.

"See what you've got to live up to?" Chris warned. "I wouldn't want a handicap like that."

"You two men make me so mad," Marion exploded. "Here I'm doing everything under the sun to make it pleasant for Fred, and trying to arrange things so that some awful creature down on your old coffee plantations won't grab him up—and you both look on it as a joke."

"Maybe he prefers to do his own arranging," Chris explained, his eyes twinkling. "Such is often the case."

"The trouble with him is," his wife replied coldly, "he doesn't know what he wants. I doubt if he ever saw a girl who gives him a thrill twice running. He is always on the lookout for the next one. He's hopeless."

But she was mistaken. As astute and forceful and sisterly as Marion Culbertson was, there was one episode in Fred's life that was utterly unknown to her.

He did know what he wanted. That was what was back of all his dilly-dallying; apparent irresponsibility, and was causing all the trouble. Unspoken and unbreathed to a soul, Fred Hammond cherished deep down in his heart a lovely, romantic ideal. In fact, he had not only seen her and spoken to her, but he had kissed her. The memory of that kiss thrilled him even yet. What her name was he had not the faintest idea—but he had kissed her—and he could never forget.

It had happened like this:

Back a few years, in the time of training camps and feverish war brides, a certain company of khaki-clad men had hiked through a certain secluded town one moonlight evening.

Its streets were calm and quiet and tree shaded, with fine old houses set back on velvety lawns. The brilliant moon, shining down on the thick leafy branches, made a fairy tracery on pavements and marchers alike.

And they sure were weary! A four days' hike, up and down hills, across unfamiliar country, one village dovetailing into the next, endlessly, on and on—and any normal person would welcome a halt.

So, when finally the cheering command

came, the gods stepped in and took a hand. They played their cards so that Fred's particular footsteps should pause before an old stone house set back in a hedge-bordered yard. There was a broad low porch supported by pillars, and entwining and encircling them and rambling in unrestrained confusion across the railing grew masses of uncontrolled moon vines. This thick, leafy screen was studded with millions of waxy, fairy-like moon flowers. They gleamed against their dark background like pearls on dusky velvet. And pouring down on everything, transforming the homeliest details with dreamlike beauty, was the gorgeous moon.

The effect was entrancing, and Fred leaned for a minute on his gun, drinking it all in.

Here was romance and moonlight—Youth and Mars! All that was needed to complete the effect was Venus.

And then she appeared!

Fred remembered having seen pictures and plays dealing with the romantic Civil War period—a girl in white standing by the pillars of some old veranda. She was always young and beautiful, and always dressed in white—an elusive vision of desirable loveliness.

Now here, right before his enthralled eyes, was a modern version of the same thing. Here was the martial atmosphere—the old homestead—the vine-covered porch—the girl framed in the wonderful moon-flower-studded background.

It was more than any impressionable youth could stand. Leaving his resting comrades squatting at ease on the ground, without a further thought, Fred bounded over the low iron gate, and hat in hand, strode up the path.

Each step brought him nearer, and only proved how much lovelier she really was. To his palpitating heart she seemed the embodiment of all the graces—a slim, youthful figure leaning one hand against the vine-covered pillar, with smiling dark eyes and wavy hair standing out like a soft halo.

He wished that he could tell her all he thought—how exquisite she was—how she thrilled his soul—what a glorious picture she made among the myriads of moon flowers. Instead, he said, "I'm awfully thirsty. Please, may I have a drink?"

He twisted his hat in his hands, his eyes fixed on her in a worshiping stare. He hoped she could not hear the thumping in his chest.

From the top step she smiled down on him. "If I had to march as far as you boys do each day," she remarked, "I'd pray to be a camel. Do sit down. You deserve two drinks."

She reappeared from the dim recesses of the house with two tall clinking glasses on a tray. Fred placed the latter on a wicker table while she explained, with a wave of her hand.

"They're both for you. One is lemonade—nice and cold—with a sprig of mint, if you like it. The other is plain water, equally cold, and guaranteed to be refreshing."

"And it is," he assured her, in ecstasy; "it sure is. I never tasted anything that hits the spot like this—both of them—the drinks, I mean," he added.

Then they both laughed, why, or at what, they could not have told. Wasn't it reason enough, just to be young and alive on a moon-dappled porch, and filled with the joy of living?

"Don't you suppose," the girl ventured, "that perhaps some of those other boys are thirsty, too? I could get a pitcher."

"Oh, no," the wily Fred answered, "none of them are. They never drink. Besides, there's not time. There's only a minute longer."

"I see," she laughed. "It is perfectly clear. You want the center of the stage, limelight and all."

"Oh, no," he corrected, gently but firmly. "I'm just a poor super—you are the star."

And so they talked on. It was amazing how much lasting damage can be done in less than five minutes. When eyes speak to eyes, and there are electric thrills in the air.

When the hated, crisp summons came from some iron-throated officer in the street to "Fall in," Fred groaned and obediently rose to his feet.

The girl who stood beside him, smiled up into his face and shyly put out her hand.

"Good-by and good luck," she said, lifting her eyes to his.

"Oh, please," he whispered, begging; "just something to remember you by—something I can see."

She broke off the largest, waxiest blossom that dangled near and thrust it through a buttonhole on his shirt. He felt her fingers tremble as they brushed against him, and he pressed them close in his hand. Outside on the street sounded the clatter of guns and the shuffle of feet, and the deep-toned murmurings of men's voices as they fell into line.

"Quick, sweetheart!" he cried, imploringly. "I must go. May I, please; just one before I leave you? I didn't know there was a girl in the world like you!"

He drew her, unresisting, into the shadow of the pillars, and folding her in a hungry embrace, kissed her.

"I'll never, never forget, dear," he stammered softly, "and I'll be back. Watch for me."

And then he was gone — tearing down the path and over the gate, out among the scores of others, swallowed up in the rapidly moving mass—the scent of her hair, the feeling of her lips, the charm of her lilting musical laughter just a memory.

Only the moon flower remained. He pressed it carefully in his little pocket case and planned to ask for another when he went back.

But he never went back. Immediate marching orders, with a speedy embarkation, spoiled all plans in that direction, and when months and months later he returned from overseas, he had not the remotest idea which town it was nor how to reach it. He cursed himself for not having asked her name, but those precious moments with her had been so brief. He had made all sorts of guarded inquiries, and had scoured the countryside about that particular section. And then came the opportunity to be connected with the famous and flourishing Culbertson Company—and he went.

And yet always, wherever he went, there lurked the faint possibility of perhaps finding a clew. Whenever Marion mentioned some new girl there always was the chance.

Sometimes he almost wondered if he had dreamed it all—it was such a fanciful tale. And then he opened the case and looked at the faded waxy leaves and it all came back to him.

So that was why Mrs. Culbertson's schemes for her brother continued to fail. No girl with a cigarette poised between vermilion-stained lips could be a match for a soft-voiced, smiling ideal clothed in white and drenched in moonlight on a vine-hung porch.

Marion corraled him in the hall one morning and linked her arm in his.

"I have just two announcements to make," she said, drawing him into the sunny living room.

"Go ahead—shoot," he sighed. "More females applying for the job, I suppose."

"The children are coming home to-day," she continued, ignoring his exaggerated yawn, "and I do hope you'll be decent."

"Oh, I promise not to beat them," he agreed; "but they're the darnedest imps of Satan I ever saw! Why any girl as nice as you are can have such fiends as offspring I don't see. They both deserve good thrashings. Why don't you send them to school instead of having them towed about by a prim, fool sort of governess?"

"If you've finished with your free advice, little brother," she replied serenely, "I'll answer. In the first place it's horribly bad taste of you to talk as you do about your niece and nephew, and secondly they're not devils. They're just healthy normal children. No, you needn't roll your eyes—they are. And their governess is not prim—she's quite nice, and very capable; and, last of all, it's not any of your business anyway."

She paused for breath with an air of triumph and finality. "My second announcement is that I've invited the most attractive girl I know down here for next week. It's Corella Raymond—an awfully good friend of mine, a stunning beauty, clever, rich, and everything. She's been abroad for the last year or so, and she's terribly appealing. Every one's crazy

about her. She's about your age, Fred, and I know you'll like her. She's just returned from a long visit in England—otherwise I'd have asked her here weeks ago. Now your time is nearly up. This is the last effort I'm going to make in your behalf. If you turn down this chance you deserve to marry a mulatto."

"Hooray!" he shouted, sending a sofa cushion sailing after his sister's disappearing figure.

But this Corella Raymond business sounded good. Maybe — who could tell? Near his own age, charming, beautiful, everybody falling for her—yes, that was promising. He whistled at the thought. Besides, if she didn't turn out favorably, Marion had promised to leave him alone in peace. He wished next week would hurry up and come.

He ran across Marion along toward evening, hand in hand with Genevieve and Chris, Jr.

Fred dutifully shook hands with them and gave them a brief peck on their tanned cheeks as they surveyed him solemnly out of guileless eyes.

"The little dears are looking well," he remarked blandly, over their heads. "Well, I must be off," and he made his escape in the opposite direction. Thank Heaven, the imps never ate dinner with the grown-ups—he would be spared that trial. At breakfast, which they graced with their presence and their long-suffering governess, he could be conspicuous by his absence. Oh, he'd fix it all right.

He still wondered about this Raymond girl—would she or wouldn't she? It piqued his curiosity.

He slipped away from the three-handed bridge that Chris and Marion and the Widow Baird were deep in after dinner, and went on down to the white stretch of beach. There reached out the sea, little lapping waves running up on the sand, the row of bath houses silhoueted at the background, and a round moon sailing overhead.

Heavens! What a night! Made for adventure and love and romance! Just such a night as this when he had kissed that lovely unknown girl among the moon vines. He sighed and cursed the stupidity of fate that had withheld from him even the name of the lucky town that housed her.

He watched, enchanted, the ripples shimmer along the silvery pathway on the water. Suddenly he turned and crossed over toward his own especial bath house, unlocked the door, and slipped into his swimming clothes and plunged in. Then, head down, he struck far out, hand over hand.

Later on, tingling and invigorated, he ran back, alive to his very finger tips. He noticed the door next his own bath house was ajar. That was one thing Marion was hard boiled about—never to leave them open. It seemed she feared burglars or something. Dutifully he closed it and the lock clicked.

"Well, one good deed done," he thought, applying a rough and vigorous towel. He was slipping into his clothes when he heard an exclamation accompanied by a shaking of the latch on the adjoining door.

"Ye gods!" breathed a soft, emphatic feminine voice. "If those children have locked me out they deserve to be tarred and feathered!"

Fred cautiously pushed open his door a crack and peered out.

There, in the full glare of the moon, stood a girl. She wore the briefest of abbreviated one-piece costumes it had ever been his good luck to gaze upon, and where the meager suit ended there gleamed the whitest of shapely flesh. It reminded him of magnolia blossoms or satin.

With his tie in his hand, and a pleasant leaping in his heart, he opened the door wide and stepped out.

"Greetings, mermaid!"

She looked up quickly from the door, which she continued to rattle.

"Greetings yourself!" she retorted. "Only when you're going to burst out on me like that sound a warning. You nearly gave me heart failure."

"We both have the same disease, then," he confided, his eyes on the dripping figure before him. "You've affected my heart, too.

"What a pity," he went on, seeing that his former remark was ignored, "that we could not have been gay water sprites at the same time. I've just finished dressing."

"You're lucky, that's all. I'd be, too, if those children had not shut this door. It never closed of itself."

He agreed gravely. "You're right about many things. Those Culbertson children are capable of anything. I know. I'm their unfortunate uncle."

"I know, too. I'm their governess."

"Poor creature," he sighed deeply. "I give you my sympathy."

"I'd lots rather you gave me my clothes. I can feel myself turning purple with the cold. Besides, the reason I go in swimming this time of night, anyway, is so that I can wear almost nothing and not have prying observers to bother about."

He grinned affably, and reached for the broom behind his door.

"Maybe, Miss Governess, I can fish your clothes out for you through that hole," and he pointed to the round opening over the door which served as window and ventilator alike. "I can further assure you that you aren't in the least purple; but you'll find a pile of fresh towels on the shelf in my own bathroom, and a nice warm woolly bathrobe that you're welcome to use. You'd better accept. I'd hate to feel I was responsible for an early death. And last, but not least," he called to her as she shivered her way into his bath house and closed the door, "if this is your usual time for bathing, from now on it is mine, too."

The towels, the rub down, and the woolly robe were all welcome, and presently, with the warm garment close about her, she peered out. She knew from the various sounds that things were happening.

On an upturned barrel in front of her bath house stood Fred Hammond. His head and one arm and the broom were thrust through the round opening over the door. At intervals he emerged cautiously with rescued articles dangling at the end of the handle. His remarks were muffled but expressive.

"Thank Heavens!" he exploded, gathering them up in a wad and holding them out toward her. "I think I've fished out the whole bunch. I'm exhausted. Now get clothed and in your right mind, and come on out here and talk to me as reward for my labors. We can compare notes about the children or bathing by moonlight or purple flesh. They're all safe subjects, and we both know something about each one, my dear Miss Governess."

"My name," she replied through the door, "is Frances Nelson, and I'm only going to stay a little while. It will be just long enough to show you that I'm grateful to you for poking around so successfully with that broom handle. It must have been a job."

"It was a dickens of a job. I know very very few ladies I'd do it for. It will take you a darn long time to prove your real gratitude, Miss F. N.," he cried, feelingly.

She laughed. It was a merry, trilling laugh—like rippling water in a brook. Fred liked it. He told her so when she came out.

She wore a long dark cape over her silk dress, and she still had the gay handkerchief tied over her head. It was the first time he ever knew a girl could be pretty with her hair all covered up, and he remarked as much.

Miss Nelson found herself staying far later than she had intended. Moonlight always did go to her head, and besides he was very entertaining. It was much more thrilling than hearing Latin verbs.

Although she told him she wouldn't, she fully made up her mind to swim again the next evening at the same time. He knew she would. Also, as a great condescension, he promised to join the family at breakfast. And that, he vowed, would be a real test of devotion.

As he climbed into bed that night, Fred almost forgot to wonder about Corella Raymond. This little Frances Nelson was a charmer—the cutest, brightest thing he'd run up against for some time. Witty, and a peach of a shape. He wished the camping trip had been cut short sooner. This Raymond girl, so wonderfully press-agented, would have to go some to beat her, he knew. The only way she could do it would be by turning out to be the moon flower girl herself.

It was a pleasant group about the table the next morning. There sat the senior Culbertsons, the charming young widow, the two children, and their governess.

Fred, who came in last, noted how warmly brown her hair and eyes looked against her crisp yellow gingham. Already he felt repaid for his effort.

He greeted them all warmly and impartially, and opened his napkin.

"You seem surprised to see me," he observed, blandly, attacking his orange.

"We are," Marion assented. "Whatever brings you out so early?"

"We know," Genevieve spoke up, "don't we, Chris?"

Her brother, his mouth full, nodded.

"It's Miss Nelson," he added, briefly.

"Yes," artless Genevieve went on. "It's her. She was down on the beach for hours and hours last night with Uncle Fred. We sneaked down and saw them. She had on his bathrobe part of the time, and she kept saying she was purple and had goose flesh all over her, and she dressed in his room, didn't she, Chris?"

As she paused for breath her brother valiantly struck in.

"Yes, and then they sat on the beach and looked at the moon and giggled something fierce. They both said they'd break their children's necks if they acted like us."

All anguished efforts to stop them were unavailing. They babbled on and on, regardless of the enthralled ears of the hovering butler and maids, while Mrs. Baird was convulsed with laughter, their parents horrified, and the two people most involved crimson with wrath and humiliation.

Attempts at explanations only seemed to cause more of a tangle, and the simple little adventure took on the dark aspects of a scandalous intrigue.

The erstwhile happy meal broke up in gloom and bitterness. The only contented ones were Agatha Baird and the young culprits, who disappeared hand in hand.

"Of course I know," Marion admitted to her stormy-faced brother, "there wasn't anything wrong in it. But it wasn't quite fair of you to treat me that way—or Miss Nelson, either. I'm surprised at her, too. The least she could have done was not to have stayed and talked after she got dressed."

"Hang it all!" he burst out. "The girl couldn't stand around half naked, could she? Why didn't you keep your young ones in bed where they belonged!"

Just before dinner he was informed that Miss Nelson had gone. Marion explained that they had both thought it wiser under the circumstances."

"'The circumstances!'" Fred echoed. "Well, if that isn't the cussedest slap! There weren't any circumstances, I tell you."

He wormed out of her the fact that Miss Nelson had gone to her home in a remote village somewhat off the beaten track about seventy-five or a hundred miles away.

He tore out of the house to the garage and climbed angrily into his high-powered roadster. The least he could do was to run on down and apologize to the girl. Poor little thing! To have to stand stuff like that from two worthless kids!

The roads, gradually bathed in light from the rising moon, took on a vaguely familiar appearance. Some other time he had been over this same stretch, of that he was sure. As finally he swung into the tree-shaded streets of the peaceful village, he suddenly knew.

He had found the town.

He was feverishly excited. Would the girl be a disappointment after all—or would she be as lovely and wonderful as he remembered her? Many things could happen since 1917. He wondered whether he really were awake!

He drove slowly up the street of his dreams. Yes, there was the blessed old stone house, porch and all, with the same wildly luxuriant mass of glorious moon flowers. To cap it all, and to make it more uncanny, there, from the dim inner recesses, appeared the girl.

With palpitating heart he stopped the car and hurried up the path toward her. She stood, as before, by the pillar, waiting, in a white net dress, crisply beruffled, her wavy hair like a soft halo about her face.

"The years have been long," he heard himself saying, breathlessly; "but I've come back for another moon flower. I told you I would."

There was a second's pregnant silence, and then, extending her hand, she said—

"I thought all along that there was something sort of familiar about you. Now I know. A mustache, more or less, does make a difference. You had one, you know, the first time."

Dazedly he took both her hands and drew her into the full light from the moon. He looked her over from head to foot.

"I am perfectly weak," he ejaculated, solemnly. "Frances Nelson, do you know I've searched this whole world over for you? Come up here and talk it over."

"So that's what you've been doing at your sister's!" she said, wickedly. "Looking for me."

"Yes," he retorted, drawing her back toward the swing he knew was there. "You've hit it exactly. I knew I was acquainted with your adorable little laugh. You look like yourself now. You didn't last night—but, oh, boy, I love you both ways. I didn't have a chance to look at you this morning when those fiends cut loose. I have hunted and hunted for you, my moon flower girl. And now that I've found you, do you know what I intend to do?"

She shook her head.

"Listen, then, and I'll tell you." He slipped an arm about her and began at the beginning.

"Your methods," she said, finally and happily, "are somewhat breath taking. Do you mean that I'm to be ready to go down to that coffee place in less than two weeks?"

"Exactly," he replied with ardor and emphasis.

About eleven o'clock Marion Culbertson hung up the telephone receiver and sank down weakly on her husband's knee.

"It was Fred," she informed him. "He says he is engaged to Frances Nelson; that he's there now, and that he's known her for ages. He made some kind of vague remarks about moon vines and moonshine and loving me—and Heaven knows what all!"

He shouted with laughter. "After all your efforts! Well, I won't have any young brother-in-law cutting in on me any more. I can play around with the beautiful Corella all by myself."

"Oh, no, darling, you won't." She rumpled his hair and smiled sweetly. "Corella telegraphed she can't come."

Inwardly she was glad it was settled. Frances wasn't half bad, and it would be a relief not to have any more languishing widows or wide-eyed flappers running around loose. She would devote herself wholly and solely to Chris. She smiled with fixed determination at her reflection in her mirror, while several miles away, on an old porch, shielded by millions of moon flowers, a man and a girl sat through the moonlighted hours picking up the pieces and dreaming of the future.

The Further Adventures of Zorro*

Part III

by Johnston McCulley

Author of "The Mark of Zorro," etc.

WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED

THROUGH the connivance of a jealous Governor who wishes to punish Zorro, a benevolent highwayman (who in reality is the caballero, Don Diego Vega, with the interests of the common people at heart) that had interfered with the crooked politics of Spanish California of more than a hundred years ago, Barbados, a pirate, is given permission to attack and sack the village of Reina de Los Angeles. This he may do with the assurance of no soldier interference, for the garrison under Captain Ramón has been ordered away for the night. The loot is to be the pirate's, but Captain Ramón asks as his share that Lolita Pulido, fiancée of Zorro, be abducted and carried aboard the pirate boat. In looting the village, a sacred goblet is stolen from the church, whose priest, Fray Felipe, takes an oath that he will not reënter the edifice until he obtains the cup. Don Diego Vega (Zorro) is giving his friends a bachelor dinner when the pirates break in upon them, and in the fight that follows, slashes his mark—a "Z"—on Barbados's forehead. The pirates escape, using the only horses in town; Fray Felipe asks Zorro for aid in his quest; and at that moment a servant from the outlying home of Lolita Pulido brings word of the abduction. Alone, riding the only horse left in the village, Zorro makes a dash for the coast just in time to swim after a pirate boat; he manages to touch the hand of Lolita as she dejectedly cowers in the stern, assures her of his presence, and whilst the outlaws store their booty, Zorro hides himself aboard their ship.

Hidden in a storeroom, Zorro discovers that Lolita is separated from him by only a thin partition; he reassures her that he will protect her. In the darkness he goes above, and on deck tricks the pirates into believing that the ship is haunted; Barbados, who alone disbelieves, grows fearful when he learns that the sacred goblet is aboard. With the coming of morning Zorro is discovered, and after a mad chase over the decks and through the rigging, is captured. As he is forced to the plank, with a bar of iron lashed to his wrists, he is permitted to give Lolita a farewell kiss—with the assurance that "another will kiss her soon." Meanwhile, fast overhauling them, is a second ship that bears on its topsail the Mark of Zorro.

CHAPTER XII.

TO THE RESCUE.

UPON the frantic departure of Don Diego Vega from Reina de Los Angeles, Don Audre Ruiz took command of the situation and the *caballeros* simultaneously. There was none willing to dispute his leadership. Don Audre always had been a leader when there was an enterprise that called for hard riding and hard fighting in the bright face of danger.

Captain Ramón was not to be found, and Sergeant Gonzales had ridden away with the soldiers. So Don Audre noised it abroad that he and his friends intended pursuing the pirates as speedily as possible, and made a quick search for mounts.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for May 6.

They acquired enough, presently, but the horses were a sorry lot when compared to the *caballeros's* own, which the pirates had stolen. And without changing their attire, retaining the splendid costumes they had been wearing at Don Diego's bachelor feast and with their jeweled swords at their sides, they rode up the slope and took the trail that would carry them to the sea.

Don Audre decided against following the pirates' tracks. He knew that they would reach the coast long before the *caballeros,* and would embark. Don Diego would do what he could, which would be little. And Don Audre realized that their only hope was to get to the trading schooner, put out in it, and make an attempt to overtake Barbados and his evil crew.

They rode with what speed they could, shouting at their poor mounts and at one another, along the slopes, down the dusty trails and so toward the distant sea. They crossed the trail of the pirates who had looted the Pulido *hacienda,* but ignored it. Don Audre Ruiz knew where the trading schooner would be anchored, some miles to the south of where the pirate ship undoubtedly had touched, and that place was his objective.

Hour after hour they rode, urging their jaded horses to their utmost, glad that the moon was bright and that they could make as good progress as in the day. And, when they finally were within a couple of miles of the sea, and also an hour of the dawn, Don Audre suddenly raised his hand and reined in his horse, and those behind stopped with him. A native was standing in the middle of the trail.

Don Audre approached him slowly, hand on the hilt of his dagger. There were some natives who were not to be trusted. But when he drew near he recognized the fellow as one who had worked at his father's *hacienda.*

"What do you here?" Don Audre demanded.

"I saw the *señor* coming from the distance with his friends," the native answered. "I have news."

"Speak!"

"I was coming across the hills, *señor,* and saw the pirates."

"Ha! Talk quickly!" Audre Ruiz commanded.

"I went into hiding, lest they slay me. They had good horses and much loot, also a girl—"

"Tell us of that!"

"It was the *señorita* Don Diego Vega expects to wed," the native said. "They took her with them to the shore, and presently more pirates came from Reina de Los Angeles. They went aboard their ship, taking the *señorita* and the loot with them."

"What else?"

"There was a man appeared, *señor,* and killed one of the pirates. I got a glimpse of him, Don Audre, and it was Señor Zorro, the one that—"

"Ha! Zorro!" Audre shrieked. "Speak quickly!"

"He ran from them, and they gave up the pursuit. But when the boats started from the land, he dived into the sea and swam after them. And he did not return!"

"Then is he aboard the pirate craft!" Don Audre declared.

"The pirate ship sailed to the south, *señor.*"

"Good!" Audre cried. "Know you anything of the trading schooner?"

"*Si, señor!* She is anchored straight ahead, and the men expect to start for Reina de Los Angeles in the morning to trade."

"They will not, though they do not know it." Don Audre said. "Here is gold for you, fellow. Ha! So the pirate ship sailed to the south. That means that the rogues are going to their hidden rendezvous somewhere down the coast. We'll get the trading schooner and pursue! Forward!"

But, as they would have started, Don Audre Ruiz raised a hand and stopped them again. From the rear had come the beating of a horse's hoofs. Don Audre motioned to the *caballeros,* and they scattered to either side of the road and prepared to receive the newcomer.

Nearer grew the beating of hoofs, and a horseman appeared, riding frantically through the moonlight down the slope and toward them. When he saw them, he

reined up, and stopped in their midst in a shower of gravel and sand and dust. The reckless rider was Sergeant Gonzales.

"Ha, *señores!*" he called. "I have overtaken you finally, it appears."

"And to what end?" Don Audre Ruiz asked, urging his horse forward and glaring at the soldier. "You have news?"

"Not so, *señor!* I come in search of it. I returned to Reina de Los Angeles with my troopers to learn of the pirates and what they had done. I learned, also, of your departure, so left my men and rode after you. Captain Ramón was not at the *presidio*. As the next soldier of rank—"

"It is in our minds to get the trading schooner and give pursuit," Ruiz told him.

"That is a worthy idea!" Sergeant Gonzales declared. "Too long have these bloody pirates infested our shores. Meal mush and goat's milk! Let us go forward!"

"Are you seeking to take command of this expedition?" Don Audre Ruiz demanded, hotly. "This is a private rescue party of *caballeros,* I would have you know, and not a detachment of the Governor's men! We have small love for the Governor!"

"Though I wear his uniform, I say the same thing," Sergeant Gonzales declared. "But I am after pirates! I care not who commands, so that I get a chance at a pirate with my trusty blade! Ha! When I meet a pirate face to face—"

"Spare us your boasting!" Don Audre said.

"Boasting?" shrieked the sergeant. "Boasting? Perchance you would like to cross blades with me in answer to that insult?"

"You are safe in making the challenge, knowing that I would not stoop to do so," Don Audre said.

"And you are safe in refusing, having the ability to hide behind your gentle blood!" the sergeant returned.

"*Señor*—"

Sergeant Gonzales urged his mount closer to that of Don Audre, but the expression in the sergeant's face had changed peculiarly, and his countenance did not show rage.

"*Señor,* it is true," Sergeant Gonzales observed, "that I am but a poor soldier without blue blood in my veins. My father was a butcher and my mother's father raised swine. But Don Diego Vega has been good enough to term himself my friend. And now that he is in peril, I ride with his other friends to his rescue, and the rescue of his lady! I trust the *señor* will not misunderstand! I do not seek to equal my betters. If I am not good enough to ride with you, *caballero,* then I ride by myself! But I ride!"

Don Audre Ruiz bent forward and searched the sergeant's face by the light of the one torch the company had burning. Then he extended his hand.

"Sergeant Gonzales, it is for me to ask your pardon," Don Audre said, grandly. "I would not be worthy the blood in my veins did I do less. Any friend of Don Diego Vega is welcome on this expedition. But, have you leave of absence?"

"Ha! I took it!" Sergeant Gonzales roared, grinning broadly. "Captain Ramón was not at the *presidio.* Being the next in rank, I ordered myself to set out on the trail and get a full report of the occurrence. When I am able to make that report I return."

"Ride you with us!" Don Audre said. "Thus we have the sanction of the soldiery and official approval of our deeds."

"I shall approve anything that has to do with causing the death of pirates!" Sergeant Gonzales declared.

The moon disappeared entirely, and the night was dark. They rode forward slowly now, careful not to get off the trail, but they did not have much farther to go. Soon they came to the crest of a hill, and below them they heard the hissing sea, and saw the lights of a ship riding at anchor a short distance from the shore.

Down to the surf they urged their mounts. And there they met with another surprise. For a horseman was awaiting them there in the darkness. Don Audre Ruiz gasped in astonishment when he recognized old Fray Felipe.

"We left you in the town, *fray!*" he said. "And how is it that we now find you here? Is this some sort of a miracle?"

"I departed the town while you were

yet searching for horses," Fray Felipe explained. "I got a mount for myself and came ahead, because I cannot ride like the wind, as do you young *caballeros*. It was in my mind that you would make for the trading schooner. I heard you say as much."

"But why have you come?" Don Audre wanted to know.

"I have known Don Diego Vega and the little *señorita* since they were babes in arms, and I was to have married them today," the old *fray* replied.

"But fighting is not your forte!" Don Audre declared. "You are old, and you wear a gown. Do you remain behind and pray for our success, and let us wield the blades! That were better, *fray*."

"I am willing to make my prayers. But I have taken a vow," Fray Felipe replied. "I must return the golden goblet the pirates stole from the church."

"Then you would go with us?" Don Audre asked.

"*Sí!* I already have communicated with the captain of the trading schooner, *señor*. He is coming ashore now in one of his boats. Thus time will be saved."

CHAPTER XIII.

TRAGEDY AT A DISTANCE.

THE *caballeros* dismounted stiffly and gathered near the water line. In from the distant trading schooner a boat was coming, driven over the choppy water by silent oarsmen. Half a dozen men were in her, and their flaring torches touched the sea with streaks of flame. They approached the shore carefully, and on guard, as though fearing some trap set by thieves, and by the light of the torches those on the land could see that the men in the boat were heavily armed.

Don Audre Ruiz and Fray Felipe went forward and met the boat at the water's edge and greeted the schooner's captain as he stepped to land. He was a regular trader who carried goods overland from the sea to Reina de Los Angeles every now and then. He traveled as far as San Diego de Alcala to the south, and as far as San Francisco de Asis to the north—a bold fellow and honest, well and favorably known.

"What is all this tumult?" the captain demanded. "Fray Felipe, are you not? Ha! I thought that I recognized you, good *fray!* And Don Audre Ruiz, whose father has purchased much goods of me. Sundry *caballeros* and men of rank, also! In what way may I be of service to you, *señores?* Have you ridden out all this long way in the night to have first choice of my stock of goods?"

Don Audre Ruiz told him swiftly. "We want your ship, to pursue a pirate craft!" he said.

"How is this, *señor?*" the captain cried. "There are pirates in these waters?"

"*Sí!* And possibly within half a dozen miles of you," Don Audre told him. "Early in the night they raided Reina de Los Angeles. They also raided the Pulido *hacienda*, and carried away the *señorita*, who was to have wed Don Diego Vega this day."

"By the saints!" the schooner's captain swore. "They stole the bride-to-be of Señor Zorro? Is he here with you?"

"He followed them, going ahead of us, and possibly managed to get aboard their ship," Don Audre explained. "The pirate craft has sailed by this time. They went toward the south. They will beat out to sea for a distance. If we can start soon it may be possible to overhaul them."

"How many rascals in the pirate crew?" the captain of the schooner asked.

"Not more than threescore, as nearly as we can judge," Don Audre replied. "And here are a score of *caballeros*, and we are ready to fight!"

The captain of the schooner drew a deep breath, held it for an instant, and then expelled it with great force. And during this process he evidently made up his mind concerning the matter.

"*Señores*, I am yours to command!" he said. "My ship is yours, and her crew. If I can do anything to help rid the seas of such vermin, I am more than willing. My schooner is a swift vessel in light winds such as we find now. I'll signal the other boats and have you aboard as soon as is possible."

"You will not fail to profit by it," Don Audre Ruiz told him.

"I am not doing it with the expectation of profit," the captain declared. "I detest thieves, and I admire honest men! I have many friends in Reina de Los Angeles, some of whom probably have suffered at the hands of these pirates. And, above all, I did admire the exploits of this Señor Zorro, as Don Diego was called. It will be a pleasure, *señores,* to aid you in this."

He called to his men, and they signaled to the ship with their torches. Out of the darkness and across the tumbling sea came more boats from the schooner. The *caballeros* turned their horses adrift, knowing that they would be picked up and returned, made certain that they had daggers and swords handy, and got quickly into the boats and put out to the ship.

Sergeant Gonzales and Fray Felipe, by accident, were placed in the same craft, sitting side by side on one of the wide thwarts. Sergeant Gonzales observed the *fray* carefully from the corners of his eyes. The sergeant wished to talk, having kept silent for some minutes, and the *fray* was the nearest man he knew.

"Never did I think to join hands with you in an enterprise, *fray!*" the sergeant said, puffing out his cheeks. "If I am not badly mistaken, you are the gowned one who stopped me in the plaza on a certain occasion, and made remarks about soldiers drinking too much wine at the *posada.* Ha! But pirates' raids cause rescue parties, and rescue parties cause strange comrades!"

"I am appreciating the fact," Fray Felipe replied quietly and with a smile.

"So they stole your sacred goblet, did they?" Sergeant Gonzales said smoothly. "*Fray,* when I have rescued the *señorita,* aided Don Diego to escape, and annihilated the pirates with my blade, then will I regain your goblet for you! Steal church goblets and brides, eh? Ha! Meal mush and goat's milk!"

"If your sword arm is half as strong as your tongue, *señor,*" Fray Felipe rebuked him gently, "then the pirates are as good as dead already!"

Sergeant Gonzales whirled upon him.

"Ha! Stinging words from a gentle *fray!*" he gasped. "Is it possible for me to get insulted where and when I can wipe out the insult with a thrust? A *caballero* insults me and then refuses to fight because of the noble blood in his veins and the poor swill in mine! A *fray* insults me—and I cannot fight a man who wears a gown! Meal mush and goat's milk! But wait until we meet up with these pirates! Let a pirate but insult me, and—ha! My blade shall be bathed in blood!"

Sergeant Gonzales turned away abruptly to nurse his wrath, and Fray Felipe smiled and his eyes twinkled. He waited a moment, then touched the sergeant on the shoulder.

"Soldiers and *frailes* alike are needed in the world," Fray Felipe said. "There are times when a hardy soldier should be gentle—and even there are times when a *fray* should fight. Let us be friends!"

"*Fray,*" Sergeant Gonzales declared, "you are a noble fellow, after all! I forgive you for what you said about drinking wine. When the muss commences, *fray,* get you behind me. My sword shall shield you, *fray!*"

"I thank you," Fray Felipe said. "And I shall shield you in turn with my prayers."

"Prayers may have power," Sergeant Gonzales told him, "but when it comes to fighting pirates give me my trusty blade! *Fray,* a pirate has not sense enough to know when a prayer is directed against him!"

Soon they came alongside the schooner and mounted to the deck by the light of torches. The boats were swung aboard, and the captain and Don Audre Ruiz held a long conference. Then there came a volley of orders, the anchor came up and the sails filled, and the schooner crept off the shore and away from the land through the black night.

Straight out to sea they went, gathering headway, and in time a faint streak of light showed across the land and the dawn came. *Caballeros* and crew strained their eyes and swept the sea in every direction. And finally the sharp eyes of one of the men aloft discovered a sail.

The course of the trading schooner was changed, and the chase began. Nearer

their quarry they crept as the sun came up and bathed the sea and the land, glistening through the haze. Glasses were leveled at the distant craft.

"She is the pirate!" the schooner's captain declared. "Her flag of iniquity flies from her mast!"

He bellowed another volley of orders to his crew, and they crowded on all sail. They rushed about the schooner, preparing her for the battle. The eager *caballeros* looked to their blades, the crew to their cutlasses.

"If Zorro is aboard that craft he should know that his friends are near at hand for the rescue," Don Audre said.

And then it was that they got out a sail and painted a gigantic Z upon it, and sent it aloft. It was their banner of battle, a flag of war that betokened their allegiance to a man and a cause.

"Courage and swift work does it!" the schooner's captain told Don Audre. "We are greatly outnumbered. But my crew has had dealings with pirates before, hence each man will fight with the strength of five. And you and your friends, Don Audre, have good reason for fighting like fiends."

"We are prepared to do it," Don Audre replied. "Think you that we can overhaul the pirate?"

"It is but a question of time," the captain declared. "The pirate sails prettily, but her bottom is foul. I can tell that much at this distance. Pirates are too lazy to keep a ship in perfect shape. And this little schooner of mine is a swift craft and in prime condition."

They gained steadily, and meanwhile they watched the distant pirate ship continually. They saw that there was some sort of a tumult on board. Don Audre Ruiz, standing at the rail near the bow, with a glass glued to his eye, watched carefully.

"It is probable that Señor Zorro is fighting the entire pirate company," he announced. "I can see men running about the rigging. Let us pray that we may be in time."

Sergeant Gonzales, standing near him, uttered an oath that the presence of Fray Felipe did not keep back.

"Meal mush and goat's milk!" he exclaimed. "Let us crowd on more sail and have at these pirates!" He swept his blade from its scabbard. "That for a pirate!" he shrieked, thrusting about him in a rage. "This for a pirate! Ha!"

"Save your breath and your strength," Don Audre advised him. "You may have need of them both soon."

"Did you hear that, *fray?*" Sergeant Gonzales demanded, whirling upon old Felipe. "More insults, and I cannot avenge them! A *caballero* insults me and will not fight, and I cannot fight a *fray!* By the time we clash with these pirates I shall be in a fine rage, and work it off on their worthless bodies. Ha!"

Don Audre Ruiz gave a gasp and called some of the *caballeros* to his side.

"Look!" he directed. "They are making some poor devil walk the plank! By the saints, 'tis Zorro!"

"Zorro!" the others cried.

"Look! And the little *señorita* is standing at the rail, forced to watch!"

There was a moment of horrified silence. The face of Don Audre Ruiz was white as he contemplated the fate of his friend. The *caballeros* said not a word, but those who had glasses watched, and the others strained their eyes in an effort to see.

And then Don Audre Ruiz gave a low cry of horror and turned quickly away, as though he could endure the sight no longer.

What he had seen had been enough. There were traces of tears in his eyes, and his voice choked.

"He is gone!" Don Audre said. "Don Diego, my friend! We can only avenge him now!"

"Gone!" Sergeant Gonzales cried, sudden tears in his eyes, too. He brushed them away roughly and blinked. "Don Diego gone? Then, by the saints, will my blade be thrust as it never has been thrust before! Now, by the saints—"

His vow ended in a choke of emotion, and he turned quickly away. Don Audre, his eyes stinging, his lips set in a thin, straight line, turned to Fray Felipe.

"Say your prayers for him," he directed. "And pray, also, that we will know

how to avenge him when we come alongside! *Dios!* Give strength to my arm!"

CHAPTER XIV.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

SMILING in the face of death, Señor Zorro yet battled to keep from showing his genuine emotions, because of the presence of the *señorita*. But in that awful moment when he stood upon the plank, looking first at the evil faces of Barbados and Sanchez, and then at the agonized countenance of Señorita Lolita Pulido, he knew what torture meant.

It was not that Señor Zorro was afraid of death in itself—a thing that must come to every human being in the end. But his agony came from a knowledge of what he would leave behind when he took the plunge into the sea.

The woman he had hoped to make his bride, his friends, his father, his estate—he was leaving them all for the Great Unknown. And he was young, and had not lived his fill of life. Besides, he was leaving the *señorita* in grave danger. He could only hope that his friends in the vessel behind would be able to be of service to her, and that they would know how to avenge him.

Barbados gave his last mocking laugh, and Señor Zorro felt the plank tipping. He felt himself losing his balance. The heavy weight on his wrists was almost bending him backward. He knew how swiftly it would carry him down into the depths of the sea. Then would come a brief and useless struggle, he supposed, a moment of horror—and the end!

His eyes met those of the *señorita* yet again. And then it seemed that everything gave way beneath him and he shot downward.

There came a splash of water as he struck the surface—he felt its sudden chill—and then the waves closed over his head. He was a famous swimmer, but no man can swim with a heavy bar of metal tied to his wrists, and those wrists lashed behind his back.

Mechanically Señor Zorro protected himself as he struck the water, as though for a deep dive. He drew air into his lungs until it seemed that they would burst. He kicked in vain against the down-pulling power of the heavy weight. Down and down he went into the depths until the light from the surface faded and he found himself in darkness.

Señor Zorro prayed and worked at the same instant. He jerked his wrists from side to side behind his back, trying to force them apart. He expelled a tiny bit of air now and then as he descended, but retained it as much as possible.

Often he had played at remaining as long as possible beneath water, but it is one thing to do so when a man has the knowledge that he can spring to the surface at any time, and quite another when he has reason to believe that he never will reach the surface again at all.

Yet he continued to struggle as he shot downward. Red flashes were before his eyes now, and a multitude of faces and scenes seemed to flit before him.

In that awful instant he relived half his life.

"*Dios!*" he thought. "If this be death—"

Another tug he gave at his wrists. The man who had lashed the heavy weight there had not done his work well. Perhaps he was too busy watching Barbados and fearing him. Perhaps he had held a sneaking admiration for this Señor Zorro, who had offered battle to an entire ship's company. However, the rope that held the weight gave a trifle.

Señor Zorro, in his agony, realized that. He tugged again, and then pressed his palms close together and drew in his wrists as much as possible. The heavy weight, dragging downward, pulled the loose loop over the wrists and hands. Zorro felt an immediate relief. He realized what had happened. And then he began his battle to reach the surface. The weight was gone, but his wrists were still lashed together behind his back.

He kicked and struggled and shot upward. He expelled more of the precious air his lungs retained. His chest was burning, his ears were ringing, he was almost un-

conscious because of the pressure of the water he had been forced to endure.

He saw a glimmer of light, but knew that the surface was yet far away. And it occurred to him that even the surface did not mean life. For his wrists were yet bound behind him, and he was miles from the shore.

On he went, up and up, struggling and fighting. He jerked at his wrists until they were raw and bleeding, but to no avail. Those who had lashed his wrists had done better than the one who had fastened the weight to them.

And finally he gave a last struggle, a last kick, and felt the blessed air striking upon his face.

He fought to get into the proper position for resting as much as he could. He kept afloat, and he drew in great gasps of air, and finally reduced his breathing to normal. And then, as he rose on the crest of a wave, he looked around as well as he could.

The pirate ship was some distance away, sailing slowly before a gentle breeze. Señor Zorro found himself floating in her wake. He could see men rushing around her deck and up into her rigging, but at the distance could not guess their tasks.

The wave dropped him and lifted him again, spinning him halfway around. Señor Zorro gasped at the risk of swallowing a portion of salt water. Bearing down upon him was the other craft, the one with the gigantic Z up on the sail. Zorro saw that he was directly in her path.

Not much hope burned in his breast, yet the spirit of combat still lived. He would not give up so long as there was the slightest chance. He would fight—fight—until, exhausted, he sank for the last time toward the bottom of the sea.

Those on the approaching ship did not see him, for they were watching the pirate craft and preparing for the battle that was to come.

He hailed those on board, but his voice was drowned by the roar of the water against the schooner's bows. He saw that she would strike him, and kicked frantically to work himself to one side of the track she was following. Another glance ahead at the pirate craft convinced him that the schooner would not change her course.

Once more he tugged at his bonds, to no avail. He felt himself drawn in toward the schooner's bows, and fought against the pull of the water helplessly. He was picked up, hurled forward, whirled around. Had he saved himself from the depths, he wondered, to be crushed senseless by the bow of the craft that carried his friends? Then she was upon him. He rose with the crest of a wave and was hurled at the bow.

He saw an anchor chain that was loosely looped and a dragging line. If he could but catch one of those and make his way to the deck, there might be some chance. Once more the sea whirled him and cast him forward. He came against the swinging loop of anchor chain with a crash, grasped it, was lifted and dropped, but held on!

For a moment he rested, panting, realizing how precarious was his position. He threw one leg around the swinging chain. How to reach the bowsprit he could not fathom. Those above would pay no attention to him, and could not hear him if he hailed. And to climb that swinging loop of chain would be a task for an athlete with his hands unbound.

The bow of the ship dipped, and Señor Zorro felt himself soused beneath the water for an instant. He gripped the chain with his hands and his leg and fought to maintain his position. His arms were aching, and the chain had cut through his clothing already and was chafing at his leg. Once more the bow dipped, and Zorro slipped a few feet along the chain, unable to stop his descent.

He gripped with his leg again. His hands came to a stop, and he realized that the rope that bound them had found an obstruction. Zorro worked slowly and carefully with his fingers, even as he held on. One of the links of the chain, he found, was imperfect, had cracked, and presented on one side a jagged edge.

Hope sang in his breast once more. But he knew that he would have to work carefully. He did not dare release his hold entirely, for a sudden dip of the bow and the quick wash of the water would be

enough to sweep him from the chain. But he sawed back and forth as well as he could, pulling the rope across the rough edge of the chain link.

He glanced ahead. The ships were not far apart now, and the schooner swung a bit to starboard, so as to bear down upon the pirate craft from a more advantageous angle. Zorro worked frantically, and after a time he felt the rope give. His wrists were raw and paining. His leg was bleeding already. There were pains in his head, and his vision was imperfect, but hope sang within him once more.

He sawed and sawed, and once more he glanced ahead. It would not be long now before the ships clashed. He wanted to be up on the deck, normal breath in his nostrils and the sword of Zorro in his hand, to aid his friends, to fight his way to the deck of the pirate craft and to the *señorita's* side.

The rope gave again. Señor Zorro was forced to rest for a moment, leaning back on the chain. A wave swept him to one side, and he thought for an instant that he was gone. But he regained his balance and continued his sawing.

And presently he knew that he was free. The rope dangled from one wrist only. He gave an exclamation of delight and thanks, gripped the chain, and turned over. He regarded his bleeding wrists, hesitated a moment, gathered breath and courage, and commenced the perilous ascent of the chain.

It was a painful and difficult task. Señor Zorro set his teeth into his lower lip and struggled upward foot by foot. The swinging chain, slippery, from the sea, threatened to pitch him back into the water. Every few feet he was obliged to stop, to gasp for breath and close his eyes for a moment because the pain in his wrists and leg made him weak with nausea.

He came within a short distance of the vessel, slipped back, and forced his way upward again. And finally he grasped with one hand the chain port and held on. His hope had increased now. Nothing would make him loose his hold, he told himself.

A moment he rested, then forced his way upward again. The schooner was very close to the pirate ship now. On the deck above him Señor Zorro could hear Don Audre Ruiz shrieking instructions to the *caballeros* and the captain shouting to his crew.

He managed to get up to the butt of the bowsprit, and there, safe from the sea, he rested for a moment again. The two ships would crash together in a minute or so, he saw. He raised his head weakly, and took a deep breath, and then struggled to his feet, ready to spring down to the deck.

His hand went down to whip the sword of Zorro from its scabbard. The schooner yawed suddenly as her helmsman fought to get a position of advantage. The big jib swung back, whipped by the angry wind.

Señor Zorro was looking down at the deck, and he did not see his danger. Don Audre Ruiz turned at the instant, shrieked, and rubbed his eyes.

"Zorro!" he cried.

He was seen from the deck of the pirate craft, too.

Barbados and Sanchez caught sight of him. Sanchez crossed himself quickly, and the face of Barbados turned white.

And then the jib cracked against Señor Zorro's body, knocked him from his precarious perch, and hurled him once more into the sea!

CHAPTER XV.

A SHOW OF GRATITUDE.

THE schooner sailed on, and came against the pirate ship with a crash. But here was a battle unlike the usual one when honest men met pirates. As a usual thing, the pirates could be expected to board and slay without mercy, to loot, and then either to destroy the ill-fated vessel or take it away a prize. And the honest men could be expected only to offer what defense they could. But here was a case where the honest men were more than willing to carry the fight to the pirates. For Don Audre Ruiz and his *caballero* friends had seen Señor Zorro walk the plank, and also they fought to rescue a lady.

But both forces found themselves disconcerted at the outset. Don Audre Ruiz, glancing toward the bow of the schooner, was sure that he saw Señor Zorro standing there against a background of sky and water, his figure dripping. He rubbed his eyes and looked again—and Señor Zorro was gone!

"'Tis the spirit of Zorro come to aid us!" Don Audre cried. "I saw him for a moment, waving his hand at me and reaching for his blade! The spirit of Zorro fights with us!"

The *caballeros* were not certain what he meant, but they cheered his words and rushed toward the rail, their gleaming blades ready to be dyed a crimson. Fray Felipe knelt beside the mast in prayer. But Sergeant Gonzales, standing with his feet wide apart and his sword in his hand, stared foolishly toward the bow and gasped his astonishment and fear.

"I saw him!" the sergeant shrieked. "I saw Don Diego, my friend! By the saints—"

The ships crashed together. But the pirates did not rush as was their custom. For fear had clutched at their superstitious natures, even as it had clutched at Barbados and Sanchez, his evil lieutenant. Sanchez had shrieked the news, but Barbados did not heed his intelligence. Barbados himself had seen Señor Zorro standing against the sky. And how may a man do that when he has been sent to the bottom of the sea with a heavy weight fastened to him?

"Fiends of hell!" Barbados screeched. "This Zorro must be a demon!"

"We cannot fight against ghosts!" Sanchez cried. "We are lost before we commence."

Barbados seemed to come to himself and shake off his terror in part. He instantly was eager to win free from the trading schooner. He did not fear the *caballeros,* who were greatly outnumbered now, but he did fear the supernatural. He forgot the chance for murder and loot, and wanted only to get away.

Barbados shrieked his commands, and the half-stupefied pirates ran to execute them. The pirate craft swung away from the schooner, so that men could not spring from one ship to the other. There were less than half a dozen clashes of blades; less than half a dozen minor wounds.

Slowly the pirate craft fell away. The helmsman of the schooner worked frantically to bring his ship back into the wind. The *caballeros* and the members of the schooner's crew waited, eager for the two ships to come together again, that they might engage the pirates and fight to victory.

Barbados howled more commands. From the pirate ship came a rain of fire balls, and flaming torches were hurled. It was a favorite pirate trick, and the men knew what their commander wanted. Clouds of pungent smoke rolled across the deck of the schooner.

The *caballeros* gasped and fought to get to the clean, pure air. Their nostrils and throats were raw, their eyes stinging.

Through the dense smoke they could see little. The pirate ship gradually was lengthening the distance between her and the trading schooner. The pirates' work had been done.

For the sails of the schooner were wrapped in flames, and bits of them fell, burning, to the deck below. Flames licked at the tarred rigging and spread out on the spars.

"She's making away!" Don Audre Ruiz cried. "She's running from us!"

There seemed to be no question about it now. The pirates were hurrying away without giving battle. And the raging *caballeros* wanted battle, and they remembered that the *señorita* was yet on the pirate craft.

The captain was howling to his crew, and the men were fighting the raging flames. The *caballeros,* forgetting their silks and satins and plumes, ran to help. Here was a foe more formidable than pirates of the open sea.

The schooner drifted with the water and the wind in the wake of the pirate ship. The smoke drifted away, and finally the fire was extinguished. Quick inventory was taken of the damage.

It did not amount to so very much, since the rigging had not been burned to a great

extent. But the sails were gone, for the greater part, and pursuit for the moment at an end.

Again the captain shouted his commands, and as his men hurried to carry them out he turned to Don Audre.

"I have other sails, *señor,*" he explained. "They will be in place as rapidly as my men can get them there. The craft of ill-omen cannot get far before we are upon her heels again. She is running out to sea once more. She would lose sight of us before she turns toward the accursed spot where they have their land rendezvous. Their behavior astounds me; they acted as if they had seen a ghost!"

"And so did I!" Don Audre declared. "I'll swear that, for an instant, I saw Señor Zorro standing at the butt of the bowsprit —and then he was gone!"

"By the saints, I saw him myself!" Sergeant Gonzales shouted. "He was here to aid us! Man or spirit, I know not—but he was here! And now he has disappeared!"

Fray Felipe came toward them. "It cannot be that he is alive and aboard," he told them, "else he would discover himself to us at once. Perhaps it was but a strong hope that caused you to imagine the sight."

"*Fray,* I swore friendship with you, but I'll break the compact if you say such a thing again!" Sergeant Gonzales declared. "I saw him, I say! Man or spirit, I know not—but I saw him!"

The *caballeros* were busy helping the crew with the new sails. One by one they were sheeted home, and presently the schooner gathered headway once more. On it sailed, in the wake of the pirate craft, vengeance only delayed.

Far behind, Señor Zorro watched her grow smaller and smaller, and the flare of hope that had been in his heart dwindled to a mere spark again.

His unexpected plunge into the sea before he had recovered from the first ordeal had unnerved him for the moment. He had come to the surface to find that the schooner had drifted away. Before he could handle himself to advantage she was at some distance, and the pirate craft was drawing away from the ship of smoke and flame.

There was a strong tide running, and Señor Zorro was too weak to fight against it. Near him there drifted a spar that had been torn away when the ships had crashed together. He struggled through the swirling water and managed to reach it, and drew himself upon it to sprawl there almost breathless, gasping, exhausted. He was too weak to signal his friends, and he doubted whether they would see him did he do so.

Shouting would be a waste of breath, he knew; and so, stretched across the spar, he fought to keep his consciousness, closing his eyes and forcing himself to breathe normally. When some strength had returned to him he sat upright and looked across the sea. The pirate craft was in the distance. The schooner, the fires extinguished, some of her sails in place, was drawing away from him rapidly. Señor Zorro gave thanks for that—his friends were not deserting the *señorita.*

He began to take stock of his predicament. Far away he could see a dirty streak on the horizon, and he knew it for the land he would have to reach.

He was in sore condition for the hazardous journey. His wrists were raw and bleeding; his leg pained him. He scarcely could see because of the glare of the sun on the water. Thirst tortured him; hunger added to the torture.

Señor Zorro sat up on the spar and smiled a sorry smile. He made sure that his blade still remained at his side.

"Sword of Zorro, we are in a sorry state!" he declared. "This is an emergency such as never have we faced before. But we must win through!"

A moment he hesitated, and then, as though to give courage to himself he raised his voice again, this time in his song:

Atención! A *caballero's* near—

But his voice broke, and he told himself that he was a fool to attempt to sing out there in the wild waste of waters, clinging to a spar. Far better to concern himself about getting to the land.

Señor Zorro rested a short time longer, watching the disappearing ships. And turning, he looked at the distant land.

"Sword of Zorro, we travel toward the east!" he announced. "If ever I touch dry land again, there I remain for some time to come. This seafaring is a sorry business!"

But he said that merely to amuse himself, of course. He would fare forth to sea again at any time to rescue the Señorita Lolita, and well he knew it. He only hoped that Don Audre Ruiz and the others would be of service to her.

He adjusted himself as well as he could, and started to swim, clinging to the spar. That rendered his progress slow, but he did not dare cast it aside, for he knew that he never would reach the distant land. For a time he swam, and then he floated on the spar and rested, and then urged himself to swim again. On and on through the hours, while the sun traveled across the heavens, he forced the spar through the water.

It seemed to him that he was nearing the land, but he could not be sure. There might be a treacherous current in these waters, against which he was expending his strength in vain. But he did not stop.

His mind was a maelstrom, his muscles acted mechanically. Now and then pains shot up his legs and along his back, and often he swam for minutes at a time with his eyes closed. He watched the sun begin its descent toward the sea, and yet he swam.

At times songs rang through his brain, at other times he caught himself mouthing meaningless phrases. And then he thought of the Señorita Lolita, and swam on.

Twilight came. The sun disappeared. There was a period of darkness, and then the surface of the sea was touched with the glory of the moon. Señor Zorro could not see the land now, but he knew in which direction it lay, and swam on, a few minutes at a time.

And thus passed the night. But before the dark space just before the dawn, Señor Zorro was laughing raucously, out of his wits. Some god of good fortune kept him swimming in the proper direction. And when the sun appeared again, it brought a new agony to his eyes, new tortures of thirst. He swallowed salt water and spat it out, and found that it had made him ill. For a time he was stretched across the spar, weak, sick, on the verge of delirium.

He fancied that a myriad of pirate vessels were about him, bearing down upon him. He saw the pretty, laughing face of the Señorita Lolita in the mist that hung above the sea. He laughed back at her, and once again his cracked voice rose in a song:

Atención! A *caballero's* near—

He felt himself grow suddenly weak. It seemed to him that the land was near at last, but he could not be sure. He drew himself upon the spar, sprawling across it.

"Must—rest—" Señor Zorro gasped.

And with the gasp he passed into unconsciousness.

Back to earth he struggled as through a land of hideous dreams. He tossed and groaned and tried to open his eyes, but felt that he could not. There seemed to be a roaring in his ears that was not of the sea. And finally it came to him that it was a human voice, attempting to beat through his unconsciousness and bring him to an understanding of things.

"*Señor! Señor—*" the voice said.

Señor Zorro struggled yet again, groaned once more, and opened his eyes. But not into the burning glare of the open sea! He was in cool shade, he found, and from a distance came the hissing of the surf. He blinked his eyes rapidly, felt something at his lips, and drank deeply of pure, cold water.

"*Señor!*" There was the voice again. "For the love of the saints, *señor,* come back to life!"

Full consciousness returned to him in a breath. He opened his eyes wider and struggled to sit up. Then he saw that he was in some sort of a poor hut, and that a native was beside him, with an arm beneath his shoulders.

"Ha!" Señor Zorro gasped.

"Thank the saints, *señor!*" the native cried.

Señor Zorro, with the help of the native, sat up. He had been stretched on a sort of couch, he found. He glanced around the interior of the poor hut, through the open door at the sparkling sea.

"What—" he began.

"I found you yesterday, *señor,* far out to sea, riding on a piece of wreckage," the native said. "You had lost your wits. You fought me when I tried to take you into my boat, and tried to draw blade against me. Then you went unconscious, and I had my way with you."

"And—and then?" Señor Zorro gasped.

"Why, *señor,* I fetched you here!" the native explained. "And throughout the night you raved, and so far to-day. The sun has but two more hours to live."

"More water!" Zorro commanded.

The native gave it him. He drank deeply, stood up, walked to the door and looked out. There was no other habitation as far as he could see.

"Where is this?" Zorro asked.

"On the coast, *señor,* far to the south of Reina de Los Angeles. I am but a poor neophyte who eats what fish he can catch. Once I worked on a *hacienda, señor,* but the governor took all for taxes."

"I know," Señor Zorro told him.

"And so I got me a boat and came down the coast and built this poor house. And here I live alone and am happy. There are times when I carry fish to the stronghold of the pirates, and trade them for some other things—"

"Ha!" Zorro cried. "The stronghold of the pirates? Where is that?"

"Less than ten miles down the coast, *señor,* in a little bay. There are huts, and women and children, and every now and then the pirate ship puts in after a raid. They are safe there, *señor,* though they are within eight miles of the *presidio* of San Diego de Alcala."

"By the saints!" Zorro swore. "And how does it come that you did not rob me of my sword and the few things of value upon me, and toss me into the sea?"

The native looked at him frankly. "Pardon, *señor,*" he said, "but I never would do such a thing as that. For I knew you instantly, *señor.* You are Señor Zorro, who rode up and down El Camino Real and avenged the wrongs of the natives and *frailes.* You once punished a soldier who beat my father. If it is necessary, *señor,* I am ready to die that you may live."

"And now—"

"Now," the native interrupted, "it would be best for the *señor* to sit and rest, while I prepare some hot food. Then whatever he commands shall be done."

"There was a pirate ship in the offing, and another," Zorro insinuated.

"*Sí, señor!* The pirate ship ran from the other, going out to sea. But a short time ago I saw her pass, going toward the bay where the pirates have their headquarters. And the other ship passed but a short time ago, pursuing."

"By the saints!" Zorro cried. "I would go to this pirates' den of which you speak, and as speedily as possible."

"The *señor* must eat first, so that he will have strength," the native said, firmly. "Then I will guide the *señor* to the spot. It is ten miles, and the *señor* is a weak man."

"I will eat the food gladly," Zorro replied. "Do you prepare it as speedily as possible. There shall be an ample reward."

"It is reward enough that I have been able to save the *señor's* life," the native answered. "The friends of Señor Zorro do not forget what he did for them!"

CHAPTER XVI.

SINGING CABALLEROS.

BARBADOS was like a maniac after the pirate craft swung away from the trading schooner. He shrieked at his men to make sail, and they needed but little urging. The fear of the supernatural was upon them, superstition ruled their minds.

Gradually they crept away from the schooner, but Barbados continued to watch her closely. He saw the new sails going aloft, and realized that there would be a pursuit. So he turned out to sea and began running for it.

He did not attempt to explain things to himself. He knew that his men outnumbered those on the schooner, and he felt reasonably sure that, in an engagement, the pirate crew would emerge victorious. Yet something seemed to tell him that the

proper thing was to avoid the engagement if possible.

"We will lose that sorry craft in the wide waters," he told Sanchez, "and then we will turn and go to the rendezvous. There we'll unload and apportion the loot, and care for the wench until the man comes to claim her. If we are followed, we can outfight the *caballeros* on land. The ghost of a man drowned in the sea is powerless on land, I have heard."

"And, if they follow us ashore—" Sanchez questioned.

"Then we fight them, fool," Barbados said. "You are still shaking like a child! A pirate—you? Ha! By my naked blade, you are no better than a woman in this business!"

"Men are men, but it is not in my mind to fight with ghosts," Sanchez told him. "We are bedeviled for some reason!"

"Ha!" Barbados gasped. "That reminds me!" He turned away and walked the length of the deck, and finally came across the man he sought, and drew him aside. "You have the thing yet?" he asked.

"The goblet? *Si, señor!* If the captain wishes it—"

"Do not even show it to me!" Barbados commanded. "I would have you toss it into the sea, save that such an act might bring worse luck yet. So long as you retain it, perhaps you draw all the ill fortune to yourself. Spawn of hell, if ever you come face to face with that old *fray,* in flesh or in spirit, have a look to yourself! For you have done an evil thing!"

Barbados passed on, and descended to the cabin where Señorita Lolita had been returned a prisoner.

She was as a woman stunned. She had fainted when Señor Zorro had plunged into the sea, and Sanchez had carried her below. And when she regained consciousness she remained on the bunk and groaned and prayed by turns.

And now, when Barbados opened the door, she sat up quickly, a look of agony in her face. One thing she had done—picked up from the floor of the cabin the dagger that had belonged to the man Señor Zorro had slain through the crack. She had cleaned it, and thrust it in the bosom of her dress, where it was out of sight, but where she could reach it instantly.

Barbados looked at her for a moment, and then spoke.

"In your right mind again, eh wench?" he said. "We are running away from your friends, and there can be no hope of rescue. It would be proper for you to make the best of it. The man for whom we have stolen you perchance will be kind."

"Foul beast and murderer!" the *señorita* said.

"Ha!" Barbados gasped. "I have been called worse things than that—things that you do not know exists, wench! Think you to hurt my tough hide with words?"

"Have you no manhood?" she asked. "Is it an honor for a score of men to take a girl captive? You struck down my father and burned my home! You sent to his death the man I love—"

"There are other men," said Barbados, "and other homes. And I did not strike down your father—Sanchez did that. From what he tells me, the blow was not a fatal one."

"You are the chief of murderers and thieves, the one responsible," she said.

"Words do not hurt my tough hide, I have said. It were best for you to be calm."

"Calm?" The *señorita* crept from the bunk, weak and staggering, her face white, her lips trembling, a suspicion of tears in her eyes. "Calm?" she repeated. "And how can you expect me to be calm? What is there in the future for me, save dishonor or death? When the moment comes, it will not take me long to choose!"

"Ha! When the moment comes, you may change your mind!"

"He whom you sent to death in the sea was worth ten score of you!" she cried, stepping closer to him. "And each of his friends who follow in that other ship are worth ten score of you! Do you think that you can escape them forever?"

"I can have them wiped from the face of the earth!" Barbados replied.

"Escape them, possibly—but not me!" she cried. "I have seen you kill the thing I love! And so—"

She clutched at her breast and drew forth the dagger. She gave a cry of rage, and struck out wildly. Barbados, caught unaware, lurched quickly to one side, but the blade struck his arm and tore away flesh and skin and brought a gush of blood.

"By my naked blade—" he swore.

He whirled as she struck again and missed, grasped her, and tore the dagger from her hand. He tossed her back upon the bunk, where she braced herself against the wall, gasping, weeping, expecting that now he would make an end of her.

But the pirate chief merely slipped the dagger into his belt, glanced at his wounded arm, swore again, and then stepped back to the door.

"A wench with spirit, eh?" he said. "Ha! I would not be this Captain Ramón and have the taming of you! Glad will I be when I turn you over to him! I have battles enough on my hands without fighting women! I'll send a man soon with food. Such a female warrior must eat to conserve her strength!"

He laughed at her, mocked her, went out and closed the door, and she heard the heavy bar shot into place and the sounds of his feet retreating. She collapsed on the bunk and gave way to a tempest of tears.

"Diego!" she breathed. "Diego, beloved!"

Barbados ascended to the deck, bathed the wound in his arm, and said nothing when Sanchez questioned him. Throughout the day he gave his attention to the sailing of the ship, but he could not shake off the schooner which followed.

Then came the night, and once more Barbados cursed the bright moon. For, though his craft showed no lights, yet could she be seen from the schooner. Back and forth Barbados sailed, but always failing to shake off the other ship. And when there came the dark hour before dawn he changed his course abruptly, and ran before the breeze.

But when the dawn came there was the schooner, a greater distance away, but still in sight. And so Barbados put off to sea again, for he wished, if it were possible, to go to the land rendezvous without drawing his foes there. Else he slew all of them, news of the pirates' headquarters would leak out, and they would have to move.

He ran before the wind, he tacked, he beat in toward the shore, out to sea, to the north and the south and the west. Now he gained, and now the schooner gained upon him. He cursed and drove his men, but they could accomplish nothing.

And finally he started running down the coast, intent upon reaching the rendezvous. If the men of the schooner dared follow him to land, they would be annihilated, he promised. Once or twice he felt like turning and forming an attack, but thoughts of the ghost of Señor Zorro deterred him.

"A sea ghost cannot fight on land!" Barbados told himself. "On land I have them at my mercy!"

The day started to die, and the pirate craft rushed down the coast with the schooner in close pursuit. It was almost nightfall when Barbados and his men guided the ship into the little bay. The schooner was some miles behind.

The anchor dropped, the ship swung broadside to the shore. From the land came sounds of a tumult, and down into the surf rushed men and women and children. The pirates' stronghold could be seen back some distance from the water.

There was a wide expanse of beach, a deep open space fringed with stubby trees and brush. Hills landlocked the scene. A score of huts dotted the edge of the flat. Fires were burning on the shore, stock ran wild among the habitations.

Overside went the boats, and the pirates commenced handing down the loot. Shrieks and calls came from the women and children on the shore, from the men who had been left behind as guards.

Barbados went ashore in the first boat, and began issuing his commands. The camp was to be put in a state for defense, he explained. Guards were to be established on the three land sides, and other men would watch the sea. The ship was warped closer to the shore, so that she could be defended easily.

Just as the night descended, the trading schooner sailed across the mouth of the bay, and presently she returned, farther

out to sea. Barbados boarded the ship again, and took the *señorita* from her cabin. Sanchez lashed her wrists behind her.

"You go ashore, wench!" Barbados said. "And there you are to be held until such a time as this Captain Ramón comes to claim you. Why he should want you is more than I can explain to myself. You are a pretty wench, it is true, but too much of a spitfire!"

He watched her closely when she was in the boat. And when they landed the pirates' women and the ragged children rushed forward to jeer at her as she passed beside the flaming fire. Barbados took her to a large adobe building, the best structure in the camp. He opened the door and thrust her inside.

A woman cooking over an open fire whirled to look at him. She looked at the *señorita,* too, and her eyes flamed.

"What is this?" she demanded, her fists against her hips. "Is it a younger and prettier woman?"

"It is, indeed, Inez," Barbados laughed. "She is a share of the loot!"

"Your share, eh? And you dare to fetch her here?"

"Why not?" Barbados asked.

"To my face?" the woman screeched. She was of middle age, a creature hideous in a way. "So! It has come at last, has it? I am to be tossed aside for a comely wench you have stolen from some rich *hacienda!*"

"Jealousy is a foolish thing," Barbados observed. "Think you, Inez, to hold my love for life?"

"None other shall have it!" the woman screeched. She flashed forward, her hand raised to strike, her nails ready to tear into the *señorita's* fair face. But Barbados seized her and tossed her roughly aside.

"Peace!" he cried. "I want none of the wench! She is to be kept a prisoner until claimed. A share of the loot she is, but not my share. She was stolen for a great man!"

"This is the truth?" the woman asked.

"Do I generally speak falsehood?" Barbados thundered. "Enough! Put her in the storeroom, and feed her well. Treat her gently. She must be in prime condition when she is claimed. We were followed by a schooner upon which are *caballeros* striving to rescue her. She must not be rescued!"

The woman grinned horribly. She opened the door of a room adjoining and motioned for the *señorita* to enter. She stepped aside, and Lolita Pulido, looking straight ahead, her eyes fixed and glistening, went into the storeroom without speaking, her head held proudly.

Barbados hurried outside again. The black night had descended, but soon the moon was shining. Guards were sent into the fringe of woods, and a watchman to the summit of a hill in the rear. Men were posted on the ship, men walked around the huts, alert, ready to repel an attack.

But there came no attack during the night. The trading schooner had run down the coast and back, and then anchored two miles north of the bay.

"I know the place," the captain told Don Audre Ruiz. "Once some years ago I ran in there during a storm. Their camp must be in the open, and there will be no advantage in the attack. There can be no surprise, of course."

"What is your good advice?" Don Audre asked.

"That you land here with your *caballeros,* approach the camp and wait for the dawn. I'll land as many of my crew as can be spared from the ship, and let them circle the camp to attack from the other side. There must be men enough held here to get the schooner to sea for a run if the pirate craft comes out at us."

"That is agreed!" Don Audre said.

"But it will be a sorry business, Don Audre! You will be outnumbered three to one. And you may be sure that there are men in the camp who were not on the pirate ship. They may have a few pistols they have captured from ships, but it will be hand to hand work with blades. Three to one, at least, Don Audre!"

Don Audre Ruiz drew himself up. "Three beasts to one *caballero,*" he said. "It is an equal affair. There can be no hesitating, *señor.* Señorita Lolita Pulido is held a captive by those beasts. And I am not forgetting what happened to Don Die-

go, my friend! There is but one thing to do—attack! At least, we can die!"

There was a short conference, and then the boats began carrying the men to the shore. The *caballeros* approached to within a mile of the pirate camp and stopped to rest, sending scouts on ahead. The men of the crew circled to the other side.

Some of the *caballeros* slept, sprawled on the sand. But Don Audre Ruiz sat beside a tiny fire he had kindled, his knees drawn up and nursing them with his hands.

"At least we can die, Diego!" he said, softly. "And we can strive mightily before we do that!"

The black hour came, and then the first finger of the dawn. Don Audre arose and stretched himself, and walked for a time up and down the beach. The *caballeros* shook off their sleep, bathed their faces at the edge of the sea, exercised their muscles, whipped out their blades and fanned the air.

Sergeant Gonzales, who had snored throughout the night, snorted as he bathed his face and hands, and then strode down to Don Audre and confronted him.

"*Señor,* you are in command of this enterprise," the sergeant said. "There are orders?"

"Only that every man is to do his best," Don Audre replied. "The *señorita* is to be rescued if it is possible, and returned to the schooner."

"And the pirates are to be hanged?"

"Any that do not fall by our swords and are captured."

"Ha! It is a nuisance to hang a man!" Gonzales declared. "We would have to go to the ship for a rope. The blade is better! Fray Felipe!"

"*Señor?*" the *fray* questioned. He approached them.

"You are yet my friend," Gonzales said. "If you get into the thick of it, stand you behind me, that I may protect you. But a battle is not a place for a *fray*. Stay you behind, and say your prayers!"

"There is the matter of the goblet," Fray Felipe replied, softly.

"By the saints, I take it upon myself to get the goblet for you, *fray!*"

"Do so, and I call you son!"

Sergeant Gonzales bared his head for an instant. He looked at Fray Felipe as though embarrassed, and then returned his hat to his head and gulped. "I have been an evil man in my time," he said, "but I trust that the saints will forget it for this day at least. I would have added strength to this good right arm of mine! Don Audre, I am ready!"

Don Audre Ruiz led the way along the shore. They crept nearer the camp of the pirates, spread out fan fashion, and approached boldly. They reached the crest of a slope, and saw the camp spread before them in the first rays of the morning sun.

The pirates seemed to be more numerous than even Don Audre Ruiz had expected. It looked to be a hopeless task, this attack. But there was something to urge them on.

They stopped to look at one another. In silks and satins and plumes they were, with their jeweled swords at their sides. And before them the stronghold, with the ragged, dirty pirates there ready to give battle.

"If Señor Zorro were only here to lead us!" Don Audre Ruiz said, with a sigh. "But he is not—and let us remember why he is not—and strike the harder because of our remembrance! If you are ready—"

He whipped out his gleaming blade and waved it above his head, and the *caballeros* drew blades in turn, and answered him with their cheers.

And so they advanced to the attack—slowly, carefully, in a perfect line. And Don Audre Ruiz, because he wanted to give himself and the others added courage, and because he felt that it was fitting, sang lustily a song of old:

"Singing *caballeros,* going forth to die!
Laughing in the face of grinning Death!
Facing task that's hopeless, ready yet to try!
Singing with the last of earthly breath!"

The *caballeros* took up the refrain and sang it through to the end, their voices ringing across the sea and the land. And, the song at an end, they were grim and silent again, intent upon the bloody business before them. The pirates were preparing, they could see. In a very few minutes the clash would come.

And suddenly, from the distance, from

the slope between the two attacking forces, came a solitary voice, also raised in song:

"*Atención!* A *caballero's* near—"

They glanced up, astounded. Running down the slope toward them came a figure they knew well. Don Audre Ruiz gave a great cry of joy and thankfulness. The *caballeros* cheered, and wept unashamed. For well they knew the singer and the song.

"Zorro!" they cried. "Zorro!"

And so they rushed to the attack!

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

The Black Sheep

by Patrick L. Greene

JONESBURG was a typical South African settlement. That is to say, it was composed of one long dusty street, broken here and there by optimistic beginnings of other streets, which somehow were never completed, never would be completed, though they were already named. Such grandiose, fine sounding names they had, too!

Jonesburg houses were mainly built of tin, though an occasional wooden structure thrust itself proudly forward, and, here and there, an adaptation of the mud walled, thatched roofs of native huts, broke the monotony; afforded a welcome relief from the sun-reflecting, ugly tin shacks.

A small, red painted, mission church, its bent and crooked spire dimly reminiscent of a candle melting in the fierce rays of the sun, was shut in on one side by the bank, and on the other, by a large, barn like structure dignified by the name Royal Hotel.

A general store run by a man who called himself O'Brien—but he did not eat pork and closed his store on Saturdays!—completed the list of public buildings, if one excepts the stone jail built by native convict labor.

A stranger was apt to wonder why any town, of any sort, should be located in that particular spot, and, in truth, Jonesburg seemed to have no reason for its existence. It was set at the edge of a desolate tract of veldt devoid of trees, two hundred miles, or more, from the nearest railroad. To the north of it lay a great waste of hill country, ridge after ridge of barren, jagged *kopjes,* sparsely populated by a nomadic tribe of natives closely related to the tiny bush people.

Somewhere in the waste of hills, rumor ran, was gold, and at Jonesburg men "outfitted" before making a prospecting trip into the unknown.

So Jonesburg sprang into being and stifled and sweated through the long drought of the dry season; shivered with the ague of fever through the months of rain, waiting—always waiting—and hoping for a rich strike to be made in the hills beyond; a strike that would bring the gold-hungry swarms of men, the railroad, and the blessings of civilization.

A few farmers, descendants of the first Dutch settlers, eked out a parlous existence on the fringes of the township, but for the most part the population—barely a thousand all told—were prospectors and their families; always optimistic, always sure that the next trip would be crowned by success.

In Jonesburg—and it is true of all small towns—the social scale was very clearly defined, though, to be sure, it was only recognized by the women and a few hypocritical men.

The women turned their heads the other way and snorted with disgust should they happen to come face to face with either of the girls who presided at the bar of the Royal Hotel, and bemoaned that they should have to suffer their contaminating presence. The ladies of the sewing circle, whenever they met, were sure to discuss with bated breath the evil doings and backslidings of an absent member's husband; or even of the absent member!

Human nature is much the same the world over, and wherever man congregates it is sure to fall into the same classifications. The only difference is, mayhap, in the degree of wickedness which enthralls the bad element, according to the remoteness of the community from the centers of civilization and the corresponding lack of restraint.

It is typical, too, that Jonesburg should have had a rising young man; one honored by all the inhabitants, generally esteemed, a favorite with men and women alike. He, John Ritchie, was the local representative of the government—a civil servant, a justice of the peace and commissioner of mines.

Again Jonesburg had its town drunkard, its waster, its ne'er-do-well, its remittance man. Certain of the church coterie deplored his presence, while the saloon habitués preferred him to John, his brother.

"It is disgraceful," snorted the church people. "If Frank Ritchie had half the respect and affection for John that he claims to have, he'd leave the settlement. Poor John! What a cross it must be for him to have such a brother!"

They did not know that John, laboring under the hope that he would be able to reform his brother, had begged Frank to remain in Jonesburg. He knew that if he allowed him to drift away, free from all restraint, he might sink even lower than he was now. At least he was "clean" still, that was something; that was a great deal. He had not betrayed his race, he had not gone "black." From drunkenness and shiftlessness there is an escape, but once a white man takes up his abode with, and among, the natives there is no way out; he is damned, body and soul.

"Hell!" complained the saloon loungers. "You'd think that John would loosen up a little. Don't see how he can stand by and see his brother half starving most of the time."

They did not know that John had offered to supplement his brother's remittance from home, and that Frank had refused it. He was sober at the time.

"It would do no good, old man. I'd be drunk a little longer, that's all."

"Why don't you quit, Frank?" John had asked. But he knew the question was a hopeless one; he had asked it many times before. He knew that his brother had made many resolutions to run straight; always, during the week or so of sobriety that marked the passing of his allowance and the extent of his credit at the hotel, Frank would make many resolutions, would even go to work in O'Brien's store. And always, when a fresh remittance arrived, the good resolutions were forgotten.

Once John had added to his plea:

"For the honor of the family, Frank."

And Frank had laughed.

"That rests securely in your hands, old man. The family doesn't bother about me, and they sent me out here so that I wouldn't bother them."

John sighed.

His brother had been expelled from college for some boyish prank, following a heavy drinking bout to celebrate a rowing victory, and his family had sent him to Africa to "make a man of him" as they put it.

Many black sheep are sent out to the colony to be made "men of." The people at home forget that Africa is not hedged

around by the conventionalities, the restraining influences of civilization; there are no moral watchdogs to say: "Thou shalt not do this or that," or "Such and such a thing is not done," and the poor black sheep are likely to wander still farther astray.

"But think of me, Frank," John had continued. "Think how your behavior reacts on my position here."

"You?" Frank looked at his brother, a curious light in his eyes. "I'll go away if you say so. If I'm bothering you I'll leave at once."

John shook his head vehemently.

"You know I don't want you to do that, Frank. We're a long way from home and we must stick together. But I do wish you would brace up and—"

But at that point the mail came in and Frank rushed off impetuously. His remittance was long overdue.

II.

Two men sprawled on the floor of the shaded piazza which encircled the Royal Hotel.

Before each was a lump of sugar and between them a little pile of money.

The men—one an old, weather-beaten, leathery skinned prospector; the other a young man of some five or six and twenty, his clothing shabby, and general appearance unkempt — did not move, scarcely drew a breath, but watched, with unwavering eyes, the pieces of sugar before them.

After a while a fly alighted on the lump that was before the younger man, and with a chuckle of triumph he swept up the money and rattled it exultantly in his hands.

"Going to bet again, Pete?"

The old prospector picked up his lump of sugar and putting it in his mouth, crunched it noisily before answering:

"Nope, I'm finished. Here we've been sitting nigh onto half an hour and not one fly 'lighted on my piece. I know when the luck's agin me, and I'm through. Believe there's only one fly in the place, anyhow, an' that you've got him trained to come and sit on your lump."

At that moment a fly alighted on his head and he slapped at it viciously.

The younger man laughed.

"Of course the flies won't settle on your lump when they see your shining bald pate. You should have kept your hat on, Pete."

The old prospector snorted and slowly rose to his feet.

"I've got to be moving along, Frank. The old woman 'll be expecting me."

"Come and have a drink first, Pete."

"Nope. The last time I had a drink with you some one had to carry me home, and I haven't heard the last of it yet; you don't know my old woman. But I thought you were on the 'tack'?"

The other laughed as he, too, rose.

"So I was until, thanks to you and the little fly, I got some money. Sure you won't have one? No? Then there'll be all the more for me. So long, Pete."

With flushed face, his eyes alight with anticipation, he turned and almost ran into the saloon.

Just inside the door he collided with a big, gross man, Barker by name.

"What's the hurry, Frank," the other asked jovially. "Has your remittance arrived?"

"No," impatiently, "not yet."

The smile of good fellowship faded from the fat man's face, and he took Ritchie roughly by the arm.

"Well, see here, I've got to go out, but don't you think you can get any more booze on 'tick.' You already owe me—"

Ritchie struggled free from Barker's grip.

"Don't worry, Barker," he said with a sneer. "You'll get your money all right. If you had a few more customers as good as I am you wouldn't need to swindle honest prospectors out of their pay dirt."

Barker grew crimson with wrath.

"What do you mean?" he cried.

"Oh, never mind," the other replied airily. "And don't be afraid; I'll pay for what I drink to-day."

He rattled the money he had won from Pete under Barker's nose, and then passed on through the saloon proper and entered a small room dignified by the title of parlor.

Slouching down heavily into a chair by one of the tables he arranged his winnings

in a little heap before him. It totaled exactly twenty shillings, and a bottle of whisky was twenty-one shillings. A feverish search through the pockets of his worn clothing resulted in the discovery of the needed coin.

With a sigh of relief he stamped loudly on the floor. A panel in the wall shot back and the head of Belle, one of the barmaids, appeared at the aperture.

"What do you want?" she called harshly; then, seeing who the early customer was, she added in a softer voice:

"Is that you, Frankie, old duck? Goin' to let me treat you? Barker won't let yer 'ave any more credit."

Belle's change of tone was, in a way, indicative of the attitude of the people of Jonesburg toward Frank Ritchie. No one could be really angry with him, not even those who loudest deplored his dissolute conduct. Many hardened old reprobates like Pete had tried to reform the boy, striving to resurrect the straight-limbed, clear-eyed, clean living youngster who had won their affection and esteem when he first came out to join his brother.

"I don't want any credit, Belle," he replied. "All I want is a bottle of whisky, and I'll pay for it."

"All right. 'Ave it yer own way."

The head was withdrawn and the panel closed with a slam. A moment later the door of the room opened and Belle entered, bearing a bottle of whisky and a glass on a tray.

As seen behind the bar at night Belle was a treat for tired eyes, at least for veldt weary eyes; for eyes that had for so long been deprived of the sight of a decent woman. When she stood where the light of the hanging lamp shone upon her she represented all that was desirable to tired prospectors, and they forgot, for a while, the hardships they had undergone, the hardships they were still to undergo in their search for gold. Her hair was like a halo of light; her cheeks were rosy with the bloom of youth; her eyes sparkled; her boldly modeled figure was more than hinted at by the open-work lace blouses she affected.

But now, seen by the searching rays of the sun which streamed through a window close to where Frank was seated, she reminded one of a brightly colored, many patterned, piece of cheap cretonne, the colors of which had run in the wash. Her eyes were pale and lusterless. The yellow glint of her hair was shaded at the roots by a nondescript brown. The color of her cheeks was, literally, washed off, and her figure, wrapped in a soiled kimono, slumped pathetically. But there was one thing that not even the truth revealing sun could take away from her—rather it seemed to accentuate it—and that was her big heartedness.

Belle should have been the mother of a large family. Circumstances and environment depriving her of that, she found an outlet for her natural emotions in being "one of the boys." She was a good pal, and not a few men, now more or less prosperous, owe whatever they may have to the fact that Belle once staked them.

She ran one much beringed hand lightly through Ritchie's hair, while he, ignoring and indifferent to the caress, reached avidly for the bottle, poured himself a drink and swallowed it at a gulp. A second quickly followed the first.

"My! You certainly can put the booze away," she said.

He looked up with a scowl as though conscious for the first time of her presence. Just now his sole craving was for drink. He had passed through a week of enforced sobriety, and as a result, his nerves were on edge; he wanted to be alone.

"What are you hanging around here for? There's the money."

With a wave of his hand he indicated the little pile of coins on the table.

She ignored his question.

"So yer wouldn't 'ave a drink with me, eh? There's some as 'ud be glad of the chance."

"I don't doubt it," he grunted.

"Your brother, for instance."

She looked at him curiously to see how the news would affect him. Apparently he had not heard her, for he was in the act of pouring out another drink.

"Hi said," she repeated distinctly, "your brother, for instance.'

He laughed softly.

"I heard you the first time. John drink with you! Don't make me laugh, Belle!"

Belle tossed her head indignantly.

"Is that so?" she retorted hotly. "Well, see 'ere wot 'e gave me."

She pointed to a large diamond ring which seemed to accentuate the grime of her fingers.

Ritchie's hand, in the act of conveying the glass to his mouth, was arrested in mid air. He looked at Belle, then at the ring and back to Belle again.

She flushed before his insolent gaze.

"Pinch yourself, Belle," he said. "You are dreaming."

The hand continued the interrupted journey to his lips, and he drank—slowly this time, swishing the liquor around his mouth that he might get the full flavor of it.

"Where's Mary?" he asked suddenly.

"Hout. She's quite a pal of yours, ain't she? I've 'eard tell that you was sweet on 'er at one time, and she on you. Though what a man can see in 'er—she's so quiet; ain't got no spunk—is more than I can say. For that matter Hi can't see wot she sees in you."

"Why—" began Ritchie wrathfully. Then his roving eye once again fell on the diamond ring, and he burst into a roar of laughter.

Belle tossed her head indignantly and flounced out of the room, leaving the money on the table.

Ritchie's first impulse was to call her back, but after a momentary hesitation he picked up the coins and put them in his pocket.

"They'll buy another bottle," he muttered, "and I can pay Belle when my remittance comes to-morrow."

III.

WHEN he awoke from the heavy, soddened sleep of intoxication the sun had long since set and the room was in darkness.

He groped for the whisky bottle, and, finding it empty, was on the point of calling for another when the door opened and a girl, bearing a lamp, entered.

Now, Mary Foster was all that Belle was not. Even the ladies of the sewing circle could find nothing against her. She was a Jonesburg girl, born and bred. Her father, who had died a year previously, was one of the first settlers in the district and a prospector of the best type.

Many times Mary had accompanied him on his trips to the hills beyond, and, though the search for gold had been fruitless, Mary had discovered something infinitely more precious—health, self-reliance, and honesty of purpose. She had learned to surmount the petty conventionalities which hedge in her sex; had learned to play the game, never to give up.

It was this ability to see a thing through to the end, this steadfastness of purpose, that enabled her to play a part that was altogether distasteful to her.

She became a barmaid, not because other avenues of employment were closed to her, but because she hoped, in some way which was not quite clear to her, to be able to help the man she loved.

With an exaggerated show of courtesy, grave of countenance—liquor affects some men that way—Ritchie rose from his chair and made a profound bow as the girl approached him; nor would he resume his chair until she herself was seated.

"Gen'men never sit in the presence of ladies," he mumbled.

Her dark, gray eyes clouded as she saw the empty whisky bottle; noted the twitching muscles of his face, and the bloodshot eyes. From his face her eyes wandered to his huddled form. His body was like a delicate yet powerful machine made useless by abuse and reckless treatment.

She sighed deeply.

"Wha's the matter, Mary?"

"Oh, I'm blue, Frank. I'm sick of this beastly hole. Night after night I pour out drinks for thirsty men, and wipe up dripping suds of beer. Ugh! how I hate it all."

"Cheer up, old sport. I'll tell you something that 'll make you laugh. You know that diamond ring Belle's wearing?"

Mary nodded.

"Well"—he chuckled in anticipation of the joke—"she said that John, old sobersides John, gave it to her."

He burst into a paroxysm of laughter, which ended abruptly when he saw that the girl did not join in.

"Don't you think that's funny?" he asked in injured tones.

She shook her head.

"It's true, I think. Belle told me about it. John's been to see her a lot of times lately. Didn't you know?"

Again he laughed.

"You must think I'm drunk, Mary, to expect me to believe a tale like that. As a mat' of fac', I'm as sober as a judge. I'll prove it to you; I'll sing—"

"Don't, please, Frank," she interposed hastily. "If you sing 'Asleep in the Deep,' or anything else, I'll go stark raving mad."

She buried her face in her hands; her shoulder heaved convulsively.

"Wha's the matter? Somebody insult you? Tell me his name and I'll—"

"No. It's not that, Frank. But I'm so lonely. I want to get away from here, where not a soul would care if I died to-morrow."

"You forget me," he said lightly. "You know I love you."

She looked up quickly, hopefully, but saw that his eyes, dull and expressionless, were fixed on the empty whisky bottle. She hesitated a moment; then, taking a deep breath, said with a nervous laugh:

"I'll tell you what, Frank. I'll get another bottle, and we'll have a little party in here all to ourselves."

"You're on. That's the way to talk, Mary. Wait. Here's the money. Never let a lady pay for drinks—it's bad form."

IV.

SOME time later, when the bottle was almost empty, and the two, the man and the girl, had apparently laughed themselves into a state of exhaustion, Mary said suddenly:

"Why don't you give up drinking, Frank?"

He laughed shrilly and pointed a finger of scorn at her.

"You're a nice un to talk."

It did look like Satan rebuking Satan.

Mary's long, dark hair, usually coiled neatly about her shapely head, hung down upon her shoulders. Her face was flushed, her eyes were unnaturally bright. Whisky stains besmirched the freshness of her rose-pink dress.

"Never mind about me," she replied gravely. "How about you? How about the family honor? You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Everybody's down on me," he complained, and began to weep maudlin tears. "You're talking just like John."

"John!" she giggled. "He's got no right to talk, the way he's running round with Belle."

Her mood suddenly changed.

"Nobody cares for me," she wailed.

A cunning gleam came into Ritchie's eyes.

"Let's get married, then we can take care of each other," he said; "an' it 'll teach old John a lesson," he added to himself.

"All right," she assented quickly. "We will do it to-night; but let's have another drink first."

She poured out the remainder of the whisky and watched him drink; then, taking him by the arm, she led him, reeling, through the crowded saloon out into the night.

V.

WHEN Ritchie awoke the next day it was long past noon. For a while he lay, motionless, on the cot that almost filled his tiny hut, trying to pierce through the thick clouds which separated this day from yesterday.

"It must have been a dream," he concluded with a laugh. "Dreaming one's getting married is better than seeing pink elephants."

He tossed about restlessly for a few minutes, wondering that he should have slept so late. Then came the thought that with to-day's mail his remittance would arrive, and he aroused himself instantly.

"Sixpence!" he called.

A native, more dilapidated looking, if possible, than his *baas*, came into the hut. "Yes, *baas?*"

"Bring water and make some coffee."

"Yah, *baas*. The coffee is already made."

He left the hut and, quickly returning, brought in a big cup of hot coffee and a large bucket of water.

Ritchie gulped down the steaming concoction, then, rising, sluiced himself with water from the pail. He dried himself briskly, shaved and dressed, taking an almost meticulous care in the knotting of his tie.

The reason for this extraordinary effort on his part was that he was dining that night with John.

Once a month the two brothers dined together, on the day that Frank's remittance arrived; once a month Frank attempted to live up to the requirements of a gentleman.

This dinner was John's idea. It was his last point, his only point, of contact with Frank. And Frank always attended, because it was the only way he could get his remittance cashed, and the final vestiges of pride left in him would not permit him to go to his brother other than clean—at least physically clean.

His toilet completed, he walked slowly down to the jail, which also served as a post office, to find that the mail cart had arrived some hours previously. The policeman in charge handed him a long, legal-looking envelope, the only mail he ever received, and after exchanging a jest or two with the officer he wandered back to his brother's house.

As he walked up the dusty driveway the door opened and a woman emerged. She stood for a moment where the light from the hall lamp fell full on her, and Frank saw, with a start of amazement, that it was Belle.

The door closed and the woman vanished. She had evidently taken one of the side paths, for Frank did not meet her on the driveway. He remembered now something that Belle, and later Mary, had said yesterday. Could there, after all, have been some truth in it he wondered?

A fierce resentment burned within him. To think that John should lecture him when he, John, was philandering with such a woman as Belle. His resentment took the form of righteous indignation. He quickened his steps, and, finding the door of the house slightly ajar, went in.

He stood for a moment in indecision. From one of the rooms, his brother's office, which opened off the spacious hall, came a low groan of despair and the words:

"My God! This is the end."

He burst in the room just in time to see his brother bring a revolver slowly up to his temple. With a hoarse cry Frank threw himself upon John, and for a few tense moments the two men wrestled for the possession of the weapon.

Suddenly the older man released his grip, and, sinking into a chair, buried his face in his hands.

"What's it all about, John?"

Frank passed his hands across his eyes. That John, good old sober John, should be trying to commit suicide was unthinkable. The other lifted a haggard face.

"Why didn't you let me finish it, Frank?"

"But why?"

"I'm ruined, Frank! Oh, what a fool I've been! You see," he continued hurriedly, "when I first came out here I thought I was in love with Belle, and wrote her a lot of fool letters." His tone was dull and monotonous, like one repeating a badly learned lesson. "She's been blackmailing me, Frank, and I've paid her whatever she asked. God knows I've paid! If I hadn't she would have sent the letters to Alice."

Alice was the daughter of the clergyman, and John was engaged to marry her.

"That's nothing to worry about," said Frank in relieved tones. "I thought you loved her now. Cheer up, old man; things might be worse."

"They couldn't be worse. Belle was greedy; she demanded all I had—more than I had. I took the government money to pay her, and in to-night's mail there was a letter from my chief saying that he will be here to-morrow to go over my accounts."

"You're welcome to my remittance check, John."

The other laughed.

"I gave Belle one thousand pounds, Frank."

Frank whistled. His remittance was only fifty.

"You damned fool!" he ejaculated.

"I know. But I never expected the chief so soon. He was here only a month ago, and in the ordinary run of events he would not have come this way again until next year. That would have given me time to make up the deficit. But now—" He shook his head.

"Poor dad and mother," he went on. "This will break their hearts. It's up to you; the family honor's in your hands, Frank."

Frank laughed harshly.

"You know what I'll do as soon as I get my remittance cashed. You've money on hand for that, I hope."

"Yes."

John took the check his brother handed him, and from the cash box which stood on the desk counted out fifty sovereigns.

Frank swept the money into his pocket.

"Good-by, Frank," John's voice trembled. "You'd better leave me the revolver—it's the only way. Try and keep the real news from the folks at home and—I know I have no right to preach—but can't you"—there was now a pleading not in his voice—"pull yourself together and so help to make up to them for my failure?"

Frank turned to go and John took up the revolver.

"Put that down," Frank said, wheeling suddenly. "Now, don't interrupt, but answer my questions. Have you got the letters from Belle now?"

"Yes. She brought them to-night."

"Then you've nothing further to fear from her?"

"No. Not from her."

"Where do you keep your money, John?"

"In there." He indicated the tin cash box. "Why?"

"Never mind. How about the thousand you gave to Belle? Did you keep that there?"

"Yes. It was mainly in large notes. I kept the cash box in the desk drawer."

"John?"

"Yes?"

"Damn it all, man, we can't have two black sheep in the family."

John did not answer.

Frank took the revolver from the desk, and with the butt of it, smashed the lock of the cash box. Two or three well-directed kicks smashed in the drawer of the desk, and he rummaged through the papers, throwing some of them on the floor. A small charm which dangled from his watch chain caught on the lock of the drawer. He jerked it violently. A link parted, and the charm remained fast caught on the lock.

"Listen, John," said Frank. "To-morrow morning you will report that your desk has been broken open and a large sum of money stolen—one thousand pounds, to be exact. The policeman who comes up to investigate will find this"—he pointed to the charm—"and, naturally, will set out to arrest me. When he arrives at my hut he will find that I've 'flown the coop.' To make it appear still more likely that I'm the thief, you can tell the police that I asked you for more money, and when you refused, swore to get even with you."

John seemed about to utter a protest, but the other silenced him with an impatient gesture.

"You'll do this, John, for the honor of the family. You ought to recognize that phrase. You've been dinning it into me, once a month, for the past year."

John inclined his head in mute agreement.

"Very well. Then there's nothing more to say, is there?"

"No. There's nothing more to say, Frank. It's all clear and—I'm going to accept your sacrifice. It's for the sake of —you know."

"Yes—I know," Frank assented, grimly.

"But suppose they catch you, Frank? How will you account for the fact that you haven't the money?"

"I'd thought of that, too. I'll say that I've hidden it. But don't worry, they won't catch me. Now let's forget this and go to 'scoff'; or have you forgotten this is our night to dine together?"

"No! I had not forgotten. I'll go and give the 'boys' orders to serve it."

As Frank started to follow his brother from the room he was seized by a sudden, uncontrollable desire to laugh. It appealed to his risibilities that he, the black sheep of the family, should, by this queer twist of fate, be the instrument of preserving the family honor!

VI.

WHEN Frank left his brother's house he walked quickly to his hut, taking good care to avoid casual wayfarers. Only once did his determination waver, and that was when he passed the Royal Hotel. Opposite this building he paused a moment. Then the door of the saloon opened, and fearful of being seen, he hurried on his way. When he reached his hut and entered, through the door, he gave a sigh of relief, well satisfied that no one had seen him.

For an hour or more he sat in the darkness, waiting for the time to come when he must set out on his journey to the railroad. This period of inaction was a hard test for him, and he fought hard against the desire to go to the hotel bar.

The moon rose, the soft mellow rays filtered through the window of the hut, filling it with light. It was almost time to go.

He rose to his feet and made the final arrangements for his journey. He wondered if he would be able to get his horse from O'Brien's stable without being observed. It would try him sorely, he knew, should O'Brien see him and invite him to have a drink.

The door opened, and a woman slowly entered the hut.

"Mary!" he gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"Who has a better right? Have you forgotten that I am your wife, Frank?"

He almost collapsed with astonishment.

"Then it was true; it was no nightmare?"

"Not unless you make it so, Frank."

He pondered over this a moment, then—

"I suppose you've come for a share of the remittance money," he sneered. "Well, here it is."

He counted out twenty-five sovereigns and held them toward her.

She flinched as though he had struck her in the face.

"No. Put it away, Frank. I did not come for that. I followed you to your brother's house to-night, and I heard all that was said in the library; I was listening at the window."

He grasped her firmly by the wrist.

"You won't tell any one, Mary? Swear you won't tell, or—"

"No. I won't tell. Where are you going?"

"To Kimberley, Durban — anywhere; what does it matter?"

"They'll be sure to catch you if you make for the railroad, Frank."

"What do I care, so long as I have a chance for one final spree?"

"But think of afterwards, Frank. Long months, perhaps years, in jail, without a chance to get even one little drink."

"I've thought of that, Mary. It's part of the price I must pay."

"Then go the other way, boy. Back into the hills. They'd never suspect you would go there. You can make your way over the border and live free from arrest. Free, Frank; free to do as you please."

"I'd die before I got within sight of the border, Mary. It's a long trek, three weeks or more for one who knows the way, and I don't. I'd get lost, like as not; and then the loneliness."

"I'll come with you, Frank," she pleaded. "I know the way. I've been there with my father. And listen. He struck a rich vein on his last trip. He gave me the bearings of it just before he died. We'll go prospecting, Frank—you and I."

He seemed to catch some of her fire for a moment, then came the cold waters of doubt.

"It's a dry region, Mary, and this is the dry season. A man has to know the location of the water holes to make that trip in safety. Even then there's a chance that they are dried up."

"Some I know, and I'm willing to take a chance on the others. Are you less of a man than I thought? Aren't you willing to take a chance, too?"

"How about pack mules, and grub?"

"I've already arranged for that. They are waiting outside for us now. Pete got them for me. Pete's true blue; he won't tell a soul."

He surrendered with an ill grace.

"You've got it all planned out, haven't you? You seemed damned sure I'd go," he grunted.

Mary laughed, a low, musical laugh.

"Come along, Frank," she said, "we ought to be trekking."

VII.

FEW things surpass in beauty an African sunrise. It has all the glories and none of the symbolical sadness of a sunset.

Mary, as she watched the paling of the morning star before the many colored shafts of light, pale crimson, mauve, violet, gold and silvery gray intermingling, which heralded the coming of day, found a new courage to face the task before her. Let the day bring forth what it would, courage and hope were with her now; it was the message of the rising sun.

She turned to Frank, wishing that he could share her pleasure; but he was still fast asleep beside the campfire, and she did not wake him.

Two hundred odd miles lay between them and Jonesburg. Not far, you will say. Yet, when you recollect that their pace never exceeded three miles an hour, the pace of their pack mules, and that the trail had led across a desolate waste, devoid of vegetation, waterless, save for an occasional water hole; when you consider the intense heat from which there was no respite, night or day, you will admit, perhaps, that two hundred miles in ten days represents pretty hard traveling. Nor must it be overlooked, in measuring the magnitude of the task, that one of the travelers was a man soft with years of indolent living and hard drinking; and the other a girl who, besides having the responsibility of the trip on her hands, had also to care for the man.

The first she could have done without undue exertion, for she was veldt wise. But the latter sapped her strength and vitality, and at times filled her with doubt as to whether she was strong enough to see through the thing she had undertaken.

The conflict with Frank had started almost from the time they had left Jonesburg, ten weary days ago. Even then he complained that she was persuading him, against his better judgment, to suffer untold hardships, to risk dying of thirst. It was only by dint of much pleading, of the possibility of locating gold and all that entailed — unlimited whisky, and independence of the miserly remittance from home —that she had been able to hold him.

Each morning as they set out on the trail leading still farther from Jonesburg, it had been increasingly difficult to break down his avowed determination to "chuck it all and go back for one last spree." And when he did give in to her it was with a bitter sullenness which robbed Mary of the sweets of victory.

He refused to help with the animals, sulking like a spoiled child while she collected the brush for a fire, or performed the hundred and one little duties which help to make camp life comfortable.

The first few days she ignored his attitude, doing all the work uncomplainingly. She was not yet sure of her ground; she was not yet far enough away from Jonesburg, but as soon as they were among the hills, and the last landmark of the settlement lost to sight, she suggested that he help her; that he light the fire for the evening meal.

"This is your picnic," he replied with a sneer. "I didn't want to come. Well! Now you've got me here you want me to work; but I won't."

"Very well, Frank," she had replied quietly, and unrolled her blankets. "We'll go without 'scoff' to-night. But I'm awfully hungry."

Frank had watched her in wrathful silence for a while, and then, for he, too, was hungry, and a little ashamed, went in search of wood. Each day after that she had forced him, by some such trick, to help in the making and breaking of camp. And already he was showing signs of improvement physically. His face was tanned; his eyes no longer bleary. He carried him-

self more erect, and the weak lines about his mouth had almost disappeared. No man could lead the life Mary had forced him to lead and not reap some benefit, even in so short a time. And Frank had been an athlete in the beginning. Once or twice he had showed actual pride and delight in the knowledge of his return to something approaching his old-time strength and vigor.

And now, when they had almost reached the goal for which she aimed, it seemed that all her efforts were to be of no avail.

"To-morrow," he had said, when they came to this water hole, "we go back." He had said this before, many times, but never with such a note of finality in his voice, and Mary, a feeling of hopeless despair in her heart, was unable to answer him, and turned her head swiftly that he might not see the tears which came to her eyes.

"Yes," he continued, "I'm going back, do you hear? I've had enough of this damn foolishness. If I'm arrested, who loses but me? John's safe. No one will suspect him. I will confess—if a confession is needed—and I'll go to prison for it. That's my share of looking after the family honor. If I do that no one has a right to interfere with me if I want a drink. Do you think I can live through months of this? Wandering through these blasted hills, looking for gold which we will never find? I'm going back. A man has a right to live his own life."

"But what about me?" she had asked, quietly.

"You? You knew what you were doing when you married me. I didn't. I was drunk, and I wish to God I were drunk now."

VIII.

THE sleeper stirred fitfully as though about to wake, and Mary busied herself at the fire, preparing the morning meal.

"Good morning, Frank," she called cheerfully, as the other, awakened by the aroma of coffee, sat up suddenly.

He grunted a reply.

She handed him his coffee.

"You haven't forgotten what I said last night, have you?" he asked.

"No, Frank, I haven't forgotten."

"Well, I meant it."

She waited until he had dressed and finished his breakfast before she spoke again.

"Frank?"

"Well?"

"I want to tell you that your brother did not steal the money."

"What do you mean?"

She hesitated, as though realizing she had made a false move, then, having committed herself, continued:

"It was a test of you, Frank; to see if you had altogether forgotten what it was to be a man."

"I don't understand. John would have killed himself had I not prevented him. I got there just in time."

"No! That was to make it seem more real—that and the things Belle told you. It was all my plan in the beginning, but everybody helped — John, Belle, O'Brien, Pete, and the rest. I wanted to get you away from the Royal, out here on the veldt where it's clean, and give you a chance to find yourself again.

"You're not going back, Frank. I'm not going to let you. This is your chance, and you shan't throw it away. In the hills yonder is a wonderfully fertile valley, and there we shall stay as long as our provisions last—six months or more if we're careful.

"It's going to be hard, boy, but I'll help you, and you'll come through. You must, for my sake." Her voice faltered. All this time Frank had made no sign that he heard, and she felt that she could no longer endure the suspense. "You must, for my sake," she repeated. "You loved me once."

For a moment Frank seemed to be half dazed, as if he had not fully comprehended just what this meant to him.

"Blast you," he cried suddenly, in an insane rage. "So you played a trick on me, eh? You and my brother! You let me think that I was doing a brave thing; that I was saving the family honor, and all the time you were laughing at me. Well, now I'm going back and—"

He raised his hand threateningly, and she fell back with a little cry. But the cry was not of fear, rather an expression of pity.

"All right," she assented calmly, "we will go back."

IX.

THAT day Mary failed to locate water. Another day passed and still no water!

Then Frank knew what it was to really be thirsty, for, somehow, Mary had forgotten to fill the water bags. His throat was parched, his tongue swollen, his eyeballs protruded from their sockets.

When he seemed about at the point of exhaustion, reeling in his stride like a drunken man, Mary produced a small flask and handed it to him.

He unscrewed the top with feverish haste and put it to his lips.

The next moment he had dashed it despairingly to the ground.

It was water he wanted; Mary had given him whisky!

He looked at her, and the angry curses which rose to his lips found no utterance.

He saw that his suffering was no greater than hers; that she, too, was nearing the point of collapse. And then came the thought that she had willingly taken this course, had purposely failed to locate water; had dared the great thirst; had dared death, in the hope that she could persuade him from his purpose.

A feeling of shame, of unworthiness, swept over him. He wished to express contrition, to declare that he would strive to be worthy of her. But all he could say was:

"I give in, Mary. Lead the way, I'll follow your trail."

Mary turned almost at right angles from the course they had been taking, and ten minutes later came to water.

X.

WHEN Mary awoke the following morning Frank was attempting, and not very successfully, to make some "sour cakes" for the morning meal.

"Frank," she called.

He went over at once and knelt beside her.

"I've been a cad, Mary," he said humbly. "Can you ever forgive me?"

She patted his head gently, forgivingly.

"Mary?" He hesitated a moment. "Are you really my wife, or was that a trick, too?"

"That was no trick, Frank."

"I'm glad of that," he answered simply. "But how dared you do it, Mary?"

"Your brother married us, Frank, and if you had not taken—as you then thought—his fault on your shoulders; if you had failed to meet the test or refused to make this trip, the record would have been destroyed. But you proved yourself then, and I was willing to take a chance on the rest."

"You shan't lose," he muttered to himself; then, as the smell of burning food came to his nostrils, he jumped up and ran over to the fire in order to save from complete ruin his batch of "sour cakes." In a little while he was back again, proudly exhibiting his first attempt at camp cooking.

The cakes were scorched to a cinder on the outside, soggy and unpalatable in the center; the coffee was bitter, but the two—the man and the girl—ate with great contentment, and in happy silence, hand in hand, they watched the rising of the sun; the beginning of a new day.

The Fear Sway

Part IV

by Kenneth Perkins

Author of "The Blood-Call," "The Bull-Dogger," etc.

CHAPTER XVIII.

JENNIE LEE SHOWS FOUR ACES.

WHAT Tom Drury said to Jennie in that tense moment of silence during which the court stood immobile, like a group of statues, could be heard by every one:

"I am going to do what I said. The wrongs that were laid to my name will be righted. Marty Lingo's wife won't be weeping to-morrow as I saw her weeping down at the Lingo ranch. Your grandfather's life wish will be satisfied, and as for you, you will see your home again."

Drury backed to the window covering the mute, frozen figures.

"I'm stronger than I was before the trial, men," he shouted to them. And the three outlaws heard what he said: "You've proved me the Gila. Well and good, I am the Gila. And I have the power of the Gila behind me—which is power enough to rule this range. From now on until I've accomplished my vow, I am going to rule this range and hold sway!"

He turned and vaulted out of the window over the sombreros of the outlaws who were covering his escape. Darting across the street, he vaulted onto the back of the huge gelding.

Crater reared on his hind feet, swung around, and, feeling the spurs raking into his flanks, started down the street in his usual series of straight-away bucks. When he felt the hand of his master gathering the reins taut, he subsided into a hard gallop, and disappeared where the street swerved down around the shoulder of the first hill.

Meanwhile the three outlaws ducked behind the wall of the courthouse, and scurried for the ponies they had chosen to use in their escape. On the instant every man of the Vigilantes snapped to his holster, yanked out the gun, and stampeded for the window.

A cloud of dust, the dim silhouettes of three hunched figures and sombreros, and a wild clattering of hoofs, was the target into which they hurled a rapid and continual string of fire.

Those of the Vigilantes who had been quick enough to get horses galloped madly down the street. They had barely reached the edge of the town when the first of their number dismounted on the jump, feeling his saddle slipping around underneath the horse's belly. In another moment two more men fell, and the remaining riders, realizing that they had been tricked, jumped as their cinches began to trail on the ground and their saddles to slide.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 29.

For a moment the posse itself scattered along the main street, some standing, some sprawled in the dust, others sitting up in the middle of the highway gazing blankly in every direction.

"Don't lose your heads just because you're losing your seats!" Gaunt yelled. "Saddle your mounts again and hop to it!"

As the men obeyed, Gaunt saw the cowboy who had been delegated to watch the horses during the trial. He was bound and gagged, lying sprawled in a doorway.

"Unbind this damned carcass and give him a horse!" Gaunt shouted. "And the rest of you birds who had your horses stole —get any mount you kin!"

Now that the chase promised to be a long one, the riders looked around for their own mounts. The fact that three of the horses had been stolen by the outlaws caused the wildest confusion. Crater himself — the fastest, the unbeatable—had been appropriated by the leading fugitive. On the other hand, Sugg's bay and the calico horse on which Drury had been brought to the mountains, were left as extra horses. These were accordingly appropriated by two of the Vigilantes. This left only one man in the street who had been too slow to grab a mount: he was Marty Lingo.

Sugg, ever since he had bolted out of the court room the moment before the holdup, was nowhere to be found. In the confusion Gaunt did not notice this, and for that matter no one else did. Gaunt's only thought was that Jennie was remaining behind, possibly alone in the town. Before he galloped off, leading his horsemen on the chase, Gaunt shouted:

"Look here, men, this won't do! The gal's being left behind!"

"Lucky for us!" one of the Vigilantes cried, "or else she'd be pulling off another one of her damned miracles!"

"I'll take care of her, chief," Marty put in. "But my horse is stole."

Another man added hurriedly: "Chief, I rode to the end of the town before my saddle slipped, and I seen three ponies tethered to the side of the hill. They're the ponies the outlaws must have rode up here on!"

The chief turned to Marty Lingo before wheeling his horse and bolting down the street:

"Marty, since you're without a mount, I want for you to look after that there gal of mine," he shouted hoarsely. "Like as not she'll be pulling off some more of her damned tricks. Further and more, I don't want for her to be left alone up here in the hills—even if she does think the Gila is in love with her."

"I'll see to her, chief!" little Marty Lingo said. "Don't worry. I'll take her down to my ranch; 'tain't far. I'll see that your little gal is took back safe. They won't no one touch her while Marty Lingo's chaperon!"

The chief galloped off, leading his posse up to the mountains with a thunder of beating hoofs.

Jennie Lee was standing in the doorway of the court room, watching the proceedings of the posse with an expression of triumphant amusement. The confusion of the last few moments, occasioned by the loss of three mounts and the loosened saddles, had delayed the chase long enough, she knew, to give Tom a big head-start. Added to this, he had the fastest horse, and there was a slim chance now of his being caught by the men who a moment before had amused themselves by giving him a mock trial.

Marty Lingo, who was halfway down the street, watched the posse stringing out into single file as it hit the mountain trail and disappeared into the upsloping cañons. Then he walked down the street toward the girl.

It was a walk of scarcely fifty yards, and yet Marty Lingo was unable to complete it. He saw the girl go back into the court room, ostensibly, he concluded, to get her sombrero and riding gloves. The moment she disappeared, a man stepped out of the doorway of the old, rickety, wind-warped dance hall adjacent. It was into this building that Henry Sugg had fled.

Marty Lingo did not know it was Sugg who stepped out. All he saw was a tall man, masked with a red bandanna, holding a black Colt forty-five. Marty did not

look into the man's eyes, which he might possibly have recognized. Instead, he gazed, hypnotized by the little white line of fire which the noon-day sun drew along the perfectly shined gun metal.

CHAPTER XIX.

GAUNT STARTS THE CHASE.

PETER GAUNT led the chase as far as the first big hill which sloped up to Mount Diablo. Here he divided his men, sending half of them about the hill to the north, and the other half to the south.

"On the other side of this hill," he explained, "we can see the cañon which cuts up to Diablo. At the entrance of the cañon we will meet."

A mile, galloping through the sagebrush and rocks, unmindful of the breakneck chase and its danger to either rider or horse, brought the leaders around the mountain. Gaunt, old as he was, had pressed his horse mercilessly through the rough growth, so that its hide as well as the rider's own khaki trousers were badly ripped. The chief ran his bright eyes across the wild simmering valley which separated the knoll, on which he stood, from the towering crags of Diablo.

He had hoped the view they now commanded would give them an easy clew to the direction the fugitives had taken. Instead, they were frustrated by a mirage which appeared at the end of the cañon, so that they seemed to be looking into a clear mountain lake on the bosom of which the mountain peaks were reflected.

"It's the hell of a place!" one of the Vigilantes said. "I don't feel much like diving into that thar lake! How do we know now but that the Gila will have his gang up and surrounding us?"

Gaunt did not answer immediately. He was waiting for the rest of the posse to gather, as he had ordered, and while waiting he was trying to formulate a plan.

"The Gila can avoid them open spaces of adobe," Gaunt heard one of his men saying. "And it's the only place we can see him definite like."

"The distance is too fur," said another Vigilante. "If he rides agin a background of sage or mesquite, you simply cain't follow him."

"That's him now!" another cried.

Gaunt strained his eyes. It looked to him as if the black horse and its rider were a little ant. Three other ants were creeping along at the edge of the sky-blue water.

"It appears to me like he's goin' one direction and his shadow—which is stronger'n he is—damned if it ain't goin' the other!"

By this time the last man of the posse galloped up, his horse stumbling and beating upon the stony ground.

"Are we all here?" Gaunt asked, looking around at his men.

"Marty Lingo couldn't get a hoss," one of the men reminded him.

"I know that. I told him to take the outlaws' ponies and ride with the gal down to his ranch. But is every one else here?"

The men looked around.

"Where the hell is Sugg?" Gaunt asked.

"Yes, where the hell!" others exclaimed.

"I got his horse!" one of the men laughed. "That ought to explain his—"

"But where was he when we was startin' out?"

"As I have a faint recollection durin' the trial," another man said, "Henry Sugg ducked out'n the door just before the Gila stuck us all up."

"And two of the bandits popped their noses into the door right after," another explained. "Like as not they brained Sugg."

"The gal will find him."

"And Marty Lingo's there. They'll find him."

"I'm wonderin' if he really got brained," Gaunt remarked. "And how is it he run out before any of us?"

"Any one would of run out that had a chance. And Sugg was always a quick one."

"Well, we cain't be worryin' about him, chief. Our escaped prisoner is gettin' farther and farther away. How do you want for us to go about this here man hunt?"

"Yes, the man hunt!" Gaunt replied, his face lighting up with his plan. "We'll

git back to Henry Sugg later. Now I'll tell you how we-all will play this game, men. We'll deploy here and now. Six of you ride north around Diablo, six cut straight west, followin' me. The rest of you string out for ten miles acrost the plain. That 'll bring us in a big circle and we can start closin' in. We'll circle Mount Diablo, cover the whole plain, and as we close in we'll stop up both ends of this here cañon where Drury and his outlaws are ridin'! That 'll mean they can't escape us without they try to climb the sides of the cañon and come right back to Desolation, where they started from. If they do that, we'll follow 'em back, and if we don't catch 'em by that time, I ain't fit to lead you men agin the rest of my days."

Having delivered these orders Gaunt wheeled his horse and dashed back on the trail westward as fast as his panting mount would carry him. The rest of the riders galloped off on the trails assigned to them, some dashing down the long, rocky, mesquite-covered plain, others plunging almost headlong into the cañon, and others beating across the rocks in a race to keep up with Gaunt.

CHAPTER XX.

THE GILA INTRODUCES HIMSELF.

AS the Vigilantes surmised, Henry Sugg had bolted from the court room just before the trial broke up. When he found himself outside, he was immediately confronted by one of his own outlaws who was about to hold up the Vigilantes. The giant negro into whose arms he practically fell, not knowing who he was, timed a smashing blow to his jaw. Sugg fell stunned. The hold-up was accomplished; Tom Drury had escaped, and the Vigilantes had got to horse.

When Sugg came to himself, he heard Gaunt shouting his orders to the Vigilantes to adjust their saddles and mount again for the chase.

Sugg crawled into the dance-hall adjacent to the court room, and from a window he saw that old Gaunt was giving his parting orders to Marty Lingo to take care of the girl and to ride with her to the Lingo ranch. Sugg also heard something else: one of the Vigilantes was telling the chief that ponies were in the little arroyo at the lower end of the town where they had been left by the outlaws.

This outcome pleased Sugg. He realized that, with the exception of little old Marty Lingo, he was alone in the town with Jennie Lee.

He tied his bandanna around his face. It was when Marty Lingo was coming back to the court room, to get Jennie, that Sugg sprang out from the dance-hall and confronted him.

The little rancher's woeful brown eyes bulged. In acting as chaperon to the chief's granddaughter he had not anticipated such a miraculously quick opposition.

He lifted his hands in obeyance to Sugg's command, and submitted to being bound without any questions whatever. Through his mind ran a confused jumble of ideas: the Gila, as he thought, had escaped in the person of Tom Drury. Who this man was, he could not guess. He was undoubtedly one of the Gila's gang, but he had nothing in common with the three unshaven grinning brutes who had held the court up. The fact that he was masked was all the more perplexing.

"Now then, Mr. Lingo," Sugg said, as he yanked off the rancher's bandanna and used it as a gag, "all you have to do is to lie down here in this dance-hall, and lie quiet. It won't be long. Sooner or later men will come into town. They'll untie your hands and feet. And then you can blab all you please. But don't tell them who I am. Don't try to think what my voice sounds like. You know what happens to men who mess too much into the Gila's business."

For a moment Marty Lingo thought that this man who talked like Henry Sugg, the suave ranch owner and highly respected Vigilante, might possibly be the Gila Monster himself.

"But no," Marty said to himself as the gag cut across his lips. "The Gila's went; he's up to Diablo by this time. *He couldn't of come back!*"

Sugg tied the little man to one of the up-

rights in a booth of the dance-hall, then stepped out into the glaring street.

He removed his bandanna from his face and walked to the door of the court room just as Jennie was coming out. Seeing him, she stepped back with a start, and they met within the threshold.

"Well, Miss Lee," he said, "it looks as if we had this town to ourselves."

Immediately she sensed the mock chivalry of his attitude, the amused triumph, the calmness that comes with the satisfaction that he had all the time, as well as all the power he wanted.

"Where is Marty Lingo?" she gasped, showing by the sudden draining of color from her cheeks that she realized the trap in which she had fallen.

"Marty Lingo is in the dance-hall next door, and I'm sure he has no intention of casting a damper on our meeting."

"Then you've—"

"No, I merely tied him up. You notice he's not screaming? I gagged him."

She backed horrified into the room. Sugg followed.

This was the room where scarcely half an hour before he had witnessed the almost perfect culmination of his carefully laid plans. If the girl had not interfered it would have been the perfect culmination. Sugg had reveled at the helplessness of his victim, his pleasure had been akin to the delight of a boy watching a fly through which he had stuck a pin.

And in this very room the girl had fought with every ounce of life and energy within her for the freedom of her lover. Her fight had succeeded. The lover was saved; and now, instead, she was in his place—as helpless as he had been. She had defeated Sugg completely in his first game, and now she found herself playing in another one just as desperate, perhaps more horribly vital. The cards she held this time were not the aces of every suit. She held nothing, her antagonist everything.

"All right, Mr. Sugg," she finally managed to say. "We have the town—as you say—to ourselves. And what are—"

"What am I going to do? I am going to protect you of course—protect you from the Gila and his desperate gang."

"I am not afraid of them—I have shown you that already. I brought the gang up here—three of them: that horrible negro, Slinkey, Drigges, and the Mexican."

"But how about the Gila himself?"

"Do you mean Tom Drury?" A slight spasm of anger thrilled her. It helped her voice.

"I thought you protested Tom Drury was not the Gila."

"You are the Gila," she said, her anger exploding itself and leaving her suddenly trembling and unnerved.

"You don't really believe Tom Drury's story."

"Of course I believe it. You are the Gila. I know it now. There is no doubt of it. You ran out of the court room when you knew Tom Drury had a gun, because you knew he would kill you. You knew perfectly well he would kill you the first chance he had—the very moment that he was free. But he will come back. If you don't look out, he will come back here. What do you think he would do if he found *you* here with me?"

Sugg laughed softly. The thought she suggested caused him to break out suddenly with anger:

"They would have all run out of the court room, every mother's son of them. But they were frozen with fear—and too slow. I was quicker—"

"And more afraid—"

"This is no time for you to—"

"Why did you come in here?" she cried suddenly, finding her nerve. "What are you going to do? I don't want you to ride with me! I want Marty—"

"Not Marty. I am the one you want! I am the one who will ride out across the range with you."

"The Vigilantes will find us—you do not *dare*—"

"To ride with you? Protecting you? The Vigilantes won't find us—not where I intend taking you—"

"You intend—taking—me—" she repeated, dazed.

"Down to a very delightful little Spanish hacienda on the other side of the mountains!" Sugg smiled graciously, chivalrously.

Jennie uttered a half choked cry and stepped to the door. She checked herself as she saw the Gila move, scarcely without taking a step, in the direction which would obstruct her path. She stood still, scarcely breathing. Her fear to step forward was much the same as the fear of a man who is followed by a big dog and who knows that to break into a run would only precipitate an assault. She found herself momentarily too terror-stricken to move.

When she faced three of the Gila's outlaws she had been brave. Sugg's most desperate henchmen, when confronting her, had failed to strike fear. But now that she faced one man—and that man Henry Sugg, who was in love with her—her bravery vanished. She breathed heavily for a moment, as if trying to drown the almost audible beating of her heart.

Then she collected her wits and spoke in a low trembling voice:

"You are playing a dangerous game. You have won your games before because they were played against men." Her voice suddenly steadied itself to a cutting softness. "Now you think you will try a new sort of game. It's one that many men have lost."

"I will not lose," he replied in a tone so polite as to seem almost placating. "I cannot lose. This range is mine, the law of it, and the lawlessness of it. Your own Vigilantes are with me, your grandfather."

"And your desperadoes?" she snapped. "Your desperadoes are with Tom Drury—And as long as Tom Drury wishes to remain an outlaw—the outlaw you have made him—as long as he desires to remain the leader of your gang, your power is gone!"

"Very well, I will stay away from him. You and I will go away together. We will ride from the range and over the hills until we come to a little abandoned ranch—"

"*Together*"—she repeated, horrified. "We are going together?"

"To a little ranch on the other side of Diablo," he went on. "You and I. There we will have supper to-night and no one in the world will disturb us. No one will be within miles or know that we are there. Yes," he added suddenly. "There will be one man, a little old Mexican caretaker. You remember Domingo—little Domingo with the white beard?"

"Domingo!" the girl cried. "Then you mean—"

"Yes, I mean we are going to your own ranch. What could be more romantic? You sent this man Tom Drury into the desert to clean the country so you could go back to your home. And Tom Drury said: 'I will take her back to the home she is longing for!' But he is wrong. It is I who will take you back, and see your eyes sparkle again at the sight of your childhood haunts."

"My grandfather kept me from that country because the Gila wanted me!" she cried, drawing back and putting her hand to her holster. "If you think you will take me there I will tell you this: I would rather kill you—"

He leaped forward, pinning her arm to her side. With his right arm he reached around her waist, gripped her wrist till her hand opened in pain and the six-gun clattered to the floor. This accomplished, he stepped back again and surveyed her complacently.

Now that the first step in their conflict, a swift momentary thing, had taken place, Sugg seemed to be much more at ease. He rolled a cigarette casually and purred:

"I am glad that is over with. Our relations from now are bound to be much more amicable."

Jennie knew this. It horrified her. She was reminded of the futility of any sort of struggle by the wrenching pain of her wrist. It felt to her as if in that one easy grip Sugg had broken the little bones of her hand, and in accomplishing it he had not even allowed more than the semblance of a struggle. She stood before him, helpless.

The flies buzzed. Sugg's cigarette smoke rose in a single string toward the cobwebbed rafters.

"I heard your grandfather say that you were to ride home with Marty Lingo. Marty was to ride on one of the ponies my own men left up in the arroyo. Your pony and one of these will be our mounts. I think before nightfall we should arrive at your rancho. After that we will ride on together, across the border to Mexico!"

"The Vigilantes will find you. Tom Drury will find you!" she exclaimed desperately. "They will kill you for this."

"During our party," he replied softly, "we will let Tom and the Vigilantes chase each other into the mountains!"

"I will not go. I will die first."

He stepped closer to her, looking into her face with a steady, serious smile. Again she felt the hand on her wrist, and a shudder of helplessness went through her.

"I am not going to tie your hands," he said, "and carry you off like a brigand kidnaping a child. The journey is too long. I prefer remaining here."

"Here!"

"We have the town to ourselves. I doubt if Tom Drury would return. At least not until Peter Gaunt has give up the chase."

"No! No! I cannot remain here. The place is abhorrent to me. It is like a graveyard!" She was suddenly panic-stricken at the thought of staying another moment in the desolate ghost town. To be alone with Sugg in this town seemed to her infinitely more terrible than to be thrown with him on a desert island or into the heart of an uninhabited mountain range. The walls of the shack, echoing their words; the broad empty street, the skull-like houses with their black eyes, horrified her. "No, no! Don't bind my hands!" she repeated piteously. "I will go away from here—anywhere! Take me away from this horrible place!"

"Your own rancho, then."

She opened her mouth to again cry out in protest, but a faint ray of hope came to her. As Sugg himself had said, there would be one other person at the ranch. Old Domingo, a servant who had been in the household of Peter Gaunt in the days before the exile, would see the plight of the girl who as a child had been his mistress. At least it was better to play for time, to follow her captor, who wanted to take her from this place which had grown so abhorrent, to follow him to the scenes of her childhood. At any rate they could not be abhorrent!

Suddenly she thought, with a pounding thrill in her heart—Tom Drury was free and riding Crater. He might by some miracle hear of the abduction.

"Take your hand away," she said. "I will ride away from here with you without resisting."

Marty Lingo had found himself so effectually gagged and bound that during the whole conversation between Sugg and Jennie he was helpless. He was, however, able to take one step toward his liberation. His hands had been tied so securely with a rawhide romal that he could not even attempt to twist them loose without cutting the flesh of his wrists. Sugg was an adept at this work, but he had overlooked one thing: the two-by-four upright to which he had tied the end of the romal, was so old and rotten that with a few jerks Marty pried it loose. This did little toward helping his escape. If anything he was worse off than ever, and the big upright fell upon his back, twisting his wrists like some medieval rack, so that he fell sprawling to the ground. To get out of the door carrying this beam was next to impossible, but one thing he was able to do.

Inch by inch he crawled out of his little booth. His wrists began to bleed, his gagged breath to give out. Yet he was determined at all odds to get away from his booth, cross that dance-hall floor and crawl to the window which opened out on the street. It was a matter, as he knew, of life and death.

When he reached the window the pain left his wrists and his back, as if some miracle had been performed upon him. He forgot his twisted spine, his torn flesh, even his choking breath. He thanked God that he had reached the sill of that window in time.

Yes, it was a matter of life and death, and his own plight was a miserable puny joke compared to the tragedy being enacted with Peter Gaunt's granddaughter as the leading character. Sugg and Jennie were at the end of their conflict just as Marty, his last ounce of strength going into a convulsive twist, crawled like a wounded worm to the edge of the dance floor.

He raised his head to the sill, and words drifted to him:

"Before nightfall we will arrive at your rancho . . . during our party . . . Mexico—"

The words trailed into the crooning unintelligible voice of Henry Sugg. But Marty had heard enough.

CHAPTER XXI.

DRURY GUNS FOR THE THREE HEADS.

EARLY afternoon found Tom Drury in the center of the cañon where Gaunt had espied him from the heights of the mountain.

As he rode the big gelding down into the long stretch of the cañon bottom, an exuberance thrilled him—the exuberance of unlimited power. The hot wet muscles of the horse's neck, the steady untiring gallop, the tremendous strength of the animal, enthused Drury, so that he felt as if its strength were part of his own body. The sudden sense of freedom and the power given into his hand converted him from a helpless, doomed man to a centaur, a centaur with the cunning of a man and the strength of a horse, against whom no one could prevail.

The tremendous, unbeatable mount whose superb muscles Tom could feel against his knees, his calves, the palm of his hand, was not the only source of inspiration; nor was that source the six-gun which he held in his hand. It was the memory of something Henry Sugg had told him when the two were on the mesa the previous day.

He had learned of the unlimited power of the Gila over this range. Sugg had pointed out that it was greater than the power of the Governor of the State, as great as the power of some old barbaric potentate who could order death according to his whims. "Until I conquer these three bandits who are following me," Tom said, "I am going to be the Gila!"

When he was well out on the long falling plain of the cañon, he drew rein and turned about, looking back on the trail he had followed from Desolation. As he glanced up at the mountains, he saw the outlaws who had helped him in his escape.

They were plunging down the trail as fast as their horses would carry them, trying to lessen the distance which had gradually been growing between themselves and the man they supposed was their master.

Drury did not turn to give them his dust again. Part of his job, he knew, was to get these three men; and now was his chance. He also knew that he had little time to waste on them. Peter Gaunt and his posse were hot on his trail, and Drury had no desire to fall again into their clutches—at least not until they were convinced of the duplicity of Henry Sugg.

The foremost of the outlaws, Drury observed, was well in advance of the other two. The negro followed him at considerable distance, and then came the little hunched figure of Slinkey Drigges. It was the Mexican's horse that had eaten up the distance between Drury and his followers. The Mexican, Andres, rode up. When he saw Drury waiting in the creek bed he slowed to a canter and at a distance of twenty feet drew rein.

"All right, you hombre!" Drury shouted. "Come over here."

The Mexican rode forward cautiously and stopped in front of his "master." For the first time Drury looked at the lithe figure and the narrow face, so swarthy as to seem almost black.

"Have you seen me before?" he snapped out.

Andres straightened up as if a sword had pierced his vitals. He detected a strange sound in the voice of this man who was supposed to be his master.

"Never without your mask, maestro."

"But you recognize me as the Gila?"

"It is not for me to recognize the Gila, maestro."

"But you call me maestro? Why the hell do you call me maestro and follow me down into this cañon, if you do not recognize me as the Gila?"

Andres seemed afraid to answer. It was an unbreakable tradition with him that the Gila's identity was supposed to be for all time a secret. His name was not to be uttered. To call him the Gila to his face would have been sacrilege.

"Answer me that!" Drury shouted. "Tell me who I am, Mex!"

"I—I do not know, maestro," Andres stammered. "The people on the range tell me you are taken prisoner. I say to myself, 'Andres, your maestro is prisoner. I will go for the rescue of my master.' I say those words to myself. The person who tells me this is one very beautiful señorita who is sweetheart to you who are my maestro. So we come for to make rescue."

"But who am I? What is my name? Why am I your master?"

"It is not for me to say your name, señor," the half-breed begged in a tone which had all the awe and horror of a medieval monk avoiding the devil.

Drury took his gun from its holster and pressed his horse over to the side of the half-breed.

"Look here, Mr. Mex, you know damn well I am not your Gila. You knew it from the very first time I opened my mouth. You ought to have known it by the way I mount a horse, by my seat in the saddle, my neck, my shoulders, my hands. And you do know it!"

The Mexican's dry, black hand was slowly moving toward the flap of his holster, and when it had come to within three inches of it Drury shot his hand out as if delivering a blow in the half-breed's solar plexus. With a quick flip he yanked out the six-gun and threw it into the mesquite.

"Now, then, Mex, I've got a little job for you. Before your two pals catch up with us I want to come to an understanding. You are to ride ahead, showing the trail directly to the cache where you bandits keep your swag. Those other two hombres will follow us, and if they come too close I'm going to watch you to see if you exchange any signs. If I see you so much as bat your eye at them I'll plug you. You get my game now, do you?"

"Yes, señor, but—"

"But what—"

"If you are not the Gila, please, señor, who the hell—"

"I'm a witch doctor from the Kickapoos," Drury announced. "I have an effigy of the Gila in wax. All I have to do is to put pins into this effigy and your gang will burn with the torments of hell!"

The half-breed's eyes bulged so that the discolored whites showed in a terror-stricken stare.

"Santa Maria! I will lead the way to the mine which is our cache, maestro, for you are indeed greater than the Gila."

Without any more remarks Andres wheeled his horse and bolted across the cañon.

Drury followed. Close on his heels, at a distance of scarcely a furlong, the nigger and Slinkey Drigges clattered after in hot pursuit.

When the warped gallows of the mine shaft first came into view Drury knew that a critical situation was at hand. If he permitted Andres to go into the mine alone there was little chance of his again presenting himself. If he followed Andres into the cache there was a great risk involved in leaving the gelding Crater outside at the mercy of the two remaining bandits.

This latter chance, however, was the lesser one, for there was as yet no indication that the nigger or Slinkey Drigges had any doubt concerning Drury's identity. The dogged manner in which they followed him led Drury to think that they still regarded him as their master. Andres alone knew the truth, and Andres must be kept in sight.

Accordingly as they rode up to the old rickety headframe which marked the shaft's opening Drury dismounted and left Crater snubbed to a dry pine bole. With drawn gun he commanded the half-breed to precede him through the brush toward the mine shaft.

Both men crawled through the thicket which completely covered the waste. They came out into the small clearing under the gallows where a few boards, partly covered with sand, served as a barrier between the jet blackness of the mine and the open day.

The nigger and Drigges galloped up the side of the hill.

The sound of their horses' hoofs, spattering pebbles, could be distinctly heard as Drury was searching the person of the half-breed for a possible concealed knife or gun. Having satisfied himself on this point, he

ordered the Mexican to precede him into the mine.

"As long as you feel this cold muzzle against the back of your neck, Mr. Mexican, it means that you're to lead the way directly down the chute to your cache."

"It is for me to light this jack-lantern, maestro," the half-breed begged when they had crawled under the boards in to a cavern of pitch darkness. "Otherwise maybe I lose footing and fall down the shaft, past a half dozen landings, and find myself in a thousand pieces down below the sump. What good is your six-gun then, señor? It will not hurt me!"

"No, but remember the effigy in wax, reminded Drury. "Dead or alive you will feel the torture of it."

The Mexican's hand trembled visibly as he lit the wick of the little lantern. Having no desire to remain in the foul darkness any longer, Drury felt greatly relieved as the interior of the slope filled suddenly with the wagging lights and shadows.

He followed his guide deep into the bowels of the earth. As he crept along between the dank old walls the darkness closed in behind him. It was an audacious move, and one which led to consequences Drury had not bargained for.

Out in the open world, which now seemed remotely distant and insignificant, Peter Gaunt and his posse were closing in on each end of the cañon. And, what was infinitely more serious, the nigger and Slinkey Drigges, who had ridden up to the tethered horses of Drury and the Mexican, were beginning to suspect and to ask each other illuminating questions.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SHAFT.

SLINKEY DRIGGES and his negro companion arrived at the collar of the shaft a moment after Drury and his guide had entered. They rode up to the waste where the gelding was snubbed, and where the Mexican's rangy, sore-backed pinto was standing obediently, unhitched, as he had been trained.

Both men dismounted, peered into the shaft, and then turned to each other with quizzical glances.

"Do you reckon he figures on hiding in this here mine?" the negro asked.

"With the horses out in plain sight?" Slinkey Drigges shot back sarcastically.

"He's goin' in to get the swag befo' the posse gits us."

"Then I reckon we might as well wait, have a smoke, and give our cayuses a breath of air."

"I reckon we won't wait or have a smoke or nothin'," Drigges rejoined with a note in his voice which immediately arrested his companion's attention.

"Now, what the hell?"

"They's lots of hell, nigger," Slinkey replied. "If you want to know my sentiments on this here party, I'll say we got a delicate little operation to perform before we go ridin' any farther away from that thar posse. Mr. Nigger, you and I got some tall fightin' to do."

"You-all can perfo'm your own operations," the nigger rejoined. "Ah'm takin' orders from the boss-man in thar—and not from you."

"Look here, nigger, I want to ask you candid like: What do you think of this Gila of ourn—now that he's ridin' without his mask?"

"I ain't seen him too close."

"When he came flyin' out of that court room up in Desolation and bounded over for his horse, didn't you catch a good look at him?"

"No so good as I was prayin' for. He was flyin' past me too rapid. Didn't hesitate nowhere near long enough for me to paint a po'trait of him."

"And nothin' went through your mind?"

"What all are you feedin' me, Mr. Man? Nothin' ever goes through my mind. Besides, my mind was busy figurin' on how I was to git from that thar co't room door without havin' the seat of my pants singed with some hot lead."

"And as you was followin' this here Gila Monster, you didn't think of nothin'?"

"I was turnin' over in my mind somethin' he pulled off. Couldn't think of it at the time, but after it was all ended I began to chew it like a cow thinks over her

cud. It was when the Gila mounted his hoss. It 'peared to me like he pulled off somethin' a little different than he's in the habit of pullin' off. I was wonderin' about it, suh. Not serious. I ain't questionin' nothin'. No—suh!"

"Well, out with it, nigger."

"I was give to understand that the Gila always trained his hosses so's he could mount 'em from the off side. That would prevent men from rustlin' his mounts without gettin' badly kicked. But it looked to me like he mounted that there animule from the near side like every one else does."

"So you came to the conclusion that—"

"I didn't come to no conclusions—no, suh! Ah never comes to conclusions. I jess figgered he was in a mighty big hurry to git agoin', so he hopped the old hoss from any side which was the most convenient, suh."

"Look here, nigger," Slinkey Drigges said impatiently. "You're afraid to say what you know damned well. You're afraid to say that the face of this here bird we been trailin' is redder than the face of the Gila. You'd say it might be redder because of his long ride in the sun this mornin', or that it was only redder in your imagination and all that stuff. That's what you'd say. You'd be afraid to come out with the truth and admit that his teeth, his chin, his height, his seat in the saddle —everything else that we've so much as caught a glimpse of to-day—prove that he ain't the Gila, but some one else in the Gila's shoes, or rather in his hat. He's wearin' that yellow sombrero the real Gila wore last night when leadin' us on the Lingo raid."

"Don't laffin' at me, Mr. Man!" the negro rejoined. "I knew all this long befo' it hit that little lousy skull of yours, suh. I knowed all along we was ridin' a wild goose chase."

"And what's more," Slinkey Drigges put in, "if we stay here and argue, that thar posse will be gallopin' down on us from both ends of the cañon, then where'll we be at?"

"Hop to the trail, now, that's what I'm argufyin'," the negro protested. "I don't care who this two-gun gen'leman is. Hop to it, and let's go!"

"And let this fourflusher get all our money?" Drigges cried, disgustedly.

"But how about the Mex? He can protect our swag."

"Like as not this fourflusher has the Mex under his thumb. For all we know he broke him when he stopped halfway up the cañon and we saw him havin' that conflab. If the Mex is broke, he's got a fat chance fightin'! This is what I figure is happenin' down there right now; the Mex is showin' the fourflusher where the swag is, and maybe right now the Mex is gettin' his throat cut. In another moment the crook will come boltin' out of that thar mine smilin' and still pretendin' he's the Gila."

"Brain him when he comes out," the negro advised.

"Better than that, plug him."

"You plug him. He might be too quick a draw for me."

"He might be too quick for me myself out here in the open," Drigges reflected. "The safest and surest way to play this game is for you to jump on his back, pinnin' his arms so's he can't draw; then I'll meet him face to face and finish him."

"That's all right fo' you, Mistah Man, but—"

"To make it absolutely safe so's you can jump him without no danger to your own carcass, we'll go inside the mine and hide in the first air passage, and then you drop on him just as he passes."

"And where do you drop, Mr. Drigges?"

"In front of him and throw on him."

"All right, suh; but when I pins him with my arms don't you-all be out pickin' flowers."

Drury had noticed that same air passage when he entered the mine. And, as he followed the Mexican down the long gangway, he did not forget the fact that the nigger and Slinkey Drigges were outside under the gallows of the mine. He concluded that they would either wait for him or follow him into the shaft. In either case he must remember their existence, and be prepared for the eventuality that they sus-

pected him. If they suspected him at the very time when he was appropriating their booty, he realized that there would be a finish fight.

With this danger hovering over him, he followed the Mexican as far as the first overhead stope. A chute led down to the tunnel in which they were walking. Into this cavity the Mexican crawled.

Drury followed and soon found himself in the small, almost airless cave, which was all that remained of a breathing space between the highly piled waste and the roof of the stope. Choked airways and the suffocating oil lamp made this little hole untenable, except for a moment. The Mexican showed Drury two black suit cases, which he affirmed were filled with the booty of the last few raids.

Returning to the level below, by way of the chute, Drury shot off the locks of the suit cases, and examined their contents. It was a hodgepodge of worthless paper, of bills, old gold watches, and several bits of jewelry. These latter specimens had probably been hidden, Drury argued, because of the danger of trying to dispose of them too soon after the robbery. Fifty-dollar bills, he noted, were probably a part of the money recently looted from the Lingo ranch.

He had no time to assort this booty. Much of it, he knew, was valuable; much of it trash. He decided to take both of the little black satchels with him, and, accordingly, he ordered the Mexican to carry them. They would at least make a sudden attack on his part very awkward.

"We will go back to our mounts, now," Drury ordered. "Your two companions will be waiting for us, and, remember, when you see them, do not put the suit cases down. Do not speak to them. In your mind—you are to understand—I am still the Gila."

The Mexican led the way again to the end of the tunnel. It was when the first little shining aperture of the opening came into view, that Drury remembered the air passages overhead and the chances they afforded for a sudden onslaught.

An ironical thought came into his mind. The hat he was wearing had been used against him as an irrefutable argument that he was the man who had raided Marty Lingo's ranch. It would be a turn of the tables of the most soul-satisfying justice to use this very hat as a weapon against the Gila's gang.

Tom Drury called the Mexican back to him.

"You take this lantern, Mex, and give me one of the suit cases. It occurs to me that I would rather have you in the light and remain in the dark myself, while we are approaching the end of this incline." The Mexican sullenly obeyed. "And furthermore, Mr. Mex, there may be men hiding in the air passages above who, in looking directly down on me, can see little else but this sombrero of mine. If some one else was to have his head underneath this sombrero, aside from myself, it would take a big load off my mind. So you do me that little favor, Mex. And don't look upward while you're walking. Walk like a soldier—eyes front and chin in."

"Please, maestro, I will do anything you ask—I will kiss your boots, but do not make me wear your hat!"

"Always remember that I'm behind you with this six-gun and the trigger cocked," Drury replied. "If you tilt your head upward, you will keep on tilting it till it hits the floor of this tunnel."

Doggedly the Mexican obeyed. By his cautious advance toward the mouth of the tunnel, Drury knew that the outlaw had an inkling of the trap into which he was walking.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DRURY'S RETURN.

THE situation had turned in the twinkling of an eye. Drury, instead of plunging headlong into almost certain disaster, found himself possessed of the most important advantage ever desired in any sort of a combat. That was the advantage of light.

The Mexican, whom he was using as his foil, walked ahead, carrying the little circle of light with him. Drury remained far enough behind to be completely concealed

in the dark, and yet near enough to see every movement the Mexican made.

Slinkey Drigges and the nigger, on the other hand, although in the dark, could only see the top of the Mexican's hat when the latter passed underneath the air shaft. Drury had still another advantage: in following the Mexican into the mine, his eyes had dilated to the dark, and he could accurately see what was going on; whereas Drigges and the nigger, who had just slunk in out of the sunshine, found themselves in confusing darkness.

While passing under the shaft the Mexican's sensations had so overpowered him as to make him seem almost like a sleepwalker. He expected to draw fire from above. He knew that by merely tilting his head, or calling, he could warn his companions of the trick being played upon them. At the same time he expected a bullet from the black depths of the tunnel behind him.

This nightmare of conflicting fears did not last long—nor did his punishment. His death was swift. It came, not from the hand of Tom Drury, but from little Slinkey Drigges, who bided his time and played his game in a way absolutely safe—for him.

Drury saw the streak of pale red light flashing from the air shaft, heard the almost deafening crack of the gun reverberate through the tunnel, and saw Andres, the Mexican, sink to his knees.

The huge figure of the negro dropped down from the shaft opening. He blotted out the light of the outside world. At the same time the jack-lantern, which had dropped from Andres's hand, rolled and flickered out.

"It's the Mex!" the negro shouted, just as Slinkey Drigges dropped cautiously down from the opening.

Without waiting to identify the body of the man he had killed, Drigges intuitively jumped to the conclusion that Drury was behind him in the dark. He whirled and emptied his revolver into the depths of the tunnel.

The negro, awakening slowly to the danger of his situation, turned panic-stricken and scurried toward the light of day.

Drury could see every move of this game. When Slinkey fired in his direction, the shots whizzed past, ricocheting against the rocky ground of the tunnel and splintering the timbers overhead and on both sides. One shot was all Drury needed to silence this fire.

He aimed at the little glinting weapon which was belching its sharp streaks of light from Slinkey's hand. Slinkey dropped the gun, clutched his arm, and turned, stumbling toward the opening of the mine.

Drury followed, hurdling over the prostrate form of the Mexican. He dashed past Slinkey Drigges to the tunnel opening.

The negro had vaulted over the thicket-covered waste and was running for his horse. Drury shouted to him to hold up his hands.

The negro at first disobeyed, thinking that he could reach the shelter afforded by the horses. A bullet, whistling past his head, changed his mind, and he turned, holding up his huge trembling paws, pleading:

"Don't shoot, Mr. Boss-man. I ain't done nothin'. It was Slinkey fired at yuh, Mr. Boss-man! I ain't done nothin'!"

"Come back here. I've got some work for you, nigger," Drury commanded.

The negro advanced, and, after being disarmed, followed Drury to the mine opening.

"Bandage up that bird's arm," Drury said, "while I take a look at the Mex."

The negro obeyed, tearing off a strip of Slinkey's shirt.

"He's got us, nigger," Slinkey said. "But I'll tell you this. My left arm is still good—and I'm goin' to use it the first chance I git.'

"I ain't lookin' for no mo' arguments," the negro said. "From now on I'm peaceful—until this white trash gits bumped off by our chief. Wait till the chief hears of this!"

Drury kept the two men in sight as he walked into the darkness of the tunnel. He returned a moment later and ordered the negro to help Slinkey to a saddle. The black giant picked up Drigges and mounted his horse with the ease of a man carrying a child.

Drury regarded the whole episode as a

miserable little squabble that had little to do with his great purpose. The man he was after was Henry Sugg. These three henchmen of the Gila were scarcely worth the trouble of hanging.

In fact, now that his fight was over, Drury suddenly awoke to the seriousness of the situation in which he found himself. In the fight there had been shooting. One shot had been fired in the open. The sound, reverberating through the silent cañon, could be heard sharp and clear in the thin mountain air for miles. It was that shot which gave Peter Gaunt and his posse the clue by which they ultimately trailed their fugitive.

Drury looked at the southern end of the cañon and saw a small cloud of dust slowly moving toward him. To the north, at the opposite end, was another cloud coming steadily downward.

It was plain to be seen that Peter Gaunt had cast his net with skill. At the lower end of the cañon a string of riders, presently visible, completely blocked an escape. It was also obvious that Gaunt had divided his men, and a long ride back through the cañon to the upper end would undoubtedly result in meeting another group.

While debating with himself which trail would now be the safest, Drury thought of the little ghost town which had been his starting point. It occurred to him that Jennie Lee would scarcely join her grandfather's posse in its hunt. This being the case, Tom wondered what Jennie Lee would do. Would her grandfather leave her there alone? Would Henry Sugg follow with the posse, or would he take this first chance he had ever had to carry off Jennie? Would the girl be safe in riding back to the city of Cattleoe, or to the ranch of Marty Lingo, alone?

These thoughts beset Tom as he frantically tried to arrive at a definite decision regarding his flight. The only way he could satisfy himself about Jennie's safety was actually to return to the town from which he had escaped. Furthermore, the only move that Gaunt had left him was to cut up across the little range by mounting the bluffs which formed the eastern side of the cañon. The fact that he had two prisoners—and both mounted on one horse—made this move an absolute necessity.

"All right, Mr. Nigger," Drury said. "You will lead the way up those bluffs, and if you don't want the Vigilantes to catch us and shoot us on sight I advise you to pick out a fast trail."

A canter along the gradual rise at the base of the cañon's side, through patches of black sage and bearbrush, brought the fugitives to a series of steps. The horses then scrambled up a trail of lava, overlain by broken rock and volcanic cinders. This led to a dizzy ledge where the crags of sandy shales fell off to the gulch below in an almost horizontal wall of brilliantly colored, rain-painted rocks.

The steaming horses pawed their way up a still steeper rise of sand until they gained the flat ground. A mile's heavy loping across this divide brought them to the eastern slope, where, after tearing through big patches of brush, they came again within view of the little old ghost town.

Drury estimated that if he could rid himself of his prisoners, without actually giving them up, he could escape from the town on Crater, this time without giving the exhausted pursuers a chance to capture him.

He urged on the nigger with oaths and galloped at the very heels of the mount which was carrying the two prisoners. In another half hour, while his pursuers were starting on the difficult trail up the side of the cañon, he galloped down the apparently deserted main street of Desolation.

When opposite the dance hall he heard the muffled sound of a man calling for help.

He ordered his prisoners to dismount and walk before him. Then he entered the old rickety building, where, as he had expected, he found a man bound and gagged.

He replaced the revolver in his holster, and went to Marty Lingo, who had lain helpless in his bonds of rawhide romal. When the bandanna which had been gagging him was untied he turned his face to Drury and gasped, partly in astonishment, and partly from the delight of breathing freely again.

"Well, free my hands, dammit!" Marty cried.

"Why should I free your hands, Mr. Lingo—and let you put up a fight? If I have still another enemy to take care of, these two prisoners of mine might take it into their heads to start another riot."

"Then these men are prisoners?" Marty exclaimed, his mournful brown eyes bulging.

"Take a look at their holsters. You see the unbuttoned flaps? You see that fox there with the bleeding arm? They are the men who raided your ranch, Marty. Their leader is Henry Sugg—"

"I know it! I know everything. Loosen my hands and I will tell you. I'm fighting for you, Tom Drury, not for these coyotes. I know the whole truth. You are not the Gila, but Tom Drury. For God's sake, free me! This rawhide has my wrists nearly sawed off! Dammit, let me tell you everything."

Drury burst into a laugh and knelt down behind the little rancher, cutting the romals until the gnarled old hands were free.

Marty finished the job by freeing his own legs.

"Drury, you've done a good job!" he said when he got to his feet. "These men are two of the three henchmen who aided the Gila in all his dastardly jobs for the last five years."

"The third is dead," Drury announced. "He was bumped off down in the cañon while I took these two men prisoners."

"Then the gang will be cleaned out—if you get the Gila himself," Marty cried.

"You don't believe I am the Gila, according to those words?"

"Hell, no! I said I know who you are. You're Tom Drury. And you've had the orneriest trick played on you that the Gila ever played on anybody on this here range. Henry Sugg, he's the two-faced, shag-gutted crook, and I know it! I believe it! Lookee here, Tom, you and me has got a big job on our hands.

"Peter Gaunt left me here in town for to look after his gal, and I no sooner started back for the court room to get the gal than Henry Sugg steps out and sticks me up. He was masked, but I heard his voice later. I heard him talking to—"

"Where's the girl now?" Tom cried, suddenly sensing the fearful truth.

"Where is she? You're askin' me the right question thar, Tom. And I'll tell you the answer! She's with Sugg! He talked with her in that thar room next to this dance hall, and I know there was fightin'. I couldn't hear much, only one other thing just before they come out and passed by this here window.

"The damned two-gun man said he was going to take her to her grandfather's rancho. Can you beat that? Kidnaping the gal right under the very nose of me, Marty Lingo, who was set to be her chaperon! I'll smash the old double-dyed seed-wart so's he ain't fit for nothin' but tamale meat! Damned if I won't! Just let me git a horse and ride!"

"You can't get a horse and ride, Marty," Drury replied hurriedly. "You are going to stay here and watch these two men. You can chaperon 'em down to your ranch if you want. But you will be responsible for them. I am the one who is going down to the Gaunt ranch to get the Gila. Now that I have a gun, and Crater to carry me, I'm going to ride all over hell until I get Sugg face to face."

"I got a grievance of my own!" Marty objected. "I'm goin' down there to pot him!"

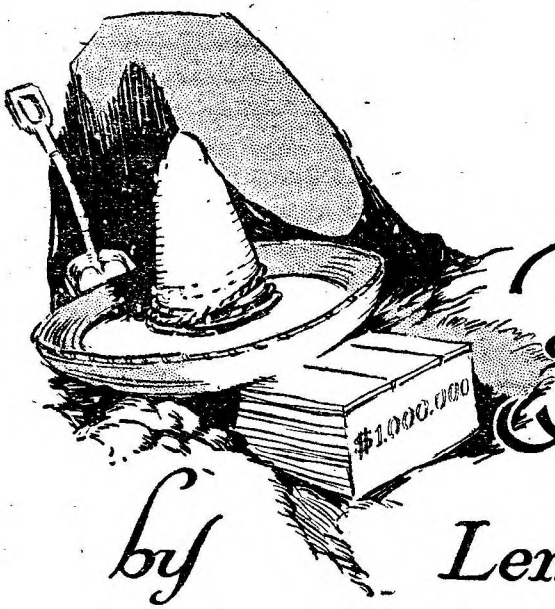
The distant clatter of hoofs broke in sharply upon the argument. Drury turned partly to the window.

"The Vigilantes are coming into town again!" he cried. "Marty, you deliver these men to them. Tell his honor the judge where I've gone. I have no time now to prove to that bunch of boneheads that I'm not the Gila. They'll be wanting to stage another trial. Tell his honor that I've gone for his granddaughter—that I'm going to get her—"

"And the Gila!" Marty shouted. "The damned shag-gutted—"

But Tom had jumped through the window. Vaulting to the back of his horse, he sped to the hills just as the Vigilantes galloped down the main street of the town.

(To be concluded NEXT WEEK.)



Boxed Boodle

by Lemuel L. DeBra

"A MILLION dollars!"

"A million dollars in your American money," declared Juan Garcia. "And eet ees mine. The gringo ees dead. I do not know how nor where he got eet. I am going to geef eet all to you. Listen."

Garcia lowered his voice so it would not carry to the other prisoners milling restlessly about in the small promenade of the San Francisco jail. Richard Q. moved closer to the dying man, but he remained silent.

Garcia continued. While an officer in the Mexican army stationed near Tia Juana he had befriended a Yankee who had fled across the border. Just why the Yankee preferred Mexico to his own country, Garcia, being an officer and a gentleman, had not inquired. The gringo died soon afterward from a neglected bullet wound. He had left a certain mysterious package. Garcia opened it. It contained a million dollars in greenbacks.

"Juan," said Richard Q. gently, "you're a bit feverish to-day, aren't you? You'd better be quiet and—"

Garcia waved a silencing hand.

"The money ees of no use to me. I am the same as dead. You listen: I knew I could not keep all that money in Mexico. My friends would stick a knife in my back and rob me. So I brought it across the border one night and came to San Francisco. I buried it."

"Why didn't you put it in a bank?"

Garcia rolled his fever-bright eyes.

"Then what would your police do to me, eh? A Mexican putting a million dollars American money in the bank! I knew I had to be ver' careful. I wanted to be far from the police. So I looked for a house. You see, a man wit' a million dollars can get married, eh?"

"Well, if he got a saving woman he might get by," smiled Dick. "But go on!"

"I found a house out by the ocean. I put the money in a box and buried it at night—in the sand—back of the house—under a little tree. Then I came downtown to eat and drink. I remember fighting—"

Garcia managed an eloquent shrug.

"What was the number of the house, Juan?"

"I forgot." Garcia's voice was growing weaker. "But eet ees on Seaview Avenue, a block and a half from the park car line—about the middle of the block—house still vacant. I had to take six months' lease."

Dick knew the location. It was a string of summer cottages, vacant during the winter, greatly in demand during summer. By this time they would all be occupied—all except the one Garcia had leased. Back of the house—a little tree.

A simple matter—if there was anything to the Mexican's story. Dick consumed half a cigarette in hesitation, and looked up

to find Garcia tendering him a key. It was an ordinary flat doorkey; but it seemed to be tangible evidence that the Mexican was telling the truth.

Dick had no sooner put the key in his pocket than Garcia appeared to regret his hasty display of confidence and generosity. Perhaps, after all, he might get well. "If I do I'll hunt you up," he half promised—and half threatened.

II.

JUST why Richard Q. Mandeville, only son of the California multimillionaire oil king, happened to be serving thirty days in jail has nothing to do with this story; besides, when a judge has six children and no automobiles, one must try to be charitable.

Richard Q. had found the world so full of a number of things that he never took any of them seriously. He looked on his "thirty days" as more or less of a lark. His fellow prisoners interested him tremendously—especially Juan Garcia. Dick had taken to the queer old Mexican the first day.

Garcia spoke something he thought was English, and Dick spoke something his college professor had assured him was Spanish. Since neither was ever quite sure what the other was saying they got along famously.

On the last day of Richard Q.'s sentence Garcia had sent for him. For a week Garcia had been very sick. A fever that baffled the prison physician seemed to have taken deadly grip on the old Mexican. He declared he was dying; that he hadn't a friend in all North America, save Dick; and that he was going to make him a present of a million dollars.

And then he told that strange tale of the wounded Yankee, the vacant house at the beach, the little tree, and the buried million. Had it not been for that door key—But that's where the girl comes in!

III.

WHEN one has been in jail thirty days one finds much to do on the first day of freedom. Dick discovered many tasks that to him appeared more important for the moment than the search for Garcia's million; and it was late the following afternoon before he turned his car off Lincoln Way into Seaview Avenue and began looking for a vacant house in the middle of the block. It was a bright afternoon—flowers everywhere, children playing in the sand, girls in summery dresses, the old ocean booming sleepily, tradesmen going about their prosaic task of delivering pies and pickles.

"And I'm out here looking for a million dollars beneath a little tree!" muttered Dick. "I ought to be back in jail!"

He drove slowly past the second block of houses. The entire block was owned by Abner Westwick, an old skinflint who, to save expenses, had every house built after the same plan and painted alike. Tenants had to watch their step to keep from straying into their neighbor's yard. About in the middle of the block was a house bearing the sign:

Select Board and Rooms
$25 per Week

A girl in a white frock sat on the porch reading a magazine. Dick passed and repassed so often he saw people were beginning to stare at him. Then he took a spin through the beach section, and came back to where the girl sat on the porch.

This was the block. There was no mistake about that. But not one of the houses was vacant. If Juan Garcia had ever leased one it had since been occupied. Now, Richard Q., like his father, was one of those rare souls who thrive on obstacles. Never before had he hunted for a million dollars beneath a little tree. He was not going to be turned back now by a boarding house with a girl on the front porch.

If the truth was in Garcia one of these houses had a little tree in the back yard with a million dollars buried in the sand beneath it. But which house? Several of them were "about in the middle of the block"—three at least.

Dick thought of the key, but with every house occupied the key was not much help.

He couldn't sneak around after dark from house to house trying the key in people's doors.

No young man just out of jail would think of such a thing!

Thoughtfully Richard Q. drove back to town. He reached his apartments and a decision at the same time.

IV.

EARLY the following day Richard Q., handbag in hand, strolled down Seaview Avenue looking for the house with the sign. It was an infernal nuisance—this idea of having every house alike. "Ought to be this one," Dick complained aloud. "No. Wrong again. Next one surely. Ah!"

A girl in a summery dress; the sunshine in her hair, and proud of it; the dahlias in her arms jealous of the roses in her cheeks. She observes young man at gate looking at her, turns slowly, strolls toward the house. A dahlia slips reluctantly from her arms to the walk.

Just so!

Richard Q. picked up the dahlia. He put his bag on the porch and doffed his hat.

"How do you do? I believe you dropped one of your begonias."

The girl laughed—a girlish, mischievous laugh. She accepted the dahlia.

"Thank you, sir; but they're not begonias. They're—sweet Williams."

Dick unleashed another smile.

"Very stupid of me, I'm sure." He sat down on the porch step. "Where—where can I find the landlady, please? You see, I saw the sign 'Select Board and Rooms.' I want to select some."

Another laugh—just like the girl: not one false note.

"Oh, very well; what can I do for you, sir?" she asked. "You are looking at the proprietor right now."

Dick took a long breath. This girl did not look a bit like the conventional landlady; but women were doing such odd things these days. Moreover, this girl at present appeared very businesslike.

She was appraising Dick very coolly and very thoroughly.

"Well," Richard Q. began uncertainly, "may I ask your rates?"

"Thirty dollars."

Thirty dollars! The sign gave the rate as twenty-five. Not that Dick cared a hang about the cost; but she said it so easily. Just like the judge had said "Thirty days."

Dick handed over the thirty, and the girl turned to a small writing table.

"What is the name, please?"

"Richard — er — that is — George E. Richards."

The girl bowed her pretty head and wrote rapidly. She tore out the receipt and handed it to Richard Q. He glanced at it, and winced.

It was made out to "Georgie Richards."

Well, two could play at that game.

Dick looked down at the signature on the receipt. "Susan Bernice Ware!" he exclaimed. "What a pretty name! What a comfortable, affectionate name!"

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Susan Bernice Ware. "Have you references?"

"Eh? References? Oh, yes. Yes, indeed, Miss Ware." Dick began fumbling through his pockets. The nerve of this landlady! "I'm afraid I left my references in my trunk, Miss Ware. You, see, they are —rather bulky."

"You may bring them later. But please do not forget. Now, Mr. Richards, where have you been the past thirty days?"

"I beg pardon?"

"I say, where have you been the past thirty days? You see, I must telephone to your last place of residence and inquire as to your character and conduct. Of course, you know that is customary."

"Oh, yes! Yes, indeed, Miss Ware. But—er—you see, I have been living in Los Angeles."

"In Los Angeles! My brother is there now. He writes that he'd rather be in jail."

"I'd rather be in Los Angeles," rejoined Dick promptly.

Susan arose. For a moment she seemed puzzled over something.

"Well," she said finally, "would you mind waiting here while I have your room prepared?"

She left without waiting for reply, and Dick registered a tremendous sigh of relief. After all, the inquisition might have been worse.

Presently Richard Q. strolled to the fence by the dahlias. For a distance of nearly thirty feet the fence was ablaze with the flowers. Then a voice—he knew at once it was Susan's—caused him to look up. He saw he stood beneath an upstairs window. To avoid being an eavesdropper he started back toward the porch; but what he heard brought him up short.

". . . . But, mamma dear, listen! I did it just for a lark. He could stay in Brother Bob's room, you know; but of course he'll leave as soon as—"

The rest was drowned in a gale of laughter, but Dick had heard enough. He stepped back and looked up at the front of the house. Nothing there. He flung a swift look at the house across the dahlia-bordered fence.

There, swinging in the breeze, was the sign, " Select Board and Rooms."

Richard Q. pursed his lips in a long-drawn whistle. He had seen the siren and had promptly forgotten the sign. Beyond the dahlias lay the boarding house—the house behind which Dick hoped to find the little tree and the hidden million.

Dick was peeved. Not because he had made a mistake; with the houses all alike, the mistake was quite a natural one. He was peeved because the girl with the laughing eyes had been laughing at him. She had known at once that he had turned into the wrong yard. How she would laugh when he confessed his mistake and passed out of the picture!

" H-m!" mused the son of the pioneer oil king. " Well, maybe!"

He went back to the porch—and sat down.

Susan returned presently. With her was a sweet-faced little woman in a dark dress softened with deft touches of old Spanish lace. Her eyes were serious but gentle. Dick liked her on sight.

" Mr. Richards—my mother."

" Mrs. Ware, I'm delighted. You have a wonderful place here. I like it already."

Mrs. Ware smiled. She started to say something, hesitated, and looked around at Susan in perplexity.

" Now, now, Mrs. Ware, don't you bother about any apologies," Dick hastened to say. " I know you're afraid the coffee is wretched, and the steak is done to death, 'n' everything. Just like my mother. She used to—"

" But, Mr. Richards, I want to explain that—"

" That you're just opening here, and everything isn't quite all you hope to make it later. Yes, I know. But it's all right with *me,* Mrs. Ware. I'll be perfectly happy just to sit here on the porch and listen to the booming of the surf and watch the budding begonias and—"

Dick broke off to look around at Susan. How stunning she was with that " Merry Christmas " look on her face!

" Don't bother with apologies, mother," said Susan. " Mr. Richards, being a man, is impatient for his luncheon."

" Very well," concluded Mrs. Ware, a bit reluctantly. " Lunch will be ready in a half hour. Mr. Richards, I'll show you to your room."

V.

THE lunch, as Dick had feared from previous experiences at doe parties, consisted of salad, sponge cake, tea, and conversation. He liked the conversation.

" We just love it out here," said Mrs. Ware. " We never grow weary of the sea."

" It's so romantic," Susan chimed in. " The charging sea, the eternal stars, the shifting sands!"

" I'd like the sand better if it didn't shift quite so often," remarked Dick soberly. " But it is romantic. Like pirates. And buried treasure. I just wonder if there isn't some vast treasure hidden somewhere in these shifting sands, eh?"

" I wouldn't be surprised," Susan's mother said quietly. " In fact, we know there is something buried beneath—"

" Mamma!"

Dick did not trust himself to look up. So they knew, eh? Could it be possible? Mrs. Ware must have had something else in mind. Still, why had Susan stopped her from telling it? Mighty queer!

Lunch over, Dick found a chance to go upstairs and make his way to the rear balcony. He had observed this balcony when Mrs. Ware showed him his room, but had no chance to explore it then. From this balcony Dick believed he could see into the back yard of the boarding house.

He found that a roll awning had been let down to shut out the morning sun; but there was no awning at either end. Dick looked into the yard back of the boarding house. Yes, there it was. A little tree!

This was progress; but as he wondered how he'd get a chance to explore the sand beneath that little tree his gaze wandered across to the next yard. And there was another!

Dick swung around and looked down into the yard adjoining the Wares on the other side. There, too, was a small tree. Half amused, half disgusted, he lifted the awning and looked down into the yard back of Mrs. Ware's cottage. There was another tree.

"Four little trees in four different yards, and all about in the middle of the block! Huh! I'll need a gang of men and a steam shovel and—"

There were voices in the hall. "Just let things run along, mamma. We'll surely get a maid to-day. And we do need a man in the house until Bob gets back."

Dick coughed warningly.

"Oh!" Mrs. Ware was pleasantly surprised. "Mr. Richards, there isn't much of a view from this part of the house, but—"

"There's plenty, I assure you," Dick smiled. "Lots of trees 'n' everything. By the way, Mrs. Ware, I'll be taking dinner downtown this evening. I may be rather late getting back."

"Well," said Mrs. Ware, "if you come back before ten o'clock we'll be at the beach; if you come much later than that we'll be asleep. You had better take this." And she handed him a key.

Dick took the key. As he thrust it into a vest pocket his fingers came into contact with another key—one which he had almost forgotten—the key Juan Garcia had given him.

Richard Q. drew out the two keys and fitted them together. They were mates!

VI.

Jail life leads one to note many things not observed ordinarily by inhabitants of the land of midnight suppers. From observations made through a certain barred window, Dick knew that the moon was due to rise that night at about nine o'clock. Accordingly, he made all his preparations and returned to the Ware cottage at exactly a quarter to nine. He tried both keys, found that either fitted, and went up to his room, assured that this was the house Garcia had leased, and behind which he had buried his million in greenbacks.

Drawing the shades carefully, Dick turned on the light and unwrapped the spade he had brought. Then he drew his cap low over his eyes—all night prowlers wear them so—and went out into the hall. Although the house was apparently deserted, he had decided he would not venture downstairs again. It would be a simple matter, he reasoned, to climb over the balcony rail and drop to the sand beneath.

On the rear porch Dick found that the awning was up. In the east a full moon was rising. He began climbing over the baluster.

Suddenly, below him, Dick heard a stealthy step—a low *swish, swish, swish.* Looking down he saw the shadowy figure of a woman. She had stepped off the walk and was looking at the sand like a girl hunting a four-leafed clover. Presently she passed into the shadows of the little tree. A low exultant exclamation floated up to the man on the balcony.

Standing on the nosing, Dick grasped one of the uprights of the baluster and leaned far out. The girl was on her knees in the sand. She was passing her hand over the sand—*searchingly.*

Of a sudden Dick felt the baluster giving. He tried to save himself; but two hundred pounds suspended on a two-inch baluster was too much. Richard Q. Mandeville struck the sand directly in front of the kneeling girl. His position on arrival at destination was more expressive than

elegant. His greeting, being entirely involuntary, was a monosyllabic aspirate. Under the circumstances no lady would take offense.

Of course the girl screamed. She sprang to her feet and was gone before Dick could speak—gone, as the novelists say—"with a wild, sobbing cry into the night!"

In the back yard of the boarding house a dog started an uproar. Somewhere a window was raised. A woman's voice shrilled above the barking: "Murder! Thieves! Murder!"

As Dick struggled to his feet, something white, lying on the sand, caught his eye. He picked it up. It was a girl's handkerchief. He thrust it in his pocket, grabbed the spade which had followed him off the balcony, ran around to the front door, and back up to his room.

There Dick examined the handkerchief. It was a dainty, half-grown thing, faintly perfumed. In one corner were the initials: "S. W."

"Susan Ware!" groaned Richard Q. "I thought so! But what does it mean? If they know about Garcia's million, why haven't they dug it up before this? Ah, to the devil with Garcia and his greenbacks! I'd rather go back to jail than frighten Miss Ware that way again. Of course she'll know it was her star boarder who fell off the porch. Wait until she sees me in the morning!"

He found her in the morning by the fence of dahlias, and handed her the handkerchief.

"I'm sorry, Miss Ware. I owe you an apology. And an explanation."

Susan took the handkerchief, looked at it, then up at Richard Q. "Yes?" The tone was cool, but it encouraged further confession.

"Of course," Dick went on lamely, "you knew it was I who fell off the back porch last night almost into your lap?"

"Oh, was it? Well! What were you doing there? Are you a porch climber?"

"I'll explain that," Dick hedged; "but I want you to know I'm sorry I frightened you."

"Very well," concluded Susan Bernice Ware nonchalantly; "the maid said nothing about the matter. I'll give her the handkerchief with your—"

"*The maid?*"

"Yes. Sarah West is her name. She came yesterday just after you left. She went to the beach with us last evening, but came back to get a wrap. She is quite a stunning girl, I admit; but you—you fell for her rather easily, didn't you?" And with that, Miss Ware turned on her French heels and went into the house.

Richard Q. registered two hundred feet of blank amazement. He returned to the porch and dropped into a chair. This was what the governor would call "striking a new gusher." That girl was the maid, eh? Rather an unusual maid! Came back after a wrap, did she? Uhuh! Went pawing around beneath that little tree; that's what she did! Good Heavens! Did every one in North America know about that hidden million?

Under the circumstances Dick could not help feeling more interest in the maid than in the breakfast. And when he saw her! It was as she stepped into the breakfast room with the coffee. Their eyes met. Dick gasped. The "maid" stopped short, stared at Dick, then turned right around and fled back to the kitchen.

Sarah West, indeed! The maid was none other than Sarah Westwick, sister of Abner Westwick, the old skinflint who owned this string of cottages. She had servants in her own home. And here she was acting as a maid in the house of the hidden million!

There was only one conclusion. In some way Abner Westwick had learned Garcia's secret. Perhaps Garcia had left papers in the house that betrayed him. Perhaps, in the two days since Dick had left jail, the Mexican had told others of his treasure. The way Miss Westwick had searched the sand beneath that little tree might have been mere coincidence; but it looked more like certain knowledge.

Back in his room again, Dick sat down by the window and waited. He felt certain that as soon as possible Miss Westwick would ask for an hour off. She would hasten to her brother, tell him that she had been recognized by Richard Q. Mandeville,

who was boarding there under an assumed name. About that same time Susan and her mother would go to the beach for their morning stroll. Once more the way would be clear.

So it happened. When Dick saw Miss Westwick turn toward the car line, and Susan and Mrs. Ware go toward the beach, he got out his spade, went downstairs, and out through the kitchen door.

On one side of the tree the sand had not been disturbed since the last rain. On the other side it showed marks of Miss Westwick's searching and Richard Q.'s fall. There Dick began digging.

Perhaps fifteen inches beneath the surface the spade struck a wooden box. It was about eighteen inches long, six by six. Dick flung the spade aside, grabbed the box, and hastened into the house.

He was in the front hall when it dawned on him that it wouldn't do to have Susan and her mother return unexpectedly and find the spade and the signs of digging. Promptly he slipped the box beneath the hall seat and hastened out to the back yard. He was patting down the last shovelful of sand when he heard footsteps on the walk.

"Mr. Mandeville! What on earth are you doing?"

Dick swung around. It was Susan and her mother!

"Say!" gasped Richard Q. "What did you call me?"

Susan made a gesture of annoyance. "I didn't intend to give it away," she smiled; "but I've known you all the time. I saw your picture in the papers—about thirty days ago. And now, sir," she went on with mock gravity, "what does this mean? You—an ex-convict—coming here under an assumed name, and surreptitiously digging holes in our back yard."

"I'll tell you, Miss Ware, of course," Dick managed to reply. "Been wanting to tell you all the time. I'll do better. I'll give you half of it. Come on!"

He led the way to the front hall, and reached beneath the hall seat.

The box was gone!

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Susan. "Did you dig up a box? If you did, I'll thank you to put it back. I buried that box there myself. It contains my poor—little—dead—canary."

Richard Q. sat down.

"And if any one has taken that box from where you put it, it was Miss West. I saw her hurrying down the street with a package under her arm."

"You did?" Dick jumped up. "Aha! She came back after something, saw me hide the box, waited until I had gone to the back yard again, then stole the box and skipped. She thinks she's got a million dollars and it's only—"

"Say!" cried Susan, looking around at her mother as though for protection, "are you and Miss West crazy?"

Suddenly Dick broke off laughing. He grabbed his spade. "Come on!" he cried. "Back to the trenches!" He hastened out to the back yard again and began tearing up the sand on the opposite side of the tree.

He was not long uncovering a box. This one was the size of a full-grown suit case. He carried it into the kitchen, laid it on the table, and broke it open.

Mrs. Ware and Susan were too stunned for speech—almost. The box was packed with bills of large denomination, all tied in neat bundles.

The doorbell jangled sharply. Mrs. Ware answered, and returned with two men, one of whom Dick recognized as Abner Westwick. Old Westwick looked at the box of greenbacks, and nearly fainted. Then he introduced his companion: "Mr. Levers, of the Secret Service."

The officer fixed a suspicious eye on Richard Q. Then he spied Juan Garcia's million.

"Aha!" he cried. "At last I've got it!"

"So you knew about it, too!" exclaimed Dick, stepping between Levers and the old Mexican's million. "Well, you're too late. I was in the garden this morning planting onions and I found it."

"I don't think you want it," grinned Levers. "That's all counterfeit. Wait a minute!" the Secret Service operative went on, raising a hand for silence. "You see, we've been on the trail of this for months. It was made in the East. We got the whole mob except one. He skipped to Mexico with this stuff, and died. A Mex-

ican brought it here, then vanished. When he died night before last, in jail, we located him. At the same time we located the carman who recalled the Mexican with the suit case. A canvas of the beach district indicated that the man probably leased a house from Mr. Westwick. I found Mr. Westwick reading the newspaper account that came out on Garcia's death; but Mr. Westwick couldn't recall the matter until I told him the money was all counterfeit, a trifling detail we had purposely omitted in the news story. Then he suddenly recalled everything. So, we're at the end of the chase. I'll take this 'queer' and—"

"Take it!" laughed Richard Q. "This has been a queer proposition right from the get-away."

VII.

LATER that evening, Susan, sitting on the front porch, gazing pensively at the precise spot where Richard Q. Mandeville, *alias* Georgie Richards, had passed from view down the street, heard a strange call. It came from somewhere about the fence of dahlias. She stepped quickly to the edge of the porch and looked, and her obstreperous little heart nearly knocked her off the porch.

There, by the fence, was Richard Q. With both hands he had parted the dahlias so he could look between them at Susan. And the dahlias in all their glory were no brighter than Richard Q.'s face. "Look!" Dick pointed to the sign that swung in the breeze: "Select Board and Rooms." "I'm one of the select now, Miss Ware. Say, going to the beach this evening?"

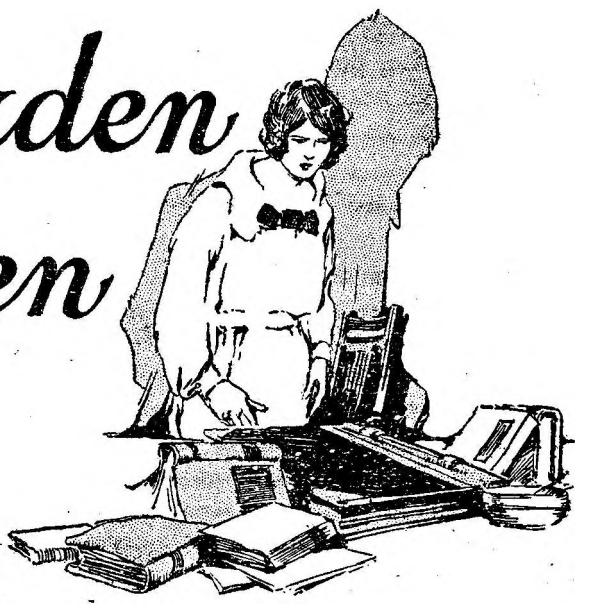
"Well, perhaps." Susan was biting her pretty lips shamefully. "But why are you staying? That treasure—"

"You said it!" Dick broke in. "You see, Miss Westwick got the dead canary, the Secret Service man got that 'queer' million, while I—I'm going to stick around until I get *the treasure*. Know what I mean?"

The Garden of Eden

Part VI

by Max Brand



Author of "The Untamed," "Trailin'," "The Seventh Man," "Black Jack," etc.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE TRIUMPH.

DAVID watched them go, and while his back was turned a fierce, soft dialogue passed between Ruth Manning and Ben Connor.

"Are you a man?" she asked him, through her set teeth. "Are you going to let that beautiful little thing die?"

"I'd rather see the cold-hearted fool die in place of Timeh. But what can we do? Nothing. Just smile in his face."

"I hate him!" she exclaimed.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 15.

"If you hate him, then use him. Will you?"

"If I can make him follow me, tease him to come, make him think I love him, I'll do it. I'd do anything to torture him."

"I told you he was a savage."

"You were right, Ben. A fiend—not a man! Oh, thank Heavens that I see through him."

Anger gave her color and banished her tears. And when David turned he found what seemed a picture of pleasure. It was infinitely grateful to him. If he had searched and studied for the words he could not have found anything to embitter her more than his first speech.

"And what do you think of the justice of David?" he asked, coming to them.

She could not speak; luckily Connor stepped in and filled the gap of awkward silence.

"A very fine thing to have done, Brother David," he said. "Do you know what I thought of when I heard you talk?"

"Of what?" said David, composing his face to receive the compliment. At that Ruth turned suddenly away, for she dared not trust her eyes, and the hatred which burned in them.

"I thought of the old story of Abraham and Isaac. You were offering up something as dear to you as a child, almost, to the law of the Garden of Eden."

"It is true," said David complacently. "But when the flesh is diseased it must be burned away."

He called to Ruth: "And you, Ruth?"

This childish seeking after compliments made her smile, and naturally he misjudged the smile.

"I think with Benjamin," she said softly.

"Yet my ways in the Garden must seem strange to you," went on David, expanding in the warmth of his own sense of virtue. "But you will grow accustomed to them, I know."

The opening was patent. She was beginning to nod her acquiescence when Connor, in alarm, tapped on the table, once and again in swift telegraphy: "No! No!"

The faint smile went out on her face.

"No," she said to David.

The master of the Garden turned a glance of impatience and suspicion upon the gambler, but Connor carefully made his face a blank. He continued to drum idly on the edge of the table, and the idle drumming was spelling to the girl's quick ear: "Out!"

"You cannot stay?" murmured David.

She drank in his stunned expression. It was like music to her.

"Would you," she said, "be happy away from the Garden, and the horses and your servants? No more am I happy away from my home."

"You are not happy with us?" muttered David. "You are not happy?"

"Could you be away from the Garden?"

"But that is different. The Garden was made by four wise men."

"By five wise men," said the girl. "For you are the fifth."

He was so blind that he did not perceive the irony.

"And therefore," he said, "the Garden is all that the heart should desire. John and Matthew and Luke and Paul made it to fill that purpose."

"But how do you know they succeeded? You have not seen the world beyond the mountains."

"It is full of deceit, hard hearts, cruelty, and cunning."

"It is full of my dear friends, David!"

She thought of the colt and the mare and Elijah; and it became suddenly easy to lure and deceive this implacable judge of others. She touched the arm of the master lightly with her finger tips and smiled.

"Come with me, and see my world!"

"The law which the four made for me—I must not leave!"

"Was it wrong to let me enter?"

"You have made me happy," he argued slowly. "You have made me happier than I was before. And surely I could not have been made happy by that which is wrong. No, it was right to bring you into the valley. The moment I looked at you I knew that it was right."

"Then, will it be wrong to go out with me? You need not stay! But see what lies beyond the mountains before you judge it!"

He shook his head.

"Are you afraid? It will not harm you."

He flushed at that. And then began to walk up and down across the patio. She saw Connor white with anxiety, but about Connor and his affairs she had little concern at this moment. She felt only a cruel pleasure in her control over this man, half savage and half child. Now he stopped abruptly before her.

"If the world, after I see it, still displeases me, when I return, will you come with me, Ruth? Will you come back to the Garden of Eden?"

In the distance Ben Connor was gesturing desperately to make her say yes. But she could not resist a pause—a pause in which torment showed on the face of David. And then, deliberately, she made her eyes soften—made her lips smile.

"Yes, David, I will come back!"

He leaned a little toward her, then straightened with a shudder and crossed the patio to the Room of Silence. Behind that door he disappeared, and left Connor and the girl alone. The gambler threw down his arms as if abandoning a burden.

"Why in the name of God did you let him leave you?" he groaned. "Why? Why? Why?"

"He's going to come," asserted Ruth.

"Never in a thousand years. The fool will talk to his dummy god in yonder and come out with one of his iced looks and talk about 'judgment'! Bah!"

"He'll come."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because—I know."

"You should have waited — to-morrow you could have done it, maybe, but to-day is too soon."

"Listen to me, Ben. I know him. I know his childish, greedy mind. He wants me just as much as he wants his own way. It's partly because I'm new to him, being a woman. It's chiefly because I'm the first thing he's ever met that won't do what he wants. He's going to try to stay with me until he bends me." She flushed with angry excitement.

"It's playing with fire, Ruth. I know you're clever, but—"

"You don't know how clever, but I'm beginning to guess what I can do. I've lost all feeling about that cruel barbarian, Ben. That poor little harmless, pretty colt—oh, I want to make David Eden burn for that! And I can do it. I'm going to wind him around my finger. I've thought of ways while I stood looking at him just now. I know how I can smile at him, and use my eyes, and woo him on, and pretend to be just about to yield and come back with him—then grow cold the next minute and give him his work to do over again. I'm going to make him crawl on his knees in the dust. I'm going to make a fool of him before people. I'm going to make him sign over his horses to us to keep them out of his vicious power. And I can do it—I hate him so that I know I can make him really love me. Oh, I know he doesn't really love me now. I know you're right about him. He simply wants me as he'd want another horse. I'll change him. I'll break him. When he's broken I'm going to laugh in his face—and tell him—to remember Timeh!"

"Ruth!" gasped Connor.

He looked guiltily around, and when he was sure no one was within reach of her voice, he glanced back with admiration.

"By the Lord, Ruth, who'd ever have guessed at all this fire in you? Why, you're a wonder. And I think you can do it. If you can only get him out of the infernal Garden. That's the sticking point! We make or break in the next ten minutes!"

But he had hardly finished speaking before David of Eden came out of the Room of Silence, and with the first glance at his face they knew that the victory was theirs. David of Eden would come with them into the world!

"I have heard the Voice," he said, "and it is just and proper for me to go. In the morning, Ruth, we shall start!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE LAST DAY.

NIGHT came as a blessing to Ruth, for the scenes of the early day had exhausted her. At the very moment when David succumbed to her domination,

her own strength began to fail. As for Connor, it was another story. The great dream which had come to him in far away Lukin, when he watched the little gray gelding win the horse race, was now verging toward a reality. The concrete accomplishment was at hand. Once in the world it was easy to see that David would become clay, molded by the touch of clever Ruth Manning, and then—it would be simply a matter of collecting the millions as they rolled in.

But Ruth was tired. Only one thing sustained her, and that was the burning eagerness to humble this proud and selfish David of Eden. When she thought how many times she had been on the verge of open admiration and sympathy with the man, she trembled and grew cold. But through the fate of poor little Timeh, she thanked Heaven that her eyes had be n opened.

She went to her room shortly after dinner, and she slept heavily until the first grayness of the morning. Once awake, in spite of the early hour, she could not sleep again, so she dressed and went into the patio. Connor was already there, pacing restlessly. He had been up all night, he told her, turning over possibilities.

"It seems as though everything has worked out too much according to schedule," he said. "There'll be a break. Something will happen and smash everything!"

"Nothing will happen," she assured him calmly.

He took her hand in his hot fingers.

"Partner"—he began, and then stopped as though he feared to let himself go on.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"On his mountain, waiting for the sun, I guess. He told the black-faces a while ago that he was leaving to-day. Great excitement. They're all chattering about it down in the servants' house."

"Is no one here?"

"Not a soul, I guess."

"Then—we're going into that Room of Silence!"

"Take that chance now? Never in the world! Why, Ruth, if he saw us in there, or guessed we'd been there, he'd probably murder us both. You know how gentle he is when he gets well started?"

"But how will he know? No one is here, and David won't be back from the mountain for a long time if he waits for the sun."

"Just stop thinking about it, Ruth."

"I'll never stop as long as I live, unless I see it. I've dreamed steadily about that room all night."

"Go alone, then, and I'll stay here."

She went resolutely across the patio, and Connor, following with an exclamation, caught her arm roughly at the door.

"You aren't serious?"

"Deadly serious!"

The glitter of her dark eyes convinced him more than words.

"Then we'll go together. But make it short!"

They swept the patio with conscience-stricken glances, and then opened the door. As they did so, the ugly face of Joseph appeared at the entrance to the patio, looked and hastily was withdrawn.

"This is like a woman," muttered Connor, as they closed the door with guilty softness behind them. "Risk her life for a secret that isn't worth a tinker's damn!"

For the room was almost empty, and what was in it was the simplest of the simple. There was a roughly made table in the center. Five chairs stood about it. On the table was a book, and the seven articles made up the entire furnishings. Connor was surprised to see tears in the eyes of Ruth.

"Don't you see?" she murmured in reply to his exclamation. "The four chairs for the four dead men when David sits down in his own place?"

"Well, what of that?"

"What's in the book?"

"Are you going to wait to see that?"

"Open the door a little, Ben, and then we can hear if any one comes near."

He obeyed and came back, grumbling. "We can hear every one except David. That step of his wouldn't break eggs."

He found the girl already poring over the first page of the old book, on which there was writing in a delicate hand.

She read aloud: "The story of the Garden of Eden, who made it and why it was made. Told without error by Matthew."

"Hot stuff!" chuckled Connor. "We got a little time before the sun comes up. But it's getting red in the east. Let's hear some more."

There was nothing imposing about the book. It was a ledger with half-leather binding such as storekeepers use for accounts. Time had yellowed the edges of the paper and the ink was dulled. She read:

"In the beginning there was a man whose name was John."

"Sounds like the start of the Bible," grinned Connor. "Shoot ahead and let's get at the real dope."

"Hush!"

Without raising her eyes, she brushed aside the hand of Connor which had fallen on the side of the ledger. Her own took its place, ready to turn the page.

"In the beginning there was a man whose name was John. The Lord looked upon John and saw his sins. He struck John therefor. First He took two daughters from John, but still the man was blind and did not read the writing of his Maker. And God struck down the eldest son of John, and John sorrowed, but did not understand. Thereat, all in a day, the Lord took from John his wife and his lands and his goods, which were many and rich.

"Then John looked about him, and lo! he was alone.

"In the streets his friends forgot him and saw not his passing. The sound of his own footfall was lonely in his house, and he was left alone with his sins.

"So he knew that it was the hand of God which struck him, and he heard a voice which said in the night to him: 'O John, ye who have been too much with the world must leave it and go into the wilderness.'

"Then the heart of John smote him and he prayed God to send him not out alone, and God relented and told him to go forth and take with him three simple men.

"So John on the next morning called to his negro, a slave who was all that remained in his hands.

"'Abraham,' he said, 'you who were a slave are free.'

"Then he went into the road and walked all the day until his feet bled. He rested by the side of the road and one came who kneeled before him and washed his feet, and John saw that it was Abraham. And Abraham said: 'I was born into your service and I can only die out of it.'

"They went on together until they came to three robbers fighting with one strong man, and John helped this man and drove away the robbers.

"Then the tall man began to laugh. 'They would have robbed me because I was once rich,' he said, 'but another thief had already plundered me, and they have gotten only broken heads for their industry.' Then John was sorry for the fortune that was stolen.

"'Not I,' said the tall man, 'but I am sorry for the brother I lost with the money.' Then he told them how his own brother had cheated him. 'But,' he said, 'there is only one way to beat the devil, and that is to laugh at him.'

"Now John saw this was a good man, so he opened his heart to Luke, which was the name of him who had been robbed. Then Luke fell in with the two and went on with them.

"They came to a city filled with plague so that the dead were buried by the dying and the dog howled over his master in the street; the son fled from the father and the mother left her child. They found one man who tended the sick out of charity and the labor was too great for even his broad shoulders. He had a broad, ugly face, but in his eye was a clear fire.

"'Brother, what is your name?' said John, and the man answered that he was called Paul, and begged them for the sweet mercy of Christ to aid him in his labors.

"But John said: 'Rise, Paul, and follow me.'

"And Paul said: 'How can I follow the living when the dying call to me?'

"But John said: 'Nevertheless, leave them, for these are carrion, but your soul in which is life eternal is worth all these and far more.'

"Then Paul felt the power of John and followed him and took, also, his gray horses which were unlike others, and of his servants those who would follow him for love, and in wagons he put much wealth.

"So they all rode on as a mighty caravan until they came, at the side of the road, to a youth lying in the meadow with his hands behind his head whistling, and a bird hovering above him repeated the same note. They spoke to him and he told them that he was an outcast because he would not labor.

"'The world is too pleasant to work in,' he said, and whistled again, and the bird above him made answer.

"Then John said: 'Here is a soul worth all of ours. Rise, brother, and come with us.'

"So Matthew rose and followed him, and he was the third and last man to join John, who was the beginning.

"Then they came to a valley set about with walls and with a pleasant river running through it, and here they entered and called it the Garden of Eden because in it men should be pure of heart once more. And they built their houses with labor and lived in quiet and the horses multiplied and the Garden blossomed under their hands."

Here Ruth marked her place with her finger while she wiped her eyes.

"Do you mean to say this babble is getting you?" growled Ben Connor.

"Please!" she whispered. "Don't you see that it's beautiful?"

And she returned to the book.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE ROOM OF SILENCE.

"THEN John sickened and said: 'Bring me into the room of silence.' So they brought him to the place where they sat each day to converse with God in the holy stillness and hear His voice.

"Then John said: 'I am about to depart from among you, and before my going I put this command on you that you find in the world a male infant too young to know its father or mother, or without father and mother living. Rear that child to manhood in the valley, for even as I depart so will you all do, and the Garden of Eden will be left tenantless.'

"So when John was dead Matthew went forth and found a male child and brought him to the valley and the two said: 'Where was the child found and what is its name?' And Matthew said: 'It was found in the place to which God led me and its name hereafter shall be David.'

"So peace was on the valley, and David grew tall and strong. Then Luke died, and Paul died in a drift of snow and Matthew grew very old and wrote these words for the eye of David."

The smooth running, finely made letters come to an end, the narrative was taken up in fresher ink and in a bold, heavy hand of large characters.

"One day Matthew called for David and said: 'My hands are cold, whereby I know I am about to die. As I lay last night with death for a bedfellow thoughts came to me, which are these: We have been brother and father and son to one another. But do not grieve that I am gone. I inherit a place of peace, but you shall come to torment unless you find a woman in the world and bring her here to bear children to you and be your wife.'

"Then David groaned in his heart and he said: 'How shall I know her when I find her?'

"And Matthew said: 'By her simplicity.'

"And David said: 'There may be many who are simple.'

"And Matthew said: 'I have never known such a woman. But when you see her your heart will rise up and claim her. Therefore, within five years, before you are grown too old, go out and find this woman and wed her.'

"And on that day Matthew died, and a great anguish came to David. The days passed heavily. And for five years he has waited."

There was another interval of blank paper, and then the pen had been taken up anew, hurriedly, and driven with such force and haste that it tore the paper-surface.

"The woman is here!"

Her fingers stiffened about the edges of the book. Raising her head, she looked out through the little window and saw the tree tops down the hillside brightening against the red of the dawn. But Connor could not see her face. He only noted the place

at which she had stopped, and now he began to laugh.

"Can you beat that? That poor dub!"

She turned to him, slowly, a face so full of mute anguish that the gambler stopped his laughter to gape at her. Was she taking this seriously? Was this the Bluebeard's chamber which was to ruin all his work?

Not that he perceived what was going on in her mind, but her expression made him aware, all at once, of the morning-quiet. Far down the valley a horse neighed and a bird swooping past the window cast in on them one thrilling phrase of music. And Connor saw the girl change under his very eye. She was looking straight at him without seeing his face and into whatever distance her glance went he felt that he could not follow her. Here at the very threshold of success the old ledger was proving a more dangerous enemy than David himself. Connor fumbled for words, the Open Sesame which would let in the common sense of the everyday world upon the girl. But the very fear of that crisis kept him dumb. He glanced from the pale hand on the ledger to her face, and it seemed to him that beauty had fallen upon her out of the book.

"The woman is here! God has sent her!"

At that she cried out faintly, her voice trembling with self-scorn: "God has sent me—me!"

"The heart of David stood up and beat in his throat when he saw her," went on the rough, strong writing. "She passed the gate. Every step she took was into the soul of David. As I went beside her the trees grew taller and the sky was more blue.

"She has passed the gate. She is here. She is mine!

"What am I that she should be mine? God has sent her to show me that my strength is clumsy. I have no words to fit her. When I look into her eyes I see her soul; my vision leaps from star to star, a great distance, and I am filled with humility. O Father in Heaven, having led her to my hand, teach me to give her happiness, to pour her spirit full of content."

She closed the book reverently and pressed her hands against her face. He heard her murmuring: "What have I done? God forgive me!"

Connor grew angry. It was no time for trifling.

He touched her arm: "Come on out of this, Ruth. If you're going to get religion, try it later."

At that she flung away and faced him, and what he saw was a revelation of angry scorn.

"Don't touch me," she stammered at him. "You cheat! Is that the barbarian you were telling me about? Is that the cruel, selfish fool you tried to make me think was David of Eden?"

His own weapons were turning against him, but he retained his self-control.

"I won't listen to you, Ruth. It's this hush-stuff that's got you. It's this infernal room. It makes you feel that the fathead has actually got the dope from God."

"How do you know that God hasn't come to him here? At least, he's had the courage and the faith to believe it. What faith have we? I know your heaven, Ben Connor. It's paved with dollar bills. And mine, too. We've come sneaking in here like cowardly thieves. Oh, I hate myself, I loathe myself. I've stolen his heart, and what have I to give him in exchange? I'm not even worthy to love him! Barbarian? He's so far greater and finer than we are that we aren't worthy to look in his face!"

"By the Lord!" groaned Connor. "Are you double-crossing me?"

"Could I do anything better? Who tempted me like a devil and brought me here? Who taught me to play the miserable game with David? You, you, you!"

Perspiration was streaming down the white face of Connor.

"Try to give me a chance and listen one minute, Ruth. But for God's sake don't fly off the handle and smash everything when we're next door to winning. Maybe I've done wrong. I don't see how. I've tried to give this David a chance to be happy the way any other man would want to be happy. Now you turn on me because he's written some high-flying chatter in a book!"

"Because I thought he was a selfish

sham, and now I see that he's real. He's humbled himself to me—to me! I'm not worthy to touch his feet! And you—"

"Maybe I'm rotten. I don't say I'm all I should be, but half of what I've done has been for you. The minute I saw you at that key in Lukin I knew I wanted you. I've gone on wanting you ever since. It's the first time in my life—but I love you, Ruth. Give me one more chance. Put this thing through and I'll turn over the rest of my life to fixing you up so's you'll be happy."

She watched him for a moment incredulously; then she broke into hysterical laughter.

"If you loved me could you have made me do what I've done? Love? You? But I know what real love is. It's written into that book. I've heard him talk. I'm full of his voice, of his face.

"It's the only fine thing about me. For the rest, we're shams, both of us—cheats—crooked—small, sneaking cheats!"

She stopped with a cry of alarm; the door behind her stood open and in the entrance was David of Eden. In the background was the ugly, grinning face of Joseph. This was his revenge.

Connor made one desperate effort to smile, but the effort failed wretchedly. Neither of them could look at David; they could only steal glances at one another and see their guilt.

"David, my brother—" began the gambler heavily.

But the voice of the master broke in: "Oh Abraham, Abraham, would to God that I had listened!"

He stood to one side, and made a sweeping gesture.

"Come out, and bring the woman."

They shrank past him and stood blinking in the light of the newly risen sun. Joseph was hugging himself with the cold and his mute delight. The master closed the door and faced them again.

"Even in the Room of Silence!" he said slowly. "Was it not enough to bring sin into the Garden? But you have carried it even into the holy place!"

Connor found his tongue. The fallen head of Ruth told him that there was no help to be looked for from her, and the crisis forced him into a certain boisterous glibness of speech.

"Sin, Brother David? What sin? To be sure, Ruth was too curious. She went into the Room of Silence, but as soon as I knew she was there I went to fetch her, when—"

He had even cast out one arm in a gesture of easy persuasion, and now it was caught at the wrist in a grip that burned through the flesh to the bones. Another hand clutched his coat at the throat. He was lifted and flung back against the wall by a strength like that of a madman, or a wild animal. One convulsive effort showed him his helplessness, and he cried out more in horror than fear. Another cry answered him, and Ruth strove to press in between, tearing futilely at the arms of David.

A moment later Connor was miraculously freed. He found David a long pace away and Ruth before him, her arms flung out to give him shelter while she faced the master of the garden.

"He is saved," said David, "and you are free. Your love has ransomed him. What price has he paid to win you so that you will even risk death for him?"

"Oh, David," sobbed the girl, "don't you see I only came between you to keep you from murder? Because he isn't worth it!"

But the master of the Garden was laughing in a way that made Connor look about for a weapon and shrink because he found none; only the greedy eyes of Joseph, close by. David had come again close to the girl; he even took both her hands in one of his and slipped his arm about her. To Connor his self-control now seemed more terrible than that one outbreak of murdering passion.

"Still lies?" said David. "Still lies to me? Beautiful Ruth—never more beautiful than now, even when you lied to me with your eyes and your smiles and your promises! The man is nothing. He came like a snake to me, and his life is no more worth than the life of a snake. Let him live, let him die; it is no matter. But you, Ruth! I am not even angered. I see you already from a great distance, a beautiful, evil thing that has been so close to me.

For you have been closer to me than you are now that my arm is around you, touching you for the last time, holding your warmth and your tender body, keeping both your hands, which are smaller and softer than the hands of a child. But mighty hands, nevertheless.

"They have held the heart of David, and they have almost thrown his soul into eternal hellfire. Yet you have been closer to me than you are now. You have been in my heart of hearts. And I take you from it sadly—with regret, for the sin of loving you has been sweet."

She had been sobbing softly all this time, but now she mastered herself long enough to draw back a little, taking his hands with a desperate eagerness, as though they gave her a hold upon his mind.

"Give me one minute to speak out what I have to say. Will you give me one half minute, David?"

His glance rose past her, higher, until it was fixed on the east, and as he stood there with his head far back Connor guessed for the first time at the struggle which was going on within him. The girl pressed closer to him, drawing his hands down as though she would make him stoop to her.

"Look at me, David!"

"I see your face clearly."

"Still, look at me for the one last time."

"I dare not, Ruth!"

"But will you believe me?"

"I shall try. But I am glad to hear your voice, for the last time."

"I've come to you like a cheat, David, and I've tried to win you in order to steal the horses away, but I've stayed long enough to see the truth.

"If everything in the valley were offered me—the horses and the men—and everything outside of the valley, without you, I'd throw them away. I don't want them. Oh, if prayers could make you believe, you'd believe me now; because I'm praying to you, David.

"You love me, David. I can feel you trembling, and I love you more than I ever dreamed it was possible to love. Let me come back to you. I don't want the world or anything that's in it. I only want you, David—I only want you! Will you believe me?"

And Connor saw David of Eden sway with the violence of his struggle.

But he murmured at length, as one in wonder:

"How you are rooted in me, Ruth! How you are wound into my life, so that it is like tearing out my heart to part from you. But the God of the Garden and John and Matthew has given me strength." He stepped back from her.

"You are free to go, but if you return the doom against you is death like that of any wild beast that steals down the cliffs to kill in my fields. Begone, and let me see your face no more. Joseph, take them to the gate."

And he turned his back with a slowness which made his resolution the more unmistakable.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONNOR MAKES A LAST STAND.

IT was, unquestionably, a tempting of Providence, but Connor was almost past caring. Far off he heard the neighing of an Eden Gray; Ruth, with her bowed head and face covered in her hands, was before him, sobbing; and all that he had come so near to winning and yet had lost rushed upon the mind of the gambler. He hardly cared now whether he lived or died. He called to the master of the Garden, and David whirled on him with a livid face. Connor walked into the reach of the lion.

"I've made my play," he said through his teeth, "and I don't holler because I've lost the big stakes. Now I'm going to give you something to show that I'm not a piker—some free advice, Dave!"

"O man of many lies," said David. "Peace! For when I hear you there is a great will come on me to take you by the throat and hear your life go out with a rattle."

"A minute ago," said Connor coolly enough, "I was scared, and I admit it, but I'm past that stage. I've lost too much to care, and now you're going to hear me out to the last damned word!"

"God of Paul and Matthew," said David, his voice broken with rage, "let temptation be far from me!"

"You can take it standing or sitting," said Connor, "and be damned to you!"

The blind fury sent David a long step nearer, but he checked himself even as one hand rose toward Connor.

"It is the will of God that you live to be punished hereafter."

"No matter about the future. I'm chattering in the present. I'm going to come clean, not because I'm afraid of you, but because I'm going to clear up the girl. The old black-face, Abe, had the cold dope, well enough. I came to crook you out of a horse, Dave, my boy, and I did it. But after I'd got away with the goods I tried to play hog, and I came back for the rest of the horses."

He paused; but David showed no emotion.

"You take the punishment very well," admitted Connor. "There's a touch of sporting blood in you, but the trouble is that the good in you has never had a fair chance to come to the top. I came back, and I brought Ruth with me.

"I'll tell you about her. She's meant to be an honest-to-God woman—the kind that keeps men clean—she's meant for the big-time stuff. And where did I find her? In a jay town punching a telegraph key. It was all wrong.

"She was made to spend a hundred thousand a year. Everything that money buys means a lot to her. I saw that right away. I liked her. I did more than like her; I loved her. That makes you flinch under the whip, does it? I don't say I'm worthy of her, but I'm as near to her as you are.

"I admit I played a rotten part. I went to this girl, all starved the way she was for the velvet touch. I laid my proposition before her. She was to come up here and bamboozle you. She was to knock your eye out and get you clear of the valley with the horses. Then I was going to run those horses on the tracks and make a barrel of coin for all of us.

"You'd think she'd take on a scheme like that right away; but she didn't. She fought to keep from going crooked until I showed her it was as much to your advantage as it was to ours. Then she decided to come, and she came. I worked my stall and she worked hers, and she got into the valley.

"But this voice of yours in the Room of Silence—why didn't it put you wise to my game? Well, David, I'll tell you why. The voice is the bunk. It's your own thoughts. It's your own hunches. The god you've been worshiping up here is yourself, and in the end you're going to pay hell for doing it.

"Well, here's the girl in the Garden, and everything going smooth. We have you, and she's about to take you out and show you how to be happy in the world. But then she has to go into your secret room. That's the woman of it. You blame her? Why, you infernal blockhead, you've been making love to her like God Almighty speaking out of a cloud of fire! How could she hear your line of chatter without wanting to find out the secrets that made you the nut you are?

"Well, we went in, and we found out. We found out what? Enough to make the girl see that you're 'noble,' as she calls it. Enough to make me see that you're a simp. You've been chasing bubbles all your life. You're all wrong from the first.

"Those first four birds who started the Garden, who were they? There was John, a rich fellow who'd hit the high spots, had his life messed up, and was ready to quit. He'd lived enough. Then there was Luke, a gent who'd been double-crossed and was sore at the world on general principles.

"Paul would have been a full-sized saint in the old days. He was never meant to live the way other men have to live. And finally there's a guy who lies in the grass and whistles to a bird—Matthew. A poet—and all poets are nuts.

"Well, all those fellows were tired of the world—fed up with it. Boil them down, and they come to this: they thought more about the welfare of their souls than they did about the world. Was that square? It wasn't! They left the mothers and fathers, the brothers and sisters, the friends, everything that had brought them into the

world and raised 'em. They go off to take care of themselves.

"That wasn't bad enough for 'em—they had to go out and pluck you and bring you up with the same rotten hunches. Davie, my boy, d'you think a man is made to live by himself?

"You haven't got fed up with the world; you're no retired high liver; you haven't had a chance to get double-crossed more than once; you're not a crazy poet; and you're a hell of a long ways from being a martyr.

"I'll tell you what you are. You're a certain number of pounds of husky muscle and bone going to waste up here in the mountains. You've been alone so much that you've got to thinking that your own hunches come from God, and that 'd spoil any man.

"Live alone? Bah! You've had more concentrated since Ruth came into this valley than you've ever had before or you'll ever have again.

"Right now you're breaking your heart to take her in your arms and tell her to stop crying, but your pride won't let you.

"You tried to make yourself a mystery with your room of silence and all that bunk. But no woman can stand a mystery. They all got to read their husband's letters. You try to bluff her with a lot of fancy words and partly scare her. It's fear that sent the four men up here in the first place—fear of the world.

"And they've lived by fear. They scared a lot of poor black-faces into coming with them for the sake of their souls, they said. And they kept them here the same way. And they've kept you here by telling you that you'd be damned if you went over the mountains.

"And you still keep the negroes here the same way. Do you think they stay because they love you? Give them a chance and see if they won't pack up and beat it for their old homes.

"Now, show me that you're a man and not a fatheaded bluff. Be a man and admit that what you call the Voice is just your pride. Be a man and take that girl in your arms and tell her you love her. I've made a mess of things; I've ruined her life, and I want to see you give her a chance to be happy.

"Because she's not the kind to love more than one man if she lives to be a thousand. Now, David Eden, step out and give yourself a chance!"

It had been a gallant last stand on the part of Connor. But he was beaten before he finished, and he knew it.

"Are you done?" said David.

"I'm through, fast enough. It's up to you!"

"Joseph, take the man and his woman out of the Garden of Eden."

The last thing that Connor ever saw of David Eden was his back as he closed the door of the Room of Silence upon himself. The gambler went to Ruth. She was dry-eyed by this time, and there was a peculiar blankness in her expression that went to his heart.

Secretly he had hoped that his harangue to David would also be a harangue to the girl and make her see through the master of the Garden; but that hope disappeared at once.

He stayed a little behind her when they were conducted out of the patio by the grinning Joseph. He helped her gently to her horse, the old gray gelding, and when he was in place on his own horse, with the mule pack behind him, they started for the gate.

She had not spoken since they started. At the gate she moved as if to turn and look back, but controlled the impulse and bowed her head once more. Joseph came beside the gambler and stretched out his great palm. In the center of it was the little ivory ape's head which had bought Connor his entrance into the valley and had won the hatred of the big negro, and had, eventually, ruined all his plans.

"It was given freely," grinned Joseph, "and it is freely returned."

"Very well."

Connor took it and hurled it out of sight along the bowlders beyond the gate. The last thing that he saw of the Garden of Eden and its men was that broad, apelike grin of Joseph, and then he hurried his horse to overtake Ruth, whose gelding had been plodding steadily along the ravine.

He attempted for the first time to speak to her.

"Only a quitter tries to make up for the harm he's done by apologizing. But I've got to tell you the one thing in my life I most regret. It isn't tricking David of Eden, but it's doing what I've done to you. Will you believe me when I say that I'd give a lot to undo what I've done?"

She only raised her hand to check him and ventured a faint smile of reassurance. It was the smile that hurt Connor to the quick.

They left the ravine. They toiled slowly up the difficult trail, and even when they had reached such an altitude that the floor of the valley of the Garden was unrolling behind them the girl never once moved to look back.

"So," thought Connor, "she'll go through the rest of her life with her head down, watching the ground in front of her. And this is my work."

He was not a sentimentalist, but a lump was forming in his throat when, at the very crest of the mountain, the girl turned suddenly in her saddle and stopped the gray.

"Only makes it worse to stay here," muttered Connor. "Come on, Ruth."

But she seemed not to hear him, and there was something in her smile that kept him from speaking again.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE NEGROES SING.

THE Room of Silence had become to David Eden a chamber of horror. The four chairs around him, which had hitherto seemed filled with the ghosts of the four first masters of the Garden, were now empty to his imagination. In this place where he had so often found unfailing consolation, unfailing counsel, he was now burdened by the squat, heavy walls, and the low ceiling. It was like a prison to him.

For all his certainty was gone. "You've made yourself your God," the gambler had said. "Fear made the Garden of Eden, fear keeps the men in it. Do you think the negroes stay for love of you?"

Benjamin had proved a sinner, no doubt, but there had been a ring of conviction in his words that remained in the mind of David. How could he tell that the man was not right? Certainly, now that he had once doubted the wisdom of that silent Voice, the mystery was gone. The room was empty; the holiness had departed from the Garden of Eden with the departing of Ruth.

He found himself avoiding the thought of her, for whenever her image rose before him it was torture.

He dared not even inquire into the depression which weighed down his spirits, for he knew that the loss of the girl was the secret of it all.

One thing at least was certain: the strong, calming voice which he had so often heard in the Room of Silence, no longer dwelt there, and with that in mind he rose and went into the patio.

In a corner, screened by a climbing vine, hung a large bell which had only been rung four times in the history of the Garden of Eden, and each time it was for the death of the master. David tore the green away and struck the bell. The brazen voice crowded the patio and pealed far away, and presently the negroes came. They came in wild-eyed haste, and when they saw David alive before them they stared at him as if at a ghost.

"As it was in the beginning," said David when the circle had been formed and hushed, "death follows sin. Sin has come into the Garden of Eden and the voice of God has died out of it. Therefore the thing for which you have lived here so long is gone. If for love of David, you wish to stay, remain; but if your hearts go back to your old homes, return to them. The wagons and the oxen are yours. All the furnishing of the houses are yours. There is also a large store of money in my chest which Elijah shall divide justly among you. And on your journey Elijah shall lead you, if you go forth, for he is a just man and fit to lead others. Do not answer now, but return to your house and speak to one another. Afterward, send one man. If you stay in the Garden he shall tell me. If you depart I shall bid you farewell through him. Begone!"

They went out soft-footed, as though the master of the Garden had turned into an animal liable to spring on them from behind. He smiled as he watched them. What children they were, in spite of their age? Without his orders, how could they be directed?

He began to pace up and down the patio, after a time, rather impatiently. No doubt the foolish old men were holding forth at great length. They were appointing the spokesman, and they were framing the speech which he would make to David telling of their devotion to him, whether the spirit was gone or remained. They would remain; and Benjamin's prophecy had been that of a spiteful fool. Yet even if they stayed, how empty the valley would be—how hollow of all pleasure!

It was at this point in his thoughts that he heard a sound of singing down the hillside from the house of the servants—first a single, thin, trembling voice to which others were added until the song was heartened and grew full and strong. It was a song which David had never heard before. It rang and swung with a peculiarly happy rhythm, growing shriller as the old men seemed to gather their enthusiasm. The words, sung in a thick dialect, were stranger to David than the tune, but as nearly as he could make out the song ran as follows:

"Oh, Jo, come back from the cold and the stars
For the cows they has come to the pasture bars,
And the little game chicken's beginning to crow:
Come back to us, Jo; come back to us, Jo!

"He was walkin' in the gyarden in the cool o' the day
When He seen my pickaninny in the clover blossoms play.

"He was walkin' in the gyarden an' the dew was on His feet
When He seen my pickaninny so little an' sweet.

"They was flowers in the gyarden, roses, an' such,
But the roses an' the pansies, they didn't count for much.

"An' He left the clover blossoms fo' the bees the next day
An' the roses an' the pansies, but He took Jo away.

"Oh, darkies rock yo' cradles, an' darkies sing yo' song,
For He walked in the gyarden an' He took Jo along.

"Oh, Jo, come back from the cold and the stars
For the cows they has come to the pasture bars,
And the little game chicken has started to crow:
Come back to us, Jo; come back to us, Jo!"

He knew their voices and he knew their songs, but never had David heard his servants sing as they sang this song. Their hymns were strong and pleasant to the ear, but in this old tune there was a melody and a lilt that brought a lump in his throat. And there was a heart to their singing, so that he almost saw them swaying their shoulders to the melody.

It was the writing on the wall for David.

Out of that song he built a picture of their old lives, the hot sunshine, the dust, and all the things which Matthew had told him of the slaves and their ways before the time of the making of the Garden.

He waited, then, either for their messenger or for another song; but he neither saw the one nor heard the other for a considerable time. An angry pride sustained him in the meantime, in the face of a life alone in the Garden. Far off, he heard the neigh of the grays in the meadow near the gate, and then the clarion clear answer of Glani near the house. He was grateful for that sound. All men, it seemed, were traitors to him. Let them go. He would remain contented with the Eden grays. They would come and go with him like human companions. Better the noble head of Glani near him than the treacherous cunning of Benjamin! He accepted his fate, then, not with calm resignation, but with fierce anger against Connor, who had brought this ruin on him, and against the negroes who were preparing to desert him.

He could hear plainly the creaking of the great wains as the oxen were yoked to them and they were dragged into position to receive the burdens of the property they were to take with them into the outer world. And, in the meantime, he paced through the patio in one of those silent passions which eat at the heart of a man.

He was not aware of the entrance of Elijah. When he saw the old negro, Elijah had fallen on his knees near the entrance to the patio, and every line of his time-dried body expressed the terror of the bearer of bad tidings. David looked at him for a moment in silent rage.

"Do you think, Elijah," he said at last, "that I shall be so grieved to know that you and the others will leave me and the Garden of Eden? No, no! For I shall be happier alone. Therefore, speak and be done!"

"Timeh—" began the old man faintly.

"You have done that last duty, then, Elijah? Timeh is no longer alive?"

"The day is still new, David. Twice I went to Timeh, but each time when I was about to lead her away, the neighing of Juri troubled me and my heart failed."

"But the third time you remembered my order?"

"But the third time—there was no third time. When the bell sounded we gathered. Even the watchers by the gates—Jacob and Isaac—came and the gate was left unguarded—Timeh was in the pasture near the gate with Juri—and—"

"They are gone! They have passed through the gate! Call Zacharias and Joseph. Let them mount and follow and bring Juri back with the foal!"

"Oh, David, my master—"

"What is it now, Elijah, old stammerer? Of all my servants none has cost me so much pain; to none shall I say farewell with so little regret. What is it now? Why do you not rise and call them as I bid you? Do you think you are free before you pass the gates?"

"David, there are no horses to follow Juri!"

"What!"

"The God of John and Paul give me strength to tell and give you strength to hear me in patience! When you had spoken, and the servants went back to speak of the strange things you had said, some of them spoke of the old days before they heard the call and followed to the Garden, and then a song was raised beginning with Zacharias—"

"Zacharias!" echoed David, softly and fiercely. "Him whom I have favored above the others!"

"But while the others sang, I heard a neighing near the gate and I remembered your order and your judgment of Timeh, and I went sorrowfully to fulfill your will. But near the gate I saw the meadow empty of the horses, and while I stood wondering, I heard a chorus of neighing beyond the gate. There was a great answer just behind me, and I turned and saw Glani racing at full speed. I called to him, but he did not hear and went on, straight through the pillars of the gate, and disappeared in the ravine beyond. Then I ran to the gate and looked out, but the horses were gone from sight—they have left the Garden—they are free—"

"And happy!" said David in a terrible voice. "They, too, have only been held by fear and never by love. Let them go. Let all go which is kept here by fear. Why should I care? I am enough by myself. When all is gone and I am alone the Voice shall return and be my companion. It is well. Let every living thing depart. David is enough unto himself. Go, Elijah! And yet pause before you go!"

He went into his room and came out bearing the heavy chest of money, which he carried to the gate.

"Go to your brothers and bid them come for the money. It will make them rich enough in the world beyond the mountains, but to me there is need of no money. Silence and peace is my wish. Go, and let me hear their voices no more, let me not see one face. Ingrates, fools, and traitors! Let them find their old places; I have no regret. Begone!"

And Elijah, as one under the shadow of a raised whip, skulked from the patio and was gone.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HUMILITY.

THE last quiet began for David. He had heard the sounds of departure. He had heard the rumble of the ox-wains begin and go slowly toward the gate with never the sound of a human voice,

and he pictured, with a grim satisfaction, the downcast faces and the frightened, guilty glances, as his servants fled, conscious that they were betraying their master. It filled him with a sort of sulky content which was more painful than sorrow. But before the sound of the wagons died out the wind blew back from the gate of the Garden a thin, joyous chorus of singing voices. They were leaving him with songs!

He was incredulous for a time. He felt, first, a great regret that he had let them go. Then, in an overwhelming wave of righteousness, he determined to dismiss them from his mind. They were gone; but worse still, the horses were gone, and the valley around him was empty! He remembered the dying prophecy of Abraham, now, as the stern Elijah had repeated it. He had let the world into the Garden, and the tide of the world's life, receding, would take all the life of the Garden away beyond the mountains among other men.

The feeling that Connor had been right beset him: that the four first masters had been wrong, and that they had raised David in error. Yet his pride still upheld him.

That day he went resolutely about the routine. He was not hungry, but when the time came he went into the big kitchen and prepared food. It was a place of much noise. The great copper kettles chimed and murmured whenever he touched them, and they spoke to him of the servants who were gone. Half of his bitterness had already left him and he could remember those days in his childhood when Abraham had told him tales, and Zacharias had taught him how to ride at the price of many a tumble from the lofty back of the gentle old mare. Yet he set the food on the table in the patio and ate it with steady resolution. Then he returned to the big kitchen and cleansed the dishes.

It was the late afternoon, now, the time when the sunlight becomes yellow and loses its heat, and the heavy blue shadow sloped across the patio. A quiet time. Now and again he found that he was tense with waiting for sounds in the wind of the servants returning for the night from the fields, and the shrill whinny of the colts coming back from the pastures to the paddocks. But he remembered what had happened and made himself relax.

There was a great dread before him. Finally he realized that it was the coming of the night, and he went into the Room of Silence for the last time to find consolation. The book of Matthew had always been a means of bringing the consolation and counsel of the Voice, but when he opened the book he could only think of the girl, as she must have leaned above it. How had she read? With a smile of mockery or with tears? He closed the book; but still she was with him. It seemed that when he turned in the chair he must find her waiting behind him and he found himself growing tense with expectation, his heart beating rapidly.

Out of the Room of Silence he fled as if a curse lived in it, and without following any conscious direction, he went to the room of Ruth.

The fragrance had left the wild flowers, and the great golden blossoms at the window hung thin and limp, the bell lips hanging close together, the color faded to a dim yellow. The green things must be taken away before they molded. He raised his hand to tear down the transplanted vine, but his fingers fell away from it. To remove it was to destroy the last trace of her. She had seen these flowers; on account of them she had smiled at him with tears of happiness in her eyes. The skin of the mountain lion on the floor was still rumpled where her foot had fallen, and he could see the indistinct outline where the heel of her shoe had pressed.

He avoided that place when he stepped back, and turning, he saw her bed. The dappled deerskin lay crumpled back where her hand had tossed it as she rose that morning, and in the blankets was the distinct outline of her body. He knew where her body had pressed, and there was the hollow made by her head in the pillow.

Something snapped in the heart of David. The sustaining pride which had kept his head high all day slipped from him like the strength of the runner when he crosses the mark. David fell upon his knees and buried his face where her head had lain, and his arms curved as though around her

body. Connor had been right. He had made himself his god, and this was the punishment. The mildness of a new humility came to him in the agony of his grief. He found that he could pray, not the proud prayers of the old days when David talked as an equal to the voice, but that most ancient prayer of sinners:

"O Lord, I believe. Help Thou mine unbelief!"

And the moment the whisper had passed his lips there was a blessed relief from pain. There was a sound at the window, and turning to it, he saw the head and the arched neck of Glani against the red of the sunset—Glani looking at him with pricked ears. He went to the stallion, incredulous, with steps as short as a child which is afraid, and at his coming Glani whinnied softly. At that the last of David's pride fell from him. He cast his arms around the neck of the stallion and wept with deep sobs that tore his throat, and under the grip of his arms he felt the stallion trembling. He was calmer, at length, and he climbed through the window and stood beside Glani under the brilliant sunset sky.

"And the others, O Glani," he said. "Have they returned likewise? Timeh shall live. I, who have judged others so often, have been myself judged and found wanting. Timeh shall live. What am I that I should speak of the life or the death of so much as the last bird in the trees? But have they all returned, all my horses?"

He whistled that call which every gray knew as a rallying sound, a call that would bring them at a dead gallop with answering neighs. But when the thin sound of the whistle died out there was no reply. Only Glani had moved away and was looking back to David as if he bid the master follow.

"Is it so, Glani?" said the master. "They have not come back, but you have returned to lead me to them? The woman, the man, the servants, and the horses. But we shall leave the valley, walking together. Let the horses go, and the man and the woman and the servants; but we shall go forth together and find the world beyond the mountains."

And with his hand tangled in the mane of the stallion, he walked down the road, away from the hill, the house, the lake. He would not look back, for the house on the hill seemed to him a tomb, the monument of the four dead men who had made this little kingdom.

By the time he reached the gate the Garden of Eden was awash with the shadows of the evening, but the higher mountain-tops before him were still rosy with the sunset. He paused at the gate and looked out on them, and when he turned to Glani again, he saw a figure crouched against the base of the rock wall. It was Ruth, weeping, her head fallen into her hands with weariness. Above her stood Glani, his head turned to the master in almost human inquiry. The deep cry of David wakened her. The gentle hands of David raised her to her feet.

"You have not come to drive me away again?"

"To drive you from the Garden? Look back. It is black. It is full of death, and the world and our life is before us. I have been a king in the Garden. It is better to be a man among men. All the Garden was mine. Now my hands are empty. I bring you nothing, Ruth. Is it enough? Ah, my dear, you are weeping!"

"With happiness. My heart is breaking with happiness, David."

He tipped up her face and held it between his hands. Whatever he saw in the darkness that was gathering it was enough to make him sigh. Then he raised her to the back of Glani, and the stallion, which had never borne a weight except that of David, stood like a stone. So David went up the valley holding the hand of Ruth and looking up to her with laughter in his eyes, and she, with one hand pressed against her breast, laughed back to him, and the great stallion went with his head turned to watch them.

"How wonderful are the ways of God!" said David. "Through a thief he has taught me wisdom; through a horse he has taught me faith; and you, oh, my love, are the key with which he has unlocked my heart!"

And they began to climb the mountain.

(The end.)

The Last to Leave the Ship

by George M. A. Cain

CAPTAIN WAIN'S bloodshot eyes gave one glance at the thick haze to eastward and another at the dimly seen palm tops of Wa'yau Island. He turned then on Mr. Crowther, the mate, with a bombardment of seamanlike profanity that blasted like a typhoon.

And Mr. Crowther took it straight, rising in its tone and its fierceness, like the wind that told them both of the ship's doom. It behooved him to take it. In his heart of hearts he did not question the skipper's perfect right to call him all the names that did not belong to him. In fact, he was inwardly glad to have the "old man" take it out in swearing. Captain Wain's justice was so tempered with mercy that, if he so far forgot himself as to curse a subordinate, he repented eventually and refrained from inflicting other penalties. And Crowther knew he deserved other penalties.

In his own way Captain Wain was already figuring the matter out as Crowther did. The windward coast of Wa'yau Island is as mean a spot in a blow as the Pacific Ocean owns. They were facing death. It was no time for swearing.

Morally, Captain Wain would have felt more justified in shooting Crowther. But the law would not let him do that; and something else was hindering him from doing the things the law would allow. He did not mean to punish the mate. He had to do something. So he swore.

And he inwardly approved of the way Crowther took it, with eyes not faltering, yet not defiant, with an occasional nod that somehow accepted punishment and awaited more as voluntary penance for acknowledged guilt.

Then Crowther's eye wavered an instant to the right, toward the head of the stairway from the deck, behind the skipper's shoulder. And—

"They were your orders, sir—sou'west by south till you came up. I had 'em from you myself. I gave 'em to Mr. Hupper, as you said."

The flimsiness of the excuse rightly raised Captain Wain's fury. He had said he would be back on the bridge within an hour of the beginning of the afternoon watch. They had let him sleep; there was no reason why he shouldn't have slept. Crowther had his own master's license, and should have known enough to shift the course.

The actual facts Wain could guess as well as Crowther knew them. Crowther had been enjoying the afternoon watch so well he had not wished to give it up, so well that he had forgotten or neglected to make his own shift in the course.

The name of the cause of the joy sprang

to his lips, to mingle with the fearsome profanity. But his eyes had given another pained, beseeching, sidewise glance past his shoulder. The skipper turned enough to see the look on Miss Bascom's face; and her name and the further profanity died abruptly, as if he had suffered a sudden stroke of paralysis.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Bascom," Wain muttered thickly. "I didn't know you were here." He started to blush; turned white instead. For the second time that day he seemed to slump toward years past sixty. Most men had been accustomed to take Captain Wain for fifty. During this voyage he had got to looking hardly more than the forty-one which was his actual age.

The other time he had looked old, had been when he left the bridge at four bells of the morning watch. There had been only one reason in the world for his relieving the mate of the first half of that watch. Miss Bascom had expressed the wish the previous evening to see the sun rise.

To avoid the extra tolls for passengers, freight steamers frequently list those going through the Canal as extra officers—fourth assistant engineers and superfluous stewards and such. It had been Wain himself who had evolved the fact that Miss Bascom, as third stewardess, could sit on the bridge without violating the company rule against passengers being up there.

Miss Bascom was going home to America with her father, long an agent in Shanghai for the company that operated the South Sea and Orient trading ships. The ships are stanch tramps, plying the Seven Seas, but mostly the Pacific. Old John Bascom wanted to reach New York without paying railroad fares from Frisco. He had waited for the Famura San, destined to finish its itinerary by crossing the Atlantic. A devious voyage she had made thus far. It was two whole months since they had cleared from Shanghai.

In those two months Captain Wain had fought the folly of love at his age; love had won the fight. Slowly but surely his will and mind had yielded to pleas that he was hardly over forty, she possibly a shade past twenty-five.

Love had beaten him; and he was glorying in his defeat. Even when he doubted his courage ever to declare his sentiments to the lady of his heart, he joyously acknowledged that the possession of the sentiment was the biggest thing his all too empty life had held.

For there had been but one other love in that life. It had come when he was even younger and in the next lower position than his mate, Mr. Crowther. And he had been sitting beside a bright eyed girl in a nook behind a lifeboat, bedazzled in silver-hazed moonlight at five bells of the first watch, a quartermaster on the bridge where he should have been, a sailor at the wheel—when the ship struck an iceberg. Never in this world would he know whether he might have saved that ship or not had he been at his post of duty.

Twenty years of mental torture; twenty years of outliving the truthful and the exaggerated rumors that bound his name with the catastrophe in every port and every cabin where deep-sea-going men congregated—had been twenty years of penance for Captain Wain. It had taken nineteen of those years and an emergency to give him the Famura San, such a ship as he might have commanded within four years but for his one dereliction. The inward penalties had been worse. It was a decade since a stranger had guessed his age under fifty. He had long had to remind himself that he was younger than that.

But now who could blame him if he questioned whether his penance had not been sufficient, if he snatched eagerly at the last few years remaining, before the actual date of his birth would turn any thoughts of romance into symptoms of dotage in the eyes of the world and his own?

And this morning Miss Bascom had watched the sun rise. It had been a splendid sunrise for him. He had seen it—mostly as reflected in her eyes. For him no sky could have held the beauty of color her cheeks had acquired during the healthful, restful months out of Shanghai. He had been telling himself a hundred times since that those two hours of the morning watch had been colorful enough to brighten the dun gray of the score of years just finished and another score that might come.

But the telling had not convinced his heart to make it really joyful. At the end of those two hours, Mr. Crowther had come to relieve him. And the bright eyes had turned upon the younger man, and the cheeks had gained a heightened hue—and the skipper had seen his mistake.

Certainly, as seamen go, Captain Wain had never been a drinking man. But he had gone down from the bridge feeling very old and very tired—much older than the worst of the usual guesses at his age, much more tired than many nights on the bridge had ever made him. And he was experienced enough in heartache to know that sleep is its best anodyne.

He knew that, for him, alcohol offered sleep. For real drinkers it gives sleep only as stupor. The fact that the little he had drunk had kept him asleep longer than he had intended is but proof that his system was not inured to liquor. He had not been drunk, even when he slept. A call would have brought him to the bridge and to competent command of his ship. At his first waking glance at his watch, confident of Crowther's capability, he had been only glad that he had escaped another two hours of waking with his fresh misery.

He had allowed himself no resentment or jealousy. He had blamed neither the man nor the girl. He had been foolish; he but recognized the fact and suffered for it. He could take it like a man.

Even after he had got outside and discovered Crowther's awful blunder, he listened to the counsel of mercy. It is little wonder that the angels rejoice over the sinner repentant; he is so much kindlier a man than the righteous without need of repentance. Captain Wain swore at his mate—because he already had determined to do no worse by the delinquent. He was not really letting his wrath get out of hand until Crowther uttered an excuse unmanly because it was knowingly insufficient.

Then he saw what had tempted Crowther to utter that excuse—and he excused its making. His wrath died. He blushed with shame that she should have heard his words. But he went white as his own muttered apologies reminded him of the peril she shared with all on board.

Let her sympathy go with her love; let her believe well of her beloved; let her think the ill of himself. He turned to the hopeless, futile efforts to save the ship.

He knew they were hopeless and futile. The superpower of a dreadnought might possibly push a vessel into the teeth of the wind which was rising by the second, and would reach the proportions of a tornado in minutes. The single engine that gave the Famura San nine knots would be insufficient to keep her from dragging her heaviest anchors astern or snapping their chains.

But the useless motions must be made. Crowther had already started them. The ship was headed due east, away from the dangerous shore. The Chinamen were pouring up from the forecastle in response to the boatswain's whistle. Crowther dropped down the stair and ran forward to his place while the skipper's last word was spoken to the girl.

Wain's orders were mechanical. One might almost have thought he had not fully wakened from his too long sleep. There was one of the eight passengers who, alarmed at first by the swift cries of the crew, but listening then to the skipper's voice, remarked:

"Guess he doesn't think it's going to be very bad—just taking precautions against possible danger."

"I don't like that island behind us," argued another.

He would have liked it less had he known it more. Its name is probably but a dialectic variation of the Filipino's *Yaua*, the word for "devil." It would appear to an airman like the usual atoll provided with a pair of horns. These lengthen the eastward coastline.

Though its highest point would hardly shield a small yacht's mast from a blow, its windward shore drops to deep water like the side of a mountain. There is scarcely a patch of beach as big as a bedsheet from one horn's tip to the other. The pounding waves have on the other hand washed ugly caverns into the low cliffs.

But the unfriendly coastline is the least dangerous feature of this ugly island's windward shore. About half a mile in

front of it, and running from the northern horn-tip almost to the middle of the crude circle behind, full half the length of the whole stretch, extends a submerged, serrated reef. A small launch in water no rougher than the trade-wind keeps things almost perpetually, might cross this anywhere without knowing it had done so. Only in the heaviest storms is the reef's presence marked by any surf. But for ships drawing seventeen or eighteen feet of water, it is as deadly a trap as Satan could invent. If there is a space in its length through which a ship's width could be squeezed without tearing a plate or plank from her bottom, no chart-maker has discovered it.

And yet one more peril goes to spoil this unfortunate island. It is in the form of a breach in the wall of the island's front, giving entrance to the lagoon. It all but ruins the latter as a harbor. Above the general water-level, it is wide enough to let the wind blast through. Below it is hardly more than ten feet across, shallow enough to wade over if it were ever still, so full of bowlders it would be foolhardy to attempt it at the best it ever gets. It serves principally to let the breakers send their tops into the lagoon in every storm with sufficient force to make any ship uneasy. As a matter of fact, ships never enter the fine gateway on the western side of the lagoon at all; they accept the better shelter behind the northern weatherward horn.

So far as is known, there is just one boat that can get through that breach in the wall unscathed. A chief's son, M'nawah by name, devised it; possibly with some stray Down East dory as a model. He and his brother, L'nawah, superbly skillful surfmen, maintain their prowess amongst the score and a half inhabitants of the island by demonstrating over and over that they can pass through "Hell Inlet" not merely in ordinary weather, but in anything the sea can stir up to hinder them.

There is only one thing more to say of Wa'yau Island. It repays the hardihood of its tiny group of inhabitants with some of the richest pearl-fishing in the Pacific. The Famura San was booked to stop there; but of course behind the horn instead of in its present position, where her stop was certain to be permanent.

Too close upon it and too far down to have the slightest hope of beating back northward around the end of the reef, Wain spent every effort to get beyond its southern tip.

That would not save his ship. Spared the reef, she must but drive ashore beyond. It would afford a chance for some of her hardier passengers and members of a crew to clamber the rocks, a little protected by the hull from the waves' fury. For the two Malay women, for Miss Bascom, for old men like her father, like himself—it would be no chance at all. But to take the lifeboats on the reef and across the half mile of crazy water behind it would be no chance for anybody.

And so he gave no order to the mate, waiting at the hawsers to let the anchors go. He ran on, always headed a little southward, long after Mr. Hupper had taken in the taffrail-log to keep its backed up line from the propellers. He was working southward, though creeping back to westward and the hidden rocks.

But he had to give this up at length and take the last forlorn hope—a dash directly to the south, with the wind and waves sluing the steamer broadside at the rocks as she ran—

Not much for a captain of a ship in it all—a bare chance to save a few of the lives when his vessel went down in circumstances for which his world of seamen would hold him responsible, however little he might be to blame for it. No other man is so nearly a king as the master of a vessel. But no other man must bear a heavier responsibility for the very existence of his domain and the safety of every one of his temporary subjects. The failures of his subordinates may be punished by himself or by the maritime courts; but he is still responsible for permitting them to fail. And Wain knew that he was done for.

"Starboard helm," he commanded the Chinaman at the wheel. The words were a sigh of surrender of hope. He turned to the engine-room telegraph and pleaded for just a little more steam. The Scotchman down in the ship's bowels must have be-

lieved he hoped to save the vessel, but the Chinaman knew he had no hope at all.

"God!" he gasped, as he saw how the ship rushed broadside at the shore. He had calculated it all as well as man might; but the sight of it scared him. For an instant an order to steer back hung on his lips. But he had done all of that he could.

There are seconds that seem hours, minutes that drag into eternities. Wain lived through a lot of such now. And he got to the spot where a surge of bubbles showed the last point of rock beneath. And it was seventy-five yards to leeward of his bow.

His hands gripped the spokes of the wheel. As the danger spot passed amidships, half the distance between it and the ship had vanished. He swung the wheel down to throw the stern a little farther off, though it must point him fairly at the coast line below.

And three-quarters of the ship's length swung her so close he listened for the crash. It was the forward fling of a wave that had carried the vessel in; she was swept off again a little more, as the ship dropped down the back of the water ridge.

He shook his head. The thing could not be done. He needed six seconds to finish passing; four would bring on the next wave and shiver the afterquarter on the jagged point. It came. Up, up the vessel rose, riding broadside to the wave—up and in upon the froth that marked where the bottom of the last billow's trough had surged over bare rock.

As the ship hung there on the very crest of the breaker a bare fraction of a second, Wain's eyes, turned aft, seemed to photograph every face of passengers and crew, save the half watch waiting with Crowther in the bow for orders to let go the anchors. He read their very thoughts and saw the white fear written on their cheeks.

Yet it was fear for the shore beyond. They did not know that the crash was but a half second away—they were in terror for what he might have hoped to escape for a quarter of an hour. He had an awful feeling that they should be warned; it sickened him to think of the start they would give.

Only two understood—Mr. Hupper, already with his men at the starboard after lifeboat—and Miss Bascom. Her gaze was bent over the rail and astern.

The ship came down with that awful lurch which wrings the vitals of the seasick; now a thousand times more awful to the husky seaman who knew she was dropping for the last time.

Down—down—

The breath seemed to leave his lungs. For an instant he felt his knees giving beneath him. He could not think of the things he had planned to do—the swift outward swing again, the orders to let the anchors run. He was battling with relief so great it hurt.

For the ship had missed. He could account for it only be believing the rock much deeper than he had guessed, and the wave high enough to sweep his ship clear over it.

Then the relief turned to a vast joy. Perhaps he could save them all. He would not let the anchors go. It was not fated that these should die on the rocks. Another race on down the front of the island; another close shave, perhaps, with the nearer rock at the entrance—and he would jam her bow into the inlet itself. And the ship would stick there—half of her, at least, long enough for all aboard to leap ashore to dry land.

"Forward!—all hands forward!" he shrieked down the length of the steamer. "Forward—for—"

They went forward—sprawling, stumbling, face down on the steel deck. His own word was cut in half as he was hurled from his feet into the rail of the bridge at the forward edge. There had been another rock—and the Famura San had hit it.

The charts do not show each point of a rocky ledge like that. They mark the reef; and mariners keep away if they can.

Pulling himself to his feet, Wain turned in sheer amazement and stared at the bow of his ship where the crash had sounded. Already the next wave was lifting her from what she had hit. Once more he saw in a second what he might ordinarily have seen by several minutes of careful study. He marked Crowther's hands, moving in a gesture of despair; he somehow felt that, could Crowther survive what must follow, it would be to accuse him of doing the wrong thing

in making this attempt to wreck his vessel ashore instead of the hopeless one to ride the blow out at anchor. He felt almost elated that Crowther would never live to talk.

And he saw, beyond Crowther, beyond the raised bulwark at the forepeak, clear over the shore's edge, between two of the scant palm-trees on it, the comparatively placid water of the one safe but shallow corner of the lagoon. An odd-shaped canoe was being swiftly paddled by two all but naked brown men from the shore.

The ship came down again. The second crash was more terrific than the first. The stern settled still more than the bow.

"Forward!" he tried to yell again, but without the hope that had given him voice before. The shrieking gale seemed to bite off his hoarse croak at his very lips. He saw that the afterport stay of the smoke-stack had parted. The great iron chimney went clean overboard without touching a head.

The sea itself did what his voice could no longer do. A huge wave caught the port afterquarter. It hurled vast tubfuls of water across and along the deck. The yellow sailors, Mr. Hupper, the passengers—scrambled forward to escape further ducking. But there was to be no such escape. The rain began abruptly, great sheets of it sweeping in almost horizontal lines across the deck. It beat husky Chinamen into the leeward rail. The passengers came along it as if pulled by a rope.

The stokers and engineers seemed fairly belched from the companionway to the hold in a cloud of steam that told better than Wain could guess as yet how fast the vessel was filling. He took the ladder down from the bridge almost in a leap.

He was in time to head off the most of the jam into the passage leading through the forward deckhouse to the other deck.

"Passengers only," he snapped. "Mr. Hupper, take the starboard boat here. Twenty-one."

"The starboard boat, sir," the second mate repeated in a croak barely audible above the roar. He took his command as his sentence to death. The forward boat on that side would be a little safer to launch, would offer a shade more hope for clearing the wreck. The eight passengers went on through the passage. Hupper drew a pistol from his pocket.

"Use it if you have to—but you won't," Wain ordered. He was about to turn into the passage when he saw Miss Bascom.

"Passengers forward," he bade her.

"But I am not a passenger," she objected. At this moment the jest which had given her the privilege of the bridge seemed almost blasphemous. They were too near death for humor.

"You forward, then," he commanded, and thrust her before him. They came out on the forward deck.

Crowther and his half-watch of men, together with some who had come through, already had the boat nearly swung out into position. Wain needed to wait but two seconds before he could take command here himself.

"The ladies first—and all aboard this boat. We can't launch another. Quick, please!—*Passengers* first!" One of the Chinamen had leaped aboard. He leaped out. He was the only member of that yellow crew who forgot the precedents for life-chance on a ship.

Two women—all there were aboard, save Miss Bascom—were lifted bodily into the boat. Both were wives of Malay passengers. Their husbands quickly followed.

"Women first!" Crowther snarled at the second of them. And, for the second time, Miss Bascom used her privilege as a member of the ship's company—

"*Passengers* first!" she protested. "I'm an officer."

"The dev—" cried the mate. But Wain turned upon him.

"Let her wait if she will," he ordered.

"What—what—By Heaven! I'll kill you if—" Crowther did not know what it meant. He broke off, guessing that his guess was too wild. It was. He had thought the captain meant to keep the girl aboard and die with her. There was that in Wain's eyes which silenced further guesses.

"My daughter!" It was Mr. Bascom, the father, with one foot in the boat, who awoke now to the situation. But the one

other white passenger on the ship was close behind and in a frantic panic. He pushed Bascom over the gunwale. The older man's head struck one of the seats. He lay still in the bottom.

The Chinese crew piled in as one man. The chief engineer and his second assistant followed.

"Eighteen Persons," the legend ran on the boat's side. Twenty were in it. Its builders had designed it against overcrowding. One more person could be got aboard, and only one.

It would seem as if Wain had already stretched the capacity of the human mind to balk the limits of time. If he had crowded the thinking of hours into seconds, of weeks into minutes, during the past ten of these—he now made the decision of a lifetime in a fraction of a second. He would never know how he did it.

For his eye had flashed far enough forward to find the mouth of Hell's Inlet through the blinding sheets of rain. And he had seen what he sought to see—the nose of an odd-shaped canoe, shooting upward and outward over the very peak of a breaker.

It could be but one boat in the world; it could come through there only by the power of two men in the world. It was the strange canoe of M'nawah and his brother, L'nawah. Once more they were proving their defiant superiority to the might of the gods.

And that canoe could give two passengers such a chance as Wain knew neither of the lifeboats could approach. Two years ago he had watched those princelets drive their craft out that inlet and in again, in a squall hardly less severe than this. And they had carried a barrel two-thirds full of water, to show they could do it; and had come back and added a second barrel to make their wild stunt a shade wilder. They had tried a third barrel, and upset in the lagoon.

The lifeboats had no chance. The ship itself, piled up on the rocks, might have dumped its passengers almost ashore. The smaller craft would be in splinters and all aboard pounding their lives out on the rough bowlders.

But two might be saved. Two—the captain and the lady! He must be the last to leave the sinking vessel. The coasts of the seven seas would resound with his shame if he boarded the lifeboat and left the girl or his mate aboard the ship. Two would live. There was hardly a danger that the ship would slide off tail down in ten minutes; hardly a hope that she would wait twenty. Twelve would suffice for those two superb young Tritons to reach her.

Two would live. He might be willing to die. But to die leaving his memory blackened by the last stigma of coward's shame a seaman's name may suffer—when he might live with the credit of having fulfilled every obligation of courage, when he might even hope to win love with his rival off the earth—that was too much to ask of any man.

Crowther was lifting Miss Bascom into the boat. He touched her cheek with his lips. She did not offer objection. Wain did—

"An officer must go with that boat," he spoke crisply.

Crowther stared at him in sheer amaze. Once more there must have flashed through his brain the wild notion that the skipper wanted to share death with the girl.

"I'm damned if—"

"Very well, I'll go," Wain broke in with the answer.

Crowther's look of amaze took on a different hue. In it Wain might discern just what all the world would think of him and say of him within two days. The mate was speechless with a man's loathing for a coward.

"I'll stay with you, John," Miss Bascom whispered.

"Lower away," Wain ordered the men in the lifeboat. He sank from the view of John Crowther clasping the girl to his breast, their love confessing itself in the face of a death that they would know in ten minutes might be deferred for years.

There is one thing about Captain Wain I have not told. It did not belong in the story up to this point. It belongs here now.

When he was ashore he used, as I think is the manner of most seamen of the better

sort, to go to church occasionally. He tried to join in the services like everybody else. Somehow he never could. When he tried to pray, the memory of that ship his recklessness had sunk years ago rose up to stop him. He could not quite believe that God would hear him. He felt as if it would be blasphemous impertinence for him to speak to God.

Of course he was all wrong. Any priest or minister could have told him better, could have shown him, right out of the Bible, that a penitent sinner has the best chance in the world with a prayer. Perhaps a very wise one might have thought that his utter humiliation was, in itself, the best sort of prayer.

When the lifeboat reached the water, Wain hardly knew what he had done or how he had done it. Somehow he felt that it was all so tremendously right that he must be wrong about it. Yet he could not keep down an exultation which made it hard for him from raising his voice in song.

Then the exultation died. The lifeboat had been pushed clear of the ship's protection. He realized how little he had really done; he came back to consciousness of the forty-two lives he had not saved; he looked down that coast with the breakers smashing themselves upon its rough rocks; he saw that the canoe was making good headway, but he saw with deeper interest now, that no lifeboat could ever land on that shore and a man aboard survive. Of course they hadn't a chance on the earth or the waters of the earth to skirt it four miles to the south and around behind it. The steamer couldn't keep off those rocks with its power. No oarsmen could.

And, in that utter helplessness of the most futile of all his gestures at saving his company he became suddenly conscious that he was praying with all his might. He didn't know what prayer he was saying; he couldn't think of another when he did. It was "Now I lay me down to sleep."

But it somehow seemed all right to him now to pray, and he kept it up.

I don't say that the wind changed on that account. You can write your own ticket about that. You can say that a cyclone like that would whirl anyhow, and that, down there, ten degrees below the equator, its next quarter must naturally have been the north. But I can't help feeling that, if Heaven ever would hear a man pray, it would be somebody who had just done something like the more-than-life sacrifice Wain had made. Besides, if the wind was going to change as soon as that anyhow, it makes a mess of my story. He might have saved the ship and everything by getting off as far as he could, anchoring, and helping the anchors hold with the engine. It wouldn't have dragged ashore as quickly as the wind changed.

Anyhow, it did change. It blew the two lifeboats down the shore of Wa'yau's southern horn; and getting up behind it was no great trick. The shift spoiled the fine stunt of the M'nawah brothers, too. It couldn't be done in a cross wind. They had to slide down the shore and around it —their lighter craft led the way home by a mile or more.

When Captain Wain had his last passenger and the last member of his crew ashore, he quit praying. There wasn't much he might pray for the others now; there wasn't anything he could imagine heaven giving him. He was an old sea-captain who had lost his ship again, and who had topped everything by deserting the wreck with other lives aboard. He couldn't shift the responsibility for the loss; or prove anything but cowardice in the desertion. In his ears still rang the curses Bascom had heaped upon him when the father had come to after his stunning bump and discovered that the daughter had been left on the ship.

Bascom had influence with the company. Wain would never have another ship; he could never make a living again; his eyes ached and burned in the rain; he thought his sight was failing; he felt seventy; he wished he were ninety and had died at three score and ten. He dropped at the foot of a swaying, dripping palm and closed his eyes and wished for sleep. The rest went on without him, to the chief's house.

He woke up with a start. Around his neck were damp sleeves; before his eyes blurred two brighter, younger eyes; close to his lips two other lips whispered:

"Thank God! I thought I had lost

you. My captain! Oh, what a mistake I almost made!"

"You—you what?" he gasped; for the lips had momentarily shut off his breath. "Don't—darling. I'm an old man, and no good, and can't ever get a ship again and—"

"You're a big and a brave man," she interrupted. "I know it now."

"You know—what?" Wain faltered.

"You—you—I know why you left us on that ship—because you thought it was our only chance for life; because you wanted to give it to us, even when you had to die in disgrace and shame for it.

"Yes—you did it because you loved me. I've had enough of conventions—trying to make myself love a man because he was nearer my age than the man I wanted to love.

"And then I knew I couldn't. It was when you were going down into that lifeboat—yes, before I saw the canoe coming through. Even then I knew I had made a mistake. I knew I was losing a man who was doing something big and fine—something poor Crowther could never do in a hundred years.

"What do I care if you're fifty? Why, it must take fifty years to make a man like you. I don't care if you're old as Methuselah. But—

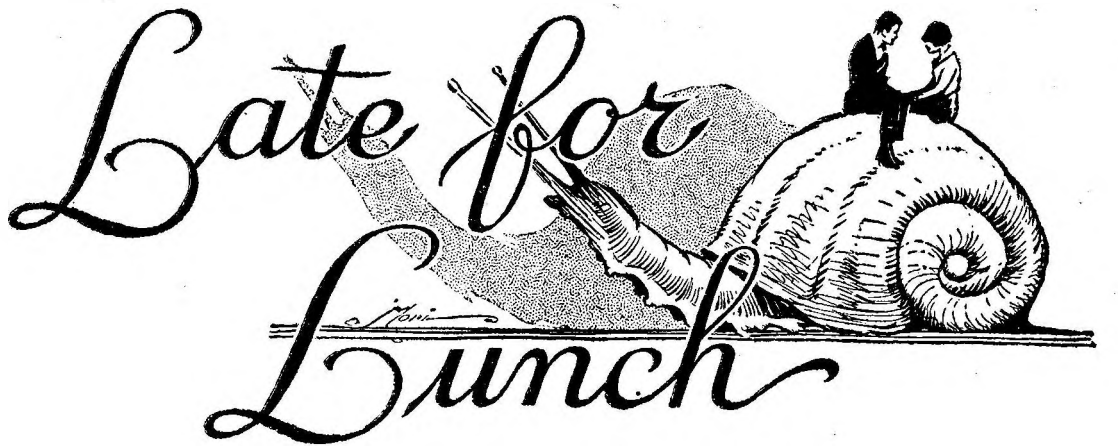
"Why—why—you're getting younger looking. I don't believe you're much over forty. I'm—not so far from thirty myself. Aren't you going to propose to me?"

"How can I? I can't get a ship—can't support you," he protested vaguely.

But he was wrong about that. Maybe what he did when he got off the Famura San wasn't enough to give him any special drag on heaven. But, when Mr. Bascom understood it, it got a heavy grip on him. And Mr. Bascom has a drag with the South Sea and Orient Company.

And, what with the company's backing and Mr. Crowther's straightforward confession, Wain kept his ticket. He kept Mr. Crowther, too.

Of course, that doesn't exactly fix the mate up in the matter of love. But it saves him the prospect of twenty years' penance such as Wain had endured. As a matter of fact, Crowther is engaged to another girl already.



by Courtenay Savage

IT was quarter to eleven when Murray McHugh reached the Grand Central Terminal from his home in the foot-hills of the Berkshires. He was due at his uncle's Wall Street office at twelve for luncheon—also, so he hoped, for a position.

"Now, don't be late," his mother had cautioned with her good-by, "you know how fussy your Uncle Dan is about being on time."

Murray remembered. He did not like his Uncle Dan, who was one of those crusty, oversuccessful men who have little patience with youth—especially youth such as Mur-

ray typified—five foot ten, good looking, twenty-five and not a pronounced business success. Murray had studied to be a private secretary after leaving high school, but among his other jobs had been a partnership in a public garage. He had held three different positions as "private secretary" and he had served in the navy during the war. Not such a bad record, but one that Uncle Dan thought spelled "shiftless."

However, Uncle Dan had offered to help him get a responsible place in Wall Street, and they were to talk it over at luncheon. And he was going to be punctual. So he hurried down toward the subway, ran down the stairs, and got into the last car of the express.

The car was practically empty, for it was an "off" hour. Across the aisle from him sat a large, rather loudly dressed man, who looked as if he were of foreign extraction—Russian or Pole, Murray decided. As the train started Murray saw that the man's gaze was fixed toward his side of the car. He had noticed that there was a girl not so many feet from where he sat, and as the man's eyes grew insolent, Murray glanced, half casually, in her direction.

His heart gave the thump that any normal male heart would give. Gee, she was pretty! Young, and well dressed, she looked more like a limousine than the subway. Trying not to be rude, Murray kept on looking, and he saw that the man across the aisle also continued to look.

Instinctively, he moved just a trifle closer to the girl. He didn't like that man. He noticed, among other things, that he carried a large, almost square cigar-box, which he held with great care. A second glance, however, told him that it was not a real cigar-box, but one that had been manufactured from cigar-box wood. Murray wondered.

The young woman had opened her handbag and had taken out a small pad of paper and a pencil. The man across the aisle seemed to lean forward as if to watch her more closely. Murray also watched; he could not help it. Once she looked quickly in his direction, a searching glance, that seemed both smiling and appealing. Then she began to trace little figures on her pad. When she had finished one sheet, she tore it off, and crumpled it. She started on her second sheet just as the train reached Fourteenth Street.

No one entered their car. When she had finished the second page of sketches, she slanted the pad, so that Murray could see. It was as if she did it purposely and again his heart gave a leap. They were stenographic notes that she had written, and she "wrote the same system" as he did.

I am in danger—follow me.

When she saw that he understood, she sent him another of those quick, appealing smiles. She crumpled the piece of paper, threw it aside and started scribbling on the third. The train pulled into Brooklyn Bridge station. The girl rose, so did the man. The girl stepped aside to let the man precede her. Then, with a swift glance at Murray, who was still debating as to just what he should do, she tossed toward his lap the third sheet of the pad. He picked it up and hurried after the girl, down the long platform, and up the stairs to the street. The man was just in front of him. Murray glanced at the note. It was in shorthand.

Please keep following me and when I reach the settlement house, come in. If this man should attack me, run away for your own sake.

He deciphered this note as he reached the street. The girl walked off toward the congested district of the city to the north of Brooklyn Bridge. She walked rapidly, and Murray saw her glance from left to right, as if to make sure that he was following. The man, after having hesitated a moment at the top of the subway stairs, had started after the girl. Murray lagged slightly, so as to let the man come opposite him. Then he kept pace.

The strange procession continued for several blocks. They had passed the great warehouses, and were in the congested tenement district, with its squalid little shops, cellarways, where goods were displayed, and where peddlers lined the curb. It was rather a fearsome district, the slums, of which

Murray had read, but never seen. Women in odd, soiled clothing, that had once been gay, stood in doorways and chatted noisily. Children screamed and sprawled over the sidewalks as they played, or darted in and out among the traffic.

Murray hurried his steps. He had noted the glances that were sent in the direction of the girl as she hurried along—quick, heavy glances that were generally followed by nudges, and comments in strange tongues.

By this time the girl was only a few feet in front of him, the man who followed her was perhaps a dozen paces behind. They started across the street. A couple of heavy trucks swung around the corner. Those on the street scattered toward the curb. Murray saw that he and the girl were safe on the farther side; the man was held behind by the swarm of traffic. It was Murray's opportunity. He raced to the girl's side.

"Can't we dodge in somewhere?"

The girl looked at him with frightened eyes.

"He's caught back there by the traffic—it's a chance—in a doorway—anywhere."

The girl understood. Even though her features were drawn with fright, she was very beautiful. Murray felt vaguely that he had seen her somewhere—perhaps she was one of those dream creatures that he had read about.

"Yes—come," and she darted up the steps of the nearest tenement. He followed. It was the old-fashioned type, with a hall that ran from the front door to another at the rear of the building. Beyond was a squalid backyard. It was to this place that the girl led the way. They dodged out of sight and waited. In one corner of the littered yard Murray saw a piece of heavy wood. He picked it up. After all, a stout stick had proved valuable in many an encounter.

A couple of minutes passed in silence. Nothing happened.

"Had we better stay here?" Murray asked. He had been studying his companion. She was dark, with large black eyes, and soft hair that curved about her temples. She was not tall, but there was a grace and dignity in her youthful carriage. She was quietly, but very handsomely dressed—perhaps it was the richness of her clothing that had made them look at her.

"No," she told him quickly. "I guess not. But we can go down through these yards. You see, there are no fences, and we can come out by another building."

"Yes, that would help if he were watching the front door."

She smiled at him sweetly, and again she took the lead. They went to the end of the row.

"Perhaps we had better wait a few minutes longer?" she suggested.

"Yes. And I'll hold on to this weapon. Or maybe you would like me to get a policeman?"

"Oh, no, I don't want that," she told him quickly. Then, after a second: "I suppose you wonder what it is all about? It's very good of you to help me like this. I have no right to place you in any danger—yet—"

"I'm very happy if I can be of assistance," Murray hurried to assure her.

"And I suppose that I ought to call the police, but—I was panic-stricken there in the subway. I took a chance that you would understand the same system of shorthand—so many people know stenography these days. You see, I am on my way to a settlement house. It isn't very often that I can go there personally and work among the women and children, but when the opportunity affords, I give them part of every day. I used to live in this section of the city; I think I understand what these people need to make them real citizens."

"You used to live here?" Her statement hardly fitted in with her appearance.

"Yes, I was quite poor once, very poor. My father was a Scotchman, and a sailor. My mother was an Italian, a singer before my father met her in an Italian seaport and married her. Then they settled here in New York, and when I was a little girl my father died, and my mother had to work for us. We came down here to live—it was so much cheaper. I had a brother several years older than I was, and he was a splendid chap. There were a great many gangs down here then—killers, the scum of the

earth congested in the slums. When a reform movement started to clean up the city, my brother did his part down here. He became employed as a detective, and helped in sending to jail a lot of the worst characters, men who committed the most revolting crimes with a smile. The gangs said that they would kill him, and they did. It broke my mother's heart, and after she died, I moved away. I'm not poor any more, and I have been trying to help—but—I think that some of the old gang spirit is left—there is so much lawlessness, and—"

"And—you're afraid that they will kill you?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"They might."

"How long have you been followed? I suppose this it not the first time?"

"No, I saw that man outside the settlement yesterday morning. He followed me home, I think. I am sure that I have seen him before—up-town—near my apartment."

"Well, hadn't I better get a taxi and send you home? And don't you think you had better have some one to guard you?"

"Yes, and the settlement house is on the next block. I will phone for a taxicab when we get there."

They went into the hall and so toward the front door. A couple of children who were entering the tenement stopped and looked at them with wondering eyes. A man coming down the stairs stood still, and gazed after them, frowning heavily. There was something so menacing about the atmosphere of the place that Murray hurried her to the sidewalk. She took his arm. In his right hand he still held the heavy stick.

"It's just at the end of the next block," she told him, and they hastened their footsteps.

The settlement house occupied the two first floor apartments of a tenement. They almost ran up the steps, and into the room that was used as an office.

"Oh, Miss Brinker," the girl with Murray cried, "I've seen that man again. This gentleman has protected me, and—you'd better call a taxi. I'm afraid that I should never have come here, but I thought they had all forgotten."

"You poor dear, you're all excited," was the calm reply of the head of the settlement. She was a large woman, no longer young, but with a kindly face which was at the minute inclined to smile. "Nothing will hurt you here," she went on softly. "I'll call a cab, and this young gentleman will take you home. You had better not come again." She went across the room to the telephone, and after looking at her pad, asked for a number. The girl sat huddled on a bench. Murray rested his stick against the wall and stepped toward the curtained windows.

And then the door opened suddenly, with a swiftness that startled them all. The girl jumped to her feet with a low cry of horror. It was the man of the subway train. He was still carrying the square box.

"What do you want here?" Murray demanded. "What do you mean by disturbing this lady? Now, get out, quick!"

The man was a couple of inches taller than Murray, and at least twenty pounds heavier, but Murray was game.

"Listen, you butt out of this," the man said roughly. "I'm here for my reason and it's no business of yours. I ain't going to hurt you, lady, nor you, young fellow, if you don't get fresh. I lost you for a couple of minutes, but I come on here, thinking you'd sure show up. I was only sent here to get—" He held the box before him, and lifted one side.

Murray thought of bombs, and other such things. With a rush he was on the man and the box went flying across the room, and crashed through the window. Murray was startled at his own action, and in the instant of silence that followed the tinkling of breaking glass, he waited for what he feared might be an explosion. None came.

What did come was a quick blow that sent Murray reeling across the room. He recovered himself instantly, and rushed back. He saw against the wall the heavy stick he had been carrying, but he could not reach it. Instead he sent his fists to the left and right. He was young, quick, and athletic. His clean strength came to his aid, and his blows were as hot rain. They came so rapidly and Murray dodged so perfectly

that the big man could hardly seem to find him. Once he grabbed Murray by the collar, as if to choke him, but a couple of quick jabs ended that hold.

The settlement worker rushed past the two men toward the street. Her smiling expression had vanished. She knew when to smile and when to act quickly. This was the moment for a policeman.

Just what would have happened if an officer had not been half a block away is problematical, for Murray was becoming winded, and the big man, even though he was bruised and battered, had the strength of a stone wall. He was far from being down and out.

The man in uniform, however, made it a different type of argument. Murray quit fighting when he appeared, and looked quickly toward the girl. The big man took advantage to deliver one last punch, which, like the first, sent Murray reeling, this time into the policeman's arms.

"He come at me—and—" the big man began.

"Shut up!" remarked the policeman, and there was force in his command. The settlement worker explained quickly.

"This lady and gentleman were followed here by this man. This lady is one of the chief supporters of the settlement, and the young gentleman is her friend. This man has annoyed the lady before. A few minutes ago he burst in here, and the young gentleman defended himself and us."

"Say—say—I was sent down here to—"

"Keep quiet!" commanded the officer. "You can tell your story to the judge. And you'd better come along as a witness." This to Murray.

"Oh, no, please, I want him to take me home," the girl interposed. "Please—you don't have to have him, do you?" She was very agitated. The policeman looked from Murray, who was decidedly rumpled in appearance, but otherwise quite the master of the situation, to Miss Brinker, who was calmly awaiting the outcome of the situation, then at the girl, who seemed nearly on the verge of a collapse, and finally at the big man. There were two or three lumps beginning to appear on the latter's face, and one ear showed signs of a scratch.

"You sure hit him, didn't you?" The policeman could not help smiling at the difference between this dapper youth and his assailant.

"Yes, he did." Miss Brinker was quite proud. "And, officer, is there any reason why I could not go to court and press the charge of disorderly conduct—this man started the fight in the settlement house. I know that this—young lady needs to be taken home."

"Well, if you think it's best," was the officer's judgment. "Come on, you—" And very unceremoniously he dragged the bewildered man after him. Miss Brinker reached for her hat and coat and made the third of the procession to the police station.

"Your taxi is here," she called from the door. "I'll be up-town to-morrow, and I'll run in to see you—good-by." And she hurried away.

"Shall we go now?" Murray asked. The girl nodded, and they went out through the little crowd that had collected to the waiting taxi. The girl gave an address and the driver started the car.

For several minutes they rode in silence, the girl huddled close to Murray, while unconsciously he held one of her hands in his. Gradually the color came back to her cheeks. It did not seem unnatural that her head should rest on his shoulder, or that he should hold her hand.

As they hurried uptown Murray began to realize that it must be getting late, and that his appointment was for twelve sharp. He looked at his watch—it was five minutes to twelve now. He would be very late.

The girl noted his swift look of concern.

"What is it?" she asked quickly.

"I had an appointment for twelve—I ought to leave you—and try and make it."

"But—you couldn't go anywhere looking as you do. Your collar is torn, and your tie—and you need to get washed and brushed up. You can phone from my apartment, and I'll send my maid out for a fresh collar and tie."

She was right. He could telephone. Still the frown persisted, and wrinkled his forehead.

It was just ten minutes after twelve when they reached her apartment.

"Tell me the size and the name of your collar, and I'll send the maid right out—you can telephone." She commanded, and he obeyed. Now that she had reached the safety of her own home she seemed quite at ease. Murray looked up his uncle's phone number, and gave it to Central. He waited. The wire was busy. He called again. Six precious minutes had passed. Still busy. Another delay. At twenty minutes past twelve he was connected with his uncle's office. His uncle had just left, and would be back in an hour.

"I'm awfully sorry—I can't tell you how sorry. But—won't you stay and have lunch with me? Please do. You can come back here, and get washed up. Nannie will have your fresh collar in a minute or so."

The girl smiled so sweetly that Murray's heart gave a great jump, and all the annoyance that he felt at having missed the appointment momentarily vanished. Murray smiled back at her, and the world was very bright.

He had washed, brushed his clothes, put on the new collar and tie, and was starting toward the living-room, when there was an excited ring at the bell, a sound that made him start, and brought both the girl and the maid to the door. The maid opened the door cautiously, as if afraid. Then with a low laugh she stepped aside to let a man pass.

"Oh, it's you, Woody!" And there was great relief in the girl's voice when she recognized her visitor.

"Yes, I rushed right over as soon as I heard."

"Heard? Heard what?"

"About the mess with Comsky. I'm afraid that a lot of it is my fault—but you mustn't get angry."

"Comsky? Your fault?"

"Yes, the man who followed you. He's sort of a near private detective. You see, I knew that you were doing something for the poor there on the East Side whenever you weren't working on a picture, and I knew darn well that you would never stand for it being made the subject of a cheap publicity story, so I had him trail you, and get all the dope. He reported to the publicity department, and said that he could get, without your knowing, a picture of you. He had a camera hidden in a box, and it's a whale of a story—and—we told him to go ahead. I never dreamed that he would use such rough methods."

"Publicity!" the girl exclaimed.

"Yes—now, listen, don't get mad. You know, we need all the good legitimate stuff we can get to put the pictures across big—why—"

"Well, I ought to get mad," she broke in. "You gave me a terrible fright. Why—" And she suddenly remembered Murray. "Oh, this is the young man who saved me. And I made him miss a very important engagement—just because you wanted to put all my private life in the papers."

"Well, it would have made a good story, but now—" Woody laughed. "Gee whiz! Comsky told the whole yarn in court, and that settlement worker got mad, and I had to telephone for a lawyer to go right downtown to explain, and every paper in the city will give it space as real news. As far as the publicity goes, it turned out better than any one dreamed of. I'm sorry you got scared."

"You mean—that she wasn't in any danger at any time?" Murray did not understand all of this talk, but a rising sense of anger made him desirous of investigation.

"No, there was no danger. You see, we like to keep our stars' names before the public, but it's difficult with Miss Bannerman, for she's always fighting shy of making herself conspicuous."

"Then I've wasted my time to make publicity for a movie star? And you're Molly Bannerman? I knew I'd seen you before. Well, I hope you enjoyed yourself—it's been a disastrous morning for me." Murray went swiftly to get his hat and coat, fighting to keep his temper from getting the best of him.

"Oh, please, please! I didn't know it was publicity. What I told you about the gangs and my brother was true—all true. It's your fault, Woody—all your fault." She took Murray's arm and held it fast. "Please don't be angry with me—you were so good and kind, I'm so grateful—really, I am."

"Well, of course, I thought you were in danger or"—he was trying to be a good sport—"I wasted my time—well, never mind." Murray turned and walked toward the door. The girl still held his sleeve. She smiled at him wistfully, longingly.

The boy looked at her quickly. In spite of all his anger, Murray's young heart gave a great leap. After all, it had been a great adventure. And with Molly Bannerman!

"I honestly thought I needed help," the girl pleaded. "I can never tell you how relieved I was when I discovered you could read that shorthand sentence about my being in danger. You see, I was a stenographer for two years before I went into the movies."

"Tell the truth, didn't you know it was a put-up job, didn't you sort of guess I was a poor boob from the country?" Murray was still highly indignant.

"No, I didn't. I liked you. You looked so nice and clean—and—a gentleman. Please say you believe me—that we can be friends."

"Friends? What do you want of me for a friend? Just let me tell you one thing. I was on the way down-town to get a job, had an appointment for twelve, but I thought that if I could save your life or something like that, the job would go hang. Now—I've lost it."

The girl did not answer, but two big tears sprang into her eyes. The man she had called "Woody" came to stand beside her.

"Really, old man, Miss Bannerman didn't have anything to do with this. I'm sorry, but—what was that job you lost? I know a lot of business men."

"Oh, I suppose that it would have been a private secretary to somebody—a he-stenographer."

"And you don't want to be a stenographer? I know you don't. Do you? What do you want to be?" Molly's eyes sparkled as she questioned him.

"You're thinking that he's very good looking, and would photograph well?" Woody asked the girl.

"Yes, and he fought ever so splendidly. Have you ever been in any shows?"

"Shows—well, when I was in the navy during the war, I was stationed at Pelham Bay—we used to have a lot of shows up there. But you don't mean that I could be a—a—"

"Yes, I do," she clapped her hands. "Can you ride a horse—all those things—can you? He's got screen personality, don't you think so, Woody?"

"Yes, a good camera face. It would make a whale of a publicity story if he joined the company. Say, I've got to run along now. Sorry you got such a scare—but it will make a good story." And then to Murray, "Glad to have met you—see you later. You'd better sign up with Miss Bannerman." And he hurried away.

Still, Murray was not overenthusiastic.

"Don't look like that, don't," the girl cried when they were alone. "Why, you break my heart when you look like that. Wouldn't you like to act with me?"

"Do you really mean it?" Murray asked slowly. "You're not fooling me?" He put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. She felt the flush of color rising to her cheek, but she met his gaze steadfastly.

"I really mean it." And there was just a hint of a sob at the end of her sentence. "I want you to like me, and I know you'll be very clever, and earn lots of money—one hundred and fifty dollars a week right away, but—and—I want you to say that you forgive me."

Forgive her! He and Molly Bannerman stood there as if they were alone in the universe. His hands were still on her shoulders, but her eyes had looked away toward the floor, for they wished to hide the sudden start of tears. They could neither of them explain why, but it was the most perfect moment of living.

Presently, after a minute or an age, they did not know which, Molly's maid came out from the kitchen.

"Shall I serve lunch now?"

"Yes, please." Then Molly asked suddenly, joyously, "Why—why, I don't even know your name!"

"It's Murray McHugh."

"Murray McHugh! What a peach of a stage name! Woody will be tickled to death when he hears it!"

At luncheon, he told her who he was—all about himself, and she asked a thousand questions. And every few minutes they laughed—just because. Time went swiftly. The maid, a wise, middle-aged soul, kept out of their way. It was an hour for remembering.

"Why, it's three o'clock!" Molly discovered suddenly. "I have to see my dressmaker. I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll phone Woody, and we three will have dinner here, and we can talk business. Woody's the general manager of the company, you know. Then afterward we can all see a show. And if you haven't got a place to stay, Woody will put you up. He's got a bachelor apartment."

So they parted at the street door, Molly on her way to the dressmaker's, Murray McHugh left to his own devices until six o'clock. He walked five blocks trying to think it all over, and at the end of that time it seemed quite tangible, almost ordinary—that is, the adventure and the promised job did.

As he neared the subway entrance, he thought of Uncle Dan. He supposed he ought to tell his uncle why he had not put in an appearance. He ran down the subway steps, and so to Wall Street.

It was exactly five minutes to four when he sent in his card. Uncle Dan ordered that he be admitted at once.

"Young man," he said by way of greeting, "young man, do you realize that you are exactly three hours and fifty-five minutes late for your luncheon appointment? How can you expect me to help you get a position when I know that you are not punctual—when I know—"

Murray stopped the storm that threatened to overwhelm him.

"I have a position, Uncle Dan. That's what I came to tell you. I'm sorry I was so late for lunch. You see, I met a girl, and she helped me get a job that will pay me one hundred and fifty dollars a week and—"

"A hundred and fifty dollars a week?"

"Yes, sir, and I'm in love with the girl!"

Uncle Dan was momentarily speechless. Murray twirled his hat, and muttered something about having to go.

"A hundred-and-fifty-dollar position, and in love, all in one day!" Uncle Dan shook his head. "And I thought you were slow!"

The Dark Vortex

by

H. C. Wire

OFFICIALLY announcing noontime to the Elk Hills oil camp, Mexicalli Joe, chief hunger-destroyer of the outfit, stood in front of the cook-shack banging on a loud-voiced triangle. Pausing at regular intervals the Mexican would cry out in high-pitched singsong: "Chow, boys, chow!" then continue to beat on the echoing steel.

As he swung his body in time with the

clang of the triangle his beaded vest took up the rhythm and glittered like star-points of many colors. That vest, having been given to him by some captivating *señorita,* was the pride of Joe's existence. It was won, according to Joe, only after he had fought three other suitors for the caresses of his queen. He had killed them all, bare-handed; whereupon he deemed himself a man to be loved by women and feared among men.

All this was, according to Joe, done before he arrived in the Elk Hills camp. Perhaps it was true, perhaps not—at any rate he would rather have lost his hand than the beaded vest.

From the bunk-house a short distance beyond the cook-shack came a group of men laughing and joking with each other. Their clothes were black with oil, their shoes were soaked with it, as were their hats. But their faces were rough and white from having been washed in gasoline.

They were the roustabouts; drifters unskilled in the work of the oil fields; flunkies of the camp. Digging ditches, laying pipe lines, rigging up and cleaning out boilers—all the hard jobs and the dirty jobs were theirs. And occasionally that most hated job of all—going down into the choking guts of the big covered storage tanks to shovel the accumulated sand from their bottoms.

But they took it as all in the day's game; worked like devils until pay-day because they were broke, then came back on the job twelve hours after pay-day because they were broke again. And these fellows were a happy, good-natured lot. Each one greeted the cook in a friendly way before entering the mess-room.

Behind them, not included in their jesting, walked Stu Broder, alone. The hard-set lines of his sullen face were drawn in a sneer, as with his hands shoved deep in his pockets he swaggered up, rolling his huge bulk from side to side as he came.

Broder had once taken a great liking to the Mexican's beaded vest and had offered to buy it. Joe had refused, probably knowing the roustabout had no money. Broder had then tried to steal it, had won the ensuing fight, but not the vest. From that time on he had constantly bully-ragged the Mexican.

Now, passing Joe, he suddenly reached back and jerked the tail of his vest. Joe, in the middle of a downward stroke with the long iron striker, changed its course and swung at the man behind him.

With a cry of pain and rage Broder released the vest and squeezed his wrist where the rod had struck.

The cook's face was immobile, but his fingers were clinched around the iron.

"Damn fool!" he spat. "Some day you get hurt!"

Broder glared. "No damn greaser can hit me and get away with it!"

Suddenly shifting his position, he shot his fist for the Mexican's jaw. But Joe, using the iron rod as a fencer would a sword, thrust the point of it into Broder's stomach, and the man doubled like a jack-knife.

Joe stepped past him to the door of the cook-shack and paused. He said nothing, but the fire in his eyes as he glared at the roustabout should have been warning enough. Then he shuffled on to his kitchen.

It was several minutes before Broder went in to the table. He dropped upon his seat near the end and glowered about him, still rubbing the spot where he had caught the cook's thrust.

"I'll kill that greaser!" he muttered.

One of the men across the table looked up. "What the hell's the matter with you, Broder. Lay off that Mexican or else you'll go out of here carved in chunks."

"Yeh?" Broder sneered. "Let him try it!"

"All right—you're the wise guy; but take it from me, Joe has had enough of you. I'd advise you to walk backward and lock your door at night."

"To hell with you and your advice!" Broder snapped. "I wasn't born yesterday!"

The fellow across the table continued his meal. The other men ignored Broder. For a moment he sat glaring at his empty plate, then turned toward the kitchen. "Bring my grub!" he roared.

Joe appeared with a bowl of soup. In his belt was a sharp-edged meat knife

Broder burst into a growl of laughter as he saw the weapon.

"Look at the sword he's carryin'—think you're a tough one, do you? All right, you sun-baked fool, start somethin'."

Joe approached the table.

Broder waited until he was within arm's reach, then snatched at the knife. He jerked it from the belt, then leaped from his chair, howling and blinded as the bowl of hot soup crashed down on his head.

He drew the back of his sleeve across his eyes, and knife in hand, leaped out to fight. The Mexican fled toward the kitchen. Broder was upon him as he reached the swinging door and sent him crashing through it with a blow of his fist. Joe, lifted clear of the floor, fell in a heap half way across the kitchen, and before he could rise Broder leaped to him. The roustabout had dropped the knife and now clutched the back of the Mexican's vest with both hands.

By this time the men in the mess-room had jumped from their seats and one of them jerked Broder from the prostrated cook. But as Broder came away he held the torn vest in his hands.

As the men turned back to the mess-room, Joe rolled on his side and slowly rose to his knees. Then, with the swiftness of a cat he leaped toward his rack of cutlery. He grabbed a meat cleaver from its nail and swung back to Broder.

When a camp cook runs amuck with a meat cleaver in his hand there's murder in his heart. So had not the Mexican, still dazed from his fall, tripped over an upturned chair he would have split the roustabout's head. But as he stumbled he dropped the cleaver in catching himself, and before he could recover it one of the men had pinioned his arms.

"Cut it, Joe!" the man ordered. "You two damn fools fight it out later—we want to eat now."

The Mexican stood tensely, eyes half-closed, mouth drawn tightly shut, and a look of purposeful cunning crept into his face. Then he turned from the door, replaced the cleaver and went about his work.

In the mess-room Broder gloated in his possession of the vest. The other men ate hurriedly and departed, so he sat alone helping himself generously from the pot of stew and pans of vegetables. Occasionally he glanced toward the kitchen door and he kept the long knife within reach; but he saw nothing of Joe.

He was finishing his meal when the camp boss entered the cook-house.

"Broder," he said, "I'm not mixing in your scraps, but if you run Joe out of camp you'll go, too. I can't be hiring cooks for you to drive away."

"Aw, hell, he won't leave," Broder laughed. "Jobs are too scarce now. Anyway, we've settled our trouble. He poked me in the guts this noon, and I got even with him—that's all."

"You took his vest, didn't you?"

Broder proudly exhibited his prize.

The boss stared at it.

"You had better watch out," he said quietly.

"Don't worry," Broder scoffed. "I can take care of my own little self."

The camp boss dismissed the topic with a wave of his hand.

"What I came to tell you," he said, "is that I've got to use the rest of the gang on that pipe line job down the cañon this afternoon, so you'll have to finish cleaning out tank six alone. Most of the sand is out of her already—take up a shovel and a bucket and carry out the rest of it."

"All right," Broder grunted, and gulped the last of his coffee.

"It should take you about two hours to finish the job," the boss continued, "so you can get out of the tank by three o'clock. The new gusher has been flowing pretty steady to-day. Number five tank is about full and I've told the pumper to switch the stream into tank six at three thirty."

"I see," Broder replied. "I'll get out of it by three."

The boss left the cook-house. Broder started to follow, but stopped at the outer door and returned to pick up the vest. Stuffing the trophy under his arm he turned to leave the room, then swung back abruptly as there came a sound from behind him.

The kitchen door had opened to a crack, and closed. Broder leaped forward and

flung it wide open. Joe, with his back to the mess-room, stood washing dishes.

For a moment Broder stared into the room, then slowly backed away, came to the outer door and left the cook-house.

II.

THE boss had taken all available men to repair the blow-out on the pipe line down the valley. The camp seemed deserted as Broder passed to the tool shed for a shovel and a bucket.

Up on the hillside above camp the new gusher roared spasmodically. Some distance below it the two great storage tanks stood black against the gray desert soil. Below camp in the bottom of a narrow ravine a reservoir of water shimmered in the summer sun.

Down there was the only sign of life. On the bank of the reservoir two large steam pumps used to force the water to different parts of the camp hissed in smooth regularity, their huge pistons sliding back and forth with the precision of clock-work. Beneath the near by boilers gas fires flared and died, and flared again, automatically regulated by the steam pressure. In the shade of his pump-house dozed the pumper.

Broder went on to the tool shed, got a bucket and shovel and trudged up to the storage tank. He climbed the ladder to its top, removed the cover from the manhole and peered down into the gray depths. Hot, stifling air boiled up into his face.

"Hell hole!" he muttered, and a confirming echo from the black hollow repeated it. "Damn the job anyway!"

There was truth in his expression. For the steel tank had become a choking, blistering oven. The black oil, slopped over from some time of overflow, boiled and bubbled, cooked by the heat of the sun. And the tank was tightly covered, save for the small opening in the roof near the wall.

Constant use for storing oil from new gushers had filled its bottom with several inches of fine sand and a sticky black scum. The greater part of this had been removed, as the camp boss had said, but a small pile still remained directly beneath the manhole.

"Hell of a job!" Broder repeated as he prepared to climb down.

There was a light wooden ladder inside, left there by the men who had started the cleaning task. Broder dropped his bucket and shovel through the hole, and after taking a deep breath of pure air descended into the tank.

It was choking hot down there — like breathing over a flame. The oil-smeared sides and bottom gave off a sickening gas; a man's lungs were never made to be filled with gas, nor his head to be baked in a stinking furnace. And it was as black as night in that big hollow, with only a little light coming from the hole overhead.

Broder quickly filled his bucket with sand, then scrambled back up the ladder. The simple act of dumping the stuff over the side took much longer than the whole process of shoveling and climbing—he was in no hurry to get back into the smothering hole.

He drew himself up to the edge of the manhole and sat there gazing over the camp. There was no movement about the cook-house, not even a trace of smoke from Joe's stove. He soon saw the reason for that.

As his eyes roved up the hillside to the gusher he saw the familiar figure disappearing into the derrick house. For a moment the roustabout stared with a puzzled scowl creasing his face. That the Mexican's presence up there had something to do with himself Broder guessed. But what could he do from that place? Nothing. Damn the yellow fool—he'd better stay up there on the hill!

Determined to keep watch each time he came up with sand, Broder prepared to go back to work. From the tank next to his came a roar of gas and a swish of oil, as the gusher on the hill-side sent down one of her spasmodic flows.

A thick red gas rose from the manhole in the tank top, spumed up from the boiling oil that had been violently discharged from the hot gullet of the gusher. The stuff mushroomed up into the air for ten feet, then settled slowly, congealed into tiny sparkling drops. A slight breeze sent it across into Broder's face.

He coughed and swore aloud at the gusher. Then dropped his bucket to the sand below and followed it down the ladder. The roar of the flow into the near by tank echoed and rumbled in the dark hollow in which Broder worked. He listened intently when the noise ceased, then continued his shoveling as it started again.

With each trip out of the hole he remained a little longer in the fresh air; but the work was tiring, and each time he went down he stayed a little longer filling his bucket.

His eyes began to smart, his head ached and he grew dizzy from the heat and fumes. He started nervously each time the flow roared into the other tank. And when it stopped for several minutes he would listen to catch a sound from the pipe leading into his, wondering if the pumper were switching the flow too early. The boss had said the stream wouldn't be turned until three thirty, but Broder was taking no chances.

He worked on; climbing, shoveling, climbing again; swearing at the job, then grinning as he thought of his victory in the rumpus of noontime.

Once he suddenly ceased work and stood listening for a sound which he thought came from the steps outside the tank. Leaving the bucket down below, he quietly climbed to the manhole and peered out to the ground. There was nothing unusual. But he was certain he had heard some one. Joe? If that half-baked devil was sneaking around— Broder climbed down outside the tank.

In the oil-covered ground were tracks. Some were his own, but the oil had flowed back into the imprints. There were others, fresh ones still sharply outlined.

Broder started to walk around the base of the tank, watching intently in front of him as he went. The footprints continued ahead; but no sign of the maker. Half way around, Broder stopped, looked back, then dashed forward—and saw nothing but footprints leading around the great curve. Soon he was back to the point from which he had started.

"Hell!" he muttered. For a moment he stood thinking, then suddenly ran at top speed completely around the tank. No man could have escaped in front of him. Satisfied, he climbed back up to the manhole.

Had he examined the footprints in the oil more closely after that first trip around the circle he might have noticed that they continued over and behind the other tank. But he didn't, and so climbed down into the dark hole telling himself that he had heard nothing. Still the thought preyed on his mind, and he worked harder that he might soon get out and away from that ungodly place.

Finally he stopped to survey his work. A few more trips would finish the job. He had removed the pile of sand and was now on the bottom. As he started to complete the task his shovel scraped noisily on the overlapping steel plates beneath the remaining dirt.

It was this noise that drowned the soft thud of footfalls slowly crossing the tank cover. Broder filled his bucket and turned to leave. Then with a cry of terror he dropped the thing and lunged toward his ladder. But his fingers closed below the bottom rung as it was jerked up through the manhole.

"Hey!" he called, "what the hell you doing? I'm down here."

A head was framed in the opening high above.

Broder shrank into the darkness as he saw it.

"Joe!" he gasped. A cold chill swept through his veins, and he felt weak—weak and helpless. "Joe," he pleaded, "give me the ladder. The oil—it 'll be turned in here soon!"

The head above remained motionless. Two eyes blinked down into the blackness of the prison.

The trapped man strove desperately to move his captor. He pleaded, he threatened, he promised.

"Listen, old boy," he said, striving to put a tone of friendliness in his voice, "I been kinda rough on you, but that was just in play. I'm sorry I got your vest to-day, and I'll pay you for it. Honest, I got money — name your price." He waited. There was no answer. "Come, put back the ladder—I'll play square with you."

He paused, then a happy thought came to him. "Say, tell you what—I got two quarts o' *tequilla*. How's that?"

The head above moved slightly downward. "Huh? You got *tequilla?*" Joe asked eagerly.

"Sure thing—hid 'em in my bed-roll. We'll have one hell of a celebration. Come now—but down the ladder."

For a moment the Mexican's face seemed wrinkled in a smile. Then his head disappeared from the manhole. There came the scraping as of a ladder being drawn along the roof of the tank. Broder grinned. Two quarts—suppose he'd be on the job and sober, if he had two quarts lying around? Well hardly! The smile widened—dam fool greaser. Just wait until—

Suddenly Broder looked up. The light had vanished from his prison. The manhole was closed!

For an instant he was paralyzed. Then he heard the creak of the steps outside as Joe descended, and cried out wildly. Grasping the shovel he beat upon the unyielding side of the tank. The crash echoed in the black hollow. From without came a mocking tap—then silence.

Throwing down the shovel Broder dug his finger nails into the overlapping joints of the steel plates and tried to climb upward.

With the discovery that he could cling to the upper edges of the thick plates he regained some of his courage and stepped down to rest before attempting the ascent. As he waited, he became aware that the roaring in the other tank had ceased. He listened tensely for the sound to begin again—there came nothing but the creak of boards overhead as they shrank in the blazing sun and the singing of blistering steel.

On the opposite side of the tank, up near the top, a band of light showed where the ten-inch discharge pipe entered. From that direction came a low moan—just a far-off sigh—then silence. Broder, hardly breathing, strained to hear more. From out the blackness came a faint splash, then the light drip, drip, drip of falling liquid.

The thought that the gusher was being turned on again unnerved him. He groped for the wall, clutched at the edge of the plates and started up. By straining his fingers almost to breaking, he could cling to the half-inch ledges formed by the overlapping plates. Three feet apart, up an oil-smeared wall these ledges rose, and the man in his terror thought he could climb them.

At the second joint he fell, staggered to his feet and tried again. His nails were pulled from the flesh; the blood made the plates slippery when he once more tried to climb. He sucked it from his fingers, dug them into the steel, but they were numb with pain. Again he fell, and lay writhing in the sand and scum.

He was choking from his fear and the heat. His heart was racing under the strain of terror, and his mind tortured him with pictures of a horrible death. He could see the splash of foaming oil shoot from the discharge pipe, and hear the roar of the gas. He cringed as he felt how he would strangle, choked to death in the thick gas.

He clutched his throat. What was that?

Out of the dark near the top of the tank came a sigh—gently at first, then harshly like the slow outrush of breath from a sleeping giant. Broder gasped, dug his fingers into his neck and tried not to breathe.

Came again that sigh in the darkness—louder, longer, swiftly developing into a hiss of violently exhaled breath. The man screamed—the death-cry of a trapped animal.

Then with a thunderous crash a black flow shot from the pipe above and fell roaring on the bottom of the tank.

III.

THE sun dropped behind the hills, sending out soft evening shadows that slowly engulfed the camp, the gusher and the tanks. From the cook-shack floated the merry ring of a triangle. There came a pause, then the high-pitched singsong of Mexicalli Joe: "Chow, boys, chow!" announcing the close of day.

When the men had gathered about the table and Joe had placed their food before them he hurried from the cook shack.

The thought of his revenge was not enough—he wanted to *see* his victim slowly

die in that seething black pit. How he would writhe in the hot oil! It would rise slowly—first to his knees, then to his waist, then to his neck. Joe grinned. He could see how Broder would then stretch his neck to keep his head out of the oil. Ah, *Sacré Dios!* He would have to make it long, very long indeed if he were to keep the oil from his mouth! He would probably scream—a gurgling scream—as the black stuff trickled past his lips, his teeth, and finally into his throat.

Joe hurried up the hill. Perhaps he was too late. Perhaps the gusher had already filled the tank. He stopped and listened. No sound came from up there. He went on toward the tank now faintly visible in the evening light.

As he came to the black wall he walked quietly, stopped and tapped the side. He put his ear close and listened. Silence. He tapped again. From the inside came a splash, followed by a muffled cry. The Mexican smiled.

The cry came again as he climbed the steps to the top of the tank.

All about the manhole was a slippery black scum that had slopped from Broder's bucket. In the dim light Joe could not see this. His feet slipped from under him and he sat down heavily on the manhole cover. He swore softly, then crawled to the edge of the manhole and slid back the wooden top.

There was nothing but blackness in the hole below. With an expectant leer on his face Joe leaned farther down trying to see the man he knew was there. At that instant there came a roar of discharged oil; a cloud of gas surged up around the Mexican's head.

Broder, in the center of the tank, cowering waist-deep in the whirlpool of oil, saw the figure in the manhole. Half-crazed though he was he recognized Joe and his hatred drove him into a frenzied rage.

Suddenly Broder ceased his cursing. He heard a terrified gasp from above, and saw the figure teetering on the brink of the manhole. He saw the Mexican fall, but catch the edge of the opening and hang suspended. Broder's hands opened and closed as if choking something. Here was his man come to him—he was slipping, he would never get back on top!

But the Mexican, throwing the last of his strength into his arms, drew himself upward until his head was level with the tank-top. Then he kicked one leg up to catch on the edge of the manhole. His heel caught, slipped on the oil-smeared surface and his leg dropped back. For a moment his whole body swung suspended down into the gas-filled tank—then it dropped.

There was no sound of a splash as the heavy black stuff closed over the Mexican.

Broder had not moved from the center of the tank. The oil, set awhirl by the flow from the discharge pipe at one side, surged about him, but in the center it was still and he could stand on his feet. He saw the Mexican being swept around the great swirl struggling to stand up, and knew that gradually he would be driven toward the middle of the pool.

Again Broder's hands opened and closed as if crushing something, while he watched the floundering man draw near. He would wait. Soon he could reach out and clutch him as he passed. Then he would choke him, hold him— Broder stopped. He looked at the manhole, at the Mexican, then at himself.

"Joe," he called. The roar of discharging oil had ceased and now his voice rumbled strangely in the tank.

No answer came from the darkness. But Broder saw the Mexican not ten feet away. He started toward him.

"*Señor!*" The word was almost a scream of terror. "No touch me—no hurt me!" Joe shrank away. "I came to help you, to put down the ladder—but I fall."

"That's a damn lie. I know what you came back for. You wanted to watch me die. Hah! Now we both die. See? We'll strangle, or we'll drown—or we'll kill each other!"

"No—not that, *señor*, not that!"

"No," Broder agreed, "because we might get out of here if we work together. Are you going to do as I say?"

"You play some trick?" Joe's voice was tremulous with fear.

The knowledge of the Mexican's fright restored some of Broder's courage. Where

a few moments ago he had cowered on the verge of insanity he now acted with definite purpose; boastfully flaunting his superiority even in the face of death.

He walked beneath the manhole. "I'm not playing a trick—I'm going to get us out of this mess. See? Come here!"

Joe went slowly and hesitated a few feet away.

"If one of us stands on the other's shoulders," Broder explained, "we can both get up."

The Mexican regarded him suspiciously. "Who goes first?"

"I do! You *might* put the ladder down to me after you got up—and you might *not*."

"No, no!" Joe pleaded, "I go first—this gas"—he coughed—"it choke me."

Broder clutched him around the throat. "You didn't think of that when you put me down here," he snarled. "Now I go up first. See?" He tightened his grip.

Joe gasped, his knees gave beneath him and he felt limp in Broder's grasp. "All right—you go."

He spread his feet wide apart and braced himself. His clothes dripped oil, his face was covered with it; it streamed from his hair onto his shoulders, making them slippery. And although Broder dug his fingers into the Mexican's flesh he could get no hold.

"Hell! I can't climb you. I've got to make it in a jump. Now brace up!" He lunged upward. Joe crumpled beneath his weight, slipped, and they fell cursing into the oil.

Fighting the stuff from their faces they came to the surface and stood up. It was some time before they could open their eyes.

Joe was whimpering like a baby. "No can do," he moaned. "No can hold you up."

From the discharge pipe there came a sound that Broder had learned to fear. In a short time the gusher would flow again.

"Here," he said. "We've got to get out of this. I'm going to put you up first. But swear to me—you'll put the ladder down." He gripped Joe's arm.

The Mexican looked up into the bit of sky visible through the manhole. "I swear it—may I rot in hell—see, I cross myself. I put down the ladder!"

"Then come on." Broder went to the wall of the tank and leaned against it. "Now climb!" he ordered, and steadied himself against the steel as the Mexican slowly mounted to his shoulders.

Standing upright, Joe could reach the tank-top. His groping fingers found the edge of the manhole. He clutched it, sought a firm hold and pulled himself up.

"All right?" Broder called as he saw the Mexican disappear through the opening.

There came no answer; no sound except the soft shuffling across the tank top. Then that died away. Broder called again—again silence. All his insane terror surged back. He struck barehanded against the tank, and heard nothing but the echo within his black prison.

Gently, softly as the breath of a sleeper, came the warning from the discharge pipe. Then a deep far-off rumbling set the tank aquiver.

Broder cried out madly—goaded insanely by the thought of how close he had been to freedom.

Something thudded heavily above, and a rasping sound came from the boards of the cover. Then two sticks of wood appeared in the patch of light as the ladder descended.

Broder scrambled up. As he reached the top there came a roar in the depths from which he had come, and the tank vibrated with the rush of oil.

Staggering back from the man hole he stumbled over the form of the Mexican. Alternately moaning and praying, still trembling with uncontrollable fear, lay the man who had slain three suitors barehanded—for a *señorita*, and a beaded vest.

With an expression that was half sneer, half smile Broder stared down, then unbuttoned something that had been fastened around him and held out a dripping object. It was the vest—a cheap beaded thing which had almost cost him his life.

He dropped it beside the Mexican, then with a shrug of his shoulders turned and started back to camp.

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