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THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE

JUNE 1916

Beginning

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— AND —

"BLOOD WILL TELL"

the first of the only short stories which will be written in 1916 by

GILBERT PARKER

"Have you, too, said "Why can't I have the charm of pink cheeks—the kind where color comes and goes?"

Read the "color secret" below if you would gain the charm you have longed for.

The girl who wanted more color

The secret she learned is one you, too, can use to give your cheeks the lovely glow—the radiant complexion you have longed for.

The girl to whom a pale, colorless complexion is really becoming is one in a thousand.

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The Blue Book Magazine [Vol. XXIII No. 2, June 1916] ed. Ray Long (The Story-Press Corporation, 15¢, 240pp, pulp, cover by J. Knowles Hare, Jr.)
Details supplied by Richard Fidczuk.

Missing Page

Advertisements

June
1916

THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE

Vol. XXIII
No 2

The first of the only short stories by Gilbert Parker to be published in 1916

Blood Will Tell

GILBERT PARKER is one of the three or four really great living writers of fiction; and we are therefore proud indeed to offer our readers a series of his best short stories. The story which follows, the first of the six he has written for us, is a vital, vivid, keenly interesting work that you will enjoy to the utmost.

By GILBERT PARKER

Author of "The Right of Way," "The Seats of the Mighty," "The Money Master," etc.

I

THE Young Doctor opened the door of the bedroom slowly and stepped outside.

"It's all right," he said. "He'll pull through."

In the dark hall, only lighted by the subdued reflection of a lamp in the bedroom, a voice cried out in relief from a smothering anxiety.

"Oh—oh, thank God!" it said. Then its owner slid forward, caught the Young Doctor's hand and kissed it twice. "Bless you—bless you," the low, soft voice said.

It had a curious coaxing, almost pensive quality, which always touched sensitive ears. There was in it an intimate, confiding note natural to it and not springing from emotion of the moment. It was without assertion or self-confidence. In it were dependence and the confiding thing. It was not the voice which goes with beauty, for beauty most commonly has a peacock note in the voice. Beauty's voice has the note of power, and sympathy is not of its fiber.

Yet here Voice and Beauty were mated in one person, though Flora did not know how beautiful she was, or why her voice so affected animals and people. She had never dwelt upon her own beauty, and she could not hear her own voice.

When her lips touched the hand of the Young Doctor, he had the sudden desire to take both her hands in his and squeeze them hard; for now that the operation was over,—the most difficult he had ever performed,—there was an elation such as a great speaker feels who has had a vast audience in his power. He had done a remarkable piece of surgical work, at least remarkable for a general practitioner and for one apparently so young. He was always known as the Young Doctor, even when the years proved him middle-aged at last.

Tempted as he was, he did not, how-

ever, take Flora's hands: first, because it would not have been professional; and second, because Cyrus stood behind Flora, his eyes gone sullen with anger. She stood against her husband's bulk like a stem of golden-rod against a tree. Cyrus blotted out the faint light of the candle at the other end of the hall, and the dark background brought out the features of his wife's face as it caught the reddish reflection from the bedroom where her father lay quiet in the happy exhaustion following the operation.

Little disposed to dwell upon beauty when it came his way, and never tempted to loiter with it, the Young Doctor had a sudden sense of how really compelling and sweet was the beauty of the young wife with the glowering, jealous fellow towering behind her. Her hair was a Titian red; her face was a perfect oval, with dimples which gave her a childlike look. Her eyes—not large—were a strange, soft mixture of velvety gray, with a glint of subdued green and again a touch of brown, under eyebrows perfectly arched and a forehead with the serenity of a mind which has made few excursions into the world of thought. And when she smiled, her teeth were like ivory—a light within them, as it were, for it did not seem light falling upon them.

Flora's beauty struck the Young Doctor as it had never done before, because in her face was the heavenly relief which had flooded her mind and spirit. It made her radiant with a light which was more than that of joy or happiness. She had kissed the Young Doctor's hand in pure simplicity of spirit, and she would have kissed his lips at the moment with no thought that had the alloy of a physical emotion. Sense, in its ordinary meaning, was insulated.

"I love you for it—I love you," she said after a moment, when it seemed that she must weep for very joy. She seemed oblivious of the dark spirit towering over her.

FLORA had had no mother since she was seven, and her father had been both father and mother to her, companion and confidant, a haven of rest for her always. Small, white-bearded, white-haired, slightly lame always and walking with a stick, John Lansing had a native distinction which came from a primitive nature. He was an inspector under the Government; and if he was a lenient inspector, he was also an efficient one, for he had the gift of getting their best out of people, and by reason of his native simplicity he was astute and inseeing. "You can't fool Lansing," was a saying on his beat. He adored his daughter; yet he had encouraged and even innocently connived at her marriage, in his desire that she should be well placed when he was gone; for he knew his life was uncertain, as the sudden necessity for an operation had shown. He had thought Cyrus Boon the right sort of man for his daughter—well-to-do, healthy, strenuous, dominant. Like most men who are of frail make, he had a secret worship for the physically powerful.

He had, however, made a mistake for once in his life, for Cyrus Boon had proved a difficult husband. He had married a wife who was above him in all the finer things—with an instinct, an undefined aspiration, for a life beyond her, the doors to which had never yet been opened out to her. She was without vanity or self-consciousness, and she was in her way well content in her man; yet there came a time when he showed a sort of resentment toward her, spoke to her roughly, even sneered at her.

This was due in part to Augustus Burlingame, the lawyer, who had gathered Boon into his gambling circle, poisoning his mind also with a worldly knowledge of the relations of men and women, by no means good for the stalwart and strong-tempered, self-willed farmer, who had an irascible strain in him. While Burlingame had sowed pernicious seed in the nature of his impressionable friend, he also tried to find his way into the secret good-will of his friend's wife. Ignominiously failing in that, he then proceeded to sow distrust of his wife in Boon's mind by insinuating references to young and pretty women with ideas above themselves. When the Young Doctor began to at-

tend Flora's father in his illness, Burlingame, inordinately jealous of the physician's popularity, saw an opportunity to belittle him to Boon. He subtly questioned the wisdom of having so young a doctor in a house where there was a handsome young wife with no children.

So it was that when Flora, with a childlike impulsiveness, seized the Young Doctor's hand and kissed it, the hidden irascible strain, the morose egotism of Cyrus Boon's nature, broke out of leash into turbulent freedom. He had been drinking; he had also lost money at poker the night before, neglecting his wife in a passion to recover money which he had lost; and he was also chafing over Flora's reproaches of the morning. Roused out of her natural patience and sweet forbearance, by what she thought was her husband's indifference to her father's fate and to herself, she had spoken her mind as impulsively as she kissed the Young Doctor's hand. The day had been aflame with anxiety, and now with release from apprehension, she was only conscious of one thing—her father saved from death.

The lighted room beyond and her father lying there still and peaceful, his moaning over, was like a vision of heaven to her. She had no sense of what was brooding in the black nature behind her.

"I love you for it—I love you," she said to the Young Doctor, and stole into the room where Science had been the friend and servant of human love.

THE love Flora felt at that moment for the Young Doctor might have been shouted from the housetops; she spoke only in a whisper—but it sounded like a cataract, in the ears of her distempered husband.

If she had turned and looked her man in the eyes after she had kissed the Young Doctor's hand and used words capable of sinister interpretation by the unworthy, later sorrows might not have come. The wonderful, true look in her eyes might have prevailed over a primitively suspicious mind. The price to be paid for her pure inadvertence was high.

When she stole into the bedroom, the Young Doctor turned and entered also, apprehensive that she might disturb the patient, and Cyrus was left in the shadow of the hall, immovable and glowering. In the sight of the aggrieved husband, the Young Doctor gave the nurse and Flora directions, felt the pulse of the old man gently, and poured out a few drops of some powerful stimulant in a glass, placing it ready for the nurse's hand; then he whispered a brotherly word to the daughter whose father was restored to her, and left the room with a surgical-case in his hand. As he entered the hallway, shutting the door after him, Cyrus turned and made his way downstairs quickly.

The Young Doctor, instinctively disturbed by the situation, quickened his footsteps also. A few words at once with the sullen husband could do only good, he thought. When he reached the ground-floor, he saw Cyrus standing in the doorway of the dining-room, a threatening look in his face.

"Ah, Boon, we've had some luck to-day—I'm glad for all of you," the Young Doctor said calmly and with a friendly look.

"Come in here," returned Cyrus with an abrupt gesture.

An instant later the Young Doctor was in the dining-room standing near a small table on which he had placed his surgical-case.

"It looked at one time as if we couldn't keep him," he remarked coolly. "My diagnosis was right. I found what I expected, but I also found what I didn't expect, and it looked ticklish for a few minutes. It was a job for a big surgeon, really, and I was lucky in not losing him. I made up my mind just in time—just in time."

"Yes, you had a lot of luck to-day—and yesterday and the day before that, and every day since you bin attendin' here," Cyrus flung back in a hoarse voice. "You've had more luck than you'll get paid for in the way you want."

Suddenly his choler mounted higher; a black spirit was on him. He was

in the grip of the blind monster Jealousy.

"What you bin doin' in my house? What you bin doin' with my wife? What—"

"I've been saving a life dear to your wife, and doing her good," replied the Young Doctor, steadily facing the situation. "You ought to be grateful for that. You ought to be shaking my hand, Boon; for it has made your wife happy, and her happiness is yours."

THE young farmer made a harsh noise in his throat. "What's *your* happiness aint mine. I aint kissin' your hand; I aint sayin', 'I love you!'" Rage made Boon tremble. "You both," he cried, "ha' got the cheek of hell! She goes for me, her own husband, this mornin' with her teeth showin'—not fit to live, I aint; and to-night she kisses your hand before my face as if you was the Pope and says—says what she don't say to me that's got a right to have it said. You and she don't seem to care—do you think I'm blind? Do you think I aint got ears? Do you think it don't matter what you do? Got reckless, eh—here night and day, you and her—"

The Young Doctor, gone pale, but with eyes growing hard and determined, threw out a hand.

"Marrying a woman doesn't give you the right to slander her, Boon," he said sternly. "If you didn't *understand* what happened upstairs, before the nurse, before you, before her father, before God in Heaven, you don't deserve a wife. If you don't, you belong to some place God doesn't look at without saying He's sorry he made the world."

His words were slow, deliberate and scornful, for the slander of Flora roused every chivalrous instinct in his nature, and he would have liked to take the great bully by the throat. If he had been perfectly wise, he would have spoken differently, but he had been touched in a tender corner. He resented deeply the suggestion that he had been professionally dishonorable, and that gave a murderous irony to his words which inflamed the mind of this particular sort of man. Cyrus revolted against the fact that in the natures of both the Young Doctor and his wife were things he could not share, that they felt things he could neither feel nor understand.

Suddenly in an access of blind, insane anger, he snatched up a chair and flung it across the room at the Young Doctor, who was quick enough to dodge it; but it caught the surgical-case on the small table and brought it to the floor, the lid flying open and disclosing rows of bright knives. One of these was thrown out on the floor. The glitter of the thing caught Boon's maddened eye. He rushed forward and seized it, while the Young Doctor, again perfectly controlled and cool, watched him.

Presently, as Boon was about to rush on him, the Doctor said:

"That knife saved the life of Ned Sandys at Broken Creek last year, after he had hauled you out of the ruins of the bridge. You think a lot of Sandys for that. You ought to think a lot of me, and of that knife for what it did for Sandys. You soon got well, but Sandys was in bed for three months. Want to kill me with it, do you, Boon?"

For a minute the quivering man looked at the knife; then he dropped it on the floor, and with a growl as of a discomfited animal robbed of its prey, he stamped out of the room, slamming the door behind him. An instant later the outer door of the house slammed also.

The Young Doctor carefully and thoughtfully placed the knife in the case again, put on his hat, made toward the door of the hall and opened it. As he did so, he heard the sound of a woman's footsteps on the stairs.

"What is it? Oh, what is it?" said a tired and anxious voice. "Such noises!"

He had no desire to see Flora now. Making his way quickly to the door which led into the kitchen, he passed through and presently was in the open air, making for his buggy.

"I didn't manage that quite well," he reflected as he flicked his horses with his whip and they started briskly away towards Askatoon.

II

WHETHER the Young Doctor did or did not manage the thing as well as he might have done, his premonition that the incident had not ended was correct. For a day or two Cyrus was subdued and isolated himself; but it was not to continue. Flora, completely absorbed by her father's illness, was scarcely conscious of what the situation was. She knew nothing of what happened in the dining-room when Cyrus "went large," as they say in the West. She insisted on staying in her father's room at night, so relieving the nurse; and at meal-time one of Cyrus' two maiden sisters—Cornelia and Augusta—was usually present watching for opportunities to criticise, for they were jealous, with an evergreen sadness, of Flora's beauty and superior personality. On her part, Flora was uniformly cordial and gentle to Cornelia and Augusta and all of Cyrus' relations—even his cousin Euphenia Zaphe.

Euphenia — generally known as Phenie—was pert, good-looking, quick with her tongue and very much in the marriage-market. She would probably have married Cyrus, had he never seen Flora. Though Flora received her with good-nature at Rough Neck Ranch, it was always with a vague feeling of distrust. Phenie Zaphe was one of the girls of Askatoon who had offended public opinion by receiving the sly, but not sufficiently sly, attentions of the notorious Augustus Burlingame for a period,—fortunately not too long a period,—and who, proving too difficult for him, were "left upon the shore," as the song goes. Phenie was much too careful and selfish to sacrifice herself to the profligate Burlingame, not because he was a profligate, but for other common-sense reasons: she wanted to get married; and for her, she looked high. She even looked as high as the Young Doctor.

SO when, several days after the operation, she came to midday dinner at Cyrus' house, it was with the good chance of meeting the Young Doctor—by chance. She was clever enough to visit the ranch on ironing- and churning-day; and she came early in the morning, put on an apron and began to help with the household work (and afterwards with the ironing) before Flora even knew of her presence. Quick, neat and bustling, she was really useful; and Flora, greatly pressed, was glad of her services and for the first time in her life kissed the young schemer almost warmly when she came to know of her presence. How should she know what was in Phenie's mind? Why should she expect another to look forward to the Young Doctor's coming as eagerly as she did herself, though in a wholly different way?

The Young Doctor's visits twice a day—at noon and in the late evening—had come to be happy events in her life, especially when she realized that Cyrus was becoming more sullen every day. He had spoken brutally to her several times since her father's operation, and he had ceased to show her any sign of affection, scarcely to take any notice of her presence, even; and when at last she no longer remained at night in her father's bedroom, and returned to her own room, he slept in a bunk in the great dining-room of the house. She knew full well that this was not due to any consideration for her.

On the day that Phenie Zaphe came, Flora was in a tremulous state. This was in part due to the overstrain of nursing, in part to a growing sense that Cyrus had turned against her. She was not conscious that she was desperately hungry for sympathy and kindness, that she had entered a danger-zone. If she welcomed Phenie warmly that day, her welcome of the Young Doctor, when he came, was almost ardent. Somehow she felt alone and deserted. This was natural, after all she had endured of late. Her sudden weakness was only of the day, but behind it was an aching realization of the cloud settling on her married life.

When the Young Doctor came, just before dinner was laid, she stood awaiting him at the foot of the stairs with flushed cheeks and appealing eyes, which he met with a calm friendliness—a real professional friendliness;

for he was too deep a student of life not to know what was working in her, and too true a man not to deal with the situation sanely. He had only met Cyrus once since the painful incident in the dining-room on the night of the operation, and he had spoken and acted as though nothing had happened; but he was only too well aware that a rank poison was working in the man's mind, which might suddenly induce some rash act imperiling the future. For Flora he had a deep sympathy and regard, into which no wanton emotion entered. He was sorry for her, and he was anxious to "pull things straight again for her," as he said to himself. When he saw Phenie Zaphe in the garden of the house, as he drove up, he had a sense of discomfort and annoyance, knowing her meddlesome nature. He thought it well, however, to have a few friendly words with her, in the hope that he might catch at what was working in her mind.

PHENIE was playing her game for all she was worth, and while pretending to great frankness, she was cautious in what she said. She was not so cautious, however, that presently the Young Doctor could not read what really lay behind those black eyes, so cheerfully roving, and the red lips breaking into smiles on the pale, somewhat careworn face—for she had fretted greatly because, while other lesser souls were mated after their hearts' desires, she remained unsatisfied.

"Flora's waiting for you; she's all on pins and needles," was her remark to him, and she keenly watched the effect of her words. "I don't see why she should be so strung up this morning, for her father's doing all right. He's sitting up in bed this morning. But there she is waiting for you as though you were her only hope and only friend."

The words were said with a smile, but the Young Doctor did not fail to understand. "Well," he replied, "that's the way to look at it. Faith does much in making things come to pass that we want to come to pass. Haven't you found that out—or aren't you a believer in that sort of thing? Have you ever tried it?"

Her eyes coquetted with his, for she did not know whether he meant to be sarcastic or not, and it was safer to assume that he meant no sarcasm. There seemed to be no irony in his eye. Now that she saw it looking into hers so serenely and yet inquiringly, she felt the most real feeling of emotion for a man she had ever known. She realized that she wanted the Young Doctor not only for a husband who could give her a name and a home of her own, but that she wanted him for himself as a lover. And all at once, with the newborn revelation, she also realized that Flora might at any moment feel what she now felt for this man—might, indeed, do so now. It did not matter to her that Flora was married. Flora could still stand in her way, though she could not marry the Young Doctor!

"I'm a child of nature, not of the imagination," she answered. "If you were my doctor, I wouldn't get fluttered like Flora. I'd just put things in your hands and keep cool."

"Yes, I'd trust to your keeping cool," he rejoined, laughing, not ill-pleased at the flattery, while rejecting it in fact. "Almost cold-blooded, I'm thinking. I should feel afraid of you."

She coquetted her eyes at him again. "Shall I pick you a basket of strawberries to take home?" she asked. "I'll show you I have some feeling for a man who lives alone as you do."

She certainly was playing a bold game, and in that she was right. The Young Doctor would more admire a woman who showed her hand than one who used obviously stealthy methods.

"Come and let me introduce you to my cook one day, and see what she says to that," he remarked.

He thought it well to humor her, for she was no insignificant factor in this house, or in any house where she might be; and it was well to have good feeling all around. He was wise in his way,—very wise,—but he ought to have known that if this girl added any real emotion to her obvious angling, she might prove more troublesome than helpful to Flora and this household.

INDEED, that is what happened; for when, a few moments later, Flora eagerly put a hand on the Young Doctor's arm in greeting and welcome, something more than ordinary cattishness possessed Phenie; she became jealous—and dangerous. She could have no idea of the course which the Young Doctor was pursuing; she only realized that Flora was not in favor with her husband, that the Young Doctor was a most sympathetic person, and that if she were the Young Doctor she would take every advantage of the situation.

She would have been relieved if she had heard the Young Doctor say to Flora a little later: "I shall only need to come once in every four or five days from this time on—he is so much better. It is nursing now; nothing else is needed."

If she had heard that, perhaps she would not have dropped into Cyrus' already darkened mind and rabid soul a fresh tincture of pernicious suspicion. To her credit be it said she did not realize how pernicious it was. She felt that Flora was a fool, and she wanted the Young Doctor to herself, if she could get him; and for the first time since she had known him, she had some hope. The Young Doctor had miscalculated in being kind to her, in being a little less than frank.

III

FOR a whole month the Young Doctor, Flora and Cyrus Boon did not meet: for a whole month Euphenia Zaphe cherished a hope doomed to disappointment. The Young Doctor made no move towards her. There was nothing tender in his smiling eyes when they met, and a waspishness entered the mind and hid at the lips of one who felt that life was betraying her, one of its secret servants being this very man who had really moved her egotistic soul.

There was no day in which the Young Doctor did not wonder what was going on at Rough Neck Ranch, where Flora and her husband were working out their destinies. He thought it a blot upon the eternal scheme of things that two people who might well have been happy together should look at each other over a gradually widening abyss of misunderstanding. Fine, sensitive and good to see as Flora was, there was also in Cyrus, with his rougher fiber, his more strenuous and burly qualities, a spirit, which rightly touched, and a mind, which happily lighted, might have been the balance to his wife's nature and have made a perfect companionship and a radiant home-life. Their individual qualities were so emphatic, so distant from each other in one sense, however, that each would need some shock of soul to bring them together in the true home-sense.

"At bottom this man's all right," the Young Doctor said to himself more than once. "He sees that she's above him in some ways; he feels himself inferior; and it maddens him. That's how the trouble started; and that rogue Burlingame, and our night-hawk, our bright little, bad little Euphenia, have been much too busy. It's drinking and cards and surly touchiness, and the whisperers who whisper just the one thing that can throw him out of gear! What's to be done?"

He was out on the prairie driving towards Mayo Ranch while he ruminated thus, and as he looked around over the sunny prospect and the fruitful waste, it seemed too bad that anybody should be unhappy where all was so sumptuous, shining and serene.

"I suppose," he said to himself as his eyes drank in the wondrous scene, "I suppose that I would do more for them—do more to bring them together—than anyone else out here, because I understand them best, because she's worth any good that could come to her. Yet I can do nothing at all. I can do less than anyone else, because—because she forgot I was a man, and knew I was a friend. Heaven help the fellow's foolishness. When I want a woman, I'll have my own, and perhaps I wont be any more sensible than Cyrus Boon—but yes, I will, if Euphenia doesn't fetch me home a captive." He laughed. "If it was Euphenia, I think I'd throw chairs as Cyrus did. Hang Euphenia!"

FOR several minutes the Young Doctor kept his eyes half shut, thinking in his philosophic way of the hundreds of problems which he had seen worked out in the homes of Askatoon and round about him, problems which involved the happiness of so many. And as he reflected, a half-ironic smile was on his lips, for it seemed to him that Fate, or Providence, or whatever it was, gave with one hand and took away with the other, and yet gave again rarely at the last, where it seemed worth while, where the taking-away had given understanding.

After a long time he looked up, and his keen eyes swept the prairie. He seemed suddenly conscious of something happening. Presently, as he gazed, he was aware of some one in a buggy on the crosstrail not far away waving a handkerchief toward him.

It was a woman standing beside a buggy, with the wheel gone. He could not see her face—it was too far away; but the figure was familiar. He swung his horses out from the trail, and cut across the rough, unfenced prairie.

"I thought it was you," he said as he drew up beside the shipwrecked buggy.

"I knew your horses," the woman rejoined as she held out her hand. "I knew your roans. They have a gait and a color all their own."

"Well, this is bad luck, my friend," he said as he looked at the wrecked wheel; "and you're five miles from Askatoon!"

"Oh, I can walk," Flora answered, flushing, for he seemed to take little interest in her plight.

"Yes, of course you can walk," he replied, "and so can I, though I'm not going to, and so here goes your buggy off the trail. We'll tie your horses up behind my rig, and we'll be off in no time."

"You're going to take me to Askatoon?" she asked, a curious, eager look coming into her eyes.

He smiled quizzically. "I didn't say that," he replied. "You said you'd walk, but if you'd like to drive, and can bear driving with me, your chariot is ready."

He proceeded to take the horses from her buggy.

"I wish what you say was true," Flora replied.

He looked at her over the backs of the horses with humor in his eyes. "Well, if I knew what you meant, I might be able to say something," he returned dryly. "But pity the ignorant—"

"I meant,"—there was a slight quiver in her voice,—"I meant that if I had all you have, I'd have your brains; and if I had your brains I'd have more sense; and if I had more sense, I'd see the right thing to do when it ought to be done."

"And a very fine speech too," he remarked as he drew the horses away from the wagon-tongue and tied them behind his own buggy. "Now, off comes the wreckage," he added cheerfully as he pulled the wagon off the trail and put the broken wheel in the body of it.

AS he did so, she kept looking at him reflectively with a puzzled expression on her face. In the past he had always treated her with a sort of benevolent friendliness suggesting the attitude of an almost privileged relative. He had changed, or so it seemed to her. Yet, in fact, it was she who had changed and if he was different to her in his manner and words, it was because he had instantly recognized the change in her. He saw from her face that things had not bettered at home, but he also saw a look in her eyes which made him anxious. It was the brooding, steadfast, waiting look which a woman gives to a man in whom she has become interested, the look that comes long before any words are spoken which betray the mind, or any act which betrays the desire.

"Well, I'm a prophet," he answered playfully, "and I think you'll do more with your intelligence than you ever could with what you call your brain: and, if you please, Mrs. Cyrus Boon, your chariot is waiting!" he added gayly. He motioned to the seat of the buggy. She got in.

"Would you like the top up?" he asked.

It was one of those buggies peculiar to the American lands, with a leather top like an umbrella, and the sides and back open. The top protects from the sun; also by its resistance to the breeze, if there is any, it creates a pleasant current of air; but that was not the reason why Flora said yes.

With the top up, she would have the feeling that the world was shut out; that they would be more together, more companionable, more friendly, more alone. She did not put this in so many words. If she could have got as far as that, she would in timidity have shrunk away from him; yet that was the inner meaning of it, unrealized by her.

As they drove along there was silence for some time. The horses behind seemed trying to keep step with the horses in front, and it was as though the Young Doctor were interested in the matter. Presently the *thud-thud* of the hoofs on the soft prairie trail were as one. It was very pleasant: the shade, the slight breeze, the silent woman with the faint color to her cheeks, and hands folded in her lap, so curiously neat and effective, in so curiously simple a dress. She was so straight and well poised that she looked distinguished. Yet she was only a ranchman's wife, who had never seen a great city, or the sea, or had been to an opera, or to a great play, or had studied a great statue or a great picture, or heard a great orchestra, or even a great speech; and she was mated to one almost a giant—heavy, with a lumbering mind, with blind prejudices; and yet, as the Young Doctor had divined, down beneath all in the man was an honest soul, twisted somewhat out of place, as the heart or some other organ might be in the human body, disturbing the whole organism.

PRESENTLY, as though they had been talking, as though it were the continuance of a conversation, Flora said in such a voice as one uses for a story—the once-upon-a-time voice:

"I want to tell you about it. I know what happened that day. I saw the broken chair in the dining-room. It was dreadful to me. At last I spoke to him about it, and he said it was true; that he would have killed you, if it was not for what you had said about the knife."

She shuddered and shut her eyes for a moment.

"It's no good talking about it," the Young Doctor said soothingly. "It's really no good. I hoped it was all right by this time. He was off his head."

She did not look at him. She had kept her eyes fixed in front of her—on the far horizon in front of her.

"No, it's not all right, and I must talk—I must tell you," she said. "I should be afraid of him if it weren't that I think you weren't afraid of him, and you mastered him. He didn't tell me that, but I know it. He could have killed you, but you wouldn't let him. You mastered him with your mind, and when I think of you, and how you mastered him, I try and feel the same, and I make myself go to sleep at night. I don't think he's in his right senses."

Her hands wrung each other, separated and then clasped again; a paleness overspread her face; her lips seemed dry and parched; in her eyes there was a bright fire.

"I have always been true to him in every way," she continued. "I always wanted to be. At first we were happy."

He interposed. "I don't think you ought to tell me; I really don't. It's not my business."

"I must tell it to some one. I can't stand it alone. I must not tell my father; he doesn't see. He only thinks that Cyrus is troubled about things on the ranch, about the cattle-disease, and all that. There's no one else I can tell, no one I can trust. Besides, *you* understand—you're the only one that does understand," she persisted. "I was happy at first—oh, wonderfully happy; and I thought he was too. Then every man I spoke to—and I didn't care for any man in any way—seemed to upset him. For a whole year it was like that, and then you came and saved my father's life!"

SHE suddenly turned and looked at him straight in the eyes, and he saw a look which was not there the night

when the operation was performed, when she had kissed his hand, and said, "I love you for it—I love you."

He knew that she would not have kissed his hand now, that she would not say, "I love you for it!" She would not say it, because—she did not feel toward him in the same way, because it meant a different thing now. It was not the primitive, childlike thing; it came from the heart of a woman bullied, bruised, pursued with rancor, made to feel the victim of brute force. In her eyes now was revolt, appeal to be befriended, was what would have made her shudder if she had really understood it; for the quiet self-control and human wisdom of the man beside her seemed a haven to her. Had there been passion and pursuit in his eyes, she probably would have revolted from him and from what it all was; but the fact that she felt he believed in her, that he even cared for her in some way or another, produced in her, through her agitation, through the burning of her heart and the hungry trouble of her soul, that spurious passion which belongs to the abnormal condition. All tremulous excitement produces the lower, or at least the more primitive, forms of feeling—and how kind and wise and handsome this man beside her looked!

She did not quite know what she was doing or saying; that is, she did not know what it meant; but if he had put his arms around her and kissed her now, she would not have thought it strange. Yet the Young Doctor had wisdom to know that it was only the half-delirium in her which came from not possessing the happiness of her true fate; and he was a good man as men go, and where he lacked in goodness he had wisdom. In one sense he almost wished he might have taken her in his arms and hypnotized her by the strength of his will into quietness. He saw the sudden wild fever in her eyes; he saw the danger. He laid a cool hand on both of hers, and said:

"Now, if you will only be patient, everything will come all right. I don't know how yet, but it will. I feel it in my bones." He smiled at her; he almost laughed. He saw that any show of emotion on his part might produce collapse and hysteria, with its tears, and with it greater dangers still.

HE felt one of her hands move as though it would be free to—he knew not what. He clasped both hands firmly in his own strong grasp. "My dear child," he continued, smiling still more and with good cheer in his eyes, "I promise you that all will be well. I am a seer—I am a prophet. The kind of trouble you are in comes to everybody, to all married people at one time or another in their lives—perhaps not in the same way—of course not in the same way; but there always is a time of danger in married life when everything looks as though it would go to pieces. Then, if you are steady and good and straight, as God wants you to be, and don't let go, don't fly off, don't splash about in your own tears, why, it all comes out right. I tell you, Flora Boon, flower of the prairie,"—he talked as though to a little child.—"if this thing isn't right within another week, call me a quack and cook me for a goose!"

He saw the red lights of danger slowly fade from her eyes; he felt the tension of her hands go.

"Come, it's all right now. Pull yourself together like a hero. We're in Askatoon, and there are lots of eyes here that like to see what's going on. Steady now. Is it all right?" he asked encouragingly.

"I don't know what you've done to me. Have you given me some medicine?" she asked with a sad smile.

"That's it," he answered.

They were in the principal street of the town now. He looked keenly along the sidewalks. Not a hundred yards away was Phenie Zaphe!

IV

THERE is nothing more vigilant on earth than a jealous mind. It sees all there is to see, and generally twenty times more, and when two jealous minds coincide, the Devil may take a holiday. Two such met, and one whispered and the other

snarled within a few hours of the entrance of Flora Boon and the Young Doctor into Askatoon.

That night, after supper had been laid upon the table at Rough Neck Ranch, and before husband and wife sat down, Cyrus, tortured and enraged by what Phenie had told him, broke into the peace of his home-life as a wounded elephant might crash through the undergrowth of a jungle. The home-life of Rough Neck Ranch had indeed become a jungle. There was an undergrowth of misery and misunderstanding which might easily and quickly end in tragedy. Phenie had made up her mind that the Young Doctor and Flora were no better than they ought to be, and she had said as much to Cyrus.

As he challenged Flora, Cyrus' face was distorted with passion; the desire to kill was on him. There is something in huge strength, in great stature and girth, which is a terrible temptation to its possessor. Its sheer bulk in action seems impossible of control to the ordinary will and intelligence.

Cyrus had scarcely said anything when, in the afternoon, Flora had told him of the breakdown on the prairie; and between that time and supper he had seen Phenie, and the war-spirit was on him. He was an uncontrolled force which would take no heed of anything in his way. Madness makes no selection. It seemed monstrous that this great, infuriated animal should storm down upon a delicate, frightened woman. When he broke out, his voice was shaking with ungovernable passion; his eyes were bloodshot with distemper; his great body swayed like that of a wild animal.

To herself, Flora kept saying, "He's mad, he's mad!" Fear filled her heart.

IT was not fear only of wild words, of even the physical injury he might do her, but fear of the insane thing in him. It was horrible that two people, who had sworn faith and love till death to each other, who in each other's arms had seen the night spread its coverlet of peace over them and the morning shake its banners of sun in greeting, should front each other so.

"I know all about it, I know all about it," he shot out. "You're only a rip—carrying on with a doctor that's got the free entry where you are, just because he's a doctor. Why don't you go off with him and have done with it? P'r'aps you want me to kill him first? I could do that without thinking twice, and I could bury him, and stamp the ground over him, and glad to do it. You don't know how to be a wife. You can't go straight—"

The horror in her eyes gave way suddenly to resolution and indignation. She was innocent, in act at least, and only by her acts ought she to be judged.

"Do you think you've got a right to say such things to me because I'm your wife?" she asked bravely, and with a new spirit. "I've been a true and faithful wife to you, Cyrus. Until you began to treat me as though I was dirt under your feet, I didn't think of anything else but you and my home and our life together. I've never done anything to be ashamed of, and you speak to me as if I were a bad woman! You have no right to do so. Your mind is poisoned. If my father wasn't an old man with one foot in the grave, I'd tell him. You wouldn't dare to say what you have to me if I had anyone to protect me. A great, huge creature like you, to say these things to a girl like me, that's got little more strength than a child, that you know you could break in two as you'd break a match! Oh, I know—with your big hands you could choke me to death in a minute—I know it. Why don't you do it, and have it over?"

"You kissed him. You said you loved him," he exclaimed.

"Yes, I kissed him, and I said to him, 'I love you for it,'" she returned almost defiantly. "I loved him for having saved my father's life. I kissed the hand that saved my father. I wasn't thinking of him as a man. My heart was full. If I wanted to be what you think I am, do you suppose I'd have done it with you there? I wouldn't be such a fool. I was honest. I only did what came into my head. I loved my father. He never spoke an unkind word to me in all my

life. He believed in me. He knew I never lied." Her voice became low and tremulous. "He let me be what I was, without trying to put me into a straight-jacket. I grew up free. I married you, a free woman.

"Since then I've not been free. I was at first—or thought I was. I loved you. You were good to me. I thought you believed in me. I loved having a home of my own and a man of my own. I knew you were different from me, and that only made me want to get closer to you; but you pushed me away. I don't know why it was, but you pushed me away. Farther and farther away you've been pushing me, till now it's as though I were a beetle that ought to be trod on—that ought to be trod into the dust. You're killing all in me that's worth while keeping. Everything of me was all yours, but you're strangling it to death. What right have you to do that? You can kill my body, and I sha'n't care; but I'll hate you forever and ever for trying to kill my heart and soul."

SHE was pale and wan; her eyes were large with a suffering which seemed to wonder why she should be tortured so; her hands were clenched at her side. Tragedy, deeper than murder or death, was consuming her. She seemed to speak like one in a dream.

The strange, almost mysterious monotony of her voice, the far-away agony of her eyes, the pathetic misery of her look, the power of her spirit, seemed suddenly to produce in Cyrus a sense of awe. This was like nothing he had ever known or seen; this was not the face, this was not the graceful, yielding body he had looked at so many hundreds of times. It was something transformed—terribly transformed. It buffeted his rage; it confused and abashed him. In a sense it produced in him apprehension. He would not have been afraid of a man a foot taller than his six-foot-three. He had not intelligence enough of the right sort to understand this, to him, mysterious transformation.

Suddenly he shrank dumfounded from the strange, isolated, pain-struck figure before him. He had seen men hurt, he had seen them killed, he had seen women suffer: this was different, however. The reckless rage and ruthless tyranny with which he had entered upon this conflict were suddenly neutralized. He breathed hard; he looked ill. The purple flush on his face when he began to torture her had faded to an almost greenish pallor. It seemed hardly possible that a man of such rough fiber should undergo such a curious reaction.

He thrust out a hand in angular, spasmodic protest.

"I got to think all that over," he said in a shaken voice. "I don't know where I am. I'm going—" He turned as though to leave the room.

Native, elemental woman stirred in her. The everlasting domestic spirit showed itself. In a vague way she felt she had conquered, if not wholly.

"Sit down and have some supper, Cyrus," she said in a low voice—still, however, as though in the rigid grasp of some remorseless thing. She tried to smile as she spoke, but it was not good to see. It was only a pathetic make-believe. Yet she realized that she had shaken him, that she had stayed the plague, as it were. He looked like one stricken with mortal trouble—haggard, shaken, dreadfully pale.

"I can't eat—I got to think. It's been hell. I'm going onto the prairie," he muttered; and with that, not looking at her again, he opened the door, stepped out and shut it behind him quietly.

For a moment she stood immovable, looking at the closed door; but in the look of her face was a glimmer of light. She listened painfully until the outer door of the house closed and she heard his footsteps outside.

There was the uneaten meal on the table; there were the two empty chairs; there was the cradle in the corner which had never been used, because her baby girl had died at birth; there was no sound save the ticking of the grandfather's clock. For a long time she sat still, isolated from all contact with the visible, actual world. Then she sat down in her own chair at the table. She did not eat, but once she drank a goblet of water.

AT last, upon the silence, there came the tap of a stick overhead. She got up quickly. "I forgot. Oh, I forgot Father!" she said reproachfully to herself. Then she left the room noiselessly and went upstairs.

While she was gone, the servant came into the room, saw the untasted food and the empty chairs and removed to the kitchen again the hot meat and vegetables she had placed on the table. She left the table set, however. Something was going on she could not understand. Her master and mistress had not eaten supper. That was like breaking all the commandments at once.

When she looked in again a half-hour later, Flora sat in her chair at the table.

"Keep everything hot," Flora said in a low, even voice.

For hours she sat so—until it was past midnight. Then she went to the kitchen.

"Go to bed," she said to the servant. "I will keep things hot until he comes back."

The servant whimpered, left the kitchen and went creaking up the stairs to bed.

One—two—three—four—five o'clock came, and Cyrus had not returned. Daylight was over the land.

With a newborn fear, Flora searched the house. He might have come in unheard, she thought. There was no trace of him. She went out and searched the sheds, the barn and the stables without success. She remembered his haggard, shattered look as he left the room where the supper lay still untasted. A sharp premonition seized her. She summoned the farmhands.

TWO hours later, Cyrus was carried into the house and upstairs to the great corn-husk bed on which he always slept. He was unconscious; he had been so for hours. Some one had gone for the Young Doctor at once; the Young Doctor was away, and another, his inconsequent rival, was brought.

"It's been hanging on him a long time," this doctor said. "It isn't the loss of blood he got from falling on that spike. He's almost bled to death, but that's not what will kill him—if he dies."

"It's for you to make him live," Flora said firmly. "There's no need for him to die."

"Perhaps you'd like another doctor," remarked the old practitioner irritably.

"I don't want another doctor to take your place, but if it's a difficult case, wouldn't you like a consultation?" she asked with complete self-possession, for she had an inner conviction that Cyrus would not die. She was equally convinced that he was very ill; and she soothed her heart and soul by saying to herself that he had been ill for a long time, and that his ugly treatment of herself was due to his disease.

The old practitioner had his own secret doubts as to the case. He was not certain either of his diagnosis or of the treatment to be pursued, apart from cleansing the blood from the wound made by the spike on which Cyrus had fallen, and taking what measures were possible against blood-poisoning.

"Whom will you call in?" he asked.

She gave the Young Doctor's name.

The old practitioner's face fell. "Send for him, then," he answered reluctantly, almost petulantly. As a professional man, however, he had faith in her choice.

Suddenly she changed her mind. "No, I will not send for the Young Doctor. Choose some one else," she said decisively.

What was working in her mind must be for those to understand who know what a woman is, who has the deeper logic of the emotions which never touch a man.

So it was that two doctors labored to save the life of Cyrus Boon, whose illness developed swiftly and dangerously.

V

ONE day there came a message to the Young Doctor that his presence was urgently required at Rough Neck Ranch. He had long been puzzled by the reports which came to him of how Cyrus had wasted away, and the curious nature of his disease, to

which the doctors had not given a name; and he had chafed at the thought that unhappy circumstances made his presence at Rough Neck Ranch undesirable. He had a feeling that he might be of use.

But now that a message came from Flora, his decision was instantly taken.

Arrived at the ranch where the other two doctors were waiting, Flora met him in the hallway, entered the dining-room with him and shut the door. She was dry-eyed and pale, but she was composed, and she had a look of resolution in her eyes.

"They say he will die," she said. "I don't believe it. They don't understand. Cyrus wouldn't let me send for you, and the doctors wouldn't insist. I had to wait. Now he is unconscious. They think there is no hope for him. I believe there is. I have faith in you. Something tells me you can save him. The other doctors act so queer. It's as though he must die, but that he might be saved. I don't know what they mean. Why don't they save him if he can be saved? But this morning they told me there was no hope. So I sent for you."

She paused, moved her hands slowly over her brow, held her eyes lightly with her fingers for a moment and then continued:

"If there's any hope, you will know it. If anything can be done, you will do it. . . . . He is very dear to me. Lying there so helpless, he that was so strong and great, I forget everything. I only think of him as he was when I first married him, and we were happy together. Somehow the great gap between us is closing up. It is not death—I wont believe it is death that's closing it up. He understands now. I know, I feel—though he's said nothing when he's been conscious—he understands me better now, or he will. Phenie Zaphe came here twice. She wanted to help me in the house, but I wouldn't let her stay. I don't know why I didn't say something dreadful to her. She's done a lot of harm, but I understand about her. She's lonely; she wants a man and her own home. I can't help being sorry for her, but I wont have her here—not at any time."

AGAIN she paused; again her fingertips held her eyes an instant as though they pained her. Then she looked the Young Doctor in the face, and a firm look took the place of the moment's emotion.

"You must save him," she said. "I know you can—you are so wise and clever."

He had not spoken a single word since he had entered the room. He had let her talk on. He was glad that it should be so. She was emptying out the crystals of weeks of thought—the pent-up feelings and reflections which, over the hot fire of her anxiety, pain and bitterness, she had burned down to a few inevitable facts of the mind. It was as though she were confessing, as though she were telling a story to the ear of a priest. It was so open, so full of perfect confidence, so free from the half-hysterical emotion of their last meeting—the dangerous half-hysterical emotion—that he had no desire to say a single word. But his look encouraged her; it was a look which had put hundreds of troubled minds at their ease, for most sick people have far more than troubles of the body to give them pain. The trouble of the body seldom ravages alone.

At last she paused again, and then he said with a grave smile: "I will do all that it's possible to do, if it hasn't already been done. You know that. Remember, I told you when last we talked together that all would come right. I don't want to be a bad prophet. Come, and let's see if what I said isn't true. The other two doctors wont like to have me here, but that doesn't matter."

A few moments later he was in consultation—in grave and anxious consultation—with his medical colleagues, who had welcomed him with constraint, but also with the unspoken acknowledgment that they were in the presence of one of more account than themselves. On his part, the Young Doctor treated them as though they were of great account, listened to their tale of diagnosis and judgment, of the course of the illness, of things that puzzled them, of the curious nature of the malady, of the weakness from loss of blood, of the strange and unnatural impoverishment of a powerful constitution.

Fifteen minutes later the Young Doctor had completed his examination. When it was over, with his chin in his hands, he stood gazing with concentrated reflection at the figure in the bed. There was in his face at once the light of knowledge and a look which made him appear older. A deep gravity possessed him. He turned to the other doctors at last, and said:

"You feel hopeless about it?"

Both nodded. They were certain that the course of the disease was carrying everything to a sure exit hence.

"It has occurred to you, of course," remarked the Young Doctor, with the faintest note of irony in his voice, "that there is a possible cure, that he has a chance?"

Purposely he did not look at them, because he knew that they did not understand, that there would be confusion in their faces. He was right. Each had a startled and abashed look.

"Of course you have hesitated because of the heroic nature of the remedy," he continued calmly. "But I don't think we should hesitate. The three of us together agreeing should be enough. The risk must be taken by some one with the courage to do it. In his condition a great deal of blood is needed, the blood of some one not too old, not too young—of a perfectly healthy person." Now he looked at them. "You agree, do you not?" he asked.

He knew that all he was saying to them was new and startling, that they had never considered the remedy which he was putting forward, but that they would grasp it now—that there should be transfusion of blood from some healthy body into the veins of the unconscious man upon the bed.

THE other practitioners looked at each other a little shamefacedly, but with understanding, too. They had never diagnosed as he had done; had never thought of his remedy; but they could not allow him to take the entire credit for it if he succeeded. They had sufficient knowledge of their profession to realize that probably he was right. It might save the apparently dying man. It certainly could do no harm to anyone except to whomever offered his veins for the sacrifice.

"We didn't feel we had the right to ask anyone to take the risk," said one of the two, boldly lying.

The Young Doctor's eyes half closed. He knew it was a lie, and reflected on it for an instant ironically, and then he said, "Quite right," adding presently, "In any case, both of you were too old to take the risk. No one over fifty should take it. His wife would do so willingly enough, no doubt, but she's too unstrung at present; and so, if you will just make him ready and prepare to open the vein in his arm—here, let's have a look," he broke off. Then he slowly exposed the upper arm of the patient. "We have the place here," he added.

With a further description of the operation, he answered the puzzled look of his fellow-doctors by saying: "I'll sit here on a chair by the bed, with my arm lying so beside him, and you'll pass the blood from my veins into his until I feel I've given all that's necessary or all I can give. I've got all that's needed, in any case."

As the whole meaning of the thing, and his purpose, dawned upon his fellow-doctors, they protested, but his reply was, as he opened his surgical-case, that he could more easily gauge how much blood he dare lose than could be gauged if some one else were willing to do the thing. His air was determined. His matter-of-fact view of

the proposal steadied them to the normal.

"There's no time to lose," he said. "Let's get ready."

TIME passed. The work was done at last.

"You—you did that for me. You gave your life's blood—to save him!" Flora said slowly to the Young Doctor, as if every word were a portent, and with a flame of emotion in her face at the wonder of the thing. "You saved my father, and now at the risk of your own life you have saved Cyrus. You've done that for him, after—!"

The Young Doctor rose slowly and a little feebly from the chair in which he was seated. His face was pale. A faint smile played lightly at his lips. "Well, not altogether as you think it," he replied. "A life is a life, and it's my business to save it if I can, no matter whose it is. I'm no hero. Also there are those to be made happy by the life saved."

"I shall never live long enough to pay you what I owe you," she responded with her bosom heaving and her eyes moist and glad.

"Well, take good care of him, and make what I've done worth while," he answered, moving slowly toward the door, for he felt dizzy in spite of his composed look.

The other doctors eyed him a little anxiously. He had conquered them. In the days that were to come, a new feeling would possess their minds where he was concerned. They themselves were incapable of such sacrifice as he had shown. One of them insisted on going home with him; the other remained to see—as the Young Doctor knew and had phophesied—Cyrus Boon open his eyes on the straight road to recovery and health. The Young Doctor had taken him past the Crossroads.

A FEW days afterward Flora told Cyrus who had saved him—who had brought him back from the Gates that only open outwards.

"I'd like to tell him what I think of him. You go and ask him to come here," Cyrus said huskily. "You go yourself and ask him," he insisted, and his eyes had a look good to see.

"He's in bed—sick," she answered.

"Because of what he done for me?" Cyrus asked.

She nodded. There was a short pause.

"I've got his blood in my veins. He's a brother of mine now, aint he?" Cyrus asked.

She smiled and nodded again. He held out his arms to her.

"I was mad, but I'm all right now. Perhaps it was the disease that set me goin'," he said, hoping she would agree.

"I'm sure it was," she answered gently, and held his hand. He kissed her with the awkwardness and eagerness of a big boy. "We're going to start again, aint we, Flo?" he asked, giving a great sigh of happiness and contentment.

He did not wait for her to answer. Gently he pushed her away from him. "You go to him," he continued. "You go to him. I don't need you now. I'm all right. You go and nurse him, and don't come back till he's well. Then you bring him here. Don't you mind what anybody thinks. It's all right. I say so. That's what I think of him and you. That's the kind of man I am now. You tell him he's got to get well. I can get along all right without you for a while. Tell him that p'r'aps with his blood in my veins I'll go about doin' good like him. You go tell him you love him—I understand now! By gosh, I love him, too!"

He and she had a vision of the Greater Love: that in which a man will lay down his life for a friend—or a foe.

A Promoter Of Pure Provender

Pinkie is a road-hopper who freely admits that he has a handsome person, an engaging manner, a gift of acute observation and a copious vocabulary. This is the story, told in Mr. Harris' most delightful vein, of the good one that Pinkie puts over in a certain Illinois town.

By KENNETT HARRIS

Author of "Marrying Mr. Micklejohn," "It's Always Some Girl or Another," etc.

PINKIE is the name. Goes well with Pomona, too—what? Perigrinating Promoter of Pure Provender—traveling salesman —road-hopper — drummer — formerly with Peter Struwell & Co., wholesale groceries, St. Louis—also a regretful memory to Canby & Bliss in the same line, Chicago, who foolishly allowed me to slip away from them on a question involving a paltry eight dollars a month. They were foolish, because—well, I'm a modest man, and I shall just say that I am fairly successful in selling goods. A slight but handsome person, an undeniable taste in dress, an engaging manner, a gift of acute observation and a tolerably copious vocabulary are among my advantages, so I naturally would be successful.

KENNETT HARRIS will have another attractive story in the August BLUE BOOK—indeed, his stories, with those of Gilbert Parker, will appear every other month this year, alternating with those of Peter B. Kyne and Walter Jones, which will begin next month.

Speaking of observation, I have observed that woman is like the flowers that bloom in the spring, inasmuch as she is, broadly speaking, a thing of fragrant beauty; but unlike the vernal blossoms aforesaid, she nearly always has something to do with the case; and such being so, the study of Janie is, in my opinion, a very useful part of a course in salesmanship. Twit me with biscuit-shooter-buzzing if you will; I care not a whit for any twit you can twitter, so long as I get the tender part of the steak and my baked potato is what a baked potato should be. Credit *me*, Brother, kind words and smiles are never wasted on Janie; she has her dainty little thumb in the soup oftener than your I'm-strictly-business grip-toter begins to wot of in his philosophy.

My *coup* at Candahar, Ill., has a bearing on that point. It was when I first started to boom Pomona Products. The then sales-manager was an arbitrary, bone-headed chimpanzee with the eye of a rattlesnake and the disposition of a rabid hyena. His name was Parker H. Bonnithorne, and he showed no sign whatever of liking me as he gave me my parting instructions.

"Now, do you think you understand what I have been telling you, Mr. Pinkie, or shall I say it all over again?" he asks, with an ugly sneer. "Do you follow me, or are you streaking off on the back-track?"

"I think I get your drift, sir," I replied humbly. "You want me to sell goods. I'm to take no risks, nor miss anything by too much caution. I'm to be energetic, indefatigable, enterprising, ingenious, economical and efficient. Also I'm to sell goods. Say no more, Mr. Bonnithorne," I told him. "I spe-

cialize on those points, and I shall do my best."

"I'm sure the firm is much obliged to you," said he sarcastically. "By the way, if you could drop off at Candahar between trains and get us a good order from Egbert Sproat there, we would like it. Mr. Sproat has bought of Guppy & Frink for years. I don't mind telling you that some of our best men have tried Mr. Sproat and failed, and that I slipped up on him myself, before I was called off the road. Still, it ought to be perfectly easy for you—a mere nothing! Yes, I quite count on an order from Mr. Sproat, since I know how good you are. Sorry you have to hurry off."

I took out my memorandum-book, asked him how he spelled *Sproat,* jotted it down and ducked.

THREE days later, a distinguished-looking stranger might have been seen getting off the J. & L. accommodation at Candahar. Two or three jocular and vociferous men leaned from the windows of the smoking-car and cheered him as the train moved on; but beyond a graceful and nonchalant wave of the hand, I took no heed of their parting gibes. I was sizing up Candahar. From the platform where I stood I could easily locate the business section, which consisted of a livery-stable and blacksmith-shop, a real-estate office, a meat-market, a lumber-yard, a pantatorium, a barber-shop and a few other commercial establishments that I couldn't just then identify positively. I took one of them to be Mr. Sproat's store—a good-sized building, three blocks down. Another, a small red-brick—sort of a half-brick—I guessed was the hotel, but to make sure I asked the station-agent.

"Well, it's a kind of a hotel," says the agent. "When there's any hoteling to do, Bill sort of does it; but there aint much. More of a family hotel, you might say—Bill's family. You can get dinner there, I guess."

"I thank you. That will be all I shall require—possibly more," says I.

I walked down Main Street, keeping an observant eye open, and the town didn't look so bad as at the first conscious blush. The hotel, however, looked as if it might have been haunted. I walked into the office, nevertheless, and after I had pounded on the counter for some time, Bill appeared. He wore blue apron overalls and red whiskers, did Bill, and a whiff of boiled cabbage accompanied him. His mouth was full, but I understood him to ask me what was wanted. He seemed a little put out when I told him.

"Well," says he at last, "we're eating ours now, but if you want to wait awhile, I guess we can fix you out."

It was a better meal than I had dared hope for, but the pickles were rotten, the catsup punk, the pepper totally lacking in pep, and the horseradish seemed to be suffering from the glanders. Bill came in to bring me my coffee and found me looking at the Guppy & Frink brands on the bottles.

"Them's the best we can get at the store," says he apologetically. "Old Man Sproat don't keep no other kind. Sort of cranky, the old man is. 'If you don't like what I got, don't buy it,' says he."

"Why don't you buy somewhere else?" I asked.

"Aint nowhere else," says he; "nor there aint likely to be. This here town couldn't support two groceries. It's been tried, but Sproat always run 'em out. He's got his friends, and he owns a heap of property here; and then there's his daughter Letty."

"Tell me about Letty," says I.

"Letty's Egbert's daughter," says mine host. "I guess she's a real good trade-getter, herself. She 'tends to the dry goods and looks after the books. Old Egbert keeps a tight hand on her."

"I'll go over and sell him a line of real comestibles," says I.

Bill shook his head dubiously. "I'll bet a dollar against an oatmeal-coupon that you don't. You couldn't even sell him groceries. It's been tried."

I PICKED up my grips, sallied forth, crossed over to the store, pressed the thumb-latch on the door, entered and—stopped short with a half-suppressed gasp of respectful admiration. Behind the counter, backed by a pitiful shelving of calico, bed-ticking and silkaline, and

fenced in by bolts of ribbon, darning-eggs, hair-curlers and pin-pyramids, was a vision of loveliness in pink-striped gingham—Letty!

Ah, that smile!

She did it not only with nice red lips, and teeth like a dentifrice advertisement, but with her large and limpid blue eyes, two cunning wrinkles on her little nose and a dimple in her cheek. She couldn't have been much over twenty, if any, but she didn't seem a little bit shy.

I was the shy one. Take notice that I showed my artfulness there. No raw cracks from Pinkie, no brash behavior. I returned her smile, but almost bashfully.

"Er—is Mr. Sproat in, if you please?" I asked.

"Father's out to dinner just now," she says, "but if you don't mind waiting, he'll be back in a little while."

Did I mind! Did I! Would I wait in unqualified ecstasy until the cows came home! Would I linger, spellbound, until the bright stars twinkled out in the heavens and until Aurora's rosy fingers oped the gates of day! I came pretty near saying something of the kind, but censored it to a stammer that I would wait. I added awkwardly, after a little pause, that I was a traveling man representing Pomona Products, and that my purpose and intention was to sell Papa a bill of goods.

She heaved a little sigh of pity. "Too bad!" says she softly. "You don't act like a traveling man, and I've seen several since I've been in the store. You seem—different."

I emitted an embarrassed, high-school giggle. "It's my first trip," I confessed—which it was, for Pomona. "I'll learn how to act in time, I guess."

"Don't," said she earnestly, and then she laughed. "You do very nicely," she went on, "but I'm afraid Father wont buy anything from you. He always buys from Guppy & Frink. I wish he wouldn't."

"If you would put in a good word for me—" I suggested timidly.

"I would, if I thought it would do any good," she said kindly; "but Father—here's Father now."

HE came in—a bent-shouldered, dried-up little old chap with one of these lipless mouths clamped shut to the last turn of the screw. Below the mouth he had cultivated a rusty, bristly lambrequin that looked as if he trimmed it with hedge-clippers. He had piercing eyes and heavy eyebrows.

"Good morning, sir," I said. "I'm representing the Pomona Products Company of Chicago, and—"

"Don't want any," he broke in, and shuffled off to the rear of the store.

"Follow him up," whispered Miss Letty.

I took up his trail and ran him down by the overalls counter. "If you can spare me a few minutes of your time—" I began.

"Not to-day." He sidled off to his little Queen Anne roll-top desk.

I blocked his way out with my grips. "I can show you a line that no other house can approach in quality or price," I insinuated.

"Stocked up," he countered, opening the safe that stood beside the desk.

"Not with goods like these," I insisted, respectfully but firmly. I opened a grip and took out a raspberry jam and a pickle and pointed to the beautifully embossed blue-and-gold Pomona label. "Pomona stands for purity," I went on, "for piquancy, for prime quality, for popularity; it stands for profit to dealer and consumer; it stands for perfection. Look at that pickle! No artificial coloring, no deleterious preservative, and the price—I'm going to surprise you, Mr. Sproat."

"Not to-day," said Mr. Sproat. "Good day."

"I wouldn't knock Guppy & Frink's goods," I went on. "I wouldn't knock any competitor. Pomona hasn't any competitors, though. Our products stand alone. Just let me show you a few samples of our spices."

He changed his spectacles. I thought he was going to inspect the pickles, but he wasn't. He inspected me! Did it well, too, the old rip!

"I guess you must be hard of hearing," he said at last, "or else you get too busy talking to listen." His voice rose to a squeal: *"Not to-day! Clear out!"*

I replaced the pickle and the jam and snapped the case shut.

"Some other day, then," I said sweetly. "Good afternoon, sir."

I HAD succeeded in getting red in the face, and grew redder as I approached Miss Letty. There was something amiably devilish in that young woman's smile. I remarked, airily, that I had had no luck, and was about to pass on and out when she gave an inviting little backward toss of her head.

"Going to give up?" she asked mockingly, as I stopped.

"Well," I said, "I can't choke an order out of him, you know. He's an old man, and I wouldn't strangle any parent of yours willingly, anyhow."

"You've wasted all your time for nothing, then," she said, pityingly. "I'm sorry."

"Not for nothing," I corrected gently. "I have seen you." I smiled pathetically.

"Would you like to hear me speak a piece?" she asked.

"I'm passionately fond of music," I replied. "Please speak."

She put her hands behind her, stood up straight and looked at the ceiling—and recited:

> The constant drip of water wears away
> the hardest stone;
> The constant gnaw of Towser masticates the hardest bone;
> The mighty oak is leveled by the constant ax and saw—
> And a course of constant talking might get something out of Paw.

She removed her gaze from the ceiling and transferred it to me. "I made up the last of that while you were waiting on Father," she said.

"Letty!" calls the old man.

"In a moment, Father," she called back.

"It's a lovely piece," said I, "but he wouldn't listen to me."

"*I* would," she said.

"Letty!" her father yelled.

"Au revoir," she murmured. "There's nothing to prevent you from buying anything here, is there? —I'm coming, Father."

She gave me a little nod and hurried off. I went back to the hotel, and finding I had an hour and a half to train time, sat down and meditated. It looked like a flat turn-down as far as the old man was concerned, and yet—what did the girl mean? 'A course of constant talking.' And *she'd* listen! Where would I come in on that? But it was to 'get something out of Paw.' What was the answer? I thought of Mr. Parker Horribilis Bonnithorne and the sneer he'd give when I reported nothing doing. It seemed to me I never wanted an order so bad in my life. I had meditated thus far when Bill came in. He grinned. "What did you think of Letty?" he asked. "Little peach, eh?" I nodded.

"Most girls like Letty would boss their Paws," said Bill, worrying a plug of tobacco. "Egbert's too mule-headed, though. Still, there's one thing: she don't let the old man boss her altogether. If he had his way, she'd be married to Joe Lobdell. Joe's a good boy, too, and his father's richer than mud, but Letty wont have him nohow, and Egbert is plumb crazy about it. The boys around town here don't dast to go in the store, hardly. The old man's so pesky ugly if he thinks they're shining up to Letty. If she talks to 'em, he'll call her away. It's real funny to watch him."

I saw a little gleam of light. "Bill," says I, "can you give me a bed here? I believe I'll stay over for a few days."

"I guess you can stay if you want to," says Bill.

THE train clanged in, paused about four strokes of the bell and clanged out again. The die was cast. I made some memoranda on a slip of paper, and after a little, strolled over to the store, where I found Mr. Sproat weighing out sugar for a lady in a sunbonnet. Miss Letty was disengaged, and it seemed to me that her attractiveness had actually increased.

"So you came back?" she said.

"How do you suppose I could help it?" I asked, rather forgetting my shyness. "It's a wonder I left. Will you kindly give me half a yard of that bedticking, and while you're cutting it, I would take it as a favor if you would explain yourself."

"That's asking a good deal of a poor girl," she murmured, "—to explain herself."

"Letty!" called the old man. "As soon as you are through there, come and help me."

I bought another half-yard of the ticking, a spool of black thread, a package of assorted needles and some other small articles. I bought them separately, and there was conversation in between punctuated by calls from Mr. Sproat, who watched us from the corner of his eye continually. It took some little time to make these purchases, and meanwhile I learned among other things that the store closed at six o'clock, while the drug-store kept open until eight—which was fortunate, as Miss Letty wished to buy something there at seven-fifteen sharp.

At seven-ten that evening it occurred to me that I was running low on shaving-soap, and I strolled over to the drug-store to get some. It was a fine night for a little walk, as I remarked to Miss Letty, whom I happened to meet. We took a little walk.

THE next morning, bright and early, I hied me over to the store again and carried my grips with me. Miss Letty seemed to have a customer—a tow-headed young man about six-foot-two in height, broad in proportion, and with bony hands that seemed disproportionately large. His clean-shaved, mahogany-colored neck threw the white of his fibroid collar into high relief and seemed to indicate acquaintance with plowed fields and pastures green. As I came in, he looked around at me and grinned—a sort of nervous spasm, I judged. I lifted my hat gracefully, and Miss Letty, smiling more sweetly than ever, stuck out her little hand for me to shake, which I did.

"If Mr. Sproat is in, I'll step back and see him, Miss Letty," I said.

"You'll find him in the wareroom," she told me. "Mr. Pinkie, this is Mr. Lobdell," she went on. "Mr. Lobdell hasn't very much to do, and so he hangs around bothering busy people."

"Oh, pshaw!" remonstrated the young man, with a feeble chuckle.

"Much to be regretted," I observed gravely. "Be ashamed, Mr. Lobdell. Tut, tut! Well, I'll see what your father wants this morning."

Whatever he wanted, it didn't seem to be me. He was jamming a potato on the spout of an oil-can when I attracted his attention, and I couldn't help thinking there was danger of a double explosion.

"You remember what I told you yesterday!" he barked.

"Certainly, sir," I replied amiably. "You said, 'I don't want anything today.' But that was yesterday. You see, I'm particularly anxious to get your order, Mr. Sproat, and I'm perfectly willing to make your time mine. I appreciate the fact that you don't wish to make any change, but that's because you aren't familiar with Pomona goods. Now, if you'll—"

He picked up his oil-can and left me for a moment—only for a moment, because I was right after him. He proceeded directly to the coffee-bin and shoveled out a couple of pounds of rank Rio. I began to tell him about our own special Araby blend—just began.

"Don't you see I'm busy?" he snapped.

"I beg your pardon," I said. "I'll wait."

"You'll wait a darned long time," said he grimly.

"I've nothing else to do," I told him pleasantly. "I'll go and talk to Miss Letty until you're through."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," he rejoined with considerable heat. "Can't I make you understand that I don't want to buy anything from you and don't intend to?"

"It would be hard to understand if you'd seen my goods," I answered with a disarming smile. "However, I don't want to annoy you, so I'll go now."

He grunted, and I once more took up my grips.

"I'll look in again, later," I added reassuringly as I left him, and I heard him sputter something that I couldn't quite make out. Mr. Lobdell, I saw, had gone, but I didn't linger at the dry-goods counter. I went straight to the hotel and lay in wait till I saw the old man shuffle out to lunch. Then I went back.

"Tell me some more about Chicago, Mr. Pinkie," Letty coaxed. So I told her some more about Chicago, and she listened with shining eyes and the dimple coming and going in her cheek. I told her more about the shops on State Street, with their window glories of frilly frocks from France, and lawns and laces and gimcracks and gewgaws, and I told her of the pretty bright lights on the Boule Mich', of the palatial provender-parlors here and there, of Peacock Alley and the peacocks and peahens and peachickens with their diamonds and pearls and pearl-powder, of mirth and melody and lake-excursions, of little flats just the right size for two, with cunning kitchenettes and every known modern convenience—oh, I told her a lot!

"And here I am in Candahar!" she sighed. Her blue eyes became misty, and her mouth drooped wistfully at the corners. It was most affecting. I took her hand and was about to press it sympathetically when she withdrew it from my kindly clasp and aimed a swipe at me that would have hurt if it had landed.

"You didn't carry my slate and books for me when we went to the little red schoolhouse together," she said—not harshly, however. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Pinkie, I don't believe we have been acquainted more than twenty-four hours."

"That's no fault of mine," I pleaded. "And we've got a lifetime of acquaintance before us."

"That's as it may be," she answered, "but you be good just the same. I'm afraid you aren't such a nice, well-behaved boy as I thought you were."

I was beginning to tell her how nice I was, when her father returned, and shortly after that I left.

I DIDN'T go back that afternoon, as Mr. Sproat had intimated that it would not be necessary. Still, I let the train slide without a pang. I knew that I was gambling with my job, and I needed my job—badly. I could imagine the thoughts that Mr. Parker Hidebound Bonnithorne would be thinking when he got the report that I had sent him the night before. I could guess exactly the wording of the wire he would send me. Well, I would go in, but it would be with a good-sized slab of the bacon. I had a hunch.

So I worried not at all and went to buy a toothbrush at the drug-store. It was almost nine o'clock when I said good night to Miss Letty, and I fancied that she was a little worried about the lateness of the hour.

I found Bill in the office yawning cavernously. "There's been a gentleman to see you, Mr. Pinkie," he said, between gapes. "He left word he would call again."

"Did he leave a name at which the world grew pale?" I inquired.

"Young Lobdell," Bill replied, yawning again. "I'm going to bed. Lock the door afore you come up, and turn the lamp down. Goo'night."

He stumbled up the stairs, and a minute later I heard his boots thump on the floor overhead. I lighted a cigar and had meditated three-quarters of its length when a heavy footfall sounded on the board walk, the door opened and young Mr. Lobdell entered.

He wasn't wearing his coat, but instead of making him look smaller, that seemed to add about twenty per cent to his bulk. I never saw such arms and shoulders outside of a physical-culture magazine. I noticed that he had a worried expression on his ingenuous countenance and a rawhide whip in his right hand. He nodded soberly at my cheery greeting and took a seat between me and the two doors.

"Elegant evening," I remarked. "Have a cigar?"

HE declined the cigar and sat staring at me in a way that got on my nerves.

"I understood you called to see me," I went on. "Sorry I wasn't in. Anything particular?"

He nodded again without any change of expression. After a moment he said: "I thought I would ask you when you was a-going to leave town."

"Why, as to that, I'm a little undecided," I answered.

"I supposed you might be," he said slowly, bending the rawhide into a loop

and letting it spring back. "That was the reason I thought I'd see you. I thought I might help you to make up your mind."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Lobdell," I told him heartily. "I'm afraid you can't be of any assistance, though."

"There's a freight at about six-thirty to-morrow morning," he suggested. "I could come and wake you up so's you could ketch it. I'd make a point of so doing."

"Mr. Lobdell," said I, "there are two things particularly I dislike. One is getting up in the morning and the other is riding in a freight caboose. I never do either unless a matter of some importance makes it necessary."

"Would you call getting the everlasting stuffing whaled out of you a matter of some importance?" he asked, switching his rawhide smartly against his boot. "I could do that, too," he added.

"I haven't the least doubt in the world of it," I said. I hadn't. I had been sizing him up and considering the stove-poker and the kerosene lamp as weapons of defense ever since the conversation started, and in my mind I rejected both as inadequate.

"And I wouldn't regard getting whaled as a light and trivial matter," I further conceded. "At the same time, it isn't as important to me as getting a large and luscious order from your fellow townsman, Egbert Sproat. That's my business here, and I propose to stay until I get it."

"Having the hide took off you in strips wouldn't make no particular difference, then?" he asked, with an air of real interest.

"Not the least in the world," I replied firmly. "Of course, I should be laid up here for a week or two, if that happened; but I might get pleasant nursing and sweet sympathy, which would help some. No, Mr. Lobdell, I'm a business man and I propose to attend to my business before everything. When I get my order from Mr. Sproat, I expect to leave Candahar at once—but not before I get the order."

He chewed the end of his rawhide reflectively for quite a little while. I struck a match and lighted a fresh cigar. At last he sighed heavily and arose from his chair.

"Well, I suppose you know your own business best," he said. "Good night."

The door closed behind him and he was gone. I breathed four sighs of relief, wiped the cold perspiration from my forehead and went to bed.

IN the morning as I was eating breakfast the station-agent came in and asked me if my name was Pinkie. I admitted the soft impeachment.

"I just happened to think it might be you," he explained, handing me a telegram. "This here came yesterday, but I didn't know anybody of that name, so I let it lay."

I signed the book, noting down the time of delivery exactly, and then opened the envelope. The message consisted of two words, and was signed "Bonnithorne." I finished my breakfast leisurely, and after that, I lingered in the office smoking comfortably until I saw the stalwart figure of my friend Lobdell leaving the store across the way. I gave myself perhaps a half an hour, and then I picked up my sample-cases and hiked over.

Letty's pretty eyes began to dance as soon as I entered the store,—a regular jig-step of a dance,—and her smile was triumphantly ravishing. "Hist!" said she, and I histed while she proceeded to inform me in a rapid undertone that Father seemed to be softening. "He's been going around grumbling at the stock, and he asked me if I thought you were likely to be in this morning," she giggled. "Don't stand staring at me. Go after him."

I went after him. I opened up my cases and my little line of talk—and say! It was like a dam giving way before a flood. First a little dribble of spices, and then a fair trickle of jams and preserves and pickles, which rapidly increased to a racing stream of tea and coffee that carried away riprapping and buttresses and became a seething, foam-crested torrent of Pomona Products calculated to swamp the packing-room and start the warehouse force running for the high places.

Suddenly Mr. Sproat shut his mouth tightly and looked at his watch.

"That's all," he snapped.

"Peanut butter?" I suggested.

"That's all." His mouth clamped again, and again opened. "You've got eight minutes to make your train, and you'd better hustle. Five per cent off this at thirty days, you said? All right. Good-by."

I stopped a brief moment to press Letty's hand gratefully. "I got to go, Miss Letty," I said tenderly. "The house has wired for me, but you'll see me again soon—very soon."

She pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, and my heart smote me. "I—I'll l-live on that p-promise," she gurgled, but when she took the handkerchief away again, I saw that the little mischief was laughing at me. All the same, she kissed both her hands as I turned to close the door, and I would have been willing to bet that she soon stopped laughing.

Mr. Lobdell was at the depot. He recognized me with a grin and was so kind as to lift my grips aboard for me. They weighed something considerable, those grips, but he took them both in one hand and made nothing of them. Then he slapped me on the back. "I put in a good word for you," he said jovially. "So long!"

Clang-clang went the bell, and in a minute and ten seconds I was on the outskirts of Candahar and headed for New Castile, my next stop. My heart sang with joy. I had triumphed. Where the oiliest and foxiest had fallen down, where the mighty Bonnithorne himself had bumped, I had glided smoothly over all obstacles and copped the crown of glory. I'm afraid that for the time I completely forgot poor little Letty. From there on, I did good business, all along the line.

IT was a bright, sunny morning when I toddled across the Rush Street bridge on my way to Pomona headquarters. I threw my chest out, for I was the Guy Who Had Made Good, and Mr. Bonnithorne was going to admit it in about five minutes.

It was nearer thirty minutes, however, before Mr. Bonnithorne so much as admitted me. I entered his cubbyhole, and he started from his chair with both hands outstretched and his face glowing with welcome. Yes, he did—not. I, Pinkie, am not easily congealed, but I could hardly suppress a shiver when he looked at me.

"May I ask why you disregarded my wire, Mr. Pinkie?" he asked in zero tones.

"My dear sir, I did not disregard it," I replied. "Your message was delayed, but I left on the very next train after it was delivered. You will admit, however, that the delay was fortunate. Had I received the telegram promptly, I should have been obliged to leave Candahar before getting Mr. Sproat's order."

He smiled unpleasantly. "Still, you didn't come in," he observed.

"As fast as I could without neglecting the towns you instructed me to make," I answered. "You got my reports, Mr. Bonnithorne?"

"I got your reports, Mr. Pinkie," said he. "Nevertheless, I feel obliged to insist on an answer to my question."

"To be perfectly candid, I supposed your call to be based on misconception, Mr. Bonnithorne," I explained. "You possibly thought I was wasting time at Candahar. I think the Sproat order proves conclusively that I was not. I imagined that after you received that order, there would be no objection to my cleaning up the rest of my route in the thorough style that I did clean it up. If I have erred in my anxiety to please you by getting this Sproat trade, I hope you will take the motive into consideration. Mr. Sproat was not an easy nut to crack, believe me—as I think you may remember."

"You plume yourself pretty much on that Sproat order, don't you?" he sneered.

"I'm a modest man, but I'm not exactly ashamed of it," I answered with a modest smile.

He opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a paper which he flipped across to me. "Read that, my diffident friend," said he.

It was a telegram dated the day I left Candahar, and it was signed "Egbert Sproat."

Cancel my order given your smart-Aleck pest, Pinkie.

I was not fired. I take it Parker Bonnithorne knew a good man when he saw one, even if he did try to conceal his perspicacity. Anyway, a month later, he sent me out on the same route. "Perhaps you would like to try Candahar again," he observed at the last minute. I couldn't very well slap his face, so I answered that I would be delighted to. I also quoted a little piece of pertinent poetry.

"Very pretty," said he. "With constant dripping, gnawing and sawing wood, you will no doubt succeed in the course of a few years in making an order stick there. If it's any sort of an order, your salary will be raised and we'll allow you a ten-per-cent commission. But you've got to do it between trains."

I thanked him just as if I thought he was in earnest. Nevertheless I did drop off at Candahar. At least I would see poor little Letty between trains.

I saw Bill first. He was at the station and he gave me news of her.

"Married," says Bill. "Married young Lobdell. Old Egbert has just about turned the store over to the young folks to run, and he's gone off to some G. A. R. doings at Springfield. Want me to take your grips?"

"I'll carry 'em," I said when I'd recovered. "I can walk faster than you do, Bill."

I didn't lose any time getting to the store, for a fact. Mr. and Mrs. Lobdell were both in and seemed to be occupied, but they broke apart when the door opened, and Lobdell came briskly to the front while the lady turned her back to me and inspected the shelves. It just took him a moment to recognize me, and I was greatly relieved when he grinned and held out his hand.

"See who's here, Let," he called, crushing my lily fingers in his vise-like grip. "Pinkie—and just in time!"

Letty came, blushing and dimpling and smiling to such an extent that nothing in the world but the proximity of Mr. Lobdell kept me from embracing her. However, I congratulated them both with as much enthusiasm as I could scare up.

"I don't know but what you're a considerable to blame for its happening," chuckled Lobdell. "Eh, Let?" He winked at her and emitted another guffaw. "You got me ribbed up to talk turkey to her."

"Nonsense!" says Letty, blushing again. "How silly!"

"But I had to take her to Chicago," Lobdell went on. "She stood out for that, and we certainly did do up that little town in style."

Just then a customer came in, and as Lobdell went to wait on him, I noticed the store for the first time. Nearly all the shelves were empty, and the counters were stacked up with cans and bottles with big, stenciled price-placards stuck in some of the piles.

"We're getting ready for a big sale," said Letty, smiling queerly, as I looked around. "You might possibly sell us a little bill of goods. Do you know that was another thing I stood out for—that you should get our first order? We wont countermand it, either, and oh, how I loved Chicago! We saw nearly everything that you told me about except those lovely little apartments built for two."

"Ah, that apartment for two!" I sighed, heartbrokenly. "Oh, false and fair one!"

She dimpled at me maliciously. "Have you and Mrs. Pinkie got one of them?" she inquired.

"No," I answered mendaciously; "we had quite recently to move into one that would accommodate three."

I CAUGHT the afternoon train out. How I did it, I don't know, but I did it, and Lobdell, the good sport, sprinted alongside of me with my grips. It took me some time to get my breath, but that didn't interfere with my figuring. "Soup to nuts," Lobdell had said, and "soup to nuts" it was; nevertheless, I had my additions done by the time we got to New Castile, where I sent off my wire to Bonnithorne:

> Ten per cent on fourteen hundred and fifty-five at Candahar is one hundred and forty-five, fifty. And she sticks. Please give liberal consideration to raise.

"Number 17"

A Mystery of New York

LOUIS TRACY well describes this most fascinating of his novels as "A Mystery of New York." From the moment when Francis Theydon first catches sight of James Forbes and his daughter, to the last page, the story moves through a captivating series of mysterious and romantic episodes of the most thrilling character.

CHAPTER I

THE OUTCOME OF ARTISTIC CURIOSITY

"TAXI? Step lively when I sing out 'Number Four.'"

A red-faced, loud-breathing door-man, engaged in the lucrative task of pocketing quarters as quickly as he could summon cabs, vanished in a swirl of mackintoshes and umbrellas. People who had arrived at the theater in fine weather were emerging into a drizzle of rain. "All New York," as the phrase goes, was flocking to see the latest musical play at Daly's Theater; but all New York, regarded thus collectively, is far from owning automobiles, or even affording taxicabs, and so a majority of the audience hurried on foot toward street-car routes and subways. In the crush at the main exit, Francis Berrold Theydon, hesitating whether to join the rush for a street-car or await the hazard of a taxi, deemed himself fortunate when a panting door-man promised to secure a taxi "in half a minute."

Automobiles of every known variety were snorting up to the curb and bustling off again as promptly as their users could enter. Being a considerate person,—wishful also to light a cigarette,—Theydon moved out of the way. In so doing, he was cannoned against by an impetuous attendant, whose cry, "Your car, sir," led him to follow the man's alert eyes. He saw a tall, elderly gentleman, with clean-shaven, shrewd and highly intelligent features,—of the type which finance or the law, or a combination of both, seems to evolve only in big cities,—escorting a young lady from the vestibule. Then Theydon remembered that he had noticed this selfsame girl's remarkable beauty as she was silhouetted in white against the dark background of a first-tier box. He had even speculated idly as to her identity, and had come to the conclusion, on catching her face in profile, that she must be the daughter of the man seated by her side but half hidden behind a heavy curtain. The likeness was momentarily lost, as the two neared him; yet it was discovered anew when they halted for a second at his elbow. Oddly enough, the man was carrying an umbrella, which he proceeded to open, and his daughter's astonished question put their relationship beyond doubt.

"Father," she said, with a charming smile in which there was just a hint of a pout, "aren't you coming home with me?"

"No. I must look in at the Union League Club. I'll take no harm. This sleet looks worse than it is, when every drop shines in the glare of so many lamps. Now, in with you, Evelyn! Tell Downs to come back, and don't forget which club—or, I'll tell him."

Louis Tracy's New Novel

DO you remember Louis Tracy's "The Red Year," "The Wings of the Morning" or "One Wonderful Night"? If you do, we need not tell you what delightful stories he writes—how likable his characters, into what interesting situations he throws them. If you don't know Mr. Tracy's work, you may count on making a most pleasant friendship.

"Shall I wait up for you?"

"Well—er—I sha'n't be late. I'll be free by the time Downs returns."

"Number Four Taxi!" came a voice, and Theydon saw his taxicab swinging in deftly behind the waiting car.

THE girl, gazing at her father, happened to look for an instant at Theydon, who, fearful lest his candidly admiring glance might have been a trifle too sustained, pretended a hurried interest in an unlighted cigarette. That was all. The three crossed the pavement almost simultaneously. The next moment the unknown goddess was gone, though Theydon snatched a final glimpse of her, faintly visible, yet no less radiantly lovely, as she leaned forward from the depths of the limousine and waved a white-gloved hand to her father through a window jeweled with rain-drops.

There was nothing in the incident to provoke a second thought. Assuredly Francis Berrold Theydon—Frank, as his friends called him—was not the only young man in the vestibule of Daly's Theater who had found the girl well worth looking at; it was the mere accident of propinquity which enabled him to overhear the quite commonplace remarks of father and daughter. A score of similar occurrences had probably taken place in like circumstances that night in New York. Not even the maddest dreamer of fantastic dreams would have heard the fluttering wings of the spirit of romance in connection with any one of them.

It was by no means marvelous, therefore, but rather in obedience to the accepted law of things as they are when contrasted with things as they might be, if Theydon both failed to attach any importance to that chance meeting and proceeded forthwith to think of something else. He did not forget it, of course; his artist's eyes had been far too interested in a certain rare quality of delicate femininity in the girl's face and figure, and his ear too quick to appreciate the music of her cultured voice to permit that. Indeed, during those fleeting moments on the threshold of the theater, he had garnered quite a number of minor impressions, not only of the girl but of her father.

In some respects these two were singularly alike. Thus, each had the same proud, self-reliant carriage, the same large, brilliant eyes, serene brow and firm mouth, the same repose of manner, the same clear, incisive enunciation. Neither could move in any company, howsoever eclectic, without evoking comment. They held in common that air of refinement and good breeding which is, or should be, the best-marked attribute of an aristocracy. It was impossible to imagine either in rags, but, given such a transformation, each would be notable because of the amazing difference that would exist between garb and mien.

It must not be imagined that Theydon indulged in this close analysis of the physical characteristics of two complete strangers while his taxi was wheeling into the scurry of traffic in busy Broadway. Rather did he essay a third time to light the cigarette which he still held between his lips. And yet a third time was his intent balked. A policeman stopped the uptown stream of vehicles somewhat suddenly at the corner of Thirty-fourth Street; owing to the mud, the taxi skidded a few feet beyond the line; a lamp was torn off by a heavy wagon coming south; and a fierce argument between taxi-driver and policeman resulted in "numbers" being demanded for future vengeance. Then Theydon took a hand in the dispute, poured oil on the troubled waters by a polite explanation to the law and a dollar tip to the driver,—thus assuaging all damage to both dignity and lamp,—and the journey was resumed, with a net loss, to the person who had absolutely nothing to do with the affair, of one dollar in money and nearly ten minutes in time.

THEYDON was not rich, as shall be seen in due course, but he was generous and impulsive. He hated the notion of anyone's suffering for having done him a service, and the taxi-man might reasonably be deemed a real benefactor on that sloppy night.

So far as he was concerned, the delay of ten minutes was of no consequence. It only meant slightly deferred snuggling down into an easy chair in his suite with a book and a pipe. That is how he would have expressed himself if questioned on the point. In reality, it influenced and controlled his future in the most vital way, because, once the taxi had crossed Thirty-fourth Street and turned into the quiet thoroughfare on which the first block of the Innesmore residential buildings abutted, he passed into a new phase of existence.

The cigarette, lighted at last after the altercation, had filled the cab with smoke to such an extent that Theydon lowered a window. At that moment the driver was slowing down to take the corner of the even more secluded road which contained the long front of the Innesmore and the gardens appertaining thereto, and nothing else. Theydon happened to look out, and he was greatly surprised at seeing the unknown gentleman of the theater walking rapidly around the same corner. He could not be mistaken. The stranger tilted back his umbrella and raised his eyes to ascertain the number of the street, as though not quite sure of his whereabouts, and the glare of a lamp fell directly on his clean-cut, almost classical, face. Being thus occupied, he did not glance at the passing taxi, or recognition might possibly have been mutual—possibly, though not probably, because, during that brief pause on the steps of the theater, he had stood beside Theydon; hence he was half turned toward his daughter while the night's immediate program was under discussion.

In itself, the fact that he had gone in the direction of the Innesmore rather than toward the Union League Club was in no wise remarkable. Nevertheless he had evidently deceived his daughter, deceived her intentionally, and the knowledge came as a shock to an unsuspected critic in Theydon. This did not look to be a man who would stoop to petty evasion of the truth. It was as though a statue of Apelles, miraculously gifted with life, should express its emotions, not in Attic Greek, but in the up-to-date slang of the Bowery.

"Well, I'm dashed!" said Theydon, or words to that effect, and his taxi sped on to the third doorway. The Innesmore arranged its roomy flats in blocks of six, and he occupied Number 18. He held a dollar, plus a reasonable tip, in readiness; the rain, now falling heavily, did not encourage any loitering on the pavement. For all that, he saw out of the tail of his eye that the other man was approaching, though he had paused to examine the numbers blazoned on a lamp over the first doorway.

"Good night, sir, and thank you," said the well-satisfied taxi-driver.

AS Theydon ran up a short flight of steps, the cab made off. The Innesmore did not boast elevators. The flats were comfortable, but somewhat

out of date, and as a consequence not absurdly expensive, and their inmates climbed stairs cheerfully; at most, one had only to mount to a third story. Each block owned a janitor, who, on a night like this, even in May, needed rousing from his lair by a bell if in demand.

Theydon took the stairs two at a stride, opened the door of Number 18, which, with Number 17, opened from the top landing. He was valeted and cooked for by an Englishman, an ex-sergeant of the Army Service Corps, and his wife, an admirable couple named Bates, and the male of the species appeared before Theydon had removed coat and opera hat in the tiny hall.

"Bring my tray in fifteen minutes, Bates, and that will be all for to-night," said Theydon.

"Yes sir," said Bates. "Remawkable chinge in the weather, sir."

"Rotten. Who would have expected this downpour after such a fine day?"

Bates took the coat and hat, and Theydon entered his sitting-room, a spacious, square apartment facing the gardens. He had purposely prevented Bates from coming immediately with his nightly fare, which consisted of a glass of milk and a plate of bread and butter.

Truth to tell, the artistic temperament contains a spice of curiosity, which is, in some sense, an exercise of the perceptive faculties. Theydon wanted to raise a window and look out, an unusual action, and one which, therefore, would induce Bates to wonder as to its cause. For once in his life, a man who bothered his head very little about other people's business was puzzled, and meant to ascertain whether or not the unknown was really calling on some resident in the Innesmore. It was a harmless bit of espionage. Theydon scarcely knew the names of the other dwellers in his own block, and his acquaintance did not go even that far with any of the remaining tenants of the forty-eight flats, all told.

Still, to a writer, the vagaries of the tall stranger were decidedly interesting; so he did open a window, and did thrust his head out, and was just in time to see the owner of the limousine which would call at the Union League Club in a quarter of an hour mount the steps leading to Nos. 13-18. Somehow, the discovery gave Theydon a veritable thrill. Could that pretty girl's father, by any chance, be coming to visit *him?* A wildly improbable development had been whittled down to a five-to-one chance. He closed the window and waited—yes, actually waited—for the bell to ring!

THE sitting-room door was open, and it faced the hall door. Footsteps sounded sharply on the slate steps of the stairway; when Theydon heard some one climbing to the topmost landing he was almost convinced that, as usual, the unexpected was about to happen. It did happen, but took its own peculiar path. The unknown rang the bell of Number 17, and after a slight delay was admitted.

Theydon smiled at the anticlimax. A trivial mystery had developed along strictly orthodox lines. A rather good-looking and distinctly well-dressed lady, a Mrs. Lester, occupied Number 17. She lived alone, too, he believed. At any rate, he had never seen any other person, except an elderly servant, enter or leave the opposite flat, and he had encountered the tenant herself so seldom that he was not quite certain of recognizing her apart from the environment of the staircase which provided their occasional meeting-place.

Then he sighed. Romance evidently denied her magic presence to one who wooed her assiduously by his pen. He was yet to learn that the alluring sprite had not only favored him with her attentions during the past twenty minutes, but meant to stick to him like his own shadow for many a day. And he frowned, too. He did not approve of that pretty girl's father visiting the attractive Mrs. Lester in conditions which savored of something underhand and clandestine. The man had deliberately misled his daughter—had left her with a lie on his lips; yet never were appearances more deceptive, for the stranger had the outward aspect of one whose word was his bond.

"Oh, hang it all, what business is it of mine, anyhow?" growled Theydon, and he laughed sourly as he sat down to write a letter which Bates could take to the post, thus himself practicing a slight deceit intended solely to account for the deferred bringing of the tray.

It was apparently an unimportant missive, which could well have been postponed till the morning, being merely an announcement to a firm of publishers that he would make a business call later in the week. In less than five minutes, it and another making an appointment for Wednesday, this being the night of Monday, were written, sealed, directed and stamped.

HE rang. Bates came, with laden hands, thinking the tray was in demand.

"Kindly mail those for me," said Theydon, glancing at the letters. "Better take an umbrella. It's raining cats and dogs."

The man had found the door open, and left it so when he entered. Before he could answer, the door of Number 17 was opened and closed, with the jingle inseparable from the presence of many small panes of glass in leaden casing, and footsteps sounded on the stairs. For some reason—probably because of the unusual fact that anyone should be leaving Mrs. Lester's flat at so late an hour—both men listened.

Then Bates recollected himself.

"Yes sir," he said.

Oddly enough, the man's marked pause suggested a question to his employer.

"Mrs. Lester's visitor didn't stop long," was the comment. "He came up almost on my heels."

"I thought it must have been a gentleman," said Bates.

"Why a 'gentleman?'" laughed Theydon.

"I mean, sir, that the step didn't sound like a lady's."

"Ah, I see."

Vaguely aware that he had committed himself to a definite knowledge as to the sex of Mrs. Lester's visitor, Theydon added:

"I didn't actually see anyone on the stairs, but I heard an arrival, and jumped to the same conclusion as you, Bates."

Tacitly, master and man shared the same opinion—it was satisfactory to know that Mrs. Lester's male visitors who called at the unconventional hour of eleven-thirty P. M. were shown out so speedily. The Innesmore was an intensely respectable habitation. No lady could live there alone whose credentials did not satisfy a sharp-eyed secretary. Further, Theydon was aware of a momentary disloyalty of thought toward the distinguished-looking father of that remarkably handsome girl, and it pleased him to find that he had erred.

Bates went out, closing the door behind him; he donned an overcoat, secured an umbrella and presently descended to the street. Yielding again to impulse, Theydon reopened the window and peered down. The stranger was walking away rapidly. A patrolman, glistening in waterproof coat, stood at the corner near a letter-box. The tall man, who topped the burly patrolman by some inches, halted for a moment to mail a letter. Whether by accident or design, he held his umbrella so that the patrolman could not see his face. Then he disappeared. Bates came into view. He dropped Theydon's letters into the box, but he and the patrolman exchanged a few words, which, his employer guessed, must surely have dealt with the vagaries of the weather.

For an author of repute, Theydon's surmises had been wide of the mark several times that night. The patrolman had seen the unknown coming out from the doorway of Nos. 13-18, and had noted his stature and appearance.

"Who's the tony one who came out of your lot a minute ago?" he said when Bates arrived.

"Dunno," said Bates. "Some one callin' on Mrs. Lester, I fancy. Why?"

"Oh, nothin'. On'y, if I was wearin' my Sunday suit on a night like this, I'd put up a taxi-fare."

"Didn't see him meself," commented Bates. "My boss 'eard him come, an' both of us 'card him go. He didn't st'y more'n five minits."

"Wish I was in his boots. I've got

to monkey around till six in the mornin'," grinned the patrolman.

"Well, cheer-o, mite."

"Cheer-o!" The patrolman liked Bates, and was much interested in his way of talking.

BATES looked in on his master before retiring for the night.

"What time shall I call you, sir?" he said.

Theydon was in the pipe-and-book stage, having exchanged his dress coat for a smoking jacket. He was reading a treatise on aëronautics, and like every novice, had already formulated a flying scheme which would supersede all known inventions.

"Not later than eight," he said. "I must be out by nine. And by the way, I may as well tell you now: After lunch to-morrow I am going to Belmont Park—Hempstead Plains, to be exact. I return at six-forty. As I have to dine 'way up Madison Avenue at seven-thirty, and my train may be a few minutes behind time, I want you to meet me with a suit-case at the barber shop in the Long Island depot. I'll dress there, and go straight to my friend's house. It would be cutting things rather fine if I tried to come here."

"I'll 'ave everything ready, sir."

Bates was eminently reliable in such matters, even if he occasionally clipped an *h*. He could be depended on to the last stud.

The storm which had raged overnight must have cleared the skies for the following day, because Theydon never enjoyed an outing more than his trip to the famous motor-track. His business there, however, lay with aviation. A popular magazine had commissioned him to write an article summing up the progress and practical aims of the air-men, and he was devoting afternoon and evening to the quest for information. A couple of experts and a photographer had given him plenty of raw material in the open, but he looked forward with special zest to an undisturbed chat that night with Mr. James Creighton Forbes, millionaire and philanthropist, whose peculiar yet forcible theories as to the peaceful conquest of the air were engaging for the hour the attention of the world's press. He had never met Mr. Forbes. When on the point of writing for an appointment he had luckily remembered that the great man was a lifelong friend of the professor of physics at his (Theydon's) university, and a delightfully cordial introductory note was forthcoming in the course of a day or two. This brought the invitation to dinner. "On Tuesday evening I am dining *en famille*," wrote Mr. Forbes; "so, if you are free, join us at seven-thirty and we can talk uninterruptedly afterward."

THE train was not late. Bates, erect and soldierly, was standing at the rendezvous. With him were two men whom Theydon had never before seen. One, a bulky, stalwart, florid-faced man of forty, had something of the military aspect; the other supplied his direct antithesis, being small, wizened and sallow. The big man owned the round, bullet head, prominent bright eyes,—blue, in his case,—and the cheek-bones, chin and physical development of a heavy-weight pugilist. His companion, whose dark and recessed eyes were noticeably bright too, was hardly more than half his weight, and Theydon would not have been surprised if told that this diminutive person was a dancing-master. Naturally he classed both as acquaintances of his valet, encountered by chance at the Long Island terminus.

He was slightly astonished, therefore, when the two faced him together with Bates. A dramatic explanation of their presence was soon supplied.

"These gentlemen, sir, are detectives, Mr. Steingall an' Mr. Clancy, of the Bureau," said the ex-sergeant in the awed tone which some people cannot help using when speaking of members of the famous department which wages ruthless and successful war against the crooks of New York and of many other cities in the world as well.

Though daylight had not yet failed, it was rather dark in that corner of the depot, and Theydon saw now, what he had not perceived earlier, that the usually sedate Bates was pale and harassed-looking.

"Why, what's up?" he inquired, gazing blankly from one to the other of the ominous pair.

"Haven't you seen the evening papers, Mr. Theydon?" said Steingall, the giant of the two.

"No. I've been at Hempstead Plains since two o'clock. What is it?"

"You don't know, then, that a murder was committed in the Innesmore last night, or early this morning?"

"Good Lord, no! Who was killed?"

"A Mrs. Lester, the lady—"

"Mrs. Lester—who lives in Number Seventeen?"

"Yes."

"What a horrible thing! Why, only the day before yesterday I met her on the stairs."

It was a banal statement, and Theydon knew it, but he uttered the first crazy words that would serve to cloak the monstrous thought which leaped into his brain. And a picture danced before his mind's eye, a picture, not of the fair and gracious woman who had been done to death, but of a sweet-voiced girl in a white satin dress who was saying to a fine-looking man standing by her side: "Father, aren't you coming home with me?"

HIS blurred senses were conscious of the strange medley produced by the familiar noises of a railway station blending with the quietly authoritative voice of the chief inspector.

"Mr. Clancy and I have the inquiry in hand, Mr. Theydon," the detective was saying. "We called at your flat, and Bates told us of the sounds you both heard about eleven-thirty last night. I'm afraid we have rather upset you by coming here, but Bates was unable to say what time you would return home, so I thought you would not mind if we accompanied him in order to find out the hour at which it would be convenient for you to meet us at your flat—this evening, of course."

"You have certainly given me the shock of my life," Theydon gasped. "That poor woman dead, murdered! It's too awful! How was she killed?"

"She was strangled."

"Oh, this is dreadful! Shall I 'phone apologies to the man I'm dining with?"

"No need for that, Mr. Theydon," said Steingall sympathetically. "I'm sorry now we blurted out our unpleasant news. But you had to be told, and we have to get your story some time to-night. Can you be at home by eleven?"

"Yes, yes. I'll be there without fail."

"Thank you. We have a good many inquiries to make in the meantime. Good-by, for the present."

The two made off. Steingall had done all the talking, but Theydon was far too disturbed to pay heed to the trivial fact that Clancy, after one swift glance, seemed to regard him as a negligible quantity. It was borne in on him that the detectives evidently believed he had something of importance to say, and meant to render it almost impossible for him to escape questioning while his memory was still active with reference to events of the previous night. And he had so little, yet so much, to tell. On his testimony alone it would be a comparatively easy matter to establish beyond doubt the identity of Mrs. Lester's last known visitor. And what would be the outcome? He dared hardly trust his own too lively imagination. Whether or not his testimony gave a clue to the police, the one irrevocable issue was that somewhere in New York there was a girl named Evelyn who would regard a certain young man—Francis Berrold Theydon, to wit—as a loathsome and despicable Paul Pry.

BATES, somewhat relieved by the departure of the emissaries of the Bureau, recalled his master's scattered wits to the affairs of the moment.

"It's gettin' on for seven, sir," he said. "I've engiged a dressin'-room."

"Tell you what, Bates," said Theydon abstractedly, "it is my fixed belief that you and I could do with a brandy and soda apiece."

"That would be a good hidea, sir."

The good idea was duly acted on. While Theydon was dressing, Bates told him what little he knew of the tragedy, which was discovered by Mrs. Lester's maid when she brought a cup of tea to her mistress' bedroom at ten

o'clock that morning. Bates himself was the first person appealed to by the distracted woman, and he had the good sense to leave the body and its surroundings untouched until a doctor and the police had been summoned by telephone. Thenceforth the day had passed in a whirl of excitement, active in respect to police inquiries, and passive in its resistance to newspaper interviewers. He saw no valid reason why his employer's plans should be disturbed, and so made no effort to communicate with him at Hempstead Plains.

"Them 'tec's were very pressin', sir," said Bates rather indignantly, "very pressin', especially the little one. He almost wanted to know wot we 'ad for breakfast."

At that, Theydon laughed dolefully, and as it happened, Bates' grim humor prevented his employer from ascertaining the exact nature of Clancy's pertinacity. Moreover, time was passing. At a quarter past seven Theydon called a taxi, and was carried swiftly to Mr. Forbes' house in Madison Avenue, while Bates disposed himself and the dressing-case in a Thirty-fourth Street car.

The mere change of clothing, aided by the stimulant, had cleared Theydon's faculties. Though he would gladly have foregone the dinner, he realized that it was not a bad thing that he should be obliged, as it were, to wrench his thoughts from the nightmare of a crime with which such a man as Evelyn's father might be associated, even innocently. At any rate, he was given some hours to marshal his forces for the discussion with the representatives of the Bureau. He knew well that he must then face the dilemma boldly. Two courses were open. He could either share Bates' scanty knowledge, no more and no less, or avow his ampler observations. And why should he shirk the latter alternative? Was he not bringing himself practically within the law? Why should any man be shielded, no matter what his social position or how beautiful his daughter, who might possibly have caused the death of the pleasant-mannered and ladylike woman fated now to remain forever a tragic ghost in the memory of one who had dwelt under the same roof with her for five months?

It was a thorny problem; yet it permitted of only one solution. Duty must be done though the heavens fell.

THIS conviction grew on Theydon as his cab scurried across the streets and avenues of the East Side. A pretty conceit could not be allowed to sweep aside the first principles of citizenship. Indeed, so reassuring was this reasoned judgment that he felt a sense of relief as he paid off the cab and rang the bell of the Forbes mansion.

He gave his name to the footman, who disposed of his overcoat and hat and led him to an upstairs drawing-room. Even the most fleeting of glances at hall and staircase revealed evidences of highly trained artistic taste gratified by great wealth. The furniture, the china, the pictures, were each and all rare and well chosen. Given the opportunity, he would have loitered on the way, now to admire a splendidly carved old Colonial desk, now to revel in the perfect coloring of a plum-blossom jar of the Ming dynasty, and again to appreciate the daring yet harmonious contrasts of a tiny Meissonier hanging side by side with a gloomy Corot.

But he followed perforce an Ariel in black livery, and was shown into a wide and lofty room, the dominant note of which was the period of Louis Quinze.

"Mr. Theydon!" announced the man, throwing wide the door.

A lady, bent over some prints spread on a distant table, turned at the words and hastened to greet the guest.

"My father is expecting you, Mr. Theydon," she said. "He was detained rather late in Wall Street, but will be here now at any moment."

Theydon was no neurotic boy whose surcharged nerves were liable to crack in a crisis demanding some unusual measure of self-control. Yet the room and its contents—and, not least, the graceful girl advancing with outstretched hand—swam before his eyes. Because this was Evelyn, and it was certain as the succession of night to

day that Mrs. Lester's mysterious visitor must have been Evelyn's father, James Creighton Forbes.

CHAPTER II

THE COMPACT

(*That which follows was written in July, 1914, when the shadow of war had as yet hardly darkened the sky of Europe.*)

SO petrified was Theydon on coming face to face with the last person breathing whom he expected to meet in that room, that he stumbled over a small chair which lay directly between him and his hostess. At any other time the *gaucherie* would have annoyed him exceedingly; in the existing circumstances, no more fortunate incident could have happened, since it brought Evelyn Forbes herself unwittingly to the rescue.

"I have spoken twenty times about chairs being left in that absurd position," she cried as their hands met, "but you know how wooden-headed servants are. They *will* not learn to discriminate. People often sit in that very place of an afternoon because anyone seated just there sees the Canaletto on the opposite wall in the best light. When the lamps are on, the reason for the chair simply ceases to exist, and it becomes a trap for the unwary. You are by no means the first who has been caught in it."

Theydon realized, with a species of irritation, that the girl was discoursing volubly about the offending chair merely in order to extricate an apparently shy and tongue-tied young man from a morass of his own creation. That an author of some note should not only behave like a boy from the backwoods, but actually seem to need encouragement so that he should "feel at home" in a New York drawing-room, was a fact so ridiculous that it spurred his bemused wits into something approaching their normal activity.

"I have not the excuse of the Canaletto," he said, compelling a pleasant smile, "but may I plead an even more distracting vision? I came here expecting to meet an elderly gentleman of the—well, the 'high-brow' class, and I am suddenly brought face to face with a Romney 'portrait of a fair lady' in real life. Is it likely that such an insignificant object as a chair, and a small one at that, would succeed in catching my eye?"

Evelyn Forbes laughed, with a joyous mingling of surprise and relief. Most certainly Mr. Theydon's manner of speech differed vastly from the disconcerting expression of positive bewilderment, if not actual fright, which marred his entrance.

"Do I really resemble a Romney? Which one?" she cried.

"An admitted masterpiece."

"Ah, but people who pay compliments deserve to be put on the rack. I insist on a definition."

"Lady Hamilton, as Joan of Arc."

He drew the bow at random, and was gratified to see that his hearer was puzzled.

"I don't know that particular picture," she said, "but I cannot imagine any model less adapted to the subject."

"Romney immortalized the best qualities of both," he answered promptly. "Please, may I look at the Canaletto which indirectly waylaid me?"

SHE turned to cross the room, but stopped and faced him again with a suddenness that argued an impulsive temperament.

"Now I remember," she said. "Father told me you had written novels and some essays. Have you ever really seen Romney's portrait of Lady Hamilton as Joan of Arc?"

Those fine eyes of hers pierced him with a glance of such candid inquiry that he cast pretense to the winds.

"No," he said.

"Then you just invented the comparison as an excuse for colliding with the chair?"

"Yes. At the same time I throw myself on the mercy of the court."

"It was rather clever of you."

"But quite unworthy of my theme."

"Oh, don't call me a theme. I hate themes. They remind one of deadly dull school exercises."

"I deserve punishment, I admit. What shall it be? Twenty lines?"

"Yes," she retorted. "Come here at once and write a jingle in my autograph album. Having caught an eminent author tripping, I exact a fitting penalty."

"I'm far from being eminent," he said, "but I am ready and willing to put my offense on record."

Bending over the book which she had opened on a buhl writing-table, he took a pen, inwardly rejoicing that he had cudgeled his brains only a week earlier to gratify a small but singularly persistent niece. He wrote:

When lovely woman stoops to folly,
And bids a scribe write instant verse,
What charm can soothe his melancholy,
Thus dared to rhyme, impromptu, terse?
Hard pressed, to lore in proverb writ
He turns for succor, while she waits,
And reinforces scanty wit
By borrowed wisdom. In such straits
He may enjoin on Eve's fair daughter,
That one man to the river's brink
May lead a horse which wants no water,
But twenty cannot make him drink.

He counted the lines.

"Twelve," he said. "I have adapted two, and the other ten are rank plagiarism, so I pray you remit the remainder of the sentence."

SHE stooped to read what he had written; while he was signing his name, and dating the effusion, their heads came remarkably close together, considering that their acquaintance was not yet five minutes old. She leaned an elbow on the table, and propped her chin on her hand, while the other hand rested on the back of his chair. He felt her breath on his cheek, and the subtle fragrance of her hair was almost intoxicating; yet he was quite certain that she had no more intent of flirting with him than he had of telling her that her father might at any moment be charged with the commission of a terrible crime.

"Is that really original?" she asked, after reading.

"Yes, subject to the sweeping provisos already made."

"I must get some of your books," she said naïvely.

He laughed, and their eyes met, at very close range.

"May I share the joke?" said a voice, and Theydon knew, before he turned, that the man he had last seen disappearing around the corner of the Innesmore in a heavy rainstorm was in the room.

The girl snatched up the album and ran to her father without the slightest sign of self-consciousness.

"Why did you tell me that Mr. Theydon was a serious, scientific person?" she cried. "He is anything but that. He can write nonsense quite admirably."

"So can a great many serious scientific persons, Evelyn. Glad to see you, Mr. Theydon. Professor Scarth's letter paved the way for something more than a formal meeting, so I thought you wouldn't mind giving us an evening. My wife is not in town. She is a martyr to intermittent fever, and has to fly from sweltering New York to the breezes of Oyster Bay early in May in order to escape. If caught here in June nothing can save her. To-night, as it happens, you're our only guest, but my daughter is going to a *musicale* at Mrs. de Winton's after dinner, so you and I will be free to soar into the empyrean through a haze of tobacco-smoke."

Standing there, in that delightful drawing-room, made welcome by a man like Forbes, and admitted to a degree of charming intimacy by a girl like Forbes' daughter, Theydon tried to believe that his meeting with those ill-omened detectives at the Long Island depot was, in some sort, a figment of the imagination.

But he was instantly and effectually brought back to a dour sense of reality by Evelyn Forbes' next words. She had given the album to her father, and by chance, looked at Theydon just as she had looked at him the previous night.

"Were you at Daly's Theater last night?" she inquired suddenly.

"Yes," he said. Then, finding there was no help for it, he went on:

"You and I have hit on the same discovery, Miss Forbes. We three stood together at the exit. I was waiting for a taxi, and saw you get into your car. Now you know just why I fell over the chair."

Forbes, smiling at the quip in the book, glanced up quickly.

"Don't tell me Tomlinson forgot to move that infernal chair again!" he cried. "Really, I must get rid either of our butler or the Canaletto—yet I prize both."

"Don't blame Tomlinson, Father dear," laughed the girl. "If Mr. Theydon hadn't made an unconventional entry, we would have talked about the weather, or the Panama Canal, or something equally stupid. As it is, I took him unaware, and had him scribbling verse before he knew where he was."

AT that moment Tomlinson himself, imperturbable and portly, announced that dinner was served. The three descended the stairs, chatting lightly about the musical comedy witnessed overnight. It was no new revelation to Theydon that truth should prove stranger than fiction, but the trite phrase was fast assuming a fresh and sinister personal significance. He believed, and not without good reason, that no man living had ever undergone an experience comparable with his present adventure. When he left that house he was going straight to two officers of the law whose duty it would become to call upon Mr. Forbes for a full and true explanation of the visit to Mrs. Lester—provided, that is, he (Theydon) told them what he knew. Talk about a death's-head grinning at a feast! At that bright dinner-table he was a prey to keener emotion than ever shook a Borgia entertaining one whom he meant to poison.

In sheer self-defense, he talked with an animation he seldom displayed. Evelyn was evidently much taken by him, and, fired by her manifest interest, he indulged in fantastic paradox and wild flights of fancy. Seemingly, his exuberance stimulated Forbes, himself a well-informed talker.

An hour sped all too soon. The girl rose with a sigh.

"It's too bad that I should have to go," she said. "I shall be bored stiff at Mrs. de Winton's. But I can't get out of it, except by telling a positive fib over the telephone. Father, next time you ask Mr. Theydon to dinner, please let me know in good time, and neither of you will be rid of me so easily."

She shook hands with Theydon. While she was giving her father a parting kiss, the guest moved to the door and held it open. As she passed out she smiled, and her eyes said plainly:

"I like you. Come again soon!"

Then she was gone, and the pleasant room lost some of its glow and color.

"Don't sit down again, Theydon," said Forbes, rising. "We'll have coffee brought to my den. What is your favorite liqueur—or shall we tell Tomlinson to send along that decanter of port? It's a first-rate wine. Another glass wont hurt you—or me, for that matter."

THEYDON had hardly dared to touch the champagne supplied during the meal. Abstemious at all times, because he found that wine or spirits interfered with his capacity for work, he felt that a clear head and steady nerves were called for that night more than any other night in his life. Following the lead given by his host, therefore, he elected the port.

"You are right, too," said Forbes. "You remember Dr. Johnson's dictum? 'Claret is the liquor for boys, port for men; but he who aspires to be a hero must drink brandy.' To-night, not aspiring to the heroic, we'll stick to port."

"It is a curious fact that on my return from Hempstead Plains to-day I took a glass of brandy," confessed Theydon. "I seldom, if ever, drink any intoxicant before dining, but I needed a stimulant of a sort, and some unknown tissue in me cried aloud for brandy."

He hoped vaguely that the comment would lead to something more explicit, and thus bring him, without undue emphasis, so to speak, to the one topic on which he was now resolved to obtain a decisive statement from the man chiefly concerned.

But Forbes, motioning to an easy chair in a well-appointed library, and flinging himself into another, gave heed only to the one allusion, Hempstead Plains.

"Did you fly?" he asked.

"No. I was soaking in theory, not practice."

"Ah, theory! It would, indeed, seem to be true that folded away in some convolution of our brains are the faculties of the fish and the bird. Those latent powers are expanding daily. The submarine has already gone far beyond the practical achievements of aërial craft. But why, in the name of humanity, should every such development of man's almost immeasurable resources be dedicated to warlike purposes? I am sick at heart when I hear the first question put in these days to each inventor: 'Can you enable us to kill more of our fellow-men than we can kill with existing appliances?' Is it a new engine, a new amalgam of metals, a new explosive, a new field of electrical energy, one hears the same vulture's cry: 'How many, how far, how safely can we slay?' I regard this lust for destruction as contemptible. It is a strange and ignominious feature of modern life. The birth of printing, of steam, of telegraphy, was not hailed with that detestable chorus. Forgive me, Mr. Theydon, if I speak strongly on this matter."

IT was not the younger man now who talked brilliantly and forcibly. Theydon listened enthralled to one who spoke with the conviction and earnestness of a prophet.

"Don't imagine that I am framing an indictment against Christianity," went on Forbes passionately. "The Sermon on the Mount inspires all that is great and noble in our everyday existence, all that is eternally beautiful in our dreams of the future. But why this din of war, this smoke of arsenals, this marching and drilling of the world's youth? Nature's law appears to have two simple clauses. It enforces a principle in the struggle for existence, a test in the survival of the fittest. Great Heavens, are not these enough, without having our ears deafened by powder and drumming? What Englishman, in his heart of hearts, wishes to murder a German? Where is the German who longs for the gore of a Frenchman? It is rank lunacy even to imagine that the fifteen thousand inhabitants of some quiet little town in Britain are filled with an intense and abiding hatred of the fifteen thousand inhabitants of some equally quiet little town in Bavaria.

"That is why I am devoting a good deal of time and no small amount of money to an international crusade against the warlike idea, and I see no reason why a beginning should not be made with the airship and the aëroplane. We are too late with the submarine, but before the golden hour passes, let us stop the navigation of the air from forming part of the equipment of murder. Surely it can be done. Let America show the way! England and Germany, France, Russia and the rest of Europe—the founts of civilization—can write the edict, with all the blazonry of their glorious histories to illuminate the page: 'There shall be no war in the air!'"

Theydon was carried away in spite of himself.

"You believe that the airship might develop along the unemotional lines of the Parcel Post?" he inquired.

Forbes laughed.

"Exactly," he said. "I like your simile. No one suggests that we Americans should endeavor to destroy our hated rivals by sending bombs through the mails. Why, then, in the name of common sense, should the first, I might almost say, the only, use of which the airship is commonly supposed capable be that of destruction? Don't you see the instant result of a war-limiting ordinance of the kind I advocate? Suppose the peoples and the rulers declared in their wisdom that soldiers and war-material should be contraband of the air—and suppose that airships do become vehicles of practical utility—what a farce would soon be all the grim fortresses, the guns, the giant steel structures now designed as floating hells! Humanity has yet time to declare that the flying-machine shall be as harmless and serviceable as the mails. I believe it can be done. Come, now,

Mr. Theydon, I think you've caught on to my scheme—will you help?"

Help! Here was a man expounding a new evangel, which might, indeed, be visionary and impracticable, but was none the less essentially noble and Christian in spirit, and yet Theydon was debating whether or not he should give testimony which would bring to that very room a couple of detectives whose first questions would make clear to Forbes that he was suspected of blood-guiltiness!

THE notion was so utterly repellent that Theydon sighed deeply; his host, not unnaturally, looked surprised.

"Of course, such a revolutionary idea strikes you as outside the pale of common sense," he began, but the younger man stayed him with a gesture. Here was an opportunity that must not be allowed to pass. No matter what the cost,—if he never saw Evelyn Forbes or her father again,—he must dispel the waking nightmare which held him in such an abnormal condition of uncertainty and foreboding.

"Now that your daughter is gone, I may venture to speak plainly," he said. "I told you that I felt the need of a brandy and soda on arriving at New York. As a matter of fact, I did not leave the Hempstead Plains track until six o'clock, and, as the Innesmore, where I live, lies on the West Side, and I was due here at seven-thirty, I had my man meet me at the depot with a suit-case, meaning to change my clothes in the dressing-room there, and come straight here. Guess my astonishment when I found Bates—Bates is the name of my factotum—in the company of two strangers, whom he introduced as representing the New York Detective Bureau."

He paused. He had brought in his own address skillfully enough, and kept his voice sufficiently under control that no tremor betrayed a knowledge of Forbes' vital interest in any mention of that one block of flats among the multitude. Now, for the first time, the Innesmore figured as his abode, the correspondence which led to the dinner having centered in his club. But not a flicker of an eyelid nor twitch of mobile lips showed the slightest concern on Forbes' part. Rather did he display at once a well-bred astonishment on hearing Theydon's concluding words.

"Do you literally mean detectives?" he cried.

"Yes."

Forbes smiled, and commenced filling a pipe.

"Evidently they did not hold you as a principal," he said.

HIS tone was genial, but slightly guarded. Theydon realized that this man of great wealth and high social position had reminded himself that his guest, though armed with the best of credentials, was quite unknown to him otherwise, and that, perhaps, he had acted unwisely in inviting a stranger to his house without making some preliminary inquiry. This reversal of their rôles was a conceit so ludicrous that Theydon smiled too.

At any rate, he meant now to pursue an unpleasing task, and have done with it.

"No," he said slowly. "It seems that I am the worst sort of witness in a murder case. I may have heard, I may even have seen, the person suspected of committing the crime, or, if that is going too far, the person whom the police have good reason to regard as the last man who saw the poor victim alive and in ordinary conditions. But my testimony, such as it is, is so slight and inconclusive that, of itself, no one could hang a cat on it."

"Good gracious! This sounds interesting, though you have my sympathy. It must be rather distressing to be mixed up in such an affair, even indirectly."

Forbes struck precisely the right note of friendly inquiry. He wished to hear more, and was at the same time relieved to find that Professor Scarth had not introduced to his home a notorious malefactor in the guise of a young writer seeking material for an article on airships!

Theydon could have laughed aloud at this comedy of errors, but the fact that at any moment it might develop into a tragedy exercised a wholesome restraint.

"I live at Number Eighteen, the Innesmore," he said. "Opposite—on the same floor, I mean—lives or did live, a Mrs. Lester. I do not—"

"Are you telling me that a Mrs. Lester, of Number Seventeen, the Innesmore, is dead—has been murdered?"

FORBES' voice rang out vibrant, incisive. His ordinarily pale face had blanched, and his deep-set eyes blazed with the fire of some fierce emotion; but beyond the slight elevation of tone and the change of expression, he revealed to Theydon's quietly watchful scrutiny no sign of the terror or distress which an evil-doer might be expected to show on learning that the law's vengeance was already shadowing him, even in so remote a way as was indicated by the presence under his roof of a witness regarded by the police as an important one.

"Yes," stammered Theydon, quite taken aback by his companion's vehemence. "Do you—know the lady? If so—I am sorry—I spoke so unguardedly—"

"Good God, man, don't apologize for that! I am not a child or weakling, that I should flinch in horror from one of life's ruthless dramas! But, are you sure of what you are saying? Mrs. Lester murdered! When?"

"About midnight last night, the doctor believes. That is what Bates told me. I was so shaken on hearing his news, which was confirmed by the two detectives, that I really gave little heed to details . . . . . She was strangled—a peculiarly atrocious thing, where an attractive and ladylike woman is concerned. I have never spoken to her, but have met her at odd times on the stairs. I was immeasurably shocked, I assure you. In fact, I was on the point of telephoning an excuse to you for this evening, but the Chief Inspector—Steingall, I think, his name is—said it would suffice if I met him at my flat about eleven o'clock, as he was engaged on other inquiries which would occupy the intervening hours."

"But if the news of this dastardly crime only reached you to-night at the Long Island depot, and you have no personal acquaintance with Mrs. Lester, what evidence can you give that will assist the police?"

"Mrs. Lester received a visitor last night, an incident so unusual that I, who heard him arrive, and Bates, who was in my sitting-room when we heard him depart, commented on the strangeness of it. That, I suppose, is the reason why I am in request by the Bureau."

"You say 'him.' How did you know it was a man? Did you see him?"

"Er—that was impossible. We were in my flat, behind its closed door. Bates and I deduced his sex from the sound of his footsteps."

AGAIN Theydon nearly stammered. Events had certainly turned around in the most amazing way. Instead of carrying himself almost in the manner of a judge, he was figuring rather as an unwilling witness in the hands of a skilled and merciless cross-examining counsel.

"Did the detectives supply any theory of motive for the crime? Was this poor woman killed for the sake of her few trinkets?"

By this time Theydon was stung into a species of revolt. It was he, not Forbes, who should be snapping out searching questions.

"I regret to say that *my* nerves were not so entirely under control at the depot that I could listen carefully to each word," he said almost stiffly. "Bates had picked up such information as was available, but he, though an ex-sergeant of the British army, was so upset as to be hardly coherent. When I meet the detectives in the course of another hour I shall probably gather something definite and reliable in the way of details."

Forbes laid on the table the pipe which he had filled but not lighted. He poured out a glass of port, and drank it.

"Try that," he said, pushing the decanter toward Theydon.

"No, thanks. Nothing more for me to-night until the Bureau men have cleared out."

"They cannot trouble you greatly. You have so little to tell."

Forbes rose as he spoke, and strode the length of the room and back with the air of a man debating some weighty and difficult point.

"Mr. Theydon," he said at last, halting in front of the younger man, and gazing down at him with a direct intensity that was highly embarrassing to one who had good cause to connect him with the actual crime, "I want you to do me a favor—a great favor. It was in my mind at first to ask you to permit me to go with you to the Innesmore, and be present during the interview with the detectives. But a man in my position must be circumspect. It would, perhaps, be unwise to appear too openly interested. I don't mind telling you, in confidence, that I have known Mrs. Lester many years. The shock of her death, severe as it must have been to you, is slight as compared with my own sorrow and dismay. More than that I dare not say until better informed. I remember now hearing the newsboys shouting their ghoulish news, and I saw the headlines making large-type display of 'Murder of a lady,' but little did I imagine that the victim was one whom—one whose loss I shall deplore. —Have you a telephone?"

"Yes," said Theydon, thoroughly mystified anew by the announcement that Forbes had even contemplated, or so much as hinted at, the astounding imprudence of visiting the Innesmore openly that night.

"Ring me up when the detectives have gone. I shall esteem your assistance during this crisis as a real service."

For the life of him, Theydon could not frame the protest which ought to have been made without delay and without hesitation.

"Yes," he said, "I'll do that. You can trust me absolutely."

Thus was he committed to secrecy. That promise sealed his lips.

CHAPTER III

IN THE TOILS

THEYDON, though blessed or cursed with an active imagination—which must surely be the prime equipment of a novelist—was shrewd and level-headed in dealing with everyday affairs. It was no small achievement that the son of an Episcopalian minister in secluded Vermont, aided only by a stout heart, a university education and an excellent physique—good recommendations, each and all, but forming the stock-in-trade of many a man on whose subsequent career "Failure" is writ large—should have forced himself to the front rank of the most overcrowded among the professions before attaining his twenty-sixth year.

It may be taken for granted, therefore, that he was not lacking in the qualities of close observation and critical analysis. He would, for instance, be readier than the majority of his fellows to note the small beginnings of events destined to become important. Often, of course, his deductions would prove erroneous, but the mere fact that he habitually exercised his wits in such a way rendered it equally certain that his judgment would sometimes be accurate. One such occasion presented itself a few seconds after he had left the Forbes mansion.

Tomlinson, the bland, had helped him to don his overcoat, and had pocketed a tip with as fine an air as a Fifth Avenue physician accepting a fee. A taxi, summoned by a footman, was in waiting, and Theydon was crossing the pavement when he noticed a gray landaulet car at rest beneath the trees at some distance. Mr. Forbes' house stood in a square, and the gray car had been drawn upon the quiet side of the roadway, being stationed there, apparently, to wait its owner's behest. Gray cars are common enough in New York, but they are usually of the touring class. Not often does one see a gray-painted landaulet; hence the odd though hardly remarkable fact occurred to Theydon that a precisely similar gray automobile had stood outside the Long Island depot when he took a taxi there.

Admittedly, he was in a nervous and excited state. It could hardly be otherwise after the strain of that astounding conversation with Forbes, and there was no prospect of the tension being relaxed until the close of the interview with the detectives, which he now re-

garded as the worse ordeal of the two. But this subconscious neurasthenia in no wise affected the reflex action of his ordinary faculties. When, on leaving the square, and while his cab was rattling along an aristocratic thoroughfare heading to the center of the city, he peered through a tiny observation-window in the back of the vehicle and ascertained that the gray car was stealing along quietly about a hundred yards in the rear, he began to believe that the presence of two such vehicles both at the Long Island depot and outside Mr. Forbes' residence could not be wholly accidental. When he had watched its persistent treading on the heels of his own car for some minutes, its intent became almost unmistakable.

THE route to the Innesmore traversed some of New York's main arteries, but despite the rush of traffic due to the first flight of homeward-bound playgoers, the gray car kept steadily on his track. Amused at first, he became angry because of a notion which grew out of the wonderment of finding himself the object of this persistent espionage. To make sure, and at the same time discover the sort of person who was spying on him, he adopted a ruse. Leaning out, when about to cross Broadway, he said to his driver: "Turn sharp to the right, into Thirty-ninth Street, and pull up. I'll tell you when to go on again."

The man obeyed. Theydon posted himself at the outer window, and in a space of time so short that the excellence of the gray car's accelerator was amply demonstrated, the pursuer swung into sight. A stolid-faced chauffeur at the wheel did not appear discomfited at coming on his quarry thus unexpectedly. He whirled past, seemingly quite oblivious of Theydon's fixed stare. Though the weather was mild, the man wore an overcoat with upturned collar; so, what between its protecting flaps and a low-peaked cap, his face was well hidden. Still, Theydon received an impression of a curiously wooden physiognomy which might have belonged to an automaton for all the heed given to the taxi or its inquisitive occupant. But his aspect was almost forgotten in the far stranger discovery that the limousine was empty. Both windows were open, and the bright lights of a corner store flashed into the interior; yet not a soul was visible. Moreover the car sped on unhesitatingly, stopping some two hundred yards ahead.

So far as Theydon could tell, no one alighted. He jotted down the number —X Y 1314—on his shirt-cuff.

"Did you happen to see that car waiting near the house I came from?" he said to the taxi-man, who, of course, provided an interested audience of one.

"Yes sir," was the ready answer. "It's not a New York car. I've never seen them letters afore."

"In other words, it may be a faked number?"

"Likely enough, sir, but rather risky. The cops are quick at spotting that sort of thing."

"Can *you* take a hand in the game? I want to know where that car goes to."

The man grinned.

"I wouldn't like to humbug you, sir. That there machine can lose me quicker'n Gunboat Smith could knock me out. Didn't you hear the hum of the engine as it went by?"

"Thanks. Now go ahead to the Innesmore."

HE was paying the driver when the gray car stole quietly past the end of the street, and that was the last he saw of it.

"There it goes again, sir," said the man. "Say—gimme your name an' address. I'll ask around a little an' keep me eyes open as well. Then, if I get wise, I'll let you know."

Theydon scribbled the number of his flat on a card.

"There you are," he said. "Even if I happen to be out, I'll leave instructions that you are to be repaid for your trouble if you call. By the way, what is your name?"

"Evans, sir."

There was really little doubt in Theydon's mind as to the reason why he had been followed. He was fuming about it when Bates met him in the hall of Number 18 with the whisper:

"Them two are w'iting 'ere now, sir."

Theydon glanced at his watch. The hour was ten minutes past eleven.

"Sorry I'm late, gentlemen," he said, on entering the sitting-room and finding the detectives seated at his table, seemingly comparing notes, because the Chief Inspector was talking, while Clancy, the diminutive, was glancing at a notebook.

"We have no reason to complain of being kept waiting a few minutes in such comfortable quarters," said Steingall pleasantly.

"Oh, I fancy I was detained by some zealous assistant of yours," said Theydon, determined to carry the war into the enemy's territory.

At that, Clancy looked up quickly.

"Will you kindly tell me just what you mean, Mr. Theydon?" said Steingall.

"Why? Is it news to you that a gray limousine car stalked me from the Long Island depot to—to my friend's house, waited there three hours or more, and has carefully escorted me home? I dislike that sort of thing. Moreover, it strikes me as stupid. *I* didn't kill Mrs. Lester. It will save you and me a good deal of time and worry if you accept that plain statement as a fact."

"Wont you sit down?" said Steingall quietly. "And—may I smoke? I didn't like to ask Bates for permission to light up in your absence."

THEYDON was not to be outdone in coolness. He opened a corner cupboard and produced various boxes.

"The cigars are the real thing," he said. "A birthday present from a maiden aunt, who is wise enough to judge the quality of tobacco by the price. And here are Virginian, Turkish and Egyptian cigarettes."

Steingall inspected the cigars gravely.

"By Jove!" he cried, his big eyes bulging in joyous surprise. "Last year's crop from the Don Juan y Guerrero plantation! Treasure that aunt of yours, Mr. Theydon. None but herself can be her equal."

Theydon saw that the little man did not follow his chief's example.

"Don't you smoke?" he said.

"No. If you'll not be horrified, I would like to smell one of those Turks."

"Smell it?"

"Yes. That is the only way to enjoy the aroma and avoid nicotine poisoning. My worthy chief dulls a sound intellect by the cigar habit. What is worse, he excites a nervous system which is normally somewhat bovine. You also, I take it, are a confirmed smoker—so you two are at cross purposes already."

Clancy's voice was pitched in the curious piping note usually associated with comic relief in a melodrama, but his wizened face was solemn as a red Indian's. It was Theydon who smiled. His preconceived ideas as to the appearance and demeanor of the typical New York detective were shattered. Really, there was no need to take these two seriously.

Steingall, while lighting the cigar, grinned amiably at his colleague. Clancy passed a cigarette to and fro under his nostrils and sniffed. Theydon reached for a pipe and tobacco-jar and drew up a chair.

"Well," he said, "it is not my business to criticise your methods. I have very little to tell you. I suppose Bates—"

"The really important thing is this car which followed you to-night," broke in Steingall. "The details are fresh in your memory. What type of car was it? Did you see the driver and occupants? What's its number?"

Theydon had not expected these questions. He looked his astonishment.

"Ha!" cackled Clancy. "What did I tell you?"

"Oh, shut up!" growled Steingall. "I am asking just what you yourself are itching to know?"

"May I take it that the car has not been dogging me by your instructions?" said Theydon. He was inclined to be sceptical, and yet the Chief Inspector seemed to have spoken quite candidly.

"Yes," said Steingall, meeting the other's glance squarely, "we have no reason on earth to doubt the truth of anything you have said, or may say, with regard to this inquiry. The car is

not ours. This is the first we have heard of it. We accepted your word, Mr. Theydon, that you were dining with a friend. Perhaps you will tell us now what his name is, and where he lives."

FOR the fraction of a second Theydon hesitated. That, he knew instantly, was a blunder, and so he proceeded to rectify it.

"I was dining with Mr. James Creighton Forbes, who lives in Madison Avenue," he said. "Probably you are acquainted with his name, so you will realize that if my evidence proves of the slightest value I would not like any reference to be made to the fact that I was his guest to-night."

"I don't see how that can possibly enter into the matter, except in its bearing on this mysterious car."

Though Steingall was taking the lead, Theydon was aware that Clancy, who had given him scant attention hitherto, was now looking at him fixedly. He imagined that the queer little man was all agog to learn something about the automobile which had thrust itself so abruptly into the affair.

"Exactly," he agreed. "I visited Mr. Forbes to-night for the first time. We are mutually interested in aviation. That is why I went to Hempstead Plains to-day, and the invitation to dinner was the outcome of a letter of introduction given me by Professor Scarth, of Harvard University."

Then, thinking he had said enough on that point, he described the gray car and its stolid-faced chauffeur to the best of his ability. He told of the brief chat with the taxi-driver and its result.

"Good," nodded Steingall. "I'm glad you did that. It may help. I am doubtful of any information turning up, but you never can tell. The number-plate, at any rate, is certainly misleading. Now, about last night? Try and be as accurate as possible with regard to time. Can you give us the exact hour when you returned home?"

"I happened to note by the clock on the mantelpiece that I came in at eleven-thirty-five."

Steingall compared the clock's time with his watch.

"You had been to a theater?" he said.

"Yes—Daly's."

"It was raining heavily. Did you take a taxi?"

"Yes."

"Were you delayed? The piece ended at eleven-five."

"My cab met with a slight accident."

"What sort of accident?"

Theydon explained.

"In all likelihood, you can discover the driver," he smiled, "and he will establish my alibi."

His tone seemed to annoy Clancy, who broke in:

"Don't you write novels?"

"Yes."

"Sensational?"

"Occasionally."

"Then you ought to be tickled to death at being mixed up in a first-rate murder. This is no ordinary crime. Several people will be older and wiser before the culprit is found and put in the chair."

"What Mr. Clancy has in mind," purred Steingall cheerfully, "is the curiously aggressive tone of some witnesses when questioned by the police. They arm themselves against attack, as it were. You see, Mr. Theydon, we suspect nobody. We try to ascertain facts, and hope to deduce a theory from them. Over and over again we are mistaken. We are no more astute than other men. Our sole advantage is a wide experience of criminal methods. The detective of romance—if you'll forgive the allusion—simply doesn't exist in real life."

"I accept the rebuke," said Theydon. "I suppose the gray car was still rankling in my mind. From this moment I start afresh. At any rate, the man who brought me from the theater might check my recollection of the time."

STEINGALL nodded. He was evidently pleased that Theydon was inclined to share his view of the difficulties the Bureau encountered in its fight against malefactors.

"Did you see or meet anyone in particular while your cab approached these mansions, or when you ascended the stairs?"

"No," said Theydon.

He perceived intuitively that if the detectives found the driver of the taxi which brought him from the theater, it was possible the man might have noticed Forbes, who had certainly been scrutinized a few minutes later by a patrolman; so he hastened to add:

"You said 'anyone in particular.' I did see a tall, well-dressed gentleman at the corner of the street, but there is nothing remarkable in that."

"Which way was he heading?"

"In this direction."

"Then it is conceivable that he might be the man who called on Mrs. Lester?"

"Yes."

"Aren't you pretty sure he *was* the man?"

Theydon permitted himself to look astonished.

"I?" he said. "How can *I* be sure? If you mean that, judging from the interval of time between my seeing him at the corner and the sound of footsteps on the stairs, followed by the opening of the door at Number Seventeen, it *could* be he, I accept that."

Steingall nodded again. Apparently he was content with Theydon's correction.

"As the weather was bad, you probably hurried in when your cab stopped?" he said.

"That is equivalent to saying you credit me with sense enough to get in out of the rain," smiled Theydon.

"Just so. And you wore an overcoat, which you removed on entering your hall?"

"Yes." Theydon's tone showed a certain bewilderment at these trivialities.

"Then if you paid no special heed to the movements of the tall gentleman you have mentioned, why did you open one of these windows and look out soon after Bates went to the post?"

THEYDON flushed like a schoolboy caught by a master under circumstances which youth generally describes as "a clean cop."

"How on earth do you know I looked out?" he almost gasped.

"I'll tell you willingly. The discovery was Mr. Clancy's, not mine. When we arrived here this morning, and ascertained that you had been out at a late hour last night, we asked your man if he could enlighten us as to your movements. He did so. To the best of his belief, you dined at a club and occupied a stall at Daly's Theater subsequently. He was sure, too, you had not walked home through the rain, so it was easy to draw the conclusion that you returned in a covered vehicle. Mr. Clancy requested Bates to produce the clothes you had worn, which, owing to the uproar created by the news of the murder, had not been brushed and put away. As a consequence, the silk collar and part of the back of your dress coat bore the marks of raindrops. How had they got there? The only logical deduction was that you had thrust your head and shoulders through a window, and the time of the action is established almost beyond doubt, because you had changed the coat when Bates came from the letter-box. It was either directly after you came in, or while Bates was absent. Of course, you may have looked out twice. Did you? Whether once or twice, why did you do it?"

Theydon's feelings changed rapidly while Steingall was delivering this very convincing analysis of a few simple facts. He had passed at a bound from the detected schoolboy stage to that of a man forcing his way through a thicket who finds himself on the very lip of a precipice. He remembered hazily that Bates had said something at the Long Island depot with regard to the manner in which the detectives, especially Clancy, had bothered his stolid British brain with questions. But it was too late to apply the warning thus conveyed. If he faltered now, he was forever discredited. These men would read his perplexed face as if it were a printed page. In his distress, he was prepared to hear Steingall, or that little satyr Clancy, say mockingly:

"Why are you trying to screen James Creighton Forbes? What is he to you? What matter his fame or social rank? We are here to see that justice is done. Out with the truth, let who may suffer!"

BUT neither of the pair said anything of the sort. Clancy only interjected a sarcastic comment.

"You will observe, Mr. Theydon, that even in a minor instance of deductive reasoning such as this, the man who smells rather than the man who smokes tobacco solved the problem promptly."

Theydon threw out his hands in token of surrender. He thought he saw a means of escape, and took it unhesitatingly.

"I'm vanquished," he said. "You force me to admit that I do know a little, a very little, more than I have confessed hitherto about the man who visited Mrs. Lester's flat last night. I have said nothing about the matter thus far, because I didn't want to be convicted of a piece of idle curiosity worthy of a gossip-loving cook. I noticed the man I have described staring at the number of the street as my cab turned the corner. I did not know him. I had never seen him before last night, but he was of such distinguished appearance, and his face was of so rare a type, that I was interested, and wished to ascertain, if possible, on whom he meant calling, if, as it seemed, he was searching for an address in these flats. Therefore I did look out, and I saw him enter the doorway beneath. In due course, I heard him arrive at Mrs. Lester's door—that is, I assume it was he. Five minutes later, Bates and I heard him depart. To make sure, I looked out a second time. If you ask me why I behaved in that way, I cannot tell you. I have occupied this flat during the past five months, and I have never previously, within my recollection, lifted a window and gazed out to watch anybody's comings and goings. The thing is inexplicable. All I can say is that it just happened."

"Would you recognize him if you saw him again?"

"Yes."

Theydon gave the assurance readily. It was beyond credence that either detective should put the one question to which he was now firmly resolved to give a misleading answer, and in this belief he was justified, since not even Clancy's uncanny intelligence could suggest the fantastic notion that the man who walked through the rain the previous night and the man with whom Theydon had dined that evening were one and the same person.

"I don't blame you for adopting a policy of partial concealment," said the Chief Inspector dryly. "You are not the first, and you certainly will not be the last, witness from whom the police have to drag the facts. Now that we have reached more intimate terms, can you help by describing this stranger?"

THEYDON complied at once. He drew just such a general sketch of Forbes as a skilled observer of men might be expected to formulate after one direct glance close at hand, supplemented by a view into a lamp-lit street from a third-story window on a rainy night.

"So far, so good," said Steingall. "You have contrived to fill in several details lacking in the description supplied by a patrolman who chanced to be standing at the corner when Mrs. Lester's visitor posted a letter. Did you notice that?"

"Yes. Indeed, I believed that, whether intentionally or not, he held an open umbrella at an angle which prevented the policeman from seeing his face."

"In fact, it's marvelous what you really do know when your memory is jogged," snapped Clancy.

Theydon did not resent the sarcasm. He smiled candidly at the little man.

"I suppose I deserve that," he said meekly.

"Why did you hide your knowledge of Mrs. Lester's visitor from your man Bates, or Bites, as he calls himself?"

"I was rather ashamed of the subterfuge I adopted in order to get him out of the room while I opened the window the first time."

"That was understandable last night, but I fail to follow your reasoning for a policy of silence when we told you at the Long Island depot that Mrs. Lester had been killed."

"I was utterly taken aback by your news. I wanted time to think. I never meant to hide any material fact at this interview."

"You have contrived to delay and hamper our inquiry for twelve hours—twenty-four, in reality. I can't make you out, Mr. Theydon. You would never have said a word about your very accurate acquaintance with this mysterious stranger's appearance had not last night's rain-storm left its legible record on your clothes. Do you now vouch for it that the man was completely unknown to you?"

"You are pleased to be severe, Mr. Clancy, but having placed myself in a false position, I must accept your strictures. I assure you, on my honor, that the man I saw was an absolute stranger."

Happily Theydon was under no compulsion to choose his words. He met the detective's searching gaze unflinchingly. Fate, after terrifying him, had been kind. If Clancy had expressed himself differently,—if, for instance, he had said, "Had you ever before seen the man?" or, "Have you now any reason for believing that you know his name?"—he would have forced Theydon's hand in a way he was far from suspecting.

"It may surprise you to hear," piped the shrill, cracked voice, "that there are dozens of policemen walking about New York who would arrest you on suspicion had you treated them as you have treated us."

"Then I can only say that I am fortunate in my inquisitors," smiled Theydon.

STEINGALL held up a massive fist in deprecation of these acerbities.

"You have nothing more to tell us?" he queried.

"Nothing."

"Then we need not trouble you further to-night. Of course, if luck favors us, and we find the gentleman with the classical features,—the most unlikely person to commit a murder I have ever heard of,—we shall want you to identify him."

"I am at your service at any time. But before you go, wont you enlighten me somewhat? What did really happen? I have not even seen a newspaper account of the crime."

"Would you care to examine Number Seventeen?"

It was Clancy who put the question, and Theydon was genuinely astonished.

"Do you mean—" he began, but Clancy laughed, almost savagely.

"I mean Mrs. Lester's flat," he said. "The poor woman's body is at the mortuary. If you come with us we can reconstruct the crime. It occurred about this very hour, if the doctor's calculations are well founded."

Theydon rose.

"I shall be most—interested," he said. "By the way, Mr. Clancy, though yours is not a French name, may I ask if you are of French extraction?"

"On my mother's side, yes. The other half is Brooklyn-Irish. You think I am adopting some of the methods of the French *juge d'instruction,* eh?"

"No. I cannot bring myself to believe that you regard me as a murderer."

The three passed out into the hall. Mr. and Mrs. Bates immediately showed scared faces at the kitchen door.

"It's all right, Bates," said Theydon airily. "I'm not a prisoner. I'll be with you again in a few minutes."

But Bates was profoundly disturbed.

"Wot beats me," he said to his wife when they were alone, "is why that little ferret wanted to see the Guv'nor's clothes. I looked 'em over carefully afterwards, an' there wasn't a speck on 'em except some spots of rain on the coat-collar. It's a queer business, no matter how you tike it. Mr. Theydon's manner was strange when he kem in last night. He seemed to be *listenin'* for something. . . . . I don't know wot to make of it, Eliza. I reelly don't."

In effect, since no man is a hero to his valet, what would Tomlinson, butler in that Madison Avenue palace, have thought of *his* master if told that Mrs. Lester's last known visitor was James Creighton Forbes?

The next installment of *"Number 17"* will appear in the July BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE—on sale June 1st.

Sympathy

CALLISTA wanted to be loved for herself rather than for her father's wealth: the story of an unusual love-affair, handled with Mrs. Warren's exceptionally keen insight and power of character-portrayal.

By MAUDE RADFORD WARREN

Author of "Barbara's Marriages," "Marrying Off the Massereens," etc.

HER father's yacht had not ridden out the storm uninjured, and so, while repairs were being made, Callista had the unique experience of exploring unattended and unknown the two streets of the quaint cape town, hedged by its shifting dunes of sand. It was her father's whim to spend his week-ends on the yacht, taking as guests the men with whom he wished to talk business. King had made and lost three enormous fortunes in his day; and he had won, and for some years had held, a fourth so magnificent that—in spite of any impression he had ever given of financial instability—none of his associates cared to refuse the invitations of such a transcendent factor in the world of business. Callista, who had the clear sight of the abnormally sensitive, knew that her father believed he had other men somewhat at a disadvantage when they were detached from their ordinary surroundings.

Callista had sent her maid back to the yacht and was walking the length of the town, savoring the white houses with their tall flag-poles, the magnificent willow trees and the people she met, part of them blue-eyed, still-faced New Englanders, and part dark, stolid Portuguese. Tired at last, she had come to rest on a dory which had been drawn up from the beach upon a vacant shore lot. Resting here in the shadow of her parasol, she had her first sight of Manuel Nickerson. Opposite her was a fish-store, and at first all she noticed was that three men were sunning themselves on the little platform—wind-roughened, sun-browned men, bearing the inalienable stamp of the sea.

At the second glance she realized Manuel Nickerson with almost smarting vividness. He was larger than his companions, made, Callista could see, on a big, shambling plan. His face was so grotesque that it looked as if it had been painted and caricatured. His cheeks were a deep, staring crimson, the more startling because of the deep brown of his forehead and nose. His eyes were protuberant and underlined with heavy black shadows; his nose was long and crooked and lumpy, leaning over pendulous, flabby lips and a round, weak chin. Blue-black whiskers, every hair of which seemed as coarse and as pointed as a black pin, concealed his cheeks. His hair grew in unsightly patches, and one lock met his bushy eyebrows. He was talking, using his arms and legs in awkward, descriptive gestures, his eyes sometimes darting upon his companions, but more often cast down. It was not the man's appearance so much as the attitude of his listeners which stirred Callista. They sat apart from him, as if unwilling to share the platform with him, and they gazed straight ahead, a faint, unconcealed contempt in their faces. It seemed to Callista that they were too scornful of him even to tell him to be silent.

CALLISTA shifted her glance to Manuel Nickerson: his voice was loud and self-consciously confident; he laughed raucously at his own words, as

if indifferent to his listeners. But Callista understood; she saw under that boisterous, conceited manner, a pathetic desire to please, a painful consciousness of failure and a sickening self-disgust. And Callista knew this because she, heiress to more money than Manuel was able to count to, felt a kinship with him, shared his sense of nothingness, his pitiful knowledge that in the eyes of his fellows he was negligible.

"If I could put my soul in that man's body, and disguise my voice as his," thought rich Callista King, "I should be treated as he is being treated and not otherwise."

Callista's soul was as sensitive as the body of that fairy-tale princess who could feel a crumpled rose-leaf under twenty silken mattresses. There was no indirection about her vision or her feelings. She looked into her mirror as her maid was dressing her, and she did not see Ralph King's daughter, who would, if his luck held, be one of the richest women in America. She saw an angular girl, halfway between twenty and thirty, and looking older, with scant hair, dull complexion, small, pale eyes and a heavy mouth. The body of the woman who waited upon her, she thought, was far more worthy of care than her own. Hour by hour she was the recipient of deference from her servants, which she knew was bought with wages; and of consideration from her friends, which she knew had also been earned by her father's money.

Any other girl but Callista would have accepted the deference and the consideration as her right, would have agreed that great wealth was an asset of personality, like beauty, charm. But Callista was a slave to the naïveté of wanting to be considered for herself. She longed for it, and at the same time she humbly believed that it was impossible. At a luncheon or tea or theater party, she felt that essentially she was the least regarded person of her group, though her money was frequently given the place of honor. She was used to talking to men and women whose voices said the right things, but whose eyes and minds wandered away from her, anticipating the moment when they should be free to seek the people they really wanted to be with.

Callista had not been without the hope that somebody, some time, would see her instead of her father's money. Since her seventeenth birthday, men had made love to her—and one and all they had been fortune-hunters, from the portrait painter to whom she had been sitting just five times when he had bribed her maid to leave them alone and give him a chance to propose, to Bobby Herendon, whose rich grandfather had disinherited him and who dropped in between tea and dinner to tell her she could have him. If any man not in need of marrying money had told her he loved her, Callista would have loved and served him like a dog. She had never had a real lover, and she did not believe she had a real friend.

SHE thought of all this with her eyes upon Manuel Nickerson, and in very pity for him she could have made one of his listeners. While she looked, one of his companions nudged the other, and both rose. Without a word to Manuel, they walked a few rods to the beach and found a bulkhead, where they sat down. Manuel watched them, whistling briskly, but Callista could see the hurt look in his eyes.

Up the street came a group of two or three ten-year-old boys. Manuel picked up some pine-cones and pebbles that lay by his platform, and when the children were opposite him began to juggle them. Callista had seen the best sleight-of-hand in the world, and she knew that Manuel was no mean performer. The children watched, fascinated, for a time; then one cried to the others:

"Aw, come on and get the clams! Manuel'll do this for us any time we want him—wont you, Manuel?"

"Sure," Manuel said, "—always ready to oblige."

He rose and followed the children, stopping to speak to one or two men, who replied to him as they passed, scarcely troubling to turn their heads. It all hurt Callista as if it were a slight dealt herself. When Manuel was

out of sight, she went into a little general store next the fish-store, and making an unnecessary purchase, she asked the woman who served her about Manuel.

"The big one of the three sitting out here awhile back?" the woman replied. "He's Manuel Nickerson. His father came of a nice New England family, but he was lazy and married a Portugee woman who had a little store her father left her. Manuel was all the child they had."

"Is Manuel lazy too?" said Callista.

"Oh, no, ma'am, I can't say he is. He works hard enough, but he don't seem to have much luck. Then he's always hanging around, and he talks a lot, and I guess he gets in people's way. He's just Manuel Nickerson—that's all."

Callista walked back to the wharf where the yacht's boat was tied. At least, she reflected, her money was of some use. It protected her from the worst brutalities; no one would ever show the scant tolerance allowed poor Manuel Nickerson. So impressionably had she lent herself to a comprehension of Manuel Nickerson, that when she reached the yacht the captain's smiling deference and the eager servility of her maid came to her as a soothing surprise.

THAT night after dinner, as she sat on deck, listening to the voices of her father and his friends still talking business over their cigars, she looked across the harbor, past the schooners and sloops and dories dipping to the incoming tide, to the irregular line of shore lights. She began to think again of Manuel Nickerson, somewhere in the crooked front street, talking with his pitiful conceit, accepting neglect with spasmodic smiles or loud whistling. Her sympathy was even stronger than it had been in the afternoon. She began to wonder whether she could not provide for his sad self-contempt some sort of protection, some equivalent of the sheltering and muffling her father's money gave her. Slowly, for she was not fertile of expedient, her mind groped through various possibilities. At last she formed a plan.

A day or two later Callista drove to the office of a theatrical manager. She knew nothing of the forces and men that put in motion the puppets which amuse the world. She knew nothing of Amos Grant, on whom she was going to call; she had selected his name from the telephone-book merely because it sounded competent. Other people who entered or tried to enter his office could have told her that he was that rare person, a manager who could, four times out of five, put on a play that was not only good, but also would pay him. They could have told her, too, that the official privacy of Amos Grant was as carefully guarded and as difficult of access as that of Ralph King.

Knowing nothing of all this, Callista sat in her car and sent her chauffeur into a famous building on Forty-second Street and Broadway. He was to say that Miss Callista King would like to know if Mr. Grant could see her. After a few minutes the man returned, busily editing the remarks which had been addressed to him by a facetious desk-attendant. He had been told that if some chorus girl was faking something to get in to the old man and pretend she would make his everlasting fortune as a star, he couldn't put it across—that the old man would not go downstairs to see the Queen of England in her carriage, and that anyone who said she was Miss Callista King had better come upstairs and let the office compare her face with her pictures in the Sunday supplement. All this was translated to Callista in the remark that it seemed to be the extraordinary custom for callers on Mr. Grant to present their cards in person.

IN Callista, native dignity constantly struggled with diffidence. She felt extremely shy when she entered Grant's outer office, which seemed full of men and women, but her bearing was such that the incredulous grin on the face of the junior clerk changed into an inquiring smile, and he had an uneasy sense that too much skepticism would be as perilous for his career as too little. He consented to take in Callista's card.

Presently he came out, preceded by a young actress whose face showed that her conference with the manager had been cut short. Mr. Grant would see Miss King. Callista, innocent of any dismay she might be causing, passed this woman and the other applicants, some of whom had been waiting three hours to see the manager. She entered Grant's office and found herself facing a black-haired, keen-faced man of forty. At one glance she knew him as powerful and genuine. He saw that she really was the person she purported to be, and that she had not come to ask him to make a star of her.

Callista had thought of various ways of stating her business, but when she sat down before Grant, she had a sudden impulse to show him Manuel as she had seen him.

"I think he has unusual talent," she finished, "though perhaps he is only a bit above the average. But if it is not worth your while to take him up for what happens to be in him, I'll gladly pay all the expenses. I don't know in the least how you arrange such matters, but I suppose some one of your office force would go up to see him? If two or three thousand dollars could get him started—"

Grant was looking at her curiously and, she realized, sympathetically. Callista had no idea that Grant had never included vaudeville in his business, and that her proposition was not one that would pay him for any time and trouble he might take.

"I suppose, Miss King," he said, "that it would not do for me to ask you just why you want to put this across for your Portuguese-New-Englander? The reason behind the reasons—if you get me?"

Grant had a cultivated voice; the colloquial expressions germane to his profession sat upon it oddly. Callista had a feeling that he was intuitive; those nearest him could have told her that he had succeeded without money and without friends because he had a gift for reading human psychology.

"I—do I need to say any more," Callista murmured, blushing, "than that this man has won my sympathy and that I want to—to make a place for him where he can—can look up to himself, as it were?"

"If there's enough to him, he can put up a bluff," Grant said. "A man's real self is exactly worth the face he's got the nerve to show."

"Then—you will help him?" Callista asked, with a smile that made her plain face likable.

"Help him? I'll make him!" Grant said.

CALLISTA was ignorant of the fact that there were a thousand women in New York who would have been quite mad with joy if Grant had promised so much for them. She had no idea of the kind and extent of Grant's power, but she did understand that he was doing her a favor for which she had no right to ask.

"Thank you," she said, rising, "but do remember that I want to be responsible for the financial part."

She hesitated; she was sufficiently conventional, and not a scheming person, but she wanted to be quite sure that her plan for Manuel would be carried through by the best possible person—Grant himself; so she added:

"If you were thinking of seeing yourself the sort of performer he is, my father is going to take a week-end party there next Friday afternoon. They're all men—but Father recommends the cigars and sherry. If you'd care to go with us, Father will write you."

Grant had no engagement for the week-end—at least none that he was not willing to break. He had never met a girl of Callista's sort. He had been used to the provincial society of a little Indiana town, until he became a school-teacher. Tiring of that, he had got himself attached to theatrical circles and for ten years had been accustomed to the studied brightness and charm of women of the stage. A girl like Callista, to whom indirection and reserve were natural, had never come his way. Besides, Grant had a taste for experience; he was willing to come close enough to the meteoric Ralph King to see what he was like. He had once considered putting in rehearsal a play built on King's business career.

"I'd be glad to," he said.

"Father will write you," she repeated. "Manuel Nickerson is a lucky man."

Callista had the air of a woman used to seeing her wishes carried out—not like Grant's actresses, because of beauty, or talent, but because Ralph King's money did not admit failure.

Grant himself escorted her to the elevator, past the waiting men and women who gazed upon them breathlessly, not knowing how to place Callista and the manager's attentions. She had no idea how much she had asked of him. As she drove home, she was merely feeling pleased that she would be able to remove from some one the sting under which she secretly suffered.

THE next Friday evening Grant sat beside Callista in the stern of the yacht, rather amused at his mingled feelings. If some women had given him such an invitation, he would have looked to the fortifications of his heart. But Callista was above suspicion. Doubtless her father meant her to marry some high-born foreigner, was merely waiting for some one good enough to offer. Her quest to secure the happiness of the lightly esteemed Manuel was quixotic; doubtless the fellow was not lightly esteemed at all, was sufficiently happy in his career as a fisherman, and would jeer at the notion of life on the stage. This rich young woman suffered from an over-ready imagination. Meantime there was a moon, and Callista's voice was pleasant.

The next morning Callista led Grant along the narrow front street of the harbor town, in search of Manuel. They found him again seated in front of the little fish-store, and again working in his boisterous way to earn the applause of an indifferent audience. They sat on an upturned dory on the vacant lot opposite, and looked and listened.

"By George, the fellow doesn't need to make up!" Grant said. "That face is too good to be true."

He listened attentively, casting presently an appreciative glance at Callista.

"You got under his skin, all right, Miss King," he said, with the colloquialism to which she was becoming accustomed in him.

"Look!" Callista said. "The other men are leaving him—leaving him in the middle of a sentence!"

She spoke poignantly, and Grant stared at her. "He'll have a better audience in a minute," he said, rising.

He approached Manuel and got at once into talk with him. After a few minutes, the two came over to Callista, and Grant said:

"This man says he can work with hands and feet both, and jump—"

"You bet I can," said Manuel gruffly; "I can jump on a table and put out two lighted candles on it with my feet while I'm doing it."

"He says he can imitate sea-gulls and some of the birds back in the woods. He was born out there on the dunes you were telling me of. I asked him to show you his stunts."

"I should like to see what you can do," Callista said.

WITH an air of grotesque importance, Manuel began his performance, his audience making for themselves a stage-box out of the stern of the dory. Grant's face wore the blank, uninterested gaze to which his aspiring actresses were accustomed. But nothing escaped him; he knew, far better than Callista did, the commercial possibilities in Manuel's movements, changing from awkwardness to grace, from sheer gross power to the lightest of the lissome suggestions. Callista saw only pathos in the man's face and spirit, but Grant, to whom it was an axiom that humor is a relative thing, knew that Manuel's personality would evoke merriment from a vaudeville house, quite apart from his physical dexterity. When the man began his imitations of birds and sea-fowl, Callista looked with involuntary admiration at Grant. Manuel's loose mouth did not change its pucker, but his whole figure seemed to expand in silly pride.

After a few moments Grant stopped him, exactly as he would have stopped one of his own performers.

"If you happen to be going down to the beach," he said, "I'll join you there after a while."

When Manuel had slouched down to the shore, calling to the whistling seagulls above him, Grant said to Callista:

"I can do what you want for him—if you think it's wise. I can get one of my people to write him up some jokes, and a man with legs like that can be taught dancing stunts. The bird stuff is good and new. He'll never be a headliner, but he need not necessarily be a chaser."

"If I think it wise?" she questioned.

"Wherever he goes, he'll carry that personality with him, and I doubt if it's in him to bluff. Probably he's the sort that's foredoomed to be shoved into the corners of the world. His very manner asks you to count him out, and promises you to stand for it."

Callista quivered inwardly. In some queer fashion she had come to believe that if only it were possible to rehabilitate Manuel, it would be possible to rehabilitate herself. Ah, but why should she look for miracles? And yet she could not quite accept all that Grant said.

"Give this Manuel his chance," she urged; "the new life may at least partly make him over."

GRANT nodded, and walked briskly down to Manuel. Callista went slowly away from the sound of the incoming tide into a little thicket of pines, as isolated and still as if it had been a thousand miles inland. Thence she passed into the long, steep reaches of the dunes, slowly burying the woods on one side, and on the other being swallowed by the beating sea. There the double spell of sand and sea made her forget all about Grant and Manuel. When Grant joined her, she looked at him as one recalled from a long distance.

"It's all fixed," he said. "I put it to him straight, too—what he'd have to expect in a vaudeville circuit, and how half of the laughter of the audience would be at his face. But I showed him that it means a lot to have a face that can bring you as much in a week as other fellows earn in a month. Besides that, after our arrangements were made I took the trouble to speak to some of the natives and tell them about the genius that had been buried in their midst. Your Manuel will come into his own here, at least."

"You've taken so much trouble for me, Mr. Grant," she said, "and I'm very grateful. Sit down here, will you, and let these dunes work magic on you. In ten minutes you will forget all about Manuel; you'll be wanting to write a poem."

Grant flung himself beside her, and followed her mood. The habit of half a score of years fell from him; again he felt the quick sensibility of the eager young teacher who had secretly wanted to write. Yet he did not think of him with regret, or dwell upon him long. He thought of Callista, and realized that the wall of gold her father had built around her had not stifled her imagination, any more than it had starved out her sympathy. But for that wall of gold, he thought, and his work which took him so far afield from the Kings, they, too, might be friends. Yet, even as he thought it, he chided himself for sentiment which could only be momentary. What did a man like himself need with friends of Callista's sort? The men and women who tried to score with him must be his friends, and not a woman who had almost the right to patronize him.

IT was mid-June, and although Callista's circle had betaken itself to various country places, she remained in New York to be near her father. For some reason which he had not told her, King delayed opening his country house. Callista rather liked being in the city, now that people were leaving. She would not be expected to keep up forms of friendship which were meaningless. Grant was in town, putting on an enormous summer show which, he told Callista, would make or break him. When its fate was assured, he would have to rehearse a play which would either recoup him for his losses, or else make him still more prosperous. Nevertheless he took the time to shape for her the career of Manuel Nickerson.

Grant himself rehearsed Nickerson. Callista asked to be present at their first rehearsal, and after that it became a matter of course for her day by day

to follow this process that was, she saw, an act of creation. It was a simple matter enough in which to be interested, but to Callista it was a revelation of what his work could mean to a man. She had realized her father's intense absorption, but she had not understood it; she considered it merely a chase for more and unnecessary money. Now she was beginning to realize that the game in itself, quite apart from its results, was the thing into which a man put the best part of himself. She saw it day by day in Grant's work—which to her father would have been quite inconsiderable, because he could so easily have bought it; she saw it even in the earnest and intelligent efforts of Manuel Nickerson to mold himself and his art after Grant's plan. And though she was only a spectator, Callista felt a new zest in life, felt glad that she was in what her circle called in summer "empty New York."

Grant "tried out" Manuel in New Jersey. Night after night Callista went to see the man's work, accompanied by her bored and wondering maid. Grant attended only once, and that for Callista's sake; he was sure that Manuel would succeed. Callista repeated her visits because she felt a strange vicarious elation in the appreciation that was given the act of the ex-fisherman. At first the elation was unmixed with any other emotion; like Manuel himself, she grasped only the applause, the appreciation. But as the days passed, she realized that a faint scorn underlay the laughter. Here was a man who was not just pretending to be a ridiculous clown-creature; he was in himself a clown-creature, a kind of less-than-man whose antics people took as they took the antics of some dog, minus the sense of proprietorship and protection. With almost the same pain as if the humiliation had happened to herself, Callista realized that allowing for the fact that Manuel's audience considered him worth paying for, they regarded the man himself much as his neighbors in the harbor town regarded him.

WHEN Manuel moved the next week to a vaudeville house in Harlem, Callista followed his progress there. This time, through Grant's influence, she went behind the scenes. She talked to Manuel; she met the performers in the other acts. She was introduced to that mimic world where idiosyncrasies do not trouble to conceal themselves, and vanity and naïveté flaunt themselves as openly as if they were virtues. And here in the clamor for the best dressing-rooms, in the demand for recognition of reputation, in the self-advertising, she saw Manuel pushed into a corner, as Grant said he would be. She saw him treated with a raw brutality that his own boon companions would not have been capable of, because these stage people had little patience with a conceit and bluster which could not sustain themselves.

Callista read in Manuel's eyes a recognition of his true status. One day she spoke to him of his new life; she told him that behind the scenes there seemed to be a crude struggle for place, but that that was because people were nervous and anxious to make a good impression on their audiences. Manuel must not mind them, any more than they minded each other; he must remember that his real world, after all, was in front of the curtain, and his value must be measured by the pleasure he gave people. Manuel did not understand all her words, but he caught her meaning and brightened under her kindness.

"There's the notices in the local papers," he said. "I cut them out and sent them back home. Some of the fellows, maybe, are coming down next week on the Fall River boat. I'll be farther downtown then, and Mr. Grant says he'll see I get passes for them."

"Why don't you have a supper afterwards for them, and invite some of the nicest of the stage people?"

Manuel's face glowed, and Callista looked at him almost pitifully. She foresaw it all. Manuel would invite a few of the performers likely to be least rude to him and best fitted to dazzle their fellow-guests, the Cape Cod fishermen. He would spend perhaps two weeks' salary for food and drink, and doubtless he would thus buy the consideration of his home town, and not being in the town to neutralize his

reputation, he could enjoy it at long distance. Ah well, why not?

"You're glad you left home, Manuel?" she asked.

"I'd not go back for anything for good—yet. I'll go home when I've made my pile, and can buy the old Nickerson place. Maybe I'll buy a po'gie boat, and start in as a captain with men under me. After I pay for this supper, I'm going to save every cent—except what I spend on vacations at home."

IT was clear that Manuel had his life all planned. Callista and Grant attended the supper and did their best to see that Manuel's fishermen friends were duly impressed. The other guests followed the lead of the manager and made Manuel the center of his feast. Afterwards Grant masterfully sent Callista's maid home in her motor, and himself drove her. When she had thanked him for what he had done for Manuel, and he had pushed away her gratitude, he said abruptly:

"I've been trying to figure it out for some days whether I'm sorry or glad I took your Manuel in hand. It's up to you to say, Miss King. I never yet asked a girl to marry me, though I wont say I haven't told some I loved them, for this is no time for lies. But I never met a woman like you, and I never loved one as I love you. I've hesitated about telling you, and I guess you know why. But I never yet let anything go that I wanted without trying to get it."

"But—but, I never dreamed of this!" Callista gasped.

She had had enough practice in fending off the advances of fortune-hunters to know when a proposal was imminent. Her association with Grant had been so purely a matter of business, and she had seen so little of him, that she had never thought of considering him even as a friend. Men in her own circle made their approaches more gradually. Grant was applying his rapid business methods to his wife-seeking. Callista felt the effect of her wall of gold; this man was not of her world; he did not know any of the people she knew, and his ways were not her ways. Her utter surprise kept her from the yearning question that she always asked herself when any man sought her in marriage: "Can he really love me for myself?" She did not ask herself this question, and yet she felt a withdrawal from Grant, precisely as if she had asked it and answered it in the negative.

"I—I'm sorry," she added hastily, "but—it can't be."

USUALLY her suitors asked her if there was no hope for a change of feeling in the future, but Grant remained absolutely silent; stealing a quick glance at him, she saw a strange expression in his eyes. It reminded her, grotesquely enough, of the way Manuel Nickerson had looked when his companions had shown him the light regard in which they held him. She felt a quick sense of wonder—could it be that he was really hurt? Her intuition was of no guidance here, but her sensitiveness made her quiver in every nerve for him. They did not speak until he helped her out of the car in front of the King house, and then only to say a word of parting. Grant did not ask to see her again; she understood that he was treating her like a play that had failed. Always he tried to think of his plays that failed as bad dreams to be forgotten in the exhilaration of new healthful work.

It was a sensible enough attitude, but in the days that followed, she came to resent it. For August had come; New York was emptier than ever; and her father showed no sign of taking a vacation. When she proposed opening their country house so that at least he could spend the week-ends there, he told her abruptly that he had sold it, because he had got tired of it. She was used to his sudden changes of property and of plan, but she did not like to lose this particular country place. King suggested that she join some of her friends in the mountains, or at the sea, but Callista preferred not to go. They never had very much to say to each other, but—as she told him, with sudden unreserve—he was all she had, and she did not want to leave him.

The time came when she was glad she had said that, though the only

notice King took of it at the moment was to tell her that she was a good girl, and that perhaps they would take a little jaunt to Europe in the autumn. She thought he was looking old and tired, as indeed he had reason to, since he had worked so hard all summer. Callista spent all her evenings sitting opposite him in the library. She had given up following Manuel's career, and she tried not to think of Grant. She had sufficient food for speculation as she sat with her silent father; one with less than her sensitiveness would have known that King was in deep waters.

IN the early autumn there came a morning when King told Callista of what all the newspapers heralded next day: his gigantic failure. He said to her that he had made and lost four fortunes and that he was capable of making and holding a fifth. But he spoke with but a trembling shadow of his old assurance. That afternoon he was under the care of a nerve specialist and a trained nurse.

Toward dinner time, Callista, leaving his room, was told that Grant was calling, and in spite of the fact that she had said she would be at home to no one, he would not be denied. When she entered the room where he was waiting, he made no apologies for his insistence, and he did not ask for her father. He took her two hands in his, and said:

"Look here, I oughtn't to have let you get away from me a month ago. It was your father's money made me lose my nerve. I shouldn't have let it! What's money beside a man who understands you through and through and who needs you and whom you need?"

"W-wont you sit down?" murmured Callista.

"Not yet, Miss King. I know why you wanted to help Nickerson. And I'll tell you why I know—because I'd be like Nickerson myself if I hadn't learned to bluff. It's not the secret inside of a person that counts: it's the front he builds for himself and lives up to."

Callista was staring at him.

"We're the same sort of shy, meaching people, you and I," he said, "except that you are much finer, and that's to the good, and that you haven't built up a front, and that's to the bad! But I'll teach you how. At the bottom of your heart you know you've wished you dared stand alone without your father's money, and see what you'd draw. Well, rich or poor, you've drawn a man who'll never let go. Wont you tell me you missed me, Miss King?"

"Yes—yes," Callista whispered.

"Maybe your father will make good again, and maybe he wont. But for a while, anyhow, you'll have to give up your old life. Wont you put in the time learning a new life with me? You're the girl I want, and no cowardly, yellow, un-self-respecting streak in me is going to let go this time! I'm going to follow you up till I've taught you to love me. It's not money and the social round that give a woman happiness and a belief in herself: it's a man that loves her, and will stick to the end of time. What do you say? Not that it makes much difference, for I'll never give you up."

Already Callista's eyes were shining with the triumph and pride of a woman really loved. Already her old life, her old diffidence, lay behind her like a discarded garment. She need never pretend again; she could undertake the adventure of life with a guide who knew her through his adoring eyes. What matter what she was, if love could make her anything he liked? He had done what she and Manuel never could have done—imposed on the world his ideal of what his own personality should be. And he wanted her love—hers only! Although Grant still held her hands, she made a gesture as if to give them to him again.

"Perhaps," she said, with a little choking laugh, "perhaps I've learned that I don't want you to give me up!"

The Pigtail Of Hi-Wing-Ho

THIS eerily fascinating story is an excellent example of that strikingly individual flavor that makes Mr. Rohmer's work uniquely attractive. You will find it one of the most alluring stories of mystery you have ever read.

By SAX ROHMER
Author of the "Fu Manchu" stories, etc.

LEAVING the dock gates behind me, I tramped through the steady drizzle, going parallel with the river and making for the Chinese quarter. The hour was about half-past eleven, on one of those September nights when, in such a locality as this, a stifling quality seems to enter into the atmosphere, rendering it all but unbreathable. A mist floated over the river, and it was difficult to say if the rain were still falling, or if the ample moisture upon my garments were traceable only to the fog. Sounds were muffled, lights dimmed; and the frequent hooting of sirens added another touch of weirdness to the scene.

My insatiable thirst for "copy" of a certain character not infrequently led me to haunt these dreary ways from midnight until close upon dawn; but well as I knew the district and the strange and sometimes dangerous creatures lurking in its many burrows, tonight I experienced a chill partly physical and partly of apprehension; indeed, strange though it may sound, I hastened my footsteps in order the sooner to reach the low den for which I was bound,—Chinese Charlie's,—a spot marked plainly on the crimes map and which few respectable travelers would have regarded as a haven of refuge. But the chill of the adjacent river, and some quality of utter desolation which seemed to emanate from the deserted wharfs and ramshackle buildings about me, were driving me thither now; for I knew that human companionship, of a sort, and a glass of good liquor—from a store which the Customs would have been happy to locate—awaited me there.

I was just about to turn to the right into a narrow nameless alley, lying at right angles from the Thames, when I pulled up sharply, grasping my stick and listening.

A confused and continuous sound, not unlike that which might be occasioned by several large and savage hounds at close grips, was proceeding out of the darkness ahead of me—a worrying, growling and scuffling which presently I identified as human, although in fact it was animal enough. A moment I hesitated; then, distinguishing amid the sounds of conflict an unmistakable though subdued cry for help, I leaped forward and found myself in the midst of the mêlée.

THIS was taking place in the lee of a high, dilapidated brick wall. A lamp in a sort of iron bracket spluttered dimly above on the right, but the scene of the conflict lay in densest shadow, so that figures were undistinguishable.

"Help! They're strangling me!"

From almost at my feet the cry arose—and was drowned in Chinese chattering. But guided by it I now managed to make out that the struggle in progress waged between a burly English sailorman and two lithe Chinese. The yellow men seemed to have gained the advantage, and my course was clear.

The stick which I carry upon such expeditions has two virtues: the handle is leaded, and the ferrule is of steel and sharply pointed. A crack on the skull of the Chinaman who was engaged in endeavoring to throttle the victim laid him prone in the dirty roadway. His companion, who was holding the wrists of the recumbent man, sprang upright as though propelled by a spring. Reversing my stick, I lunged at him sharply. He uttered a shrill scream not unlike that of a stricken hare, and fled so rapidly that he seemed to melt into the mist.

"God bless you, mate!" came chokingly from the ground—and the rescued man, extricating himself from beneath the body of his stunned assailant, rose unsteadily to his feet and lurched towards me.

As I had surmised, he was a sailor, wearing a rough, blue-serge jacket and having his greasy trousers thrust into heavy sea-boots—by which I judged that he was but newly come ashore. He now stooped and picked up his cap. It was covered with mud, as were the rest of his garments, but he brushed it with his sleeve as though it had been but slightly soiled and clapped it on his head.

He grasped my hand in a grip of iron, peering into my face—and his breath was eloquent.

"I'd had one or two, mate," he confided huskily. The confession was unnecessary. "It was them two in the Blue Anchor as did it; if I 'adn't 'ad them last two, I could 'ave broke up them Chinks with one 'and tied behind me."

"That's all right," I said hastily, "and it may serve as a warning to you to keep sober when you are in such a dangerous neighborhood. We must look to the Chinaman here," I added, endeavoring at the same time to extricate my hand from the vise-like grip in which he persistently held it. "I may have struck him too hard—"

AS if to settle my doubts, the recumbent figure suddenly arose and without a word fled into the darkness and was gone like a phantom. My new friend made no attempt to follow.

"You can't kill a blarsted Chink," he confided, still clutching my hand; "it aint 'umanly possible. It's easier to kill a cat. Come along o' me and 'ave one; then I'll tell you somethink. I'll put you on somethink, I will."

With surprising steadiness of gait, considering the liquid cargo he had aboard, the man released my hand; and now seizing me firmly by the arm, he confidently led me by divers narrow ways which I knew to a little beer-house frequented by persons of his class. My own attire was such as to excite no suspicion in these surroundings, and although I considered that my acquaintance had had more than enough to drink for one night, I let him have his own way in order that I might learn his story, which he seemed disposed to confide in me. Settled in a corner of the beer-house—which chanced to be nearly empty—with portentous pewters before us, the conversation was opened by my new friend:

"I've been paid off from the *Jupiter* —Samuelson's Planet Line," he explained. "What I am is a fireman."

"She was from Singapore to London?" I asked.

"She was," he replied, "and it was at Suez it 'appened—at Suez."

I did not interrupt him.

"I was ashore at Suez—we all was, owin' to a 'itch with the Canal company—a matter of money, I may say. They make yer pay before they'll take yer through. Do you know that?"

I nodded.

"Suez is a place," he continued, "where they don't sell whisky—honly poison. Was you ever at Suez?"

Again I nodded, being most anxious to avoid diverting the current of my friend's thoughts.

"Well, then," he continued, "you know Greek Jimmy's—and that's where I'd been."

I did not know Greek Jimmy's, but thought it unnecessary to mention the fact.

"It was just about this time on a steaming 'ot night as I come out of Jimmy's and started for the ship. I was walkin' along the Waghorn Quay, same as you might be walkin' along to-night, all by myself,—bit of a list to port but nothing much,—full o' joy and 'appiness, 'appy and free—'appy and free. Just like you might have noticed to-night, I noticed a knot of Chinese scrappin' on the ground all amongst the dust right in front of me. I rammed in, windmilling all round and knocking 'em down like skittles. Seemed to me there was about ten of 'em, but allowin' for Jimmy's whisky, maybe there wasn't more'n two or three. Anyway, they all shifted and left me standin' there in the empty street with this 'ere in my 'and."

At that, without more ado, he thrust his hand deep into some concealed pocket and jerked out a Chinese pigtail, which had been severed apparently some three inches from the scalp, by a clean cut. My acquaintance, with somewhat bleared eye glistening in appreciation of his own dramatic skill,—for I could not conceal my surprise,—dangled it before me triumphantly.

"Which of 'em it belonged to," he continued, thrusting it into another pocket and drumming loudly on the counter for more beer, "I can't say, cos I don't know. But that aint all."

THE tankards being refilled and my friend having sampled the contents of his own:

"That aint all," he continued. "I thought I'd keep it as a sort of relic, like. What 'appened? I'll tell you. Amongst the crew there's three Chinks —see? We aint through the Canal before one of 'em—Li-Ping is his name; 'e'd signed-on at Suez—offers me five bob for the pigtail, which he sees me lookin' at one mornin'. I give him a punch on the nose, and 'e don't renew the offer; but that night (we're laying at Port Said) 'e tries to pinch it! I dam' near broke his neck, and 'e don't try any more. To-night"—he extended his right arm forensically—"a deppitation of Chinks waits on me at the Dock gates; they explains as from a patriotic point of view they feel it to be their dooty to buy that pigtail off of me, and they bids a quid—a bar of gold, a Jimmy O'Goblin!"

He snapped his fingers contemptuously and emptied his pewter.

"I told him to go to China," concluded the object of my suspicion, again rapping upon the counter, "and you see what come of it. All I got to say is this: If they're so blarsted patriotic, I says, I aint the man to stand in their way. You done me a good turn to-night; I'm doing you one. 'Ere's the ruddy pigtail; 'ere's my empty mug. Fill the mug, and the pigtail's yours. It's good for a quid at the Dock gates any day!"

My interest increased. I refilled my acquaintance's mug, pressed a sovereign upon him (in honesty I must confess he was loath to take it) and departed for my chambers with the pigtail coiled neatly in an inner pocket.

IT was not until the following evening that I found leisure to examine my strange acquisition, for affairs of more immediate importance engrossed my attention. But at about ten o'clock I seated myself at my table, lighted the lamp, and taking out the pigtail from the table drawer, placed it on the blotting-pad and began to examine it with the greatest curiosity.

I had scarcely commenced my examination, however, when it was dramatically interrupted. The door-bell commenced to ring jerkily. I stood up, and as I did so the ringing ceased and in its place came a muffled beating on the door. I hurried into the passage as the bell commenced ringing again, and I had almost reached the door when once more the ringing ceased; but now I could hear a woman's voice, low but agitated.

"Open the door! Oh, for God's sake be quick!"

Completely mystified, and not a little alarmed, I threw open the door—and in there staggered a woman so heavily veiled that I could see little of her features; by the lines of her figure, however, I judged her to be young.

Uttering a sort of moan of terror, she herself closed the door and stood with her back to it, watching me through the thick veil, while her breast rose and fell tumultuously.

"Thank God, there was some one at home!" she whispered.

I think I may say with justice that I had never been so surprised in all my life; every particular of the incident marked it as unique—set it apart from the episodes of everyday life.

"Madam," I began doubtfully, "you seem to be much alarmed at something, and if I can be of any assistance to you—"

"You have saved my life!" she whispered, and pressed one hand to her bosom. "In a moment I will explain."

"Wont you rest for a little after your evidently alarming experience?" I suggested.

My strange visitor nodded, without speaking, and I conducted her to the study which I had just left, and placed the most comfortable armchair close beside the table, so that as I sat I might study this woman who so strangely had burst in upon me. I even tilted the shade of the lamp, artlessly, in order that the light might fall upon her face.

She may have detected this device; I know not; but as if in answer to its challenge, she raised her gloved hand and unfastened the heavy veil which had concealed her features.

THEREUPON I found myself looking into a pair of lustrous, black eyes whose almond shape was of the Orient; I found myself looking at a woman who was probably no older than eighteen or nineteen, but whose beauty was ripely voluptuous, who might fittingly have posed for Salome, who, despite her modern fashionable garments, at once suggested to my mind the wanton beauty of Herod's daughter.

I stared at her silently for a while, and presently her full lips parted in the slow smile of the East. My ideas were diverted into another channel.

"You have yet to tell me what alarmed you," I said in a cold voice but as courteously as possible; "and if I can be of any assistance in the matter—"

My visitor seemed to recollect her fright—or the necessity for simulation. The pupils of her fine eyes seemed to grow larger and darker; she pressed her white teeth into her lower lip, and resting her hands upon the table, leaned forward towards me.

"I am a stranger to London," she began, now exhibiting a certain diffidence, "and to-night I was looking for the chambers of Mr. Raphael Philipps in Figtree Court."

"This is Figtree Court," I said, "but I know of no Mr. Raphael Philipps who has chambers here."

The black eyes met mine despairingly.

"But I am positive of the address," protested my beautiful but strange caller; and from her left glove she drew out a scrap of paper. "Here it is," she added.

I glanced at the fragment, upon which in a woman's hand the words were penciled:

Mr. Raphael Philipps
36b Figtree Court
London

I stared at my visitor, deeply mystified.

"These chambers are 36-B!" I said, "but I am not Raphael Philipps, nor have I ever heard of him. My name is Barton Hales. There is evidently some mistake, but"—returning the slip of paper—"pardon me if I remind you: I have yet to learn the cause of your alarm."

"I was followed across the court and up the stairs."

"Followed! By whom?"

"By a dreadful-looking man, chattering in some tongue which I did not understand!"

My amazement was momentarily growing greater.

"What kind of man?" I demanded rather abruptly.

"A yellow-faced man—remember, I could only just distinguish him in the darkness on the stairway, and see little more of him than his eyes, at that, and his ugly gleaming teeth—oh! it was horrible!"

"You astound me," I said; "the thing seems utterly incomprehensible." I

switched off the light of the lamp. "I'll see if there's any sign of him in the court below."

"Oh! don't leave me! for Heaven's sake, don't leave me alone!"

She clutched my arm in the darkness.

"Have no fear; I merely propose to look out from this window."

Suiting the action to the word, I peered down in the court below. It was quite deserted. The night was a very dark one, and there were many patches of shadow in which a man might have lain concealed.

"I can see no one," I said, speaking as confidently as possible, and relighting the lamp. "If I call a cab for you and see you safely into it, you will have nothing to fear, I think."

"I have a cab waiting," she replied, and lowering the heavy veil, she stood up to go.

"Kindly allow me to see you to it. I am sorry you have been subjected to this annoyance, especially since you have not attained the object of your visit."

"Thank you so much for your kindness; there must be some mistake about the address, of course."

SHE clung to my arm very tightly as we descended the stair, and often glanced back over her shoulder affrightedly as we crossed the court. There was not a sign of anyone about, however, and I could not make up my mind if the story of the yellow man was a delusion or a fabrication. I inclined to the latter theory, but the object of such a deception was more difficult to determine.

Sure enough, a taxicab was waiting at the entrance to the court; and my visitor, having seated herself therein, extended her hand to me; and even through the thick veil I could detect her brilliant smile.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Hales," she said, "and a thousand apologies. I am sincerely sorry to have given you all this trouble."

The cab drove off. For a moment I stood looking after it in a state of dreamy incertitude; then I turned and slowly retraced my steps. Reopening the door of my chambers with the key, I returned to my study and sat down at the table to endeavor to arrange the facts of what I recognized to be a really amazing episode. The adventure, trifling though it seemed, undoubtedly held some hidden significance that at present was not apparent to me. As has always been my custom, I prepared to make notes of the occurrence whilst the facts were fresh in my memory. . . . . It was at the moment that I was about to begin, that I made an astounding discovery:

Although I had been absent only a few minutes, and had locked my door behind me, the pigtail was gone!

I sat quite still, listening intently. The woman's story of the yellow man on the stair suddenly assumed a totally different aspect—a new and sinister aspect. Could it be that the pigtail was at the bottom of the mystery? Could it be that some murderous Chinaman who had been lurking in hiding, awaiting his opportunity, had in some way gained access to my chambers during that brief absence? And was he gone?

From the table drawer I took out a revolver, ascertained that it was fully loaded, and turning up light after light as I proceeded, conducted a room-to-room search. It was without result; there was absolutely nothing to indicate that anyone had surreptitiously entered or departed from my chambers. I returned to the study and sat gazing at the revolver lying on the blotting-pad before me. Perhaps my mind worked slowly, but I think fully fifteen minutes must have elapsed before it dawned upon me that the explanation, not only of the missing pigtail but of the other incidents of the night, was simple enough. The yellow man had been a fabrication, and my dark-eyed visitor had not been in quest of "Raphael Philipps" but in quest of the pigtail: and her quest had been successful!

"What a hopeless fool I am!" I cried, and banged my fist down upon the table. "There was no yellow man at all; there was—"

My door-bell rang. I sprang nervously to my feet, glanced at the revolver on the table—and finally dropped it into my coat-pocket before going out and opening the door.

On the landing stood a police constable and another officer in plain clothes.

"Your name is Barton Hales?" said the constable, glancing at a notebook which he held in his hand.

"It is," I replied.

"You are required to come at once to Bow Street to identify a woman who was found murdered in a taxicab in the Strand about eleven o'clock tonight."

I suppressed an exclamation of horror; I felt myself turning pale.

"But what has it to do—"

"The driver states that she came from your chambers, for you saw her off, and her last words to you were, 'Good night, Mr. Hales; I am sincerely sorry to have given you all this trouble;' is that correct, sir?"

The constable, who had read out this information in an official voice, now looked up to me, as I stood there stupefied.

"It is," I said blankly; "I'll come at once."

It would seem that I had misjudged my unfortunate visitor; her story of the yellow man on the stair had apparently been no fabrication but a gruesome fact!

MY ghastly duty was performed; I had identified the dreadful thing, which less than an hour ago had been a strikingly beautiful woman, as my mysterious visitor. The police were palpably disappointed at the sparsity of my knowledge respecting her, and in fact they could not conceal their doubts respecting the accuracy of my story. As a journalist, I fully recognized its improbability, but beyond relating the circumstances leading up to my possession of the pigtail and the events which ensued, I could do no more in the matter. The weird relic had not been found upon the dead woman, nor in the cab.

Now the unsavory business was finished—except that I knew myself to be under police surveillance. I walked along Bow Street, racking my mind for the master-key to this mystery in which I was become enmeshed. That the pigtail was some sacred relic stolen from a Chinese temple and sought for by its fanatic custodians, was a theory which persistently intruded itself. But I could find no place in that hypothesis for the beautiful Oriental-looking woman, and that she was intimately concerned I did not doubt. A cool survey of the facts rendered it fairly evident that it was she and none other who had stolen the pigtail from my rooms; some third party—possibly the "yellow man" of whom she had spoken—had in turn stolen it from her, strangling her in the process.

The police theory of the murder (and I was prepared to accept it) was that the assassin had been crouching in hiding behind or beside the cab—or even within the dark interior. He had leaped in and attacked the woman at the moment that the taxi-man started his engine; if already inside, the deed had proved even easier. Then, during some block in the traffic, he had slipped out unseen, leaving the body of the victim to be discovered when the cab pulled up at her hotel.

I knew of one place only in London where I might hope to obtain useful information, and for that place I was making now. It was Chinese Charlie's, whither I had been bound on the previous night when my strange meeting with the seaman who then possessed the pigtail had led to a change of plan. The scum of the Asiatic population of the East End came at one time and another to Chinese Charlie's, and I hoped by dint of a little patience to achieve what the police had apparently despaired of achieving: the discovery of the assassin.

Having called at my chambers to change into those shabby garments which I always wore on such expeditions, I mounted an eastward-bound motor-bus. The night, as I have already stated, was exceptionally dark. There was no moon, and heavy clouds obscured the sky. So the deserted East End streets presented a sufficiently uninviting aspect, but one with which I was by no means unfamiliar and which in no way daunted me.

Almost unconsciously, I think, I turned my steps in the same direction as upon the preceding night; but if my

own will played no part in the matter, then decidedly Providence guided me. Poetic justice is rare enough in real life; yet I was destined to-night to witness swift retribution overtaking a malefactor.

THE byways which I trod were utterly deserted; I was far from the lighted highroad, and the only signs of human activity which reached me came from the adjacent river; therefore, when presently an outcry arose from somewhere on my left, for a moment I really believed that my imagination was vividly reproducing the episode of the night before!

A furious scuffle—between a European and an Asiatic—was in progress not twenty yards away!

Realizing that such was indeed the case, and that I was not the victim of hallucination, I advanced slowly in the direction of the sounds, but my footsteps echoed hollowly from wall to wall of the narrow passageway, and my coming brought the conflict to a sudden termination.

"Thought I wouldn't know yer ugly face, did yer?" yelled a familiar voice. "No good squealin'! I got yer! I got yer—yeller-faced blighter! And I'd bust you up if I could." (A sound of furious blows and inarticulate chattering.) "But it aint 'umanly possible to kill a Chink."

I hurried forward toward the spot where two dim figures were locked in deadly conflict.

"Take that to remember me by!" gasped the husky voice as I ran up.

One of the figures collapsed in a heap upon the ground. The other made off at a lumbering gait along a second and even narrower passage branching at right angles from that in which the scuffle had taken place.

The clatter of the heavy sea-boots died away in the distance. I stood beside the fallen man, looking keenly about to right and left; for an impression was strong upon me that another than I had been witness of the scene—that a shadowy form had slunk back furtively at my approach. But the night gave up no sound in confirmation of this, and I could detect no sign of any lurker. I stood over the Chinaman (for a Chinaman it was) who lay at my feet, and directed the ray of my pocket-lamp upon his yellow and contorted countenance. I suppressed a cry of horror and alarm.

Despite the human impossibility referred to by the missing fireman, this particular Chinese had joined the shades of his ancestors. I think that final blow, which had felled him, had brought his shaven skull in such violent contact with the lower part of the wall that he had died of the thundering concussion.

Kneeling there and looking into his upturned eyes, I became aware that my position was not an enviable one. Already I was half suspected by the police of knowing more about the crime in the taxicab than I had revealed, and I realized that I had a poor chance of establishing my innocence in regard to this second outrage, particularly since I felt little disposed to set the law on the track of the real culprit. For this man who now lay dead at my feet was doubtless one of the pair who had attempted the life of the fireman of the *Jupiter*.

The dead Chinaman wore a rough, blue coat, and gingerly, for I found the contact repulsive, I inserted my hand into the inside pocket. Immediately my fingers closed upon a familiar object—and I stood up, whistling slightly, and dangling in my left hand the missing pigtail!

Beyond doubt justice had guided the seaman's blows. This was the man who had murdered my dark-eyed visitor!

I STOOD perfectly still, directing the little white ray upon the pigtail in my hand. I realized that my position, difficult before, was now become impossible; the possession of the pigtail compromised me hopelessly. What should I do?

"My God!" I said aloud, "what does it all mean?"

"It means," said a gruff voice, "that it's lucky I was following you and heard what happened—though I was too late to make a capture."

I whirled about, my heart leaping wildly. The plain-clothes officer who

had called at my rooms that evening was standing watching me, a grim smile upon his face!

I laughed rather shakily.

"Lucky indeed!" I said. "Thank God you're here. This pigtail is a nightmare which threatens to drive me mad!"

The detective advanced and knelt beside the crumpled-up figure on the ground. He examined him briefly and then stood up.

"The fact that he had the missing pigtail in his pocket," he said, "is proof enough to my mind that he did the murder."

"And to mine."

"The gentleman who made off just as I arrived on the scene," continued the detective, "probably had a private quarrel with the Chinaman and was otherwise not concerned in any way."

"I am disposed to agree with you," I said guardedly.

"Of course you've no idea of his identity?"

"I'm afraid not."

"We may find him," mused the officer, glancing at me shrewdly, "by applying at the offices of the Planet Line, but I rather doubt it. Also I rather doubt if we'll look very far. He's saved us a lot of trouble, but"—peering about him in the shadowy corners which abounded—"didn't I see *somebody else* lurking around here?"

"I'm almost certain there was some one else!" I cried; "in fact, I could all but swear to it."

"H'm!" said the detective, "he's not here now. Might I trouble you to walk along to Limehouse Police Station for the ambulance? I'd better stay here."

I agreed at once, and started off. The officer's suspicions in regard to myself—if, indeed, he had seriously entertained any—were clearly removed, and he frankly accepted me as an ally.

Thus a second time my plans were interrupted, for my expedition that night ultimately led me back again to Bow Street, whence, after certain formalities had been observed, I departed for my chambers, the mysterious pigtail coiled up in my pocket. A Scotland Yard officer, Inspector Glasgow, who was a personal friend of mine, chanced to be at Bow Street in connection with the case; otherwise the pigtail must have been retained as evidence. But:

"We shall know where to find it if it's wanted, Mr. Hales," said the Yard man; "and I can trust you to look after your own property."

The clock of St. Paul's was chiming the hour of two when I locked the door of my chambers and prepared to turn in. The clangor of the final stroke yet vibrated through the night's silence when some one set my own door-bell loudly ringing.

With an exclamation of annoyance, I shot back the bolt and threw open the door. A Chinaman stood outside upon the mat!

"ME wishee see you," said the apparition, smiling blandly. "Me comee in?"

"Come in by all means," I said without enthusiasm, and switching on the light in the study, I admitted the Chinaman and stood facing him with an expression upon my face which I doubt not was the reverse of agreeable.

My visitor, who wore a slop-shop suit, also wore a wide-brimmed bowler hat; now, the set bland smile upon his yellow face, he removed the bowler and pointed significantly to his skull.

His pigtail had been severed some three inches from the root!

"You gotee my pigtail," he explained; "me callee get it—thank you."

"Thank you," I said grimly, "but I must trouble you to establish your claim rather more firmly.

"Yessir," agreed the Chinaman.

And thereupon in tolerable pidgin English he unfolded his tale. He proclaimed his name to be Hi-Wing-Ho, and his profession that of a sailor, or so I understood him. While ashore at Suez he had become embroiled with some drunken seamen; knives had been drawn; and in the scuffle, by some strange accident his pigtail had been severed. He had escaped from the conflict, badly frightened, and had run for a great distance before he realized his loss.

Since Chinamen hold their pigtails in the highest regard, he had instituted

inquiries as soon as possible and had presently learned from a Chinese member of the crew of the S. S. *Jupiter* that the precious queue had fallen into the hands of a fireman on that vessel. He (Hi-Wing-Ho) had shipped on the first available steamer bound for England, having in the meanwhile communicated with his friend on the *Jupiter* respecting the recovery of the pigtail.

"Was the name of your friend on the *Jupiter* Li-Ping?"

"Him Li-Ping—yessir!"

"Go on," I said.

He arrived at the London docks very shortly after the *Jupiter;* indeed, the crew of the latter vessel had not yet been paid off when Hi-Wing-Ho presented himself at the dock gates. He admitted that, finding the fireman obdurate, he and his friend Li-Ping had resorted to violence; but he did not seem to recognize me as the person who had frustrated their designs. Thus far I found his story credible enough—excepting the incident of the accidental severing of the pigtail at Suez; but it now became wildly improbable, for he would have me believe that Li-Ping, obtaining possession of the pigtail (in what manner Hi-Wing-Ho protested that he knew not), had sought to hold it for ransom, knowing how highly Hi-Wing-Ho valued it.

I GLARED sternly at the Chinaman, but his impassive countenance served him well. That he was lying to me I no longer doubted; for Li-Ping could not have hoped to secure such a price as would justify his committing murder; furthermore, the presence of the unfortunate young woman in the case was not accounted for by the ingenious narrative of Hi-Wing-Ho. I was standing staring at him and wondering what course to adopt, when yet again my restless door-bell clamored upon the silence. Hi-Wing-Ho started nervously, exhibiting the first symptoms of alarm which I had perceived in him. I took my revolver from the drawer and covered him.

"Be good enough to open the door, Hi-Wing-Ho," I said coldly.

He shrank from me, pouring forth voluble protestations.

"Open the door!"

I clenched my left fist and advanced upon him. He scuttled away with his odd, Chinese gait, and threw open the door. Standing before me I saw my friend Inspector Glasgow of Scotland Yard, and with him a remarkably tall and very large-boned man whose square-jawed face was deeply tanned and whose aspect was dourly Scottish.

When the piercing eyes of this stranger rested upon Hi-Wing-Ho, an expression which I shall never forget entered into them—an expression coldly murderous. As for the Chinaman, he literally crumpled up.

"You rat!" roared the stranger.

Taking one long stride, he stooped upon the Chinaman, seized him by the back of the neck as a terrier might seize a rat, and lifted him to his feet!

"The mystery of the pigtail, Mr. Hales," said the detective, "is solved at last."

"Have ye got it?" demanded the Scotsman, turning to me, but without releasing his hold upon the neck of Hi-Wing-Ho.

I took the pigtail from my pocket and dangled it before his eyes.

"Suppose you come into my study," I suggested, "and explain about this affair."

WE entered the room which that night had been the scene of so many singular happenings. The detective and I seated ourselves, but the Scotsman, holding the Chinaman by the neck as though he had been some sort of inanimate bundle, stood just within the doorway, one of the most gigantic specimens of manhood I had ever set eyes upon.

"You do the talking, sir," he directed the detective; "ye have all the facts."

While Inspector Glasgow talked, then, we all listened—excepting the Chinaman, who was past taking an intelligent interest in anything, and who, to judge from his starting eyes, was being slowly strangled.

"This gentleman," said Glasgow, "Mr. Nicholson, arrived two days ago from the East. He is a buyer for a big firm of diamond merchants, and

some weeks ago a very valuable diamond was stolen from him."

"By *this!*" interrupted the Scotsman, shaking the wretched Hi-Wing-Ho, terrier-fashion.

"By Hi-Wing-Ho," said the detective, "whom you see before you. The theft was a very ingenious one, and the man succeeded in getting away with his haul. He tried to dispose of the diamond to a certain Rudolph Amberg, a Singapore money-lender; but Amberg was the bigger crook of the two. Hi-Wing-Ho only escaped from the establishment of Amberg by dint of sandbagging the money-lender and quitting the town by a boat which left the same night. On the voyage he was indiscreet enough to take the diamond from its hiding-place and surreptitiously examine it. Another member of the Chinese crew, one Li-Ping, was secretly watching our friend, and learning that he possessed this valuable jewel, he also learned where he kept it hidden. At Suez, Li-Ping attacked Hi-Wing-Ho and secured possession of the diamond.

"We are indebted to you, Mr. Hales, for some of the data upon which we have reconstructed the foregoing and also for the next link in the narrative. A fireman ashore from the S. S. *Jupiter* intruded upon the scene at Suez and deprived Li-Ping of the fruits of his dastardly scheme. Hi-Wing-Ho seems to have been rather badly damaged in the scuffle, but Li-Ping, the more wily of the two, evidently followed the fireman, and deserting from his own ship, signed-on with the *Jupiter!*

"The fireman evidently did not recognize Li-Ping, and we know that the latter, during the homeward voyage, endeavored to buy back the prize. Meanwhile, I take it, Hi-Wing-Ho was following in the ship from which Li-Ping had deserted, and, arriving in London shortly after the S. S. *Jupiter* docked, Hi-Wing-Ho apparently joined forces with Li-Ping and attacked the fireman!

"Whether he also failed to recognize in his compatriot the robber of Suez, or whether he overlooked Li-Ping's attempt, on the ground that his behavior was no more than natural, we cannot know, and Hi-Wing-Ho is scarcely in a fit state to tell us!"

WHILE this story was enlightening in some respects, it was mystifying in others. I did not interrupt, however, for Inspector Glasgow immediately resumed:

"The matter was complicated by the presence of a fourth actress—the daughter of Amberg. Realizing that a small fortune had slipped through his fingers, the old money-lender dispatched his daughter in pursuit of Hi-Wing-Ho, having learned upon which vessel the latter had sailed. He had no difficulty in obtaining this information, for he is in touch with all the crooks of the town. His daughter—a girl of great personal beauty—relied upon her diplomatic gifts to regain possession of the stone, but, poor creature! she had not counted with Li-Ping, who was evidently watching your chambers—while Hi-Wing-Ho, it seems, was assiduously shadowing Li-Ping! How she traced the diamond from point to point of its travels we do not know and probably never shall know, but she was undeniably clever and unscrupulous. Poor girl! she came to a dreadful end. Mr. Nicholson, here, identified her at Bow Street, to-night."

Now the whole amazing truth burst upon me.

"I understand!" I cried. "This—" And I snatched up the pigtail.

"That my pigtail!" moaned Hi-Wing-Ho feebly.

Mr. Nicholson pitched him unceremoniously into a corner of the room, and taking the pigtail in his huge hand, clumsily unfastened it. Out from the thick part, some two inches below the point at which it had been cut from the Chinaman's head, a great diamond dropped upon the floor!

For perhaps twenty seconds there was perfect silence in my study. No one stooped to pick the diamond from the floor—the diamond which now had blood upon it. No one, so far as my senses informed me, stirred. But when, following those moments of stupefaction, we all looked up—Hi-Wing-Ho like a phantom had faded from the room!

Below *the* Belt

THIS is concerned with a misunderstanding between two men, one of whom was only twelve years old: a most appealing story, of a sort only Forrest Crissey knows how to write.

By FORREST CRISSEY
[Author of "The Country Boy," etc.

MILES sat hunched on the top step of the front porch, his face hid in his hands and his elbows resting on his knees. His figure, as seen from the back, might have suggested "Remorse," "Dreams" or "Despair"—depending upon the insight or the imagination of the observer. But as his only observer happened to be his mother, who was comfortably unhampered by either of these troublesome attributes, the bent back and the bowed head of her stocky little son suggested only surprise at his presence.

"Why, Miles!" she exclaimed in the cheerful, matter-of-fact voice that made her a welcome guest in houses of grief, "have you forgot that Father is coming to-night? And there's the train whistling for Hoole's Crossing this minute! If you run for it, you can get to the depot yet before he misses you."

But the boy neither answered nor stirred as his mother stood wiping her flushed face with a corner of her apron and finally disappeared into the kitchen, from whence the fragrance of supper preparations penetrated to the front steps.

Supper on the nights when Father came home was a ceremony, an emotional offering into which Mrs. Honeycutt poured the essence of her wholesome, competent personality. To place before her husband, at each successive homecoming, a better supper than he had ever before tasted was both an ambition and a self-imposed test of her devotion. And if the hotel-disciplined traveler could be believed, she never failed to outstrip previous records and push her achievement one point nearer perfection. To do this required—in the closing processes of cooking, when the finishing touches were bestowed upon the meal—a concentration that shut all other considerations out of mind.

Her recognition of the fact that Miles was hanging about the house instead of waiting impatiently on the station platform was subconscious and wholly secondary to her pressing culinary responsibilities; otherwise the boy's presence at the moment would have loomed larger on her mental horizon. Never before since Miles had been old enough to go to the depot alone had he failed to be found waiting there when his father was expected home on the seven-ten.

But to-night he was unaccountably absent from the domestic delegation of train-welcomers at the depot; and when his mother voiced her astonishment at this departure from family tradition, he only moved to the end of the step out of direct eyeshot from the interior of the house and resumed the same reflective position from which he had been disturbed.

AS before, Miles could command a view of the youngsters who dangled their legs from the horse-block of the ivied old brick church opposite and occasionally challenged:

"Dare you t' come out! Aw! don't be a baby—come on!"

These appeals were interspersed with frequent taunts and insults like "Baby!" and "Papa's little darling!"

Not a muscle of the silent figure stirred until the boy caught the far-off click of brisk, hurried steps coming down the shaded avenue that led from the station. Then he suddenly vanished around the corner of the house and disappeared into the open door of the workshop.

"Where's Miles?" anxiously inquired Rufus Honeycutt as he dropped his suit-case inside the hall and kissed his wife.

"Oh, he's around here somewhere," she answered. "Was out there on the steps a minute ago. Now sit right up or your supper'll get cold. I'll call him."

"No," quickly interposed the father, a little shadow of anxiety flitting across his home-brightened face; "he'll come when he's ready. Perhaps something—" But he left the speculation unfinished and suddenly exclaimed, with an enthusiasm that lighted a response in the eyes of his wife:

"How good that supper smells! I'd rather *smell* one of your meals, Ruth, than to eat anything that has been set before me since I left home."

Meantime, in the soft shadows of the workshop, seated on the bench from which, as far back as he could remember, he had watched his father work at his recreation tasks, Miles was indulging in the strangest, stormiest and most miserable session he had ever held with himself.

Why couldn't his father understand how things stood with him? Didn't he know that a boy who couldn't fight for his own—who had his hands tied behind him by a promise that he couldn't break—had to take insults that made him writhe and burn with shame every day of his life? And the queer part of it was that his father was not a coward! Rufus Honeycutt was the bravest man in Strawberry Point, and everybody knew it. Where was there another man who dared climb to the top of the Catholic steeple and work there, between the earth and the sky, as the whole town had seen his father working the day after the big wind had loosened the great gilded cross until it leaned and swayed.

Of course it had been explained to him that, back East, his father had been a Friend, and that Friends thought it wrong to fight. But it seemed to Miles a curiously perverse thing that his father had found nothing in his queer Quaker religion worth bringing West with him except this absurd notion of not fighting. And so far as he could see, his father didn't have any other religion than this—at least, he didn't mention anything else, and now he attended the Congregational church when he went at all.

MILES almost groaned aloud as he recalled how readily he had given the promise to his father that he would not fight. Well, he had stood by it so far, anyhow! But it seemed hopelessly impossible for him to hold back his fists again and take such a black eye from Spike Hogan as he was now nursing. There were some things a boy couldn't endure twice—no matter how good a dad he had or how hard he wanted to stand by his word.

As he sat there in the mellow dusk, his throat swelling with the growing sense of his shame and helplessness, it almost seemed to him that his father had taken an unfair advantage of his innocence that day when he had held a yellow telegram in his hand—right there in the shop—and had said:

"Miles, your Grandmother Honeycutt is dead." Then, after a long pause in which the tears fell among the shavings beside the bench, his father had told him how greatly this quiet little Quaker woman had loved peace, how passionately she had abhorred strife. Then, suddenly, his father had held out his hand and said:

"Miles, I wish you'd promise not to fight. Will you?"

When a boy's father was feeling bad because his own mother was dead and then asked a promise in that way, there wasn't any way to refuse. Besides, he didn't know what it meant to keep a promise of that kind. But of course his father hadn't intended to take a mean advantage of him. Nobody could say that Rufus Honeycutt ever took an

intentional advantage of anyone. He played square, always. Hadn't he heard Bluet, the sharp old lawyer who was always running down church-goers and professing Christians, say that Rufe Honeycutt the Quaker was the squarest man in the country, a man of his word, always? There was where all the trouble came in. You just had to keep your word with a father like that! There was nothing else to do. Of course the boys he knew—most of them, anyhow—made no bones about lying to their fathers. This only showed that their fathers were not like his.

But he'd give anything in the world if somehow he could be freed from the shackles of that fatal promise. That would be all he'd ask—just the freedom to fight, to show Spike Hogan and his gang that he was no coward! Would it do to ask his father to let him off from that promise?

As he asked himself this question, he suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder and heard his father's quiet voice asking:

"Why don't you tell me about it, Miles? I'd like to help, you know."

AND so, in the friendly darkness of the old shop, the unhappy martyr of peace emptied a heart full of bitterness and revolt. As they entered the sitting-room, the father turned up the gas-light and looked keenly at the bruised and troubled face of the boy.

"You took *that* and never struck back? Took it because you'd given me your promise not to fight?" exclaimed the father.

Miles nodded his head.

Rufus Honeycutt was not a demonstrative man; it was never easy for him to free himself from the shackles of his Quaker reserve; but now his teeth closed with a sharp click and there was an audible sound of swallowing. Suddenly he took the lad's face in his two hands and gave it a quick, impulsive pressure. In a tense, strained voice he said:

"Well, you're free from that promise now, Miles. From now you are free to fight your battles in your own way. Only fight fair and never hit below the belt!"

His hand still rested on the shoulder of the boy as they passed into the dining-room. Then, as Miles took his seat at the supper-table, his father passed on into the kitchen. With the flickering half-smile that the town wit had once called "the Honeycutt snicker," he asked his wife to pay no attention to the boy's bruises.

Returning to the dining-room, Rufus Honeycutt incidentally turned down the gas to a point that left the room in a half-light which was decidedly comfortable to the boy whose left eye was encircled with a zone of darkening flesh.

Miles knew intuitively why his father had gone to the kitchen, why he had turned down the gas. Wasn't it great to have a father who caught on like that? And now the only thing that had stood between them was swept away by those liberating words—"you are free to fight your battles in your own way." Here was a Proclamation of Emancipation that made his throat swell and his heart pound!

He said to himself that nothing else in the world that his father could have given him would have been quite so great a gift as just the right to defend himself against his tormentors.

Then too, there was another thing that made his heart sing within him: the praise that his father had given him was beyond any approval that had ever come to him before. He was a new-made knight who still felt the thrilling touch of his king's sword! And he was going out now to battle like a man, and prove that he was neither coward nor weakling.

ON the rare occasions when he was able to come home,—for the big bridge at Rock City was the largest and most exacting contract he had ever taken,—Rufus Honeycutt did not fail to notice a decided change in the spirit of his son, who walked with quickened step and stiffened spine and whose eye glowed with a new light. It was equally plain from the attitude of the other boys that Miles had made good use of his new liberty.

Perhaps a suspicion that Miles was becoming a bit cocky may have influ-

enced the father to invite his son to spend a fortnight with him at Rock City—but quite as likely a desire for the lad's companionship was the motive behind this invitation that brought fresh distinction to the boy who was now fighting his own battles. He was to go to the city and live in a hotel! And that city was "as tough as they make 'em," according to the admiring estimate of Spike Hogan.

The group of boys that gathered at the station to pay homage to the departing Miles appeared determined that adult attention should be attracted to the fact that something of uncommon importance was taking place in the boy world. "Chuck" Adsit, an adept in the production of strange and inhuman noises, offered the choicest numbers of his repertory; "Beanie" Castor did a set of amateur contortions that caused an unappreciative child to inquire, "Ma, what's the matter with that boy?" and even Miles himself could not resist the temptation playfully to maul Spike Hogan about and show the state of docility to which the former terror of The Patch had been reduced. As a whole, the entertainment was impressive. The business men who happened to be waiting for the train looked as if they had suddenly become ashamed of their sex; a childless matron remarked to a friend that she had forgotten what "disgusting little animals" boys were, and only the negro expressman showed a genial appreciation of the antics—vocal and muscular—of the group of future Presidents disporting in celebration of the proud departure of their leader.

If Miles had not, as the guest of honor, been engrossed, he might have detected upon the face of his father an expression to which he was a stranger. It was not a look of undue parental pride nor of overweaning satisfaction in the fact that he was intimately connected with the central figure in the barbaric celebration.

FOR the first few days following his arrival in Rock City, Miles followed an instinctive feeling of caution and kept close to his father, spending most of his time at the bridge. Here his admiration for his father's courage was fanned into a bright, adoring flame as he watched this quiet man pace the spans of the bridge skeleton far above the boiling stream, with a tread as quick, unfaltering and sure-footed as if he were walking the floor of the kitchen at home. Besides, everybody seemed to know his father. Why, even the mayor of Rock City called him Rufe and talked with him just as common as anything! What other boy, he proudly asked himself, had a father like that?

To the father, the boy seemed quite his old self again, and in the evenings they explored new and untried fields of comradeship. Once Honeycutt smiled whimsically as he confessed to his foreman:

"When I brought Miles down here, I was afraid his chest was badly swollen because he had just found out that he could fight. But I'm beginning to think he may pull through yet without developing into a conceited little bully. I think I could stand almost anything with better grace than that. I was brought up to despise all that sort of thing."

One day, when Miles suggested that he would like to "look around town a little" instead of going out to the bridge, the contractor offered no objection. His misgivings about the boy had subsided. That afternoon Rufus Honeycutt found it necessary to return unexpectedly to his room. As he was about to pass the alley that served the block in which the hotel was located, he saw his son leaning limply against the high board fence, his face much the color of the ashes upon which he stood, and the blood oozing from his nose and falling upon the new gray suit that had been bought expressly for the visit to Rock City.

A little beyond the battered figure of the boy, Rufus Honeycutt saw a dapper youth in the earliest stages of adolescence and a boy who looked about the size and age of Miles.

Wiping the clotted blood from his nose with the back of his hand, Miles looked unflinchingly into the face of his father and started to tell his story.

"They—"

With a gesture of impatience the contractor silenced his son and said to the youth:

"Young man, do you know how this thing happened?"

"Why, yes sir," was the bland answer. "This boy—I guess he's your—jumped this little fellow. Thought he could clean him up easy, I suppose. You know how country boys are. Well, he got more'n he bargained for—that's all. The youngster here simply beat him good till I pulled him off."

At the end of this recital Rufus Honeycutt gravely nodded his head three times. If he had slowly, clearly uttered the words "Just what I expected!" his acceptance of the explanation offered by the haberdasher's clerk could not have been more emphatic.

The ashen-faced boy beside the fence did not open his lips again—but his eyes stared at his father with the bewildered, unbelieving look that a dog might give to an adored master from whom he has received a cruel kick. The look that the boy finally lifted to his father's face seemed to cry out:

"Oh, it can't be that you're not going to give me a chance to tell you how it happened—after all that's been between us, after I've kept my word with you, always!"

But the face of Rufus Honeycutt grew harder than Miles had ever seen it before. Finally the father aroused himself, and pointing up the alley toward the hotel, he said:

"Go to the room—and clean up."

These words were spoken in the cold, detached tone that the boy had once heard him use in dismissing a foreman who had forfeited his confidence.

MILES instantly caught the meaning of this dismissal. His father was ashamed to be seen with him, and he was going to be sent home. As the boy moved inertly towards the rear entrance of the hotel, it seemed to him that the solid earth was going out from under his feet.

His father had hit him below the belt—*his father!*

For the moment this blow dulled the anger that had burned within him as the clerk with the changing voice and the first pair of "long pants" had told the string of lies that had been so quickly accepted. Nothing mattered, now! He couldn't fight his father, and he didn't know how to deal with a hurt that one couldn't answer with an honest blow. But here was a thrust so far outside his code that he was crushed and dazed by it.

He hardly knew how he found his way to their room, but when his father entered, he had washed and was sitting on the bed. Not a word was passed between them on the way to the station, and Miles scrambled so swiftly up the steps of the car that he missed the mumbled "G'by" that escaped his father's grim lips.

A quick glance showed him that the rear seat was unoccupied, and he dodged thankfully into it. It seemed to him that he would have shriveled with shame if he had been obliged to walk up the car aisle and give the men, women and children a chance to grin at his swollen and discolored face. The signs of punishment were so plentiful that any eye could read in them a record of unqualified defeat.

Pulling his hat down over his grotesquely swollen eye, he shrank into the smallest possible space—an inconspicuous little ball of boyish woe. It was a great relief to him when Mr. Tinsley took his ticket and passed along without a word. He had been fearful that the jolly conductor might break into laughter at the sight of his bruised face and bombard him with jokes. With this ordeal happily passed, the boy gave himself over without reserve to the tide of wretchedness that had so suddenly engulfed him.

His father—his big, brave, understanding comrade—had condemned him without a hearing and upon the lying word of a glib-tongued stranger who had barely attained the dignity of trousers and a changing voice. And all this after he had kept his word to his father, and had finally received his liberty! With set teeth he fought back the sobs that shook him—but he could not quite stop the tears from slipping out of his swollen eyes and splashing down upon his waist. There was not, he knew, another boy so wronged and wretched in the whole world!

"I hate him—hate him!" the boy mentally repeated.

Gradually, as his grief pressed a little less insistently for physical expression, Miles found himself drifting into wild dreams of the reckless things that he might do to drive home to his father the cruel injustice of his course. Then there were the boys! Suppose Spike Hogan should see him now? Just to show his face to the gang would be enough to bring out a laugh that he could never live down.

Why not run away? Hadn't his father remarked, when constable Bailey had brought Chuck Prindle back from Rock City, that he would rather his boy would die than run away like that? Here was a way, then, to make his father feel how his blow below the belt had hurt. But he must go home first—it was such a long time since he had seen his mother! He couldn't take last leave of the old home without seeing her once more.

This decision presented a fresh difficulty. How could he go home without having any of the boys see his shameful wounds? He would slip off the train at Winterset, the last stop before Strawberry Point, and walk the seven miles home! Even the lawless Spike would be in bed by the time he would reach Strawberry Point. He was tremblingly afraid to walk the strange and lonely country road after dark, but anything would be better than the shame of having the boys see that he had been mercilessly beaten and sent home in disgrace.

So he braved the terrors of the dark road, after first arming himself with a short rod filched from a collection of scrap iron beside the blacksmith shop at the outskirts of Winterset.

NEVER before had so tired a pair of legs carried Miles Honeycutt unsteadily up the front steps of home as when his pilgrimage ended in time to allow him to hear the town clock strike twelve.

"I'm starved," he exclaimed as he freed himself from his mother's unfamiliar embraces and sank into the deep rocker. "Walked all the way from Winterset. Father sent me home for fighting. I didn't want any of the boys to see me. You wont tell *anybody* I'm home, will you, Ma? Not a soul? Promise me you wont, Ma? Please!"

There was a piteousness in this appeal that penetrated even the calm of Ruth Honeycutt's serenity. This was a strange cry to come from the lips of her sturdy, self-reliant little stoic! And they were decidedly white lips and drawn with an unfamiliar tightness.

"All right, Miles," was her quick answer. "Now you just keep quiet until I get you something to eat. You look as if you hadn't had a morsel for a week."

Never had a meal smelled so good to Miles as that which his mother deftly prepared as he lay inert and drowsing in the depths of the big, soft chair. Through his half-dreams distilled a teasing aroma of chicken broth that aroused the boy to the momentary forgetfulness of his grief and weariness.

Finally, after he was in bed and his mother stooped above him to dress his swollen face, a wild sob escaped him and his arms closed tightly about his mother's neck. Shakily he muttered:

"Ma—*you're* good to me, *anyhow!*"

"Now go to sleep. Everything'll come out all right," was her comforting assurance as she tucked him in. At the door she turned and added:

"Not a soul shall know you're here till you say so."

IN the days of his voluntary imprisonment the boy lived in hourly expectation that his mother—after the manner of her kind—would demand a detailed explanation of the circumstances that had put a premature end to his wonderful visit to Rock City. But at last, when he realized that she was going to omit this painful inquiry, he was deeply, gratefully, relieved.

Never had he known days of such endless duration as those spent in his room waiting for his bruises to reach a state that would not publish his punishment and defeat. In the unaccustomed solitude of his exile Miles had much leisure for meditation. His mind again and again rehearsed the big scene of his tragedy, and the bitterness of his resentment increased with each review. The acid of his loneliness and estrangement bit deeper every day. Oh! how

happy everything had been when he and his father were good friends!

Out of the travail of the boy's black reflections came a new purpose. Somehow he would get back to Rock City and force the necktie clerk to admit to Rufus Honeycutt that his story had been false! It would be something to make that lying clerk eat his words, even if there was no hope of restoring the comradeship that his father had forfeited.

Half-fare to Rock City was three dollars and ninety cents, and the boy's total funds were less than half that sum. It would take an unsparing liquidation of his personal assets to fill the treasury to the required point—but it must be done! One by one he drew his treasures from their hiding-places and spread them upon the bed. There was the ancient pistol that he had got from Old Tue, the traveling tinker who was always picking up odd things and who had declared that the old pistol "went back a long ways." The worn handle, with smoothly rounded butt, snuggled into the boy's palm in a way that had never failed to give him the conviction that some time it must have hung at the belt of no less a person than a pirate. Miles had once confided this theory to "Deary" Butts, the pampered son of the rich widow in the Big House, with the result that its sale had become a matter of almost weekly negotiation. This would bring money—but the thought of passing this treasure to the hand of another made the boy wince. Then there were his collection of postage stamps; the little cabinet of mineral specimens that Aunt Mary Niles, the wife of the mining engineer, had sent him from Colorado; and a queer shaped, softly tinted shell that his Great Uncle William had brought from the shore of an island in the South Seas. It might take all of these to finance his expedition of vindication!

AS he sat huddled on the foot of his bed, his arms clasping his knees and his swimming eyes shifting from one keepsake to another, he did not hear his mother enter the room. For a long time, it seemed to her, she stood there silently watching the boy and attempting to read the riddle of the little scene. Never in her life had she tried so hard to understand anything—and never before had the sight of her boy made her heart beat so wildly—not even when his baby eyes had stared up into hers for the first time, an hour after his birth. It was almost as if she had just discovered that she had a little son. And he was fighting a battle that was putting a wild, hurt look into his eyes and setting his lips in a hard line. Oh! She must understand him—he needed her so much! Instinctively she understood that she must tread softly and feel her way to helpfulness with the deft fingers of intuition. Boys, she had suddenly discovered, were strangely sensitive beings. They could feel as well as eat!

Softly she withdrew from the room to her own chamber and then returned, humming an air that heralded her approach. Miles hardly moved as she entered. For a moment Ruth Honeycutt kept silence; then, in a comfortable, commonplace tone she asked:

"How much money do you need, Miles?"

The boy stared as if he had been struck. His mother had read his secret thoughts—his mother! The wonder of it dazed him at first; then the joy of being understood swept over him with such a rush that he could not trust himself to speak until he had swallowed back lumps that persisted in his throat. But finally, as his mother came to the side of the bed and put her hand upon his shoulder, he leaned his head against her and hoarsely blurted out the truth.

"'Bout five dollars—'nough to take me to Rock City an' back. I just *gotta* do it, Ma. I gotta show Pa that that clerk lied—an'—an'—"

"It's all right, Miles," his mother interrupted. "You don't have t' tell me till you want to. I can see that it's something serious, and I guess it must be done, just as you say. But I'll have to give you the money. You can't let any of the boys see you—not yet, anyway."

His arms closed impulsively about his mother's waist, and in broken, homely boy-phrases he choked out his gratitude. Her cheeks glowed with

blushes under his stammerings of praise. Anyhow, if his father had hit below the belt, he had a mother that understood and trusted him!

The fact that "Prof. D'Arcy's Consolidated Equestrian Marvels" was at that moment putting up its tents in the old Towner lot at the other side of the village made it certain that not a boy would be encountered on that part of the State road leading out to Winterset. Here was his chance to escape unseen. Would his mother revolt at such hot haste and make him wait longer at home?—wait until something happened to "spoil it all"?

"I'll put you up a nice lunch," was her reply to his anxious suggestion, "and you can eat it on the way. Maybe you'll catch a ride; there's lots of travel on the State road. It's too bad you can't take the train here, but some boy would be almost sure to be at the station."

She kissed him good-by with a warmth that gave him a glow of comforting assurance, and he darted swiftly down the street with silent swiftness. Repeatedly as he trudged towards Winterset he said to himself:

"An' she never fussed a bit nor told me anything I'd got to say to Pa!"

WHEN he was waiting for the train at the Winterset station, he felt a sudden fear that somebody might stop him, thinking him a runaway. To be so close to the realization of his big dream of vindication and then be turned back—that would be more than he could bear! But the whole hurrying, busy world appeared comfortably unconscious of his existence. Soon he realized that he was sitting in the very seat that he and his father had occupied that wonderful morning, ages ago, when everything was all right. Again every step and incident of that trip and of his stay in Rock City came back to him with unsparing vividness and left a fresh and more biting trail of bitterness behind. A rage beyond anything he had ever felt before burned through him as he remembered just how his father had nodded his head three times at the end of the string of lies from the lips of the smooth clerk there in the alley. He could fairly hear again the cold tones of his father's voice saying: "Go to the room—and clean up!"

"He didn't give me a chance to tell how it really was—not a chance to speak," the boy muttered. "He wouldn't treat a green wop that way. He never fired a workman in the world that he didn't let him tell his side of it first. But I'll show him!"

The flames of his wrath flared and brightened with every turn of the wheels. As the train pulled into the Rock City station, he was quivering with a wild rage that drove the blood from his lips and made his eyes look like two balls of fiery blackness. Five minutes more, and he would be settling his score with the lying clerk. And after that he would have it out with his father! In his furious eagerness he flipped from the train before it had fully stopped. The next thing he knew his head was ringing wildly and a voice, strangely close to his ear, was saying:

"He's Rufe Honeycutt's boy—the bridge contractor that stops at the Mansion House. Just get me a hack and I'll take the boy up there. And you hustle a man out to the bridge quick and bring Honeycutt."

For an instant Miles realized that he was being held in the arms of Tinsley, the train conductor. Then it flashed upon him that Fate was trying to cheat him out of his great vindication.

"Lemme go!" he exclaimed. "I'm all right. I aint hurt. I gotta go—I gotta *do something!*"

THE arms of the tall conductor of the Rock City accommodation gripped his squirming burden with a force that made the boy faint.

"Hold still, you little wild-cat!" he laughed. "You can't *do* much until the bones of your arm are set. I guess it'll take more'n a baggage-truck to kill *you!* But for a second you had me scared."

Then the boy gave the conductor a second scare by going suddenly limp and remaining unconscious until some time after the hotel was reached.

When he opened his eyes again, his father's hand was upon his forehead

and there was a queer smell in the room —like the odor that always hung about Doctor Duey's office at home.

"They had to set your arm and dress it," explained Rufus Honeycutt, his hand still moving caressingly across the boy's forehead.

Suddenly Miles flared out:

"He lied—that clerk. His brother, my size, picked a fight with me. Then the clerk, he came up and caught my hands from behind and held 'em while the other pounded my face. An' you took his word—took it without giving me a chance to speak! I came back to beat him. He can't lick me, fair. Both of 'em can't."

Then the voice caught, held for a moment in the clutch of the boy's throat, and finally broke in a low cry:

"Oh! you—you hit below the belt!"

The man beside the bed was very still and very white. Finally he spoke with a voice that struck through the boy like a knife. The slow words seemed to come from a far distance—from his soul rather than his lips:

"Yes, that's so, Miles," he said. "I have never done anything that has hurt me quite so much—never. I found out all about it to-day, from that young bully of a clerk. And I was going home to-night, just to tell you—and ask your forgiveness. I didn't want my boy to become a bully. I—"

Instantly the free hand flung out towards the man and the boy exclaimed:

"Oh, that's all right, Pa. I understand! It's because you're a Quaker, and they just can't see how it is about boys and fighting. It takes a long time, Ma says, to get over being a Quaker."

Then, as an afterthought, he added:

"Ma's been awful good to me. She knows just how it is with boys. I wish she was here."

And the look that this unconscious thrust brought to the face of Rufus Honeycutt made the hand that he held suddenly tighten.

"Anyhow," was the boy's eager assurance, "everything's all right with us now—aint it, Pa?"

And the man slowly nodded three times—but with the queer Honeycutt smile on his lips!

The Opposite Sex

THE harrowing experience of one Toots Wilson with a particularly "adoptable" member of the opposite sex is described in the joyous story which follows.

I NEVER had no doubt about the adoptability of the women for the vote or for anything else they ever took it into their minds to adopt theirselves to. I always figured they could mold theirselves to circumstances like a boa constrictor molds itself around a lamb; and every now and then I hear a little wad of gossip that confirms me in my belief. I get all my dope by hearsay,—understand?—never having been no hand at romance myself. It must be about a dozen times a year I hear cases of how women have waded in and adopted theirselves to whatever was going on; and Toots Wilson's is a case in point.

Henry Cass and me and Toots Wilson was setting outside the Caffy de la Pakes in Paris one June evening drinking some box of beer, as they call it over there, and watching the crowd go by. How we came to be in Paris was we went over there following a jockey and some horses, but it didn't amount to nothing; so we was just setting around trying to get a few ideas on French graft and the like. My own particular appurtenances don't amount to nothing much, and Henry Cass was just a plain grafter too. We believed in steady, quiet work without no frills to it, and are willing to go out every fall on the buckwheat circuit among the dust-eaters and work a drop-case or the shells at the county fairs. There aint much imagination to our line, and the only thing about it is, as I said, it brings in the coin steady. But Toots, he's a sort of gifted cuss; he shows streaks of

By Harris Merton Lyon

"MA-RI-A!" "How to Win a Woman's Love" and "Stuck with the Glue" are some of the stories which have added fame as a humorist to Mr. Lyon's reputation as a serious writer.

speed, like a poet. He has an eye for the spectacular and sublime in graft, and he would of made a great name for himself long ago, if it wasn't for his little weaknesses like whisky and women and legitimate gambling. Henry Cass and me we never took a chance on any of them things.

Well, Toots sat next the sidewalk, and Henry sat next to him and I sat back a ways next to Henry, sipping our box, as I say, very boulevardy.

I had just said to Henry: "This is the caffy where they say if you'll just sit still long enough you'll see every friend you ever had go by;" and Henry had just answered, "Something not like heaven in that respect, aint it?" when I saw his eye light up with recognition at a certain party coming past us.

This party was a crooked-nosed, coffee-skinned old mark in a plug hat. He was upstanding and had a gray mustache and a gold watch-chain big enough to keep an automobile from skidding, and he smelt of money like a Fifth Avenue church. On his arm was another party. She was young enough to be his daughter, but I didn't pay any attention to that, that being the reglar combination over there. I just see that she was a blonde and all dressed up like a sample of varnish.

HENRY he said in a low, permeating voice as old crook-nose goes by, *"Cummo le va ah you stay, Seenyore?"*

And the Seenyore just winked his eye hard and blew on past. The frail she never even took a slant at us.

Henry turned and looked at Toots and said, "Teehee," and then I looked at Toots too. He had turned kind of sickly yaller and slid forward in his chair, swallowing at his Adam's apple like a bo-constrictor in distress.

"Drink your beer, Toots," said Henry.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"It's the old general—and her," said Henry.

"Tell me the yarn," I said.

"It's really Toots' yarn," he said.

"Oh, rats. Go ahead. I don't care," said Toots, ordering some more box.

"Well," said Henry, "I am shy on philosophy and description and the French pastry of narrative in general. So I will leave that part of it to Toots. The man whose story you want is a very wealthy Mexican—"

"Mexico," explained Toots, "may be described as a fruitful, impossible country—green on the map, same as Ireland—and made up of component ingredient contents such as red pepper, rebellion and graft."

"His name is General Ramon Maria Martinez y Sopadura—"

"Obnoxiously called Suds by his familiar friends," said Toots.

"All this was in the days of Diaz when the gittin's was good. Suds, he owned a large ranch out in the Indian country. He had served in the war against Maximilian, and as a general under Porfirio Diaz he was granted the said land which constitutes the said ranch."

"*Said* being a legal term referendum to something already stated and comprehensive to the contracting parties," explained Toots.

"The reason you see him here in Paris floating along the boulevards is that he now has so much money he don't know what to do with it."

"But *she* knows," said Toots gloomily.

"So naturally he comes to Paris—"

"And *she* comes," interrupted Toots.

"—where there are plenty of people who know exactly what to do with it."

"Including her," amended Toots. "Why not tell this story right? Why not get right down to the graft?"

"Now, Toots," said Henry, "I'm

telling this. You may know where to hide the little pea, but you don't know where to start a story. A story begins with a man's antecedents until he intercedes; then it proceeds until he gets the proceeds; and it end when he secedes, or deceases. You're only to put in the poetry and heart-interest and patter de eddie foy. *I'm* telling the story. To continue: You see that old gazabo fanning by here with that quilt on his arm, looking the picture of Aztect opulence, while Toots and me are drinking ten-cent beer and figuring on cahooting our roll so's to be able to relay each other playing poker on the steamboat back. Yet the time was when—"

"Time generally is when," said Toots.

"The General—"

"Call him Suds," said Toots. "It has more fancy description and aura into it."

"GENERAL SUDS," Henry explained, "was land-poor and hadn't a *centavo* in the till. And the inside story of how he rose from sweeping out the bank to sweeping out the president of the bank, as the magazines on success would relate it, is all due to the maneuverings and consequentalities of the appearance on the scene of me and Toots Wilson. We was guessing them bad at Juarez, and so we thought we'd dip on down into Chihuahua. We figured that since the greasers was easy on games of chance they'd be all the easier when they didn't have no chance. But all the same we wind up at Suds' place flat broke. When we make the acquaintance of the General, we see that things is breaking pretty bad for him too. He had an idiot son, and a Doctor Rennick had been bleeding him good and plenty for treating the boy. This Doctor Rennick—"

"A doctor M. D.," exclaimed Toots, "that could neither read nor write; but he was something of a hypnotist, very pussy on the foot."

"He was taking about two hundred dollars a month gold out of the General. Of course the case was hopeless. The boy wore a number eight hat and was undoubtedly an incurable imbecile. One day the Doc' told the old man that the boy had too much brain to live in a slow old adobe Mex. town. The Doc' suggested that the kid be sent clean around the world so he could see and converse with the different nationalities and give his large brain room to expand. Of course the boy could not go by himself; he had to have a traveling companion. Rennick, being a physician, was the best person to send along. So finally the old General closed a deal with Rennick, scraped his bank-account clean and packed the Doc' and the boy off on their tour."

"Then," said Toots, "he sat down and smoked cigarettes and waited for me to come along and make him rich."

HENRY nodded. "Which Toots done. It was Toots' idea all the way through. I should call it a swell visionary idea of graft like a poet might have in a nightmare—nothing plebeian and all one-hundred-per-cent pure rake-off. Every time I think of it, the thing hits me like a piece of soft music by a brass band. It was a happy day for Shakespeare and Honus Wagner's dad, the music-writer, Toots, when you turned your attention to really dealing a pack of cards. For pure imagination, you'd of made them guys look like barkers for an Indian medicine show."

"Go on with your yarn," said Toots, blushing.

"I can't. I don't know how you smoked him out."

"It don't matter how I smoked him out," said Toots. "I produced him. And you even rubbed his toe for luck. So you know, Henry, that no matter where I transmogrified the duffer from, he always delivered the goods."

"Who are you two a-quarreling about?" I asked.

"Why," said Henry, "I can tell you that all right. He was Seenyore Valloblanco, the Sacred Indian Rain Saint and Divine Healer, also Heeler, who was loved and adored by all good natives around them parts and also by that part of the whole republic that went in for that sort of religious line at all. He was killed in the mountains by a hostile tribe of Indians, while fighting for the Hidalgo cause during that campaign. He was also known as the Fighting

Saint, appertaining on the cognizance of his abilities as a scrapper. He was buried somewhere up in the hills and forgotten until Toots happened to hear about him."

"AS soon as I got the details," Toots puts in, "I went to the General and gave him the full hokus-pocus-Confuciokus-Topeka-Kansas degree, and he tumbled like a plum."

"The General, after he'd sent his son off to get oodles in his noodle, lived all alone on his ranch except for a bunch of soldiers, federal troops, presided over by a *cabo* or *comandante*—"

"Who, in my capacity as official describer, I should delineate as an innocent, hard-drinking human tamale, very thick-set about the head and feet," said Toots.

"Well, hastily skipping over what I don't know and what Toots wont tell, we come down to the night the General got the visitation, the hallucination, the fan-tods or whatever you want to call it. We could hear him walking the floor all night, and every now and then he fetched a yell like a sick coyote. I thought he overdone it; but Toots said it was bang-up stuff, more artistic than the ravings of John McCullough. Several times the *cabo* came to him and inquired what was eating him; but the General wouldn't loosen up with the info'. Finally the morning came, and with it the General keeled over exhausted. Just before conscientiousness passed from him, however, he managed to whisper his secret to the *cabo*.

"It had to do with the Fighting Saint. In a sort of dream the saint had appeared and made a holler to the General. The saint's kick was that many times since his death he had tried to bring the country rain and heal the sick and afflicted, but that it was impossible for him to do anything as long as his body or image—as he called it—was in a cave up in the mountains.

"The saint explained where the body —or the image—was, giving him the Rand-McNally to the exact spot. And all of this the General told the *cabo*. Then he went to bed, and the *cabo* went out and picked six soldiers.

" 'Come with me,' says he. 'I want to find out if the General is off his *cabeza*.'

"But no! Miraculous to relate, the General was not off his nut. One day's ride on mule from the ranch, the *cabo* found the cave. Examining it, he immediately discovered the saint covered with leaves, pine-needles, driftwood, et cetera. The saint was very heavy, being two meters and fifty centimeters long, and made of *tepehuáje*."

"*Tepehuáje*," said Toots, "may be described as one of the heaviest woods that grows, having a greater specific gravity than ebony or a professional humorist and a greater specific density than a British army officer."

"Curious to relate, although this image was supposed to be the actual dead body of the saint, petrified, it is also one of the finest pieces of Italian carving I ever saw. Toots wont talk, but I see him scraping a New Orleans paster off of the Seenyore's foot. Well, anyhow, the saint was altogether too much for the little band of *soldados*, so the surprised and dumfounded *cabo* left four men to watch the saint, took the other two with him and rode all night back to the ranch. There he woke up the sleeping General and told him the saint had been found. All was bustle and confusion, as Shakespeare so well says."

"About three-fourths bustle and one-fourth confusion," said Toots.

"JUST before the big gang started, the General had another snake-dance and let out some more of his vision-conversation and spook-talk with Seenyore Valleblanco. He made oration to the effect that the saint had given orders for a *capilla* or chapel to be built in which his image was to be set up. Me and Toots and the General got workmen started on the foundation right away before the big excursion started, and then about a hundred and fifty peons, vaqueros, et cetera, took to the trail. They were fifteen days getting the saint down the mountain to the ranch, amid great praying and drinking and rejoicing. The *capilla* was rushed to completion—"

"The saint got a fine lot of publicity," said Toots. "When it come to blowing

the saint's horn for him, I had Gabriel suffering from the asthma."

"If you'll glance over any of the regular religions, you'll find that one of the ideas in being a saint is to have a saint's day, or birthday. So it was decided that Seenyore Valleblanco's comes in February. Upon his first saint's day, he being duly and gorgiferously set up in his *capilla,* over three thousand Indians visited him. Each year there came more and more, not only Indians but all sorts of people from all parts of Mexico, until there used to visit him yearly upwards of a hundred thousand folks. Facts! Valleblanco got right popular. They came in all kinds of ways, in carts, buggies, coaches, on mules, burros and afoot. Some crawled on their hands and knees, being paralyzed. Some were blind. They wanted one of two things: either rain for their land or a cure for their pains.

"Every year the multitude commenced to gather two weeks before the saint's day. Wednesday at noon, two days before the saint's day, the doors of the *capilla* was thrown open—"

"The variegated crowd of motley-colored parties," described Toots, "rivaling the gaudy hues of the rainbow on the magazine cover, gathered together from hither and yon—but mostly yon—was then notified that the saint was ready for biz."

"Everybody had a chance to be cured and to touch the sacred Indian saint."

"Thursday morning," said Toots, "Thursday morning was the glad day upon which they were allowed to bring their change in with them."

"The doors was opened at five A. M., and the crowd passed by in front of the saint."

"PARDON me, Henry," interrupted Toots, "but right here the rules call for a fine chunk of description—as viz. and to wit: This lovely piece of *tepehuájc,* finely carved as has been said, stands before a sort of an altar arrangement. At its feet, and about eighteen inches above the floor, stands our hero, the strong-box. This box is a steel chest made of quarter-inch boiler-plate, and is about thirty inches by twenty-four by twenty. On each side of the box stands one very real soldier. He has in his hands one carbine. At the end of each carbine the close observer will note one affixed bayonet. For the benefit of the feeble-minded, I will state that the soldiers are there to see that the lucre is kept exclusively for Seenyore Valleblanco."

"The crowd commences filing by," said Henry, "in front of the saint and the box, dropping in their offerings as they pass. No one can expect to be cured of the jimjams or get the genuine, wet rain on his fields without putting in some money. The saint, so Toots says, distributes this money all over the world to the sick and needy. When Toots and I filed by the box Friday noon, the box was over half full—there was silver coins of all sizes, bills, gold coins, and even gold dust done up in these here small buckskin sacks and the heels of old socks. There are placer diggings close by the General's ranch, and many of the miners throw in this dust. There was one especially liberal giver—"

"Ah, yes," said Toots. "Hastily described, this party had been struck in the head by lightning. The bolt hit him so hard that he sort of stove together and is about a foot shorter than he was before. We called him Little Ajax. He was bench-legged and walked sideways like a salt-water crab. Also he keeps up a continuous motion with his arms. But whom shall say the gifts of nature are not beneficial? For, observe: this motion of his arms is identically the motion a man employs when manipulating a gold-pan to wash the gravel off of the bed-rock. As this motion was continuous and steady with this guy Ajax even when he was asleep,—and some of his friends said that he hadn't slept since he was struck,—he could wash more gravel than any two men in camp. A man that had never been hit by a thunderbolt was completely outclassed; this guy had even a rocker or jig-process skinned. He used to sit in one place all day and had four men digging and carrying gravel to him.

"He, of course, lacked the discernment of the saint. He kept giving the saint gold-dust, hoping to get rid of what ailed him. But the saint realized

that because of his very affliction Ajax has got the bulge on the other placer miners, and so of course he don't never cure him."

"WELL," said Henry, "the box keeps on filling until twelve o'clock Friday night. Then the box is padlocked and the capilla closed. Everybody is put out and the guard doubled. That very night—*bingo!* just like that—the saint distributes the money all over the world to the sick and needy. From midnight until morning, gambling—which has been prohibited by the General up till then—starts up, and roulette and monte are employed to while away the time. That there's where Toots and I was *compos mentis*. We allowed the smoked hams to do the gambling; we merely pulled in the money.

"Saturday morning the man in charge used to open the strong-box and show that the money was gone—sure enough—clean as a whistle. And there was the soldiers on guard. Nobody could get it but the saint. And he had distributed it to the needy."

"Pretty classy stuff," I said. "Them Indians was good Indians."

"Why, they had everybody doing it," exclaimed Henry. "The saint done elegant. He was batting over three hundred and getting all the breaks. If it didn't rain on a feller's land, some neighbor of his got well of a sickness; or if the sick guy kicked the bucket, chances are it rained on the other feller's land. It was a wonderful idea. And it paid—how it paid! The thing was as fat and juicy a proposition as we'll ever see, I reckon. Toots was to get fifteen per cent of the velvet, and it was all velvet. I had the gambling privilege. It looked to us to be a lifetime job, 'cause the saint he wouldn't never wear out, and the General—well, them old Indians is as longevitudinous as elephants. I remember we was in a kind of Rockefeller dream them days. All the days was rosy and the nights was simply busting with aurorea's borealices. I used to sit back and figure that some time when I got old and fat I'd buy up a whole hotel on Forty-fourth Street, New York, give the Police Commissioner and the District Attorney a bigger salary than the authorities did, and run Dick Canfield over into Hoboken. Toots, he presented himself with about a peck of four-carat diamonds. He strung 'em around all over his *sombrero*, and he used a lady's diamond brooch the size of your hand to hold his silk handkerchief in place." Henry, he hove a sigh. "But it couldn't last. It was one of them things that is too good to last. It all done busted up *pronto*."

"What happened?"

HENRY digited at Toots. "Ask him!"

Toots stirred up a little and said to me: "You seen that dame that went by with Suds, didn't you?"

I nodded.

"*That* happened," said Toots.

"I hate to talk about it to his face," said Henry, "but Toots has one illegal and spurious weakness. That's women. No sooner did he have about a hundred thousand pesos salted away, than he begins to get homesick and recapitulate all the nice calico he's gone and been looney about over the border. Then he takes to beating up a guitar and singing *'Mi Corazon'*—which is a Mexican love-song and translates 'My Heart' but really refers to some chicken or other. At first his honing for Juliets is pretty general and omnivorous, so to speak, but finally he focuses down and gets specific about a hash-wrastler in a San Antonio eating-house."

"Her eyes was as blue," said Toots dreamily, "as the sash on a sweet girl graduate. Her hair was as yellow as the back of a twenty. And her lips was as red and soft as the heart of a ripe watermelon. She done me dirt, turned me down and wiped up the floor with my heart, but as a conny-sewer I give her the credit of having a classy line of goods."

"I thought Toots would go bughouse when Miss Alberta Vinnage wrote him she was coming down to look us all over. He sent to Mexico City for some pomade and cosmetic and carnival clothes and toothpick shoes and bull-fighter neckties and razors and perfume. And he learned *'Sobre Las Olas'*

and *'La Golondrina'* to add to his stock of *'Mi Corazon'* and *'La Paloma.'* Gee! When I think of the sucker!"

"What did she do?" I asked.

"She done me," said Toots.

"Us," Henry corrected him. "I never will be able to understand it. Women must have funny brains." Henry stopped a minute and then he said: "Remember that old philosopher that stood the burro between two haystacks to see what he'd do?"

I said I did; but I didn't.

"Well, I got the answer to that, all right, all right." And he stopped again.

"Yes, but you aint finished your story," I said.

"Well, Miss Alberta arrove all right, and she took about two weeks standing looking at Toots there and at—guess who? The General, by gum! You seen Suds. He aint no Apollo Bellevue, is he?"

I admitted that there.

"THAT'S what makes her actions all the more mysterifying to me," said Henry. "Toots here was all slicked up like a mule in a parade. He peeked of diamonds and he blazed with perfume. And the General went about looking like a back-door bum. He's eighty if he's a day, and he's got a voice like a rusty saw, and twenty feet away from him you couldn't tell him from a goat-herder. And yet—" Henry got kind of hoarse and said to Toots: "Didn't you load Miss Alberta up with diamonds? Didn't you show her all the ready money you had? Didn't you sing them songs you learned to her? That one about if a pigeon come and set on her window-sill for her not to butcher it 'cause it was your soul come homing to her? And usen't she hold your head in her lap out in the moonlight while you sung them things? Didn't you tell her the saint was your very own idea and was worth a fortune? And when you told her you was to get fifteen per cent of the gate, didn't she throw her arms around your neck and tell you she was yourn forever?" Henry turned round and looked at me. "That's a woman for you. The very next week she married the General and busted up the whole game."

"She even got the General to cut me out of my fifteen per cent," said Toots.

"Do you two grafters," I said, "mean to sit there and tell me all you got out of the whole shebang was what you took in gambling?"

"You see," said Henry gloomy, "them soldiers all belonged to the General. You may think a Mex. soldier is a joke, but they take life as serious as a doctor does."

"We couldn't no more get to Suds after things was going so well with the saint," observed Toots, "than you could get at the Czar to sell him the latest wrinkle in dynamite." After he hove a sigh, he went on: "She was as false as she was fair, that there girl. She moved in a mysterious way to perform her act, but she done taught me a lesson."

"Me too," said Henry. "I got that haystack philosopher dead to rights, account of her."

We was all three silent for a long time, swigging away at our box. I don't know what the others was thinking, but I was thinking about the adoptability of women, as I said at first.

Finally, Toots said: "Yes, Henry, but that there philosopher of yourn prejudicated that them two haystacks must be absolutely equal, and that the donkey'd starve to death from not being able to make up his mind which one to tackle. Us two haystacks—me and Suds—wasn't equal."

"No, you wasn't," said Henry. "That's the point. Only, *you* looked like the good one—not him. Now, *I* know the answer—but *why* was it she didn't take you?"

"Why," I said, "you suckers, don't you see? Toots let the cat out of the bag when he said he only got fifteen per cent of the stuff. Naturally she began looking around for the eighty-five per cent. The old General may of been a pretty rusty-looking specimen, but she didn't go by appearances."

"No, she didn't. That's just the point," said Henry. "And that's where I copper the weak spot in the philosopher. A donkey would of judged them haystacks by appearances. But a *jinny* wouldn't, and didn't and never will. And this case proves it."

A Hold-up In the Sierra

This, "The Taxi-driver's Tale," is one of the most exciting of these stories of motor-car adventure that have been so popular — Mr. Sabin's clever "Tales of a Wayside Garage."

By EDWIN L. SABIN
Author of "Better Babies," "The Red-Haired Girl," etc.

WE gathered early on this the next night, in the Wayside Garage, because the Tourist wanted to hear the Taxi-driver's story and also to catch a late train south. He had been such a good sport, postponing his departure from night to night as one story brought another into the immediate vista, that we were disposed to accommodate him.

"Well, the gang's all here," remarked the Boss, strolling back to where we were idly watching Joe the Mechanic vulcanize his interminable tubes.

And so we were: the cross-country Tourist, of course; the Chauffeur of the big Locomobile; the Motor-cop; the Jitney-man; the Young Chap with the one arm; and the Driver of the Kissel taxi. These, with the Boss, Joe and myself, completed the roll of what the Boss was pleased to term the "gang."

In the air was the smell of grease and distillate—as pleasing to the nose of an automobile lover as that of printer's ink and paper is to the nostrils of a newspaper man. The garage stalls were rather emptier than usual. The alligator-snouted Franklin Thirty from St. Louis had gone; so had the Chalmers seven-passenger from Denver; so had the Tourist's heavy Packard, which his daughter, despairing of waiting upon her fascinated father, had driven down the coast. But the 1915 Maxwell, the laundry Ford, the bakery Overland, the shining new Buick Six, the taxi, the jitney, my own car (still hung up by the hind-quarters, biding the arrival of a confounded axle and a differential assembly) and the desert Renault were here, faithful to their posts. A couple of other cars also had come in—another Franklin, and a long Pierce-Arrow; and there were the garage service cars. So after all we had quite an audience.

"Must have had her out to-day," I remarked to the Tourist, for as I laid hand upon the old Renault her radiator was agreebly warm.

"Yes, sir; I turned a hundred miles in her this afternoon," he answered. "I was out in the back-country a piece. Took a party of friends."

"They put mighty good stuff in those foreign cars," mused the Boss, eying her appraisingly. "All she needs is some paint."

"It's astonishing what a car, even the cheapest, will stand in the shape of abuse," quoth the Tourist. "To me, the automobile is the most marvelous piece of machinery in the world. As accurate as a watch and as strong as a steam-shovel, and handled mainly by people who don't know anything about it."

"You're right," said the Chauffeur.

"How far has that car run?" asked the Motor-cop.

"This? Well, I don't know. Her speedometer said forty-five thousand, when I found her, and I've added a thousand since. But she'd stood out on the desert several months. That old Packard of mine has been run fifty-three thousand."

"Yes, and I sold a Franklin the other

day that had been run seventy thousand and took in on it a Ford that had been run darned near a hundred thousand," asserted the Boss.

"Jitney?" asked the Motor-cop, with a wink at the company.

"Naw—stage," replied the Boss. But he added, with a grin: "Sold it for a jitney, though."

"Stage! Now you're talking," approved the Taxi-driver. "That's where the automobile gets it in the neck. A machine on some of these daily stage-runs out in the hills needs to be built right, let me tell you. Believe me, I've been there. And the driver, he needs the same."

"Where'd you ever stage it with an automobile? Thought you learned to drive, delivering milk for a dairy!" bantered the Boss.

"You think lots of things and try to make the other fellow think them too," retorted the Taxi-driver. "That's in your business, see? But I've traveled my little old two hundred and sixty-six miles a day, seven days a week, month in and month out, sitting at the steering wheel; and it's some job. Never again, never again!"

"Taxi?" put in the Motor-cop, with another wink. "Gee, no wonder you're ready to retire."

"Taxi nothing!" blurted the Taxi-driver. "It was a stage up north in the Sierra country. Higher than *you'll* ever get. See?"

"Aw, close your cut-outs. Don't you see that sign?" instructed the Boss. "Go ahead with your story, Mike. You said you had one. Shoot. Here's a man who wants to catch a train."

"And so I do," asserted the Tourist.

"Well, 'tisn't much of a story," replied the Taxi-driver. "'Twont take long. But this cop's fairy-tale of his red-headed girl sort of reminded me of a little thing that happened to me up north."

The Boss dragged a box to him with his foot, and seating himself upon it where he could view the curb outside the front door, composedly rolled a cigarette. At the vulcanizing bench near by Joe lent expectant ear. The Taxi-driver sat on a second box, and we others stowed ourselves in the comfortable old desert car.

The Taxi-driver's Tale

THAT was the dickens of a run, anyhow (he said, musingly)—a hundred and thirty-three miles out and a hundred and thirty-three miles in, all in a day. (Lots of cars are averaging that, though," interrupted the Jitney-man. "I darn near average it myself.")

You do, do you? (continued the Taxi-driver). Where? Over pavements, aint it? You wouldn't have lasted a week up yonder, sonny. One of those long twenty-five-per-cent grades would have set you to yelling the S. O. S. signal for water. ("What are you talking about!" reproved the Jitney-man. "Why, I'll take that little old Ford of mine and I'll—" "Can that dope," growled the Boss. "This is no European war. We know all about Fords—saw one yesterday. Besides, here's a man wants to catch a train, I tell you.")

It was this way (appealed the Taxi-driver, generally). The Sunset Stage Company had been operating a four-horse stage between Sacrasanto and Gold Bar, over the old Wells-Fargo express route. A stage left each end semi-weekly, and took three days through, and laid up over Sunday. It was a horse-killer, too, that route. The hills broke his wind and his legs. I know, because I drove, and I've seen many a willing brute junked to the milk-peddlers.

That country took a boom, and the company had to put on more stages or else let competition butt in. They figured that gasoline was cheaper than horse-feed, and so what did they do but sell off their animals, scrap their two jerkies to a moving-picture outfit that was just starting in on Wild West scenes, and change to machines. Reorganized as the Sunset General Transportation Company—and it looked to me as if I was out of a job. ("Progress in the far West, eh?" commented the Tourist. "Guess so," acknowledged the Taxi-driver. And he continued:)

But the company were square, all

right, and kept all the old boys they could. So next thing I knew, I was called in to the manager's office and asked if I wanted to stay on the same job and drive an auto instead of horses.

"Who—me?" said I. "I'll herd sheep first." For I'd handled the ribbons there years, and I certainly did hate machines. But you can bet they'd none of 'em ever crowded *me* off no grade.

The manager just laughed.

"Well, Mike," says he, "I know how you feel, and the company appreciates your services. You think it over. There's your route, if you want it, at twenty-five-per-cent increase in pay; and you can learn to drive a car, all right. We'll risk that. We're going to make the round trip in a day, too."

I told him I'd see him again in the morning. And after I'd cooled off I decided I'd chip in for one round, anyway. So they gave me a day to learn the car, and off I started. Green? Lord help me, thought I, if this thing stops when I don't ask it to stop. ("Couldn't even change a tire, could you?" demanded the Chauffeur. "Change a tire!" snorted the Taxi-driver. "I was so rattled I couldn't have changed my shirt!" He continued:)

BUT the Lord is good to the righteous, and I got through and back and didn't kill anything but my engine. Think, though, of putting a man who'd never been in a car, except the day before, on a stage-run of a hundred and thirty miles into the hills. But that's the way they do. Of course I didn't make schedule, the first trip. I hadn't got the feel of her yet. You ought to have seen me, on the grades! Expect you fellows have all been there, when you first hit a good hill. (We nodded wisely.) Gee, as soon as I saw a hill coming, I slammed the gas into her, held her wide open and went clawing up like a cat climbing a telephone pole. Never mind the curves. All I wanted was to reach the top. Like as not she'd choke on me, and I'd have nothing more to give her, and I'd know a gear-shift was due, and I'd begin to pray. I surely smoked her, though, on those first trips.

Naturally, a couple of round-trips taught me a whole lot, and pretty soon there was nothing to it. The love of the road was in me, I guess, and I stayed by my job.

The Sacrasanto and Gold Bar Limited, we called her. A big four-seated White, she was—the first of the kind made, I reckon; she had a sort of long tonneau body slung on a regular truck-chassis; she had a canopy top, and side-curtains that could be rolled up or buckled down, special double springs, and a baggage-hanger behind. Built like a stage, that old girl was.

("Solid tires?" queried the Young Chap. "No, sir. We couldn't make the time with solid tires. We had demountables, though, and you bet I carried about four extra rims, and casing on 'em, with me. It wasn't on the books to change any tubes." He continued:)

Painted red, she was—gray top—her name in gold lettering on her sides. Geared five to one, for the grades; but she had the gimp, too, and she was good for fifty miles when I could open her up. A run like that, though, ought to take the tuck out of any machine. One hundred and thirty-odd miles, up hill and down, over a road that had been used mostly by the horse stage and the freight outfits. Grades to twenty-seven per cent—plenty of 'em ten and fifteen per cent; and in one climb of three miles we rose fifteen hundred feet. ("That's an average of ten per cent, itself," proffered the Tourist, who must have done some rapid calculating. "Didn't your water boil?")

Sure it boiled, sometimes (continued the Taxi-driver). You take three miles steady pull on intermediate at near a mile high, and *your* water'll boil. But as long as I had the water to boil, I let it boil. There were too many hairpin turns on that grade, for speed. I'd swung four horses and a coach around 'em, at a gallop, to scare the tenderfeet, but I didn't dare risk a car. Well (he laughed), that was some life. I can see myself yet, piloting the old boat: rear end sagged down with mail and baggage, passengers — specially the tourists—sticking their heads out along the sides, engine roaring as she hit the

grades, and me a-sitting at the wheel, watching the road and the speedometer while we ate the miles.

WE had to eat 'em, too. We left Sacrasanto every morning at five-thirty sharp, were due at Green Valley, halfway, at eight o'clock, and due into Gold Bar at noon. The road to Green Valley was a snap, but from there on we did our climbing by the Wells-Fargo express route, and it hadn't been much improved since the days of Forty-nine. Coming back, we left Gold Bar at two, and were due into Sacrasanto at seven —a quicker trip, you understand, because it was so much downhill. Gee, there was one time—but that aint my story. I was going to tell you about that girl.

("Wait a minute," bade the Boss. A car honked insistently outside, for gas. He bustled away. He hustled back. "Now what about that girl?" he demanded. "And you a married man!" rebuked the Motor-cop.)

'Twas along in the fall, and travel was getting light (resumed the Taxi-driver), especially on the up trip. The boys from the mining prospects were mostly coming out instead of going in; ranchers were busy; and the tourists had about all gone home, to put their kids in school again. Deer season had closed, too. This morning, I remember, there were only four passengers—three of 'em from Green Valley, and the other, who was the girl, for the end of the trail.

I knew the three of 'em, because I'd had 'em before. But the girl was a tourist. Awful pretty little thing, in brand new khaki, and one of those white canvas beach-hats, and with a camera slung over her shoulder. The fellows stowed themselves among the back seats, but she came running up and started to climb in beside of me. That—

("Telephone!" announced Joe—for the instrument had been ringing impatiently. "Go and answer it. What's the matter with *you?*" ordered the Boss. "Can't. Got to take out a tube," grinned Joe. The Boss grumblingly disembarked again. "Wait a minute," he bade, to the Taxi-driver. "Don't let that girl get away, either." "You trot, then," warned the Taxi-driver. "Here's a man wants to catch a train." The Boss returned. "Party wants a car at Twentieth and Broad," he informed the Jitney-man. "Get a move on you, now." "Who—me?" protested the Jitney-man. "Tell 'em to chase themselves. I'm no taxi." "It's dark and they wont know," answered the Boss sarcastically. "Gwan, now; either you or Mike, and he's busy." The Jitney-man reluctantly climbed out, and mumbling his discontent clumped across to his veteran car. "Shoot," ordered the Boss, to the Taxi-driver.)

"Where was I at?" asked the Taxi-driver.

"Girl climbing up beside you," prompted the Boss.

Oh, yes (continued the Taxi-driver). Well, I didn't fall for that worth a cent. Tourists were always trying to swipe that front seat, but I wasn't running no rubber-neck wagon. Whenever anybody with a camera started climbing up beside me, I gave him the straight-arm. Too many questions, see? And I had all I could do to listen to the engine, and watch the road, let alone paying attention to fool remarks and the scenery.

"I think you'll be more comfortable in one of those back seats, Miss," said I.

"But I'd rather ride in front with you, if you don't mind," said she, her foot up.

"That there third seat's the best," said I. "It's between the springs."

"Thank you," said she; "but I'd much prefer this. Really I would. I engaged it from the agent. You've plenty of room, he told me."

AND in she came. You can't stop a tourist with a camera. ("Don't mind *me,*" interjected the Tourist; "I'm only one of them.")

That made me mad. I guess I was feeling rather nasty, anyway. So out I got and braced the agent, who was grinning at me from the door of the office.

"What kind of a frame-up are you dealing me, I'd like to know?" said I. "Is that right? Does she sit alongside

me, or can I choose my own company?"

You know, on a regular stage, the driver's seat is his own. At least, it used to be, and his say-so went. ("That's right," nodded the Tourist.)

"Look pleasant," joshed the agent. "She promised not to steal you."

"How far's she going?" asked I.

"Through," said he. "But I'll square you with that girl at Green Valley. Now beat it. Five-thirty. And 'phone us when you get to Gold Bar."

"Why?" asked I. "Do you think I'll elope?"

"Well, you've got a bunch of registered mail there," said he, with a look. "And to-morrow's pay-day at the mines. Besides, there's a valuable passenger on the front seat with you."

"You must think I'm going to meet Jesse James or Brigham Young," said I.

Back I went and hopped in with a grouch, and gave the old boat the gun. Away she jumped.

"I'm going clear through with you," chirped the young thing to me. "It's a wonderful trip, I've been told. I thought maybe you'd be kind enough to warn me of the pretty places before we reached them, and then I'd be ready with the camera and wouldn't bother you to stop."

"I'm usually too busy driving to notice the pretty places, Miss," said I. "My business is to get through."

WE rolled along. The car was full of gimp this morning, and I certainly burned the road, because I was mad. If that girl took any "pretty pictures," she'd have to set her camera at about a thousandth of a second.

Didn't seem to make any difference to her, though. She sat up as nice as you please, and prattled very pleasant, and when we hit the curves, she never peeped. Game, all right.

"This is a splendid car, isn't it!" she said after a bit. "I do love a car. I used to drive a White, but it was only a roadster."

"Yes, she's got some class," said I. But that sort of thawed me out. ("Praise a man's car and you get into his heart," commented the Tourist.) And when we pulled into Green Valley ten minutes ahead of schedule I was almost decent. ("Half human, eh?" proffered the Boss.)

Lost all my passengers except her, at Green Valley (continued the Taxi-driver). Didn't pick anybody up, either. So out I chugged for the sixty miles up to Gold Bar, with her beside me, chipper as a sparrow. And I was rather glad of it, for it's lonesome work, driving among the hills by yourself, and a fellow gets tired of it. Of course, I might take on somebody at the camps along the road, and then again I might not.

We left Green Valley behind and began to hit the high places. That old boat sure had on its climbing-irons this day; we were traveling light, with just enough weight of baggage and mail in the rear to give us the proper traction, and I made up my mind, if she was anything of a sport, I'd show her a ride. 'Specially if she knew cars, and by her talk she did.

We wiped the Tomaso grade off the map on the high, and she never turned a hair. When the world unfolded below us, she snapped it with her camera; that's all. Down we sailed, through Yankee Gulch (nobody there for us), hit Yankee Hill—a three-mile grade of ten per cent and then some—and swung around the curves like Earl Cooper on a last lap.

"Oh, can't you slow down?" said she.

"Why?" said I.

"So I can take some pictures."

Wouldn't that have killed yuh? Here I was giving her a real joy-ride, and she wanted me to stop so she could take pictures with her black box! She didn't even give me the satisfaction of her being afraid. And I hardened my heart. Those picture machines always made me mad. What's the sense of trying to put a hundred miles of country into two by four inches?

"Got to hit these grades hard, Miss," said I. "I'm hired to drive two hundred and sixty-six miles a day, so you'll have to snap your pictures on the run. If we don't get to Gold Bar at noon, I miss my piece of pie."

"Oh!" said she. "I wouldn't have

you do *that* for *any*thing." ("Aha!" quoth the Motor-cop. "Came right back at you, didn't she! Was she red-haired?" "Naw, but she was red-blooded," retorted the Taxi-driver. And he continued:)

I'D driven that road a thousand times, I reckon, by horse and machine, so I knew just where to open up and just where to throttle down, and just what the next mile would look like; so I suppose I could have slacked once in a while at a good place to snap. But to tell the truth, I was a little anxious to beat it through, for more reasons than the pie. Hauling a bunch of registered mail, and several wads of currency (pay-day at the mines, remember), and a girl as guard, through a country lonesome as a livery-stable in Detroit, makes a long trail. The sooner I checked in at Gold Bar, the better.

I saw I'd queered the girl, all right, though. After she'd passed me that hot-shot, she didn't try for another picture. There were places where I was down to ten miles, and she could have snapped as well as not; but she'd laid her camera beside her and she sat not so much as lifting a hand.

"This next grade I have to make on intermediate," said I, to square myself. "You'll find some mighty pretty pictures round those curves."

"Thank you," said she. "But the composition of pictures taken on the fly is apt to be very poor. I'll wait till we stop at the other end."

"Well, I can't stop on no twenty-per-cent grade; that's a cinch," answered I; and I stepped on the throttle.

We hadn't met much traffic, to date, since leaving Green Valley—just a few pack outfits, and one camp outfit in an old Apperson; but after we'd climbed the grade and turned into Glorietta Cañon, there around the second curve was another car, standing facing us in the middle of the road.

"Blazes!" said I to myself.

That Glorietta Cañon is a corker. The trail follows along it about halfway up, with a wall on one side and a six- or seven-hundred-foot drop on the other. A peach of a cañon, but there's darned little room to pass except on the curves, and maybe not then. A fellow has to look ahead for turn-outs.

"It must be stuck, isn't it?" said the girl, eying the car.

"Stalled for sure," said I. "Fellows are working on it, anyhow. They might have stopped in a worse place, but I don't know where."

("Ford?" queried Joe, from his bench. "You're talking," approved the Taxi-driver. "How'd you guess?" He continued:)

Yes, of course it was a Ford—new roadster. A couple of fellows were on the ground looking inside the hood, and fussing.

"Now I'll get a picture, anyway," piped the girl. "You'll have to stop."

"You'd better be mighty quick about it, then," said I, hot. "This stage doesn't stop long for any Ford, you can bet on that." And I gave 'em the horn. "Get out o' there!" I yelled. "Shove off to one side so I can squeeze by."

"Can't move her," answered they. "She's froze tight."

So stop I did, and out I jumped, without shutting off, and went forward.

"Push her back," said I. "What's the matter with you? You're holding up the mail."

"Push her back yourself," said they. "Got any water to spare? She's dead on us—bearings froze."

"Naw, I aint got any water to spare," said I. "Do you think I'm a street sprinkler?"

THEY had the radiator-cap off, and I stepped to look in. The next thing I knew, there was a gun jammed against the back of my neck, and the fellow who held it was saying, gently:

"You stay awhile, pardner. We'll take care of that mail for you."

A hold-up, by heck! Registered mail! Pay funds! Me on the ground, a girl in the machine!

"Kill that camera, Bill!" yelped the fellow who was holding the gun against me; and I felt it slip.

"Look out!" bawled Bill, sharp-like. "Stop her!"

I heard the old boat roar—something told me what was happening; round I

twisted, ducked and smashed the guy with the gun in the jaw. He flattened against the cañon wall. I'd just time to dodge aside. Bill bawled, but I couldn't pay attention to him; the girl was coming in intermediate, cut-out barking like a rapid-firer, and just as she struck the Ford, I landed on the running-board. With the corner of my eye I glimpsed Bill trailing after, reaching, reaching, a gun in his hand, but she'd jumped away from him when she shot in the clutch so sudden; and we went through that Ford roadster like a mad bull through a rail fence. We never even hesitated. Froze? Well, it sure melted. There was one little smash—something red-hot bored me in the shoulder—thought it was a splinter, at the time—over tumbled the Ford, bound down into the cañon. Into first we zipped, and with a clear road ahead we hit out for home. Hanging hard, I looked back. Bill was standing pumping his gun at us; then we rounded the curve on two wheels, and lost him.

"Good stuff!" yelled I, at the girl. "Now keep going." For I saw she could drive, and Gold Bar was only ten miles before.

SHE closed the cut-out with a kick, and slacked.

"Oh, get in, quick," said she. "You're hurt! He shot you!"

And he had, through the shoulder!

"Never mind me," said I. "I'll stick. Keep going." And I leaned out for a look at the old boat. Her radiator was crumpled, and I could tell by the feel of her that her front wheels weren't tracking. But her engine was working. "How does she move?" asked I, as she jumped again to the throttle.

"Fine," said the girl. "Steers a little hard, is all. Do get in."

"You're stepping on your camera," said I.

"Never mind the camera," said she. "He left the mail-sacks to grab it, and it fell down. Do get in."

I dived in over the door; and kind of faint (I was bleeding like a stuck sheep), I crawled onto a seat.

"How far to Gold Bar?" she panted.

"Ten miles—good road. Can you make it?" answered I.

"Yes, but can *you* make it?" said she.

"If you'll drive," answered I. "Go as fast as you like."

"The water's leaking out," said she. "Wont the car overheat?"

"So am I," answered I. "Naw, she wont overheat. She can run without water and beat the best Franklin ever born." ("That's a lie," remarked the Boss calmly.)

And out of the cañon we boomed (continued the Taxi-driver), slightly disfigured but still in the ring.

"Did you get your picture?" asked I. "If you did, we can corral those fellows, sure."

Gripping the wheel, she flung me a glance over her shoulder.

"I could have got one," said she. "But there aren't any films in the camera—only a thousand dollars in bills."

And search me if she wasn't speaking truth: ten one-hundred-dollar bills she was taking up to her husband to cinch a mining prospect! And she'd been pestering me all the way, pretending she wanted to snap the landscape! Wouldn't that rile you? And, said she:

"Of course I wasn't going to let them take the camera."

She didn't a little sense the other goods we were carrying; so I swallowed my cud and made it stay down.

Well, we pulled into Gold Bar right on time, with only a leaking radiator and the front wheels cross-eyed, and a few bullet-holes promiscuous, and me with a shirt and a shoulder sort of spoiled. But they never did get those two thugs—

"Holy smoke!" ejaculated the Boss, interrupting and springing out. "Here's a wreck, b' gosh!"

For into the wide garage doorway had bolted a wild-visaged, perspiring, grimy figure, with head bare and trousers split at the knees—now to wheeze and beckon frantically as he tottered forward. He was the Jitney-man, and he proceeded to stammer out the tale of a most extraordinary adventure.

Whom God Hath Joined

"MY father died," said Chrissey Warburton, in her confession to the clergyman in Bermuda, "died and left me to the guardianship of Mr. Warburton" (a self-made man of great wealth), "who is nearly twenty years older than I.

"I am not—not poor; I might even be called wealthy in my own right. Mr. Warburton proved himself a faithful and capable guardian. My mother supervised my education.

"When the time came, I was launched in society under the most favorable auspices. I had suitors without number, and some of them, I flatter myself, were interested in me rather than in the prospect of acquiring my possessions by a marriage with me.

"I cared for but one of them. One night at Sorrento, he told me that he loved me. I was ready to give myself to him, but—he had a—failing."

She would fain not be disloyal to her lover. She was not wont to be disloyal to Warburton or to anyone, for that matter. This was hard to say.

"He saw that I returned his affection, when he spoke to me; but—he was not master of himself, and he—he embraced me so roughly, so— You understand?" she asked, crimsoning.

The priest nodded, but made no answer.

"I thrust him from me. He fell; his head struck the stone of the terrace; he was unconscious. There was another suitor, an Italian duke. Without my authority he resented it, and there was a duel. By some mischance the Duke was wounded. Mr. Neyland," she went on unconsciously—she had not used his name before—"went away. We knew there would be scandal. Mr. Warburton asked me on the ship coming home to marry him, and I said yes. He said he had loved me ever since I had become a woman, but because he was so much older than I, and different, he had stood aside and waited, but when I had thrust Mr. Neyland away and had dismissed him, he took heart and made his appeal.

Mr. Warburton does not know to this day what Mr. Neyland did; if he did, I think he would have killed him. And so I said yes. It seemed like a haven of refuge, and we were married. It was only afterward that I—I realized"—her voice sank to a low whisper—"the obligations of my position. Then I begged him to leave me—free—"

She hesitated. "He did so," she added after a pause—and another long silence followed.

"The next day my mother was stricken and died," she resumed at last. "I fell ill. The doctor said I must have a change, a rest, that I must not be molested; and so I came down here. This morning there came to me the man I do love, Richard Neyland, the man who—who forgot himself, at Sorrento. . . . I have forgiven him. I could forgive him everything. He has discovered that I do not love my husband, and that I do love *him*. He wants me to get a divorce—I am a wife in name only—and to marry him. So I come to you with my—my problem. What shall I do?"

Of course Father Smith urged Chrissey to forget Neyland, to go back to Warburton; in time she would learn to love her husband. But when Neyland again pleaded his cause, her inclination, coupled with his influence, proved too strong, and she agreed to divorce Warburton and marry Neyland. Next day she went out horseback-riding alone with Neyland. In their absence Warburton arrived, and standing in the doorway of the villa, he saw the return of his wife and Neyland—saw her permit Neyland's ardent embrace after they had dismounted from their horses.

A COMPLETE RÉSUMÉ OF THE PREVIOUS INSTALLMENTS

A FURIOUS man-to-man fight ensues, in which Warburton is victor; indeed, only Chrissey's intervention saves Neyland from being hurled to his death on the rocks below the terrace. Beaten, Neyland is forced to leave the house—and Chrissey is left alone to face her justly wrathful husband.

There follows a stormy interview in which Warburton offers to let Chrissey divorce him. She accepts, and they leave Bermuda on different boats. Chrissey goes to the Tayloes' in New York, while she makes the necessary arrangements.

At this juncture, certain friends of Neyland's, the Altons, invite her to dinner, and at their house she has another meeting with Neyland. They decide that he shall go on an exploring trip to Labrador, while she takes up the necessary residence in Nevada preparatory to securing her decree: they are not to meet again until their marriage is possible.

By CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY

CHAPTER XXVII

IN THE VALLEY OF DECISION

CONNECTION between cause and effect, often easily traceable if only one has the clue to follow to the end, frequently runs through a series of highly complex relationships, and that is especially true when the subject under consideration is a woman's mind or a woman's will. What she sets her mind on she frequently, in the end, does not wish, and what she wills she wont. This was especially true of Chrissey Warburton and her divorce. Having got it, she did not want it! It has not infrequently been observed that about the worst thing that can happen to us is to have our prayers answered, that more unhappiness comes from realized ambitions than from disappointments; and that is true without regard to sex.

THE matrimonial adventure of the wealthy and beautiful Christianna Deselden is described in this remarkable serial by the author of "The Island of Regeneration," "Web of Steel" and other noted novels.

Mrs. John Warburton having been seven months in Nevada, on a certain day in early summer there had been, by the grace of the courts, put in her hands that decree of divorce she had sought, giving her permission to resume her maiden name; and behold, it was to her as valueless a piece of paper as she had ever examined! The end of her ambition, the accomplishment of her desire, the fruition of her hope, not only brought her no joy but filled her with a dissatisfaction as intense as had been her original craving. When her lawyer handed her the paper making her a free woman, she had self-control enough not to throw it in his face. She had thrust it in the pocket of her riding coat and had left the room with the barest acknowledgment courtesy required.

She had somewhat relieved her emotions by a gallop through the hills to the lonely cabin, half lodge, half camp, where after a brief experience at Mrs. Lashbury's she had elected to pass the time. Not until she set foot on the broad porch of the rude log bungalow confronting the mighty sweep of the great Sierra Nevada range, its peaks glistening with the glory of the everlasting snow even in the summer sunshine, did she draw the paper from her pocket. Under the influence of an irresistible impulse, after one hasty glance at it, she threw it from her as if it had been a reptile, and with a movement particularly feminine she actually stamped her heel upon the portentous document as it lay on the floor of the porch.

IT represented a great deal, this inoffensive paper that she had trampled under foot. It wiped out, so far as such things could be obliterated, the bitter and harrowing experiences of the past year. It restored to her that maiden name which she might still use without too great an antagonism between name and fact. It permitted her to marry the man to whom she had deliberately elected to give herself. It shut the door of the past behind her and opened the new door of the future before her.

In that hour she discovered what she had indeed more than suspected before, but what she had steadfastly refused to admit even to herself; that she did not want to pass through the door that opened into the future, but that she would much rather go back through the portal of the past. Too late she realized that it was not Richard Neyland that she loved, but John Warburton. She was not the first woman to find out her own

heart too late. And again it may be noted that the experience is not confined to her sex.

That it was too late, she never attempted to dispute. Indeed, that consciousness had kept her from backing out at the last moment, from leaving Reno before the final judgment. There was a natural pride that moved her to stick it out to the end. She had repudiated her husband after she had virtually refused to have anything to do with him, declining to be his wife. She had thrown herself into the arms of Neyland; to be sure, those arms had been eagerly extended to her, but that did not materially alter the fact.

For that matter, there was no doubt of Warburton's feeling for her, or at least there had been no doubt before. Now he might have changed. She had gone over many times all the episodes in her singular intercourse with these two men. She could not think of one without thinking of the other. And in that camp in the hills, to which no one came, where she had been left completely alone, a new perspective of values had been established. She saw the two men in their right relations to each other. Of necessity she drew comparisons and considered them together.

She had had but few correspondents. Rose Tayloe was the only one worthy of the name. Her letters Chrissey read with avidity and answered at length. Becky Alton had written once, twice, thrice, but in default of any answer had finally ceased to trouble her. She had heard a few times from Colonel Tayloe on matters of business. Nearly all her fortune she had withdrawn from him and had put it in her own control, for just what contingency she had not at first realized. It was that fortune which enabled her to indulge her fancy in purchasing this mountain shack which she had seen on one of her rides through the valley. She had fitted it up in accordance with her taste and comfort. She lived alone there with her devoted maid and such temporary servants as were necessary to the simplicity of the quiet domestic arrangements she had made. She grew to love the place, and she had thought she would keep it forever, but on that morning as she ground that decree of divorce under her heel it suddenly became filled with associations hateful instead of sweet, and she resolved to dispose of it immediately.

SHE sat down presently, resting her chin in her hand and looking down at the beautiful, tree-clad little city nestling beneath the protection of the range—looking like a handful of pearls in a goblet of emerald, she had often said, recalling some fantastic Arab fancy of her lighter reading. And the thought of a city with its busy, enterprising merchants and traders and its crowds of people, always brought Warburton to her mind. Even Reno did so on that summer morning. She now knew when she had begun to love him. It was on that night in which he had mastered Neyland and would have hurled him over the cliff to destruction but for her staying hand. How mighty and how masterful he had been to the man he hated, how contemptuous to her!

If he had not thereafter suggested the divorce himself, she now admitted that she never would have sought it. He might have had her then, if he had only taken her, if he had only been mighty and masterful to the woman he had loved. She fancied herself in his strong arms, her little body high uplifted; and her very soul thrilled to the idea. Why had she been such a fool? Seeking to avoid the Scylla of the obligations of an unloving marriage, she had fallen into the Charybdis of exactly the same situation; for until that hour she had been firmly resolved to go through with the program, to marry Neyland just as soon as it became legally possible. She had learned earlier in her sojourn at Reno the true state of her feelings, but she had gone on because no other course seemed possible to her.

There was nothing new or strange or unexpected that Neyland had done that had opened her eyes. He was just as he had been. In fact, he had been in a much better and more admirable frame of mind and condition of body and spirit than ever before. For the first three months of their separation

he had been lost to the world and to her in the wilds of Labrador. He had come back from his battle with nature in the wilderness with the renewed strength he needed for the harder battle with civilization in New York. But these three months had been fatal to him in ways of which he did not dream. Three months of silence, three months of removal, three months of separation, three months without the exchange of a word, had wrought his undoing so far as her love was concerned.

He had kept for her the fragmentary journal that had been agreed upon. When he forwarded it to her from the first post office he came upon, she found it filled mainly with rhapsodies about her, protestations of his love, asseverations of his determination to conquer, for her sake, that sin that so easily beset him. Here and there, a little bit of daring adventure was modestly set forth; he told lightly and briefly of hairbreadth 'scapes by flood and field, of which she, had she loved him, would have imperiously demanded the fullest details and in which she would have gloried. She read the book with interest, with appreciation, but it left her strangely cold. For his part, he had been compelled to get over as best he could the disappointment which followed her frank statement that she had kept no journal as promised.

She had not given up without a struggle her hope of happiness with Neyland. Since his return to New York he had written her every day—passionate, intense, pleading, devoted letters to which she honestly endeavored to reply in kind. She strove to simulate a virtue—if so it might be called—she did not possess; she tried to exhibit an emotion she did not feel. At first he had reproached her for her coldness—being keen to detect it despite her efforts at concealment; but latterly he had come to realize the impotency as well as the impolicy of such a course.

NEYLAND had not been idle after his return to New York. A great undertaking had been conceived by him, with the assistance of Mr. Billy Alton—who, to do him justice, had shown himself a better friend than ever before, in that he had ceased to put temptation in Neyland's way; and indeed, in the excitement of a different method of having a good time, he had put it out of his own way, somewhat to the annoyance of his wife, who found him on occasion strangely prosaic.

Alton and Neyland had joined forces and had determined to crush Warburton! The audacity of the proposition, its difficulty and its magnitude, did not daunt the two young adventurers. Given a good hatred back of him, and man will try anything. Neyland's dislike of Warburton was shared by his friend, who for various reasons found the great financier, who had treated him with cutting indifference on occasion, an object most agreeable to his pride to attack. A man whose operations were as vast and varied as Warburton's was always open to assault. In the course of those operations there were always points that were vulnerable. Many men had attacked Warburton singly or in combination with others, but he had always beaten the enemy and had won through. There was no single man who could successfully oppose him. But could he fight such a group as Neyland and Alton enlisted?

Neyland and Alton alone would have no chance whatsoever. They knew that, of course. They decided to organize from an opposition which was always ready to attack success or to oppose mastery, such a powerful combination as even Warburton could not stand against. They went about it quietly. They were both men of unusual ability and wide acquaintance. Neyland's position socially was of the highest. Alton's acquaintance was most extensive and he was very popular even with solid and substantial men, who had often wondered why he had not done something in the world.

There was plenty of business acumen and an infinite material resource available if it could be brought to bear. The two young men worked heroically on the problem. Other long-time opponents of Warburton became interested, and seeing a good chance of success, entered heartily upon the undertaking. Two weeks before the date set for the hearing of the case and the granting of

the divorce, having completed their organization, they hurled an attack upon Warburton's stocks and properties which for power and skill and determination the Street had never in all its history seen equaled.

WARBURTON was not a man who was easily beaten. In fact, he never had been beaten completely. He had gained his place by hard fighting, and when the battle was joined, he fought on coolly, resourcefully, determined as ever to win. He soon fathomed the strength of the opposition, and he was soon forced to draw upon every resource at his command to meet the gigantic combination against him. It seemed to him for a time that not even genius and his limitless financial power could stem the tide or even long sustain the assault. More and more money was poured out by the combination to beat him. All Wall Street caught the contagion of the conflict, and the opposition received accessions from every quarter. Even trusted friends, people whom he had made, turned against Warburton. There was a perfectly natural desire widely prevalent to see the biggest operator beaten to his knees and eliminated.

IN the excitement of these last two weeks Chrissey Deselden had fully shared, for on her lover's representations she had put her whole fortune at his absolute disposal. Strangely enough, she wanted Warburton beaten. She wanted him brought down even to poverty. She did not see exactly why, and she would not have admitted it if anyone else had said so, but if she were the possessor of the fortune and he were poor, she might— But what was the use of thinking that, since she was going to be Neyland's wife?

Well, if Warburton were beaten, as every paper in New York stated he would be, after the battle became a public affair, he would be ruined and she, with all the others in the combination, would make millions. She had a distinct purpose in her mind to give back to Warburton what she made, in order that he might start again. Thus her action in transferring the control of her securities to Neyland meant one thing to Neyland and another thing to herself. It meant another thing to Warburton, too. For that great captain of finance was not yet beaten. By a series of desperate and unheard of maneuvers, as subtle as they were bold, and as secret as they were subtle, he had finally got command of the situation. When the settlement was made, his enemies would find to their surprise and confusion that he was still the master.

They had no anticipation of this; they could not realize it—even the brightest minds who had long since taken direction of affairs could not. Neyland and Alton did not dream it. In high glee they pressed him harder, fancying that he was against the wall and there was nothing left for him but to die with his back to it.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SWEPT AWAY

NOW, the constantly growing strain of this battle had become increasingly terrific. Neyland had to sustain it alongside of the strain of another battle, an inward strife which through each succeeding day grew more terrible, and which each hour found it more difficult to bear. He had sworn a high oath to such gods as he believed in that he would not give way to the temptation which had so often brought him low. His friends had laughed at his strange but steady refusal even to taste what was so freely poured out before him. He had gone back into society, naturally into its fastest and most extravagant set, for that was the set in which he legitimately belonged; but everywhere and at all times he had refused to break his rule to touch no liquor. He gave no reason, of course, and no one knew it was for her sake.

But the pressure on Neyland was tremendous. Presently something of it crept out in his letters; Chrissey Deselden had detected it instantly. She had encouraged him and appealed to him and stimulated him in the double battle. If she had loved him, her appeals and encouragement and stimulation would

have been greater, but since she did not, there was always back of what she said an expression which he rightly enough considered cruel—a suggestion, a determination, that if he failed she would have none of him.

Neyland found himself praying that it might be soon over. If the double strain kept up much longer, he would be unequal to it. He grew weaker and weaker, and just when he needed most the passionate devotion of womankind, in spite of his optimism and his hopefulness he found it the more and more lacking in her letters. His very terror lest he might fall grew more and more pronounced in his own letters, and it awoke her pity—but also moved her contempt. Warburton was not weak. And yet she saw just deep enough into the soul of Neyland to realize the greatness of the struggle he was making for her. She had to admit that she was not helping him as he had a right to expect she would. And it was that very consciousness that had made her determined, if he did not give way, to go through with the plan to the marital end.

ONE thing to which Chrissey eagerly looked forward was seeing Rose Tayloe again, for the new Duchessa di Attavanti expected to return to America with her husband early in the summer. A letter received that very day had been mailed just before her departure from Italy.

In Chrissey Deselden's pocket there was also one of Neyland's daily letters. She had not cared enough about it to read it, but now she took it out and opened it. It was like all the others, only more pitiful. He was weaker. His resisting power was less. He did not know whether he could stand the strain. The temptation was horrible. The situation was the worse, because he said Warburton was absolutely a ruined man. Neyland had practically won the material battle. Could he win the spiritual one? He did not know. He could not tell.

The next four days would settle both questions openly and before the world. The success of the combination was settled actually beyond peradventure now, so Neyland declared; Warburton would be beaten beyond recovery. The opposition had learned that every resource at his command had been employed, that his credit had been strained to the breaking point—and nothing had availed. Richard Neyland had done it. There was triumph in that announcement, clear and undisguised. He had avenged all the insults Warburton had heaped on him and all the misery that Warburton had caused her, he declared. It was for her sake, he went on to say, that he had done it. Yet he repeated that such was his own condition that he hardly knew whether he could survive the strain. He was like a runner who leads the field, who sees the goal before him, who knows that if he can but maintain the pace a little space longer he will win the race, but who hears the panting breath of the enemy at his shoulder.

"I am determined to succeed," he wrote, "for if I fail, I lose you. I have come to see things differently since you have loved me. If I can't be worthy of you, I wont claim you. You don't know what temptation is. You can have no idea of how it confronts me. I have scarcely slept. I haven't eaten. I am living on your love alone; and—forgive me; I cannot bear to say it—but it does not seem to me that you have given me that support I have a right to ask from a heart that truly loves, that I expected from you, dearest. That is what makes it so hard. With love all things are possible. Without it—well, you know what life is without it! I am a little mad to-night, I think, dear heart. Do you love me after all, and can you love me to the end? Can anyone love a man who is so weak as I am showing myself? I ought not to tell you. I should dwell upon the triumph that awaits me, the happiness to which I look forward, but I can have no secrets from you. My heart is breaking, because my will is breaking. If you would save me, write me, telegraph me, and at the first moment come to me. The great God, if such there be, alone knows how I have struggled. I have said it was for my manhood, but it was for you. I am on the brink of failure, a failure the more terrible because it is a mental, a spiritual, failure that goes side by side with

the great material success. Help me. Save me. You alone can do it, if you even care.

"Yet it is your happiness of which I think more than of my own. I said once I would accept any fate in any future to insure that; and that is true, whether I fail or whether I succeed, whether I go down into the depths and sever myself forever from you, or whether I arise above them to your level. The lawyers assure me that there will be no possibility of your failing to receive the divorce. Perhaps when you get this letter it will have already been granted to you. If you love me, telegraph me instantly. I cannot come to you now, as I should have. I've got to stay to see the end of Warburton. I cannot let go, but the minute that battle is over, I shall be yours. And yet, O woman that I love, who stands so far above me, my very passion for you has shown me that unless you can return my love in some measure, I wont condemn you, for if you do not love me, even though I have you as my wife, I could never conquer myself, and life with me would be hell for you—yes, and for me. I love you, I love you, I love you. If only I could stand up these next few days—"

THE letter broke off abruptly here. It was a letter that accurately represented the man—independence and dependence, strength and weakness, power and helplessness. The words burned themselves in her soul. One reading fixed them forever in her memory. What was she, she asked herself—a *Frankenstein?* Had she no soul that such appeals as this could not arouse her, could not evoke a reply, could not awaken her heart? She knew what love was. She loved Warburton. It was his picture, not Neyland's, that rose before her eyes. She saw him suddenly an old man against the wall, wrecked, ruined, humiliated, changed. Neyland had told her before that it was her fortune which he had thrown into the effort at the last minute that had completed Warburton's undoing. She loved him, not Neyland. Sometimes love is the cruelest thing on earth. It was cruel to Neyland now.

She gathered up the papers, thrust them into the pocket of her jacket and went out into the woods. Far from observation, away from the haunts of men, in a secret place in the hills, she flung herself down on her face and clenched her hands. Her cheek touched that bracelet she had worn. With raised head she looked at it a long time. Finally she sat up and drew it from her arm. It spoke no message her heart craved for, now. Hard by, a brook flowed down the mountain-side into the dashing green torrent of the Truckee River in the valley. She stared at the bracelet in her hand for a long time. She came to her decision; yet she could not approach it without some reluctance, without some hesitation. So long as she held the bracelet, which until that hour she had worn constantly, she was not committed. She could not marry Neyland. What had he said? His own words had given her the reason. She could not disguise from him, even if she were with him, the fact that she did not love him. She knew what a hell a loveless marriage made. In that hell he would be weaker than ever. After all, it was not so much his love for her that kept him up, as hers for him. And she did not love him. It was better that he should know it now than later.

The circlet of silver with its strange settings lay dull in her hand, its message unspoken. A—E—I! For eternity? Never! Suddenly she rose to her feet. She threw the bracelet from her full into the torrent roaring down the mountain. A little splash, and it was gone.

She was relieved but not happy. It seemed to her that she had no heart, no soul. She called aloud upon God as she had done before in the solitudes of the wooded hills, but He answered not, neither in the wind that stirred the pines, nor in the roar of the stream as it tumbled over the rocks on the mountainside. . . . . .

She had sought happiness, fondly fancying that she might get it in freedom from Warburton and in union with Neyland, but it was not to be. There was not to be any joy in life for her anywhere that she could see. And yet—failing love, she might get happiness from service. She would go back to New York. She would make over to

Warburton her share of the winnings of the great combination. She would force him to accept it. He should not know whence it came. She dreamily imagined she could accomplish that impossible task. And then she would go to Bermuda. She would seek out Father Smith. She would ask him to show her how to work and serve, and perhaps in that way she should atone.

She went back to the house after spending the whole day alone in the woods. She sat down before she ate or slept, and wrote a letter to Neyland. She told him that she had been mistaken, that she realized as well as he and even better, what a loveless marriage would be—that while she had been willing to enter upon it, she would damn him by so doing more utterly, because he would see it, than if she broke it off then by telling him the truth. She sent a man down on horseback to mail her letter so that it might catch the night express.

Whatever the motive, love of Warburton, contempt of Neyland, the slings and arrows of an outraged conscience, she was going to follow the right course at last. How pitiful it is that the right course for the individual frequently brings so much sorrow and grief and shame to many with whom his life is inextricably intertwined! Chrissey Deselden had broken Warburton's heart. She would break Neyland's. And her own?

Moved by a sudden impulse, the day after she dispatched her letter she took the train for New York.

CHAPTER XXIX

RECEIVING THE NEWS

SO important a social event as the granting of a divorce to the wife of the great John Warburton could not take place without widespread public and private comment. The next morning the report was spread broadcast throughout the land by the newspapers, and interest was the more excited because of the desperate straits to which Warburton had been reduced by the great combination. Neyland saw it. Warburton saw it, of course; these two were looking for it. There was nothing Warburton could do. It added a grimmer touch to his already grim face. It intensified the anguish which had never left him since that day at Bermuda.

To him early came Colonel Tayloe, his one remaining friend and confidant, apparently. Indeed, Colonel Tayloe's very considerable fortune had been promptly and cheerfully pledged to Warburton.

"John," said the old man as they sat at breakfast together,—they had been living together ever since Rose's marriage,—"I suppose you saw the papers this morning."

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Don't speak of it, please."

"I must speak of it. This one time shall be the last, I promise you, but I have just learned that the funds for that last attack upon you, the source of which you could not fathom, came from her."

"No, not that! It isn't possible," exclaimed Warburton.

"Yes. Not knowing of the transfer from me, some brokers consulted me about some interests of hers, and with that as a clue I learned that she had made it all over to—"

"Not to him?"

"Yes."

"Good God!"

"It's a bad business."

"Those fellows think they have me beaten, but they don't realize that I have found the one weak point in their attack, the one joint in their armor. I've trapped them, and just when they think to deliver the *coup de grâce* they'll find that they are beaten, not I."

"Your wife—"

"Not since this morning."

"Forgive me. Her fortune will go with the rest?"

"Yes. She and her lover will both be ruined."

"Warburton," began the Colonel after a pause, "you're too big a man—"

"I hope so," answered the other, divining the older man's thought. "I'll have to depend on you. We'll get the man she—Neyland—to fix it up in some way. You will do it. Perhaps she can be persuaded that her fortune had been

transferred to you and not used, after all."

"Of course. That is just what I wanted to bring out, John."

"SHE will be unhappy enough with that drunken weakling," said Warburton passionately, "not to have to fight poverty as well. I'll leave you to attend to these details, Colonel. Don't mention them to me. Just say how much you will need and I'll draw you the check. I think the settlement will come in a few days, now. They can't keep it up much longer, I'm sure. It is only a question as to when they will learn that they are beaten. You can fix it up afterward."

"Warburton," said the older man earnestly, "I never heard of such magnanimity. You gave her up; you let her marry the man she loves, who has sought to crush you because he hates you; and now you give her back her fortune. I do not understand it."

"Yes, you do," answered Warburton. "When a man like me loves a woman, he loves her absolutely and forever. It is her happiness, not his, that counts. I know how miserable she is going to be. There is nothing I can do to stop it; there is nothing I can do to help her but this. Now, don't mention it to me again. I can't stand it. Did you hear from Rose this morning?"

"I had a cablegram from the Azores relaying a wireless from the *Ancona*. She will be here in a few days, I think. It will all be over by that time, I suppose. The battle, I mean, and other things."

"Well, bring the Duke and the Duchess to the house; there is room enough for us all. I'll not be a kill-joy or a wet blanket on their happiness. You will be down at the stock exchange every day now until the issue will be decided? I might need you at any time, you know."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," said the Colonel. "No battle I ever went through has equaled this. Let's talk the matter over again before you leave for the office."

The two men at once engaged in a discussion of the financial situation. While not an operator in the Street, Colonel Tayloe was a man of sense and judgment. He had already given valuable advice, and his clear insight and shrewd comment won confidence in him. Warburton reposed the completest confidence in him and made no secret whatever of his plans.

ANOTHER man was clinging to a hope that seemed to bid fair to be realized when first his eye caught sight of the flaming headline by which attention was called to the divorce. How his heart leaped as he read it! For a moment he was eased of his torment. His temptation was forgot. For a brief space his strength returned to him. Every moment he expected to hear from her.

But Neyland waited all the long morning in vain for a telegram. He knew that his letter beseeching her to send him a wire must have reached her the day the divorce was granted. Already nearly twenty-four hours had elapsed, and no other word had come. He threw prudence to the winds. He forgot in those hours of suspense and longing the supreme necessity of watching the battle on the stock exchange. He was consumed, obsessed, by thoughts of her. He told Alton to look after things. At last when he could stand it no longer he boldly sent her a wire. "For God's sake, if you love me, telegraph me," the message ran. Thereafter he waited until late in the night but received no reply.

In his agitation it did not occur to him to ascertain from the telegraph company whether his wire had been delivered or not. As a matter of fact, it did not reach Reno until she had gone. Her departure had been quiet. The servants at the camp who were to pack up and follow had been given strict orders to say nothing. They refused to accept the telegram. It did not seem to be of moment, and it was not relayed to her train.

The strain of her silence was the last straw to poor Neyland. He could fight no longer. After six months he fell. Let no man who has not grappled with such an appetite condemn him for the fall or wonder at the greatness and the swiftness of his descent.

CHAPTER XXX

WORMWOOD

THREE days later Neyland stumbled out from a cab that had drawn up at his door, and made his way dizzily up the few steps and into the foyer hall. Across his sick brain flashed chaotic recollections of the long debauch from which he was just emerging: visions of sordid resorts, of ribald merriment, of ceaseless drinking, of—a woman, an evil creature of the streets, slatternly, drunken. . . . .

Neyland had occupied these apartments, off and on, for years. It was not the first time he had come home in such a condition. He was a liberal spender, genial and pleasant when sober, and popular with the servants of the house. The hall-man caught him in his arms, and with the assistance of the elevator-boy got him to his apartment. With his pass-key the hall-man let Neyland in.

"Is there anything we can do for you, sir—get you anything?"

"Nothing," answered Neyland. "My man?"

"He was here a moment ago, sir. I'll—"

Just then the servant came from his quarters in the apartment.

"Mr. Neyland, sir!" he exclaimed, noting his master's condition.

"It's all right, Judson," said Neyland. "I've just come another cropper, you know, and—"

"Yes sir," said the man. "You can go," he said to the two house servants, who immediately left them alone; they were sure of a big tip later, they knew, if they kept quiet.

"I'll fix you up in no time, sir," said Judson, encouragingly.

The faithful valet had often seen his master in bad condition; but that day there was something different in his master's bearing, which he could hardly define but which vaguely alarmed him; and Neyland's next words increased his apprehension.

"I don't want anything now, Judson," was the unusual answer. "I just want to be left alone. You go out, and don't come back till midnight—or take the rest of the day off if you want to."

"But I can't leave you like this, Mr. Neyland," persisted the man, perplexed and now thoroughly alarmed.

"I tell you I don't want anybody about me. I've got to be alone. I want to think things over. You come back later."

The servant, his face full of solicitude and concern, opened his mouth to remonstrate further, but Neyland cut him short.

"Did you hear me?" he roared with a sudden access of passion in spite of his weakness. "Go!"

"Very well, sir," returned the man.

THERE was nothing else he could do, and it occurred to him that it might be dangerous to cross his master in his present mood.

"By the way," asked Neyland quickly, "what day is it, Judson?"

"Friday afternoon, sir."

"And when was I here last?"

"You went out Tuesday night, sir; at least you weren't here when I came back, and—"

"Quite so! Has there been any telegram for me?"

"No sir. Mr. Alton and a number of other gentlemen have called up constantly, but I had to tell them I didn't know where you were."

"That's right. No telegram, you say?"

"None at all, sir."

"Nothing from Nevada?"

Judson of course knew all about Neyland's love-affair, as he knew all about the battle with Warburton. Neyland's mail all went to his office downtown, and only letters of a personal nature came to the apartment.

"Only one letter, sir."

"A letter! For God's sake, where is it? Why didn't you give it to me? Why—"

"Here it is, sir," said Judson, taking it from the table, opposite which Neyland had sunk down in a big chair.

The wretched man caught it quickly; one glance, and he recognized the handwriting. He laughed horribly as he turned it over in his hand.

"Too late," he said at last, for the moment oblivious to Judson.

"What do you mean, sir?" asked the

valet, who was so well trained that nothing but a crisis of this kind would have made him venture upon such a personal question.

"Nothing, nothing! Just go, that's all."

"Very good, sir."

"Oh, before you go," said Neyland, "make me the strongest pick-me-up you can concoct, and then leave me."

While this was preparing, Neyland sat there dully in a collapsed heap, holding the letter crumpled in his hand and staring at it, half uncomprehendingly, it seemed.

"Here it is, sir," said Judson, bringing him a brimming glass. "You'll feel better if you drink that and take a hot bath sir. I wish you'd let me—"

"I know, but I'll fix it myself."

"Beg pardon, sir," said the man, "but that stock-deal, the combination, sir, you were in—"

"It's of no consequence," answered Neyland, anxious to be rid of the man.

"Some of the gentlemen are getting very anxious about you, sir. Mr. Alton's been here half a dozen times."

"Has it failed?"

"No sir; it's all right yet. They think to-morrow—"

"Very well; go."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE PLEA

IT was with the utmost reluctance that Judson left the apartment, but in the face of his master's repeated and even angry commands he had no option. He loved Neyland in spite of his weakness, perhaps even the more because of it. Never before had he been driven away when his master came home in such a condition. Always Judson's ministrations—and he knew exactly what to do for Neyland—had been not only suffered but anxiously demanded. There had been something so terribly different about Neyland's demeanor in this instance that it now alarmed Judson beyond measure.

He went down into the street and stood hesitating, the more frightened because he had heard Neyland shoot the bolt of the dead-latch of the door behind him so that Judson could not readmit himself with his key if he had dared to try it. Alton, as representative of the syndicate, had called in person every day, and he and others had telephoned nearly every hour. There was evidently something very serious the matter.

Although Judson possessed a great deal of his master's confidence, which was always respected, he was only a valet, after all; he felt quite unequal to cope with the situation. He must get assistance. Mr. Alton, of course, occurred to him, but for some strange reason he did not feel like appealing to him. There had been of late an estrangement between his master and Colonel Tayloe, but the valet remembered that the old Colonel had formerly been Neyland's best friend. He would go to him and ask his advice. That was the best course that presented itself to him.

Judson hailed a passing taxicab and directed the driver to hurry to Mr. Warburton's house, where he knew Colonel Tayloe was living and where, as it was now past business hours, he fancied the Colonel might be found, especially since the old man had retired from active business, and among other pleasant pursuits usually enjoyed a canter in the park in the late afternoon. He would go to him with his story and seek his advice.

HE was fortunate enough to catch the Colonel just about to mount his horse before the door of the house. The Colonel was in high spirits. The little Italian Duke had returned that morning, bringing back his beloved Duchess, the Colonel's only daughter. Rose stood in the doorway watching her father. There was a second horse before the door, and as she looked down the long flight of steps to the street, the little Duke appeared in the doorway, paused on the threshold, kissed her and then descended to the Colonel on the sidewalk. By his dress he was also minded for a canter.

In his excitement Judson flung himself out of the taxicab before it was fairly stopped and rushed unceremoniously up to the old man.

"You are Colonel Tayloe, sir," burst

out the excited man impulsively. "I've often seen you with my master."

The Colonel looked at him narrowly.

"Why," he exclaimed, "it's Neyland's man!"

"Yes sir, I'm Judson, sir," returned the perfectly trained Englishman, striving to recover some of his composure and to speak normally.

Rose came down the steps, having heard all that had been said, and stopped by her father's side. The Duke drew nearer, having first thoughtfully bidden the grooms lead the horses across the street. The newcomer's voice and face indicated something serious.

"I came to you for help, sir. Perhaps I had better speak to you in private."

"This is my son-in-law and this is my daughter. They have both been very fond of Mr. Neyland. Is anything the matter with him?"

"Yes sir—that is to say—er—"

The man was reluctant indeed to discuss his master's shame.

"Good God," said the Colonel, "you don't mean to tell me he's been on another debauch?"

"Yes, sir."

"Poor Chrissey Deselden!" murmured the old man under his breath.

"Well," began the Duke, "how does that concern—"

"It's this way, sir," said Judson, "he came home in an awful state and he wouldn't let me do anything for him. He drove me out of the apartment and locked the door behind him and told me to stay away, sir. I'm afraid."

THE Colonel stared at the man.

"Afraid of what?"

"He might do himself some harm, sir. The fact is, he sent a telegram to Nevada last Tuesday, and he waited all day for an answer and it did not come, and then while I was out, he went away, and he just came back in a horrible state, sir. The first words he asked me were for a telegram."

"Was there any?" asked the Colonel.

"No, sir; only a letter. He gets all his business mail at the office; only letters from Nevada come to the house."

"I see, and was this—"

"Yes sir. I gave him a bracer and I left him, but somehow I'm afraid, sir. He's worse than I ever saw him, sir, and somehow different."

"It's no concern of mine," said the Colonel, grimly, "and he's fighting my best friend."

"I know, sir, but if you could see him now, Colonel Tayloe! He has been a good master to me, and I'm afraid."

"Father," said Rose, "you will go instantly to Mr. Neyland's rooms, and if you wont go, Enrico shall."

"But it is a most delicate matter, my dear Rose," protested the Duke.

"I see it all," said the new Duchess; "you know you told me that Chris had got her decree of divorce?"

"Yes, last Monday."

"He expected her to wire him to come to her, and she didn't do it; and he couldn't stand it."

"There is something in that."

"Perhaps she has seen what a poor, wretched man he is, and perhaps she's found out she doesn't care for him. And oh, don't you see he drank because his heart was broken; and now—"

"*Madame la Duchesse* is right," said the little Duke, "as she always is. You are in an alliance with Mr. Warburton, my dear sir. Naturally you feel a hesitancy, but I will go."

"Oh, thank you, sir, thank you," cried the valet. "You are so kind. I have a taxicab right here."

A MESSENGER-BOY on a bicycle drew up before the sidewalk where the three men stood talking, the grooms across the street with the horses looking on with interest at a scene which they could not comprehend, but whose importance and interest they could sense. The messenger jumped off his wheel.

"Telegram for Colonel Tayloe," he said.

"Why didn't you telephone it?"

"It was addressed to your office, sir. They couldn't get an answer there, so they telephoned it up here to our Madison Avenue office, and as I had a few to deliver near here I brought it around, sir."

"Just a moment," said the Colonel, putting on his glasses. "You sign for it, Duke," he continued as he thrust his thumb into the envelope. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed as he read the message. "Chrissey Deselden is on her way to New York. She will arrive on the Lake Shore Limited from Chicago at five-thirty. It wants fifteen minutes of that now. Duke, will you go and meet her?"

"But Mr. Neyland, sir," interposed the indomitable Judson.

"I'll go to him myself," said the Colonel, "after I change my clothes."

"Don't stop for anything," said the practical Rose; "go just as you are. The taxi can drop you at Neyland's address, and I'll have the car around in a jiffy for Enrico. There will be plenty of time for him to meet her. If I were only dressed, I'd go myself."

"God bless these women!" said the Colonel, scrambling into the cab in his riding clothes.

"Take the horses to the stable and have the chauffeur bring the Rolls-Royce around immediately. See that it comes without delay. Hurry," the Colonel heard his daughter say to the head groom as the cab turned and went swiftly down the avenue.

"What do you think, Rose?" asked the Duke, amused at her prompt decision and admiring her more than ever.

"I think if Father doesn't get to Neyland, he may kill himself; and I don't know what effect that will have on Chris. I cannot understand her. Love is so straightforward with you and me, but it seems wretchedly tangled with her. You will go to meet her, Enrico. You will receive her kindly. Say nothing to her about Neyland. Remember how miserable she has been. Tell her that the telegram came late, that I was not dressed, or I should have come with you."

"I obey," said the Duke, bowing over her hand with all the fervor of premarriage days; he was more in love than ever with his beautiful wife. As the car came around to the door, he sprang into it and drove away.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE PASSING

AS he shot the dead-bolt in the door behind the departing Judson, Neyland experienced a transient sensation of relief. Whatever his plans, he was now free to work them out without interruption.

Stop! One connection still remained between him and the outside world. As he staggered back from his private hall through the foyer to the big library, he was conscious of a ringing sound somewhere. In his benumbed, bemused state, he did not realize at first what it was or where it came from. He could not identify it or realize it. He only knew that the sharp clanging tore his already wrecked nerves to shreds. He stood trembling and listening, praying that it would stop. Finally it came to him that it was the telephone-bell. He could soon settle that. He stumbled over to it, took the connecting wire in his hands and jerked it savagely free from the box. The ringing ceased instantly. The last tie that bound him to the world without was broken. He was greatly relieved.

The bracer that Judson had made for him had cleared his head and steadied his nerves a little. He went over to his desk, sat down before it, drew out a sheet of paper and seized a pen. It was a task of incredible difficulty for him to write legibly with his twitching hands. Sheet after sheet he scrawled and blotted in vain. What could he do?

Fortunately there was still something left of the bracer in the glass Judson had given him. He had only drunk about half of it. He seized the glass avidly and swallowed it down hard, although his feeling was one of loathing for the mixture. It steadied him a little, and by a terrible effort at concentration and control he managed to scrawl a few words:

Not hearing from you, I fell again. I woke up in hell, where I belong. I have won from Warburton, but I have been beaten in the greater thing after all. Even to think of you is profanation to you. I feel that you don't love me. I could not live honorably with you. I could not allow you to marry the rotten, degraded, helpless thing I am. Our children would rise up and curse me. I am physically unclean, but in spite of my weakness I love you. If I had known you before, I might have been a different man. Don't reproach yourself. You cannot help it. Good-by, Chris; good-by.

He hesitated a long time, staring at the blurred words that seemed somehow to run themselves together. Finally he lifted the pen again and added these words:

May God—if there is any God; I will know that soon—bless you and may He be not too hard on me. I love you greatly and I take myself out of your way. That is something, isn't it?

HE folded the letter up crookedly, nervously, badly, thrust it into an envelope, sealed it after a fashion and scrawled her name on it. The effort was almost beyond him. He sank back in the chair when he had finished, white, ghastly, sweat beading his brow. But he could not rest, not yet. He still had something else to do. Another letter had to be written. Painfully and with even more slow deliberation than before, he scrawled:

Who can minister to a body and mind alike diseased? Not she, not anyone. Everything of which I die possessed I have left to her. Colonel Tayloe, you have been a good friend to me. If any man could have helped me, you would have done so; if any woman, she. It is no one's fault but my own. Let no one else be blamed. Will you see that my wishes are carried out. There ought to be a great deal for her after to-morrow.

He signed this letter firmly with his full name; the other letter had not been subscribed. She would know and understand. It was important that his signature to this document should be unmistakable, and he forced his nerves into submission for the moment. He slipped the letter to her inside this letter, placed them both in a large envelope which he directed to Colonel Tayloe. He arose, staggered over to the mantel and with trembling hands placed the letter on the shelf, where it could not fail to be seen by anyone entering the room.

Turning back, from a drawer of the desk he took a small but heavy automatic pistol, which he slowly made ready to fire. Carrying it in his right hand he went over to the table. There lay the crumpled letter from Chrissey Deselden just as he had dropped it after he had locked the door on the valet and had gone to the writing-desk. He laid the automatic down on the table, picked up the letter, smoothed it out and with shaking hands started to tear open the envelope. He would go on his last journey with her last message, with words from her, before his eyes and in his heart.

With the envelope half torn open he stopped and withdrew his finger. He was not worthy of any word from her. He would not look. If she loved him, it would only make his task harder. If she did not, he would rather not know. And by his restraint he could punish himself a little more. He would not look. No one, not even she, would ever know how much that decision cost him.

He had fought, he had triumphed, he had failed. In that in which he had triumphed he found no condonation; nor was there compensation for that in which he had failed. He did not know what the future would hold for him, but he knew that no hell could be worse than that in which he now lingered. Holding the letter in his hand for a moment, he pressed it to his lips and strove to think only of her, but athwart his vision of her came the picture of that nameless woman from whom he had just come. He had been associated with many women, but somehow none of them came to him as this unknown outcast of the street. That was the horror of this ending. She would not be forgotten—this unnamed!

He groaned aloud. He was not to be permitted a last thought only of her he loved. No, it was not meet that he should read her words; it was not right that he should even hold the letter. He made a movement to unclasp his fingers, but that was too much. He transferred

it to his left hand, the heart hand, and clutched it desperately. With his other hand he seized the weapon.

Should he sit down? He decided that he would die standing up. He faced the mantel. Her picture was there. He could not see it. He closed his eyes. The fingers of his left hand tightened on the letter. There was life and love, he fancied, in that hand. The fingers of his right hand tightened on the automatic. There was death and whatever might be beyond in that hand. He lifted both hands, the one with love and life above his head, the other breast high. . . . .

CHAPTER XXXIV

BRAVE MAN OR COWARD

THE door-bell of the apartment rang insistently. The Colonel and the valet stood without.

"Try the knob again," said the Colonel.

"It's no use, sir," answered Judson. "My key wont unlock the dead-latch. I heard him shoot it behind him. See, sir."

He twisted the knob and even shook the door violently. It did not yield. The Colonel reached his hand out the second time and pressed the bell.

Is there a difference between the sound of a bell ringing in rooms that are occupied and the sound it makes where humanity is present? These men thought so, as they listened again.

"Maybe he's in another stupor," said the Colonel.

"No," said the valet, his face white. The man wrung his hands. "Oh sir, let me break down the door."

"Very well."

Judson had been a soldier. He still was young, strong and vigorous. The Colonel looked at him closely.

"I believe you can manage it," said the old officer.

"Yes sir, I'm sure I can; please stand aside, sir."

The door was at the end of a hall. Judson backed away as far from it as he could—then ran swiftly and hurled himself against it. The panels gave; the bolt slipped; the door crashed open; and Judson fell headlong into the private foyer. Without waiting for him to pick himself up, Colonel Tayloe stepped over him, ran forward into the library and stopped.

Surely the noise of the forcing of the door would have awakened anyone but a dead man; but no earthly sound could awaken Richard Neyland. He lay on his back at full length in front of the mantel. The automatic rested on the floor by his right hand. His left hand was still tightly clenched.

The Colonel had seen death too many times not to recognize it, even though Neyland's coat had fallen so that it concealed the gaping wound over his heart. Neyland's eyes were wide open. They seemed not yet to have set in the ghastly stare of dissolution. There was a little smile upon his lips, a smile of pride, of resolve, of wonderment. Death had somehow smoothed out the lines of care, of anxiety, of shame, of despair. In the face of the tempest-tossed was a great calm.

The Colonel took off his hat. It was Judson who broke the silence.

"Oh," he wailed, "he's done it. I feared it."

He knelt down by the side of the dead and bowed his head over his master. Tears that were not unmanly fell upon that master's breast.

So Richard Neyland passed. Dead by his own hand! Brave man or coward? It was over, over. Triumph and defeat, temptation and resistance, love and despair—no more.

WE are the makers of our own fate, the engineers of our own design, the shapers of our own end. Ah, but is that true? How many generations of men who drank, and of women too, had gone to debase the ichor that filled this man's veins and that made him weak? He had fought hard, and so far as in him lay, he had loved much. In the end he had failed, but as he lay there dead, it seemed to the Colonel that perhaps he had made some sort of atonement. Was it because he looked so whitely peaceful?

The old man stooped down and unclasped that left hand. Neyland had had no lasting grip on death with the right

hand. Coincident with purpose served, he had, as he fell, cast the weapon from him; and there it lay, its work accomplished, rejected—like Neyland himself, perhaps! But he had clung to love and life with the other hand. Not even in the articles of death had he let go of all that had been left him of her. Death had mastered him, but love had triumphed. And was it for that he seemed so calmly at rest?

The Colonel took the crumpled letter, smoothed it out, looked at it, observing that Neyland had faltered and stopped in his purpose to open it and to read it; and then the Colonel thrust it into the pocket of his coat. He was familiar with the handwriting and he recognized it instantly. Judson too had risen.

"Steady, man, steady," said the Colonel, laying his hand on the other's shoulder.

Judson, striving to control his agitation and subdue his grief, caught sight of the letter on the mantel. He stepped over, and taking it down, handed it to the other.

"This is for you, sir," he said, after a glance at the envelope.

The Colonel looked at it, read the address and put it in his pocket with the other letter.

"You will say nothing about these letters, Judson, until I give you leave."

"No sir, of course not."

The next moment the room was filled with people. The servants of the house had heard the crash of the forcing of the door. Some of them had previously heard a muffled sound like a shot, although they had given it no attention until the elevator-boy, passing up and down, reported that the apartment had been broken into and the door was open. Thereupon the hall-man had summoned a policeman. An ubiquitous reporter who happened to be passing by had also stopped in.

OWING to a freight-wreck on the road, the limited train was two hours late. The Colonel had telephoned to Rose the dreadful tidings, and when the Duke had telephoned shortly after from the station that he would wait for the train, she had told him and had said that she herself would join her husband at once and they would together meet the train.

It was a beautiful, if unhappy, woman they welcomed as she stepped down to the platform in the Grand Central Station. Chrissey Deselden's health had been fully restored, but there was an anxiety in her voice and bearing which was patent to her friends. They greeted her warmly, and although it was but a short distance to the Biltmore, they took her there in the car. As they were about to enter the door, a newsboy thrust in her face a late edition.

"Extree!" he shouted. "All about the suicide of Richard Neyland and the collapse of the great anti-Warburton combination."

The Duke hurriedly caught her by the arm.

"Dear lady," he said softly, "not here!"

He thought she was going to faint in the entrance. It was fortunate that Rose had come along. The Duke had already reserved her suite of rooms. She was heavily veiled, and they managed to get her to her apartment without attracting attention. When the door closed and they were alone, she confronted them. She threw back her veil and stared at them, her face horribly drawn.

"Is it true?" she asked.

The Duke nodded.

"Yes."

As Rose stepped closer to her side and put her arm about her, Chrissey Deselden shuddered.

"I did it," she said. "I killed him."

The conclusion of *"Whom God Hath Joined"* will appear in the July BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE—on sale June 1st.

A Prisoner Pro Tem

JABEZ BUNKER, the too, too innocent old farmer who comes to New York from Iowa, follows his new profession of bunco-steerer with conspicuous and entertaining success. This story of the undoing of that pious fraud, the Reverend Gideon Gith, is one of Mr. Butler's best.

By ELLIS PARKER BUTLER

Author of the "Philo Gubb" stories, "Pigs Is Pigs," "Jabez Bunker," etc.—and the foremost humorist in America.

GRANDPA JABEZ BUNKER, a look of gentle benevolence on his plump, rosy, babylike face, sat in his rocking-chair in his room in Mrs. Wimmer's boarding-house, reading a small book with a glaring yellow cover. The title of the book was "The Complete Confessions of the King of Grafters. Telling How He Defrauded Thousands. Full Exposition of All the Methods of the Most Celebrated Confidence Men. Price 25 Cents." Having come to New York from Oroduna, Iowa, to embark in the profession of a bunco-steerer, Mr. Bunker had met with good success, and he was keen to continue his career. Now, while Grandma Bunker sat and rocked in a chair opposite him, he was studying the little book in a search for some method of bunco he had not yet tried. One chubby knee was cocked over the other, and a red carpet-slipper dangled from his elevated toes; his pink brow was wrinkled and his kindly blue eyes concentrated their glances through his gold-rimmed spectacles. From time to time he rubbed his hand over his smooth bald head thoughtfully.

"Well, Jabez," said Mrs. Bunker at length, "aint you findin' no nice way to bunk nobody?"

"Plenty, Ma, plenty!" he answered. "Seems sort o' hard to make choice when there's so many."

"Seemed to me that Spanish Prisoner way that you read out awhile ago was a real nice, respectable way to bunk," said Mrs. Bunker.

"Well, 'twan't so bad," admitted Mr. Bunker. "I reckon 'taint much difference what way I choose, these New Yorkers is so easy to bunco. So long as it is some old, reliable bunco-game, they just kind of beg to be bunked by it. I was sort of thinkin' of tryin' this one on page twenty-two, entitled 'Fake Cleric.'"

"So long as it is a nice, honest, respectable confidence game," said dear old Grandma Bunker placidly, "it don't matter to me what it is. I only want you should be straight and honest, Jabez."

"This Fake Cleric game, as set out by the King of Grafters," said Mr. Bunker, "is downright easy, but I aint right sure it is as honest as sellin' gold bricks, et cetery. Seems like the victim don't get nothin' for his money. I don't know as I'd care for it, anyway. It says here the con'-man has to make up like a minister of the gospel—"

"Jabez Bunker!" said Mrs. Bunker firmly, "you wont ever work no such bunco-game with my consent! Rig up like a minister, indeed! I'd call that plain, out-and-out dishonest. No, Jabez, you'd better stick to honest wire-tappin' and gold-brick-sellin' and such!"

"It wouldn't seem right honest to let on I was a minister," said Mr. Bunker, "and that's a fact. If we can't do a clean, honest graft business, we might as well go back to Oroduna and start a

store. I wunt try this Fake Cleric game."

MR. BUNKER turned back to the description of the Spanish Prisoner bunco—one of the oldest and best, but one that needs confederates such as Mr. Bunker lacked. The plan appealed to Mr. Bunker as something strictly high-class in the bunco line, but he felt that for the present it was beyond his capacity. In very few words, the Spanish Prisoner game is something like this: The victim in America receives a letter, written in a fine Spanish hand and mailed in Spain, telling of a young girl who is imprisoned in a Spanish jail. Sometimes the prisoner is an aged man. The writer of the letter professes to know that the prisoner is heiress or heir to a vast sum of money, to which the guardian will fall heir if the prisoner is made away with. The guardian has accused the prisoner, through others, of conspiracy against Spain, and hence the imprisonment. If ten or twenty thousand dollars can be obtained to bribe the government officials, the charge can be dismissed and the prisoner can be set free to protect his or her rights. If the receiver of the letter will advance ten or twenty thousand dollars, sending it to the enclosed address, the heiress will divide the fortune when it is secured, and the generous American will receive fifty thousand dollars, that being half the fortune.

It was evident to Mr. Bunker that this plan would be far more difficult to carry out than the simpler one of walking down to the corner to sell the policeman on post there a leaden brick washed in gold. To go to Spain would in itself be an annoyance. It was much more comfortable to sit in a comfortable rocker in Mrs. Wimmer's boarding-house. Having given up the Fake Cleric game, he now, with a sigh, gave up also the Spanish Prisoner idea.

Mrs. Bunker, the daylight having faded so she could no longer see to knit, arose and lighted the gas and took up the monthly copy of *The Oroduna District Leaflet and Messenger*, a thin pamphlet published by the First Church of Oroduna, Iowa. Each month this little leaflet came to Mrs. Bunker, for it was one of the ties that still bound her heart to Oroduna. She now adjusted her spectacles and read. She first turned to a letter from Miss Petunia Scaggs, who had "gone missionary" from Oroduna to Armenia and who managed to write two full pages of *The Leaflet and Messenger* in such a way that the reader got no idea of Armenia and remained, at the end of the letter, absolutely uninterested. Mrs. Bunker's comment, when she had finished reading the letter, was:

"'Tuny Scraggs has a letter in *The Leaflet and Messenger,* Pa. She says the butter aint so good in Armenia as what it is in Oroduna."

"'Taint so good in New York, neither," said Mr. Bunker. "'Tuny could have stayed in Oroduna and knowed there wasn't no better butter nowheres."

Mrs. Bunker turned a page of *The Leaflet and Messenger.*

"Land sakes!" she exclaimed. "Pa, listen to this! If here aint somebody been playin' that Fake Cleric bunco-game out to Oroduna! 'Warning! The people of Oroduna and vicinity are warned against a party calling himself Reverend Gideon Gith and engaged in collecting funds for a so-called Star of Hope Home for Orphans of Reformed Zulu Cannibals. Investigation shows there is no such Home, and it is believed the "Reverend" Mr. Gith is a fraud.'"

"My! my! my!" exclaimed Mr. Bunker, shocked. "The mean, low-down crook, cheatin' good, benevolent folks that way! Ma, people like him ought to be put into jail. The rascal!"

WHEN, a few minutes later, Mr. and Mrs. Bunker went down to dinner, Mr. Bunker saw evidence of a new arrival at the boarding-house. This evidence was a suit-case standing in the hall, and on the end of the case toward Mr. Bunker as he entered the dining-room were the letters "Rev. G. G." Seated at Mr. Bunker's table in the dining-room was a thin, wolfish-looking man of some forty-five years. He was in quasi-clerical garb and wore a white string tie. Mrs. Wimmer, who

always beamed and fluttered when she had a new boarder, fluttered up to Mr. and Mrs. Bunker and beamed as she introduced the Reverend Gildad Griffin.

"And this is Mr. and Mrs. Bunker," she said to the Reverend Gildad.

"From Oroduna, Iowa," said Mr. Bunker, and he noticed that the Reverend Gildad started nervously. Throughout the meal the Reverend Gildad seemed to watch Mr. Bunker closely, but what he saw evidently satisfied him. Mr. Bunker ate placidly and plenteously; not a sign of suspicion showed on his calm, babylike face. His questions were quite harmless: "Preachin' in this neighborhood? Expect to stay here long? Know any of the folks at this boardin'-house?" They were all such questions as one boarder might ask any new boarder. Cautiously Mr. Griffin introduced the subject of Oroduna, since Mr. Bunker had mentioned the town, and he was relieved to learn that Mr. Bunker had been in New York several months.

"Oroduna is a right smart little city," said Mr. Bunker. "You ever been there?"

"Never," said Mr. Griffin with absolute untruthfulness. "My activities have been confined to the Eastern States solely. Are you visiting in the East?"

"Nope! Come East to start into business," said Mr. Bunker, "—and I'm doin' right well at it."

"Produce?" asked Mr. Griffin politely.

"Bunco," said Mr. Bunker. "I'm a bunco-man. I sell gold bricks and work the wire-tappin' game, and so on."

Mrs. Wimmer, at the head of the table, giggled.

"Mr. Bunker is always joking!" she tittered. Mr. Griffin smiled.

"The men of my cloth are used to that, dear Mrs. Wimmer," he said. "You would be surprised, dear madam, were I to tell you how many of those I meet pretend to be what they are not, in order to shock me. It is a form of pleasantry to which I have become quite accustomed."

It was plain to see that Mr. Griffin had placed Mr. Bunker as a plump, harmless middle-Western booby. Mr. Bunker chuckled good-naturedly.

"I got money in the bank," he said.

"Jabez don't have to work if he don't want to," added Mrs. Bunker proudly.

THE fingers of the Reverend Gildad Griffin twitched. After the scare he had had in Iowa following his exposure in *The Leaflet and Messenger*, he had decided to keep low for a while. Memories are short, and after a few weeks he meant to shift to Maine or Georgia and go on with his work of collecting funds for the purely imaginary Home for Orphans of Reformed Zulu Cannibals, but for the present he had intended keeping dark. Now, however, chance had thrown in his way two fat geese ready for the plucking. He turned to Mrs. Bunker.

"I presume you have, Sister, since your arrival in New York, interested yourself in the field of benevolence?"

"I been knittin' some socks for the Belgians an' givin' a few cents now and then for somethin' or other," said Mrs. Bunker.

"And noble works, all of them!" said Mr. Griffin heartily. "The suffering Belgians! How the heart bleeds! Alas!"

"Yes, don't it!" said Mrs. Bunker.

"But do you know, Mrs. Wimmer," said the Fake Cleric, turning to the landlady, "that there is suffering tenfold more dire at this moment in Tasmania? Have you heard of the sufferings of the converted Doodags? A pitiful, pitiful case! Moslems the Doodags were until our missionaries ventured upon Tasmania's shores and converted the little tribe, and now they are surrounded by Moslem foes—by the Bilhaks, the Jigmiks, the Tolteks and the Hiptags."

"My! my! Do tell!" exclaimed Mrs. Bunker.

"Yes, Sister Bunker," said Mr. Griffin, "it is a sad case. The Doodags, our meek brothers with brown skins, are made the victims of the most cruel persecutions. Their fields are burned over, their homes are robbed, their children are carried into captivity. They starve in the midst of plenty. The Bilhaks and the Hiptags wax fat while

the faithful Doodags die of starvation."

"Can't something be did?" asked Mrs. Bunker with feeling.

"Something is being done," said Mr. Griffin sadly, "—but not as much as we would like to be able to do. It is hard indeed to raise the money when all charitable purses are pouring their contents into Europe. My own time I give freely. It is all I have to give, but I give it freely. When I reflect that ten thousand dollars would save forty thousand faithful lives among the Doodags, and when I ponder over the unfortunate fact that in the last three months I have been able to raise only three thousand—" He raised and lowered his hands in token of despair. "The little children! Thousands of little children!" Mr. Griffin added in a choking voice. "They die!"

"If I can help—" Mrs. Bunker began, but Jabez placed his foot firmly on her toe, and she stopped.

"Thank you, dear Sister!" said Mr. Griffin, and picked up his knife and fork. "I will speak to you anon. It is no fit subject to dwell on at this bounteous board, where digestion requires a mind free from sorrowful thoughts."

IT was not until they were in their room again that Mrs. Bunker mentioned the Doodags of Tasmania. She had settled herself into her chair with a sigh of satisfaction and had taken up her knitting.

"Jabez," she said in her simple, kindly way, "I feel like I ought to give my mite for them Doodags."

"Well, Ma, give, if you feel that way," said her husband.

For a few moments Mrs. Bunker knit in silence.

"I reckon you could spare five dollars, Jabez, for them Doodags," she suggested. Ordinarily Mr. Bunker would have put his hand in his pocket at such a hint: he was a generous husband.

"Five dollars!" he exclaimed. "Five dollars! If you aint just like a woman, Ma! Five dollars, and forty thousand of them Doodags starvin' to death! The trouble with all you women is, you putter out your money so it don't do nobody no good,—a dollar here and a dollar there,—and when you hear of a cause that really ought to be helped and that really needs help, you talk about five dollars!"

Mrs. Bunker's kindly old face beamed.

"Jabez!" she exclaimed. "If you aint the best man in the world! It's just like you knew I was aching to give a real good sum to Reverend Griffin! Jabez, do you suppose I could give him a—a thousand dollars?"

She hesitated and almost whispered the sum, as if awed by the very thought of doing so much good all at once. She half feared to hear what her husband would say.

"Of course you can, Ma!" he answered heartily.

"Oh, Jabez, I didn't know how you would fancy the notion. I didn't know whether you could spare that much."

"Spare it, Ma? *I* don't have to spare it. You've got two thousand dollars of your own, aint you, out in the Oroduna Bank? 'Taint for me to say how you spend it."

Mrs. Bunker breathed a sigh of gratitude. She knew she had two thousand dollars in the bank at Oroduna, in the Savings Department and drawing a nice four per cent per annum, but she had never really considered the money her own. Jabez had put it in the bank for her, and she had felt it was her duty to leave it untouched. If she could consider the two thousand dollars her own, she would feel twice the joy in giving a thousand of it to Reverend Griffin for the Tasmanian Doodags that she would feel in having Jabez give for her. She eased herself out of her rocker and walked across to Jabez and kissed the top of his bald, pink head.

"That's all right, Ma," he said, clinging to her hand for a loving moment. "Only don't tell that preacher feller I said you could do it. A man sort of feels foolish if it's known he's lettin' his folks give away so much money."

IT was not until the next afternoon that the Reverend Gildad Griffin, alias the Reverend Gideon Gith, alias "Solemn" Henry, had an opportunity

to see Mrs. Bunker again. He went to the Bunkers' room and tapped on the door, and Mrs. Bunker opened the door and asked him to step inside. The interview was a most satisfactory one for Mr. Griffin. Deep in Mr. Bunker's easy rocker, his finger-tips pressed together, he allowed his talent full swing and told Mrs. Bunker of scenes of horror among the Doodags of Tasmania that made her blood run cold and the warm tears fall from her kind old eyes. She longed to take one of the starving Doodag babes in her arms and comfort it.

"And now," said the Reverend Gildad Griffin in conclusion, "can you—will you help?"

"I'll be right glad to," said Mrs. Bunker.

"Thank you, Sister!" cried Mr. Griffin, taking her hand and pressing it gently. "The Doodags of Tasmania will bless you. And I may tell them you will give how much?"

Mrs. Bunker drew a deep breath; she was almost frightened to mention the vast sum she had decided to devote to the starving Doodags.

"I—I—I'd like to give a thousand dollars," she gasped.

THE coldish, clammy hand that grasped hers tightened in a quick involuntary convulsion. The Fake Cleric had not hoped for anything like this. He had hoped Mrs. Bunker might be good for perhaps twenty-five dollars, which would pay his board at Mrs. Wimmer's for a couple of weeks, but—a thousand dollars! He wet his lips three times before he could utter the blessing that was part of his stock-in-trade and that he always uttered when one of his victims fell into his trap. He uttered it now with unusual unction. One thousand dollars! It was great luck. Immediately, however, he felt a fear that the news was too good to be true. Mrs. Bunker was a dear old lady, and she was just the kind of dear old lady to fall into such a trap as the Reverend Mr. Griffin had set, but only too often had "Solemn" Henry worked some old dame to the point of giving liberally and then been checkmated by a closer-fisted husband.

"I presume, Sister," he said, "your husband approves of this?"

Dear old Grandma Bunker turned red. She was such an honest old soul that she could not tell a fib, and yet she had promised Jabez not to let Mr. Griffin know he had said she could give the money. She smoothed the front of her dress over her knees.

"I'd ruther you didn't say nothin' to Jabez about it," she said in what struck Mr. Griffin as a somewhat shamefaced manner. "I got my own money to give away as I like. It's in the savings-bank, and I guess Jabez don't care how I spend it. So far as you and me is concerned, Mr. Griffin, it's enough that I want to help them poor Doodads and that I can afford to do it the way I want to."

"Doodags, not Doodads, Sister Bunker," said Mr. Griffin gently. "Otherwise I agree with all you say. Our left hand should not know what our right hand doeth. Secret charity is the sweetest. This shall be our little secret, for the good of the poor Doodags of Tasmania. You do not mind if I tell them who their generous benefactor is?"

"I guess I don't mind that," said Mrs. Bunker.

"Your name will be blessed by thousands of the poor creatures," said Mr. Griffin, with a roll of his eyes toward the ceiling. "Dear Mrs. Bunker, with death taking away hundreds of them daily, I know it is your wish to get the money to them without delay. Each moment saved is a life saved. If you could—ah—let me have the cash soon—"

"I'm minded that same way," said Mrs. Bunker. "The sooner, the better for them poor, starvin' Googag babies—"

"Doogag—no, Doodag babies," said Mr. Griffin.

"Well, Goodad or Doodad, or whatever they are," said Mrs. Bunker. "The sooner they get what they need, the better I'll feel about it."

"Mrs. Bunker," said Mr. Griffin, "you are a queen among women."

"So just as soon as I can get the money out of the bank, I'm going to give it to you," said Mrs. Bunker. "I'm

going to ask Jabez to get it out for me right away, and—"

"Ah, yes!" said Mr. Griffin uneasily. "You—you don't think you could withdraw the money without—ah—troubling your husband?"

"I don't know as I can, and I don't know as I can't," said Mrs. Bunker. "If I can, I will. Jabez is a dear old soul, but I guess I'm old enough to manage my own affairs for all that!"

THAT evening Mr. Bunker came in from the street a good half-hour before dinner, and after removing his coat he kissed Mrs. Bunker a good old-fashioned smack. He found her full of the story of her proposed benevolence, and while he washed his hands and face he listened to her recital of her interview with the Reverend Mr. Griffin.

"Well, you done right, Ma; you done right!" he said heartily. "I wouldn't give two cents for a wife that didn't feel sorry for them Doogag babies. Goin' to give a thousand dollars, hey? All right! It's your money. I aint got a word of complaint."

"Pa, you're the best man in this livin' world," said Mrs. Bunker with feeling. "And, lawsy me! I just go on talkin' about me and my affairs, when you've been out workin' hard all day tryin' to bunk somebody, and I don't even ask how you're makin' out!"

"Pretty fair to middlin', Ma," said Mr. Bunker cheerfully. "I aint lookin' for big money this time; I just took a notion to try out that there Spanish Prisoner game to sort of see how it works. I reckon that it's comin' along all right. Takes time, but it looks like it was turnin' out all right. Yes, indeedy!"

"Jabez," said Mrs. Bunker.

"Yes, Ma."

"Them Doogag babies is starvin' every minute."

"I dare say, Ma."

"And the sooner I git my money to them, the sooner some of the poor things wunt starve."

"Seems like," answered Jabez.

"Could you—could you git my money out of the Oroduna Bank for me pretty soon, Jabez?"

Mr. Bunker was rubbing his face with the rough towel, but now he stopped and looked at Mrs. Bunker as if in surprise.

"Me get it out?" he exclaimed. "Why, Ma, I aint got nothin' to do with your money! What's yours is yours. I can't get your money out of the bank; you have to get it out."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Bunker, and after a moment of thought: "Can I get it out any time I want to, Jabez?"

"Any time you want to, Ma! Yes, indeedy! All you got to do is to go up to the cashier's window and say you want it, and Cashier Harris will hand it right out to you across the window-sill. Of course," he added, as one explaining the most obvious details of the banking business to a beginner, "you'll have to sign a paper—a check, they call it. Any time you go up to the cashier's window at Oroduna and—"

"At Oroduna, Jabez!" exclaimed Mrs. Bunker. "You meant I got to go 'way out to Iowa to get that money?"

Mr. Bunker rubbed his face vigorously with the towel.

"Yes, Ma," he said. "Seems so. To tell you the truth, Ma, I figured maybe you'd never want that money, so I made a sort of trust fund of it. It's yours, all yours, but I sort of told Harris he wasn't to hand it out unless you come for it personally. I hadn't no idea we'd ever leave Oroduna then, Ma."

Mrs. Bunker rocked a few minutes in silence.

"Pa," she said after a while.

"Yes, Ma?"

"I been wishin' for some weeks I could go back and make a little visit in Oroduna. Cousin Margie has that new baby since we left, and I got some things in the cedar chest I wish I'd brung with me. I'd sort of enjoy visitin' a week or two out home."

"I seen it!" chuckled Pa Bunker. "You can't fool your old husband, Ma! I been seein' you get more and more homesick every day, and I just been wonderin' how long it would be before you spoke up and said you wanted to go out home for a visitin' spell. I knowed it was comin', Ma."

"Will you come along?"

"Ma," he said seriously, "I'd like to, but I can't leave town till I get this Spanish Prisoner bunco-game cleaned up. If you're plannin' to go soon, maybe you'd better plan without me. I guess you're safe to leave travel onto a train alone without havin' young fellers flirtin' with you."

"I'd like to see 'em!" said Ma Bunker. "I reckon I can start next week."

AFTER dinner that evening Mr. Bunker insisted on remaining in the dining-room a few minutes to discuss the Ford peace party with Mrs. Wimmer's elderly boarder, Mr. Daggle, and Ma Bunker was glad of the opportunity to say a few words to Reverend Mr. Griffin. It need not be said that the Reverend Mr. Griffin was glad to hear a few words from Ma Bunker.

At the announcement that the money was in the Oroduna Bank, Mr. Griffin's face fell, and he was for a minute the picture of a most disappointed man, and his sorrow was no whit lightened by Ma Bunker's announcement that to draw the money it would be necessary for her to go to Oroduna; but when she said, further, that she had decided to go to Oroduna the next week and then hasten back to New York with the money, joy filled his heart again.

Before Mr. Bunker had finished his discussion with Mr. Daggle, Mr. Griffin had convinced Mrs. Bunker that it was in no way necessary to wait until she had finished her visit with Cousin Margie and rescued certain pairs of wool socks from her own cedar chest before saving the lives of countless Doodags. He explained how she could purchase a draft at the Oroduna Bank and mail it to him the moment she received it. Mrs. Bunker agreed to do this. Every moment meant a life or two saved among the poor Doodags of Tasmania.

The next few days passed happily for everyone at Mrs. Wimmer's boarding-house. The Reverend Gildad Griffin maintained a sweetly benevolent manner while at table—and sat with his feet cocked on the window-sill, smoking twenty-for-ten-cents cigarettes and occasionally sipping from a flat bottle, while in his room. His earnings in Iowa while posing as the Reverend Gideon Gith had been excellent, but an additional thousand was a delightful prospect. Mrs. Bunker was cheerfully busy preparing for her trip. Mr. Bunker was in and out of the house, seemingly busy with the Spanish Prisoner affair he had undertaken, and he was never so happy as when working on a plan to bunco some one in New York. So all were happy. The first cloud fell over the boarding-house sky Monday morning.

MONDAY morning Mrs. Bunker was up bright and early, for she had decided to leave for Oroduna Tuesday at 5:30 P. M., and she was a leisurely old soul and considered a day and a half none too much to give to the packing of her trunk. She let Mr. Bunker sleep a full hour after she was up and dressed, and even then she said nothing until he had shaved his chubby cheeks. Then she spoke in the half-reluctant manner of a woman who seldom asks her husband for money.

"Pa," she ventured, "kin I have a leetle money?"

"Eh?" exclaimed Mr. Bunker, turning sharply.

"A leetle money," repeated Mrs. Bunker.

"Money?" said Mr. Bunker. "Why, Ma, you've got two thousand dollars in the bank out at Oroduna. If you want any of it, all you've got to do is to go out and get it, Ma."

"But Jabez," said poor Mrs. Bunker, "I can't get any of that money unless I go out there. And I haven't any money to go out there with. The least I can get out and back on is fifty dollars, Jabez."

"Well, Ma," said Mr. Bunker, "I hate to refuse you, but I'm goin' to do it. I aint goin' to give you a cent to go to Oroduna with! If you want to go, go, but don't ask me for no money to pay for the goin'. I'm willin' to have you go, and I'm willin' to have you get a thousand dollars out of the bank and give it to the Doodag Tasmanians, if you want to, but askin' me to pay for a trip that will leave me here all alone and homesick for you is too much. I wunt do it, Ma!"

And Mrs. Bunker knew Jabez would not. Only three or four times in their married life had he used this tone. When he used it he meant what he said. Why he had taken this position Mrs. Bunker did not know, and it did not matter.

"Very well, Jabez," she said meekly, and that was all. It was a tremendous disappointment to her, however, and she went into the little hall-room annex and dabbed at her eyes. The moment she was out of sight Mr. Bunker laughed inaudibly but with such joy that he shook all over. He had to knock himself on the bald head with his knuckles, and that right sharply, to control his laughter. It was evident that Mrs. Bunker amused him.

THE Reverend Gildad Griffin, when Mrs. Bunker told him she was not going to Oroduna to draw the money, did not laugh. He sat in deep dejection until the silence was unbearable, and then he fled to his room. In his room he threw himself on his bed and stared at the ceiling, thinking hard. A crafty light came into his eyes, and he sat straight up. Then he laughed. He arose and brushed his black garments carefully and left his room, descending one flight to the floor on which Mr. and Mrs. Bunker lived. There he tapped gently on the door. It was opened by Mrs. Bunker.

"You are alone, Sister Bunker?" he asked.

"Pa reckoned he'd go out and get a breath of air," said Mrs. Bunker.

"Then I will enter for a few moments," said Mr. Griffin. And he did enter. He seated himself in Mr. Bunker's chair. "Sister Bunker," he said, "I am giving my life to the service of the poor, suffering Doodags of Tasmania. I am a poor man, Sister Bunker, and I have always felt, much as I would like to give money, that in giving my time I was giving all that I could."

"And I'm sure you deserve a whole lot of credit," said Mrs. Bunker.

"Thank you," said Mr. Griffin meekly. "But it was not for praise of myself I came here. Mrs. Bunker, I am a poor man, but I have, in the years I have lived upon this earth, saved a few—a very few—dollars. Yesterday, only yesterday, I decided that it was my duty to give a part of my all to the cause to which you hoped to give so much. I decided, Sister Bunker, to send fifty dollars of my own money to the Doodags."

"You good man!" said Ma Bunker feelingly.

"But now, just now," said Mr. Griffin, "I saw a great light! I saw how my little gift could be made to profit twentyfold. Mrs. Bunker, I ask you to take my fifty dollars and go to Oroduna and get your thousand for the Doodags. I ask no repayment. It will be my gift to the Doodags."

Mrs. Bunker clasped her dear old hands.

"Brother Griffin," she said, "you're the best—one of the two best men in the world! I aint sayin' Jabez aint a fine man in every shape and manner, but you're a good man, Brother Griffin. Shame be it for me to have to take money from you, but when Jabez is sot he is sot. Them Doodags wunt suffer none by what you do, Brother Griffin. I'll dror out a thousand and fifty, and the whole thing shall go to them Doodads."

"Spoken like a true daughter of benevolence," said Mr. Griffin, and without further parley he put his hand in his pocket and drew out ten crisp five-dollar bank-notes and handed them to Mrs. Bunker. "And bless you!" he added.

"Same to you," said Mrs. Bunker, tears filling her kindly old eyes.

MR. GRIFFIN, alias Gith, alias "Solemn" Henry, having thus made it possible for Mrs. Bunker to get the thousand dollars out of which he meant to trick her, extended his hand, bowed his head over it for a moment as if overcome by emotion, and returned to his room. Had he looked back as he climbed the stairs he might have seen Mr. Bunker's plump, infantile face peering at him from the door of the little hall-room annex that was the "other" room of the Bunkers' suite of two. Mr. Bunker was smiling his guileless smile.

Mr. Bunker waited until he heard Mr. Griffin's door close, and then he too climbed the stairs. He tapped gently on Mr. Griffin's door, and the Fake Cleric, who had already lighted a cigarette, hastily extinguished the little comforter in the water-pitcher and opened the door cautiously. Seeing Mr. Bunker, he stepped outside and closed the door.

"Well, Brother?" he queried.

"I got somethin' here I sort of reckoned you might like to know about before I got to tellin' it 'round," said Mr. Bunker, carefully adjusting his spectacles on his little nubbin of nose. "I got a couple of letters or so here that was writ me from Oroduna—"

"Solemn" Henry put his hand on the knob of the door behind him.

"This here fust one," said Mr. Bunker, "is from the pastor of the First Church of Oroduna, and there aint much into it except a right smart description of a fraud that was out there that called himself Reverend Gideon Gith; but this here second one is from the county sheriff, and he says—wait a minute, an' I'll read you what he says."

But the Reverend Gildad Griffin did not wait. The window of his room opened upon the roof of a smaller building. Mr. Griffin had chosen it for that very reason, and he had taken the precaution to explore the roof and its exits. Now he entered his room hastily, locked and bolted the door, closed his suit-case and climbed out of the window. Mr. Bunker, his ear to the door, chuckled as he heard the departing guest of Mrs. Wimmer's select boarding-establishment. He retraced his steps to his own room and opened the door.

MRS. BUNKER sat as the Reverend Gildad Griffin had left her, the fifty dollars still in her hand. With his innocent, babelike face beaming, Jabez Bunker went to her and kissed her a resounding smack.

"Well, Ma," he said, "how's my dear old Spanish Prisoner that couldn't escape to Oroduna to rescue her money unless the sucker put up the money for it? Feelin' pretty good?"

For a moment the sweet old lady's mouth fell open in amazement as she stared at Jabez.

"Your Reverend Griffin and that fraud of a Gith out to Oroduna was one and the same," said Mr. Bunker; and as the full meaning dawned on Mrs. Bunker's mind, the look of amazement gave way to one of love and admiration for her husband.

"Well, Jabez Bunker!" she exclaimed. "If you wasn't usin' me all the while to help that feller get stang! I declare if you aint gittin' to be such a smart bunco-man you fool even me."

She sighed deliciously.

"Oh, well!" she said blissfully, "I was worryin' and worryin' whether it was right to take this money from him when he wasn't my husband or nothin'. Somehow it didn't seem just right, even if 'twas for them poor Doodabs—but," she added brightly, "if 'twas just to help you bunk an easy-mark, o' course 'twas all right!"

The Man They Made

This is a fine virile story of the prize-ring and the life-saving service, told with a sympathy and skill that make it exceptionally effective.

By FREDERICK ARTHUR DOMINY

Author of "The Motto of the Service," "The Probationers," etc.

JACKEY EGAN had tried to come back and failed, just as many others had done before him. As champion middle-weight of the country he had found it easy traveling upon the primrose path beaten smooth by the feet of other champions before him, and he had finally faced a challenger for his title when he was scarcely fit to meet a second-rate feather-weight —let alone the husky, aggressive youngster whom he had taken on, as he expressed it to his admiring friends, "jest to gather in a few easy shekels."

The loser's end of the purse for that particular bout had been small; Jackey had insisted upon that strenuously when the agreements were being signed, for that was not the end he was expecting to handle, but somehow it had looked infinitely smaller when he had found himself in his dressing-room, dazed, and scarcely comprehending the fact that he had been cleanly knocked out, and that the roar of excited voices he could hear was the greeting to a new champion.

"Knocked out, an' only half of the third round gone!" He growled a savage exclamation of disgust. That he —who had often been declared by men who were authorities on the subject to be the shiftiest, most skillful boxer, the most hard-hitting fighter who had ever won the middle-weight belt— should be beaten by one who handled himself like a raw preliminary boy: this was worse than a mere calamity; it was a horrible disgrace.

Then had come weeks of trailing the one who had wrested his honors from him, weeks when his manager, who seemed to read the writing on the wall, grumbled, and had threatened to let him shift for himself if he continued to ask for money, with only the doubtful security that it would be returned when he won his next fight. Perhaps the manager could not be blamed altogether, for now Egan's affairs were far from prosperous, and no manager is handling a fighter simply for the sake of something to do. A champion with a fat bank-account is one thing, but an ex-champion with his money gone is another.

Finally another match was arranged, and secure in the belief that his previous defeat had been a fluke, pure and simple, Egan entered the ring determined to win back the laurels which were rightfully his. It was not much of a fight, as fights go. The new champion was evidently following instructions which showed the long-headedness of his handlers. For round after round he let his opponent chase him about the ring, only to fall into a clinch whenever cornered; and finally these tactics had their effect, for a few weeks' training will not offset months of riotous living, and Egan grew tired, most plainly tired. Now it became simply a question of how long he could with-

stand the savage attacks of the other, who was almost as fresh as when the fight had begun; and the time was short. Twice rushes sent him back against the ropes; and then, as his arms grew so weary they could ward off scarcely a quarter of his opponent's blows, a hard fist crashed against his jaw, another terrific drive landed over his heart, and for the second time he was knocked out by the same man.

SOME time the next day Egan awoke and looked inquiringly about him. His head ached and throbbed fearfully; his lips were parched, and his tongue felt as if it were swollen to twice its normal size; and though his first thought had been of his surroundings, his curiosity was speedily forgotten as the craving for water, for drink of almost any kind, if it would allay the burning in his mouth and throat, became more and more incessant.

Painfully he arose, and as if the action had helped to clear his brain, he began to recall something of the night before. He remembered the angry argument he had had with his manager when that worthy had entered his dressing-room after the fight and coolly handed him a miserable twenty dollars, stating that it was what had been left of his end of the purse after all his expenses had been deducted. He had also informed Egan he was through with him, that he was a "has-been," a "back number," that he was not even a "pork an' beaner," by which he meant one of those hangers-on about the clubs who fill in if a contestant fails to put in appearance, and take the worst of wallopings for a five- or ten-dollar bill.

That was the last straw, and Egan's stiff lips twisted into something resembling a smile as he thought of his answer to the insult. "Gee!" he muttered, "I left Johnny somethin' to remember me by, anyhow. The last I see of him, the blood was runnin' outer his nose an' down his white front like some one had turned the fa'cet on."

What had followed his ejection from the building was not so clear. He knew he had gone somewhere and drank, how much or how little he could not say, but it must have been sufficient, if his present feelings were any indication, for him to have forgotten for the time being his defeat and his failure, as he mentally phrased it, 'to come back.'

This much he recalled as he stumbled along, as yet scarcely half conscious; and then he became dimly aware he was aboard a vessel, and though for an instant he hesitated as if uncertain of his next move, the desire that was uppermost would not permit delay; and when he spied before him a cask, a water-cask unmistakably, with a tin dipper on the deck beside it, he hastened with shaking hands to draw the longed-for draught.

Never before had he known water to be so good. It seemed as if his thirst would never be satisfied, and finally, in his eagerness, he dropped upon his back and lay beneath the wooden spigot, letting the tiny stream run over his aching temples and into his bloodshot eyes and opened mouth.

HOW long he would have lain there if he had not been interrupted is problematical. In his enjoyment he gave no heed to the exclamation of astonishment that sounded close at hand, but as this was followed after a brief interval by the thump of a heavy-soled shoe against his ribs, he quickly scrambled to his feet and stared blankly at his assailant.

"What d'ye think ye're doin', ye dirty wharf-rat?" roared the one who had been so free with his feet, as Egan faced him, blinking and half-dazed. "What d'ye mean by layin' there an' lettin' that good water run to waste? Shut it off, drat ye, shut it off, quick, or—"

The speaker's intention was so evident that Jackey instinctively raised one hand to ward off the expected blow, even while he groped behind him with the other and closed the flowing spigot, but his prompt obedience saved him, and he only received another command, couched in no uncertain language, to explain what he was doing under that water-butt, and who he was.

"Me? I'm—I'm Jackey Egan," he stumblingly ejaculated, for his nerves were still fluttering wildly from the

effects of his unaccustomed debauch, and it seemed almost impossible to put his thoughts into words and utter them intelligently. "Jackey Egan, that's—that's me," he repeated, and shook his head emphatically as if to give weight to his assertion.

"Jackey who?" the other shouted angrily. "Look-a-here, young feller, don't you lie to me. Don't you think I know who Jackey Egan is, curse your eyes? Aint I seen him fight, an' then you stan' there an' try to fill me up on sech guff as that. Mebbe this is the flagship *Oregon,* too," he stormed on sarcastically, "an' mebbe I'm Admir'l George Dewey, 'stead of it's bein' the ol' barge *Mary Ellen,* in tow halfway down the Jersey coast, an' in charge of Bill Biggs, which is me; an' mebbe you are Jackey Egan, as was middleweight champion of the world; but ag'in mebbe you aint nothin' but a dirty young bum what crawled aboard here some time las' night to sleep off a souse. An' anyhow—jest to show you that your lyin' don't git you nothin' but a fancy lickin'—I'll hand you one 'fore settin' you to work to earn your passage."

Ordinarily Jackey would have laughed at this threat from the hands of anyone as clearly unskillful in the finer points of the fistic art as it was evident this man was from the first move he made to carry out his intention, but now it seemed to Jackey that all his strength had left him, and he cringed and fell back before the threatening fists, which he seemed to see through a cloud that rapidly grew thicker and more impenetrable.

Plain sea-sickness was what it was, brought about by the effect of the constant motion of the barge on a stomach soured and writhing from an overload of cheap whisky and then filled to its utmost capacity with chilling water; but that Egan did not know, and he swayed as he retreated and raised an ineffectual guard, wondering hazily all the time why he felt so sick and weak.

Then came a blow that sent him reeling against the low bulwarks, and though instinctively he tried to throw himself forward, a roll of the barge added to his momentum, and he felt himself falling, and heard a cry of dismay that sounded as if it were miles away; an instant later his senses returned sharply and he gasped for breath as he rose to the surface of the water, chilling despite the warmth of a September sun.

IT had but needed that sudden immersion to clear the cobwebs from Jackey's brain, and as he gazed up at the stern of the receding craft, he saw his assailant of a moment before standing white-faced and trembling, plainly so horror-stricken by this unforeseen termination of the affair that he was momentarily incapable of acting.

If the ex-champion middle-weight had not been almost as much at home in the water as he was on land, this story would now come to an abrupt ending, but fortunately swimming was one of his accomplishments, and after a useless struggle to reach the rope that Biggs finally cast toward him, he decided to save his strength, for he quickly discovered that the powerful tug ahead was towing the barge much more rapidly than he could swim. He thought it strange as he paddled along, exerting himself just enough to keep afloat, that a boat was not launched to rescue him; but though he did not know it, the owners of such worn-out old hulks as the one upon which he had crept some time during the previous night, do not waste good money in manning them as they should be or equipping them any more than is absolutely necessary. It may be prescribed by law that every vessel going to sea shall have proper lifeboats and other paraphernalia, but inspection is not always rigid, and the old yawl that swung in rusty davits over the *Mary Ellen's* stern lacked something most essential to make it seaworthy; and that something was almost its entire bottom planking.

Hence it was that Jackey was left to rely solely upon himself, and somehow he did not feel uneasy regarding the situation. He could hear distinctly the dull boom of waves breaking upon a beach; the sun was yet high above the horizon, and the comforting coolness of the water was driving away that miserable, sickly feeling that had almost

overcome him; so his hopes ran high, and he almost laughed as he recalled the expression that had swept over the face of the man who had named himself Bill Biggs as he had gazed down upon him struggling in the water.

"I'll bet a quarter ag'in' a plugged nickel that that guy is doin' more worryin' than me," he chuckled. "He's thinkin' hard, jest about now, of how he'll fit in the big chair, an' of the straps an' things, an' what'll happen when they turn the juice on. Mebbe, though, he'll keep his mouth shut—I guess that's what I'd do if I was wearin' his boots—an' if he does, no one will be wise. That ol' tub was the las' of the whole outfit, an' if there was anybody else aboard they must 'a' been poundin' their ears somewhere outer sight. Now," he added after a moment or two, "I guess Jackey'll be on his way over to Jersey, seein' that that's the nearest lan', 'cordin' to that feller Biggs, an' there aint no use in my driftin' round out here, soakin' in so much water I'll never dry out ag'in."

As his ears had told him, the beach was not so very distant, for it was good weather and the tug, with her tow, had stood well inshore; it was but a matter of twenty minutes or so before Jackey passed through a line of breakers that could hardly be dignified by that name, and felt a sandy bottom beneath his feet.

HE was splashing through the few yards of water that remained between him and the shore, when a sudden hail startled him for the moment and he saw a blue-uniformed man running toward him across the sands.

"Howdy, Cap'n," he greeted the newcomer cheerfully, as he neared him. "Fine day for a swim, aint it?"

The man stopped and stared at him in astonishment, finally ejaculating: "Holy smoke! What kind of a feller be you, anyhow? Didn't I see the whole business from the top of the hill there? Didn't I see you tumble overboard from one of them barges, an' wasn't I ready to run over to the station an' git the crew when you struck out for shore an' kep' a-comin' so fast I made up my mind you didn't need no help? Darn funny kind o' doin's, I call it. An' now, 'spose you'll be tellin' me next you did it a-purpose, an' that that's your reg'ler way of leavin' ship if things don't go to suit you. Who be you, anyhow? What's your name, an' what you mean by cuttin' up sech a caper?"

He snapped out the final questions so abruptly that Egan was almost surprised into giving a name known from one end of the country to the other, but he checked the words as they were trembling on his tongue and instead answered shortly: "John Egan."

A resolution he had made while swimming ashore was what had prompted him to discard the sobriquet which would be sure to reveal his identity. As Jackey Egan he would be known wherever newspapers were read, but surely John Egan was not so uncommon a name that the bearer of it would be confused with the one who had held a championship in the ring.

"John Egan, eh?" repeated the questioner. "Well, that's a good old Irish name, an' as I'm Irish on my mother's side myself, I guess we'll git along all right till you leave for the mainlan'." Then he added, as if suddenly aware that the introduction was only half complete, and that the one he had questioned would undoubtedly be glad to change his dripping clothes for dry ones: "My name's Jim Phillips, an' if you'll come with me to the station, I guess we can fit you out in some other duds what'll feel consid'able better'n them you've got on."

"Station? What station?" Jackey inquired half suspiciously. "P'lice or railroad? Them's the only kind I ever heard of, an' I dunno as I've got business at either one of 'em jest now."

"Naw, naw. P'lice or railroad be darned," was the disgusted reply. "Life-savin' station's what I mean. Don't tell me you aint heard of the Life-savin' Service, an' lifeboats, an' life-savers."

That one should be so ignorant seemed to amaze the other, and as he spoke, Jackey did seem faintly to recall the fact that he had heard something about such an organization—he could

not remember when or where; but anyhow, as long as he neither had to board a train without a cent of money in his pocket nor answer the searching questions of a police sergeant, he was satisfied; and immediately he expressed a willingness to accompany his latest acquaintance, the self-introduced Jim Phillips, anywhere.

AS he trudged along beside the life-saver, Egan was thinking rapidly. Despite his upbringing, which had lacked the guiding hands of parents, for they had both died long before he was of an age to remember them or their teachings, and despite the ignorance that had handicapped him his entire life, he possessed one trait that partially recompensed for the lack of those other things: that was the never dormant desire to be always at the top. "To make good and stick," was the way he would have expressed it, and never for an instant since that last fight and knock-out had he faltered in his determination again to be the middleweight champion of the country, although it is true that he had done as many other men, with more knowledge and better opportunities, had done before him, endeavored to dull the first keen disappointment by a brief period of the forgetfulness that liquor brings.

He knew, none better, the primal cause for the loss of his title. The white lights had beckoned and he had yielded. To regain the honors he had lost so carelessly would be the hardest fight he had ever experienced—he was aware of that. But there was that desire to be again at the top to urge him on, and he gritted his teeth and muttered: "By ——, I'll do it. I'll do it if it takes ten years."

"What? Say somethin' to me?" inquired Phillips, as Jackey unconsciously put his thoughts into words; and the latter stared at him for an instant, at first not understanding the reason for the question.

Then he laughed and replied: "No, I was jest thinkin' aloud—that's all. Kinder fool trick I've got. But say: where's this place, anyhow? You said somethin' 'bout it's bein' an island. How do you get off, an' what's the chance of a feller strikin' a job somewhere round here?"

"Darned poor, I should say, answerin' your las' question," said Phillips. Then he paused as if something had occurred to him which needed reflection, and after a moment's deliberation he asked: "What kind of a job you lookin' for —anything special?"

"Nope. Somethin' that'll get me three square a day an' a place to sleep in an' keep clothes on my back. That's all I'm askin'."

THE reply was prompt, and seemed to be what the life-saver desired, for he exclaimed in satisfied tones: "Good enough! I guess there wont be no trouble 'bout fixin' you up, then. You see, it's this way: This here is Crow Island, an' there aint nothin' on it 'cept a life-savin' station, an' gen'ally a crew of seven men an' the keeper; but now there aint but six in the crew. One short, you understan', an' no subs to be got, for there bein' plenty of work on the mainlan', men aint very anxious to come over on this God-forsaken strip of beach. Now, as you say you want work an' aint perticular what it is, how'll a job subbin' in the Crow Island station suit you, at sixty-five a month an' thirty cents a day allowed for rations, if Cap'n Carter's willin' to ship you?"

Jackey stared at him incredulously. Work paying sixty-five dollars a month obtained as easily as that! As his face showed his astonishment, Phillips nodded emphatically.

"Yep, I mean it," he asserted, "—if Cap'n Carter'll take you on; an' it's almost sure he will."

"Then I aint lookin' no further. It suits me to the groun'," declared Jackey. "There aint but one thing, though. I aint up on this life-savin' game. What's the dope, an' how'm I goin' to get wise?"

"Nothin' to it," the other assured him easily. "Subs aint 'spected to know the codes, an' a feller as husky as you are, an' who can swim half a mile as easy as you did, wont have no trouble pullin' an oar or walkin' four-mile patrols."

Then, as if this business was satis-

factorily settled, he asked the question which had evidently been uppermost in his mind for some time. "Say, Egan, how come you to go overboard from that barge, anyhow? Looked to me as if you was havin' a scrap with some one, though you was a little too far off to see plain."

Jackey had been expecting he would have to give some reason for his unusual method of quitting a vessel at sea, and now he answered readily, and as if the incident was of small moment: "No, 'twasn't no scrap. Jest a little argument 'tween the boss an' me; an' as I didn't like the way things was goin', an' it was an easy swim ashore, I left. That's all."

While this explanation did not make the situation particularly clear, it seemed to satisfy Phillips, who had apparently taken it for granted that he had shipped aboard the barge in the regular manner, which was the impression Jackey was anxious he should form, and as they had now neared a low-lying structure, shingled and weather-worn, evidently the life-saving station, the minds of both turned to more immediate matters.

ONE would have thought the building deserted, for no one greeted them as they entered, but Phillips muttered, explanatorily: "All han's turned in for a snooze. I'm standin' day watch—so there aint no need of them bein' around. Guess the ol' man's in his room, though, so we might as well get your business settled up right away."

He walked across the room they were in, plainly kitchen and dining-room combined, with its stove, dish-closets and oilcloth-covered center-table, to a door, upon which he knocked. Immediately a voice bade him 'Come in,' and beckoning Jackey to follow, he obeyed. In reply to Keeper Carter's questioning stare over his spectacles, he said briefly: "Man here wants a job subbin', Cap'n. Name's John Egan. Was a barge hand, an' I know he's a good swimmer, for I seen him at that myself."

The few questions put by the Keeper after this introduction were easily answered, and Egan was enlisted as a temporary surfman in the crew of the Crow Island station almost before he knew it.

It had been so ridiculously easy he could hardly believe his good fortune, but there was no doubt it was a fact, and the others of the crew, when he met them at the supper-table, did not seem to think shipping a man on such short notice an occurrence out of the ordinary. Not until Phillips had laughingly told the story of how he had summarily left the barge did they have any comments to make, and then those were in a joking vein, some one warning him that if he got tired of his present position and decided to leave he would be wise to take a boat, as Crow Island was five miles from the nearest land.

A MONTH passed quickly, and Jackey grew so accustomed to his new mode of life that it seemed almost as if he had lived no other. It was a good life to lead, at that. The plain food, the constant outdoor exercise and the entire lack of alcoholic drinks soon made so great a change in his appearance that it is doubtful if his friends of the ring and the glittering palaces of pleasure would have recognized him, even if he had been brought face to face with them. His face was bronzed and weather-beaten, instead of an unhealthy white; his eyes were clear and free from those telltale little red streaks, and his whole being impressed one with a sense of force and vigor. So satisfied had he grown with his surroundings that had it not been for the newspapers he sometimes read, and their mention of the new middle-weight champion, he might have forgotten his resolution; but these items served as a spur to awaken all his slumbering ambition, and he would sneeringly mutter, as he studied the reports of his conqueror's fights, painstakingly, weighing each word, endeavoring to picture to himself each feint and blow and quick shifting of position: "The big stiff! Takin' on nothin' but second-raters. Pickin' up the easy coin, an' keepin' shy of all the good men. Yes-sir. That's what he's doin', an' I hope he'll keep it up till I can raise a stake

big enough to make a match with."

As his discoverer, from the first Phillips had assumed a proprietary interest in Egan, and this had rapidly grown into a friendship more real and sincere than the latter had ever realized could be possible. His defeats had made clear just what dependence could be placed on those who had called themselves friends when he was at the height of his popularity, but there was something genuine in the surfman's manner, something that told him he was an ally in foul as well as fair weather, which finally persuaded Jackey to give him his confidence.

The two were on fog patrol when this happened, and before Egan had finished his story Phillips stopped and stood staring at him in amazement through the drifting mist.

"What!" he finally blurted. "You Jackey Egan, who everybody called the best middle-weight that ever stepped in a ring?"

"Yep. You've got me right, first time," averred Jackey. "But say, Jim, jest 'member this is 'tween us two, will you? I dunno, though, as I'd told you yet if I didn't think you was square, an' I wantin' some one to talk to and kinder help me to do a little schemin'."

Then he went on and described his half-formed plans, while the surfman listened intently.

"An' you say you've been doin' some trainin' right along?" inquired Phillips, when Egan had finished. "What kind of trainin'?"

"Oh, road-work an' bag-punchin'," he answered. "You see, I figgered out that I had to do somethin' to keep my legs right, an' my wind, so when I go on patrol I doubles up. Hour an' a half gives me jest time to go twice to the key-post an' back if I keeps up a good stiff jog, an' I've got an ol' sand-bag fixed up—"

"What's that you're sayin'?" interrupted the surfman. "You do nigh eight mile on the beach every night?"

"Yep." The reply was composed, as if the speaker saw nothing remarkable in his performance. "That's easy, 'specially after I'd been at it a month or so. Only thing's botherin' me is not havin' some one to work with. The bag's good enough to get up muscle on, but what I needs is a pardner, so's I can spar a bit an' keep up my footwork. If I don't get one I'll be slower'n a cripple, an' that's what I wanted to ask you 'bout, special. You know—"

SOMETHING in the grin that spread over Phillips' face caused him to cut short his explanation and stare questioningly at the other, who now laughed heartily as he saw Jackey was at a loss to understand his behavior. "A sparrin' pardner is what you want, eh?" he finally managed to ejaculate. "Haw! Haw! Haw! A reg'ler two-fisted feller who aint afraid of bein' put away, an' mebbe is able to make you go some. I swan! I can't help from laffin'; it struck me so kinder funny. What'd you say if I told you I can get one in less'n no time? Yessir. I mean it. That's what made me laff. You wishin' a man like that was here on this ol' island, where the whole darn population is eight, jest eight, remember; an' sure enough, he is. Yessir. He's here, an' in his day he was champeen of the whole darn southern fleet of your Uncle Sam's navy. An' now I 'spose you'd like to know who he is?" He paused tantalizingly, and smiled.

"Aw, say, Jim, cut out the kiddin' an' talk sense," Egan growled protestingly.

"But I aint kiddin'," Phillips replied earnestly. "I'm tellin' you there's jest the man you're lookin' for right on Crow Island. His name is—well, I 'spose I might jest as well tell you 'fore you get sore. He's Number Three Surfman in the crew of the Crow Island life-savin' station, an' his name is nothin' more or less than James W. Phillips."

"What!" There was no mistaking the other's astonishment, and the life-saver laughed again before he replied.

"Yep. Ol' Jim's the huckleberry. Kinder took the wind outer your sails, didn't it? But say, 'spose we finish this patrol 'fore the Cap'n thinks we're lost an' sends out a party to look us up."

"Come on, then," impatiently cried Jackey. "I wants a good long gab with you, 'specially now that I knows

you're wise to the fightin' game, an' if we don't frame up somethin' that'll put a kink in the rolls of them four-flushers who give me the razzle-dazzle when I got licked, I'll eat that yaller oiler of yourn, buttons an' all."

AFTER this conversation, there was scarcely a day but that some of the other members of the crew would nod meaningly toward the two, who would be busily engaged in an animated discussion, either in the station or on the beach, but always their voices would be lowered when another approached; and whatever the subject, it might have remained a mystery if certain complications had not arisen.

The secret of these mysterious conferences was disclosed in a peculiar manner, and all through an inability on the part of Phillips to guard successfully against a puzzling left hook. Twice within a month he had appeared at the table with an eye puffed and swollen and circled with a ring of darkened purple, and on both occasions Keeper Carter had viewed this phenomenon with silent curiosity. A third occurrence of this kind, however, was too much for the Keeper's patience, and in tones that indicated his displeasure he informed the possessor of the artistically draped organ that he would like to see him in his office at once.

As the Number Three surfman expressed it later, "There wa'n't no use in lyin' about somethin' which wa'n't no hangin' affair, anyhow." And much to his surprise his superior exhibited an interest in the recital of the past happenings and ultimate developments expected that led him to make certain suggestions which were enthusiastically received by both Phillips and Egan.

Thereafter, instead of being obliged to slip away unobtrusively to the hollow in the hills which had concealed them from prying eyes, the training quarters were transferred to the roomy loft of the barn, and with seconds, self-appointed and willing, and a timekeeper and referee, the preparing of Jackey to win back his laurels continued.

It was nearing the close of the active season when a conference was held which led to Egan's spending the greater part of an afternoon at the Keeper's desk laboriously composing a letter that was mailed the following morning by a surfman who had been granted leave for that particular purpose, and the missive brought results with gratifying promptness.

The man who landed on the island a few days after the letter had been written was a stranger to all its inhabitants with the exception of Jackey, and scarcely had the introductions ceased when he blurted out shortly, and as if making new acquaintances was almost a bore: "Get busy, Egan. Le's see what you've got."

AN anxious company, with one exception, watched Jackey and Phillips go ten fast rounds in the loft of the old barn, and that exception was the stranger, who might have been a mummy transported to the scene from a museum, so entirely lacking was he in expression. With half-closed eyes he sat watching the two until the end of the final round; then he slowly arose, and beckoning Jackey to him, examined him as one might an interesting animal he was thinking of purchasing.

"Wind's good," he grunted. "Leg's all right. Umph-umph! Little slow. That's all. Umph! Mebbe you can do it. No tellin'. Rub down. Talk to you then."

An hour later, the little boat that had conveyed the visitor to the island was returning him to the mainland and Egan was explaining to the life-savers what had been accomplished.

"It's all fixed up," he declared, "an' you can bet your bottom dollar Tom Waters is suited down to the groun' with the way I showed up or he wouldn't be willin' to take hold an' try to make the match. He knows what he's doin' every step of the way; an' say, mebbe them newspaper sharps wont sit up an' take notice when ol' Tom springs it on 'em that he's goin' to back Jackey Egan for a fight with the dub who's callin' himself middleweight champion. Winner take all—that's the way the purse'll be split—an' that's the reason Puggy Levine can't sidestep the match. He's beat me twice, an' if he wants to renig on a deal with

conditions sech as that, there'll be sech a howl it'll jest make him sign articles."

"How much'll the purse be?" some one inquired, "an' when's the fight goin' to come off?"

"Ten thousand's what Waters said he'd guarantee, an' of course there can be as big a side bet as me an' Levine wants to make. You see, that's the reason I got Waters over here. I knowed it'd take money to make this match, an' if I tried to do it on a shoestring I'd been laffed at. But now, with the man who's run some of the biggest bouts behind me, there aint nothin' to it. I'll be in the ring with that false alarm inside of six weeks, an' what I'll do to him'll be plenty."

SOMEBODY had once remarked that Tom Waters never required the assistance of a press-agent, for he could get more publicity than any other man in the business. Now that he had a subject to talk upon full of possibilities, he did himself more than justice. Soon the whole world of sport was buzzing with conjectures regarding Jackey Egan, the former champion whom all had thought dead but who was plainly very much alive—or else some one was so monumental a liar that it was worth being interested in anyhow.

So skillfully were the sensations of the public played upon by the astute promoter that the present champion was practically forced into an agreement to meet Egan, or else lose his entire following and popularity by refusing. So the match was made, but still the whereabouts of the challenger remained a mystery which Waters would not clear —only remarking that if he failed to produce his man at the specified time he was perfectly willing to forfeit the sum agreed upon in the event of either principal failing to appear.

It was in September when Egan was last seen in the ring. Now it was June, and had it not been for an old trick of his which identified him to the followers of the fighting game it is doubtful if they would have accepted him as the ex-champion, even when the referee lifted his hand for silence and made the customary introductions. So altered was he in demeanor and in looks that it needed that familiar little jig on the powdered resin in his corner to satisfy the doubting crowd of his identity; but that was sufficient, and the reception given him, as he waited for his opponent, would have made him think he was actually a favorite.

Then entered the champion, and again the house was in an uproar which was not silenced until the two were presented to the audience. From the moment Jackey slipped off the concealing bathrobe he had been the target for a thousand pairs of eyes; and from somewhere, as the timekeeper had raised his hand to sound the bell that would start the fight, came an exclamation that summed up the opinion of the entire gathering. "By George, boys, he's fit!" the voice had said; and no truer description could have been given.

He *was* fit—fit to fight for one round or twenty. The picture of rugged health, with muscles that rippled smoothly and easily under a clear skin, with legs that were able to carry him tirelessly, and without an ounce of superfluous flesh on his body. And there was in his manner something that told of a confidence in himself not easily shaken, and after the first survey, the onlookers had settled themselves comfortably in their seats with the satisfied air of those who are about to view something far and beyond their utmost expectations.

AS if it were a sign of good omen, Jackey got in the first clean blow, a right, straight from the shoulder, which landed fair upon Levine's jaw; and as the clenched fist had flashed forth, so swiftly the eye could scarce follow it, a gasp of disappointment had arisen, for it had seemed as if the battle was ended then and there. But the champion had gathered skill and generalship since that September night when he had won his title, and though he had failed to ward off the blow, it did not fall with force sufficient to send him to the canvas. He had sensed the danger and was backing away; but now, as if angered by the nearness of his escape, he closed in and forced the

fight, working both hands with bewildering speed as his lowered head rested for the moment on Egan's chest; and the crowd roared its appreciation of the rapid attack which finally ended in a clinch not broken until the bell announced the finish of the round.

Over in Jackey's corner, Phillips worked on him during the brief resting space, warning him against being too eager, advising him to guard against his opponent's left in the in-fighting, and to use his own left in the short, quick hook he had developed during those months of training on the island.

"Take it easy for a while," he urged. "Make him work, an' feel him out. Don't take no chances with that uppercut he showed. Keep him off with your right; he's leery of it already. An' wait, jest wait, till he slows up. He aint been workin' with no sech feller as me, who he'd have to give twenty pounds to, an' you can stan' the pace when he'll be blowin' like a grampus."

It was good advice, and Jackey was wise enough to profit by it. So he fought carefully, and though he failed to block a jab which started the blood from his nose, and one eye was puffed from a stinging left that might have done serious damage if it had landed six inches lower, he was still fresh and confident, and waiting for the moment when he could carry the battle to the other.

THE moment came, and he was ready. Not for nothing had he run mile after mile in the loose sand on the shores of Crow Island, or wrestled and sparred with the heavier Phillips. Not for nothing had he lived cleanly for months, breathing the fresh air in long hours out of doors and eating the plain food of the life-savers. All this was what had given him strength and endurance far beyond that possessed by his opponent, and it became apparent as they faced each other when the bell rang for the fourteenth round.

Now the champion did not step so jauntily from his corner. There was a noticeable trembling in his legs, and his breath was coming irregularly. He seemed slow, too, to lift his guard, as if his arms were growing weary, and it did not need Phillips' urgent cry, "Take it to him, Jackey," to send Egan swiftly across the ring.

It was the beginning of the end. For a moment the champion rallied his waning powers and withstood the vicious attack of the other, and the crowd grew wild with excitement as they fought. Clear above the clamor sounded the voice of Phillips begging Jackey to "Put him out." "Now! Now!" he cried. "The left. Remember, boy, what I told you. Hook him. That's it. Jest once more. There. Now you're fightin'," he shouted joyfully, as an opening appeared and a long arm darted forward, sending the champion reeling back against the ropes.

"There he goes! There he goes!" It was the requiem of a fighter's hopes, delivered by the spectators as they sensed the outcome. Even as the cry arose, Egan had struck again, and a championship was lost and gained, for Levine swayed and then dropped to the floor in a limp heap, never stirring, not even when the referee had droned the final "ten."

The cheering was deafening. The building was full of excited men who were pressing forward to obtain a better view of the conqueror, but to them the new champion paid scant attention, for there was a little group, with weather-beaten faces, now standing close to the ring, and it was to them he had turned after the last blow had been delivered.

"I done it, boys," he had said, "but you're the ones who oughter get the credit. I s'prised this bunch who thought I was a has-been. What do I care for their yellin'? They'd made jest as much noise if it had been the other way. You was the fellers I was thinkin' of, the bunch from Crow Island, an' it aint Jackey Egan who come back; it was the man you made of him."

A Pair Of Popinjays

THE Progress of Ferdy McPhule, young man about town, leads him through another surprising experience. One of the best of Miss Hamilton's excellent stories.

By GERTRUDE BROOKE HAMILTON

Author of "A Woman," "The Game and the Poacher," "Lots of Money," etc.

VIOLA TOWNE and Will Scott both had brilliant minds. Both were dynamic, driving and delightful. Both were young and good to look at.

Viola and Will had first met at the six hundred and seventy-third banquet of the Twilight Club in New York City. They had both been hailed at the banquet as young story-tellers of extraordinary promise: Viola had been publicly praised for the vivid realism of a pen that feared neither man nor God, and Scott had been acclaimed apostle of new literary creeds.

The aftermath of the banquet had been collaboration on several short stories. Then Viola and Will had written a play together, and had suffered together the agony of having the 'script stolen from under their artistic, unpractical hands. Eschewing the fascinations of drama, Viola and Will had collaborated on a novel laid on and about the river-piers of Manhattan. The human rats who live near the water, the desperate who seek oblivion in the water, and the pleasure-seekers who sail on the water had been woven together in a fearless, delicate tangle. The book of "The Pier" had caused a stir. But on the eve of a second collaboration, Viola and Will had quarreled.

CHARLES B. DAVIDS and Will Scott were talking in Scott's bachelor quarters in the Gainsborough on West Fifty-ninth Street. Davids, an ugly, witty man, with a long line of literary successes to his credit, was brutally rooting through a nearly finished manuscript of Scott's.

"The style is there, and the charm, but where's your punch?" demanded Davids. "Where's the grip of 'The Pier'?"

Scott gave his friend an intolerant look.

"Don't get riled," said Davids, bright, pig-like eyes twinkling. "You called me in to get my opinion of your masterpiece, didn't you?"

"I surely did," replied Scott, face reddening under Davids' amused regard. He added emphatically: "This novel, 'The Hurdy-gurdy,' is the best thing I've done. The story's there, and I'm conveying admirably the thing I'm *trying* to convey."

"Admirably—and rottenly," snorted Davids.

Scott turned hotly in his chair. "What's wrong with the stuff?"

"You need your collaborator," retorted Davids.

Scott jumped up and gave his counselor a blasting look. He walked to the window and sprung the shade to the top, letting in the streaked glow of a Manhattan sunset. It illuminated his set face and angry eyes.

"Tut, tut," said Davids. "You've let fools turn your head, and she's let them turn hers. I know both of you. I ad-

mire you both. And I consider you a pair of popinjays."

"The term fits her like a glove," agreed Scott, over his shoulder. "She's eaten up with conceit and egotism."

"She used identically the same words in speaking of you yesterday," imparted Davids.

"She did?" Scott wheeled about. "I've no doubt," he said ill-temperedly. "She doesn't care what she says."

"That's why men admire her," mused Davids.

"Yes, she's excessively popular." Scott's voice scraped like a nutmeg over a grater.

"Was jealousy behind your quarrel?" asked Davids bluntly.

"No." Scott barked the word. "She has mentality. But physically, she's not my ideal."

"Mental jealousy is what I was talking about," grinned Davids, "—though a man might easily lose his head over the physical attractions of Viola Towne."

"Some asses do,"—shortly.

"Yes, so I understand. Viola lets that big temperament of hers run away with her a little bit. She's the sort of young woman who needs a boss—or a baby."

"I'd hate the job of bossing her."

"I can imagine more unpleasant jobs."

"I can't."

"Don't be peevish, Scott. You're irritated because 'The Hurdy-gurdy' isn't nearly so good as 'The Pier.'" Davids' ugly genial face was chopped up by a scintillating smile. "'Sex' is missing in your book. It lacks the 'goad.' It's like a stalled engine without fuel." Davids' guttural bass was sincere. "What are you going to do about it—let a great 'script remain unrounded?"

"What do you suggest? Crawling on my knees to her ladyship and whimpering, 'I beg a sip of your 'punch'?'"

"No; that might send her ladyship up in the air. As you say, she has plenty of egotism already. If we ladle the punch from her brain into your book, it must be done in a speak-easy, roundabout way."

"Thank you," said Scott bitterly. "I don't want any sneaked sips from her brain!"

"It isn't what you want—it's what you need," grunted Davids.

"When I need it, I'll go after it."

"No; that would inflate her self-esteem." Davids' face screwed in cogitation. "Beyond doubt, you have the big things in 'The Hurdy-gurdy,' a bigger possibility than 'The Pier.' But, without your collaborator, the story is hardly more than a flow of exquisite thoughts. It needs the rip-tear of her pen."

WILL SCOTT returned to his desk and put it in order. He snapped on the green-shaded reading-lamp and tore up a batch of waste pages.

Davids' excessively small eyes all but disappeared in the scrambled map of his rotund face as he squinted at the pile of manuscript on Scott's desk. He gave a short, emphatic snort.

"I have it!" he said. "Are you willing to let 'The Hurdy-gurdy' be brought out anonymously?"

"I want it brought out perfectly," granted Scott.

"You admit that it needs the 'Towne' touch?"

"Yes."

"Good! You'll feel better for having said that—you'll sleep better to-night and wake up refreshed in the morning. Here is a suggestion: Hand over your 'Hurdy-gurdy' manuscript to another man, and let the man approach Viola Towne on the subject of collaboration. In the deal with her let him appear as author of the story. Let her leap upon the 'script, as you know she will, and set it blazing. Let the man play the goat and the go-between, carrying the revised copies back and forth. Bring the book out anonymously. Allow the goat to draw a tithe of the royalties. Double yours and Viola's fortunes. Preserve your asinine pride. Give the public the perfected 'Hurdy-gurdy.'"

Scott made a ball of the pages he had torn up and slung it across the room. "I don't care for the suggestion, Davids," he said unhappily.

"It's a bully one—carry it out."

"It doesn't appeal to me as possible."

"Why not?"

"Too hectic."

"Not a bit."

"It would be nerve-racking."

"You need your nerves racked—so does Viola. You need a term of probation, a period of stress, a few knuckling-down raps on your overdeveloped craniums."

"Perhaps."

"And the public needs the perfect 'Hurdy-gurdy.'"

"It surely does—I agree with you there." Scott looked at his manuscript with a horizontal line across his forehead. "The book does need her," he with difficulty yielded.

SCOTT roused himself and gave his friend an almost hostile glance. "How find the goat?" he asked angrily. "I couldn't trust my 'script to a shyster—or send a shyster to her."

"Of course not," replied Davids. "The goat would have to possess a zest for adventure, honor, diplomacy, a gentle sense of humor, and a conscience not adverse to financial benefit."

"Where can be the fellow be found?"—gratingly.

Davids' small left eye executed a whimsical wink under the greenish light from the reading-lamp. "Do you know Ferdy McPhule?" he asked.

"I do not," replied Scott.

"He has an apartment below-stairs," said Davids. "He is an affable, blond young gentleman, a trifle giddy and glib, a bit susceptible, somewhat feather-brained—but in the main he's O. K. Throw an adventure at Ferdy McPhule, and he'll leap to catch it."

"Does he write?" asked Scott.

"No! He draws a steady salary. Every day, from I imagine quite early in the morning to quite late in the afternoon, his blithesome presence enlivens the ponderous atmosphere of a Fifth Avenue trust-company."

"How could he find time to play the goat?" Scott demanded with distaste.

"McPhule's sort always find time to play."

"Why should he take the time to oblige us?"

"He's an obliging fellow." Davids' eyes twinkled upon Scott's telephone. "Shall I summon him to a conference?" he asked, stepping toward the instrument.

"Do what pleases you," replied Scott hotly. He stared at his unrounded, incomplete manuscript. The horizontal line plowed a furrow across his fine forehead.

THE telephone rang in Ferdy McPhule's bachelor quarters in the Gainsborough.

Ferdy, smartly tailored, magnetic and self-enthusiastic, sprinted to answer the call. His "Hello" was a buoyant question-mark.

"This is Charley Davids," came in a choppy bass. "I'm in Scott's rooms here—Will Scott, the novelist. We have a proposition to put up to you. Apartment Seven-B. Can you join us?"

"Sure," said Ferdy McPhule.

He left his apartment with a light step.

Ferdy McPhule listened with surface attention to the suggestions that Charles B. Davids laid amusedly before him.

At the finish Ferdy gave a slight, high laugh. "Why not?" he said gayly.

Davids drew up contracts between Scott and McPhule, allowing McPhule a tithe of the novel's royalties.

Ferdy signed his name with a heedless flourish.

Scott affixed his signature with drawn brows.

"It's a situation that may take serious turns," Scott said to McPhule, regarding him keenly.

"I like a road with many turns," flipped Ferdy.

"Have you met Miss Towne?"—curtly.

"No, I haven't."

"Are you familiar with her work?"

"I can't say that I am."

"You haven't read 'The Pier'—or any of her short stories?"

"No, I'm not much of a reader."

"Evidently. Miss Towne is perhaps the most widely read author in America."

Ferdy elevated his eyebrows.

"She is diabolically clever," said Scott, face darkening.

Ferdy straddled a chair and crossed his arms on the back.

"You'll have to carry it off with a high hand," warned Scott.

Ferdy beat a tuneful tattoo on the back of the chair.

"You think you can put it across?" A current of anxiety tightened Scott's brusque question.

"I'm sure that I can," smiled Ferdy.

Charles B. Davids, small eyes gleaming, went again to the telephone. He called up the Hotel Seville, where lived Viola Towne.

Davids informed Miss Towne, in his whimsical, guttural bass, that a brainy, bashful young friend of his had just brought him, in timorous confidence, the partially written manuscript of a remarkable but painfully crude novel.

Will Scott, stationed tautly behind the telephone, shook his fist at Davids' fat back.

With chuckling emphasis, Davids lamented to Miss Towne that his young friend suffered from chronic shyness and self-depreciation. . . . .

Ferdy McPhule held up both hands. "Please, please!" he mocked.

In brief, Davids begged Miss Towne to give a boosting half-hour chat to his charmless young friend and his charming novel.

"You see," Davids explained to Ferdy as he turned from the telephone, "there's a bit of mental jealousy in the case, and I thought it best to make you appear a bore."

"What did she say?" snapped Scott.

"She said, in her most entrancing tones, 'Send him along,'" snickered Davids.

FERDY McPHULE'S mental guess at what Viola Towne would be like hit cleverness and missed beauty.

McPhule had met quite a few types of women: the semi-artistic professional woman; the simple, sinful woman; the lovely innocent woman; the warmly dangerous married woman; the woman with lots of money. He had yet to come into contact with the flamboyantly intellectual woman, perhaps the most startling of the many colorful illustrations blazoned across the pages of Manhattan.

When Ferdy saw Viola Towne he executed a mental somersault.

She was tall, very tall, with flaming sapphire eyes, luminous, analytical glances, a divine carriage and oddly growing hair that looked tawny under one light and sepia under another.

Ferdy straightened and settled his well-put-on coat. He had the manuscript of "The Hurdy-gurdy" in a portfolio under his arm, and he was fresh from Will Scott's presence, the author having walked with him to within a block of the Hotel Seville.

"Mr. Davids tells me you have a big story half written," Viola Towne said to Ferdy, in a bell-toned, ringing voice. She held out her hand to him.

Ferdy peeled off his suède glove to shake hands with her. "This opportunity is a rare one," he said gracefully.

Her splendidly powerful glance summed up the jeweled ring on his finger, the flawless fit of his coat and the sleekness of his ash-blond hair, as she seated herself with a free bend of long limb and swing of shapely, ringless hand. Her sapphire smock-blouse might have been bought for a couple of dollars; her graceful black velvet skirt was shabby; her beautiful feet were encased in flat slippers of red morocco, and her filmy stockings were flame-color.

Ferdy sat opposite to her with Scott's portfolio on his knees. Beside him stood a typewriter-stand littered with work; books and magazines were everywhere in the sunny, commodious room; all the window-shades were rolled to the top. The flare of light falling on Viola's odd hair gave it a copper tinge and encircled her striking head like an aureole.

"It's good of you to give a half-hour, Miss Towne," McPhule said easily.

"I don't know whether you'll get much out of it," she replied, with the manner of a queen.

"I suppose it's not for me to say how much I've already derived," said Ferdy, with his touch of winning earnestness, generally used with telling effect.

Her sapphire eyes, in the full glow of the sunlight, grew cold. She gave an inquiring glance at the portfolio.

Ferdy opened the portfolio and took out Scott's manuscript. "You'll like

it," he predicted, and rattled into a volley of words:

"It's a bully story. Once you begin you can't put it down. We've called it 'The Hurdy-gurdy.' What do you think of the name? I rather like a name that keeps you guessing, don't you? It sort of piques your interest, makes you want to see the show—I mean, read the tale. The characters are supposed to dance all through the story to the measure of the hurdy-gurdy. It's a tale of the New York streets—something like 'The Pier,' you know. You'll like it immensely." With a surface laugh, and flushing, Ferdy held out the batch of manuscript.

THE full searchlight of Viola's richly blue eyes had focused on McPhule. Her intent brows drew together in a half-frown as she took the story from him. She put it on her shabby lap and turned some of the pages.

Ferdy watched her with zest. With eyes down, figure in repose, and long, creative hand turning the typed pages, she suggested a lioness browsing in the sun of the jungle.

He was unprepared for the effect that the manuscript had on her. Color as rich as full-bodied wine dyed her face and throat; she dragged her eyes up with difficulty. "You have—charming style," she admitted.

Ferdy flushed again, and attempted a flippant gesture.

"It looks delightful," she insisted, eyes golden with intelligence. "May I read it through?"

"Certainly," replied Ferdy.

"Perhaps you'd rather read it to me," she suggested.

"Oh, no; I'm shy," laughed Ferdy, waving a ringed hand.

She gave him a puzzled glance.

"I'd make a mess of it," he glibly assured her. "But I'll be awfully grateful for your advice, and for any help that you can give me on the book. It seems to need something, though it sounds all right to me."

"You're satisfied with it?" she questioned.

"Oh, no, not a bit,"—catching himself up. "It's a patch quilt with lots of the stitches left out."

"I'll read it," she said, drawing her chair to the center-table. "You can amuse yourself with some of my current short-stories." She indicated a pile of magazines on the wide window-seat, placed the bulk of manuscript on the table in front of her and riveted her whole attention on the story.

If she had planned it, she could not have thought out a more effective scheme to catch the lightly erratic and slightly satiated senses of Ferdy McPhule. He was conscious of a distinct wave of exhilaration in finding himself ignored by a beautiful female. Of a type peculiarly attractive to women, Ferdy had been petted and pursued by them.

He sauntered over to the pile of magazines, ensconced himself in the wide window-seat and read some of Viola's stories. Their realism and idealism punched down into a new part of him. He looked at her curiously, and with a little bit of awe. She was fathoms deep in Scott's story.

Ferdy's superficial gray-blue eyes turned to the window. Shadows chased and shifted across his cherubic countenance.

HE waited, content, until she had finished "The Hurdy-gurdy." She looked up with a long sigh and a coming-back of her deep-sea eyes.

"It's here," she said reverently. "It has caught the length and glamour of the streets, but it needs a few mental subway-explosions—and harrowing accidents—and more madness." She touched the 'script with her hand. "You should have a collaborator, Mr. McPhule."

It was so simple, the way she tumbled into the trap Charles B. Davids had laid for her!

Ferdy stood up and executed a slightly mocking bow. "I know it, Miss Towne," he answered, with his persuasive smile.

"I'll write it with you," she said definitely. "We can make a splendid thing of it."

"That's fine of you, Miss Towne."

"The book is fine—but you write with too much restriction. You've penned yourself up with your idea,

rather than let your pen go wallowing in your subject. When we wrote 'The Pier' I wanted actually to become a water-rat—I wanted to spend my time in rags and filth."

"You did?"—with incredulity.

"'The Hurdy-gurdy' is the same sort of stuff. To catch its color and emotion we should go straight to the streets."

"As you say," conceded Ferdy, settling his coat.

"If I may speak frankly," she went on, bell-toned voice gilding her vigor, "you must shake the rings from your fingers and the bells from your toes."

"I'm game," he smiled, slipping the jeweled ring from his finger and putting it into the pocket of his form-fitting vest.

"It's hard to believe that you wrote this story," she mused, eyes on his.

"You never can tell," said Ferdy, flushing.

Her glance went away and came back. "Do you devote all your time to writing?" she asked.

"No," replied Ferdy; "I'm paying teller in the Union Trust."

"That's too bad; mechanical work drains art."

"I'm not half bad as a mechanic," he ventured.

"Which shows that half your heart is there—what have you left to give?"

"Only half-heartedness, I suppose."

"If you're going to write with me, you'll have to be whole-hearted."

"I will," he promised.

He crossed from the window-seat to the table and stood looking down at her shapely, creative hands with something like wistfulness. "I'm yours to command," he added. "Everything shall be as you say."

"You're unlike some collaborators," she half-smiled. "Some of them are quarrelsome."

"So I've heard."

SHE brought herself back to the manuscript. "We should hire a hurdy-gurdy, become Italians and make a tour of the streets,"

"It is the thing to do," he agreed.

She lifted her eyes—they had a gratified expression. "You'd do it?"

He gave his easy laugh. "Why not?"

She stood up and held out her hand. "There are no two words in the dictionary that I like better than 'Why not.'" she said.

He shook hands with her. "I'm free every day after banking-hours," he told her. "The time is yours."

"We'll start to-morrow," she decided, face alight. "We'll get our color and action, and then settle down to real work."

"Meaning?" he inquired delicately.

"The scribbling part,"—impatiently. "The hard hours when we're bound to tussle and pit our brain-force against each other."

Ferdy tapped his forehead. "I hope there's something there," he said derisively.

"Your story shows there is much there," she encouraged.

"But my countenance gives me away! May I come to-morrow at five?"

"Yes."

"I'll bring the hurdy-gurdy along."

"Fine! You'll have to wig your part—you're so blond."

"So will you—you're so gold."

"I'll look the swarthy peasant, never fear."

"Fear and I have yet to meet."

"I believe it!" she laughed.

He picked up his hat and stick. The chimes in the Little Church Around the Corner were ringing the vesper hour.

"Will you leave the manuscript with me?" she asked. "I'd like to go over it again."

"Sure," slipped easily from his lips. He extended his hand again. "To-morrow at five."

The pressure of her fingers was vital and strong, her face fascinating in its brilliancy. He went from her with a sensation of having been refilled.

At the corner of Fifth Avenue and Twenty-ninth Street a big, tense figure bore down upon Ferdy McPhule.

"You stayed four hours!" barked Will Scott.

"I did?" said Ferdy, elevating his eyebrows.

Scott confronted McPhule. "Where's my manuscript?" he snapped.

"I left it with her."

"What did she say about it?"

"She strengthened our opinion that it needs a collaborator."

"She's going to collaborate on it?"

"With me, yes." Ferdy lightly hooked his arm into Scott's arm and started up the Avenue.

In an easy flow of words, McPhule gave Scott the benefit of his scene with Viola Towne. He gave it word for word, like an agreeable human dictaphone. When he finished, Scott cranked him up again and demanded a second rendition.

The forthcoming hurdy-gurdy adventure caused Scott to say, morosely: "Watch out—she'll make you dance the monkey!"

EVERY late afternoon for a couple of weeks, a tall, slim Italian lad with gray-blue eyes, and a tall Italian girl with a divine carriage, a bell-tone laugh and analytical, sapphire eyes, started from the corner of Twenty-ninth Street and Madison Avenue with one of the ancient street pianos that are a part of the New York street life.

Their tour started on the East Side; then it covered the West Side—uptown and downtown and in the city's chambers. They were such a blithesome, happy-go-lucky pair of street Italians that, unawares, the seared streets gave up their secrets to them, as old people mumble sacred confidences to the young.

Under the lad's black wig a brain was quickening, and under his velvet jacket a heart was turning somersaults. Ferdy McPhule had plunged into the adventure to pass away time and make life interesting. From the first, Viola Towne had been able to arouse brainstorms in him. He had been in love before, many times; love had come in through his impulsive heart, through his volatile senses and his elusive soul. This was the first time love had come in through his mind. Mental love is potent and powerful.

A goading dissatisfaction hit Ferdy McPhule. Stepping at the end of every day from the routine of bank life to the color and motion of street life, he taxed his tongue and wits to keep pace with Viola Towne. He began to hate Will Scott.

The hatred was heartily returned. While the copy was being gathered, Scott stalked like a specter on the edge of the process.

Satiated with the song of the streets, Viola Towne announced it time to settle down to work. Ferdy, on Charles B. Davids' advice, stated that *his* scribbling must be done in private. He carried chapters back and forth between Viola Towne and Will Scott; he made notes for Scott—and caught, for Scott, the rare heat and delirium of Viola's creative fever.

"The Hurdy-gurdy" was different from its predecessor "The Pier." Underneath its realism and charm ran a volatile, half-flippant, half-fatalistic lure, given it by Ferdy McPhule.

VIOLA TOWNE did not want the novel brought out anonymously. She sent for Charles B. Davids.

"Tell me the truth," she said. "Isn't there a third person mixed up in this thing?"

Davids' small, pig-like eyes twinkled, and he grunted.

"You must tell me," she said, with a throb in her voice. "You're not dealing with an immature girl, or a block of ice."

His quizzing gaze took stock of her glowing looks. The flame-color of her smock-blouse brought out her vivid eyes and hair.

"Did Will Scott write that first manuscript Ferdy McPhule brought me?" she asked, without parley.

"Do you doubt the brain ability of my bashful young friend?" demanded Davids, face chopping into a smile.

"I know Will's inimitable style." Her voice was mellow. "'Great Scott,' I used to call him."

"My poor young friend!" exclaimed Davids, reaching for his hat. "Is he left out, ignored, forgotten?"

"Please tell me, Charley," she urged, stepping between him and the door. She was at her best standing, because of the long, lioness lines of her limbs and her regal carriage. "The book must have the two names," she stated, coloring.

"Yours and McPhule's?" queried Davids.

"Stop teasing, Charley! Tell me. Hasn't Will Scott been collaborating under cover with me?"

"Tut, tut—under cover? I thought you a frank young woman, with a *penchant* for the open!" Davids was rooting out of the conversation, and of the room.

"Go on," she said tolerantly, stepping aside. "You're an old villain, Charley, and behind the whole silly stunt. Ferdy McPhule is coming at seven. I'll get it out of him."

WHEN Ferdy came at seven, Viola said: "When you go back to the Gainsborough, tell Will Scott that I want to see him."

A flicker passed over Ferdy's face. "I don't quite get you," he said, in their street vernacular.

"That *was* handing you one over, signor," she flashed.

"A grand slam, signorita."

"A devilish knock-out, signor."

"But really, I don't know what you mean."

"Yes you do—don't fence."

"You're putting me on a fence and sticking me from below with your foils."

"Why can't you come down off the fence? Are you a coward?"

"Far be cowardice from me!"

"Then go fetch Will Scott."

"That's not a fencing rôle."

"But you've been playing the rôle of 'fetch and carry.'"

"I'll be glad to roll out of it."

"That's uncivil."

"Can you expect civility of me when commanded to cut loose from my fetish?" His gray-blue eyes went from her tawny head to her beautiful feet.

He straightened. "Can you expect it of me?" he repeated, in a wrenched voice, height matching hers.

Her frown died before his utter seriousness.

He made a gesture of entreaty—not to claim her bodily, though she was beautiful, but to be placed on a level with her mind, to keep step with her in the long walk toward immortality.

He saw in a second that the thought was all but ludicrous to her, and in a second he was himself again.

"Of course, Will Scott wrote 'The Hurdy-gurdy,'" he said, with his sudden surface laugh.

Her finely molded face lifted like the face of a lioness when she is sure of her mate.

With a long, majestic step, she moved to the telephone. Forgetful of Ferdy McPhule, she took the receiver from the hook and called for the Gainsborough.

Ferdy gave a mute look about the room—at the sunlight, at the window-shades rolled to the top, at the typewriter-stand littered with work.

The finished manuscript of "The Hurdy-gurdy" lay on the center-table.

McPhule took from his pocket the contract that would allow him a tithe of the royalties and flipped it into a waste-basket. He went over to the center-table and turned a few typed pages of the novel, soon to be advertised throughout the country as the full-zenith product of two big, brilliant minds.

Viola Towne, at the telephone, said richly: "Is it you, Great Scott?"

Ferdy settled his well-put-on coat. The shadow of brain-power that Viola had brought to his handsome countenance established itself about his gray-blue eyes and strengthened his lovable mouth.

He picked up his hat and stick and hurried to the door. As he passed out, Ferdy McPhule took his jeweled ring from his pocket and slipped it back on his finger.

The next episode in the Progress of Ferdy McPhule will be described in the July issue of THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE—on the news-stands June 1st.

That Gratitude Stuff

Two men and a girl—and a rivalry fought out in an unusual way. . . . . A romance of railroad life, written from an intimate acquaintance, and in that terse, convincing fashion so characteristic of Mr. Sanders' work.

By CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS
Author of "Pat Turns Over a New Leaf," "Taken at the Flood," etc.

ADLARD and Masterson decided that they were men of sense. They knew that both of them could not marry Margaret Stewart. But why be petty about it? Why not get together and talk the thing over? Then let the best man win. So they agreed.

Their decision grew out of the respect in which each held the other—and something more. The road had no better runners than those two. Everybody conceded that. Each had a calm confidence in his own ability, and each was broad enough to recognize the ability of the other.

They were not very well acquainted. They ran freight, and when one was in, the other was more than likely to be out on the road. It was through the girl that they came to know that they were common suitors. She mentioned Adlard's name to Masterson.

"A good man," said Masterson. "A first-rate runner."

She mentioned Masterson's name to Adlard.

"A first-rate man," said Adlard. "A good runner."

A shadow of thoughtfulness came to the girl's face. She liked both these big men. They were the kind of men by whose attentions a girl is flattered. Margaret was a stenographer in a downtown office building. There is no romance in stenography, and Margaret had had her dreams.

She had been besought by many men, but she had turned a deaf ear to all of them. Then Adlard had drifted her way and then Masterson. There had been little interval between her introduction to each of them, and she was still studying them and wondering about them when they came to their decision that they were men of sense.

"We could easy pull off the jealousy stuff," said Adlard as they sat with their feet under the table of a downtown restaurant, "but what's the use? Margaret is wise enough to make up her own mind. If she makes it up against me, I'll drop out without a kick."

"Same here," said Masterson. "We're not a couple of kids. We're both past thirty. I'm of a peaceable disposition. If Margaret wants me, all right. If she wants you, that'll be all right. She knows her own business better than we can tell it to her."

And so, after more talk along the same line, they parted the best of friends. Or at least they thought they were the best of friends. Each was sure the other had no chance.

AS they parted, each had made up his mind that he would hasten matters with Margaret. Masterson had the first opportunity. While Adlard pushed his engine through the dusk of a summer evening, Masterson made his way to the Stewart home. As he

went up the walk, he could see Margaret's white-clad figure sitting in a rocking-chair. As he mounted the steps, she rose and came to meet him. The pressure of her hand was warm and friendly.

Masterson felt no confusion. He looked straight into her eyes and appraised her loveliness as much as the dark would permit. When he began to talk, he talked in steady, even tones. Masterson was no embarrassed lover. He had too much confidence in himself. He felt no uneasiness about the outcome of the proposal he was about to make.

They sat on the front porch till ten o'clock. Margaret's father and mother had gone to bed. The house within was quiet and dark. Masterson put his question, in quiet, steady tones:

"Margaret, will you marry me?"

It was very still on the front porch for a full half-minute. It was so still that Masterson, in some surprise, turned his eyes on the girl. She was sitting too far away from him to permit him to touch her. In the dark he could get only an outline of her, but he could imagine her big, brown eyes, her fair, soft hair, her tempting lips, the shapeliness of her strong figure. He rose and stood before her, a tall, broad-shouldered man, a man whose blood ran red and whose passions were of the simplest.

"Well?" he said, and his voice was not so gentle.

He was astonished and a little angered that Margaret should take so long with her answer. She lifted her head with the quick movement of decision.

"I can't, Mr. Masterson."

For a moment the engineer could not speak. He thought somehow that there must be a mistake. After his numbness his brain began to work in flashes. He recalled every look which he had thought tender, every word that spoke of intimacy, every pressure of the hand at meeting and parting. Then an anger that he had fought with all his life swept over him.

"You can't?" he repeated. "What do you mean by that?"

The girl was no weakling. She felt no timidity as she saw his temper break its bounds. She stood her ground hardily. She knew she had been innocent of guile. Masterson had nothing to blame her for. She had merely permitted him to call, as she might have permitted any one of a hundred men.

"I mean that I can't marry you," she said. "I don't care for you enough."

"Who do you care for, then?" he demanded. "Adlard?"

The girl rose. Her face had gone a little white. A tempered anger was shining in her own eyes.

"You have no right to ask me a question like that," she said.

Masterson caught her wrist. He wasn't going to be trifled with. He was going to find out about this thing right now.

"I'm asking it, anyhow," he said. "Is it Adlard?"

"Let me go," Margaret said coldly.

"When you tell me if it's Adlard, I'll let you go," Masterson said. "Me and Adlard had an agreement about you—to play the game square. If he's been up to any underhand tricks, I want to know about it."

The girl struggled to free her wrist, but Masterson held her as he would have held a child. Suddenly he put his arm about her waist and drew her up to him.

"Is it Adlard?" he demanded.

"No," the girl breathed. "It isn't Adlard. Let me go."

He freed her. His brain cleared. His anger had always been like that.

"I'm sorry," he said in a low voice. "I went too far. You took me off my feet for a minute. . . . . Isn't there any chance for me?"

The girl escaped into the house and fastened the screen door behind her.

"I wish you'd go," she said. "And don't come back."

"Very well," said Masterson. "I'll go. But you may be sorry for this some day."

THE girl listened till his footsteps died away on the sidewalk and then she began to cry in a flood of soundless weeping. She spent a sleepless night and an unhappy day.

But she was sitting on the front porch that night when Adlard came up the walk, as Masterson had done the night before. And her red lips curved in a smile that for her was rather tremulous. The smile was gone when she shook hands with Adlard.

Adlard had not meant to propose that night. He wanted to wait a little. He wanted to give her time. But he found something strange and new in her to-night. She seemed to have lost some of her poise. He was drawn to her as he had never been drawn before. She stirred his pulses strangely. His question dropped from his lips almost before he was aware of it:

"Margaret, will you marry me? I wish you would."

"Yes," she whispered.

"I'll have to tell Masterson about this," he chuckled after a while.

He felt her hand flutter in his.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "Has Masterson been doing anything? Has he been bothering you?"

She was still somewhat aghast at Masterson's red anger. She could still feel the clutch of his hand on her wrist. And so she told Adlard what Masterson had done.

Adlard was no man's fool. He showed no excitement. He only soothed her and told her never to mind. He knew that if he stormed she would exact a promise from him to leave Masterson alone. And he had no intention of leaving Masterson alone.

After he left her, late in the evening, he let his own rage burst its bounds. All the way to his boarding-house he cursed Masterson under his breath. When he reached home, he called the yards and ascertained Masterson's whereabouts on the road. Then he figured. He was too nearly out to meet Masterson when Masterson got in. They would pass somewhere on the road. Those meetings and passings might go on for a week. He called up again and asked for a lay-off. It was promptly denied him.

Next morning as Adlard sped into the dawn there was a letter in the rack for Masterson. Adlard met him out on the road. They were both wheeling their trains in the way that had got them their reputations. Adlard glanced across at Masterson's cab as the two engines came abreast. He could just glimpse Masterson sitting up in his seat, with his hand on the throttle. Masterson did not look Adlard's way. Adlard emptied the vial of his wrath on the other engineer's head again.

When Masterson got in he took his letter from the rack. It read:

> I know all about your visit to Miss Stewart the other night. You're a dirty whelp. I intend to wallop you the minute I can lay hands on you.

"Yes, you will," said Masterson grimly. "You better go into training for that stunt, fellow."

THEY met and passed and met and passed again for a week. Then the gap between them closed, and they found that Masterson was first out after Adlard at the western terminal.

Adlard discovered this with utter satisfaction. As a good general does, he mapped his plan of campaign. He would not try to "get" Masterson at this end. He would delay till he got in at the east end of the division. He would wait for Masterson then. It would be night, and he would have his chance without fear of molestation. For he had no notion that Masterson would not fight back. He didn't underestimate Masterson. He knew Masterson had the courage of a strong man. And he also had the courage of a brute, Adlard told himself. But he would "get" Masterson. He had to "get" him for what he had done to Margaret.

He strode to the office with the step of elation when he was called for first "52." He found second "52" was also ready. The two trains would start right on time, Masterson following on Adlard's heels. Adlard was fully content with the situation.

"Masterson draws that second Fifty-two, doesn't he?" he asked the operator, as he and his conductor sat in the telegraph office, waiting for their clearances.

"He do," the operator replied. "What's the matter? 'Fraid he'll chase you home?"

"Forget it," said Adlard, so savagely

that the operator looked at him in surprise.

As they sat there in silence after that, the door was opened. Masterson's bulky figure filled the doorway. He caught sight of Adlard.

Soon after he had received the note from Adlard Masterson had heard that Adlard and Margaret were engaged. He had had a few more minutes of flaming rage in which he had cried out against the girl for deceiving him. He was sure she had been engaged to Adlard when she had repulsed him, and that she had lied to him about it.

So he stood in the doorway, eying Adlard malevolently. Adlard returned the look steadily.

"Well," Masterson ground out, "why don't you start it?"

"I'll start it soon enough to suit you," Adlard returned. "I'm due to take out a Fifty-two in a few minutes. I'll see you when we get in."

"Yeh," Masterson sneered, "you'll see me when we get in. By God, you're a cheap four-flusher."

Adlard half rose but caught himself in time. A fight here in the office would mean the carpet and possibly dismissal for him. He couldn't afford that now, for Margaret's sake.

"I'll just put that in your bill," he whispered.

"And I'll pay that bill any time," Masterson returned. "If you don't collect it before long, I'll ram it down your throat."

They got away on time without orders. Masterson chased Adlard all the way. Adlard kept to the schedule.

They came to Arlington, the first station west of a despatchers' office, opened a year before in the middle of the division. Traffic had become so heavy that the despatchers could not handle the trains over the long subdivision. The new office had been opened to ease the strain. Another road, coming up from the south, had offices there also.

The block at Arlington was set to let them in. They would have to stop at the despatchers' office to register and get clearances or orders. As Adlard came in sight of the distant signal, his watch showed noon. The sun was beating down outside in a brassy glare. In the engine the heat was great. Adlard wiped his face and wished himself in. He was glad that the cool of the evening would have descended on the parched earth before he should meet Masterson for that reckoning.

HE pulled down past the office, so that Masterson could pull in behind him. This left the engines equally distant from the office. Adlard went around his engine, and then started along the south track. Coming from the other direction was Masterson.

The two men were a hundred yards from the office when Adlard suddenly stopped. Then he broke into a run. He had seen a spurt of flame from the top story of the despatchers' office. The engineer was quite well aware of the peril of fire in that building. It was built all of wood, and its construction had been hasty to meet the emergency. On the ground floor were the offices of the officials of the two roads. The despatchers' offices were on the second floor. Up there where Adlard had seen the spurt of flame were the clerks' quarters. Adlard knew that among them were young men and half a dozen girls. There were no fire-escapes.

The engineer came breathlessly to the front door. Masterson was just behind him.

"Did you see that fire?" Adlard asked.

"I saw it," said Masterson, impersonally. "We better get up there. Those kids'll be in a panic."

As they started up the stairs the two trick despatchers came tumbling down.

"Don't go up there," one of them cried. "The place is all on fire. The flames are eating down through the ceiling."

"There's some kids on the second floor, aren't there?" Adlard asked.

The trick man's face went white. He clutched at the bannister.

"I forgot about them," he said huskily. He half turned about. "I'll go back with you," he added. "We were so busy the fire kind of took us off our guard."

"Never mind," Adlard said. "Masterson and I can handle it. You get

outside and send out calls for help. We may need it."

The engineer turned and began climbing the stairs two at a time. At the first landing there was a turn from the one stairway to the other. As he set his foot on the steps of the second stair, he could hear the crackle of flames above him and the pungent odor of smoke drifted down. Then above the crackle of the flames there was the sound of a sudden rush of feet. Midway on the stair, Adlard, with Masterson at his back, came upon half a dozen men and three girls. The men were forcing the girls ahead of them. The girls were wide-eyed with fear.

"There's three other girls up there," one of the men said. "We couldn't get them to come. They act so strange. They just stand at the windows and stare down. They act as if they were stunned."

Adlard and Masterson brushed past them. On the top floor they came to a closed door. Adlard threw it open. The hot breath of the flames swept out on them. Adlard stepped inside. Masterson quickly followed him and closed the door.

The room was filled with smoke, and tongues of flame were licking up through the floor. The heat was stifling. Adlard, peering through the smoke, saw two girls near a window. They were standing motionless, gazing at the tracks below them. The two men ran to them and each seized one in his arms. They carried them to the door and put them down outside.

"Beat it down the stairs," Masterson said. "Do you want to be burned alive?"

The suddenness of their action seemed to rouse the girls. They glanced about them, and then they scurried for the stairs.

"There's one more, they said," Adlard said. "We'd better get to her pretty quick. That fire is going to break through in a minute."

THEY reëntered the room. For an instant they could see nothing. The smoke was increasing in volume, and they knew that the flames would be all about them at any moment. They dropped to their hands and knees and began to crawl across the room. The floor was so hot that it almost blistered their palms as they made their slow progress. At the far side of the room Adlard stood up.

"Look there," he whispered.

Masterson followed the direction of his gaze with eyes that burned and smarted. He saw a young girl standing on the window-ledge. The window before her was open. She was staring down with fascinated eyes. From below came shouts of warning. Adlard saw that she was poised to spring.

"I wouldn't jump if I were you," the engineer said, quite calmly.

At the sound of his voice the girl turned. She wavered so that Adlard thought she must topple from the sill. But when she discerned his figure through the smoke, she grasped the side of the window and stayed herself.

"We've come to get you," Adlard said in a low voice. "You'll be all right in a minute."

He moved slowly toward her and she stood on her perilous perch watching him. When he was within three feet of her he suddenly sprang and clutched her and pulled her to the floor. She went limp in his arms. He lifted her and deposited her in Masterson's arms.

"You get her out," Adlard said. "I'll just take a look in the room beyond and see if everything is all right. There might be more."

Masterson took the girl without a word. He moved toward the door. As he opened it, he called back over his shoulder:

"You better not waste any time. This thing is a shell and it's liable to go any minute. When it goes it will go fast."

"I'll come in a minute," Adlard said.

He heard Masterson close the door to prevent a draft. He started through the smoke toward a door at the far end of the big room. Though he did not know it, the room beyond the door was used only as a sort of storeroom. No one entered it except for supplies. The chance that anyone was in that room was remote.

Adlard opened the door abruptly. Directly opposite the door was an open

window. As Adlard opened the door there was a roar of flames. They leaped out at the engineer and almost enveloped him. He staggered back. His jumpers and overalls were on fire, and he stopped to beat this out with his hands.

He dropped to his hands and knees, but the floor was so hot that he could not bear to put his hands on it. He got to his feet with difficulty. The flames back of him were eating into the woodwork. The smoke was clearing a little, but the heat was so intense by now that he gained little from that.

As he staggered toward the door, the first of the fire ate its way through the floor. Then all about the engineer tongues of fire seemed to leap out.

He began to grow weak and dizzy. The door seemed a long way off. All he wanted now was air—fresh air. He wanted that more even than he wanted to save his life. His lungs were smarting and aching.

He turned about to grope his way to the open window where the girl had stood. But he had taken only three steps when he went to his knees. He was almost prone before he caught himself. Then, distantly, behind him, he heard Masterson's voice:

"Hay, what're you trying to do? Want to burn yourself up? This place is all on fire. Where are you?"

"Here," Adlard managed to call.

He was conscious that Masterson dashed through the fire and seized him and dragged him to the door. With Masterson's help he got downstairs and into the open. There a drink of water and half a dozen deep breaths revived him.

ADLARD was nearing the terminal. Night had fallen. He was coming in an hour late because of the fire. Masterson was somewhere in the dusk just behind him.

In the half light of the engine cab Adlard was smiling grimly to himself. He was about to even things up with Masterson. There had been a single moment after the fire when he had wavered in his determination to lick Masterson. Masterson had saved him—saved him for Margaret. He owed Masterson a good deal, but Masterson had showed no sign of softening. As he passed Adlard he had looked him up and down insolently, insultingly.

As soon as he had put his engine away, he waited outside the roundhouse. Masterson came out in five minutes. In the glow from the roundhouse windows he looked at Adlard with contempt written large on his big face. Then he turned away.

"Hay, you," said Adlard in a low voice. "I want to talk to you."

Masterson faced him.

"Well, what is it?" Masterson asked. "Something *more* I can do for you?"

They stood eye to eye for a moment, the primal emotions of hatred and hostility seething in them. Masterson's lips curled in a sneer.

"Oh, I get you," Adlard ground out. "I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that just because you gave me a hand when things looked bad for me I've got to pass up that beating I've promised you. What has your going in after me got to do with that? What's it got to do with your laying your dirty hands on my little girl and making her cry? Why, any man with red blood in his system would have done what you did for *any* other man. On the other matter we stand just as we did." His clenched hands came up slowly. "I'm off the gratitude stuff so far as that other matter goes, Masterson. And I'm going to lick hell out of you for what you did to my girl, just like I said I would."

And he did. But there was a black eye and a cut cheek and a bruised lip to account for to Margaret. He was too lately engaged not to account to her with perfect honesty.

"I knew he was a brute," she said. "I sensed it in him somehow. That's why I didn't marry him."

Adlard had a moment during which he nursed his sore lip.

"W-e-ll," he said slowly, "he was a brute to you all right, and I had to give him his beatings. But, Margaret, if it hadn't been for him maybe I wouldn't be here to-night."

And that undoubtedly was "gratitude stuff," but Masterson never knew about it.

Free Lances In Diplomacy

"TOUCHING UPON THE HONOR OF ISLAM" is the title chosen by Mr. New to describe this, one of the most remarkable adventures of the "Free Lances in Diplomacy" — that extraordinary group of daring and astute secret agents who have done so much for England, both before and during the war.

By CLARENCE HERBERT NEW

ON the forecastle of a big East Indian steamer, one morning, half a dozen Hindus were squatting around a bowl of steaming rice—pawing out of it handfuls which, for convenience, they transferred to smaller bowls from which they ate. Four were members of the Lascar crew—shipped in Bombay. The fifth had come aboard at Port Said—taking passage, for a few rupees, in the Oriental steerage. The active man with the black beard and green turban—to whom the others paid marked respect, as one who had made the pilgrimage—had taken his steerage passage from Aden, having gone down the coast of the Red Sea to Mecca on the "te-rain," as he said, over the line of the new Turkish railway.

Both the Hadji and the man from Port Said were now questioning the Lascars, who had been in London several times, as to what caravanserai was safest for Oriental travelers—which of them was noted for a minimum of insect-life—where the principal mosques were located—the bazaars—the objects of interest—whether it were cheaper to hire a camel for traveling through the country or to use the "te-rain," at native rates?

After much discussion, it was decided that the two should accompany the Lascar bo's'n to a house where he was accustomed to lodge, over Bromley way—thereby avoiding the more exorbitant charges of the sailors' lodging-houses and lower-class hotels in the Dock quarter. Getting into a third-class compartment at Central Station, they rode as far as Canning Town, where they changed to the top of a 'bus going west over the River Lea bridge into Bromley. The detached house to which the Lascar took them was owned by a thrifty Bengali who knew the requirements of his countrymen and the profit to be made thereby in a city where the usual manner of living was so entirely foreign to them. In the basement, he served coffee, *kabobs* and *pilau*—accompanied by a *narghile* from the row which hung from hooks around the room—at any hour of the day or night; and so he couldn't very well utilize that space for lodgings. But in each room of the upper floors a raised platform—eighteen inches high, by seven feet wide—ran along one side and end, with a mattress of burlap-covered excelsior two inches thick. If they lay fairly close to each other, even the smaller rooms could thus be made to accommodate half a dozen sleepers at least. And in justice to the Bengali, it must be admitted that he sprayed insect-powder over each burlap mattress

at least once every two months. Of course, each guest usually brought with him a certain number of pensioners which maintained a floating average, so to speak—but from the Oriental viewpoint, the place was fairly comfortable.

After depositing their bundles in a cellar-bin provided for that purpose, the Hadji and his friends proceeded to regale themselves with *pilau*, sweets and coffee—followed by *narghiles* and a comfortable period of relaxation upon the basement divan.

As it happened, they had the place to themselves for an hour or so. When this became apparent, occasional low remarks were tentatively dropped—considered—briefly answered. Such a matter, now,—as had been mentioned in the Mediterranean, coming up,—touching upon profit to be had from knowing ones in the great Angrezi city? Aie—there was no mistake! Such a one in Arabia had mentioned a name, and a place. If, now, a True Believer were to find that one, and obtain a certain *chit* upon paper so thin it could be rolled into a ball no bigger than a hazelnut and swallowed, upon occasion, it was said that a hundred rupees might be had for carrying such a matter to a certain other place. Behold, also—there was profit in the knowledge of where certain Turkish armies were, at that time, and how soon they would fall upon the *Angrezi* in Egypt. Touching upon the tale borne by that one who had come down the Nile to Port Said, it was sure that a *jihad* was brewing in the Soudan. Here also be knowledge that might be turned to account with certain ones who would pay for good tidings in London.

AS they smoked and talked in monosyllables, a tall Pathan came in the basement door. Clapping his hands for a *narghile* and sherbet, he proceeded to make himself comfortable near them on the rough divan. From his appearance and caste-marks, he might have been *khansamah* in the house of some wealthy personage; his clothing was of noticeably better quality than that of the Hadji. Evidently he frequented the place because of the coffee served by the Bengali, but a veiled glance or two made them doubt his being a lodger. He seemed one favored by Allah with money and position among the Angrezi; yet he bore himself with the courtesy and humility of a True Believer.

Like the average Oriental in a strange country, the last arrival minded his own business—apparently absorbed in his thoughts. Presently the Hadji ventured a guttural salutation—being a privileged person because of his pilgrimage. The stranger responded with the customary Mohammedan proverb, and permitted himself to be drawn into a somewhat halting discourse upon matters of interest to be observed in the great city of the Angrezi. The Lascar was for making the most of his time ashore—proposing that they should journey westward during the afternoon and visit this place or that. This suggestion appealed to the man from Port Said, but the Hadji preferred remaining in surroundings more familiar to him until he'd had a little more time to adjust himself—say, until night, when the wonders of the great city would be more amazing. Possibly the stranger would play with him a game of chess or parchesi, to pass the time? Aie—it was even so. The man clapped his hands—upon which, the Bengali's son fetched a chess-board and placed it upon the divan between them. The Lascar and the Port Said man went out upon their voyage of discovery—leaving the other two playing their game with great deliberation and few words. Again the room was empty save for the two players. A great stove at the further end kept the room warm, and steam from the mass of wet clothing during the forenoon had condensed upon the two small windows until the panes were opaque. In the rear, the Bengali could be heard scolding two of his women. When the stranger first came into the room, he had noticed a loose end of the Hadji's green turban which had been tucked over his left ear; there were, also, a bruise-discoloration upon the second finger of his right hand and a small birthmark upon the side of his neck. When certain that nobody could overhear them, he said—in a very low tone, without perceptibly moving his lips:

"WE couldn't be sure as to just what boat you'd catch—but there aren't over thirty of these Oriental lodging-houses within a reasonable distance of the Docks, and we've paid occasional visits to each of them during the last two weeks. There's always a lot of gossip which may be picked up—so the time was by no means wasted. Now—what do you suggest?"

"H-m-m—the Port Said man is a Turco-German spy, through whom we can reach a nest of 'em here in London. Have us followed to-night, when we go into the City. On the third day, you'd best have us both arrested by an ordinary 'Bobby' upon some petty charge—and taken before a magistrate. He will discharge the Port Said men for lack of evidence, but hold me. At night he will send me west to Scotland Yard in a closed motor-van in which there will be a change of clothing. You can sit in front with the chauffeur. Give me time to change—then speed up until you're sure nobody is following us, set me down at Number 395 Park Street and dismiss the van. My people in Park Street will recognize me, even with this beard."

Having thus briefly covered every point necessary to a thorough understanding, they switched back to Urdu and went on with their chess. That night the Lascar took his companions—with several changes from the Underground to electric tram and 'bus—to what seemed a semi-respectable boarding-house in Bethnal Green. Among the twenty or more occupants were Russians, Poles, Orientals, Swiss and West Indians—if one judged them by language and racial appearance. But had a stranger of either nationality applied for room or board, he would not have been admitted without certain passwords and credentials. Had suspicion been aroused as to where he might have obtained them, he never would have left the place alive. For a Turk may easily pass for any Mohammedan Oriental—a conspiring Soudanese for a West Indian—a Russian, Pole or Swiss for German or Hungarian. A certain rug-dealer—Dimitri, by name—was the man for whom they inquired. They were left waiting at the door until he came down to them, but after noting certain almost imperceptible peculiarities about their clothing and hearing three names mentioned, he took them to a large room upon an upper floor where other men were drinking beer and discussing certain matters in whispers.

IT was daybreak when they returned to the Bengali's—the Lascar going on to his ship in the Royal Albert Dock. Next afternoon, as the Hadji and the Port Said man were strolling along one of the East End streets, they were arrested upon the complaint of a tradesman who claimed they had purchased in his shop certain packages of tobacco for which they had paid him but half-price, claiming that to be all the stuff was worth. The Hadji had indeed bargained for two boxes of Turkish tobacco and endeavored to beat the tradesman down,—after the manner of the East, where standardization of prices is a thing unknown,—but to the best of the Port Said man's understanding, the tradesman had rather unwillingly agreed to the Hadji's valuation. As he'd really had nothing to do with the transaction, the magistrate discharged him—but at the shopkeeper's request held the Hadji.

The whole affair was so entirely the sort of thing which the Port Said man had seen happen a dozen times in various cities that he had no suspicion of its being a "plant"—and returned, next day, with the Lascar Muallim of the *Shanklin Hall,* who testified to the Hadji's being a very just and holy man, ignorant of *Angrezi* customs. The magistrate informed them that he had been about to dismiss the prisoner with a reprimand when a Scotland Yard officer had detained him on suspicion of being a German spy, and taken him away for examination. If no evidence was found against him, he would be undoubtedly set at liberty and returned to the Bengali's lodging-house within a day or two.

Meanwhile the Hadji had been taken away in a closed motor-van—which, after many twistings to baffle those who might have followed it, set him down at a small but handsome dwelling in Park

Street. When he emerged from the van, it was in an English morning suit, with a Fedora hat—and carrying a russet-leather Gladstone bag. Inside the house he proceeded to a dressing-room on the second floor with the manner of one thoroughly at home—changed into a suit of better quality—trimmed and brushed his beard to a shape nearer the Van Dyck, and then descended to a rear room, in the wainscoting of which was a concealed panel giving access to a subterranean tunnel running back under the grounds of a handsome Jacobean mansion that faced Park Lane. At the end of the tunnel he ascended a long flight of steps, glanced through a peep-hole, pressed a button which actuated an electric buzzer, somewhere, and then touched a spring which swung back a section of book-casing in a great library.

AS the casing swung back into place with a slight click, he saw that the library was empty—but he had scarcely walked across it when Lord Trevor of Dartmoor came in from the hall and closed the doors behind him.

"Gad, Abdool! . . . . . I fawncied I heard the buzzer! We'd been fearin' something must have happened! Nan will be down in a few moments. My word, old chap, I've not seen you lookin' like *that* since the old days in Madras an' Afghanistan! I'll wager you passed for a Mesopotamian with no diffic'lty! Sit down an' give us the story!"

Sir Abdool Mohammed Khan—prince of an older family than the Ameer of Afghanistan, and considered a potentiality by the British Government—had been the friend and companion of Sir George Trevor when that gentleman was merely a deputy commissioner in Madras. They had come to England together, and for many years had rendered secret diplomatic services to the British Crown of such value that they were rewarded with a peerage for Sir George and a "G. C. S. I." for Sir Abdool, at the Delhi Durbar.

"I will try to avoid the vernacular, O friend of my father's son—for brevity's sake. The situation in Turkey, just now, is about like this: Enver Bey appears to be steadily losing influence. There is a widespread hope of getting back to the Old Turk régime—concluding a peace with Russia and the Entente before Turkey becomes completely dismembered. They hope to save Stamboul—and might make almost any concession to do so. Probably that will be out of the question when the peace terms are discussed, but we might concede them Brousa and Smyrna. On the other hand, Germany promises them not only Stamboul but slices of Albania and Serbia, and the whole of Georgia. If Germany is able to convince them until September that she is winning the war, their fears may induce them to go on with the fighting until they are defeated beyond hope of recovery, but if we can manage to exert influence in various quarters now, it may result in a *coup* by which Turkey will be eliminated as an adversary. The feeling against Teutonic rule is strengthening—whether it breaks out in immediate rebellion or not. I've talked with people of every class; they feel that Turkey was drawn into this war against her will and that the final result will be disastrous for her. But the unfortunate feature of the situation, as far as we are concerned, is the lack of leadership for anything like organized revolution."

"And yet—there *are* men in Turkey who are fully capable of handling anything of the sort at forty-eight hours' notice."

"Prince Sulieman, for example? Hairi Bey? Prince Said Halim?"

"Said Halim is a prince of Egypt; any Englishman in Cairo would tell you he was the chief instrument of Abbas in trying to stir up an Egyptian *jihad* against us. But I've had a number of confidential talks with Halim; he has a broader knowledge of European politics and more common sense than the majority of his countrymen. For instance, he knows the English have never interfered with the Mohammedan religion—on the contrary, have safeguarded its observance in Egypt, India and Persia. He knows his country has enjoyed greater prosperity under our supervision than it ever knew before. On the other hand, he's been

getting a daily object-lesson of the autocratic rule Germany will impose upon Islam if she gets control of Turkey. Between two evils, he has the sense to choose the lesser. Neither Abbas nor any other Egyptian prince will ever govern Egypt as advantageously for his own people as we have done, in spite of our mistakes there. Until the Turkish Empire became infested with German secret agents, the Osmanli recognized the fact that it was only British and French influence which permitted their unmolested occupation of the Bosporus and Dardanelles. Hairi Bey has been Minister of Pious Foundations—a strong believer in the old régime. He is in position to command a very large following throughout the Empire if he can escape assassination long enough to get a revolution fairly started. As for Prince Sulieman, he is a man fifty-six years old—experienced in political intrigue, fairly popular, a possible heir to the throne—but more valuable for his backing than for leadership. I've in mind two other men you've not mentioned, who might jump into the limelight at a psychological moment. But the great trouble in Turkey, just now, is to know who may be trusted! When you complicate Oriental intrigue with a German propaganda, one scarcely dares trust his own eyes or hands."

ABDOOL nodded. Then: "If we could only bring about some incident or *coup* which would galvanize every Mohammedan in the Empire—unite all Musselmen in one great wave of religious frenzy—?"

"By Jove, Abdool! Do you know, that was exactly what was runnin' through my mind! An' the thing was beginnin' to assume substance! You've been in Stamboul within the month—haven't you? Er—quite so! The city's a perfect inferno of rioting, assassination an' intrigue, of course—mosques in use as hospitals, dead men in every street—women an' children, too. Well, in all that mess, did you get a glimpse of old Mussa Hazikem?"

"You mean—the Sheik-ul-Islam?"

"That's the man! . . . . . The supreme head of Mohammedanism in Turkey an' Egypt!"

"Aie! . . . . . Thou art gifted with the wisdom of *Nag, O Thakur Bahadur!* He has visited all the mosques, ordered special readings of the Koran for the wounded, organized a corps of hospital assistants from the *Ulema*. He is personally loved as far as Bassora and Erzeroum. The Germans hate him for the influence which they run up against at every turn—and can't handle. If they dared, they'd have him accidentally killed in the streets, but they've sense enough to know what that would mean to German influence in Turkey. You see, the man stands for practically everything which is opposed to German ideas of system and efficiency. As long as one of the Faithful is regular in his religious observances, the Sheïk is quite willing that he should squat himself under a cypress on the bank of the Bosporus and 'go into the silence' for as long as he pleases. That's up to *him*—that's the good old Oriental temperament which the Sheïk would like to see preserved for another thousand years. Let the man work when he pleases, according to his needs—and worship Allah as the Koran prescribes. But to the German idea, all that represents an economic waste. Each man should be a cog in the national machine—his actions, work, manner of living, all portioned out by the wiser 'man higher up'—the governing caste. Our 'blood-brother' hath said:

> East is East—and West is West:
> And never the twain shall meet.

"What thou hast in mind, then,—O Protector of the Poor,—is something which concerns this holy man in Stamboul?"

"Aye. If it could be pulled off, it would undoubtedly have a most far-reachin' effect. But—d'ye see—it'll be practically suicide to attempt it! It's possible—aye—"

JUST then, the door opened, and Lady Nan came in—with outstretched hands.

"Abdool," she cried, "we feared something had happened to you! Raymond Carter had word from the American Embassy in Stamboul that a certain Mohammedan whom we knew must be

you had been talking revolution in different parts of the Empire until the Germans were searching for him everywhere—and that they had finally hanged him. That was over a month ago! How did you escape? Where have you been since then?"

"Making my way down the Aleppo-Medina railway until I could strike across on a camel to Aden—then coming up on the *Shanklin Hall* in the Oriental steerage."

"But why did you waste time doing that, when every hour was valuable and you knew we must be anxious about you?"

"For excellent cause, *O Chota Rance*. First, there was the need of talking revolution in Syria. Then I had word that a Wilhelmstrasse man—born in Bagdad and speaking Arabic as his mother tongue—was bringing messages from revolutionists in the Soudan to German spies in London. Also that he would take certain of our plans and secrets back to Berlin when he escaped as he came. I came aboard the *Shanklin Hall* at Aden—he at Port Said. He believes me to be of the Wilhelmstrasse in an even higher capacity. We went to an Oriental lodging-house kept by a Bengali, in Bromley—and the other night had a long conference with a nest of German spies in Bethnal Green. Had I abandoned my disguise in Egypt and come up by rail from Marseilles, it would have been practically impossible to locate that rendezvous. Furthermore, it seems to me advisable that one or two of us should return to Constantinople at once. There is a chance for a diplomatic *coup* just now which might influence the whole Eastern situation. By going back the way I came, we would be received anywhere in Turkey without suspicion."

A little shiver of apprehension ran through Her Ladyship. "Whom would you suggest to accompany you, Abdool?" she asked.

"Whomever is best fitted to do the work! If I can go back with just one man who speaks Arabic and Urdu fluently, with a few Turkish phrases for emergencies.—one who, with a little darkening of his skin, might pass for Arab or Mesopotamian Turk,—I think the chances are something more than even for work that will eliminate Turkey from the war and open the Dardanelles for supply-ships to Russia. 'Lammerford Sahib' could do it with very little risk of detection—but he is in Petrograd and can't be spared from there."

HIS LORDSHIP crossed from where he was standing by the big fireplace and sat down on the arm of Lady Nan's chair—drawing her close against him for a moment:

"I fancy it's up to me, Nan," he said. "There are a few Downing Street men who speak Arabic, but they lack my knowledge of the whole situation an' might get their throats cut inside of a week, not knowin' just where they'd blundered. It's a risk, of course—but you yourself are still impersonating the Condesa de la Montaneta here in London, thick as thieves with agents of the Wilhelmstrasse every day. I've been dreadin', freq'ntly, that some one would kill you with cyanide or a knife! There's no sense wastin' our breath in argum'nt—we've our duty to do, like the men in the trenches—an' all three of us know it. So we'll just go on with the day's work an' hope to pull through alive, for better times! Abdool, I fawncy we'll get to work more quickly, an' avoid a good many of the fleas, if we run down to Beirut on the yacht an' get put ashore from a dinghy some dark night!"

"Aye, *Huzoor,* but we are then compelled to make explanations to the first men we meet—explanations which may not be accepted. I love the fleas and other creatures of Allah as little as thou, O friend of my youth, because it hath come to pass that I am even as the *Angrezi* in my washings and my cleanliness, now that I have wealth and honors. Yet behold, *Huzoor*—if we go steerage in some little steamer to Piræus, and from there in a Greek boat to one of the smaller Turkish ports, we shall be passed on from one crew to another as men who are what they claim to be—Hadjis, both: for thou also didst go with the Holy Carpet from Cairo, upon occasion. Thou hast touched the veil of the *Kaba,* and may speak know-

ingly of the holy *Serai* at Mecca—of matters which be seen and done there."

THERE was a moment or so of silence, as His Lordship weighed the possibilities.

"H-m-m—your way has its advantages, Abdool," he observed at length. "If I can pass successfully as one of the Osmanli, it reduces the danger from German officers and secret agents to a minimum. If I go in from one of the Greek ports as an American, I'll be constantly watched—no question as to that. On the other hand, it'll be diffic'lt to carry out what I've in mind without German uniforms an' make-up. Still—Freddy Goldthwaite is on the ground. He should be able to find whatever clothes we need—"

"I regret to say Captain Goldthwaite is lying at the bottom of the Bosporus. He shot a Pasha who was trying to abduct a girl from the American College—got her safely into the American Embassy. Afterward, they caught him—and cut his throat."

"My word! . . . . . Poor old Freddy! I'm dev'lish sorry to hear that, Abdool! Who else have we in Stamboul, just now? There's Cramer, I hope? Though we've had no word from him in five weeks! An' Tom Devereaux — Leftenant Archer — Sir Harry Bond—eh?"

"I fear that Archer Sahib was killed in Galata, during some of the street-rioting. He was disguised, but Devereaux recognized his body and buried it. The others were alive and working when I left. Also there were three young attachés from the Embassy who remained in disguise after it was closed. They had shown much ability in the Madrid, Stockholm and Vienna embassies before they were sent to Stamboul. All speak Turkish very well. I think we may count upon what assistance we need. H-m-m—would it not be well for me to present you at that Bethnal Green rendezvous, as a Bulgarian secret agent entrusted with information for the German and Turkish commanders in Constantinople? I gave strict orders that no raid was to be made upon the place until I said so—that we might bag four other men, and a number of plans stolen from us. The crowd, there, will undoubtedly give us memoranda on tissue-paper and messages that will help us materially in Turkey."

"Aye, that's a good suggestion. When we've our plans all blocked out an' know just where we're to board our steamer, I'll have a hint dropped by Downing Street to the milit'ry details watching the outgoing boats—so that we'll be neither detained nor searched."

A FORTNIGHT after this conversation, two Syrian Mohammedans went ashore from a Greek *felucca* at the little seaport of Mersina in Asia Minor—from where they took the railway up to Scutari by way of Adana and Konia. They appeared to have been very popular with the Greek captain and his mixed Levantine crew—some of whom accompanied them to the nearest wine-shop, where the Mohammedans ordered *mastiç* for themselves, thus saving their face as Hadjis in good repute, with a proper reverence for the Koran. By underground rumor—which operates almost as rapidly as wireless—their status, nationality and loyalty as Turkish subjects were known throughout the little seaport before they had taken their first meal in the *serai*. They wore the customary *tarbush* with its black-silk tassel—but had wrapped green turban-cloth around it, after the manner of those who discard the Arabian *burnous* for a European coat but cling to a suggestion of the old turban as a matter of religious prejudice. Such men are held in great respect by all True Believers throughout the Turkish Empire; their mere appearance being usually a sufficient passport in any part of the country.

Getting into a *caique* at the Scutari railway-pier, with their cloth-wrapped bundles of clothing and other personal effects, they were rowed across the mouth of the Bosporus to the Yeni Kapou—from where, shouldering their bundles, they disappeared in the maze of narrow twisting alleys stretching northwest, through the Ak Serai, along the valley formed by the Lycus brook between the main ridge of old Stamboul and the hills of the Silivri Kapou quarter. Most of the rioting and pillag-

ing during the war had been in the European quarter of Pera, north of the Golden Horn. Street-brawls and nightly assassination are common enough in old Stamboul at any time, because the constant intrigue, the network of narrow streets and the inviolable secrecy preserved about every Turkish dwelling, lend themselves to that sort of thing; but the war had scarcely brought a perceptible increase of them.

Knocking in a peculiar manner upon the door of a small dwelling in an obscure and winding alley, they were received by a bearded Turk, rather shabbily dressed, who gravely bowed them into his *salaamlik*—where he clapped his hands for a girl who brought them coffee and *narghiles*.

"*Salaam aleykum, O Hamet Effendi.*"

"*Aleykum salaam, O Agha.* A-i-e! Thou art the holy Abdullah Hadji who honored my poor house two months ago! And this be thy friend—another holy one! *Sefa gelden!* Are you well, sirs?"

"*Mashallah!* As God wills. We are come a long way, O Hamet—from a far country—that certain matters be laid before thee and others among the Faithful. If so be that thou hast room in thy house for such as we, it may come to pass that we shall remain with thee for a week or more. It hath been a refuge for the persecuted in other times; perchance it may now serve as good a purpose."

"My house is thine, O Hadji Abdulla—and all it contains. Do with it as thou wilt."

SIR ABDOOL'S impersonation of a Turk from a southern province was, of course, perfect—because he was Afghan-born, and spoke several of the Oriental dialects fluently. But Lord Trevor's appearance of genuineness was a masterpiece of acting. His Turkish was not extensive enough to risk a conversation in that language, but his pronunciation of what he did know was perfect, from his knowledge of Arabic—and his pilgrimage to Mecca, several years before, had taught him little mannerisms and Mohammedan customs which vouched for him better than any statements that could be made. It may be doubted by the reader whether an Englishman or American could successfully impersonate an Oriental, among Orientals. But a number of well-known instances establish the fact. Captain Burton—whose translation of the Arabian Nights is the best extant—made the pilgrimage to Mecca without being once suspected. Lord Kitchener, long before the Khartoum campaign, passed among the Soudanese and other natives as one of themselves. Several men connected with the Indian Secret Service and British Foreign Office have gone among the natives time after time without discovery.

After a light meal the two went to another house in the Yeni Kapou quarter, occasionally used as a rendezvous by the English secret agents and, partly through exceptional luck, partly because of the extreme care taken in approaching it, never suspected to be other than the private residence of a wealthy and influential Osmanli. Here they were fortunate enough to find the Honorable Tommy Devereaux, Sir Harry Bond, Lieutenant Hedges and Captain Sir Philip Leicester, in various disguises—the last two having been attachés at the British Embassy before the war. Without revealing His Lordship's real identity, Sir Abdool introduced him as the most famous man in the underworld of diplomacy—which they took as a hint that they were at last in the presence of the celebrated Diplomatic Free Lance, whose marvelous *coups* had been for years the wonder of every chancellery in Europe. This belief was at once apparent in the deference with which they urged him to make use of them in any way he considered advisable.

"Gentlemen, I appreciate this thoroughly. I'll take you at your word—partly because I want to prove that appreciation, but chiefly from the fact that what I have in mind cannot be carried out with Mohammedan assistance. Even if they believed that no harm was intended, no followers of the Prophet would take the risk of injurying the most holy man in the Moslem world today. Because most of us are likely enough to be killed in pulling off this

bit, I'd hesitate in asking your assistance if you hadn't offered it. But—if we are successful, it may bring about a revolution that will eliminate Turkey as a German ally."

"My word, old chap! That's what we're here for! Let's have a go at it, whether we succeed in pullin' it off or not! What's the idea?"

"We'll get to that, step by step, so you'll have an impression of the machinery and the probable effect. First we must have some house in a secluded quarter of old Stamboul—some house which is occupied by a prominent German officer, but in which there are rooms that he doesn't use. Who knows of such a man—and such a house?"

FOR a moment, there was a dead silence—presently broken by Devereaux, with a sharp exclamation:

"By Jove! I know of *one* such place—but I don't see— Wait a bit—till I describe it! Colonel von Holtzen, who is now one of the Staff in command of the city, was quite thick with old Kara Pasha just before the war started—used him to spread German influence among the 'Young Turk' party. They were chummy for a year or more. Kara had been getting poorer for some time—bought shares on the Paris bourse which proved a total loss. So, for his influence, Von Holtzen lent him money on his house over in the Psamatia quarter until it was mortgaged for more than it was worth—then gave him a good bit more for services rendered. Von Holtzen spent the night with him frequently—used to bring German officers and secret agents there for conferences—made himself quite at home. Just after the first attempt to force the Dardanelles, old Kara went down to the forts on a commissary matter—and was killed by a fragment of shell from one of our ships. Von Holtzen wound up his estate, found the old Pasha had been saving the money advanced him until he had over four thousand pounds, Turkish, in bank.

"There were three sons in the *harim*. The Colonel paid over the money to them on the supposition that they would look after their own mothers and possibly some of the other women. Then he cleaned 'em all out of the house, which he took over to satisfy his mortgage. Von Holtzen is by way of bein' a woman-hater. At all events, he never trusts one or has her near enough to learn any of his business, and so the rooms of the *harim* have been unoccupied, and the entrance from the *salaamlik* locked, ever since he took over the house. Now, his orderlies, most assuredly, would never enter those rooms unless he told them to, and he seems to have forgotten their existence—doesn't need them—"

"How do you know that, Devereaux?"

"I got in through the garden at the back, and prowled through the house for whatever information I could find—went through every room of the *harim*, and slept there, one night."

"Hmph! You were safe enough from Mohammedan intrusion—if the rooms were unoccupied! But you were playing with death every minute! Suppose Von Holtzen had taken a notion to inspect them?"

"Er—quite so. That's all in the game, don't you know. At all events, it occurs to me that since he has lived there, he seems to prefer holding most of his conferences with the milit'ry crowd over in Pera—which frequently leaves the house in charge of an orderly and a couple of old Turkish servants, because his *kawass* and his adjutant usually accompany him."

"Is there any communication between that garden and the *harim?*"

"Aye—the old sleeping-room of the eunuch has a door opening directly into the garden—and another into the rear hall of the *harim*. The path from that door to the gate runs just inside the high brick wall between two eight-foot hedges. The house is considerably over a hundred years old; you can imagine what that rear entrance may have been used for, occasionally, with the Psamatia Kapou and the Marmora beach less than six hundred yards away!"

"H-m-m—with any sort of luck, I'd say nothing could better serve our purpose! We'd not have much trouble in forcing the locks of those doors, from the garden."

"None at all! I fetched the keys

along with me—thinking that *harim* might be a fairly good place to lie up, in case the Germans or Enver Pasha's men got to combing the city for any of us."

"By Jove! I'm beginning to fancy we may have something better than even chances, after all! You certainly kept your wits about you, Devereaux. Very good! Let's get on to the next point! Who knows anything about the usual daily movements of Mussa Hazikem, the Sheïk-ul-Islam?"

SIR HARRY BOND started to speak —then hesitated.

"Go on, Sir Harry!" urged Lord Trevor. "Tell us anything you can!"

"Why, d'ye see—I know what the old chap has been doin' right along for a month past, but there'll be no sayin' he'll keep it up indefinitely. Parts of Santa Sofia, the Achmet an' the Bajazid mosques, have been turned into hospitals, d'ye see—the *katib* reads the noon prayer to the wounded an' dyin' every day from the *minber*. And at night, when the grease-lamps are lighted, the Sheïk himself comes into one or another of the mosques to see how the patients are gettin' along—whether his pet *Ulema corps* are carryin' out his instructions. Before leavin', he mounts the steps of the *minber* an' repeats a verse of the Koran. Awfully decent old chap, Mussa! An' I have it rather straight that he prays to Allah every night for the overthrow of the 'Young Turks' and the Germans. He's a bit conservative—Mussa is! Knows deuced well that if German efficiency ever takes root in Turkey, it'll be good-by to the Faith—sooner or later. We've been sowin' our bit of trouble for the Kaiser, down here, by pointin' out how absolutely the English *Raj* avoids the least meddling with any of the native beliefs in India or Egypt. The Osmanli know that—every blessed one of 'em! An' they're beginnin' to draw comparisons between the two sorts of government.

"However—gettin' back to old Mussa. To-morrow'll be Friday—with the Mohammedan Sunday prayers in all the mosques. I happened to notice they were doin' a lot of sprucin'-up at the little Daoud Pasha Mosque, quarter of a mile from here—an' nosed about to see what was up. Seems there's to be a private conference—several big men of the *ulema*. Now—say the Sheïk is at the Bajazid Mosque between eight an' nine in the evening, when I'm quite sure they expect him? He'll drive from there to Daoud Pasha in his brougham—along the tramway streets to the Rue Hasseki. In this part of the town, there are no electric lights except along some of the main streets. Of course, I can only conjecture what you'll be up to, old chap—but if it's anything in the line of temporary abduction, as I rather imagine, you'll scarcely have a better opportunity than you'll get to-morrow night. Mussa is so well known, an' considers himself so inviolable, that he never even takes a *kavass* about with him."

"Hmph! Seems as if everything was playing into our hands! But I fancy it's because nobody has ever dreamed of pulling off such a thing—anyone caught in the act of doing it would be literally torn to pieces! Nice prospect, if we happen to slip up! However, I see but one possible stumbling-block in our attempting it. Sir Abdool—will you give us your opinion, frankly? Is it your belief that if the Sheïk-ul-Islam could see how thoroughly it might swing the whole country away from the Germans and 'Young Turks,' he might willingly submit to what would amount to personal violence and insult—for a few hours? Or, put it another way—to get the proper effect, he must know nothing of the reasons behind it until afterward—if ever. Do you think he would then forgive those who had a hand in it, and bear them no ill will?"

ABDOOL reflected—his mind ranging over fanaticism in other countries beyond Turkey.

"Huzoor," he replied after a moment, "I have spoken to the Sheïk-ul-Islam, as a poor Hadji may speak to the supreme head of his faith in this world. And, even so, I have found him courteous to one so far beneath him in holiness and worth. He has great breadth of mind. He sees nothing but disaster for the Faith—for the Padi-

shah—for Turkey—in this war. It is conceivable that, proud man as he is, he would submit to personal indignity—even temporary suffering—if by so doing he could better the condition of all True Believers. As to how he might deal afterward with those who so used him, that would be as Allah moved him. Yet I think he would forgive—knowing what they sought to bring about. The man himself is too shrewd a politician not to see the probable effect of what we may do."

"M-w-e-l-l—that's about my impression of the man. Now comes another question: would you, as a True Believer, have any scruples against our making this attempt? Would you be willing to assist us? If I'm thinking of committing a sacrilege for which there can be no possible excuse in Mohammedan eyes,—were the true facts known,—we'd best not attempt it!"

"Nay, *Huzoor*—I dared let myself dream, even in London, what it was that lay in thy mind. We, of Hind, be not as those who slumber even as they walk about. I will do as you command me. For against the man who knoweth that he intends no evil—who doeth a little evil that great good may come—no evil may be charged. But if we would prove ourselves like *Nag* in our wisdom, we will permit no other follower of the Prophet to know what it is we mean to do—or learn of it afterward. For myself, I have lived many years with the *Angrezi*—I see even as they see, upon certain matters."

"Thank you, old chap! That removes the last scruple I had about going into this. There are six of us, here—which should be enough for the job. Sir Harry, I'll depend upon you to find out precisely what the Sheïk's movements are likely to be to-morrow night. Devereaux, here is a memorandum of some things I want smuggled into that *harim* just after dark—an' you're to find out what Von Holtzen will be doing to-morrow! If necessary, we must send a fake telephone message that'll take him out of the house for a couple of hours—but we'll hope he has some conference to attend in Pera. The rest of you gentlemen must get some German uniforms that will fit us; we'll take the measurements now. Particularly, we'll need the long gray-green military capes—with an extra one to wrap about the Sheïk.

"Sir Abdool, will you get in touch with the Chief Hamal—head of the Hamal Guild? Hint to him that some great outrage is likely to be committed by the Germans within a few days—ask how many men he can get together from his own and the other guilds, at an hour's notice. Unless conditions have changed very much within the past five months, you'll find him even willing to stir up a small revolution if he's sure of reasonable backing. The *hamals* and firemen of the various quarters have started most of the street rioting since last August, I'm told. Keep his mind as far away from our real proposition as you can! If he once suspected that, we probably wouldn't live five minutes after we laid hands on the Sheïk."

THE next morning broke with a flurry of snow and a chilly wind, down the Bosporus from the Black Sea. With the approach of spring, the water in the Sea of Marmora had begun to warm up a little, each noon—consequently, the effect of this cold draught upon it from the north was a fog which settled down upon the surrounding hills and seemed to grow thicker toward night. In the narrow streets of old Stamboul, fog is the last straw in the way of confusing the senses of those who attempt to navigate them—particularly, at night. And this proved another favoring element in an enterprise which, in cold blood, appeared little short of suicidal.

Various persons had offered to present the Sheïk-ul-Islam with a motor-car after such things in the line of transportation became practical, but he had steadily refused to accept one. It savored too much of those modern ideas which he felt to be undermining the Moslem faith. So he drove about the city and suburbs in a rather shabby brougham drawn by two excellent horses. In broad daylight, this equipage was recognized by everyone. At night, there was a similarity to other vehicles which made it less easily picked out. In a fog, it might have been any

one of a hundred broughams. So, to lessen the chance of making a mistake and losing an opportunity which might not occur again for months, Sir Abdool was in the Sultan Bajazid Mosque at seven o'clock—waiting there until the Sheïk arrived, about eight.

When his brougham drove away, down the Rue Koska, following the tracks of the electric tramway, Sir Abdool was swinging underneath, hanging on to the axles. Just beyond the little mosque of Mourad Pasha, the coachman turned into the narrower Rue Hasseki and Rue Daoud Pasha. After passing the Hasseki Mosque, a shrill cry appeared to come from the pavement under the brougham—startling the coachman so much that he pulled up his horses under the impression that he had run over somebody. Then—five ghostly figures came running out of a narrow alley in the fog. While one held the horses' heads, the others pulled the coachman and footman from the box—gagging and binding them. The door of the brougham was wrenched open—the Sheïk hauled unceremoniously out upon the pavement, where he was bound and wrapped in a long military cloak which effectually concealed his official robes. Leaving the carriage in the middle of the street, the coachman and footman propped against the wall of a house, the attacking party, afterward identified as German officers, marched away in the fog, down the next twisting alley, with the Sheïk between them—a savage whisper in Arabic warning him that the slightest outcry would promptly bring a knife between his ribs.

MUSSA HAZIKEM was a man past middle age, who had been unaccustomed to physical exercise for many years. The walk they forced him to take was really less than half a mile—yet so roughly did they urge him on, twisting and turning through a number of dark alleys, that he was completely exhausted when they finally reached a gate in a brick wall. There was a step against which he stumbled, pitching forward upon the stones and receiving an ugly cut upon his forehead which bled profusely. He was so nearly all in that they carried him the rest of the way—gently enough. When they laid him upon a couch in a cold, damp room which had the appearance of having been a woman's apartment at one time, his senses were so confused that his only clear impression was a whispered threat—that the slightest outcry from him during the next few hours would bring in some one to cut his throat. Unbinding his arms and throwing a number of filthy rugs over him to prevent his freezing to death, they went out of the room—locking the door so quietly that he barely heard the click of the bolt.

Twenty minutes later, as the chief of the Hamal Guild was drinking *mastic* with a number of fellow *hamals* (public porters) in a low Turkish café near the Yeni Kapou, the Osmanli Abdullah, who had spoken to him on the previous afternoon, came panting into the place with news which brought every man to his feet with hoarse cries of rage. The holy Mussa Hazikem—the Sheïk-ul-Islam—representative on earth of the Prophet himself—had been outrageously attacked by German officers upon the public street, dragged from his own brougham, bound and gagged—hauled off down a filthy alley to be butchered, in all probability!

The news spread throughout the neighboring quarters of old Stamboul with the rapidity of prairie fire. A momentarily increasing mob of fanatics tore through the streets with Abdullah and the chief *hamal* to the spot where the brougham had been stopped—finding the two men still propped against the wall. When their bonds had been loosened, they corroborated Abdullah's story in every particular—indicating the near-by alley down which they had heard the footsteps of the officers hurrying away with their holy captive. The mob surged through the alley. At its further end another Osmanli who proved to be a friend of Abdullah came running up with the report that he had followed the abductors to the old house of Kara Pasha, now occupied by Mir Alai von Holtzen. He said that with blows and much abuse, they had forced the half-fainting Sheïk to enter the house—that when the door had closed

upon them, there had been the sound of quarreling voices and a horrible gurgling cry, as if some one had been stabbed. That was enough! The mob searched in the foggy darkness for something with which they could batter in the oak door, and presently found a water-logged beam in a neighboring alley.

MEANWHILE, as the Sheïk partly recovered from the effects of his rough handling, he became conscious of a slight grating noise which appeared to come from the door. Expecting, after what had happened, that he might be assassinated very soon, Mussa's flesh began to creep; then it occurred to him that some one who had witnessed the outrage might have followed, and was attempting at the risk of his life to rescue him. The stealthy actions of the man on the other side of the door seemed to favor this belief. Presently there was a faint creak of the hinges—he knew the door was being cautiously opened, though he couldn't see it in the pitchy blackness. Then came a whisper:

"Art thou here, O Holy One? Father of the Faithful!"

"Even so, my son—and in grievous plight."

"Deign to take my hand, Holy One—and step as lightly as possible! There be three of us. We saw thee attacked, and followed as quickly as might be—climbing over the garden wall."

"Thou art not Osmanli, my son! Thy tongue hath a roughness like that of the *Ingiliz!*"

"It is even so, O Father. I am Captain Leicester of the British Embassy—whom thou mayest have seen there upon occasion. Leftenant Hedges and a good Turkish friend are with me. Come quickly before we are discovered!"

In the garden, two other indistinct figures gently grasped the Sheik by his elbows and partly supported him as he walked out of the little gate. A short distance away, they stopped at the house of a prominent Osmanli, who telephoned for a carriage and administered restoratives to Mussa.

As they left Von Holtzen's garden, another ghost dragged a struggling sheep into the *harim*, cut its throat, cautiously opened the door communicating with the *salaamlik* and, carrying the sheep in his arms, let fall a trail of bloody drops which led from the street-door to the *harim*. In the room where the Sheïk had been confined, he left a pool of blood upon the divan and floor—then carried the sheep's carcass out through the garden just as Von Holtzen, with his adjutant and *kavass*, came home from Pera.

Calling for the orderly and Turkish servant, with no response, Von Holtzen and the *kavass* proceeded to search the lower floor—presently finding them, either drunk or drugged, in one of the smaller rooms. Just then they became conscious of a hoarse murmur in the street. It grew louder—more ominous. In a few moments a mighty blow from a water-logged beam shattered the front door, and a mob of crazed Mohammedans surged into the *salaamlik*, demanding the Sheïk-ul-Islem.

Von Holtzen's look of stupefied amazement was reflected upon the faces of his adjutant and *kavass*—but it carried no conviction. In a moment, some one looked down at the floor—saw the trail of bloody drops. With hoarse cries of rage, the mob followed it—hesitated a moment before the door of the *harim*, which is, to all Moslems, inviolable; then they smashed it in and fetched lights from the *salaamlik*. On the dusty, half-rotting divan were the Sheïk's robes of office and *tarbush*—soaked with blood. The pile of filthy rugs bore mute testimony to the sort of covering with which he had been insulted. And upon a tabouret near the divan was a dirty plate of two rancid ham sandwiches!

That quite settled it! They brought Von Holtzen into the room with his four men, and deliberately cut their throats. Afterward they did other things which cannot be described. They didn't burn the house, because fire is too serious a matter in Stamboul—but they wrecked it. And it is likely to stand for another hundred years as the memento of a great outrage committed against the Mohammedan Faith. No Musselman will enter it. No European will be per-

mitted to lease or occupy it. No man may destroy it and build again upon the site.

A FEW days later there was a conference at the secret rendezvous in the Yeni Kapou quarter—Sir Abdool and his mysterious friend being about to leave for England by way of Asia Minor. They were congratulating themselves upon the successful way in which their work had been accomplished, and speculating as to its future effect. The still unknown Hadji was inclined to think it would take time to work out.

"The powder is getting warmed up to the exploding point, gentlemen—but no leader has yet appeared. The seed, however, has been sown. It will take time for the story to reach the further extremes of the Empire; nevertheless it will travel there just as surely, and will lose nothing in the telling. Nor will it be forgotten that two Englishmen from the British Embassy—remaining in Stamboul at the risk of their lives—went out of their way to rescue the Sheïk-ul-Islam from what seemed unquestionably a death-trap. The wiping out of Von Holtzen and his people was only an incident. All Turkey will snarl at the suggestion that it was a personal grudge upon his part. They believe now that Mussa's abduction and death had been decided upon as a *coup d'état* with the idea of terrorizing all the conservative element among the Turks. I think we have scored a *coup* that will have far-reaching results—and there was one feature which I consider a masterpiece. The man who thought it out certainly applied the finishing touch! Which of you was it who left those rancid ham sandwiches by Mussa's divan in the *harim?* Exactly the sort of thing which would occur to the German mind as rations for a prisoner—yet so loaded with possibilities that they were just that much dynamite!"

Devereaux grinned: "Why—er—d'ye see—I fancy I may as well claim that as my own little touch, old chap. The Indian Mutiny, don't you know, started with pig's fat on the cartridges. Pig is the limit in uncleanliness to all True Believers."

The Lady In the Case

THIS lightsome story of a blonde broiler and a demon ball-player is built about an interesting angle of human—too human—nature: an unusually clever story.

DANNY KNAPP had enemies,—many of them,—but even the most aggressive did not attempt to discount his ball-playing ability. Invariably they prefaced their diatribes with, "He's a great little old third baseman, but—" and thereupon proceeded to enlarge upon the many shortcomings to which Danny was heir.

The Vultures, barring only the recruits, knew Danny of old. Jerry Rohan vividly recalled Danny's original début with the team, his boastfulness, his blatant ego—and the unfailing manner in which he had made good. Danny had starred that year during his brief stay in the ranks of organized baseball—only to arrive at the conclusion that the Vultures did not appreciate him at his true worth and to jump forthwith to the Federals.

During the weeks that his case was being threshed out in the courts of the land, Danny had been open and aboveboard in his newspaper statements that when he hit the Federal League he'd set it afire. Baseball reporters grinned and printed his frankly raw statements—then said "I-told-you-so" when Danny proceeded to lead the league in batting, base-running and in the difficult art of fielding the important third-base position.

At the close of the season came the now historic peace-conferences whereat the Federal League ceased to exist and a large handful of stellar lights were thrown on the market. As the result of frenzied bidding the Vultures landed Danny, at a big price. The Vultures

BY OCTAVUS ROY COHEN

"RED TAPE," "The Treasure on Carejas" and "The Course of True-love" are some of the other novels and stories that have built up Mr. Cohen's excellent reputation.

needed him, and needed him badly, what with Spike Heston out of the game with a bum whip, and a recruit in the short-field position. The day Danny was sold to the Vultures, he issued a statement to the newspaper men. As a statement it was fair; as a guide to Danny's character it was as perfect as a diplomatic note isn't. Said Danny's statement:

> The Vultures are sure to be congratulated on landing me to play third for them. And what I did in the Federal last year aint a circumstance to what I'll do in the Majors. Believe me, some one's going to lead the League this year, and it aint going to be Ty Cobb. The initials of the man who's going to come out on top when the final averages are totaled are D. K.

And more of the same. Individually and collectively the Vulture regulars read the fulsome notice, and individually and collectively they swore their most treasured oaths. Furthermore, they agreed that while Danny was certain to strengthen the team, he was certain to need taking down, and to that end they went into star-chamber session to consider ways and means. Suggestion after suggestion was made and discarded.

As Tommy Gray, the captain, put it, Danny wasn't any ordinary mortal, and ordinary methods could not apply to his case. His ego was diamond-proof and his ability unquestioned. Therefore it behooved them to wait until Danny showed up and they had had an opportunity for further first-hand personal study.

ONE blustery March evening Danny breezed into the training-camp hotel. He was short and stocky, with a rather unprepossessing face, steely gray eyes and a very square jaw. His suit could have been clipped to make several checkerboards, and his socks and necktie screamed at each other and at the world in general. His hat was worn cocked rakishly over one ear, and he carried a cane.

The regulars shook hands with him and welcomed him back into the organized fold. Quite as a matter of course, —it is *the* conventional question of the training season,—some one asked him what sort of trim he was in, and what he thought of the forthcoming League race.

Danny grinned a knowing grin, shifted his weight from the right foot to the left, looped the thumb of his right hand in a vest armhole and delivered himself thusly:

"Trim? Me? Say, fellers, there aint nothing to it; I'm gonna make 'em sit up and take notice this season. Why, honest, there aint a pitcher in this league I can't eat alive. Give me a broomstraw and I'll bat three hundred per cent. I'll do better than that holding the bat in my teeth. Battin' regular way, I'll hit close to five hundred per cent."

"You seem mighty confident," suggested Crab Shroder.

"Confident? Of course I'm confident. Confidence is my middle name —Daniel Confidence Knapp. That's me. And say—there aint a catcher in this league can keep me from stealing bases. Whenever you see a streak of dust getting down to second, an' beating the ball by about ninety yards—that's Danny Knapp. There's a certain gent from Georgia playing ball in this circuit who thinks he's some shakes. Well, you watch me. I'll show him a few. Honest, I'm thinking we better be writing the manufacturers to solder the covers on the balls this year—else, I'll ruin too many. Condition? Why, I—"

"Soft pedal, Danny. You talk about yourself too much."

The newcomer favored the speaker with a withering glance.

"Every man his own press-agent, say

I. And besides, it's all true, aint it? And if it's true why shouldn't I say it? Believe me, fellers, Danny Knapp aint no believer in this modesty stuff."

"So we observe," said Anti Jenks gravely. "So we observe!"

"Is *tha-at* so, Big Feller. Well, you'll observe a heap more things before I pull this shot-to-pieces team into a winner's slice of the World's Series money—and some of them things will be me, Danny C. Knapp. Put that in your pipe an' smoke it."

"I don't smoke, thank you. My wife wont let me."

"Your wife! A-a-h! say, is this another of them clubs where every man's tied up to a skirt? That gets my goat. No wimmin for Danny Knapp. Not f'r mine. They're all willin'—but pshaw!" And he whistled softly. Whereat the level brown eyes of Crab Shroder and the blue ones of Captain Tommy Gray crossed, and a smile of mutual understanding was born on their lips.

THE Vultures opened the season on their home grounds with the Buccaneers as opponents. The Bucks led until the last half of the eighth frame, when a home-run from the bat of Danny Knapp with two on bases put the game on ice for the Vultures and brought mingled happiness and misery to the team members.

Danny took it all as a matter of course, just as he took his phenomenal stab of a line-drive that was slated for the left field fence in the third inning of the game on the following day, and just as he took his superhuman work in the games that followed.

There wasn't a doubt of the fact that he was making good his boasts. The official averages indicated that Mr. Knapp of the Vultures was leading the sluggers of the slugging circuit with the magnificent average of .472, following by Mr. Tyrus Raymond Cobb, who rested just one point over .400. Furthermore Danny Knapp topped the list of base-stealers, and his total bases per hit excelled all save one man. And eventually Danny passed that one man with a record of two homers and a three-bagger in one game against the Red Sox.

With his team-mates he was about as popular as the Kaiser in Brussels. They shunned him as they would the plague, and with just as great effect, for he dogged their footsteps that he might pour a chant of his own greatness into their unwilling ears.

They tried biting through the rhinocerously thick hide with vitriolic sarcasm, but they might as well have kept their mouths shut. Invariably he grinned and said: "You can't kid me; believe me, fellers, I aint the kiddin' kind." They tried keeping away from him—with like results. They tried open insults. Once again he thought they were joshing him. On the rare occasions that a verbal dart found its way to a vulnerable spot, Danny magnanimously ascribed the bitterness to jealousy and let it go serenely at that.

One fact stood out with stark plainness, and that fact was that the Vultures had a mighty good chance for the pennant, *provided* Danny's work continued as sensationally as it had commenced. But let Danny slump, or let him leave the team, and the Vultures had no more chance than an icicle in Hades. The men knew it, and Danny Knapp knew it—which means that even if the men hadn't understood the fact previously, Danny would have enlightened them with full particulars and details. Their dislike of the man was becoming a mania; yet, as Anti Jenks admitted, there was absolutely nothing to be done, so far as they could see.

"The worst of it is," said Jerry Rohan, "that if we get his goat and he jumps us or lays down, we're done for. Without the fool we haven't a chance for the pennant; with him I think we're an even bet to win. And getting a slice of the World's Series coin would strike little Jerry in just the right spot. But I'd give half of it if he'd forget to think that he was the only and original nonpareil and become a human being—or if, mebbe, he was struck dumb."

TWO weeks later Yvonne Parrenne blazed across Danny's horizon—paused, came closer—and merged her immediate future into his.

Yvonne was a blonde of exceeding pulchritude and excessive color. She

earned eighteen legitimate dollars per week in a fairly good musical show which was at that time in the heydey of a ten-weeks' run at a large local theater. In return for that eighteen a week, Yvonne exhibited her radiant beauty of face and figure six nights per week and at Wednesday and Saturday matinées. On these occasions she wore tights and a smile, sang a nasal soprano—called so because it was nearer that vocal classification than any other—and danced with quite a bit of nimbleness.

Her meeting with Danny was surprising, under the circumstances. During the middle of the first scene of Act I, Danny strutted into the right proscenium box. He had broken up the game that day with a three-bagger and three on base, and as he was ushered into the box,—alone,—some one in the audience above shouted, "Oh! you Danny Knapp!" Whereat there was a burst of enthusiastic applause. Danny bowed, smiled and seated himself with magnificent hauteur. He turned a languid gaze toward the stage, and his glance clashed with that of the one-from-the-end blonde of the broiler line.

The gazes held for perhaps a second longer than is usually the case, and during that one second Dan Cupid did the fastest work of his career. The chorus evoluted, and as the damsel in question flirted by the box she deliberately winked! Danny's heart went pit-a-pat, and thereafter the performance proved to be a series of poor jokes, uninteresting scenery and atrocious songs studded with brilliant oases of time during which the one-from-the-end blonde of the broiler line was on-stage.

No stage-door-Johnny stuff for Danny, though. Instead, he sent his card back and received it again in five minutes with four figures scribbled on it in a none too polished chirography. The figures were "11:15." And at eleven-fifteen Danny had a taxicab waiting at the stage entrance; at eleven-sixteen Yvonne joined him; at eleven-twenty-eight they were seated opposite each other in a more or less swell restaurant, and their rapid-fire acquaintanceship had gotten away to a gloriously favorable start.

In response to the naïve question, "Was it you that kid from the gallery yelled to an' then the house cheered?" Danny admitted that it was, that he was *the* Danny Knapp, best ball-player in the world—that his salary was eight thousand dollars per playing season, that during the winter months he had any number of offers from vaudeville managers, and that he wouldn't be averse to taking one of them up the following season, provided he had the bolstering help of a good-looking blonde with some singing and dancing experience—that it was a cinch of a life, that baseball was born in him and that was why he was unexcellable, and so on and so forth ad infinitum.

The lady in the case drank it all in, and the meal became a monologue. But by the time it was finished, Danny's subjugation was utter. He had found a good listener, and if there was one thing in the world that Danny treasured above his specially turned bats, it was a person who would listen interminably to his ceaseless chatter about Danny Knapp.

FROM that time forth it was a case of when Yvonne would administer the knock-out punch to the heart. It took her about a month. On that occasion Danny proposed. And then—horror of horrors! eighth wonder of the world! unbelievable occurrence! she turned him down.

For perhaps half a minute Danny sat rigid, his eyes staring away into blankness. An eighteen-dollar-a-week chorus girl had turned down a matrimonial offer from the famous Danny Knapp. The world was topsy-turvy indeed. Then he moistened his lips and attacked once again.

"You—you *wont?* You honest mean that?"

"Yes, Danny, I mean it."

"But — but — you must have a reason."

"Yes, I've got a reason."

"And you wont tell?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't tell."

"Oh!" Pause. "What is it?"

"It's this, Danny:" (She cupped her chin in her hands and stared straight into his eyes. There was a high color

of the natural variety underlying the paint.) "It's because you're too stuck on yourself. Not that I'm holding *that* against you—'most everybody loves themselves more or less; but what I don't like is the way you keep that claptrap of your'n goin' all the time about Danny Knapp. It just makes me see that *Mrs.* Danny Knapp wouldn't be nothin' more'n a piece of furniture. I'll give you a try-out. Cut out this eternal boasting; then come back to me in about a month, mebbe. Get me?"

Danny's eyes had widened and then narrowed. He spoke with some difficulty.

"Get you? Yes, I get you. But you don't get me. What I say about myself is true. If you don't believe it, read what Bob Edgren said about me in to-night's paper. Honest, there aint a man in either big league that can—"

"Whoa! Danny! That's just the sort of stuff I object to."

"But you don't understand," he explained painstakingly. "It's that gassin' about myself that makes me so confident. If I didn't believe I could do these great things what I do, and if I didn't talk about 'em—I wouldn't be able to do 'em."

"Rot! You've got the stuff, Danny," —he flushed at her first frank compliment,—"but you ought to let other people say so, 'stead of doin' it yourself. Make a try at it. But one thing goes as it lays—and that is that I can't hitch for life to you as you are now."

THAT was the way the matter stood when he parted from Yvonne that night, and that was the way matters stood during the weeks that followed.

The members of the Vultures marveled at the metamorphosis which their stellar third sacker had undergone. He was a changed man, a turtle within his shell. And fans and sport writers alike joined in one long, loud howl; for—

Danny Knapp slumped!

It wasn't an ordinary slump—Danny wasn't the ordinary kind. In the olden days Danny was wont to go to the bat with a grin and a boast on his lips—and make good. Nowadays he walked silently to the plate, and either fanned or hit one into some eager fielder's hands. His batting average dropped from the .470's to .390, which means a considerable drop in three weeks. His average for that time was something under .200.

His fielding lost the consummate dash and pep which had characterized it of yore, and to cap the climax, the Vultures felt it keenly. They sank slowly from first place to second, and from second to third. And despite their personal elation, they agreed unanimously that they preferred the old-time boastful, competent Danny to the quiet, self-possessed man of the present. The lure of a world's series was too much for them. One and all they regretted that Danny had fallen in love—for gradually it had leaked among them that Yvonne was the cause of the downfall of their star, and the reasons therefor.

During the three weeks that Danny remained in his shell he kept company with no one, and sought counsel of himself alone. Yvonne saw nothing of his rugged face. One month was her probation period, and Danny was not the one to play with fire. But at the end of three weeks he capitulated. He sought Yvonne.

She was a guest at an inexpensive hotel of unquestioned propriety in the downtown section, near enough to the bright lights to be accessible; and without telephoning or sending a message he sought her. He seated himself in one of the balcony alcoves, where he fiddled with paper and pen. Then he heard something from the adjoining alcove which caused him to prick up his ears. He heard voices. One voice was that of Captain Tommy Gray and the other was that of Yvonne Parrene. Tommy was talking then, and what he said was:

"You earned your money, all right. It was all our fault that the plan went wrong. You did the work fine—but who in thunder would have suspected that he couldn't make good except when he was talking about himself?"

"Some men are just that way," came Yvonne's tremolo answer. "He said himself that he was. They sorter make themselves feel that they can eat anything alive. Then they do it. But they gotta talk about it first."

"Well,"—it was Tommy's voice, and

it contained a sigh,—"here's your check. And say, I wanna see if you can't try to step in again an' undo what you've done."

Danny Knapp, his face suddenly haggard, arose and half walked, half staggered, from the hotel. Yvonne had sold him: it had all been a frame-up: Yvonne had, for money, caused him to fall in love with her! Danny found little rest that night.

But the conversation between Tommy Gray and Yvonne Parrenne did not cease when the eavesdropper left. It continued thusly:

Broke in Yvonne: "No sir. I'm done with it. I feel like a downright crook. Take your dirty check. You hadn't oughta got me into it in the first place. Here you've made me ruin a good feller. You wanna know something? I *like* to hear him talk about himself. And I wont have nothing more to do with it. He—I—he—I—" Whereat Yvonne resorted to tears.

THE players were half in their uniforms when Danny entered the club-house the following afternoon. He was smiling broadly, albeit his smile was forced. He paused in the doorway and flung hands to hips.

"Youse boobs look like star mourners at a funeral," he announced with old-time braggadocio. "Get wise to yourselves and stick grins on them mugs. Watch Danny Knapp—he'll show you a few things. They tell me that geezer Walter Johnson is goin' to twirl for Washington this afternoon. Chee! there never was a day when I couldn't eat that gink's offerings."

And more of the same. The men smiled delightedly—then laughed when Danny slammed out a triple, two doubles and a single, stole two bases and played sensationally in the field.

Cæsar had come into his own again!

It was the old-time Danny—with a difference. The players didn't know the difference; they knew nothing of the ache eating at Danny's heart. They didn't even know that Danny had a heart; he just didn't seem that kind of a guy. But his averages climbed, and the Vultures climbed, and one magnificent day they took both ends of a double-header from Boston and stepped into the League leadership once more. The men loved Danny for it, for they knew it was his work which had caused the miracle, and they took him into the fold and martyrized themselves to listen to his own plaudits by the hour.

The evening papers announced that "The Girl and the Ring" company was to close its local run and take the road. Yvonne Parrenne was leaving.

She left. But from Philadelphia, first stop of the company, came a letter from the lady in the case to Danny Knapp—a delighted Danny.

Dear Danny:

I don't know how you got wise, but you musta done it some way. I aint got nothing to say except that I'm terrible sorry. It was all my fault. I never took their dirty money. I want you to know that. Me—I liked to hear you talk about yourself—because, oh! Danny, can't you guess?

So Danny repaired immediately to the sanctum of the manager and announced that he wished a three-days' leave of absence. It was granted.

Twenty-four hours later Miss Yvonne Parrenne gave short notice to "The Girl and the Ring" company and departed forever from the broiler ranks. Twenty-six hours later she pledged herself in holy wedlock to Mr. Daniel Knapp, ball-player extraordinary. Twenty-eight hours later they were en route to join the team.

In the seclusion of their drawing-room, Mr. Daniel Knapp encircled the lissome waist of Mrs. Daniel Knapp with a powerful arm, perched his over-large feet on the seat opposite, sighed deeply and spoke as follows:

"It wasn't no go from the start, dearie. Danny Knapp is the best ball-player in the world, and there aint no use in him not sayin' so. Now when we was playin' Detroit last week an' they was watchin' to see me make a monkey outa Ty Cobb, why—"

And Mrs. Daniel Knapp listened with shining, love-filled eyes. When her husband finished, she kissed him.

"I just love to hear you talk about yourself, Danny," she admitted shyly. "It's so grand to know a man has confidence in himself!"

The RANGE BOSS

A NOVEL of the West Western, athrill with swift adventure, abloom with charming romance, athrob with the joy of open-air living—that is "The Range Boss." Not in many years has there been published a Western novel that is so wholly worth-while and so completely enjoyable.

CHAPTER I

AT CALAMITY CROSSING

GETTING up the shoulder of the mesa was no easy job, but judging from the actions and appearance of wiry pony and gracefully balancing rider, it was a job that would be accomplished. For part of the distance, it is true, the man thought it best to dismount, drive the pony ahead of him and follow on foot. At length, however, they reached the top of the mesa, and after a breathing spell, the man mounted and rode across the table-land.

A short lope brought pony and rider to a point where the mesa sloped down again to meet a plain that stretched for miles, to merge into some foothills. A faint trail came from somewhere through the foothills, wound over the plain and followed a slope that descended to a river below the rider. His gaze rested briefly on the river and the crossing.

"She's travelin' some, this mornin'," he said aloud, mentally referring to the water. "I reckon that mud over there must be hub-deep—on a buckboard," he added, looking at the level on the opposite side of the crossing. "I'd say, if anybody was to ask me, that last night's rain has made Calamity some risky this mornin'—for a buckboard." He drew out a silver timepiece and consulted it with grave deliberation. "It's eleven. They'd be due about now—if the eight o'clock was on time—which she's never been knowed to be." He returned the timepiece to the pocket and rode along the edge of the mesa away from the river, his gaze concentrated at the point where the trail on the plains below him vanished into the distant foothills. A little later he again halted the pony, swung crossways in the saddle and rolled a cigarette, and while smoking and watching, drew out two pistols, took out the cylinders, replaced them, and wiped and polished the metal until the guns glittered brightly in the swimming sunlight. He considered them long before restoring them to their places, doubt in his gaze. "I reckon she's been raised a lot different," was his mental conclusion, "but I reckon there aint nothin' in Poughkeepsie's name to give anyone comin' from there any right to put on airs." He tossed the butt of the cigarette away and frowned, continuing his soliloquy: "The Flyin' W aint no place for a lady. Jim Pickett an' Tom Chavis aint fit for no lady to look at—let alone talkin' to them. There's others, too. Now, if she was comin' to the Diamond H— Why, shucks! Mebbe she wouldn't think I'm any better than Pickett an' Chavis! If she looks anything like her picture, though, she's got sense. An'—"

HE saw the pony fleck its ears erect, and he followed its gaze, to see on the plains trail, far over near where it melted into the foothills, a moving speck crawling toward him.

He swung back into the saddle and smilingly patted the pony's neck.

"You was expectin' them too, wasn't you, Patches? I reckon you're a right knowin' horse!"

He wheeled the pony and urged it

BY CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

"THE BOSS OF THE LAZY Y" won distinction for Charles Alden Seltzer as a writer of exceptionally interesting Western fiction. A spirited, colorful style, an intimate acquaintance with the life he describes, and that quintessential quality, the story-telling instinct—these make his stories attractive indeed.

slowly back over the mesa, riding along near the edge until he reached a point behind a heavy post-oak thicket, where he pulled the pony to a halt. From here he would not be observed from the trail on the plains, and he again twisted in the saddle, sagging against the high pommel and drawing the wide brim of his hat well over his eyes, shading them as he peered intently at the moving speck.

He watched for half an hour, while the speck grew larger in his vision, finally assuming definite shape. He recognized the buckboard, and the blacks that were pulling it; they had been inseparable during the past two years, for Bill Harkness, the Flying W owner, would drive no others after his last sickness had seized him—the sickness which had finally finished him some months ago. The blacks were coming rapidly, shortening the distance with the tireless lope that the plains animal uses so effectively, and as they neared the point on the mesa where the rider had stationed himself, the latter parted the branches of the thicket and peered between them, his eyes agleam, the color deepening in his face.

"There's four of them in the buckboard," he said aloud, astonished, as the vehicle came nearer; "an' Wes Vickers aint with them! Now, what do you think of that! Wes told me there'd be only the girl an' her aunt an' uncle. It's a man, too, an' he's doin' the drivin'! I reckon Wes got drunk an' they left him behind!" He reflected a moment, watching with narrowed eyes, his brows in a frown. "That guy doin' the drivin' is a stranger, Patches," he said. "Why, it's mighty plain! Four in the buckboard, with them bags an' trunks an' things, makes a full house, an' there wasn't no room for Wes!" He grinned.

THE buckboard swung close to the foot of the slope below him, and he eagerly scrutinized the occupants, his gaze lingering long on the girl on the seat beside the driver. She had looked for one flashing instant toward him, her attention drawn, no doubt, by the fringing green of the mesa, and he had caught a good glimpse of her face. It was just like the picture that Wes Vickers had surreptitiously brought to him one day some weeks before, after Harkness' death, when, in talking with Wes about the niece who was now the sole owner of the Flying W, and who was coming soon to manage her property, he had evinced curiosity. He had kept the picture, in spite of Vickers' remonstrances, and had studied it many times. He studied it now, after the passage of the buckboard, and was supremely pleased, for the likeness did not flatter her.

Displeasure came into his eyes, though, when he thought of the driver. He was strangely disturbed over the thought that the driver had accompanied her from the East. He knew the driver was an Easterner, for no Westerner would ever rig himself out in such an absurd fashion—the cream-colored Stetson with the high pointed crown, extra wide brim with nickel spangles around the band; a white shirt with a broad turn-down collar and a flowing colored tie—blue; a cartridge-

belt that fitted snugly around his waist, yellow with newness, so that the man on the mesa almost imagined he could hear it creak when its owner moved; corduroy riding-breeches, tight at the knees; and glistening boots with stiff tops. And—here the observer's eyes gleamed with derision—as the buckboard passed, he had caught a glimpse of a nickeled spur, with long rowels, on one of the ridiculous boots.

He chuckled, his face wreathing in smiles as he urged the pony along the edge of the mesa, following the buckboard. He drew up presently at a point just above the buckboard, keeping discreetly behind some brush, that he might not be seen, and gravely considered the vehicle and its occupants. The buckboard had stopped at the edge of the water, and the blacks were drinking. The girl was talking; the watcher could hear her voice distinctly.

"What a rough, grim country!" she said. "It is beautiful, though."

"She's a knowin' girl," mused the rider, strangely pleased that she should like the world he lived in. For it was his world; he had been born here.

"Don't you think so, Willard?" added the girl.

THE rider strained his ears for the answer. It came, grumblingly:

"I suppose it's well enough—for the clod-hoppers that live here."

The girl laughed tolerantly; the rider on the mesa smiled. "I reckon I aint goin' to like Willard a heap, Patches," he said to the pony; "he's runnin' down our country." He considered the girl and the driver gravely, and again spoke to the pony. "Do you reckon he's her brother, Patches? I expect it aint possible—they're so different."

"Do you think it is quite safe?" The girl's voice reached him again; she was looking at the water of the crossing.

"Vickers said it was," the driver replied. "He ought to know." His tone was irritable.

"He's her brother, I reckon," reflected the man on the mesa; "no lover would talk that way to his girl." There was relief in his voice, for he had been hoping that the man was a brother.

"Vickers said to swing sharply to the left after passing the middle," declared the driver sonorously. "But I don't see any wagon-tracks—that miserable rain last night must have obliterated them."

"I reckon the rain has *obliterated* them," grinned the rider, laboring with the word, "if that means wipin' them out. Leastways, they aint there any more."

"I feel quite sure that Mr. Vickers said to turn to the *right* after passing the middle, Willard," came the girl's voice.

"I certainly ought to be able to remember that, Ruth!" said the driver, gruffly; "I heard him distinctly!"

"Well," returned the girl with a nervous little laugh, "perhaps I was mistaken, after all." She placed a hand lightly on the driver's arm. And the words she spoke were not audible to the rider, so softly were they uttered.

But the driver laughed with satisfaction. "You've said it!" he declared. "I'm certainly able to pilot this ship to safety!" He pulled on the reins and spoke sharply to the blacks. They responded with a jerk that threw the occupants of the buckboard against the backs of the seats.

The rider's eyes gleamed. "Hush!" he said, addressing no one in particular. "Calamity's goin' to claim another victim!" He raised one hand to his lips, making a funnel of it. He was about to shout at the driver, but thought better of the idea and let the hand drop. "Shucks," he said; "I reckon there aint any real danger. But I expect the boss gasser of the outfit will be gettin' his'n pretty quick now." He leaned forward and watched the buckboard, his lean under-jaw thrown forward, a grim smile on his lips. He noted with satisfaction that the elderly couple in the rear seat, and the girl in the front one, were holding on tightly, and that the driver, busy with the reins, was swaying from one side to the other as the wagon bumped over the impeding stones of the river-bed.

THE blacks reached the middle of the stream safely and were crowding of their own accord to the right,

when the driver threw his weight on the left rein and swung them sharply in that direction. For a few feet they traveled evenly enough, but when they were still some distance from the bank, the horse on the left sank quickly to his shoulders, lunged, stood on his hind legs and pawed the air impotently, and then settled back, snorting and trembling.

Too late the driver saw his error. As the left horse sank, he threw his weight on the right rein as though to remedy the accident. This movement threw him off his balance, and he slipped off the seat, clawing and scrambling, at the instant the front of the buckboard dipped and sank, disappearing with a splash into the muddy water. It had gone down awry, the girl's side high out of the water, the girl herself clinging to the edge of the seat, out of the water's reach, the elderly couple in the rear also safe and dry, but plainly frightened.

The girl did not scream; the rider on the mesa noted this with satisfaction. She was talking, though, to the driver, who at first had disappeared, only to reappear an instant later, blowing and cursing, his head and shoulders out of the water, his ridiculous hat floating serenely downstream, the reins still in his hands.

"I reckon he's discovered that Vickers told him to swing to the right," grinned the rider from his elevation. He watched the driver until he gained the bank and stood there, dripping, gesticulating, impotent rage consuming him. The buckboard could not be moved without endangering the comfort of the remaining occupants, and without assistance they must inevitably stay where they were. And so the rider on the mesa wheeled his pony and sent it toward the edge of the mesa where a gentle slope swept downward to the plains.

"I reckon I've sure got to rescue her," he said, grinning with some embarrassment, "—though I'm mighty sorry that Willard had to get his new clothes wet."

He spoke coaxingly to the pony; it stepped gingerly over the edge of the mesa and began the descent, sending stones and sand helterskelter before it, the rider sitting tall and loose in the saddle, the reins hanging, he trusting entirely to the pony's wisdom.

CHAPTER II

THE SYMPATHETIC RESCUER

HALFWAY down the slope, the rider turned and saw that Willard and the occupants of the buckboard were watching him. The color in his cheeks grew deeper, and his embarrassment increased, for he noted that the girl had faced squarely around toward him, had forgotten her precarious position; her hands were clasped as though she were praying for his safety. The aunt and uncle, too, were twisted in their seat, leaning toward him in rigid attitudes, and Willard, safe on his bank, was standing with clenched hands.

"Do you reckon we're goin' to break our necks, you piebald outlaw!" the rider said to the pony. "Well,"—as the animal whinnied gently at the sound of his voice,—"there's some people that do, an' if you've got any respect for them, you'll be mighty careful."

The descent was accomplished in a brief time, and then Patches and his rider went forward toward the mired buckboard and its occupants, the pony unconcernedly, its rider, having conquered his embarrassment, serene, steady of eye, inwardly amused.

When he reached the water's edge, he halted Patches. Sitting motionless in the saddle, he quietly contemplated the occupants of the buckboard. He had come to help them, but he was not going to proffer his services until he was sure they would be welcome. He had heard stories of the snobbishness and independence of some Easterners.

And so he sat there long, for the occupants of the buckboard, knowing nothing of his intentions, were in their turn awaiting some word from him.

NO word came. He looked down, interestedly watching Patches drink. Then, when the pony had finished, he looked up, straight at the girl. She was sitting very erect, as erect as she could in the circumstances,

trying hard to repress her anger over his inaction. She could see that he was deliberately delaying. And she met his gaze coldly.

He looked from the girl to Willard. The Easterner was examining a small pistol that he had drawn from a yellow holster at his waist, so high on his waist that he had been compelled to bend his elbow in an acute angle to get it out. His hands were trembling, whether from the wetting he had received or from doubt as to the rider's intentions, was a question that the rider did not bother with. He looked again at the girl. Doubt had come into her eyes; she was looking half fearfully at him, and he saw that she half suspected him of being a desperado. He grinned, moved to mirth.

She was reassured; the smile had done it. She returned it, a little ruefully. And she felt that, in view of the circumstances, she might dispense with formalities and get right down to business. For her seat was uncomfortable, and Aunt Martha and Uncle Jepson were anxious, to say nothing of Willard, who had placed his pistol behind him, determined, if the man turned out to be a highwayman, to defend his party to the last.

But still the rider did not move. There was no hurry; only Willard seemed to be really suffering, for the winter's chill had not yet gone out of the air. But then, Willard had earned his ducking.

The girl cleared her throat. "We have had an accident," she informed the rider, her voice a little husky.

AT this word he swept his hat from his head and bowed to her. "Why, I reckon you have, ma'am," he said. "Didn't you have no driver?"

"Why, yes," returned the girl hesitatingly, for she thought she detected sarcasm in his voice, and she had to look twice at him to make sure—and then she couldn't have told. "The gentleman on the bank, there, is our driver."

"The gentleman on the bank, eh?" drawled the rider. And now for the first time he seemed to become aware of Willard's presence, for he looked narrowly at him. "Why, he's all wet!" he exclaimed. "I expect he come pretty near drowndin', didn't he, ma'am?" He looked again at the girl, astonishment in his eyes. "An' so he drove you into that suck-hole, an' he got throwed out! Wasn't there no one to tell him that Calamity aint to be trusted?"

"Mr. Vickers told us to keep to the right after reaching the middle," said the girl.

"I distinctly understood him to say the left, Ruth," growled Willard.

The rider watched the girl's face, saw some color come into it, and his lips twitched with some inward emotion. "I reckon your brother's right, ma'am. Vickers wanted to drownd you-all."

"Mr. Masten isn't my brother," denied the girl. Her color heightened.

"Well, now," said the rider. He bent his head and patted the pony's mane to hide his disappointment. Again, so it seemed to the girl, he was deliberately delaying, and she bit her lips with vexation.

Willard also seemed to have the same thought, for he shouted angrily: "While you are talking there, my man, I am freezing. Isn't there some way for you to get my party and the wagon out of there?"

"Why, I expect there's a way," drawled the rider, fixing Masten with a steady eye; "I've been wonderin' why you didn't mention it before."

"Oh, Lord!" said Masten to the girl, his disgust making his voice husky, "can you imagine such stupidity?"

But the girl did not answer; she had seen a glint in the rider's eyes while he had been looking at Masten which had made her draw a deep breath. She had seen guile in his eyes, and subtlety, and much humor. Stupidity! She wondered how Masten could be so dense!

THEN she became aware that the rider was splashing toward her, and the next instant she was looking straight at him, with not more than five feet of space between them. His gaze was on her with frank curiosity, his lean, strong face glowing with the bloom of health; his mouth was firm, his eyes serene, virility and confidence

in every movement of his body. And then he was speaking to her, his voice low, gentle, respectful, even deferential. He seemed not to have taken offense at Willard, seemed to have forgotten him.

"I reckon you-all will have to ride out of here on my horse, ma'am," he said, "—if you reckon you'd care to. Why, yes, I expect that's right; I'd ought to take the old lady an' gentleman first, ma'am,"—as the girl indicated them.

He backed his pony and smiled at Aunt Martha, who was small, gray and sweet of face. He grinned at her—the grin of a grown boy at his grandmother.

"I reckon you'll go first, ma'am," he said to her. "I'll have you high an' dry in a jiffy. You couldn't ride there, you know," he added as Aunt Martha essayed to climb on behind him. "This Patches of mine is considerable cantankerous an' aint been educated to it. It's likely he'd dump us both, an' then we'd be freezin' too." And he glanced sidelong at Willard.

Aunt Martha was directed to step on the edge of the buckboard. Trembling a little, though smiling, she was lifted bodily and placed sidewise on the saddle in front of him, and in this manner was carried to the bank, far up on the slope out of the deep mud that spread over the level near the water's edge, and set down, gently, voicing her thanks.

Then the rescuer returned for Uncle Jepson. On his way to join Aunt Martha, Uncle Jepson, who had watched the rider narrowly during the exchange of words with Willard, found time to whisper into his ear:

"I had a mule once that wasn't any stubborner than Willard Masten."

"You don't recollect how you cured him of it?"

"Yes sir, I do. I thumped it out of him!" And Uncle Jepson's eyes glowed vindictively.

"I reckon you've got a heap of man in you, sir," said the rider. He set Uncle Jepson down beside Aunt Martha and turned his pony back toward the river to get his remaining passenger. Masten waved authoritatively to him.

"If it's just the same to you, my man, I'll assist Miss Ruth to land. Just ride over here!"

THE rider halted the pony and sat loosely in the saddle, gravely contemplating the driver across the sea of mud that separated them.

"Why, you aint froze yet, are you!" he said in pretended astonishment. "Your mouth is still able to work considerable smooth! An' so you want to ride my horse!" He sat, regarding the Easterner in deep, feigned amazement. "Why, Willard," he said when it seemed he had quite recovered, "Patches would sure go to sunfishin' an' dump you off into that little ol' suck-hole ag'in!" He urged the pony on through the water to the buckboard and drew up beside the girl.

Her face was crimson, for she had not failed to hear Masten, and it was plain to the rider that she had divined that jealousy had impelled Masten to insist on the change of riders. Feminine perverseness, or something stronger, was in her eyes when the rider caught a glimpse of them as he brought his pony to a halt beside her. He might now have made the mistake of referring to Masten and thus have brought from her a quick refusal to accompany him, for he had made his excuse to Masten, and to have permitted her to know the real reason would have been to attack her loyalty. He strongly suspected that she was determined to make Masten suffer for his obstinacy, and he rejoiced in her spirit.

"We're ready for you now, ma'am."

"Are you positively certain that Patches wont go to 'sunfishing' with me?" she demanded as she poised herself on the edge of the buckboard.

He flashed a pleased grin at her, noting with a quickening pulse the deep, rich color in her cheeks, the soft, white skin, her dancing eyes—all framed in the hood of the rain-cloak she wore.

He reached out his hands to her, clasped her around the waist and swung her to the place on the saddle formerly occupied by Aunt Martha. If he held her to him a little more tightly than he had held Aunt Martha,

the wind might have been to blame, for it was blowing some stray wisps of her hair into his face, and he felt a strange intoxication that he could scarcely control.

And now, when she was safe on his horse and there was no further danger that she would refuse to ride with him, he gave her the answer to her question:

"Patches wouldn't be unpolite to a lady, ma'am," he said quietly, into her hair; "he wouldn't throw you."

He could not see her face—it was too close to him and his chin was higher than the top of her head. But he could not fail to catch the mirth in her voice:

"Then you lied to Willard!"

"Why, yes, ma'am; I reckon I did. You see, I didn't want to let Patches get all muddied up, ridin' over to Willard."

"But you are riding him into the mud now!" she declared in a strangely muffled voice.

"Why, so I am, ma'am," he said gleefully; "I reckon I'm sure a box-head!"

HE handed her down a minute later, beside Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha, and he lingered another moment near her, for his proximity to her had set his blood tingling, and there was an unnamable yearning in his breast to be near her. He had passed hours in looking upon her picture, dreaming of this minute, or another like it, and now that his dream had come true, he realized that fulfillment was sweeter than anticipation. He was hugely pleased with her.

"She's a lot better lookin' than her picture," he told himself as he watched her. She had her back to him, talking with her relatives, but she did not need to face him to arouse his worship. "Didn't I know she was little!" he charged himself, estimating her height; "she wont come anywheres near reachin' my shoulder."

He had not forgotten Masten. And a humorous devil sported in his eye as he wheeled his pony and fixed his gaze on that gentleman.

"Speciments travel around 'most anywheres," he reflected. "This here's a swell-head with a grouch. I reckon he aint a serious friend of hers, or she wouldn't have stood for me rescuin' her when he offered himself that generous." The recollection convulsed him, and he bowed his head over the pony's neck to hide the laugh. When he looked up, it was to see Masten standing rigid, watching him, wrath on his face.

"I suppose I'm to stand here and freeze while you sit over there and laugh your fool head off!" shouted the Easterner. "I've got some dry clothing in my trunk on the wagon, which I might put on, if I could induce you to hurry a little."

"Why, shucks. I come mighty near forgettin' you, Willard," said the rider. "An' so you've got other clothes! Only they're in your trunk on the buckboard, an' you can't get 'em. An' you're freezin' an' I'm laughin' at you. You've got a heap of trouble, aint you, Willard! An' all because you was dead set on goin' to the left when you ought to have gone to the right."

"Do hurry—wont you, please?" said the girl's voice, close to his stirrup.

HE looked guiltily at her, for he had been about to say some vitriolic things to Masten, having almost lost patience with him. But at her words his slow good-nature returned.

"I'm sure goin' to hurry, ma'am."

He urged the pony into the water again, rode to the buckboard, stepped off, and kneeling on the seat reached into the water and worked with the harness. Then, walking along the wagon tongue, which was slightly out of the water, he again reached into the water and fumbled with the harness. Then he stepped back, slapped the blacks and urged them with his voice, and they floundered out of the water and gained the bank, where they stood shaking the water from their glistening bodies.

He mounted his pony again and rode to the rear of the buckboard. Taking the braided-hair rope that hung from the pommel of his saddle, he made a hitch around the center of the rear axle. Then he wheeled his pony until it faced away from the buckboard, rode the

length of the rope carefully, halted when it was taut, and then slowly, with his end of the rope fastened securely to the saddle-horn, pulled the buckboard to a level on the river-bottom.

Returning to the rear of the buckboard, he unfastened the rope, coiled it, and rode to the bank, catching the blacks and leading them up the slope beyond where the girl, her aunt and her uncle stood. He gently asked Uncle Jepson to hold the blacks, for fear they might stray, and then with a smile at the girl and Aunt Martha, he returned to the buckboard. There he uncoiled his rope again and attached one end of it to the tongue of the wagon, again, as before, riding away until the rope grew taut. Then, with a word to the pony, the wagon was drawn through the water to the edge of the sea of mud.

This mud looked treacherous, but it was the only way out; and so, after a pause for rest, he urged the pony on again. The buckboard traveled its length—then lurched into a rut and refused to move another foot, in spite of the straining of the pony and its rider's urgings.

THE rider paused, turned in the saddle and scratched his head in perplexity.

"I reckon we've run ag'in' a snag, Patches," he said. He scrutinized the slopes. "I expect we'll have to try one of them, after all," he decided.

"You were foolish to try to draw the wagon out with that thing, in the first place," loudly criticized Masten. "If you had hitched the horses to the wagon after you had pulled it out of the hole, why—"

The rider looked at the fault-finder; his eyes narrowed.

"Why, if it aint Willard!" he said, amazed. "Standin' there, workin' his little old jaw ag'in! An' a-mournin' because I aint goin' to get my feet wet! Well, shucks. I reckon there aint nothin' to do now but to get the blacks an' hitch 'em onto the wagon. There's a heap of mud there, of course, but I expect some mud on them right pretty boots of yours wouldn't spoil 'em. I'll lead the blacks over an' you can work your jaw on 'em."

"Thanks," said Masten, sneering; "I've had enough wetting for one day. I have no doubt that you can get the wagon out, by your own crude methods. I shall not interfere, you may be sure."

He stalked away from the water's edge and ascended the slope to a point several feet in advance of the wagon. Standing there, he looked across the mud at the girl and the others, as though disdaining to exchange further words with the rider.

The latter gazed at him, sidelong, with humorous malice in his glance. Then he wheeled his pony, rode back toward the wagon, veered when almost to it and forced the pony to climb the slope, thus getting Masten between the rope and the mud. He pulled the rope taut again, swinging wagon-tongue and wheels at a sharp angle toward him, drove the spurs into the flanks of the pony and headed it toward the mud level, swinging so that the rope described a quarter circle. It was a time-honored expedient which, he expected, would produce the jerk that would release the wagon.

IF he expected the action would produce other results, the rider gave no indication of it. Only the girl, watching him closely and seeing a hard gleam in his eyes, sensed that he was determined to achieve a double result, and she cried out to Masten. The warning came too late. The taut rope, making its wide swing, struck Masten in the small of the back, lifted him, and bore him resistlessly out into the mud level, where he landed, face down, while the wagon, released, swished past him on its way to freedom.

The rider took the wagon far up the sloping trail before he brought it to a halt. Then, swinging it sideways so that it would not roll back into the mud, he turned and looked back at Masten. The latter had got to his feet, mud-bespattered, furious.

The rider looked from Masten to the girl, his expression one of hypocritical gravity. The girl's face was flushed with indignation over the affront offered her friend. She had punished him for his jealousy; she had taken

her part in mildly ridiculing him. But it was plain to the rider, when he turned and saw her face, that she resented the indignity she had just witnessed. She was rigid; her hands were clenched, her arms stiff at her sides; her voice was icy, even though husky with suppressed passion.

"I suppose I must thank you for getting the wagon out," she said. "But for that despicable trick—" Her self-control deserted her. "I wish I were a man; you would not go unpunished!"

There was contrition in his eye. For an infinitesimal space he regretted the deed, and his active mind was already framing an excuse. And then out of the tail of his eye he saw Uncle Jepson winking violent applause at him, and a broad grin suffused his face. He made some effort to suppress it, but deepening wrinkles around his eyes contradicted the gravity of his lips.

"Why, I wasn't reckonin' to hurt him, ma'am," he said. "You see, he was right in the way, an' I reckon I was feelin' a bit wild right at that minute, an'—" His gaze went to Masten, who was scraping mud from his garments with a small flat stone. The rider's eyes grew wide; more wrinkles appeared around them.

"Why, I've spoiled his white shirt!" he said as though speaking to himself, his voice freighted with awe. And then, as Masten shook a threatening fist at him, he suddenly yielded to the mirth that was consuming him and bowed his head.

It was Uncle Jepson's warning shout that impelled him to raise his head. He saw Masten coming toward him, clawing at the foolish holster at his waist, his eyes flashing murder, his teeth bared in a snarl.

"You, Patches!" said the rider, his voice coming with a cold, quick snap. And the piebald pony, his muscles and thews alive with energy in an instant, lunged in answer to the quick knee-press, through the mud, straight at Masten.

SO it was a grim and formidable figure that Masten looked up at before he could get his weapon out of its holster. The lean face of the rider was close to his own, the eyes were steady, blue, and so cold that they made Masten forget the chill in the air. And one of the heavy pistols that the rider carried was close to Masten's head, its big muzzle gaping forebodingly at him; and the rider's voice, as he leaned from the saddle, came tense and low. The girl could not hear:

"Listen to this gospel, you mud-wallowin' swine," he said. "This is a man's country, an' you play a man's game or you lose out so quick it'll make you dizzy! You been playin' kid all through this deal. You're grumblin' an' whinin' ever since I set eyes on you from the edge of mesa, there. That little girl thinks you're all wool an' a yard wide. You come across, clean—you hear me! You shape up to man's size or I'll hunt you up an' tear the gizzard out of you! You jam that there cap-shooter back where it belongs or I'll take it away from you an' make you eat it! You hear me!"

The pistol went back; Masten's face was ashen beneath the mud on it.

"Now grin, you sufferin' shorthorn!" came the rider's voice again, low as before. "Grin like you'd just discovered that I'm your rich uncle, come from Frisco with a platterful of gold nuggets which I'm set on you spendin' for white shirts. Grin, or I'll salivate you!"

It was a grin that wreathed Masten's lips—a shallow, forced one. But it sufficed for the rider. He sat erect; his six-shooter disappeared magically; and the smile on his face, when he looked at the girl, had genuine mirth in it.

"I've apologized to Willard, ma'am," he said. "We aint goin' to be cross to each other no more. I reckon you c'n forgive me, now, ma'am. I sure didn't think of bein' mean."

The girl looked doubtfully at Masten, but because of the mud on his face could see no expression.

"Well, I'm glad of that," she said, reddening with embarrassment. "I certainly should not like to think that anyone who had been so accommodating as you could be so mean as to deliberately upset anyone in the mud." She looked downward. "I'm sorry I spoke to you as I did," she added.

"Why, I'm sorry too, ma'am," he

said gravely. He urged his pony through the mud and brought it to a halt beside her. "If you'd shake hands on that, ma'am, I'd be mighty tickled."

HER hand went out to him. He took it and pressed it warmly, looking at it, marveling at it, for the glove on it could not conceal its shapeliness or its smallness. He dropped it presently, and taking off his hat, bowed to her.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said: "I'll be seein' you ag'in—some time. I hope you'll like it here."

"I am sure I shall."

He grinned and turned away. Her voice halted him.

"May I know who has been so kind to us in our trouble?"

He reddened to the roots of his hair, but faced her.

"Why, I reckon you'll know, ma'am. I'm King Randerson, foreman of the Diamond H, up the crick a ways. That is," he added, his blush deepening, "I was christened 'King.' But awhile ago a dago professor who stayed overnight at the Diamond H tipped the boys off that 'King' was 'Rex' in Latin lingo. An' so it's been Rex Randerson since then, though mostly they write it *'W-r-e-c-k-s.'* There's no accountin' for notions hereabouts, ma'am."

"Well, I should think not!" said the lady, making mental note of the blueness of his eyes. "But I am sure the boys make a mistake in spelling your name. Judging from your recent actions it should be spelled *'R-e-c-k-l-e-s-s.'* Anyway, we thank you."

"The same to you, ma'am. So long."

He flashed a smile at Aunt Martha; it broadened as he met Uncle Jepson's eyes; it turned to a grin of derision as he looked at Masten. And then he was splashing his pony across the river.

They watched him as he rode up the slope on the opposite side; they held their breath as pony and rider climbed the steeper slope to the mesa. They saw him halt when he reached the mesa, saw him wave his hat to them. But they did not see him halt the pony after he had ridden a little way, and kiss the palm of the hand that had held hers.

CHAPTER III

AT THE FLYING W

IT fell to Uncle Jepson to hitch the blacks to the buckboard—in a frigid silence Masten had found his trunk, opened it and drawn out some very necessary dry clothing; then marching behind a thick clump of alder, he proceeded to make the change. After this he climbed down to the river and washed the mud from visible portions of his body. Then he returned to the buckboard, to find the others waiting for him. In a strained silence he climbed up to the seat beside Ruth, took up the reins and sent the blacks forward.

It was ten miles to the Flying W ranch-house, and during the ride the silence was broken only once. That was when, at about the fifth mile, Ruth placed a hand on Masten's arm and smiled at him.

"I really think Mr. Randerson *was* sorry that he upset you in the mud, Willard," she said gently. "I don't think he did it to be mean. And it was so manly of him to apologize to you." She laughed, thinking that time had already removed the sting. "And you really *did* look funny, Willard, with the mud all over you. I—I could have laughed, myself, if I hadn't felt so indignant."

"I'll thank you to not refer to it again, Ruth," he said crossly.

She flushed and looked straight ahead of her at the unfolding vistas that their passage revealed: at the undulating plains, green with bunch-grass that the rain of the night before had washed and reinvigorated; shivering at the cacti,—a brilliant green after the rain,—for somehow they seemed to symbolize the spirit of the country—they looked so grim, hardy and mysterious, with their ugly thorns that seemed to threaten and mock. She shrank, too, when the buckboard passed the skeleton of a steer, its bleached bones ghastly in the sunlight, but she smiled when she saw a sea of soap-weed with yellow blossoms already unfolding, and she looked long at a mile-wide section of mesquite, dark and inviting in the distance. She saw a rattler cross the trail in front of the

buckboard and draw its loathsome length into a coil at the base of some crabbed yucca, and thereafter she made grimaces at each of the ugly plants they passed. It was new to her, and wonderful. It was such a country that she had longed to live in all the days of her life.

WHEN the buckboard came to a halt in the Flying W ranch-house yard, Ruth Harkness' first emotion was one of a great happiness that the Harknesses had always been thrifty and neat, and also that Uncle William had persisted in these habits. She had feared, for during the last day of her ride on the train she had passed many ranch-houses, and she had been appalled and depressed by the dilapidated appearance of their exteriors, and by the general atmosphere of disorder and shiftlessness that seemed to surround them.

But the first glance at the Flying W convinced her that her fears had been groundless. The ranch-house was a big two-story structure built of heavy timber, with porches in front and rear, and wide cornices, all painted white and set on a solid foundation of stone. It looked spacious and comfortable. The other buildings—stables, bunk-house, mess-house, blacksmith shop, and several others—did not discredit the ranch-house. They all were in good repair. She had already noted that the fences were well kept; she had seen chickens and pigs, and flowers and a small garden; and behind the stable, in an enclosure of barbed wire, she had observed some cows—milkers, she was certain.

Two men who had been seated in the doorway of one of the buildings—she discovered, later, that it was the bunk-house—got up, lazily, and approached the buckboard. Ruth felt a pulse of trepidation as they sauntered close to the wagon—for their appearance was against them. The one in advance, a man of medium height, looked positively villainous with his long, drooping black mustache and heavy-thatched eyebrows. He eyed the occupants of the buckboard with an insolent half-smile, which the girl thought he tried—in vain—to make welcoming.

The other was a man of about thirty, tall, slender, lithe, swarthy, with thin, expressive lips that were twisted upward at one corner in an insincere smirk. This taller man came close to the wagon and paused in an attitude of quiet impudence.

"I reckon you're Ruth Harkness—the ol' man's niece?" he said.

"Yes," returned the girl, smiling. Perhaps she had misjudged these men.

"Well," said the man, looking at her with a bold glance that made her pulse skip a beat, "you're a stunner for looks, anyway." He reached out his hand. She took it, feeling that it was the proper thing to do, although she heard a grumble from Masten.

"You're welcome to the Flyin' W," said the man, breaking an awkward silence. "Tom Chavis is special glad to see a pretty woman around these parts."

She felt, in his eyes more than in his words, a veiled significance. She reddened a little, but met his gaze fairly, her eyes unwavering.

"Who is Tom Chavis?" she asked.

"I'm reckonin' to be Tom Chavis," he said, studying her. He waved a hand toward the other man, not looking at him. "This is my friend Jim Pickett. He was foreman an' straw boss, respective, under Bill Harkness."

She could not help wishing that her uncle had discharged the two men before his death. She was wondering a little at Masten's silence; it seemed to her that he must see her embarrassment, and that he might relieve her of the burden of this conversation. She looked quickly at him; he appeared to be unconcernedly inspecting the ranch-house. Perhaps, after all, there was nothing wrong with these men. Certainly, being a man himself, Masten should be able to tell.

And so she felt a little more at ease.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Chavis," she said. "Your friend Mr. Pickett too." She indicated Masten with a nod of her head toward him. "This is Mr. Willard Masten, a very dear friend of mine." The color in her face deepened with the words.

CHAVIS had looked twice at Masten before Ruth spoke. He looked again now, meeting the Easterner's eyes. Chavis had been ready to sneer at Masten because of his garments,—they were duplicates of those he had worn before the ducking, and quite as immaculate,—but something in the Easterner's eyes kept the sneer back; his own eyes gleamed with a quick, comprehensive fire, and he smiled. In the buckboard, fresh from that civilization which Chavis was ready to scorn, he had recognized a kindred spirit. There was exultation in his voice when he spoke, and he reached over Ruth to grasp Masten's hand.

"An' so this is Willard, a very dear friend of yourn, eh? Well, now, I'm sure glad, an' I reckon him an' me will get on." He urged Pickett forward and introduced him, and Pickett gave Masten one quick, appraising glance. Then he too grinned.

Ruth was gratified. These men were rough, but they had been quick to recognize and appreciate Masten's good qualities. They had gone more than halfway in welcoming him. Of course, there was Chavis' bold allusion to a "pretty woman," but the very uncouthness of the men must be the explanation for that breach of etiquette. She was much relieved.

Masten was suave and solicitous. He jumped out of the buckboard and helped her down, performing a like service for Aunt Martha. Uncle Jepson got out himself. Then, as Ruth hesitated, Masten bent over her.

"You must be tired, dear. Go in and explore the house. Get some refreshment and take a rest. I'll attend to the baggage and the horses."

He gave her a gentle pressure of the hand, and followed by Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha, she went indoors.

CHAPTER IV

A MEMORY OF THE RIDER

A QUIET satisfaction shone from Ruth's eyes when, accompanied by Aunt Martha and Uncle Jepson, she completed her inspection of the ranch-house.

"It isn't all that could be desired," she told Aunt Martha, "but it is better than I expected."

"It's comfortable, dearie," mildly smiled Aunt Martha.

"An' big enough for a feller to stretch his legs in," added Uncle Jepson. He was sitting in a big chair at one of the front windows of the sitting-room, having already adjusted himself to his new surroundings, and was smoking a short briar pipe and looking out of the window at the bunk-house, in front of which stood Pickett, Chavis and Masten, talking and laughing.

While Ruth and her relatives had been inspecting one of the upstairs rooms, she had heard the men bringing the baggage in—had heard them clumping up the stairs and setting the trunks down. Then they went out, and a little later, peering from one of the windows upstairs, Ruth had seen Masten and the other two walking toward the stable. They were talking pleasantly; their liking for one another seemed to be mutual. Ruth was delighted, but Uncle Jepson had frowned several times when looking at them.

"I cal'late them two critters'll bear a heap of watchin'," he said now. "They don't look honest."

"Jep," said Aunt Martha before Ruth could speak, "you're always criticising folks."

"It's in their faces, drat 'em," insisted Uncle Jepson. He turned a vindictive eye on his niece. "If I'd have been fifty year younger, I'd have give that Chavis a durn good t'rashin' for sayin' what he did to you about pretty gals. Durn his hide, anyhow! That there Wil—"

"I felt that way myself, at first," smiled Ruth. "After I considered, though, I felt differently. I suppose they were merely glad to see the new owner. Perhaps they haven't seen a lady in a long time."

"There's ways of showin' gladness," contended Uncle Jepson. "I cal'late if I wanted to compliment a girl, I wouldn't look at her like I wanted to carry her off to the mountains."

"Jep, they're only cowboys—they don't know any different," remonstrated Aunt Martha.

"They don't, eh?" sniffed Uncle Jepson. "I cal'late that feller Rex Randerson is some different, aint he? There's a gentleman, Ruth. You didn't see him makin' no ox-eyes. An' I'll bet you wouldn't ketch him gettin' thick with them two plug-uglies out there!"

Ruth turned away, smiling tolerantly, after having caught a glimpse of Aunt Martha's brows, uplifted in resignation. She was as fully aware of Uncle Jepson's dislike of Willard Masten as she was of Uncle Jepson's testiness and of his habit of speaking his thoughts without the slightest fear or reservation.

Also, she had always avoided crossing him. For because of a series of misfortunes, he had been left destitute, except for the little farm back near Poughkeepsie which he had sold—at her request—to accompany her here, and she felt that habits of thought and speech are firmly fixed at sixty-nine, and argument cannot shake them.

THAT first day at the ranch-house was the beginning of a new existence for Ruth. Bound for years by the narrow restrictions and conventionality of the Poughkeepsie countryside, she found the spaciousness and newness of this life inviting and satisfying. Here there seemed to be no limit, either to the space or to the flights that one's soul might take, and in the solemn grandeur of the open she felt the omnipotence of God and the spell of nature.

She had plenty of time, after the first day, to hold communion with the Creator. Masten was rarely near her. His acquaintance with Pickett and Chavis seemed destined to develop into friendship. He rode with them—"looking over the range," he told her; and only in the evening did he find time to devote to her.

Wes Vickers returned from Red Rock on the morning following Ruth's arrival. Apparently, in spite of Randerson's prediction, Vickers did not get drunk in town. Through him Ruth learned much about the Flying W. He gave her the fruit of his experience, and he had been with the Flying W, as range boss, for nearly five years.

Vickers was forty. His hair was gray at the temples; he was slightly stoop-shouldered from years in the saddle, and his legs were bowed from the same cause. He was the driving force of the Flying W. Ruth's uncle had written her to that effect the year before, during his illness, stating that without Vickers' help he would be compelled to sell the ranch. The truth of this statement dawned upon Ruth very soon after her acquaintance with Vickers. He was Argus-eyed, omnipresent. It seemed that he never slept. Mornings when she would arise with the dawn she would find Vickers gone to visit some distant part of the range. She was seldom awake at night when he returned.

He had said little to her regarding the men. "They 'tend to business," was his invariable response when she sought to question him. "It's a pretty wild life," he told her when one day about two weeks after her coming she had pressed him; "an' the boys just can't help kickin' over the traces once in a while."

"Chavis and Pickett good men?" she asked.

"You saw anything to show you they aint?" he said, with a queer look at her.

"Why, no," she returned. But her cheeks reddened.

He looked at her with a peculiar squint. "Seems like Masten's runnin' with them shows that they aint nothin' wrong with them," he said.

SHE had no reply to make to this, but she was vaguely disturbed over the expression in Vickers' eyes; that look seemed to indicate that her own first impression of the two men, and Uncle Jepson's later condemnation of them, might be correct. However, they did not bother her, and she felt certain that Masten could care for himself.

With Masten absent with Chavis and Pickett nearly every day, Ruth had much time to herself. The river attracted her, and she rode to it many times, on a slant-eyed pony that Vickers had selected for her, and which had been "gentled" by a young cowpuncher brought in from an outlying camp

solely for that purpose by the range boss. The young puncher had been reluctant to come, and he was equally reluctant to go.

"This here cayuse," he said to Vickers, when the latter instructed him to return to his outfit, saying that Miss Ruth thought she could now ride the pony without trouble, "is got a heap of devilment in him yet—which ought to come out."

"Miss Ruth's got a fellow," said the range boss, in seeming irrelevance. But the young puncher sneered a malignant denial and rode away to his camp.

There were fourteen other men employed by the Flying W. Ruth met them at various times. Invariably they were looking for strays. They seemed —some of them—content to look at her; others, bolder, manufactured ingenuous pretexts to talk; but—all were gentlemen.

She arose one morning during the third week of her stay at the ranch, to be greeted by one of those perfect days that late spring brings. It had been dry for a week, with a hint of receding chill in the air, and the comfort of a wrap was still felt. But on this morning the sun was showing his power, and a balmy south breeze that entered her window was burdened with the aroma of sage, strong and delicious. She got out of bed and looked out of the window. It was a changed world. Summer had come overnight. No morning in the East had ever made her feel quite like this.

Out on the front porch, later in the morning, with Chavis and Pickett standing near, she asked Masten to ride with her.

He seemed annoyed, but spoke persuasively.

"Put it off a day, wont you, Ruth? There's a good girl. I've promised to go to Lazette with the boys this morning, and I don't want to disappoint them." Then, seeing the disappointment in *her* eyes, he added: "Where did you want to ride?"

"Why," she said, hoping that, after all, he might change his mind, "I'm only going to the box cañon, down the river. There's such a pretty stretch of timber there."

He smiled indulgently. "I'll try to meet you there, this afternoon. About three, if I can make it. But don't wait longer." He turned his back to her and went away with Chavis and Pickett.

She stood for a little time, watching them as they mounted down near the corral gate and rode away, and then she turned and observed Uncle Jepson standing near a corner of the house, smoking, and watching her. She forced a smile and went into the house.

A LITTLE after noon she saddled her pony and rode away toward the river. She had decided that perhaps Masten might keep his appointment in spite of the obvious insincerity that had been expressed on his face during their talk.

It was fully five miles to the grove at the head of the box cañon, and she made a leisurely ride of it, so that it must have been nearly two o'clock when she dismounted and hitched the pony to a tree. Seating herself on a flat rock near the cañon edge, she settled herself to wait.

It seemed a long time. Twice after half-past two she looked at her watch, impatiently. At three she looked again; and disappointed, she was about to rise to go to her pony, when she heard the rapid drumming of hoofs near her.

With leaping heart and flushed face she turned her back to the direction from which the sounds seemed to come, and waited, listening, trying to appear unconcerned. She would make him believe she had not heard him. He did care, after all, enough to part with his companions—for her sake.

She heard him dismount, heard the rustle and crackling of twigs under his feet as he approached; and then, feeling that it would be futile to dissemble further, she turned, a smile on her lips.

Standing within five feet of her, grinning with amusement, was Tom Chavis. Curiously enough, despite her former fear of the man she did not fear him now, and after the first shock of surprise she looked at him composedly, for she half suspected that Masten had sent him, fearing that she *would* wait

in spite of his admonition not to do so. She got up and faced Chavis.

"Mr. Masten couldn't come, I suppose?" she said.

"That's right," he said, looking at her oddly; "he couldn't come. You see, he's sort of taken a shine to a biscuit-shooter in Crogan's over in Lazette, an' he couldn't very well break away."

"A biscuit-shooter!" she said, uncomprehendingly.

"Sure. I reckon that back East you'd call her a waiter, or somethin'. I aint admirin' his taste none. She aint nowheres near as good-lookin' as you."

HER first emotion was one of sickening, maddening jealousy. It made her physically weak, and she trembled as she fought it down. But the sensation passed, and though she felt that her face was hot and flushed, the cold calm of righteous resentment was slowly seizing her.

"Did Mr. Masten send you here to tell me this?" she asked icily.

"Why, no. I did it on my own hook. I knowed you'd be waitin'—I heard you makin' the date with Willard, this mornin'. An' I figgered that what was fair for one was fair for another. So I sneaked away from Willard an' come here. I've taken quite a shine to you, ma'am; you've sure got me some flustered. An' I reckon"—here he took a step toward her and grinned significantly—"that I'll make a rattlin' good substitute for Willard."

She struck at him, blindly, savagely. She felt her open hand strike his cheek, heard him curse; and then in a daze she was running toward her pony. She did not turn, but furiously raced the animal across the plains toward the ranch-house.

She was calmer when she reached the house, but went directly to her room, where she changed her clothes and sat for a long time at one of the windows, looking toward the river—and toward Lazette.

Downstairs, Uncle Jepson, who from a window of the bunk-house had seen her come in, had followed her into the house, to remark grumblingly to Aunt Martha:

"Willard didn't meet her, drat him!"

RUTH passed a miserable night, thinking over Chavis' words. The man might have been lying. Obviously, common fairness demanded that she tell Masten of the circumstance. On one thing she was determined: that Chavis should leave the ranch, whether he had lied to her or not. She would have instructed Vickers to attend to that, but Vickers had gone again to Red Rock, on business, and would not return for two or three days. She would wait until Vickers returned, to discharge Chavis, but she must tell Masten of the insult, for she yearned to see Chavis punished.

She waited until after breakfast the following morning, and then she induced Masten to walk with her, under pretext of examining the flower-beds. Reaching them, she faced him fairly.

"Willard," she said, her lips white and stiff, "there must be no double dealing between you and me. Tom Chavis told me yesterday that you are interested in a waitress, in Lazette. Is that true?"

He started, flushed darkly and then smiled blandly.

"Tom Chavis is romancing, my dear. If there is a waitress in Lazette I have not seen her." He seized her by the shoulders and spoke earnestly. "I am interested in Ruth Harkness, my dear. You don't believe such a story, do you, Ruth?" And he looked at her so frankly that her jealousy took wings, and she blushed and lowered her eyes. She raised them again almost instantly, however; they were glowing vindictively.

"Tom Chavis came to the box cañon at three, yesterday afternoon," she said firmly. "He insulted me. I want you to discharge him; Vickers is not here to do it. And I do not want to see him again."

He pressed his lips together and avoided her gaze, and a slow red stole into his face. Then he laughed mirthlessly.

"Tom Chavis is a valuable man here, Ruth," he said. "If the insult was one that can be overlooked, you would do well to let the matter rest. But be assured that I shall have a talk with Chavis, and you may believe that he

will not repeat the offense." He patted her shoulder. "In the meantime," he said, with a hurt expression in his eyes, "do have some faith in me."

Reassured, convinced that she had done him an injustice in believing Chavis, she passed the remainder of the day in comparative light-heartedness. But when the awesome darkness of the West settled over the country, and deep, stirring thoughts came to her on her pillow, she found herself thinking of the rider of the river. He grew very vivid in her thoughts, and she found herself wondering, remembering the stern manliness of his face, whether he, listening to the story of Chavis' insult, from her lips, would have sought to find excuses for her insulter.

CHAPTER V

LOVE VERSUS BUSINESS

ON Sunday afternoon Ruth, Masten, Aunt Martha and Uncle Jepson were sitting on the front porch of the Flying W ranch-house. Ruth was reading and thinking—thinking most of the time, the book lying open in her lap; Masten was smoking a cigar—one of the many that he had brought with him, and which he selfishly kept exclusively for his own use. Masten seemed to be doing a great deal of thinking too, for he was silent during long periods, reclining easily in a big rocker, well-groomed and immaculate, as usual, looking decidedly out of place in this country, where extravagant personal adornment was considered an indication of effeminacy.

Yet it was this immaculateness that had attracted Ruth to Masten in the first place, when a year and a half before she had met him at a party in Poughkeepsie. Fresh from a big city near by, he had outshone the country gallants at the party as he had outshone the cowboys that Ruth had seen since coming to the Flying W. His courtship had been gallant, too; he had quite captivated her, and after their engagement,—which had been a rather matter-of-fact affair,—she had not found it possible to refuse him permission to accompany her to the West.

"Have you visited your neighbor yet, Ruth?" Masten inquired at last.

"Neighbor!" Ruth showed her astonishment by letting her book close and losing her place. "Why, I didn't know we had a neighbor nearer than the Diamond H!"

Masten's lips curled. Her reference to the Diamond H recalled unpleasant memories.

"A nester," he said, and then added, after a pause: "—and his daughter. Only two miles from here, across the river. There's a trail, through a break in the cañon, leading to their ranch on the other side of the river. The man's name is Catherson—Abe Catherson. Chavis tells me he was something of a bother to your uncle, because of his propensity to steal Flying W cattle. He's an old savage."

"And the daughter?" inquired Ruth, her eyes alight with interest.

"Half wild, barefooted, ragged. She's pretty, though."

"How old is she, Willard?"

"A mere child. Fifteen, I should judge."

"I shall visit them to-morrow," declared Ruth.

"Sakes alive! Half wild? I should think she would be—living in that wilderness!" said Aunt Martha, looking up from her knitting, over the tops of her glasses.

"Everything is wild in this country," said Masten, a slight sneer in his voice. "The people are repulsive, in dress, manner and speech." He delicately flecked some cigar-ash from a coat-sleeve.

Uncle Jepson wrinkled his nose belligerently. He sniffed in eloquent preparation for speech, but Aunt Martha averted the imminent clash by saying sharply:

"Jep, you hop in there and get that ball of yarn off the dining-room table!"

So potent is habit that Uncle Jepson started to obey automatically; Ruth interjected a word, speaking to Masten, and Uncle Jepson's opportunity was lost.

Silence reigned again until Ruth, who was facing the Calamity Trail, suddenly exclaimed:

"Some one is coming!"

DURING the silence she had again been thinking of Rex Randerson, and seeing the figure on the trail, she had leaped to the conclusion that it was he. Her face had flushed. Masten noticed it, for he looked narrowly at her, and though he said nothing, there was that in his eyes which told her he had divined what was in her mind.

It was not Randerson, however, but Vickers, who was coming. They all recognized him when he came closer, and they watched him with that peculiar concertedness which seizes upon an expectant company, until he dismounted at the corral gates and came toward them.

Plainly there was something on Vickers' mind, for he smiled mechanically as he stepped upon the porch and looked at them.

"Well, I'm back," he said. He looked at Ruth. "There's somethin' I'd like to say to you. It's business. If you'd rather hear it private—"

"I think there is nothing—" she began.

"Well," he said, "I've got to leave here."

Ruth's face grew long. Uncle Jepson gagged on a mouthful of smoke. Aunt Martha ceased knitting. Masten alone seemed unmoved, but an elated gleam was in his eyes.

"Isn't that a rather sudden decision, Mr. Vickers?" questioned Ruth after a silence.

"Well, mebbe it is, to you," said Vickers, with some embarrassment. "But the fact is, I've been thinkin' of goin' for a long time—about a year, to be exact. I was goin' before your uncle died, but I kept holdin' on because he wanted me to. You see, ma'am, I've got a mother back East. She's been poorly for quite a while now, an' has been wantin' me to come. I've been puttin' it off, but it's got to the point where it can't be put off any longer. I got a letter from her doctor the other day, an' he says that she can't last a heap longer. So—I'm goin'."

"That's too bad," sympathized Ruth. "You ought to go, and go quickly."

"I'm aimin' to, ma'am. But I've got to tell you somethin' before I go. Me an' your uncle was pretty thick; he trusted me a heap."

"Yes," said Ruth; "he wrote me that he liked and trusted you."

"Well, you understand, then. A couple of months before he cashed in, we was talkin' of him goin'. He knowed it, ma'am. We was talkin' about the ranch. He knowed I wanted to leave. 'What'll I do for a range boss when you're gone?' he asked me. 'I wont go till you aint here any more,' I tells him. An' he grinned. 'I'm goin' to leave the Flyin' W to my niece Ruth Harkness, of Poughkeepsie,' he says. 'I'd like her to stay an' run it—if she likes it here. You'll be gone then, an' who in Sam Hill will be range boss then?' I told him I didn't have no thoughts on the subject, an' he continues: 'Rex Randerson, Vickers—he'll be range boss. Do you understand? If you was to pull your freight right now, Rex Randerson would be range boss as soon as I could get word over to him. An' if you've got any say-so after I'm gone, an' Ruth wants to keep the ranch, you tell her that—that Bill Harkness wants Rex Randerson to be range boss after Wes Vickers don't want it any more.' That's what he said, ma'am; them's his very words."

RUTH looked at Masten. He was staring stonily out into the plains. Ruth's cheeks reddened, for she felt that she knew his thoughts. But still, Randerson hadn't really used him ill at the river; and besides, he had apologized, and it seemed to her that that should end the incident. Also, she still felt rather resentful toward Masten for his attitude toward Tom Chavis after she had complained. And also, lurking deep in her unsophisticated mind was a most feminine impulse to sting Masten to jealousy. She looked up to meet Vickers' gaze, fixed curiously upon her.

"Could you recommend this man—Randerson?" she asked.

"Why, ma'am, he's got the best reputation of any man in these parts!"

"But is he efficient?"

"Meanin' does he know his business? Well, I reckon. He's got the best head for range work of any man in the country! He's square, ma'am. An'

there aint no man monkeyin' with him. I've knowed him for five years, an' I aint ever knowed him to do a crooked trick, exceptin' "—and here he scratched his head and grinned reminiscently—"when he gets the devil in him—which he does occasionally, ma'am—an' goes to jokin', ma'am. But they're mostly harmless jokes, ma'am; he's never hurt nobody, bad. But he's got a level head—a heap leveler than a lot of folks that—"

"I think Tom Chavis would make a good range boss, Ruth," said Masten. He did not look at her, and his words were expressionless.

"Mister man," said Vickers evenly, "what do you know about Tom Chavis?"

Masten looked quickly at Vickers, and as quickly looked away, his face slowly reddening.

"He's foreman now, isn't he?" he said. "It seems that Harkness trusted him that much."

"There's a first time for every man to go wrong, Mister," said Vickers.

Masten's voice was almost a sneer.

"Why don't you tell Chavis that?"

"I've told him, Mister—to his face." Vickers' own face was growing dark with wrath.

"You were range boss after Harkness' death," persisted Masten. "Why didn't you discharge Chavis?"

"I'm askin' the new boss for permission to do it now," declared Vickers. "It'll be a good wind-up for my stay here."

"We shall keep Chavis, for the present," said Ruth. "However," she added firmly, "he shall not be range boss. I do not like him."

VICKERS grinned silent applause. And again Uncle Jepson had trouble with his pipe. Aunt Martha worked her knitting needles a little faster. Masten's face paled, and the hand that held the cigar quickly clenched, so that smoking embers fell to the porch floor. Whatever his feelings, however, he retained his self-control.

"Of course, it is your affair, Ruth," he said. "I beg your pardon for offering the suggestion."

But he left them shortly afterward, lighting a fresh cigar and walking toward the bunk-house—which was deserted, for Chavis and Pickett had gone to a distant part of the range.

Thus Masten did not see Vickers, when a little later he came out on the porch with his "war-bag." He said good-by to Aunt Martha and Uncle Jepson, and then he took Ruth's hand and held it long.

"You'll never go a heap wrong when you use your own judgment, girl," he said. "I'm ridin' over to the Diamond H to tell Randerson about his new job. Don't make no mistake, girl. Rex Randerson is square. An' if any trouble comes sneakin' around you, take it to Rex; he'll stick on the right side till hell freezes over!"

CHAPTER VI

A MAN AND HIS JOB

JUST what Ruth's sensations were the next morning she could not have told. She could correctly analyze one emotion: it was eager anticipation. Also she could account for it: she wanted to see Randerson. But her reason for wanting to see him was a mystery that she could not fathom, though between the time of arising and the moment when she got downstairs she devoted much thought to it.

Yet by afternoon Ruth had tired of waiting; she had no special reason for certainty that Randerson would arrive that day, and so she went riding. She went alone, for Masten seemed to have hidden himself—at least, she could not find him. She rode to the break in the wall of the cañon, that he had told her about, found it, sent her pony through it and over a shallow crossing, emerging at length in a tangle of undergrowth in a wood, through which wound a narrow bridle-path. She followed this for some distance, and after a while came to a clearing. A little adobe house stood near the center of the clearing. Ruth halted her pony, and was debating whether to call out or to ride boldly up, when a dog came out of the door of the cabin, growling, its hair bristling belligerently. The dog was big, black, and undoubtedly savage, for the pony in-

stantly wheeled, and when the dog came closer, lashed out with both hind hoofs at it.

"Nig, you ol' duffer, git in hyeh where you b'long! Can't you see that there's a *lady!*" came a voice, unmistakably feminine. And the dog, still growling, but submissive, drew off.

Ruth urged the pony on and rode the remaining distance to the door. A girl, attired in a ragged underskirt and equally ragged waist of some checkered material, and a faded house-apron that was many sizes too small for her, stood in the open doorway, watching. She was barefooted; her hair was in tumbling disorder—though Ruth could tell that it had been combed recently. But the legs, bare almost to the knees, were clean, though brown from tan; and her face and arms glowed pink and spotless, in spite of the rags. In her eyes, as she watched Ruth, was a strange mixture of admiration and defiance.

"Dad aint hyeh this mornin'," she informed as Ruth climbed off her pony.

"I came to see *you*," said Ruth, smiling. She threw the reins over the pony's head and advanced, holding out a hand. "I am Ruth Harkness," she added, "—the new owner of the Flying W. I have been here almost a month, and I just heard that I had a neighbor. Wont you shake hands with me?"

"I reckon," said the girl. Reluctantly, it seemed, she allowed Ruth to take her hand. But she drew it away immediately. "I've heard of you," she said; "you're a niece of that ol' devil, Bill Harkness." She frowned. "He was always sayin' Dad was hookin' his doggoned cattle. Dad didn't steal 'em—ol' Bill Harkness was a liar!" Her eyes glowed fiercely. "I reckon you'll be sayin' the same thing about Dad."

"No indeed!" declared Ruth. "Your dad and I are going to be friends. I want to be friends with you, too. I am not going to charge your dad with stealing my cattle. We are going to be neighbors, and visit each other. I want to know your dad, and I want you to come over to the Flying W and get acquainted with my aunt and uncle. Aren't you going to invite me inside? I would if you came to visit me, you know." She smiled winningly.

THE girl flushed, and cast a glance at the interior of the cabin—which, Ruth had already noted, through the open door, was scantily furnished, but clean. Then the girl led the way in, motioned Ruth to a chair near a rough-topped table and stood over beside a cast-iron stove, her hands hanging at her sides, the fingers crumpling the cloth of the ragged apron. Her belligerence had departed; she seemed now to be beginning to realize that this visit was really meant to honor her, and she grew conscious of her rags, of the visible signs of poverty, of the visitor's raiment, gorgeous in comparison with her own—though Ruth's was merely a simple riding habit of brown corduroy.

Ruth had set out for this visit with a definite intention: she wanted to discover just how the girl and her father lived, and if conditions were as she suspected, she was determined to help them. Conditions were worse than she had expected, but her face gave no indication. Perhaps Ruth's wisdom was not remarkable where men were concerned, but she had a wealth of delicacy, understanding and sympathy where her own sex was in question. She stayed at the cabin for more than an hour. And at the end of that time she emerged, smiling happily, her arm around the girl; with the girl's pledge to visit her soon, with an earnest invitation to come again. Best of all, she had cleverly played upon the feminine instinct for fine raiment, slyly mentioned a trunk that she had brought with her from the East, packed to the top with substantial finery which was not in the least needed by her—an incumbrance, rather—and which, she hinted, might become the property of another, if suitable in size.

The girl followed her to the edge of the clearing, walking beside the pony. At the edge of the clearing they took leave of each other, a glow in the eyes of both that gave promise of future sincere friendship.

"Good-by, Hagar," said the Flying W girl.

"Good-by, lady," said the girl, "—Ruth," she changed, as the Flying W girl held up an admonishing finger.

And then, with a last smile, Ruth rode down the bridle-path homeward, pleasure and pity mingling in her eyes.

RANDERSON reached the Flying W ranch-house late in the afternoon. He rode first to the bunk-house, and seeing nobody there, he made a round of the buildings. Still seeing no one, he urged Patches toward the house, halted him at the edge of the front porch and sat in the saddle, looking at the front door. He was about to call, when the door opened and Uncle Jepson came out. There was a broad grin on Uncle Jepson's face.

"I cal'late you've got here," he said.

"Looks mighty like it," returned the horseman. "You reckon my new boss is anywheres around?"

"She's gone off ridin'," Uncle Jepson told him. "It's likely she'll be back shortly."

"I reckon I'd better wait," said Randerson. He wheeled Patches.

"There's plenty of sittin' room on the porch, here," invited Uncle Jepson, indicating the chairs.

"Thank you—I reckon the bunk-house will be my quarters."

He spoke to the pony. Uncle Jepson spoke at the same instant, and Patches halted.

"I cal'late you'd better wait here."

"If you insist," said Randerson. He swung off and walked to the edge of the porch, grinning mildly at Uncle Jepson. The handclasp between them was warm, for Uncle Jepson had been strongly attracted to this son of the plains; and the twinkle in Randerson's eyes as his met Uncle Jepson's was not to be mistaken.

"So Vickers has gone," said Randerson as he dropped into a chair facing Uncle Jepson. "He's a mighty fine man."

"Willard wanted Chavis to have his job," whispered Uncle Jepson.

"You don't say!" Randerson's eyes gleamed. "An' Miss Ruth didn't want him, I reckon." He caught Uncle Jepson's nod. "She's allowin' that she's goin' to be boss. But of course she would," he added. He stood up, for Aunt Martha had opened the door and was standing in it, looking at him. He removed his hat and bowed to her, his eyes gleaming with something near affection, for Aunt Martha had often found a place in his heart. He stepped forward, took her hand, and escorted her to the largest and most comfortable of the rockers on the porch, and when she sat down she looked up at him and smiled.

"I reckon you like it here?" he said gently, to Aunt Martha.

"I like it very much. But there are differences—after Poughkeepsie. One doesn't notice them so much at first."

"I expect you find it sort of rough here," he said, looking at her. "They tell me that in the East folks live pretty close together—that there's conveniences. There aint a heap of conveniences here." He pronounced the word slowly and laboriously. It was plain that he was trying to put on his best manners.

"No—no conveniences," said Aunt Martha. "But it's a wonderful country, my boy—wonderful!"

A pulse of something shot through him at the word "boy."

"I'm glad you like it," he said gravely.

Aunt Martha folded her hands in her lap and looked long at him over the rims of her glasses. There was interest in her eyes, and kindliness.

"You were born here?" she asked.

"In Colfax, ma'am."

"Is that a city?"

"Bless you, ma'am, no. It's a county."

"And you were born on a ranch then."

"Yes, ma'am."

She was asking questions that a man would not have dared to ask him, and he was answering them as a boy might have answered. It did not seem an impertinence to him or to her, so great was her interest in him, so deep was his admiration for her.

"And your parents?"

"Both dead, ma'am." A shadow crossed his face, a look of wistfulness, and she abruptly ceased questioning. And when, a little later, they saw Ruth coming across the plains toward them, Aunt Martha got up. He held the screen-door open for her, and she

paused on the threshold and patted his bare head.

"If I had had a son, I could have wished he would be like you," she said.

He blushed crimson. "Why, ma'am, I—" he began. But Aunt Martha had gone in, and he turned to face Ruth, who was dismounting at the edge of the porch.

"Oh!" she said, as though his appearance had surprised her, though she had seen him from afar, "you are here already!"

"I expect it's me, ma'am," he said gravely. "You see, Wes Vickers stopped at the Diamond H last evenin', an' I come right over."

IT was quite evident that he would not attempt to be familiar. No longer was he the free-lance rider of the plains who had been at liberty to exchange words with her as suited his whim: here was the man who had been given a job, and there stood his employer: he would not be likely to step over that line, and his manner showed it.

"Well," she said, "I am glad you decided to come right away; we miss Vickers already, and I have no doubt, according to his recommendation, that you will be able to fill his place acceptably."

"Thank you, ma'am. I reckon I'm to take up my quarters in the bunkhouse?" He paused. "Or mebbe the foreman's shanty."

"Why," she said, looking at him and noting his grave earnestness, so strikingly in contrast to his wild frolicsomeness at Calamity that day. "Why, I don't know about that. Vickers stayed at the ranch-house, and I suppose you will stay here too."

"All right, ma'am; I'll be takin' my war-bag in." He was evidently feeling a slight embarrassment, and would have been glad to retreat. He got his "war-bag" from its place behind the saddle, on Patches, shouldered it and crossed the porch. He was opening the door when Ruth's voice stopped him.

"Oh," she said, "your room. I forgot to tell you; it is the one in the northwest corner."

"Thank you, ma'am." He went in.

"Come down when you have straightened around," she called to him; "I want to talk with you about some things."

"I'll have to put Patches away, ma'am," he said; "I'd sure have to come down, anyway."

That talk was held with Uncle Jepson looking on and listening and smoking his pipe. And when it was over, Randerson took the saddle and bridle off Patches, turned him loose in the corral and returned to the porch to talk and smoke with Uncle Jepson.

While they sat, the darkness came on; the kerosene lamp inside was lighted; delicious odors floated out to them through the screen door. Presently a horseman rode to the corral fence and dismounted.

"One of the boys, I reckon," said Randerson.

Uncle Jepson chuckled. "It's Willard," he said. He peered into Randerson's face for some signs of emotion. There were none.

"I'd clean forgot him," said Randerson.

Masten came in a few minutes later. He spoke shortly to Uncle Jepson, but ignored Randerson.

Supper was announced soon after Masten's entrance, and Uncle Jepson led Randerson around to the rear porch, where he introduced him to a tin wash-basin and a roller towel. Uncle Jepson also partook of this luxury, and then led the new range boss inside.

If Ruth had any secret dread over the inevitable meeting between Masten and the new range boss, it must have been dispelled by Randerson's manner, for he was perfectly polite to Masten, and by no word or sign did he indicate that he remembered the incident of Calamity.

CHAPTER VII

HOW AN INSULT WAS AVENGED

AS the days passed, it became plain to Ruth, as it did to everyone else on the ranch,—Chavis, Pickett and Masten included,—that Vickers had not talked extravagantly in recommending Randerson. Uncle Jepson declared that "he took right

ahold," and Aunt Martha beamed proudly upon him whenever he came within range of her vision.

There was no hitch; he did his work smoothly. The spring round-up was carried to a swift conclusion; the calves were branded and turned loose again to roam the range during the summer; the corral fences were repaired; new irrigation ditches were laid, others extended—the numerous details received the attention they merited, and when summer came in earnest, the Flying W was spick and span and prospering.

Chavis and Pickett still retained their old positions, but Ruth noticed that they did not spend so much of their time around the bunk-house as formerly; they seemed to have work enough to keep their time fully employed. Nor did Masten accompany them very often. He seemed to take a new interest in Ruth; he found various pretexts to be near her, and Ruth secretly congratulated herself on her wisdom in securing her new range boss. She had scarcely expected such amazing results.

She was conscious of a vague disappointment, though. For she would have liked to see more of her range boss. Twice, under pretense of wanting to look over the property, she had accompanied him to outlying cow-camps, and she had noted that the men seemed to like him—they called him "Rex," and in other ways exhibited their satisfaction over his coming. Several times she had observed meetings between him and Chavis and Pickett; invariably Chavis was sullen and disagreeable in his presence, and a number of times she had seen Pickett sneer when Randerson's back was turned. No one had told her of the open enmity that existed between Pickett and Randerson; the latter had not hinted of it.

And Randerson was at the ranch-house even less frequently than his predecessor; he spent much of his time with the outfit. But he came in one afternoon, after Ruth's friendship with Hagar Catherson had progressed far, and met the nester's daughter on the porch as he was about to enter the house.

BY ingenious artifice and persuasion Ruth had induced the girl to accept for her own many of the various garments in the alluring trunk, and Ruth herself had been surprised at the wonderful transformation in her appearance when arrayed in them. She was attired this afternoon in a dark blue riding habit, with short skirt,—shortened by Aunt Martha,—riding boots, a waist with a low collar and a flowing tie, and a soft hat that Ruth had remade for her. She had received lessons in hair-dressing, and her brown, wavy tresses were just obstinate enough, through long neglect, to refuse to yield fully to the influence of comb and brush; they bulged under the brim of the soft hat, and stray wisps persisted in blowing over her face.

She had just taken leave of Ruth—who, at the instant Randerson stepped on the porch, was standing inside the doorway, watching her. She had given the girl a trinket that had long been coveted by her, and Hagar's eyes were bright with delight as she took leave of her friend. They grew even brighter when she saw Randerson on the porch, and a swift color suffused her face.

The girl stood still, looking at the range boss. A sudden whim to discover if he recognized her, took possession of her—for she had known him long, and he had been a friend to her father when friends were few; she stood looking straight at him.

He gave her one quick, penetrating glance, and then stepped back, astonishment and recognition in his eyes. Then he took a quick step forward and seized her hands, holding her at arm's length, his eyes leaping in admiration.

"Why, if it aint Hagar Catherson!" he said, wonder in his voice. "Have you just got out of a fairy book?"

Old friendship was speaking here; Ruth could not fail to understand that.

But he had not yet finished. "Why, I reckon—" he began. And then he saw Ruth, and his lips wreathed in a delighted grin. "You're the fairy, ma'am." And then he sobered. "Shucks! I'm talkin' nonsense, ma'am. I've come to tell you that the grass aint what it ought to be where we've been, an' to-morrow we're drivin' past here

to go down the river." He was still holding Hagar's hands, and now he seemed to realize that perhaps he had been too effusive, and he flushed and dropped them. "You was just goin', I reckon," he said to the girl. And at her nod, and a quick, pleased glance from her eyes, he added: "Tell your dad that I'm comin' over to see him, pretty soon. I'd have been over before, but I've been sort of busy."

"We've been a-hopin' you'd come," answered Hagar. And with another smile at Ruth she stepped off the porch and mounted her pony.

RANDERSON went directly to his own room, and Ruth stood for a long time at the door, watching Hagar as she rode her pony over the plains. There was a queer sensation of resentment in her breast over this exhibition of friendship; she had never thought of their knowing each other. She smiled, after a while, however, telling herself that it was nothing to her. But the next time that she saw Hagar she ascertained her age. It was seventeen.

The outfit came in the next morning —fourteen punchers, the horse-wrangler, having trouble, as usual, with the *remuda;* the cook, Chavis and Pickett. They veered the herd toward the river and drove it past the ranch-house and into a grass level that stretched for miles. It was near noon when the chuck-wagon came to a halt near the bunk-house door, and from the porch of the house Ruth witnessed a scene that she had been anticipating since her first day in the West—a group of cowboys at play.

Did these men of the plains know that their new boss had been wanting to see them in their unrestrained moments? They acted like boys—more mischievous than boys in their most frolicsome moods. Their movements were grotesque, their gestures extravagant, their talk high-pitched and flavored with a dialect that Ruth had never heard. They were "showing off;" the girl knew that. But she also knew that in their actions was much of earnestness, that an excess of vigor filled them; they were like their horses, now unleashed in the corral, running, neighing, kicking up their heels in their momentary delight of freedom.

The girl understood and sympathized with them, but—she caught a glimpse of Chavis and Pickett, sitting close together on a bench at the front of the mess-house, talking seriously; and a cloud came over her face. These two men were not light-hearted as the others. What was the reason? When she went into the house a few minutes later, a premonition of impending trouble assailed her and would not be dismissed.

She helped Aunt Martha in the kitchen. Uncle Jepson had gone away —"nosin' around," he had said; Masten had ridden away toward the river some time before—he had seemed to ride toward the break in the cañon which led to the Catherson cabin; she did not know where Randerson had gone—had not seen him for hours.

Hilarious laughter reached her, busy in the kitchen, but it did not banish the peculiar uneasiness that afflicted her. And some time later, when the laughter ceased and she went to the window and looked out, the cowboys had vanished. They had gone in to dinner. But Chavis and Pickett still sat on their bench, talking. Ruth shivered and turned from the window.

SHE was in better spirits shortly after dinner, and went out to the stable to look at her pony. Because of the coming of the *remuda* she had thought it best to take her pony from the corral, for she feared that in company with the other horses her own animal would return to those ungentle habits which she disliked.

She fed it from some grain in a bin, carried some water in a pail from the trough at the windmill, and stood at the pony's head some time, watching it. Just as she was about to turn to leave the stable, she felt the interior darken, and she wheeled quickly to see the door had closed, and that Jim Pickett stood before it, grinning at her.

For a moment her knees shook, for she could not fail to interpret the expression of his face; then she heard a gale of laughter from the direction of

the bunk-house, and felt reassured. But while she stood, she heard the sounds of the laughter growing gradually indistinct and distant, and she gulped hard. For she knew that the cowboys were riding away—no doubt to join the herd.

She pretended to be interested in the pony, and stroked its mane with a hand that trembled, delaying to move, in the hope that she might be mistaken in her fears and that Pickett would go away. But Pickett did not move. Glancing at him furtively, she saw that the grin was still on his face and that he was watching her narrowly. Then, finding that he seemed determined to stay, she pretended unconcern and faced him, meeting his gaze fearlessly.

"Is there something that you wanted to talk to me about, Pickett?" she questioned.

"Yes, ma'am," he said respectfully, though his voice seemed slightly hoarse. "I've got a letter here which I want you to read to me—I just can't sorta make out the writin'."

She almost sighed with relief. Leaving the stall, she went to Pickett's side and took from his hand a paper that he held out to her. And now, in her relief over her discovery that his intentions were not evil, it suddenly dawned on her that she had forgotten that the door was closed.

"It is dark here," she said; "open the door, please."

Instead of answering, he seized the hand holding the paper, and with a swift pull tried to draw her toward him. But her muscles had been tensed with the second fear that had taken possession of her, and she resisted—almost broke away from him. His fingers slipped from her wrist, the nails scratching the flesh deeply, and she sprang toward the door. But he was upon her instantly, his arms around her, pinning her own to her sides, and then he squeezed her to him, so tightly that the breath almost left her body, and kissed her three or four times full on the lips. Then, still holding her tightly to him, and looking into her eyes with an expression that filled her with horror, he said huskily:

"Lord, but you're a hummer!"

Then, as though that were the limit of his intentions, he released her, laughed and threw the door open.

She had spoken no word during the attack; she made no sound now, as she went toward the house, her face ashen, her breath coming in great gasps. But a few minutes later she was in her room in the ranch-house, on her bed, her face in the pillow, sobbing out the story of the attack to Aunt Martha, whose wrinkled face grew gray with emotion as she listened.

MASTEN came in an hour later. Ruth was in a chair in the sitting-room, looking very white. Aunt Martha was standing beside her.

"Why, what has happened?" Masten took a few steps and stood in front of her, looking down at her.

"Aunty will tell you." Ruth hid her face in her hands and cried softly.

Aunt Martha led the way into the kitchen, Masten following. Before he reached the door he looked back at Ruth, and a slight smile, almost a sneer, crossed his face. But when he turned to Aunt Martha, in the kitchen, his eyes were alight with well-simulated curiosity.

"Well?" he said questioningly.

"It is most outrageous," began Aunt Martha, her voice trembling. "That man, Pickett, came upon Ruth in the stable and abused her shamefully. He actually kissed her—three or four times—and— Why, Mr. Masten, the prints of his fingers are on her wrists!"

Ruth, in the sitting-room, waited, almost in dread, for the explosion that she knew would follow Aunt Martha's words.

None came, and Ruth sank back in her chair, not knowing whether she was relieved or disappointed. There was a long silence, during which Masten cleared his throat three times. And then came Aunt Martha's voice, filled with mingled wonder and impatience:

"Aren't you going to do something, Mr. Masten? Such a thing ought not to go unpunished."

"Thunder!" he said fretfully, "what on earth *can* I do? You don't expect me to go out and *fight* that man Pickett. He'd kill me!"

"Mebbe he would," said Aunt Martha in a slightly cold voice, "but he would know that Ruth was engaged to a *man!*" There was a silence. And again came Aunt Martha's voice: "There was a time when men thought it an honor to fight for their women. But it seems that times have changed mightily."

"This is an age of reason, and not muscle and murder," replied Masten. "There is no more reason why I should go out there and allow Pickett to kill me than there is a reason why I should go to the first railroad, lay my head on the track and allow a train to run over me. There is a law in this country, Aunty, and it can reach Pickett."

"Your self-control does you credit, Mr. Masten." Aunt Martha's voice was low, but flavored with slight sarcasm. Masten turned abruptly from her and went in to Ruth. Her face was still in her hands, but she felt his presence and involuntarily shrank from him.

He turned his head from her and smiled, toward the stable, and then he laid a hand on Ruth's shoulder and spoke comfortingly.

"It's too bad, Ruth. But we shall find a way to deal with Pickett without having murder done. Why not have Randerson discharge him? He is range boss, you know. In the meantime, can't you manage to stay away from places where the men might molest you? They are all unprincipled scoundrels, you must remember!"

He left her, after a perfunctory caress which she suffered in silence. She saw him, later, as he passed her window, talking seriously to Chavis, and she imagined he was telling Chavis about the attack. Of course, she thought, with a wave of bitterness, Chavis would be able to sympathize with him. She went to her room shortly afterward.

THE sun was swimming in a sea of saffron above the mountains in the western distance when Ruth again came downstairs. Hearing voices in the kitchen, she went to the door and looked in. Aunt Martha was standing near the kitchen table. Randerson was standing close to her, facing her, dwarfing her, his face white beneath the deep tan upon it, his lips straight and hard, his eyes narrowed, his teeth clenched; she could see the corded muscles of his lean under-jaw, set and stiff. Aunt Martha's hands were on his sleeves; her eyes were big and bright, and glowing with a strange light.

They did not see Ruth, and something in their attitudes kept her from revealing herself; she stood silent, listening, fascinated.

"So he done that." It was Randerson's voice, and it made Ruth's heart feel heavy and cold within her, for in it were contempt, intolerance, rage suppressed—she felt that the words had come through clenched teeth. "I reckon I'll be seein' Pickett, Aunty."

And then he patted Aunt Martha's shoulders and started for the back door. Ruth heard him open it; he must have been standing on the threshold when he spoke again. And this time he spoke in a drawl, slow, gentle:

"I reckon I'll go wash. It was mighty dusty ridin' to-day. I passed Calamity, Aunty. There aint no mud there any more; Willard wouldn't get mussed up, now. The suck-hole aint a foot deep any more."

"You're a scapegrace," said Aunt Martha severely. Ruth felt that she was shaking a deprecatory finger at him. "Your manners have been neglected." But Aunt Martha's voice gave the words an exactly opposite meaning, and Ruth blushed.

There had been a dread fear in Ruth's heart. For she had seen warning of impending tragedy in Randerson's face when she had looked at him. It seemed to have passed. His, "I reckon I'll be seein' Pickett," meant, perhaps, that he would discharge the man. Relieved, she went upstairs again and sat in a chair, looking out of a window.

A LITTLE later she saw several of the cowboys come in. She saw Pickett standing near a corner of the bunk-house. She watched him closely, for there was something strange in his actions. He seemed to be waiting for something, or somebody. Occa-

sionally he leaned against the corner of the bunk-house, but she noted that he kept turning his head, keeping a lookout in all directions. Again a premonition of imminent trouble oppressed her.

And then she saw Randerson going from the ranch-house toward the men who were congregated in front of the bunk-house—saw Pickett's right hand fall to his side as though it rested on a holster, and she half started out of her chair, for illumination now came to her.

Halfway to the bunk-house, Randerson was met by Uncle Jepson. She saw Randerson stop, observed that Uncle Jepson seemed to say something to him. She could not, of course, hear the words,—"Look out, Randerson; Pickett's layin' for you,"—but she saw Randerson lay a hand on Uncle Jepson's shoulder.

And then he continued on his way.

She saw Randerson go close to Pickett, noted that the other men had all turned and were watching the two. Randerson seemed to be speaking to Pickett; the latter had faced him. Then, as she breathlessly watched, she saw Pickett reach for his gun. Randerson leaped. Pickett's gun did not come out; Randerson's hand had closed on Pickett's wrist.

There was a brief, fierce struggle: blows were struck; and then the men sprang apart. Ruth saw Randerson's right arm describe a rapid half-circle; she seemed to hear a thud as his fist landed, and Pickett reeled and fell sideways to the ground, close to the wall of the bunk-house. She heard him curse, saw him reach again for the gun at his hip. The toe of Randerson's right boot struck Pickett's hand, driving it away from the holster; the hand was ground into the dust by Randerson's boot. And then, so quickly that she could not follow the movement, Randerson's gun was out, and Pickett lay still where he had fallen.

Presently Ruth saw Pickett get up, still menaced by Randerson's gun. Cursing, crouching, evidently still waiting an opportunity to draw his gun, Pickett began to walk toward the ranch-house, Randerson close behind him. At a safe distance, the other men followed—Ruth saw Masten and Chavis come out of the bunk-house door and follow also. The thought struck her that they must have witnessed the incident from a window. She saw them all, the cowboys at a respectable distance, Pickett and Randerson in front, with Masten and Chavis far behind, come to a halt. She divined—she believed she had suspected all along—what the march to the ranch-house meant, but still she did not move, for she feared she could not stand.

RUTH was roused, however, by Randerson's voice. It reached her, sharp, cold, commanding. Evidently he was speaking to Aunt Martha, or to Uncle Jepson, who had gone into the house:

"Tell Miss Ruth to come here!"

Ruth obeyed. A moment later she stood on the front porch, looking at them all. This scene seemed unreal to her—the cowboys at a distance; Masten and Chavis in the rear, looking on, Pickett near the edge of the porch, his face bloated with impotent rage, his eyes glaring; the grim figure that Randerson made as he stood near Pickett, gun in hand, his eyes narrowed, alert. It seemed to her to be a dream from which she would presently awaken, trembling from the horror of it.

And then again she heard Randerson's voice. It was low, but so burdened with passion that it seemed to vibrate in the perfect silence. There was a threat of death in it:

"You can tell Miss Ruth that you're never goin' to play the skunk with a woman ag'in!"

Pickett writhed. But it seemed to Ruth, as her gaze shifted from Randerson to him, that Pickett's manner was not what it should be. He was not embarrassed enough—did not seem to feel his disgrace keenly enough. For though he twisted and squirmed under the threat in Randerson's voice, there was an odd smirk on his face that impressed her as thinly concealing a malignant cunning. And his voice sounded insincere to her:

"I'm sorry I done what I did, ma'am."

"I reckon that's all, Pickett. You draw your time right now."

Randerson sheathed his pistol and turned slightly sidewise to Pickett, evidently intending to come up on the porch.

Ruth gasped. For she saw Pickett reach for his gun. It was drawn half out of its holster. As though he had divined what was in Pickett's mind, Randerson had turned slightly at Pickett's movement. There was a single rapid motion at his right hip; the twilight was split by a red streak, by another that followed it so closely as to seem to make the two continuous. Pickett's hand dropped oddly from the half-drawn weapon; his knees sagged; he sighed and pitched heavily forward, face down, at Randerson's feet.

Dimly, as through a haze, Ruth saw a number of the cowboys coming toward her, saw them approach and look curiously down at the thing that lay almost at her feet. And then some one took her by the arm,—she thought it was Uncle Jepson,—and she was led toward the door. At the threshold she paused, for Randerson's voice, cold and filled with deadly definiteness, reached her:

"Do you want to take his end of this?" Ruth turned. Randerson was pointing to Pickett's body, ghastly in its prone slackness. He was looking at Chavis.

Evidently Chavis elected not to avenge his friend at that moment. For there was a dead silence while one might have counted fifty. Then Ruth was drawn into the house.

CHAPTER VIII

"NOTHIN' CLEAN BUT HIS CLOTHES"

EVERY detail of the killing of Jim Pickett remained vivid in Ruth's recollection. She felt that she would never forget it. But her horror gradually abated, and at the end of a week she was able to look at Randerson without shuddering. During the week she had evaded him. And he, divining the state of her feelings, kept away from the house as much as possible.

Masten's demeanor on hearing of the insult that had been offered her by Pickett had seemed that of a man who was lacking in courage. At the time she had not been able to make it conform to her ideas of a man's duty to the woman he had promised to marry—or to any woman. She had heard him speak of reason in connection with the affair, as though there were no such thing in the world as rage so justifiable as to make a man yearn to inflict punishment upon another man who had attacked his woman. He had looked upon the matter cold-bloodedly, and she had resented that. But now that she had been avenged, she felt that she had been wrong. It had been such a trivial thing, after all, it seemed monstrous in comparison with the punishment—plain murder. She had seen Pickett's movement when Randerson had momentarily turned his back to him, but she had also seen Randerson's retaliatory movement. She had known, then, that Randerson had expected Pickett's action, and that he had been prepared for it, and therefore it seemed to her that in forcing the trouble Randerson had foreseen the ending—had even courted it.

Remorse over her momentary doubt of Masten's motive in refusing to call Pickett to account, afflicted her. He had been wiser than she; he had traced the line that divided reason from the primitive passions—man from beast. His only reference to the incident—a wordless one, which she felt was sufficiently eloquent—came when one day, while they were standing beside the corral fence, looking at the horses, they saw Randerson riding in. Masten nodded toward him and shook his head slowly from side to side, compressing his lips as he did so. And then, seeing her looking at him, he smiled compassionately, as though to say that he regretted the killing of Pickett as well as she.

She seized his arm impulsively.

"I was wrong, Willard," she said.

"Wrong, dear?" he said. "It wasn't your fault."

"But I thought—things about you that I shouldn't have thought. I felt that you ought to have punished Pickett. I am glad, now, that you didn't."

She shuddered, and looked again at Randerson, just dismounting at the bunk-house, paying no attention to them.

"Then you wouldn't have me like him?" He indicated Randerson.

"No," she said.

He gave her shoulder a slight pressure, and turning his head, smiled triumphantly.

Later, when they had walked to a far corner of the pasture, talking confidentially and laughing a little, he halted and drew her close to him.

"Ruth," he said, gently, "the world is going very well for you now. You are settled here; you like it; and things are running smoothly. Why not take a ride over to Lazette one of these days? There is a justice of the peace over there. It wont need to be a formal affair, you know. Just on the quiet—a sort of a lark. I have waited a long time," he coaxed.

She smiled at his earnestness. But that spark which he had tried in vain to fan into flame still smoldered. She felt no responsive impulse; a strange reluctance dragged at her.

"Wait, Willard," she said, "until after the fall round-up. There is no hurry. We are sure of each other."

They went on toward the ranch-house. When they passed the bunk-house, and through the open door saw Randerson and Uncle Jepson sitting on a bench, smoking, Ruth quickened her step, and Masten made a grimace of hatred.

INSIDE the bunk-house Uncle Jepson, who had been speaking, paused long enough to wrinkle his nose at Masten. Randerson's expression did not change; it was one of grave expectancy.

"You was sayin'—" he prompted, looking at Uncle Jepson.

"That the whole darned deal was a frame-up," declared Uncle Jepson. "I was settin' in the mess-house along in the afternoon of the day of the killin', —smokin', an' thinkin', but most of the time just settin', I cal'late,—when I heard Chavis an' Pickett talkin' low an' easy outside. They was a crack in the wall, and I plastered one ear up ag'in' it, an' took in all they was sayin'. First, they was talkin' about the bad feelin' between you an' Pickett. Pickett said he wanted to 'git' you, an' that Masten wanted to get you out of the way because of what you'd done to him at Calamity. But I reckon that aint the real reason; he's got some idea that you an' Ruth—"

"Shucks," said Randerson impatiently.

"Anyway," grinned Uncle Jepson, "for some reason, he don't want you hangin' around. Far as I could gather, Pickett wanted some excuse to have you fire him, so's he could shoot you. He talked some to Masten about it, an' Masten told him to tackle Ruth, but not to go too rough about it—an' not to go too far. Great guns! the low-down, mean, sneakin'—"

"Well?" said Randerson. His eyes were glowing; his words came with difficulty through his straightened lips.

"Masten wouldn't take it up, he told Pickett," went on Uncle Jepson. "He'd put it up to you. An' when you'd tackle Pickett about it, Pickett would shoot you. If they was any chance for Chavis to help along, he'd do it. But mostly, Pickett was to do the job. I cal'late that's about all—except that I layed for you an' told you to look out."

"You heard this talk after—after Pickett had—"

"Of course," growled Uncle Jepson, a venomous flash in his eyes, slightly reproachful.

"Sure—of course," agreed Randerson. He was grim-eyed; there was cold contempt in the twist of his lips. He sat for a long time, silent, staring out through the bunk-house door, Uncle Jepson watching him, subdued by the look in his eyes.

WHEN he spoke at last, there was a cold, bitter humor in his voice.

"So that's Willard's measure!" he said. "He grades up like a side-winder slidin' under the sagebrush. There's nothin' clean about him but his clothes. But he's playin' a game—him an' Chavis. An' I'm the guy they're after!" He laughed, and Uncle Jepson shivered. "She's seen one killin', an' I reckon, if she stays here awhile longer, she'll see another. Chavis—"

He stopped, and then went on: "Why, I reckon Chavis' dyin' wouldn't make no more impression on her than Pickett's dyin'. But I reckon she thinks a heap of Willard, don't she, Uncle Jep?"

"If a girl promises—" began Uncle Jepson.

"I reckon—" interrupted Randerson. And then he shut his lips and looked grimly out at the horses in the corral.

"Do you reckon she'd—" Randerson began again, after a short silence. "No," he answered the question himself; "I reckon if you'd tell her, she wouldn't believe you. No good woman will believe anything bad about the man she loves—or thinks she loves. But Willard—"

He got up, walked out the door, mounted Patches and rode away. Going to the door, Uncle Jepson watched him until he faded into the shimmering sunshine of the plains.

"I cal'late that Willard—"

But he too left his speech unfinished, as though thought had suddenly ceased, or speculation had become futile and ridiculous.

CHAPTER IX

"SOMETHIN' GONE OUT OF THEM"

AS Randerson rode Patches through the break in the cañon wall in the afternoon of a day about a week after his talk with Uncle Jepson in the bunk-house, he was thinking of the visit he intended to make. He had delayed it long. He had not seen Abe Catherson since taking his new job.

"I reckon he'll think I'm right unneighborly," he said to himself as he rode.

When he reached the nester's cabin, the dog Nig greeted him with vociferous affection, bringing Hagar to the door.

"Oh, it's Rex!" cried the girl delightedly. And then, reproachfully: "Me an' Dad allowed you wasn't comin' any more."

"You an' Dad was a heap mistaken, then," he grinned as he dismounted and trailed the reins over the pony's head. "I've had a heap to 'tend to," he added as he stepped on the porch and came to a halt, looking at her. "Why, I reckon the little kid I used to know aint here any more!" he said, his eyes alight with admiration, as he critically examined her garments from the distance that separated her from him—a neat house-dress of striped gingham, high at the throat, the bottom hem reaching below her shoe-tops; a loose-fitting apron over the dress, drawn tightly at the waist, giving her figure graceful curves. He had never thought of Hagar in connection with beauty; he had been sorry for her, pitying her—she had been a child upon whom he had bestowed much of the unselfish devotion of his heart; indeed, there had been times when it had assumed a practical turn, and through various ruses much of his wages had been delicately forced upon the nester. It had not always been wisely expended, for he knew that Catherson drank deeply at times.

NOW, however, Randerson realized that the years must inevitably make a change in Hagar. That glimpse he had had of her on the Flying W ranch-house porch had made him think, but her appearance now caused him to think more deeply.

"I reckon your dad aint anywhere around?" he said.

"Dad's huntin' up some cattle, this mornin'," she told him. "Shucks," she added, seeing him hesitate, "aint you comin' in?"

"Why, I've been wonderin' "—and he grinned guiltily—"whether it'd be exactly proper. You see, there was a time when I busted right in the house without waitin' for an invitation—tickled to get a chance to dawdle a kid on my knee. But I reckon them dawdle days is over. I wouldn't think of tryin' to dawdle a *woman* on my knee. But if you think that you're still Hagar Catherson, an' you wont be dead set on me dawdlin' you— Why, shucks, I reckon I'm talkin' like a fool!" And his face blushed crimson.

Her face was red too, but she seemed to be less conscious of the change in herself than he, though her eyes drooped when he looked at her.

He followed her inside, and formally took a chair, sitting on its edge and turning his hat over and over in his hands, looking much at it, as though he admired it greatly.

But this constraint between them was the only thing that was new to him; and while she talked, he sat and listened, and stole covert glances at her, and tried to convince himself that it was really Hagar that was sitting there before him.

But before long he grew accustomed to the strangeness of the situation, and constraint dropped from him. "Why, I reckon it's all natural," he confided to her. "Folks grow up, don't they? Take you. Yesterday you was a kid, an' I dawdled you on my knee. To-day you're a woman, an' it makes me feel some breathless to look at you. But it's all natural. I'd been seein' you so much that I'd forgot that time was makin' a woman of you."

She blushed, and he marveled over it. "She can't see, herself, how she's changed," he told himself. And while they talked he studied her, noting that her color was higher than he had ever seen it, that the frank expression of her eyes had somehow changed—there was a glow in them, deep, abiding, embarrassed. They drooped from his when he tried to hold her gaze. He had always admired the frank directness of them—that told of unconsciousness of sex, of unquestioning trust. To-day, it seemed to him, there was subtle knowledge in them. He was puzzled and disappointed. And when, half an hour later, he took his leave, after telling her that he would come again, to see her "dad," he took her by the shoulders and forced her to look into his eyes. His own searched hers narrowly. It was as in the old days—in his eyes she was still a child.

"I reckon I wont kiss you no more, Hagar," he said. "You aint a kid no more, an' it wouldn't be square. Seventeen is an awful old age, aint it?"

And then he mounted and rode down the trail, still puzzled over the lurking, deep glow in her eyes.

"I reckon I aint no expert on women's eyes," he said as he rode. "But Hagar's —there's somethin' gone out of them."

HE could not have reached the break in the cañon leading to the plains above the river, when Willard Masten loped his horse toward the Catherson cabin from an opposite direction.

Hagar was standing on the porch when he came, and her face flooded with color when she saw him. She stood, her eyes drooping with shy embarrassment as Masten dismounted and approached her. And then, as his arm went around her waist, he whispered:

"How is my little woman to-day?"

She straightened and looked up at him, perplexity in her eyes.

"Rex Randerson was just hyeh," she said. "I wanted to tell him about you wantin' me to marry you. But I thought of what you told me, an' I didn't. Do you sure reckon he'd kill you, if he knowed?"

"He certainly would!" declared Masten, earnestly. "No one—not even your father—must know that I come here."

"I reckon I wont tell. But Miss Ruth? Are you sure she don't care for you any more?"

"Well," he lied glibly, "she has broken our engagement. But if she knew that I come here to see you she'd be jealous, you know. So it's better not to tell her. If you do tell her, I'll stop coming," he threatened.

"It's hard to keep from tellin' folks how happy I am," she said. "Once, I was afraid Rex Randerson could see it in my eyes—when he took ahold of my arms hyeh, an' looked at me."

Masten looked jealously at her. "Looked at you, eh?" he said. "Are you sure he didn't try to do anything else—didn't *do* anything else? Like kissing you, for instance?"

"I'm certain sure," she replied, looking straight at him. "He used to kiss me. But he says I'm a woman now, an' it wouldn't be square to kiss me any more." Her eyes had drooped from his. "An' I reckon that's right, too, aint it?" She looked up again, not receiving an answer. "Why, how red your face is!" she exclaimed. "I aint said nothin' to hurt you, have I?"

"No," he said. But he held her tightly to him, her head on his shoulder, so that she might not see the guilt in his eyes.

CHAPTER X

THE LAW OF THE PRIMITIVE

RANDERSON continued his policy of not forcing himself upon Ruth. He went his way, silent, thoughtful, attending strictly to business. To Ruth, watching him when he least suspected it, it seemed that he had grown more grim and stern-looking since his coming to the Flying W. She saw him, sometimes, laughing quietly with Uncle Jepson; other times she heard him talking gently to Aunt Martha—with an expression that set her to wondering whether he were the same man that she had seen that day with the pistol in hand, shooting the life out of a fellow being. There were times when she wavered in her conviction of his heartlessness.

Since Ruth had announced her decision not to marry Masten until after the fall round-up, she had not seen so much of him. He rode alone, sometimes not even asking her to accompany him. These omissions worked no great hardship on her, for the days had grown hot and the plains dry and dusty, so that there was not so much enjoyment in riding as formerly. Besides, she knew the country rather well now, and had no need to depend upon Masten.

Chavis had severed his connection with the Flying W. He had ridden in to the ranch-house some weeks ago, found Ruth sitting on the porch, announced that he was "quittin'," and wanted his "time." She did not ask him why he wanted to quit, so pleased was she with his decision, but he advanced an explanation while she was counting out the money that was coming to him.

"Things don't suit me here," he said venomously. "Randerson is too fresh." He looked at her impudently. "Besides," he added, "he stands in too well with the boss."

She flushed with indignation. "You wouldn't dare say that to *him!*" she declared.

He reddened darkly. "Meanin' what he done to Pickett, I reckon," he sneered. "Well, Randerson will be gettin' his'n some day, too!"

RUTH remembered this conversation, and on a day about a month later when she had gone riding alone, she saw Randerson at a distance and rode toward him to tell him, for she had meant to, many times.

Evidently Randerson had seen her too, for he had already altered his pony's course when she wheeled hers. When their ponies came to a halt near each other, it was Randerson who spoke first. He looked at her unsmilingly over his pony's head.

"I was ridin' in to the house to see you, ma'am. I thought you ought to know. This mornin' the boys found two cows with their hoofs burned, an' their calves run off."

"Their hoofs burned!" she exclaimed. "Why, who would be so inhuman as to do that? But I suppose there was a fire somewhere, and it happened that way."

"There was a fire, all right," he said grimly. "Some one built it, on purpose. It was rustlers, ma'am. They burned the hoofs of the mothers so the mothers couldn't follow when they drove their calves off—like any mother would." He eyed her calmly. "I reckon it was Chavis, ma'am. He's got a shack down the crick a ways. He's been there ever since you paid him off. An' this mornin' two of the boys told me they wanted their time. I was goin' in to get it for them. It's likely they're goin' to join Chavis."

"Well, let them," she said indignantly. "If they are that kind of men, we don't want them around!"

He smiled now for the first time. "I reckon there aint no way to stop them from goin', ma'am. An' we sure don't want them around. But when they go with Chavis, it's mighty likely that we'll miss more cattle."

She stiffened. "Come with me," she ordered; "they shall have their money right away."

She urged her pony on, and he fell in beside her, keeping his animal's muzzle near her stirrup. For he was merely an employee and was filled with respect for her.

"I suppose I could have Chavis charged with stealing those two calves?" she asked, as they rode. She

looked back over her shoulder at him and slowed her pony down so that he came alongside.

"Why, yes, ma'am, I reckon you could. You could charge him with stealin' them. But that wouldn't prove it. We aint got any evidence, you see. We found the cows, with the calves gone. We know that Chavis is in the country, but we didn't see him doin' the stealin'; we only think he done it."

"If I should complain to the sheriff?"

"You could do that, ma'am. But I reckon it's a waste of time."

"How?"

"Well, you see, ma'am, the sheriff in this county don't amount to a heap—considered as a sheriff. He mostly draws his salary an' keeps out of trouble, much as he can. There aint no court in the county nearer than Las Vegas, an' that's a hundred an' fifty miles from here. An', mostly, the court don't want to be bothered with hearin' rustler cases—there bein' no regular law governin' them, an' convictions bein' hard to get. So the sheriff don't bother."

"But there must be some way to stop them from stealing!" she said sharply.

"I reckon there's a way, ma'am." And now she heard him laugh, quietly, and again she turned and looked at him. His face grew grave again, instantly. "But I reckon you wouldn't approve of it, ma'am," he added.

"I would approve of 'most any method of stopping them—within reason!" she declared vindictively, nettled by his tone.

"We mostly hang them, ma'am," he said. "That's a sure way of stoppin' them."

She shuddered. "Do you mean that you hang them without a court verdict—on your own responsibility?"

"That's the way, ma'am."

"But doesn't the sheriff punish men who hang others in that manner?" she went on in tones of horror.

HIS voice was quietly humorous. "Them sort of hangin's aint advertised a heap. It's hard to find anybody that will admit he had a hand in it. Nobody knows anything about it. But it's done, an' can't be undone. An' the rustlin' stops mighty sudden."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "what a barbarous custom!"

"I reckon it aint exactly barbarous, ma'am," he contended mildly. "Would you have the rustlers go on stealin' forever, an' not try to stop them?"

"There are the courts," she insisted.

"Turnin' rustlers off scot free, ma'am. They can't hold them. An' if a rustler is hung, he don't get any more than is comin' to him. Do you reckon there's a lot of difference between a half dozen men hangin' a man for a crime he's done, than for one man—a judge, for instance—orderin' him to be hung? If, we'll say, a hundred men elect a judge to do certain things, is it any more wrong for the hundred men to do them things than for the man they've elected to do them? I reckon not, ma'am. Of course, if the hundred men did somethin' that the judge hadn't been elected to do, why then, it might make some difference."

"But you say there is no law that provides hanging for rustling." She thought she had him.

"The men that elected the judge made the laws," he said. "They have a right to make others, whenever they're needed."

"That's mob law," she said with a shiver. "What would become of the world if that custom were followed everywhere?"

"I wouldn't say that it would be a good thing everywhere. Where there's courts that can be got at easy, there'd be no sense to it. But out here there's no other way for a man to protect his property. He's got to take the law into his own hands."

"It is a crude and cold-blooded way."

She heard him laugh, and turned to see him looking at her in amusement.

"There aint no refinement in punishment, ma'am. Either it's got to shock some one or not get done at all. I reckon that back East you don't get to see anyone punished, or hung. You hear about it, or you read about it, an' it don't seem so near you, an' that kind of takes the edge off it. Out here it comes closer, an' it seems a lot cruel.

But whether a man's punished by the law or by the men who make the law wouldn't make a lot of difference to the man—he'd be punished, anyway."

"We wont talk about it any further," she said. "But understand, if there are any cattle-thieves caught on the Flying W, they must not be hanged. You must capture them, if possible, and take them to the proper officials, that they may have a fair trial. And we shall abide by the court's decision. I don't care to have any more murders committed here."

HIS face paled. "Referrin' to Pickett, I reckon, ma'am?" he said.

"Yes." She flung the monosyllable back at him resentfully.

She felt him ride close to her, and she looked at him and saw that his face was grimly serious.

"I aint been thinkin' of the killin' of Pickett as murder, ma'am. Pickett had it comin' to him. You was standin' on the porch, an' I reckon you used your eyes. If you did, you saw Pickett try to pull his gun on me when my back was turned. It was either him or me, ma'am."

"You anticipated that he would try to shoot you," she charged. "Your actions showed that."

"Why, I reckon I did. You see, I've knowed Pickett for a long time."

"I was watching you from an upstairs window," she went on. "I saw you when you struck Pickett with your fist. You drew your pistol while he was on the ground. You had the advantage—you might have taken his pistol away from him, and prevented any further trouble. Instead, you allowed him to keep it. You expected he would try to shoot you, and you deliberately gave him an opportunity, relying upon your quickness in getting your own pistol out."

"I give him his chance, ma'am."

"His chance!" There was derision in her voice. "I have talked to some of the men about you. They say you are the cleverest of any man in this vicinity with a weapon. You deliberately planned to kill him!"

He rode on silently, a glint of cold humor in his eyes. He might now have confounded her with the story of Masten's connection with the affair, but he had no intention of telling her. Masten had struck the blow at him—Masten it must be who would be struck back. However, he was disturbed over her attitude. He did not want her to think that he had killed Pickett in pure wantonness, for he had not thought of shooting the man until Uncle Jepson had warned him.

"I've got to tell you this, ma'am," he said, riding close to her. "One man's life is as good as another's in this country. But it aint any better. The law's too far away to monkey with—law like you're used to. The gun a man carries is the only law anyone here pays any attention to. Every man knows it. Nobody makes any mistakes about it, unless it's when they don't get their gun out quick enough. An' that's the man's fault that pulls the gun. There aint no officials to do any guardin' out here; you've got to do it yourself or it don't get done. A man can't take too many chances—an' live to tell about it. When you know a man's lookin' for you, yearnin' to perforate you, it's just a question of who can shoot the quickest an' the straightest. In the case of Pickett, I happened to be the one. It might have been Pickett. If he wasn't as fast as me in slingin' his gun, why, he oughtn't to have taken no chance. He'd have been plumb safe if he'd have forgot all about his gun. I don't reckon that I'd have pined away with sorrow if I hadn't shot him."

SHE was much impressed with his earnestness, and she looked quickly at him, nearly convinced. But again the memory of the tragic moment became vivid in her thoughts, and she shuddered.

"It's too horrible to think of!" she declared.

"I reckon it's no picnic," he admitted. "I aint never been stuck on shootin' men. I reckon I didn't sleep a heap for three nights after I shot Pickett. I kept seein' him, an' pityin' him. But I kept tellin' myself that it had to be either him or me, an' I kind of got over it. Pickett *would* have it, ma'am. When I turned my back to him I was hopin' that

he wouldn't try to play dirt on me. Do you reckon he oughtn't to have been made to tell you that he had been wrong in tacklin' you? Why, ma'am, I kind of liked Pickett. He wasn't all bad. He was one of them kind that's easy led, an' he wasn't a heap responsible; he fell in with the wrong kind of men —men like Chavis. I've took a lot from Pickett."

"You might have shown him in some other way that you liked him," she said with unsmiling sarcasm. "It seems to me that men who go about thinking of shooting each other must have a great deal of the brute in them."

"Meanin' that they aint civilized, I reckon?"

"Yes. Mr. Masten had the right view. He refused to resort to the methods you used in bringing Pickett to account. He is too much a gentleman to act the savage."

For an instant Randerson's eyes lighted with a deep fire. And then he smiled mirthlessly.

"I reckon Mr. Masten aint never had anybody stir him up right proper," he said mildly. "It takes different things to get a man riled so's he'll fight—or a woman, either. Either of 'em will fight when the right thing gets them roused. I expect that deep down in everybody is a little of that brute that you're talkin' about. I reckon you'd fight like a tiger, ma'am, if the time ever come when you had to."

"I never expect to kill anybody," she declared coldly.

"You don't know what you'll do when the time comes, ma'am. You've been livin' in a part of the country where things are done accordin' to hard an' fast rules. Out here things run loose, an' if you stay here long enough, some day you'll meet them an' recognize them for your own—an' you'll wonder how you ever got along without them."

HE looked at her now with a subtle grin. But his words were direct enough, and his voice rang earnestly as he went on:

"Why, I reckon you've never been tuned up to nature, ma'am. Have you ever hated anybody real venomous?"

"I have been taught differently," she shot back at him. "I have never hated anybody."

"Then you aint never loved anybody, ma'am. You'd be jealous of the one you loved, an' you'd hate anybody you saw makin' eyes at them."

"Well, of all the odd ideas!" she said. She was so astonished at the turn his talk had taken that she halted her pony and faced him, her cheeks coloring.

"I don't reckon it's any odd idea, ma'am—unless human nature is an odd idea, an' I reckon it's about the oldest thing in the world, next to love an' hate." He grinned at her unblushingly, and leaned forward.

"I reckon you aint been a heap observin', ma'am," he said, frankly but very respectfully. "You'd have seen that odd idea worked out many times, if you was. With animals an' men it's the same. A kid—which you wont claim don't love its mother—is jealous of a brother or a sister which it thinks is bein' favored more than him, an' if the mother don't show that she's pretty square in dealin' with the two, there's bound to be hate born right there. What do you reckon made Cain kill his brother Abel?

"Take a woman—a wife. Some boxheads, when their wife falls in love with another man, give her up like they was takin' off an old shoe, sayin' they love her so much that they want to see her happy—which she can't be, she says, unless she gets the other man. But don't you go to believin' that kind of fairy romance, ma'am. When a man is so willin' to give up his wife to another man, he's sure got a heap tired of her an' don't want her any more. He's got his eye peeled for Number Two, an' he's thankin' his wife's lover for makin' the trail clear to the matrimonial wagon. But givin' up Number One to the other man gives him a chance to pose a lot, an' mebbe it's got a heap of effect on Number Two, who sort of thinks that if she gets tied up to such a sucker she'll be able to wrap him around her finger. But if he loves Number Two, he'll be mighty grumpy to the next fellow that goes to makin' sheep's eyes at her."

"That is a highly original view," she said, laughing, feeling that she ought to

be offended, but disarmed by his ingenuousness. "And so you think that love and hate are inseparable passions."

"I reckon you can't know what real love is unless you have hated, ma'am. Some folks say they get through life without hatin' anybody, but if you'll look around an' watch them, you'll find they're mostly an unfeelin' kind. You aint one of them kind, ma'am. I've watched you, an' I've seen that you've got a heap of spirit. Some of these days you're goin' to wake up. An' when you do, you'll find out what love is."

"Don't you think I love Mr. Masten?" she said, looking at him unwaveringly.

He looked as fairly back at her. "I don't reckon you do, ma'am. Mebbe you think so, but you don't."

"What makes you think so?" she demanded, defiantly.

"Why, the way you look at him, ma'am. If I was engaged to a girl an' she looked at me as critical as you look at him, sometimes, I'd sure feel certain that I'd drawed the wrong card."

STILL her eyes did not waver. She began to sense his object in introducing this subject, and she was determined to make him feel that his conclusions were incorrect—as she knew they were.

"That is an example of your wonderful power of observation," she said, "—the kind you were telling me about, which makes you able to make such remarkable deductions. But if you are no more correct in the others than you are in trying to determine the state of my feelings toward Mr. Masten, you are entirely wrong. I *do* love Mr. Masten!"

She spoke vehemently, for she thought herself very much in earnest.

But he grinned. "You're true blue," he said, "an' you've got the grit to tell where you stand. But you're mistaken. You couldn't love Masten."

"Why?" she said, so intensely curious that she entirely forgot to think of his impertinence in talking thus to her. "Why can't I love Mr. Masten?"

He laughed, and reddened. "Because you're goin' to love me, ma'am," he said gently.

She would have laughed if she had not felt so indignant. She would have struck him as she had struck Pickett had she not been positive that behind his words was the utmost respect—that he did not intend to be impertinent, that he seemed as natural as he had been all along. She would have exhibited scorn if she could have summoned it. She did nothing but stare at him in genuine amazement. She was going to be severe with him, but the mild humor of his smile brought confusion upon her.

"You certainly don't lack conceit, whatever your other shortcomings," she managed, her face rosy.

"Well now, I'm thankin' you, ma'am, for lettin' me off so easy," he said. "I was expectin' you'd be pretty hard on me for talkin' that way. I've been wonderin' what made me say it. I expect it's because I've been thinkin' it so strong. Anyway, it's said, an' I can't take it back. I wouldn't want to, for I was bound to tell you some time, anyway. I reckon it aint conceit that made me say it. I've liked you a heap ever since I got hold of your picture."

"So that is where the picture went!" she said. "I have been hunting high and low for it. Who gave it to you?"

"Wes Vickers, ma'am." There was disgust in his eyes. "I never meant to mention it, ma'am; that was a slip of the tongue. But when I saw the picture, I knowed I was goin' to love you. There aint nothin' happened yet to show that you wont think a lot of me, some day."

"You frighten me," she mocked.

"I reckon you aint none frightened," he laughed. "But I expect you're some disturbed—me sayin' what I've said while you're engaged to Masten. I'm apologizing, ma'am. You be loyal to Masten—as I know you'd be, anyway. An' some day, when you've broke off with him, I'll come a-courtin'."

"So you're sure that I'm going to break my engagement with Masten, are you?" she queried, trying her best to be scornful, but not succeeding very well. "How do you know that?"

"There's somethin' that you don't see that's been tellin' me, ma'am. Mebbe

some day that thing will be tellin' you the same stuff, an' then you'll understand," he said enigmatically.

"Well," she said, pressing her lips together as though this were to be her last word on the subject, "I have heard that the wilderness sometimes makes people dream strange dreams, and I suppose yours is one of them." She wheeled her pony and sent it scampering onward toward the ranch-house.

He followed, light of heart, for while she had taunted him, she had also listened to him, and he felt that progress had been made.

CHAPTER XI

HAGAR'S EYES

RANDERSON had been in no hurry to make an attempt to catch the rustlers whose depredations he had reported to Ruth. He had told the men to be doubly alert to their work, and he had hired two new men—from the Diamond H—to replace those who had left the Flying W. His surmise that they wanted to join Chavis had been correct, for the two new men—whom he had put on special duty and had given permission to come and go when they pleased—had reported this fact to him. There was nothing to do, however, but to wait, in the hope that one day the rustlers would attempt to run cattle off when one or more of the men happened to be in the vicinity. And then, if the evidence against the rustlers were convincing enough, much would depend on the temper of himself and the men as to whether Ruth's orders that there should be no hanging would be observed. There would be time enough to decide that question if any rustlers were caught.

He had seen little of the Easterner during the past two or three weeks. Masten rarely showed himself on the range any more; to Randerson's queries about him the men replied that they hadn't seen him. But Randerson was thinking very little about Masten as he rode through the brilliant sunshine this afternoon. He was going again to Catherson's, to see Hagar. Recollections of the change that had come over the girl were disquieting, and he wanted to talk to her again to determine whether she really had changed, or whether he had merely fancied it.

Far down the river he crossed at a shallow ford, entered a section of timber, and loped Patches slowly through this. He found a trail that he had used several times before, when he had been working for the Diamond H and necessity or whim had sent him this way, and rode it, noting that it seemed to have been used much, lately.

"I reckon old Abe's poundin' his horses considerable. Why, it's right plain!" he added, after a little reflection; "this here trail runs into the Lazette trail, down near the ford. An' Abe's wearin' it out, ridin' to Lazette for red-eye. I reckon if I was Abe, I'd quit while the quittin's good." He laughed, patting Patches' shoulder. "Shucks, a man c'n see another man's faults pretty far, but his own is pretty near invisible. You've rode the Lazette trail a heap, too, Patches," he said, "when your boss was hittin' red-eye. We aint growin' no angel's wings, Patches, which would give us the right to go to criticisin' others."

PRESENTLY he began to ride with more caution, for he wanted to surprise Hagar. A quarter of a mile from the cabin he brought Patches to a halt on a little knoll and looked about him. He had a good view of the cabin in the clearing, and he watched it long, for signs of life. He saw no such signs.

"Abe's out putterin' around, an' Hagar's nappin', I reckon—or tryin' on her new dresses," he added as an afterthought.

He was about to ride on, when a sound reached his ears, and he drew the reins tight on Patches and sat rigid, alert, listening.

The perfect silence of the timber was unbroken. He had almost decided that his ears had played him a trick, when the sound came again, nearer than before—the sound of voices. Quickly and accurately he determined from which direction they came, and he faced that way, watching a narrow path that

led through the timber to a grass-plot not over a hundred feet from him, from which he was screened by some thick-growing brush at his side.

He grinned, fully expecting to see Abe and Hagar on the path presently. "Abe's behavin' to-day," he told himself as he waited. "I'll sure surprise them, if—"

Suddenly he drew his breath sharply; his teeth came together viciously; and his brows drew to a frown, his eyes gleaming coldly underneath. For he saw Willard Masten coming along the path, smiling and talking, and beside him, his arm around her waist, also smiling, but with her head bent forward a little, was Hagar Catherson.

The color slowly left Randerson's face as he watched. He had no nice scruples about eavesdropping at this moment—here was no time for manners; the cold, contemptuous rage that fought within him was too deep and gripping to permit of any thought that would not center about the two figures on the path. He watched them, screened by the brush, with the deadly concentration of newly aroused murder-lust. Once, as he saw them halt at the edge of the grass-plot, and he observed Masten draw Hagar close to him and kiss her, his right hand dropped to the butt of his pistol and he fingered it uncertainly. He drew the hand away at last, though, with a bitter, twisting smile.

FIVE minutes later, his face still stony and expressionless, he dismounted lightly and with infinite care and caution led Patches away from the knoll and far back into the timber. When he was certain there was no chance of his being seen or heard by Masten and Hagar, he mounted, urged Patches forward and made a wide detour which brought him at length to the path which had been followed by Masten and Hagar in reaching the grass-plot. He loped the pony along this path, and presently he came upon them—Hagar standing directly in the path, watching him, red with embarrassment which she was trying hard to conceal; Masten standing on the grass-plot near her, staring into the timber opposite Randerson, trying to appear unconcerned and making a failure of it.

"It's Rex!" ejaculated the girl. Her hands had been clasped in front of her; they dropped to her sides when she saw Randerson, and the fingers began to twist nervously into the edges of her apron. A deep breath, which was almost a sigh of relief, escaped her. "I thought it was Dad!" she said.

Evidently Masten had likewise expected the horseman to be her father, for at her exclamation he turned swiftly. His gaze met Randerson's: his shoulders sagged a little; his eyes wavered and shifted from the steady ones that watched him.

But his composure returned quickly. He smiled blandly; there was a trace of derision in his voice:

"You've strayed off your range, haven't you, Randerson?" he said smoothly.

"Why, I reckon I have." Randerson's voice was low, almost gentle, and he smiled mildly at Hagar, who blushingly returned it but immediately looked downward.

"I expect Dad must be gone somewhere—that you're lookin' for him," Randerson said. "I thought mebbe I'd ketch him here."

"He went to Red Rock this mornin'," said the girl. She looked up, and this time met Randerson's gaze with more confidence, for his pretense of casualness had set her fears at rest. "Mr. Masten come over to see him, too."

The lie came hesitatingly through her lips. She looked at Masten as though for confirmation, and the latter nodded.

"Catherson is hard to catch," he said. "I've been over here a number of times, trying to see him." His voice was a note too high, and Randerson wondered whether, without the evidence of his eyes, he would have suspected Masten. He decided that he would, and his smile was a trifle grim.

"I reckon Catherson is a regular dodger," he returned. "He's always gallivantin' around the country when somebody wants to see him." He smiled gently at Hagar, with perhaps just a little pity.

"It's gettin' along in the afternoon,

Hagar," he said. "Dad ought to be amblin' back here before long." His face grew grave at the frightened light in her eyes when he continued: "I reckon me an' Masten better wait for him, so's he wont dodge us any more." He cast a glance around him. "Where's your cayuse?" he said to Masten.

"I left him down near the ford," returned the other.

"Right on your way back to the Flyin' W!" said Randerson, as though the discovery pleased him. "I'm goin' to the Flyin' W too, soon as I see Catherson. I reckon, if you two aint got no particular yearnin' to go prowlin' around in the timber any longer, we'll all go back to Catherson's shack an' wait for him there. Three'll be company, while it'd be mighty lonesome for one."

MASTEN cleared his throat and looked intently at Randerson's imperturbable face. Did he know anything? A vague unrest seized Masten. Involuntarily, he shivered, and his voice was a little hoarse when he spoke, though he attempted to affect carelessness:

"I don't think I will wait for Catherson, after all," he said; "I can see him to-morrow, just as well."

"Well, that's too bad," drawled Randerson. "After waitin' this long, too! But I reckon you're right; it wouldn't be no use waitin'. I'll go too, I reckon. We'll ride to the Flyin' W together."

"I don't want to force my company on you, Randerson," laughed Masten nervously. "Besides, I had thought of taking the river trail—back toward Lazette, you know."

Randerson looked at him with a cold smile. "The Lazette trail suits me too," he said; "we'll go that way."

Masten looked at him again. The smile on Randerson's face was inscrutable. And now the pallor left Masten's cheeks and was succeeded by a color that burned. For he now was convinced and frightened. He heard Randerson speaking to Hagar, and so gentle was his voice that it startled him, so great was the contrast between it and the slumbering threat in his eyes and manner:

"Me an' Masten is goin' to make a short-cut over to where his horse is, Hagar; we've changed our minds about goin' to the shack with you. We've decided that we're goin' to talk over that business that he come here about—not botherin' your dad with it." His lips straightened at the startled, dreading look that sprang into her eyes. "Dad aint goin' to know, girl," he assured her gravely. "I'd never tell him. You go back to the shack an' pitch into your work, sort of forgettin' that you ever saw Mr. Masten. For he's goin' away to-night, an' he aint comin' back."

Hagar covered her face with her hands and sank into the grass beside the path, crying.

"By God, Randerson!" blustered Masten, "what do you mean? This is going too—"

A look silenced him—choked the words in his throat; and he turned without protest, at Randerson's jerk of the head toward the ford, and walked without looking back, Randerson following on Patches.

WHEN they reached the narrow path that led to the crossing, just before entering the brush, Randerson looked back. Hagar was still lying in the grass near the path. A patch of sunlight shone on her, and so clear was the light that Randerson could plainly see the spasmodic movement of her shoulders. His teeth clenched tightly, and the muscles of his face corded as they had done in the Flying W ranchhouse the day that Aunt Martha had told him of Pickett's attack on Ruth.

He watched silently while Masten got on his horse; and then, still silent, he followed as Masten rode down the path, across the river, through the break in the cañon wall and up the slope that led to the plains above. When they reached a level space in some timber that fringed the river, Masten attempted to urge his horse through it, but he was brought to a halt by Randerson's voice:

"We'll get off here, Masten."

Masten turned, his face red with wrath.

"Look here, Randerson," he bellowed, "this ridiculous nonsense has gone far

enough. I know, now, that you were spying on us. I don't know why, unless you'd selected the girl yourself—"

"That's ag'in' you too," interrupted Randerson coldly. "You're goin' to pay."

"You're making a lot of fuss about the girl," sneered Masten. "A man—"

"You're a heap careless with words that you don't know the meanin' of," said Randerson. "We don't raise men out here that do things like you do. An' I expect you're one in a million. They all can't be like you, back East; if they was, the East would go to hell plenty rapid. Get off your horse!"

Masten demurred, and Randerson's big pistol leaped into his hand. His voice came at the same instant, intense and vibrant:

"It don't make no difference to me *how* you get off!"

He watched Masten get down, and then he slid to the ground himself, the pistol still in his hand, and faced Masten, with only three or four feet of space separating them.

MASTEN had been watching him with wide, fearing eyes, and at the menace of his face when he dismounted, Masten shrank back a step.

"Good heavens, man, do you mean to shoot me?" he said, the words faltering and scarcely audible.

"I reckon shootin' would be too good for you." Again Randerson's face had taken on that peculiar stony expression. Inexorable purpose was written on it; what he was to do he was in no hurry to be about, but it would be done in good time.

"I aint never claimed to be no angel," he said. "I reckon I'm about the average, an' I've fell before temptation same as other men. But I've drawed the line where you've busted over it. Mebbe if it was some other girl, I wouldn't feel it like I do about Hagar. But when I tell you that I've knowed that girl for about five years, an' that there wasn't a mean thought in her head until you brought your dirty carcass to her father's shack, an' that to me she's a kid in spite of her long dresses and her new-fangled furbelows, you'll understand a heap about how I feel right now. Get your paws up, for I'm goin' to thrash you so bad that your own mother wont know you—if she's so misfortunate as to be alive to look at you! After that, you're goin' to hit the breeze out of this country, an' if I ever lay eyes on you ag'in, I'll go gunnin' for you!"

While he had been speaking, he had holstered the pistol, unstrapped his cartridge-belt and let guns and belt fall to the ground. Then without further words he lunged forward and drove his right fist at Masten's face.

The Easterner dodged the blow, evaded the left arm that swung around and tried to encircle him, and danced off, his face alight with a venomous joy. For the dreaded guns were out of Randerson's reach; he was a fair match for Randerson in weight, though Randerson towered inches above him; he had had considerable experience in boxing at his club in the East, and he had longed for an opportunity to avenge himself for the indignity that had been offered him at Calamity. Besides, he had a suspicion that Ruth's refusal to marry before the fall round-up had been largely due to a lately discovered liking for the man who was facing him.

"I fancy you'll have your work cut out for you, you damned meddler!" he sneered as he went in swiftly, with a right and left, aimed at Randerson's face.

The blows landed, but seemingly had no effect, for Randerson merely gritted his teeth and pressed forward. In his mind was a picture of a girl whom he had "dawdled" on his knee—a "kid" that he had played with, as a brother might have played with a younger sister.

CHAPTER XII

THE RUSTLERS

AT about the time Randerson was crossing the river near the point where the path leading to Catherson's shack joined the Lazette trail, Ruth Harkness was loping her pony rapidly toward him. They passed each other within a mile, but both were unconscious of this fact, for Randerson was riding in the section of timber that

he had entered immediately after crossing the river, and Ruth was concealed from his view by a stretch of intervening brush and trees.

Ruth had been worried more than she would have been willing to admit, over the presence of Chavis and his two men in the vicinity, and that morning after she had questioned a puncher about the former Flying W foreman, she had determined to ride down the river for the purpose of making a long-distance observation of the "shack" the puncher and Randerson had mentioned as being inhabited by Chavis. That determination had not been acted upon until after dinner, however, and it was nearly two o'clock when she reached the ford where she had passed Randerson.

The puncher had told her that Chavis' shack was about fifteen miles distant from the Flying W ranch-house, and situated in a little basin near the river, which could be approached only by riding down a rock-strewn and dangerous declivity. She had no intention of risking the descent; she merely wanted to view the place from afar, and she judged that from the edge of a plateau, which the puncher had described to her, she would be able to see very well.

When she passed the ford near the Lazette trail, she did feel a sudden qualm of misgiving, for she had never ridden quite that far alone—the ford was about ten miles from the ranch-house; but she smiled at the sensation, conquering it, and continued on her way, absorbed in the panoramic view of the landscape.

At a distance of perhaps a mile beyond the ford she halted the pony on the crest of a low hill and looked about her. The country at this point was broken and rocky; there was much sand; the line of hills, of which the one on which her pony stood was a part, were barren and uninviting. There was much cactus—she made a grimace of abhorrence at a clump that grew near her in an arid stretch, and then looked beyond it at a stretch of green. Far away on a gentle slope she saw some cattle, and looking longer, she observed a man on a horse. One of the Flying W men, of course, she assured herself, and felt more secure.

SHE rode on again, following a ridge, the pony stepping gingerly. Another half-mile, and she urged the pony down into a slight depression where the footing was better. The animal made good progress here, and after a while they struck a level, splotched with dry bunch-grass, which rustled noisily under the tread of the pony's hoofs.

It was exhilarating here, for presently the level became a slope, and the slope merged into another level which paralleled the buttes along the river, and she could see for miles on the other side of the stream, a vista of plain and hills and mountains and forest so alluring in its virgin wildness, so vast and big and silent a section, that it awed her.

When she saw the sun swimming just above the peaks of some mountains in the dim distance, she began to have some doubts of the wisdom of making the trip, but she pressed on, promising herself that she would have a brief look at the shack and the basin, and then immediately return.

At last, as she was swept around a bend in the plateau, she saw spreading beneath her a little valley, green-carpeted, beautiful. A wood rose near the river, and at its edge she saw what she had come to see—Chavis' shack.

And now she realized that for all the knowledge that a look at Chavis' shack would give her, she might as well have stayed at the Flying W. She didn't know just what she had expected to see when she got here, but what she did see was merely the building,—a small affair with a flat roof,—the valley itself and several steers grazing in it.

There were no other signs of life. She got off the pony and walked to the edge of the plateau, discovering that the valley was much shallower than she thought it would be, and that at her side, to the left, was the declivity that the puncher had told her about. She leaned over the edge and looked at it.

It was not so steep as she had expected when listening to the puncher's description of it. But she thought it

looked dangerous. The wall of the cut on which she stood was ragged and uneven, with some scraggly brush thrusting out between the crevices of rocks, and about ten feet down was a flat rock, like a ledge, that projected several feet out over the level below.

She was about to turn, for she had seen all she cared to see, when an impulse of curiosity urged her to crane her neck to attempt to peer around a shoulder of the cut where it doubled back. She started and turned pale, not so much from fright as with surprise, for she saw a horse's head projecting around the shoulder of the cut, and the animal was looking directly at her. As she drew back, her breath coming fast, the animal whinnied gently.

ALMOST instantly she heard a man's voice:

"My cayuse is gettin' tired of loafin', I reckon," it said.

Ruth held her breath. The voice seemed to come from beneath her feet —she judged that it really had come from beneath the rock that projected from the wall of the cut below her. And it was Chavis' voice!

Of course, he would not be talking to himself, and therefore there must be another man with him. At the risk of detection, and filled with an overwhelming curiosity to hear more, she kneeled at the edge of the cut and listened intently, first making sure that the horse she had seen could not see her.

"I reckon Linton didn't pull it off— or them Flyin' W guys are stickin' close to the herd," said another voice. "He ought to have been here an hour ago."

"Linton aint no rusher," said Chavis. "We'll wait."

There was a silence. Then Chavis spoke again:

"Flyin' W stock is particularly easy to run off. Did I tell you? B— told me"—Ruth did not catch the name; she thought it might have been Bennet, or Ben—"that the girl had give orders that anyone ketched runnin' off Flyin' W stock wasn't to be hung!" Ruth heard him chuckle. "Easy boss, eh, Kester?" He sneered. "Ketch that damned Flyin' W outfit hangin' anybody!"

Kester was one of the men who had quit the day that Ruth had met Randerson, when the latter had been riding in for the money due them. It did not surprise Ruth to discover that Kester was with Chavis, for Randerson had told her what might be expected of him. Linton was the other man.

Nor did it surprise Ruth to hear Chavis talking of stealing the Flying W stock. But it angered her to discover that her humane principles were being ridiculed; she was so incensed at Chavis that she felt she could remain to hear him no longer, and she got up, her face red, her eyes flashing, to go to her pony.

But the pony was nowhere in sight. She remembered now, her heart sinking with a sudden, vague fear, that she had neglected to trail the reins over the animal's head, as she had been instructed to do by the puncher who had gentled the pony for her; he had told her that no Western horse, broken by an experienced rider, would stray with a dragging rein.

SHE gave a quick, frightened glance around. She could see clearly to the broken section of country through which she had passed some time before, and her glance went to the open miles of grass-land that stretched south of her. The pony had not gone that way, either. Trembling from a sudden weakness, but driven by the urge of stern necessity, she advanced cautiously to the edge of the cut and looked over.

Her pony was standing on the level below her, almost in front of the rock under which had been Chavis and Kester! It had evidently just gone down there, for at the instant she looked over the edge of the cut, she saw Chavis and Kester running toward it, muttering with surprise.

For one wild, awful instant, Ruth felt that she would faint, for the world reeled around her in dizzying circles. A cold dread that seized her senses helped her to regain control of herself presently, however; and scarcely breathing she stole behind some dense weeds at the edge of the cut, murmuring a prayer of thankfulness for their presence.

What Chavis and Kester had said upon seeing the pony, she had not heard. But now she saw crafty smiles on their faces; Chavis' was transfigured by an expresison that almost drew a cry of horror from her; she saw them put their heads close together—heard Chavis whisper:

"It's the girl's cayuse, sure. I'd know it if I saw it in the Cannibal Islands. I reckon she's been snoopin' around here somewheres, an' it's sloped! Why, Kester!" he said, standing erect and drawing great, long breaths, his eyes blazing with passion as for an instant she saw them as they swept along the edge of the cut, "I'd swing for a kiss from them lips of hers!"

"You're a fool!" declared Kester. "Let the women alone! I never knowed a man to monkey with one yet, that he didn't get the worst of it."

Chavis paid no attention to this remonstrance. He seized Ruth's pony by the bridle and began to lead it up the slope toward the plateau. Kester laid a restraining hand on his arm. He spoke rapidly; he seemed to have become, in a measure, imbued with the same passion that had taken possession of Chavis.

"Leave the cayuse here; she'll be huntin' for it, directly; she'll come right down here—give her time."

Chavis, however, while he obeyed the suggestion about leaving the pony where it was, did not follow Kester's advice about waiting, but began to run up the slope toward the plateau, scrambling and muttering. And Kester, after a moment's hesitation, followed him.

RUTH no longer trembled. She knew that if she was to escape from the two men she would have to depend entirely upon her own wit and courage, and in this crisis she was cool and self-possessed. She waited until she saw the two men vanish behind the shoulder of the cut where she had seen the horse's head, and then she clambered over the edge of the wall, rasping some gnarled branches, and letting herself slide quickly down. In an instant she felt her feet come in contact with the flat rock under which the men had been when she had first heard them talking. It seemed a great distance to the ground from the rock, but she took the jump bravely, not even shutting her eyes. She landed on all fours and pitched headlong, face down, in the dust, but she was up instantly and running toward her pony.

Seizing the bridle, she looped it through her arm, and then, pulling at the animal, she ran to where the horses of the two men stood, watching her, and snorting with astonishment and fright. With hands that trembled more than a little, she threw the reins over their heads, so that they might not drag; and then, using the quirt dangling from her wrist by a rawhide thong, she turned their heads toward the declivity and lashed them furiously. She watched them as they went helter-skelter, down into the valley, and then with a smile that might have been grim if it had not been so quavering, she mounted her own animal and rode it cautiously up the slope toward the plateau.

As she reached the plateau, her head rising above its edge, she saw that Chavis and Kester were a good quarter of a mile from her and running toward some timber a few hundred yards beyond them.

With a laugh that was almost derisive, Ruth whipped her pony and sent it flying over the plateau at an angle that took her almost directly away from the running men. She had been riding only a minute or two, however, when she heard a shout, and saw that the men had stopped and were facing in her direction, waving their hands at her. They looked grotesque—like jumping-jacks—in the sudden twilight that had fallen, and she could not withhold a smile of triumph. It did not last long, for she saw the men begin to run again, this time toward the cut, and she urged her pony to additional effort, fearful that the men might gain their ponies and overtake her.

AND now that the men were behind her, she squared her pony toward the trail over which she had ridden to come here, determined to follow it, for she felt that she knew it better than any other.

The pony ran well, covering ground with long, agile jumps. For about two miles she held it to its rapid pace, and then, looking backward for the first time, she saw the plateau, vast, dark and vacant, behind her, and she drew the pony down, for she had come to the stretch of broken country and realized that she must be careful.

She shuddered as she looked at the darkening world in front of her. Never had it seemed so dismal, so empty and at the same time so full of lurking danger. The time which precedes the onrush of darkness is always a solemn one; it was doubly solemn to Ruth, alone, miles from home, with a known danger behind her and unknown dangers awaiting her.

Fifteen miles! She drew a long breath as the pony scampered along; anxiously she scanned the plains to the south and in front of her for signs of Flying W cattle or men. The cattle and horseman that she had previously seen, far over on the slope, had vanished, and it looked so dismal and empty over there that she turned her head and shivered. There seemed to be nothing in front of her but space and darkness. She wondered, gulping, whether Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha were worried about her. They would be, of course, for she had never strayed like this before. But, she thought, with a pulse of joy, they would be lighting the lamps presently, and when she got to the big level beyond the ford, she would be able to see the lights, and the sight of them would make her feel better.

She had a glorious start over her pursuers. They would never catch her. Twice, after she entered the broken stretch, she looked back, but could see no sign of them. She did not know that at that moment Chavis and Kester, enraged and disgusted over the trick she had played on them, were riding slowly through the valley toward their shack.

She was almost through the broken stretch when the pony stumbled. She pulled quickly on the reins, and the pony straightened. But instantly she felt its forelegs stiffen, felt it slide; the thought came to her that it must have slid on a flat rock or a treacherous stretch of lava. It struggled like a cat, to recover its balance, grunting and heaving with the effort, but went down, finally, sideways, throwing her out of the saddle.

SHE had anticipated the fall and had got her feet out of the stirrups, and she alighted standing, braced for the shock. Her left foot struck the top of a jagged rock, slipped, doubled under her, and she felt a sharp, agonizing pain in the ankle. For a moment she paid no attention to it, however, being more concerned for the pony, but when she noted that the animal had got up, seemingly none the worse for the fall, she suddenly realized that the ankle pained her terribly, and she hopped over to a flat rock and sat on it, to examine the injury. She worked the ankle rapidly back and forth, each movement bringing tears to her eyes. She had almost forgotten about her pursuers, and when she thought of them she got up and limped toward the pony, which had wandered a little away from where it had fallen.

And now the pony, which had performed so nobly for her during the miles she had ridden to reach this spot, suddenly seemed determined to undo all his service by yielding to a whim to avoid capture.

She tried threats, flattery, cajolery. Twice she hobbled painfully near him, and each time he unconcernedly walked away. The third time, he allowed her to come very close, and just when she felt that success was very near, he snorted with pretended fright, wheeled, slashed out with both hoofs at her and galloped off a full quarter of a mile. She could see him standing and looking at her, his ears erect, before the darkness blotted him from view altogether.

She tried again, groping her way painfully over rocks, slipping, stumbling, holding her breath from fear of snakes—but she could not find the pony. And then, white, shaking, clammy from her dread of the darkness, the awesome silence, and the possibility of Chavis' and Kester's finding of her here, she groped blindly until she found a big rock rising high above its fellows, and after a struggle during which she tore the skin from her hands and knees,

she climbed to its top and crouched on it, shuddering and crying. And she thought of Randerson; of his seriousness and earnestness when he had said:

"I reckon you don't know hate or fear or desperation. . . . . Out here things run loose, an' if you stay here long enough, some day you'll meet them an' recognize them for your own—an' you'll wonder how you ever got along without them."

Well, she hated now; she hated everything—the country included—with a bitterness that, she felt, would never die. And she had felt fear, too, and desperation. She felt them now; and more, she felt a deep humility, and she felt a genuine respect for Randerson—a respect which more than counterbalanced her former repugnance toward him for the killing of Pickett. For she knew that awhile ago, if she had had a pistol with her, she would have killed without hesitation.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FIGHT

AT about the time that Chavis and Kester had discovered Ruth's pony and had clambered up the slope in search of the girl, the two figures on the timber-fringed level near the break in the cañon wall were making grotesque shadows as they danced about in the dying sunlight.

Masten's science had served him well. He had been able, so far, to evade many of Randerson's heavy blows, but some of them had landed. They had hurt, too, and had taken some of the vigor out of their target, though Masten was still elusive as he circled, with feet that dragged a little, feinting and probing for openings through which he might drive his fists.

A great many of his blows had reached their mark also. Randerson's face was covered with livid lumps and welts. But he seemed not to mind them, to be unconscious of them, for on his lips was still the dogged smile that had reached them soon after the fight had started, and in his eyes was the same look of cold deliberation and unrelenting purpose.

He had spoken no word since the fight began; he had taken Masten's heaviest punches without sign or sound to indicate that they had landed, always crowding forward, carrying the battle to his adversary, refusing to yield a step when to yield meant to evade punishment. Passion, deep and gripping, had made him for the moment an insensate automaton; he was devoid of any feeling except a consuming desire to punish the despoiler of his "kid."

But he was holding this passion in check; he was its master—it had not mastered *him;* he had made it a vassal to his deliberation. To have unleashed it all at once would have made him too eager, would have weakened him. He had chosen this punishment for Masten, and he would see that it was sufficient.

But as Randerson had well known, Masten was no mean opponent. He stepped in and out rapidly, his blows lacking something in force through his inability to set himself. But he landed more often than Randerson; he blocked and covered cleverly; he ducked blows that would have ended the fight had they reached him with their full force.

Masten had been full of confidence when the fight started. Some of that confidence had gone now. He was beginning to realize that he could not beat Randerson with jabs and stinging counters that hurt without deadening the flesh where they struck; nor could he hope to wear the Westerner down and finally finish him. And with this realization came a pulse of fear. He began to take more risks, to set himself more firmly on his feet in order to give his blows greater force when they landed. For he felt his own strength waning, and he knew what the end would be should he no longer be able to hold Randerson off.

HE went in now with a left jab, and instead of dancing back to avoid Randerson's counter, he covered with the left, swiftly drawn back from the jab, and hooked his right to Randerson's face. The blow landed heavily on Randerson's jaw, shaking him from head to foot. But he shook his head

as though to dissipate the effect of it, and came after Masten grimly. Again Masten tried this maneuver, and the jab went home accurately, with force. But when he essayed to drive in the right, it was blocked, and Randerson's right, crooked, rigid, sent with the force of a battering-ram, landed fairly on Masten's mouth, with deadening, crushing effect.

It staggered Masten, sent him back several feet, and his legs shook under him, sagging limply. His lips, where the blow had landed, were smashed, gaping hideously, red-stained. Randerson was after him relentlessly. Masten dared not clinch, for no rules of boxing governed this fight, and he knew that if he accepted rough-and-tumble tactics he would be beaten quickly. So he trusted to his agility, which, though waning, answered well until he recovered from the effects of the blow.

And then, with the realization that he was weakening, that the last blow had hurt him badly, came to Masten the sickening knowledge that Randerson was fighting harder than ever. He paid no attention to Masten's blows, not even attempting to fend them off, but bored in, swinging viciously. His blows were landing now; they left deadened flesh and paralyzed muscles as marks of their force.

Masten began to give way. Half a dozen times he broke ground, or slipped to one side or the other. It was unavailing. Blows were coming at him now from all angles, ripping, tearing, crashing blows that seemed to increase in force as the fight went on. One of them caught Masten just below the ear on the right side. He reeled and went to his haunches, and dizzy, nauseated, he sat for an instant, trying to fix the world correctly in his vision, for it was all awry—trees, the plains, himself—all were dancing. Dimly he sensed the form of Randerson looming over him. He still was able to grasp the danger that menaced him, and reeling, he threw himself headlong, to escape Randerson, landing on his side on the ground, and with an inarticulate shriek of fury, he pulled the small-caliber pistol from his hip pocket, aimed it at the shadowy form of his adversary and pressed the trigger.

And then it seemed that an avalanche had struck him, that he was buried under it.

EVIDENTLY he had been buried for a long time, for when he opened his eyes the dense blackness of the Western night had descended. He felt a dull, heavy pain in his right wrist, and he raised it—it seemed to have been crushed. He laid the hand down again, with a groan, and then he heard a voice. Looking up, he saw the shadowy figure of his conqueror standing over him.

"I reckon I've handed it to you pretty bad," said Randerson. "But you had it comin' to you. If you hadn't tried to play the skunk at the last minute, you'd have got off easier. I reckon your hand aint so active as it's been—I had to pretty near stamp it off of you—you would keep pullin' the trigger of that pop-gun. Do you reckon you c'n get up now, an' get on your horse?"

Masten felt himself lifted; he did not resist. Then he felt the saddle under him; he made an effort and steadied himself. Then, still only half conscious, he rode, reeling in the saddle, toward a light that he saw in the distance, which, he dimly felt, must come from the Flying W ranch-house.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ROCK AND THE MOONLIGHT

RANDERSON did not leave the scene of the fight immediately. He stood for a long time, after buckling on his belt and pistols, looking meditatively toward the break in the cañon beyond which was Catherson's shack.

"Did the dresses have anything to do with it?" he asked himself, standing there in the darkness. "New dresses might have—puttin' foolish notions in her head. But I reckon the man—" He laughed grimly. He had thought it all over before, back there on the path when he had been talking to Masten and Hagar. He reflected again on it now. "Lookin' it square in the face, it's

human nature. We'll allow that. We'll say a man has feelin's. But a man ought to have sense, too—or he aint a man. If Masten was a boy, now, not realizin', there'd be excuses. But he's wised up. . . . . If his intentions had been honorable—but he's engaged to Ruth, an' they couldn't. I reckon he'll pull his freight now. Catherson would sure muss him up some."

He mounted his pony and rode toward the Flying W ranch-house. Halfway there he passed Masten. The moon had risen; by its light he could see the Easterner, who had halted his horse and was standing beside it, watching him. Randerson paid no heed to him.

"Thinkin' it over, I reckon," he decided, as he rode on. Looking back, when he reached the house, he saw that Masten was still standing beside his horse.

At the sound of hoof-beats, Uncle Jepson came out on the porch and peered at the rider. Randerson could see Aunt Martha close behind him. Uncle Jepson was excited. He started off the porch toward Randerson.

"It's Randerson, Mother!" he called shrilly back to Aunt Martha, who was now on the porch.

IN a brief time Randerson learned that Ruth had gone riding—alone—about noon, and had not returned. Randerson also discovered that the girl had questioned a puncher who had ridden in—asking him about Chavis' shack and the basin. Randerson's face, red from the blows that had landed on it, paled quickly.

"I reckon she's takin' her time about comin' in," he said. "Mebbe her cayuse has broke a leg—or somethin'." He grinned at Uncle Jepson. "I expect there aint nothin' to worry about. I'll go look for her."

He climbed slowly into the saddle, and with a wave of the hand to the elderly couple rode his pony down past the bunk-house at a pace that was little faster than a walk. He urged Patches to slightly greater speed as he skirted the corral fence, but once out on the plains he loosened the reins, spoke sharply to the pony and began to ride in earnest.

Patches responded nobly to the grim note in his master's voice. With stretching neck and flying hoofs he swooped with long, smooth undulations that made him look like a splotched streak, splitting the night. He ran at his own will, his rider tall and loose in the saddle, speaking no further word, but thinking thoughts that narrowed his eyes, made them glint with steely hardness whenever the moonlight struck them, and caused his lips to part, showing the clenched teeth between them, and shoved his chin forward with the queer set that marks the fighting man.

For he did not believe that Ruth's pony had broken a leg. She had gone to see Chavis' shack, and Chavis—

One mile—two, three, four; Patches covered them in a mad riot of recklessness. Into depressions, over rises, leaping rocks and crashing through chaparral clumps, scaring rattlers, scorpions, toads and other denizens to wild flight, he went, with not a thought for his own or his rider's safety, knowing from the ring in his master's voice that speed, and speed alone, was wanted from him.

After a five-mile run he was pulled down. He felt the effects of the effort, but he was well warmed to his work now, and he loped, though with many a snort of impatience and toss of the head, by which he tried to convey to his master his eagerness to be allowed to have his will.

On the crest of a hill he was drawn to a halt, while Randerson scanned the country around him. Then, when the word came again to go, he was off with a rush and a snort of delight, as wildly reckless as he had been when he had discovered what was expected of him.

They flashed by the ford near the Lazette trail; along a ridge, the crest of which was hard and barren, making an ideal speedway; they sank into a depression with sickening suddenness—went out of it with a clatter, and then went careening over a level until they reached a broken stretch where speed would mean certain injury to both.

Patches was determined to risk it, but suddenly he was pulled in and forced to face the other way. And what he

saw must have made him realize that his wild race was ended, for he deflated his lungs shrilly and relaxed for a rest.

RANDERSON had seen her first. She was sitting on the top of a gigantic rock not more than fifty feet from him; she was facing him—had evidently been watching him; and in the clear moonlight he could see that she was pale and frightened—frightened at him, he knew, fearful that he might not be a friend.

This impression came to him simultaneously with her cry, shrill with relief and joy: "Oh, it's Patches! It's Randerson!" And then she suddenly stiffened and stretched out flat on the top of the rock.

He lifted her down and carried her, marveling at her lightness, to a clump of bunch grass near by, and worked, trying to revive her, until she struggled and sat up. She looked once at him, her eyes wide, her gaze intent, as though she wanted to be sure that it was really he, and then she drew a long, quavering breath and covered her face.

"Oh!" she said; "it was horrible!" She uncovered her face and looked up at him. "Why," she added, "I have been here since before dark! And it must be after midnight, now!"

"I reckon it's about nine. Where's your horse?"

"Gone," she said dolorously. "He fell—over there—and threw me. I saw Chavis—and Kester—over on the mesa. I thought they would come after me, and I hurried. Then my pony fell. I've hurt my ankle—and I couldn't catch him—my pony, I mean; he was too obstinate—I could have killed him! I couldn't walk, you know—my ankle, and the snakes—and the awful darkness, and—oh, Randerson," she ended, with a gulp of gratitude, "I never was so glad to see you—anybody—in my life!"

"I reckon it *was* kind of lonesome for you—out here alone with the snakes, an' the dark, an' things."

SHE was over her scare now, he knew—as he was over his fears for her; and he grinned with a humor brought on by a revulsion of feeling.

"I reckon mebbe the snakes would have bothered you some," he added, "for they're natural mean; but I reckon the moon made such an awful darkness on purpose to scare you."

"How can you joke about it?" she demanded resentfully.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said with quick contrition. "You see, I was glad to find you. An' you're all right now, you know."

"Yes—yes," she said, quickly forgiving. "I suppose I *am* a coward."

"Why, no, ma'am, I reckon you aint. Anybody sittin' here alone—a woman, especial—would likely think a lot of curious thoughts. They'd *seem* real. I reckon it was your ankle, that kept you from walkin'."

"It hurt terribly," she whimpered, and she felt of it, looking at him plaintively. "It is so swollen I can't get my boot off. And the leather seems like an iron band around it." She looked pleadingly at him. "Wont you please take it off?"

His embarrassment was genuine and deep.

"Why, I reckon I can, ma'am," he told her. "But I aint never had a heap of experience—" His pause was eloquent, and he finished lamely, "—with boots—boots, that is, that was on swelled ankles."

"Is it necessary to have experience?" she returned impatiently.

"Why, I reckon not, ma'am." He knelt beside her and grasped the boot, giving it a gentle tug. She cried out with pain, and he dropped the boot and made a grimace of sympathy. "I didn't mean to hurt you, ma'am."

"I know you didn't"—peevishly. "Oh," she added as he took the boot in hand again, this time giving it a slight twist, "men are *such* awkward creatures!"

"Why, I reckon they are, ma'am—that is, one, in particular. There's times when I can't get my own boots on." He grinned, and she looked icily at him.

"Get hold of it just above the ankle, please," she instructed evenly, and drew the hem of her skirt tightly. "There!" she added as he seized the limb gingerly: "now—pull!"

He did as he had been bidden. She shrieked in agony and jerked the foot away, and he stood up, his face reflecting some of the pain and misery that shone in hers.

"It's awful, ma'am," he sympathized. "Over at the Diamond H, one of the boys got his leg broke, last year, ridin' an outlaw,—or tryin' to ride him, which aint quite the same thing,—an' we had to get his boot off before we could set the break. Why, ma'am, we had to set on his head to keep him from scarin' all the cattle away with his screechin'."

She looked at him with eyes that told him plainly that no one was going to sit on *her* head—and that she would "screech" if she chose. And then she spoke to him with bitter sarcasm:

"Perhaps if you *tried* to do something, instead of standing there, telling me something that happened *ages* ago, I wouldn't have to sit here and endure this awful m-m-misery!"

THE break in her voice brought him on his knees at her side. "Why, I reckon it *must* hurt like the devil, ma'am." He looked around helplessly.

"Haven't you got something that you might take it off with?" she demanded tearfully. "Haven't you got a knife!"

He reddened guiltily. "I clean forgot it, ma'am." He laughed with embarrassment. "I expect I'd never do for a doctor, ma'am; I'm so excited an' forgetful. An' I recollect, now that you mention it, that we had to cut Hiller's boot off. That was the man I was tellin' you about. He—"

"Oh, dear," she said with heavy resignation, "I suppose you simply *must* talk! Dou you *like* to see me suffer?"

"Why, shucks, I feel awful sorry for you, ma'am. I'll sure hurry."

While he had been speaking he had drawn out his knife, and with as much delicacy as the circumstances would permit, he accomplished the destruction of the boot. Then, after many admonitions for him to be careful, and numerous sharp intakings of her breath, the boot was withdrawn, showing her stockinged foot puffed to abnormal proportions. She looked at it askance.

"Do you think it is b-broken?" she asked him, dreading.

He grasped it tenderly, discovered that the ankle moved freely, and after pressing it in several places, looked up at her.

"I don't think it's broke, ma'am. It's a bad sprain, though, I reckon. I reckon it ought to be rubbed—so's to bring back the blood that couldn't get in while the boot was on."

The foot was rubbed, he having drawn off the stocking with as much delicacy as he had exhibited in taking off the boot. And then while Randerson considerately withdrew under pretense of looking at Patches, the stocking was put on again. When he came back, it was to be met with a request:

"Wont you please find my pony and bring him back?"

"Why, sure, ma'am." He started again for Patches, but halted and looked back at her. "You wont be scared again?"

"No," she said. And then: "But you'll hurry, wont you?"

"I reckon." He was in the saddle quickly, loping Patches to the crest of a hill near by in hope of getting a view of the recreant pony. He got a glimpse of it, far back on the plains near some timber, and he was about to shout the news to Ruth, who was watching him intently, when he thought better of the notion and shut his lips.

Urging Patches forward, he rode toward Ruth's pony at a moderate pace. Three times during the ride he looked back. Twice he was able to see Ruth, but the third time he had swerved so that some bushes concealed him from her. He was forced to swerve still further to come up with the pony, and he noted that Ruth would never have been able to see her pony from her position.

It was more than a mile to where the animal stood, and curiously, as though to make amends for his previous bad behavior to Ruth, he came trotting forward to Randerson, whinnying gently.

Randerson seized the bridle, and grinned at the animal.

"I reckon I ought to lam you a-plenty, you miserable deserter," he said severely, "runnin' away from your mistress that-a-way. Is that the way for

a respectable horse to do? You've got her all nervous an' upset—an' she sure roasted me. Do you reckon there's any punishment that'd fit what you done? Well, I reckon! You come along with me!"

Leading the animal, he rode Patches to the edge of the timber. There, unbuckling one end of the reins from the bit-ring, he doubled them, passed them through a gnarled root, made a firm knot and left the pony tied securely. Then he rode off and looked back, grinning.

"You're lost, you sufferin' runaway. Only you don't know it."

He loped Patches away and made a wide detour of the mesa, making sure that he appeared often on the sky-line, so that he would be seen by Ruth. At the end of half an hour he rode back to where the girl was standing, watching him. He dismounted and approached her, standing before her, his expression one of grave worry.

"That outlaw of yours aint anywhere in sight, ma'am," he said. "I reckon he's stampeded back to the ranch-house. You sure you aint seen him go past here?"

"No," she said, "—unless he went 'way around, just after it got dark."

"I reckon that's what he must have done. Some horses is plumb mean. But you can't walk, you know," he added after a silence. "I reckon you'll have to ride Patches."

"You would have to walk, then," she objected. "And that wouldn't be fair!"

"Walkin' wouldn't bother me, ma'am." He got Patches and led him closer. She looked at the animal, speculatively.

"Don't you think he could carry both of us?" she asked.

He scrutinized Patches judicially. A light, which she did not see, leaped into his eyes.

"Why, I didn't think of that," he said, keeping his eyes on the horse. "I reckon he could, ma'am. Anyway, we can try it, if you want to."

He led Patches still closer. Then, with much care, he lifted Ruth and placed her in the saddle, mounting behind her. Patches moved off.

AFTER a silence which might have lasted while they rode a mile, Ruth spoke:

"My ankle feels very much easier."

"I'm glad of that, ma'am."

"Randerson," she said, after they had gone on a little way further, "I beg your pardon for speaking to you the way I did, back there. But my foot *did* hurt terribly."

"Why, sure. I expect I deserved to get roasted."

Ruth related to him the conversation she had overheard between Chavis and Kester, and he smiled understandingly at her.

"Do you reckon you feel as tender toward them now as you did before you found that out?" he asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "It made me angry to hear them talk like that. But as for hanging them—" She shivered. "There were times to-night, though, when I thought hanging would be too good for them," she confessed.

"You'll shape up real Western—give you time," he assured. "You'll be ready to take your own part without dependin' on laws to do it for you—laws that don't reach far enough."

"I don't think I shall ever get your viewpoint," she declared.

"Well," he said, "Pickett was bound to try to shoot me. Do you think that if I'd gone to the sheriff at Las Vegas, an' told him about Pickett, that he'd have done anything but poke fun at me? An' that word would have gone all over the country,—that I was scared of Pickett,—an' I'd have had to pull my freight. I had to stand my ground, ma'am. Mebbe I'd have been a hero if I'd have let him shoot me, but I wouldn't have been here any more to know about it. An' I'm plumb satisfied to be here, ma'am."

"How did you come to hear about me not getting home?" she asked.

"I rode in to see Catherson. I couldn't see him—because he wasn't there. Then I come on over to the ranch-house, an' Uncle Jepson told me about you not comin' in."

"Was Mr. Masten at the house?"

He hesitated. Then he spoke slowly. "I didn't see him there, ma'am."

She evidently wondered why it had

not been Masten that had come for her.

THEY were near the house when she spoke again:

"Did you have an accident to-day, Randerson?"

"Why, ma'am?" he asked to gain time, for he knew that the moonlight had been strong enough, and that he had been close enough to her, to permit her to see.

"Your face has big ugly red marks on it, and the skin on your knuckles is all torn," she said.

"Patches throwed me twice, comin' after you, ma'am," he lied. "I plowed up the ground considerable. I've never knowed Patches to be so unreliable."

She turned in the saddle and looked full at him. "That is strange," she said, looking ahead again. "The men have told me that you are a wonderful horseman."

"The men was stretchin' the truth, I reckon," he said lightly.

"Anyway," she returned earnestly, "I thank you very much for coming for me."

She said nothing more to him until he helped her down at the edge of the porch at the house. And then, while Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha were talking and laughing with pleasure over her return, she found time to say softly to him:

"I really don't blame you so much—about Pickett. I suppose it was necessary."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said gratefully.

He helped her inside, where the glare of the kerosene lamps fell upon him. He saw Uncle Jepson looking at him searchingly; and he caught Ruth's quick, low question to Aunt Martha, as he was letting her gently down in a chair:

"Where is Willard?"

"He came in shortly after dark," Aunt Martha told her. "Jep was talking to him, outside. He left a note for you. He told Jep that he was going over to Lazette for a couple of weeks, my dear."

Randerson saw Ruth's frown. He also saw Aunt Martha looking intently through her glasses at the bruises on his face.

"Why, boy," she exclaimed, "what has happened to you?"

Randerson reddened. It was going to be harder for him to lie to Aunt Martha than to Ruth. But Ruth saved him the trouble.

"Randerson was thrown twice, riding out to get me," she explained.

"Throwed twice, eh?" said Uncle Jepson to Randerson, when a few minutes later he followed the range boss out on the porch. He grinned at Randerson suspiciously. "Throwed twice, eh?" he repeated. "Masten's face looks like some one had danced a jig on it. Huh! I cal'late that if you was throwed twice, Masten's horse must have *drug* him!"

"You aint tellin' *her!*" suggested Randerson.

"You tell her anything *you* want to tell her, my boy," whispered Uncle Jepson. "An' if I don't miss my reckonin', she'll *listen* to you, some day."

CHAPTER XV

THE RUNAWAY COMES HOME

MASTEN'S note to Ruth contained merely the information that he was going to Lazette, and that possibly he might not return for two weeks. He hinted that he would probably be called upon to go to Santa Fe on business, but if so he would apprise her of that by messenger. He gave no reason for his sudden leave-taking, or no explanation of his breach of courtesy in not waiting to see her personally. The tone of the note did not please Ruth. It had evidently been written hurriedly, on a sheet of paper torn from a pocket notebook. That night she studied it long, by the light from the kerosene lamp in her room, and finally crumpled it up and threw it from her. Then she sat for another long interval, her elbows on the top of the little stand that she used as a dressing-table, her chin in her hands, staring with unseeing eyes into a mirror in front of her—or rather, at two faces that seemed to be reflected in the glass: Masten's and Randerson's.

Next morning she got downstairs late, to find breakfast over and Randerson gone. Later in the morning she saw Uncle Jepson waving a hand to her from the corral, and she ran down there, to find her pony standing outside the fence, meek and docile. The bridle-rein, knotted and broken, dangled in the dust at his head.

She took up the end with the knot in it.

"He's been tied!" she exclaimed. She showed Uncle Jepson the slip-knot. And then she became aware of Aunt Martha standing beside her, and she showed it to her also. And then she saw a soiled blue neckerchief twisted and curled in the knot, and she examined it with wide eyes.

"Why, it's Randerson's!" she declared, in astonishment. "How on earth did it get here?"

And now her face crimsoned, for illumination had come to her. She placed the neckerchief behind her, with a quick hope that her relatives had not seen it or paid any attention to her exclamation. But she saw Uncle Jepson grin broadly, and her face grew redder with his words:

"I cal'late the man who lost that blue bandanna wasn't a tol'able piece away when that knot was tied. Looks like it was tied there, accidental."

"Jep Coakley, you mind your own business!" rebuked Aunt Martha sharply, looking severely at Uncle Jepson over the rims of her spectacles.

"Don't you mind him, honey," she added, putting an arm around the girl as Uncle Jepson went away, chuckling. "Why, girl!" she went on, smiling at Ruth's crimson face, "you don't blame him, do you? If you don't know he likes you, you've been blind to what I've been seeing for many days. Never mention to him that you know he tied the pony, dear. For he's a gentleman, in spite of that."

And obediently, though with cheeks that reddened many times during the process, and laughter that rippled through her lips occasionally, Ruth washed the neckerchief, folded it, to make creases like those which would have been in it had its owner been wearing it, then crumpled it, and stole to Randerson's room when she was sure he was not there, and placed the neckerchief where its owner would find it.

SHE was filled with a delightful dread against the day when he would discover it, for she felt that he might remember where he had lost it, and thus become convinced that she knew of his duplicity. But many days passed and he did not come in. She did not know that on his way out to join the outfit the next morning he had noticed that he had lost the neckerchief, and that he remembered it flapping loose around his neck when he had gone toward the timber-edge for her pony. He had searched long for it, without success, of course, and had finally ridden away, shaking his head, deeply puzzled over its disappearance.

Nor did Ruth know that on the day she had discovered the neckerchief dangling from the knot, Aunt Martha had spoken again to Uncle Jep concerning it.

"Jep Coakley," she said earnestly, "you like your joke as well as any man. But if I ever hear of you mentioning anything to Randerson about that bandanna, I'll tweak your nose as sure as you're alive!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE TARGET

EARLIER in the morning, Ruth had watched Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha ride away in the buckboard toward Lazette. She had stood on the porch, following them with her eyes until the buckboard had grown dim in her vision—a mere speck crawling over a sun-scorched earth, under a clear white sky in which swam a sun that for days had been blighting growing things. But on the porch of the ranch-house it was cool.

Ruth was not cool. When the buckboard had finally vanished into the distance, with nothing left of it but a thin dust-cloud that spread and disintegrated and at last settled down, Ruth walked to a rocker on the porch and sank into it, her face flushed, her eyes glowing with eager expectancy.

A few days before, while rummaging in a wooden box which had been the property of her uncle, William Harkness, she had come upon another box, considerably smaller, filled with cartridges. She had examined them thoughtfully, and at last, with much care and trepidation, had taken one of them, found Uncle Harkness' big pistol, removed the cylinder and slipped the cartridge into one of the chambers. It had fitted perfectly. And thereafter, she had yielded to another period of thoughtfulness—longer this time.

A decision had resulted from those periods, for the day before, when a puncher had come in from the outfit on an errand, she had told him to send Randerson in to the ranch-house to her, on the following day. And she was expecting him now.

She had tried to dissuade Uncle Jep and Aunt Martha from making the trip to Lazette to-day, but, for reasons which she would not have admitted—and did not admit, even to herself—she had not argued very strongly. And she had watched them go with mingled regret and satisfaction—two emotions that persisted in battling within her until they brought the disquiet that had flushed her cheeks.

IT was an hour before Randerson rode up to the edge of the porch, and when Patches came to a halt, and her range boss sat loosely in the saddle, looking down at her, she was composed, even though her cheeks were still a little red.

"You sent for me, ma'am."

It was the employee speaking to his "boss." He was not using the incident of a few nights before to establish familiarity between them; his voice was low, deferential. But the sound of Masten's voice had never made her feel quite as she felt at this moment.

"Yes, I sent for you," she said, smiling calmly—trying to seem the employer, but getting something into her voice which would not properly belong there under those circumstances. She told herself it was not pleasure—but she saw his eyes flash. "I have found some cartridges, and I want you to teach me how to shoot."

He looked at her with eyes that narrowed with amusement, after a quick glint of surprise.

"I reckon I c'n teach you. Are you figurin' that there's some one in this country that you don't want here any more?"

"No," she said; "I don't expect to shoot anybody. But I have decided that as long as I have made up my mind to stay here and run the Flying W, I may as well learn to be able to protect myself—if occasion arises."

"That's a heap sensible. You c'n never tell when you'll have to do some shootin' out here. Not at men, especial,"—he grinned,—"but you'll run across things—a wolf, mebbe, that'll get fresh with you, or a sneakin' coyote that'll kind of make the hair raise on the back of your neck,—not because you're scared of him, but because you know his mean tricks an' don't admire them,—or a wildcat, or a hydrophobia polecat, ma'am," he said, with slightly reddening cheeks. "But mostly, ma'am, I reckon you'll like shootin' at sidewinders best. Sometimes they get mighty full of fight, ma'am—when it's pretty hot."

"How long will it take you to teach me to shoot?" she asked.

"That depends, ma'am. I reckon I could show you how to pull the trigger in a jiffy. That would be a certain kind of shootin'. But as for showin' you how to hit somethin' you shoot at, why, that's a little different. I've knowed men that practiced shootin' for years, ma'am, an' they couldn't hit a barn if they was inside of it. There's others that can hit 'most anything, right handy. They say it's all in the eye an' the nerves, ma'am—whatever nerves are."

"You haven't any nerves, I suppose, or you wouldn't speak of them that way."

"If you mean that I go hollerin' an' jumpin' around when somethin' happens, why I aint got any. But I've seen folks with nerves, ma'am."

HE was looking directly at her when he spoke, his gaze apparently without subtlety. But she detected a gleam that seemed far back in his eyes, and

she knew that he referred to her actions of the other night.

She blushed. "I didn't think you would remind me of *that,*" she said.

"Why, I didn't, ma'am. I didn't mention any names. But of course, a woman's got nerves; they can't help it."

"Of course men are superior," she taunted, resisting an inclination to laugh, for she was rather astonished to discover that man's disposition to boast was present in this son of the wilderness. Also she was a little disappointed in him.

But she saw him redden.

"I aint braggin', ma'am. Take them on an average, an' I reckon women has got as much grit as men. But they show it different. They're quicker to imagine things than men. That makes them see things where there aint anything to see. A man's mother is always a woman, ma'am, an' if he's got any grit in him, he owes a lot of it to her. I reckon I owe more to my mother than to my father."

His gaze was momentarily somber, and she felt a quick, new interest in him. Or had she felt this interest all along—a desire to learn something more of him than he had expressed?

"You might get off your horse and sit in the shade for a minute. It is hot; you've had a long ride, and I am not quite ready to begin shooting," she invited.

He got off Patches, led him to the shade of the house, hitched him and then returned to the porch, taking a chair near her.

"Aunt Martha says you were born here," Ruth said. "Have you always been a cowboy?"

A flash that came into his eyes was concealed by a turn of the head. So she had asked Aunt Martha about him.

"I don't remember ever bein' anything else. As far back as I c'n recollect, there's been cows hangin' around."

"Have you traveled any?"

"To Denver, Frisco, Kansas City. I was in Utah, once, lookin' over the Mormons. They're a curious lot, ma'am. I never could see what on earth a man wanted half a dozen wives for. One can manage a man right clever. But half a dozen! Why, they'd be pullin' one another's hair out, fightin' over him! One would be wantin' him to do one thing, an' another would be wantin' him to do another. An' between them, the man would be goin' off to drownd himself."

"But a woman doesn't always manage her husband!" she defended.

"Don't she, ma'am?" he said gently, no guile in his eyes. "Why, all the husbands I've seen seemed to be pretty well managed. You can see samples of it every day, ma'am, if you look around. Young fellows that have acted pretty wild when they was single, always sort of steady down when they're hooked into double harness. They go to actin' quiet an' subdued-like—like they'd lost all interest in life. I reckon it must be their wives managin' them, ma'am."

"It's a pity, isn't it?" she said, her chin lifting.

"The men seem to like it, ma'am. Every day there's new ones makin' contracts for managers."

"I suppose *you* will never sacrifice yourself?" she asked challengingly.

"It aint time, yet, ma'am," he returned, looking straight at her, his eyes narrowed, with little wrinkles in the corners. "I'm waitin' for you to tell Masten that you don't want to manage *him.*"

"We wont talk about that, please," she said coldly.

"Then we wont, ma'am."

SHE sat looking at him, trying to be coldly critical, but not succeeding very well. She was trying to show him that there was small hope of his ever realizing his desire to have her "manage" him, but she felt that she did not succeed in that very well either.

Perplexity came into her eyes as she watched him.

"Why is it that you don't like Willard Masten?" she asked, at length. "Why is it that he doesn't like you?"

His face sobered. "I don't recollect to have said anything about Masten, ma'am," he said.

"But you don't like him—do you?"

A direct answer was required. "No," he said simply.

"Why?" she persisted.

"I reckon mebbe you'd better ask Masten," he returned, his voice expressionless.

Then he looked at her with an amused grin. "If it's goin' to take you any time to learn to shoot, I reckon we'd better begin."

She got up, went into the house for the pistol and cartridges and came out again, the weapon dangling from her hand.

"Shucks!" he said, when he saw the pistol, comparing its huge bulk to the size of the hand holding it, "you'll never be able to hold it—when it goes off. You ought to have a smaller one."

"Uncle Jep says this ought to stop anything it hits," she declared. "That is just what I want it to do. If I shoot anything once, I don't want to have to shoot again."

"I reckon you're right bloodthirsty, ma'am. But I expect it's so big for you that you wont be able to hit anything."

"I'll show you," she said, confidently. "Where shall we go to shoot? We shall have to have a target, I suppose?"

"Not a movin' one," he said gleefully. "An' I aint aimin' to hold it for you!"

"Wait until you are asked," she retorted, defiantly. "Perhaps I may be a better shot than you think!"

"I hope so, ma'am."

She looked resentfully at him, but followed him as he went out near the pasture fence, taking with him a soap-box that he found near a shed, and standing it up behind a post, first making sure there were no cattle within range in the direction that the bullets would take. Then he stepped off twenty paces, and when she joined him he took the pistol from her hands and loaded it from the box of cartridges. He watched her narrowly as she took it, and she saw the concern in his eyes.

"Oh, I have used a revolver before," she told him, "—not so large a one as this, of course. But I know better than to point it at myself."

"I see you do, ma'am." His hand went out quickly and closed over hers, for she had been directing the muzzle of the weapon fairly at his chest. "You ought never point it at anybody that you don't want to shoot," he remonstrated gently.

HE showed her how to hold the weapon, told her to stand sideways to the target, with her right arm extended and rigid, level with the shoulder.

He took some time at this; three times after she extended her arm he seemed to find it necessary to take hold of the arm to rearrange its position, lingering long at this work, and squeezing the pistol hand a little too tightly, she thought.

"Don't go to pullin' the trigger too fast or too hard," he warned; "a little time for the first shot will save you shootin' again, mebbe—until you get used to it. She'll kick some, but you'll get onto that pretty quick."

She pulled the trigger, and the muzzle of the pistol flew upward.

"I reckon that target feels pretty safe, ma'am," he said dryly. "But that buzzard up there will be pullin' his freight—if he's got any sense."

She fired again, her lips pressed determinedly. At the report a splinter of wood flew from the top of the post. She looked at him with an exultant smile.

"That's better," he told her, grinning; "you'll be hittin' the soap-box, next."

She did hit it at the fourth attempt, and her joy was great.

For an hour she practiced, using many cartridges, reveling in this new pastime. She hit the target often, and toward the end she gained such confidence and proficiency that her eyes glowed proudly. Then, growing tired, she invited him to the porch again, and until near noon they talked of guns and shooting.

Her interest in him had grown. His interest in her had always been deep, and the constraint that had been between them no longer existed.

AT noon she went into the house and prepared luncheon, leaving him sitting on the porch alone. When she called Randerson in, and he took a chair across from her, she felt a distinct embarrassment. It was not because she

was there alone with him, for he had a right to be there: he was her range boss and his quarters were in the house; he was an employee, and no conventions were being violated. But the embarrassment was there.

Did Randerson suspect her interest in him? That question assailed her. She studied him, and was uncertain. For his manner had not changed. He was still quiet, thoughtful, polite, still deferential and natural, with a quaintness of speech and a simplicity that had gripped her, that held her captive.

But her embarrassment fled as the meal progressed. She forgot it in her interest for him. She questioned him again; he answered frankly. And through her questions she learned much of his past life, of his hopes and ambitions. They were as simple and natural as himself.

"I've been savin' my money, ma'am," he told her. "I'm goin' to own a ranch of my own, some day. There's fellows that blow in all their wages in town, not thinkin' of to-morrow. But I quit that, quite awhile ago. I'm lookin' out for to-morrow. It's curious, ma'am. Fellows will try to get you to squander your money,—along with their own,—an' if you don't, they'll poke fun at you. But they'll respect you for not squanderin' it, like they do. I reckon they know there aint any sense to it." Thus she discovered that there was little frivolity in his make-up, and pleasure stirred her. And then he showed her another side of his character—his respect for public opinion.

"But I aint stingy, ma'am. I reckon I've proved it. There's a difference between bein' careful an' stingy."

"How did you prove it?"

He grinned at her. "Why, I aint mentionin'," he said gently.

But she had heard of his generosity —from several of the men, and from Hagar Catherson. She mentally applauded his reticence.

She learned that he had read, more than she would have thought, from his speech, and that he had profited thereby.

"Books give the writer's opinion of things," he said. "If you read a thoughtful book, you either agree with the writer, or you don't, accordin' to your nature an' understandin'. None of them get things exactly right, I reckon, for no man can know everything. He's got to fall down, somewhere. An' so, when you read a book, you've got to do a heap of thinkin' on your own hook, or else you'll get mistaken ideas an' go to gettin' things mixed up. I like to do my own thinkin'."

"Are you always right?"

"Bless you, ma'am—no. I'm scarcely ever right. I'll get to believin' a thing, an' then along will come somethin' else, an' I'll have to start all over again. Or I'll talk to somebody, an' find that they've got a better way of lookin' at a thing. I reckon that's natural."

THEY did not go out to shoot again. Instead, they went out on the porch, and there, sitting in the shade, they talked until the sun began to swim low in the sky.

At last he got up, grinning.

"I've done a heap of loafin' to-day, ma'am. But I've certainly enjoyed myself, talkin' to you. But if you aint goin' to try to hit the target any more, I reckon I'll be ridin' back to the outfit."

She got up too, and held out her hand to him. "Thank you," she said. "You have made the day very short for me. It would have been lonesome here, without Aunt Martha and Uncle Jepson."

"I saw them goin'," he informed her.

"And," she continued, smiling, "I am going to ask you to come again, some day, to teach me some fancy shots."

"Any time, ma'am." He still held her hand. And now he looked at it with a blush, and dropped it, gently. Her face reddened a little, too, for now she realized that he had held her hand for quite a while, and she had made no motion to withdraw it. Their eyes met, eloquently. The gaze held for an instant, and then both laughed, as though each had seen something in the eyes of the other that had been concealed until this moment. Then Ruth's drooped. Randerson smiled and stepped off the porch to get his pony.

A little later, after waving his hand to

Ruth from a distance, he rode away, his mind active, joy in his heart.

"You're a knowin' horse, Patches," he said confidentially to the pony. "If you are, what do you reckon made her ask so many questions?" He gulped over a thought that came to him.

"She was shootin' at the target, Patches," he mused. "But do you reckon she was aimin' at me?"

CHAPTER XVII

THE GUN-FIGHTER

RED OWEN, foreman of the Flying W in place of Tom Chavis, resigned, was stretched out on his blanket, his head propped up with an arm, looking at the lazy, licking flames of the campfire. He was whispering to Bud Taylor, named by Randerson to do duty as straw boss in place of the departed Pickett, and he was referring to a new man of the outfit who had been hired by Randerson about two weeks before.

The new man was reclining on the other side of the fire, smoking, paying no attention to any of the other men around him. He was listening, though, to the talk, with a sort of detached interest, a half smile on his face, as though his interest were that of scornful amusement.

He was of medium height, slender, dark. He was taciturn to the point of monosyllabic conversation, and the perpetual, smiling sneer on his face had gotten on Red Owen's nerves.

"Since he's joined the outfit, he's opened his yap about three times a day—usual at grub-time, when if a man loosens up at all, he'll loosen up then," Red told Taylor, glaring his disapproval. "I've got an idee that I've seen the cuss somewheres before, but I aint able to place him."

"His mug looks like he was soured on the world—especial himself. If I had a twistin' upper lip like that, I'd sure plant some whiskers on it. A mustache, now, would hide a lot of the hyena in him," offered Taylor.

Owen stared meditatively at the new man through the flames. "Yes," he said expressionlessly; "a mustache would make him look a whole lot different."

He studied the man again. He had been studying him all day, while he and some more of the men had worked the cattle out of some timber near the foothills, to the edge of the basin—where they were now camped. But the face was still elusive.

His glance roved around the fire. Seven men, besides the cook—asleep under the wagon—and Randerson, were lying around the fire in positions similar to his own. Randerson, the one exception, was seated on the edge of the chuck-box, its canvas cover pushed aside, one leg dangling, his elbow, supporting his chin, resting on the other.

Randerson had been rather silent for the past few days—since he had ridden in to the ranch-house; and he had been silent to-night, gazing thoughtfully at the fire. Owen's gaze finally centered on the range boss. It rested there for a time, and then roved to the face of the new man—Dorgan, he called himself. Owen started, and his chin went forward, his lips straightening. For he saw Dorgan watching Randerson with a bitter sneer on his lips, his eyes glittering coldly and balefully!

Evil intent was written largely here—evil intent without apparent reason for it. For the man was a stranger here; Randerson had done nothing—to Owen's knowledge—to earn Dorgan's enmity; Randerson did not deliberately make enemies.

Owen had disliked Dorgan before; he hated him now. For Owen had formed a deep attachment for Randerson. There was a determination in his mind to acquaint the range boss with his suspicions concerning Dorgan's expression, and he got up, after a while, and took a turn around the campfires in the hope of attracting Randerson's attention.

Randerson paid no attention to him. But through the corners of his eyes, as he passed Dorgan, Owen noted that the man flashed a quick, speculative glance at him.

But Owen's determination had not lessened. "If he's suspicious of me, he's figgerin' on doin' some dog's trick to Wrecks. I'm putting Wrecks wise

a few, an' if Dorgan don't like it, he c'n go to blazes!"

He walked to the rear of the chuck-box and stood within half a dozen feet of Randerson.

"Figger we've got 'em all out of the timber?" he asked.

There was no answer from Randerson. He seemed absorbed in contemplation of the fire.

"W-r-e-c-k-s!" bawled Owen, in a voice that brought every man of the circle upright, to look wildly around. Taylor was on his feet, his hair bristling, the pallor of mingled fear, astonishment and disgust on his face. Owen grinned sardonically at him. "Lay down an' turn over, you wall-eyed gorilla!" admonished Owen. He turned his grin on the others. "Can't a man gas to the boss without all you yaps buttin' in?" he demanded.

"What for are you-all a-yowlin' that-a-way for?" questioned a gentle-voiced Southerner reproachfully. "I was just a-dreamin' of rakin' in a big pot in a cyard game. An' now you've done busted it up." He sank disgustedly to his blanket.

"He thinks he's a damned coyote," said a voice.

"You're thinkin' it's a yowl," said another. "But you've got him wrong. He's a jackass, come a-courtin'."

"A man can't get no sleep at all, scarcely," grumbled another.

BUT Owen had accomplished his purpose. For during the exchange of amenities Randerson had answered him—without turning, though:

"What you wantin', Red?" he said.

"You figger we've got 'em all out of the timber?" repeated Owen.

"Shucks." Randerson's voice was rich with mirth. "Why, I reckon. Unless you was figgerin' to use a fine-toothed comb. Why, the boys was all a-nappin', Red," he added gently.

He did not look around, so that Owen might give him the warning wink that would have put him on his guard. Owen would have tapped him on the shoulder, but glancing sidelong, he saw Dorgan watching him, and he did not. A ripple of scornful laughter greeted Randerson's reply, and with a sneering glance around, Owen again sought his blanket.

The reception that had been accorded his effort had made him appear ridiculous, he knew. It would be days before the outfit would cease referring to it.

He stretched himself out on the blanket, but after a few moments of reflection, he sat up, doggedly. He had been imagining all sorts of dire things that Dorgan might have in mind. He had a presentiment of impending trouble, and so deep was it that his forehead was damp with perspiration.

Several of the men, disturbed by Owen, had sat up, and were smoking and talking. And when he heard one of the men, named Blair, refer to a gun-man, Watt Kelso, who had formerly graced Lazette with his presence, a light leaped into Owen's eyes—his teeth came together with a snap; his lips formed into straight lines, and he drew a slow, deep breath. For that was the word that had eluded him—Kelso! And Kelso,—how plain and simple it seemed to him now!—Kelso was Dorgan, sitting opposite him now! Kelso minus his mustache, looking much different from when he had seen him last.

So great was Owen's excitement over this discovery that he was forced to lie down and turn his back to the fire for fear that Kelso might look at him and thus discover that he was recognized.

As he lay there, his brain yielded to a riot of speculation. What was Kelso doing here? Why had he come, minus the mustache, assuming the name Dorgan? What meant his glances at Randerson? He provided an explanation presently. Memory drew a vivid picture for him. It showed him a saloon in Lazette, some card-tables, with men seated around them. Among the men were Kelso and Randerson. Randerson had been a mere youth. Kelso and Randerson were seated opposite each other, at the same table. Kelso had been losing—was in bad temper. He had charged Randerson with cheating. There had been words, and then Kelso had essayed to draw his pistol. There was a scuffle, a shot, and Kelso had been led away with a broken arm,—broken by Randerson's bullet,—blas-

pheming and shouting threats at Randerson. And now, after years of waiting, Kelso had come to carry out his threats. It was all plain to Owen, now. And with the knowledge, Owen's excitement abated and he sat up, coldly observant, alert, to watch and listen.

FOR while Owen had been thinking, Blair had continued to talk of Watt Kelso—of his deeds and his personality. And Owen saw that for the first time since joining the outfit Kelso seemed interested in the talk around him.

"Kelso's pulled his freight from Lazette," declared Blair, during the course of his talk. "It's likely he'll drift somewhere he aint so well known. It got to be pretty hard pickin' for him around here—folks fight shy of him. But he was sure a killer!"

Blair paused. "I reckon I might mention a man that he didn't kill," said a man who lay near Blair. "An' he wanted to, mighty bad."

"We're wantin' to know," returned Blair. "He must have been a high-grade gun-slinger."

The man nodded toward Randerson, who apparently was not listening to this conversation. There was a subdued chuckle from the man, and grunts of admiration or skepticism from the others. Owen's gaze was fixed on Kelso; he saw the latter's eyes gleam wickedly. Yes, that was it, Owen saw now—the recollection of his defeat at Randerson's hands still rankled in the gun-man's mind. Owen saw him glance covertly at Randerson, observed his lips curl.

One of the other men saw the glance also. Not having the knowledge possessed by Owen, the man guffawed loudly, indicating the gun-man.

"Dorgan aint swallerin' your yarn about Randerson puttin' a kink in Kelso," he said to Blair.

Randerson turned, a mild grin on his face. "You fellows quit your soft-soapin' about that run-in with Kelso," he said. "There aint any compliments due me. I was pretty lucky to get out of that scrape with a whole hide. They told me Kelso's gun got snagged when he was tryin' to draw it."

So then, Randerson *had* been listening, despite his apparent abstraction. And Owen sat rigid when he saw the gun-man look coldly at Randerson and clear his throat.

Plainly, if Kelso had been awaiting an opportunity to take issue with Randerson, here was his opportunity!

"Yes," he said, "you was mighty lucky."

THERE was a sneer in the words, and malevolence in the twist of his lips as his voice came through them.

A flat, dead silence followed the speech. Every man held the position in which he had been when the gun-man had spoken; nothing but their eyes moved, and these were directed from Randerson to the gun-man and back again, questioningly, expectantly.

Randerson moved his head slightly, and he was looking straight into Kelso's eyes. Kelso had moved a little; he was now sitting on his saddle, having shifted his position when Blair had begun to talk, and the thumb of his right hand was hooked in his cartridge-belt just above the holster of his pistol.

Randerson's face was expressionless. Only his eyes, squinted a little, with a queer, hard glint in them, revealed any emotion that might have affected him over Kelso's words.

"Yes, Dorgan," he said gently, "I was mighty lucky."

Kelso's lips curved into a slow, contemptuous smile.

"I reckon you've always been lucky," he said.

"Meanin'?"

"Meanin' that you've fell into a soft place here, that you aint fit to fill!"

Again a silence fell, dread, premonitory. It was plain to every man of the outfit, awake and listening, that Dorgan had a grievance—whether real or imaginary made little difference—and that he was determined to force trouble. They knew, these men, that it was not Randerson's way to force trouble—that he would avoid it if he could do so without dishonor. But could he avoid it now? The eyes that watched him saw that he meant to try, for a slow, tolerant smile appeared on his lips.

"I reckon you're plumb excited—Owen wakin' you up out of your sleep,

like he did," said Randerson. "But," he added, the smile chilling a little, "I aint askin' no man to work for me if he aint satisfied. You can draw your time to-morrow, if it don't suit you here."

"I'm drawin' it now!" sneered the gun-man. "I aint workin' for no pussy-kitten specimen which spends his time gallivantin' around the country with a girl, making believe he's bossin', when—" Here he added something that made the outfit gasp and stiffen.

As he neared the conclusion of the speech, his right hand fell to his gun-holster. Owen had been watching him, and at the beginning of the movement he shouted a warning:

"Look out, Wrecks!"

HE had been afraid to tell Randerson that it was Kelso who was facing him, for fear that the information, bursting upon Randerson quickly, would disconcert him.

But Randerson had been watching, understanding the drift of the gun-man's words. And when he saw the shoulder of his gun-arm move, his own right hand dropped, surely, swiftly. Kelso's gun had snagged in its holster years before. It came freely enough now. But its glitter at his side was met by the roar and flame-spurt of Randerson's heavy six, the thumb-snap on the hammer telling of the lack of a trigger-spring, the position of the weapon indicating that it had not been drawn from its holster.

Apparently not a man in the outfit had noticed this odd performance, though they had been held with dumb astonishment over the rapidity with which it had been executed. But they saw the red, venomous streak split the night; they heard the gun-man's gurgling gasp of amazement; and they watched, with ashen faces, while he dropped his weapon, sagged oddly forward and tumbled headlong into the sand near the fire. Then several of them sprang forward to drag him back.

It had seemed that none of the men had noticed that Randerson had seemed to shoot his pistol while it was still in the holster. One, however, had noticed. It was Red Owen. And while the other men were pulling the gun-man back from the fire, Owen stepped close to Randerson, lifted the holster and examined it quickly. He dropped it with a low exclamation of astonishment.

"I was wonderin'— Holy smoke, it's a phony holster, fixed on the gun to look like the real thing! An' swung from the belt by the trigger-guard! And Lord, man! Did you know?"

"That Dorgan was Kelso?" said Randerson, with a cold smile. "I reckon. I knowed him the day he asked for a job. An' I knowed what he come for—he was figurin' on settlin' that grudge."

RANDERSON and Owen started toward the gun-man to determine how badly he had been hit; they were met by Blair. There was amazement and incredulity in the man's eyes.

"He's goin' to cash in—quick!" he said. "You got him, pretty nearly proper—just over the heart. But—but he says he's Watt Kelso! An' that that Eastern dude, Masten, sent him over here—payin' him five hundred cold, to perforate you!"

Randerson ran to where Kelso lay gasping and panting for breath. He knelt beside him.

"You talkin' straight, Kelso?" he asked. "Did Masten hire you to put me out of business?"

"Sure," whispered Kelso.

"Where's Masten stayin'?"

"With Chavis—in the shack. He's been there right along—except," he finished, with a grim attempt at humor, "when he's been rushin' that biscuit-shooter in Lazette."

Five minutes later, standing near one of the wheels of the chuck-wagon, gazing somberly at the men who were carrying Kelso away, Randerson spoke grimly to Owen, at his side:

"Pickett, an' then Kelso! Both of them was sure bad enough. But I reckon Masten's got them both roped an' hogtied for natural meanness" He turned to Owen. "I reckon I had to do it, old man," he said gloomily.

"Buck up, Wrecks!" Owen slapped him on the shoulder, and then turned toward the group of men.

Randerson watched him, but his thoughts were elsewhere. "I reckon she'd have wanted it different," he said to himself.

CHAPTER XVIII

READY GUN AND CLEAN HEART

UNCLE JEPSON understood the cowpunchers because he understood human nature, and because he had a strain of the wild in him that had been retained since his youth. Their simplicity, their directness, had been his own; their frankness and generosity, their warm, manly impulses—all reminded him of the days before age, with its accompanying conservatism of thought and action, had placed a governor upon them. They understood him, too, recognizing him as their kind. Blair, especially, had taken a fancy to him, and therefore it was not many days after the shooting of Kelso that Uncle Jepson got the story, with all its gruesome details, from his lips.

The tale was related in strictest confidence, and Uncle Jepson did not repeat it.

But the main fact, that Randerson had killed another man in his outfit, found its way to Ruth's ears through the medium of a roaming puncher who had stopped for an hour at the ranch-house. Ruth had confirmed the news through questioning several Flying W men, and because of their reluctance to answer her inquiries, their expressionless faces, she gathered that the shooting had not met with their approval. She did not consider that they had given her no details, that they spoke no word of blame or praise. She got nothing but the bare fact—that Randerson's gun had again wrought havoc.

She had not seen Masten. A month had slipped by since the day of his departure, when she got a note from him, by messenger, from Lazette, saying that his business was not yet concluded, and that possibly two weeks more would elapse before he would be able to visit the Flying W.

Had Randerson, standing near the chuck-wagon on the night of the shooting of Kelso, known what effect the news would have on Ruth? "I reckon she would have wanted it different," he had reflected then. And he had been entirely correct, for the news had destroyed something that had been growing and flourishing in her heart. It had filled her soul with disappointment, at least; repugnance and loathing were not very far away. She seriously thought of discharging Randerson—for he had not ridden in to report the killing and to offer a defense for it; but she remembered Vickers' words: "Randerson is square," and she supposed that all cowboys were alike, and would shoot—to kill—if they considered their provocation to be great enough.

But these thoughts did not occupy all of her time. She found opportunities to ride and sew and talk—the latter mostly with Aunt Martha and Uncle Jepson. And she kept making her visits to Hagar Catherson.

OF late Ruth had noticed a change in the girl's manner. She seemed to have lost the vivacity that had swept upon her with the coming of her new clothes; she had grown quiet and thoughtful, and had moods of intense abstraction. Ruth rode to the cabin one morning, to find her sitting on the edge of the porch, hugging Nig tightly and whispering to him. Her eyes were moist when Ruth rode up to the porch and looked down at her, but they filled with delight when they rested upon her visitor.

She did not get up, though, and still held Nig, despite the dog's attempts to release himself.

"Have you been crying, Hagar?" Ruth inquired as she dismounted and sat on the edge of the porch close to the girl.

Hagar smiled wanly and rubbed her eyes vigorously with the back of her free hand, meanwhile looking sidelong at Ruth.

"Why, I reckon not," she answered hesitatingly, "—that is, not cryin' regular. But I was just tellin' Nig, here, that he's the only sure enough friend I've got—that can be depended on not to fool anybody."

"Why, Hagar!" Ruth was astonished and perhaps a little hurt by this pessi-

mistic view. "What an odd idea for you to have! Who has fooled you, Hagar?"

"Nobody," said the girl almost sullenly. She dug her bare toe into the deep sand at the edge of the porch and looked down at the miniature hill she was making, her lips set queerly. Ruth had already noticed that she was dressed almost as she had been at their first meeting—a slip-over apron that Ruth had given her being the only new garment. It was the lonesomeness, of course, Ruth reflected, and perhaps a vision of the dreary future, prospectless, hopeless, to be filled with the monotony of the past. Her arm stole out and was placed on Hagar's shoulder.

"I haven't fooled you, Hagar," she said; "have I?"

"No, ma'am." Her lips quivered. She glanced furtively at Ruth, and a half frightened, half dreading look came into her eyes. "Nobody's fooled me," she added with a nervous laugh. "I was just feelin' sorta dumpish, I reckon."

"You mustn't brood, you know," consoled Ruth. "It ruins character."

"What's character?"

"Why—why," hesitated Ruth, "the thing that makes you yourself—apart from every other person: your reputation, the good that is in you—the good you feel."

"I aint got any," said the girl morosely, grimly.

"Why, Hagar, you have! Everybody has—either good or bad."

"Mine's bad, I reckon—if I've got any." She suddenly buried her face on Ruth's shoulder and sobbed.

Perplexed, astonished, almost dismayed, Ruth held her off and tried to look at her face. But the girl buried it deeper and continued to cry.

"Why, Hagar; whatever is the matter?"

There was no answer, and after holding her for a time, Ruth succeeded in getting a look at her face. It was tear-stained, but dogged in expression, and had Ruth been experienced in reading the human emotions, she could have seen the guilt in the girl's eyes, lurking far back. She also might have seen the determination in them—a determination not to tell her secret. And a sorrow, also, was there—aroused through the thought that she had deceived Ruth and could not tell her.

Hagar realized now that she had permitted her emotions to carry her too far, that she had aroused Ruth's curiosity. Ruth must never know! She made an effort and sat up, laughing grimly through her tears, shaking her hair back from her eyes, brushing it away fiercely.

"Dad says there's times when I'm half loco," she said. "I reckon he's right." She recovered her composure rapidly, and in a few minutes there were no traces of tears or of mental distress. But Ruth was puzzled, and after she left the cabin she tried in vain to provide an explanation for the girl's strange conduct.

ON her next visit to the cabin, Ruth was astonished when Hagar asked her bluntly:

"Aint there no punishment for men who deceive girls?"

"Very little, Hagar, I fear—unless it is God's punishment."

"Shucks!" The girl's eyes flashed vindictively. "There ought to be. Durn 'em, anyway!"

"Hagar, what has brought such a subject into your mind?" said Ruth wonderingly.

The girl reddened, but met Ruth's eyes determinedly. "I've got a book in here, that Dad got with some other traps from ol' man Cullen's girls, back in Red Rock—they thought we was poorly, an' they helped us that-a-way. It's 'Millie's Lovers,' an' it tells how a man deceived a girl, an' then run away an' left her—the sneakin' coyote!"

"Girls shouldn't read such books, Hagar."

"Yes, they ought to. But it ought to tell in 'em how to get even with the men who do things like that!" She frowned as she looked at Ruth. "What would you think of a man that done that in real life?"

"I should think that he wouldn't be much of a man," said Ruth.

As before, Ruth departed from this visit, puzzled and wondering.

On another morning, a few days fol-

lowing Ruth's discovery of the shooting of Kelso, she found Hagar standing on the porch. The dog had apprised Hagar of the coming of her visitor. Hagar's first words were:

"Did you hear? Rex Randerson killed Kelso."

"I heard about it some days ago," said Ruth. "It's horrible!"

"What do you reckon is horrible about it?" questioned Hagar, with a queer look at her friend.

"Why," returned Ruth, surprised, "the deed itself! The very thought of one human being taking the life of another!"

"There's worse things than killin' a man that's tryin' to make you shuffle off," declared Hagar evenly. "Rex Randerson wouldn't kill nobody unless they made him do it. An' accordin' to what Dad says, Kelso pulled first. Rex aint lettin' nobody perforate *him,* you bet!"

"He is too ready with his pistol."

The girl caught the repugnance in Ruth's voice. "I thought you kind of liked Randerson," she said.

Ruth blushed. "What made you think that?" she demanded.

"I've heard that you've gone ridin' with him a lot. I just reckoned it."

"You are mistaken, Hagar. I do not like Randerson at all. He is my range boss—that is all. A murderer could never be a friend to me."

A SHADOW came over Hagar's face. "Rex Randerson has got a clean heart," she said slowly. She stood looking at Ruth, disappointment plain in her eyes. The disappointment was quickly succeeded by suspicion; she caught her breath, and the hands that were under her apron gripped each other hard.

"I reckon you'll take up with Masten again," she said, trying to control her voice.

Ruth looked intently at her, but she did not notice the girl's emotion.

"What do you mean by 'again'?"

"I heard that you'd broke your engagement."

"Who told you that?" Ruth's voice was sharp, for she thought that Randerson perhaps had been talking.

Hagar blushed crimson and resorted to a lie. "My dad told me," she said. "He said he'd heard it."

"Well, it isn't true," Ruth told her firmly; "I have never broken with Mr. Masten. And we are to be married soon."

She turned, for she was slightly indignant at this evidence that the people in the country near her had been meddling with her affairs, and she did not see the ashen pallor that quickly spread over Hagar's face. Had Ruth been looking, she must have suspected the girl's secret. But it took her some time to mount her pony, and when she looked back to wave her hand to Hagar, the girl was smiling, though her face was pale and drawn.

Hagar stood rigid on the porch until she could no longer see Ruth. Then she sank to the edge of the porch, gathered the dog Nig into her arms, and buried her face in his unkempt shoulder. Rocking back and forth in a paroxysm of impotent passion, she spoke to the dog:

"I can't kill him now, Nig; he's goin' to marry *her!* Oh, Nig—Nig—what am I goin' to do now?" And then, scornfully, she looked up, her eyes flashing. "She wont let Rex be a friend of hers, because he's killed two men that God had ought to have killed a long while ago! But she'll marry Masten—who aint fit to be Rex's dog. She wont, Nig! Why—"

She got up, started for the door. But nearing it, she sank upon the threshold, crying and moaning, while Nig, perplexed at this conduct on the part of his mistress, stood off a little and barked loudly at her.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BUBBLE-DREAMS

LOPING his pony through the golden haze of the afternoon, Randerson came over the plains toward the Flying W ranch-house, tingling with anticipation. The still small voice to which he had listened in the days before Ruth's coming had not lied to him; Fate or whatever power ruled the destinies of lovers, had made her

for him. Man's interference might delay the time of possession,—his thoughts were of Masten for a brief instant, and his lips straightened,—but in the end there could be no other outcome.

But though he was as certain of her as he was that the sun would continue to rule the days, he kept his confidence from betraying his thoughts, and when at last he rode slowly down along the corral fence, past the bunk-house and the other buildings, to the edge of the porch, sitting quietly in the saddle and looking down at Ruth,—who was sitting in a rocker, sewing,—his face was grave and his manner that of unconscious reverence.

Ruth had been on the porch for more than an hour. And as on the day when he had come riding in in obedience to her orders to teach her the mysteries of the six-shooter, she watched him today—with anticipation, but with anticipation of a different sort, in which was mingled a little regret, but burdened largely with an eagerness to show him, unmistakably, that he was not the sort of man that she could look upon seriously. And so when she saw him ride up to the porch and bring his pony to a halt, she laid her sewing in her lap, folded her hands over it and watched him with outward calmness, though with a vague sorrow gripping her. For in spite of what he had done, she still felt the man's strong personality, his virility—the compelling lure of him. She felt a quick, involuntary tightening of the muscles when she heard his voice,—for it intensified the regret in her,—low, drawling, gentle:

"I have come in to report to you, ma'am."

"Very well," she said calmly. She leaned back in her chair, looking at him, feeling a quick pulse of pity for him; for as she sat there and waited, saying nothing further, she saw a faint red steal into his cheeks. She knew that he had expected an invitation to join her on the porch.

THE faint glow died out of his face, and the lines of his lips grew a trifle more firm. This reception was not the one he had anticipated, but then there were moods into which people fell. She was subject to moods too, for he remembered the night she had hurt her ankle—how she had "roasted" him. And his face grew long with an inward mirth. She would ask him to get off his horse, presently, and then he was going to tell her of his feelings on that night.

But she did not invite him to alight. On the contrary, she maintained a silence that was nearly severe. He divined that this mood was to continue, and instead of getting off his pony he swung crossways in the saddle.

"We've got the cattle all out of the hills an' the timber, an' we're workin' down the crick toward here," he told her. "There aint nothin' unusual happened, except"—and here he paused for a brief instant—"that I had to shoot a man. It was Watt Kelso, from over Lazette way. I hired him two weeks before."

"I heard of it," she returned steadily, her voice expressionless.

"I hated like poison to do it. But I had no choice. He brought it on himself."

"Yes, I suppose so," she said flatly. She looked at him now with the first flash of emotion that she had allowed him to see. "If killing people is your trade, and you choose to persist in it, I don't see how we are to stop you."

He looked sharply at her; but his voice was low and even: "I don't shoot folks for the fun of it, ma'am."

"No?"—with scornful disbelief. "Well, I presume it doesn't make much difference. Dead people wouldn't appreciate the joke, anyway."

His face was serious now, for he could see that she was deeply disturbed over the shooting.

"I reckon you wouldn't believe me, no matter how hard I talked," he said. "You'd have your own opinion. It sure does look bad for me—havin' to plug two guys in one season. An' I don't blame you for feelin' like you do about it. But I've got this to say," he went on earnestly: "Kelso come to the outfit, lookin' for trouble. I'd had a run-in with him a few years ago. An' I shot him—in the arm. I thought it was all over. But along comes Kelso, with his mustache shaved off so's I wouldn't

know him—which I did. He asked me for a job, an' I give it to him—hopin'. But hopes—"

"If you knew him, why did you give him a job?" she interrupted. "It might have saved your shooting him."

"If he was wantin' to force trouble, he'd have done it sooner or later, ma'am."

"Well?" she said, interested in spite of herself.

"He waited two weeks for a chance. I didn't give him any chance. An' then, one night, after Red Owen had been cuttin' up some monkey-shines, he talked fresh an' pulled his gun. He was a regular gun-fighter, ma'am; he'd been hired to put me out of business."

There was an appeal in his eyes that did not show in his voice; and it would be all the appeal that he would make. Looking fixedly at him, she became certain of that.

"Do you know who hired him?"

THERE was that in her tone which told him he might now make his case strong—might even convince her, and thus be restored to that grace from which he, plainly, had fallen. But he was a claimant for her hand; he had told her that he would not press that claim until she broke her engagement with Masten, and if he now told her that it had been the Easterner who had hired Kelso to kill him, he would have felt that she would think he had taken advantage of the situation, selfishly. And he preferred to take his chance, slender though it seemed to be.

"He didn't tell me."

"Then you only suspected it?"

He was silent for an instant. Then: "A man told me he was hired."

"Who told you?"

"I aint mentionin', ma'am." He could not tell her that Blair had told him, after he had told Blair not to mention it.

She smiled with cold incredulity, and he knew his chance had gone.

But he was not prepared for her next words. In her horror for his deed, she had ceased to respect him; she had ceased to believe him; his earnest protestations of innocence of wantonness she thought were hypocritical—an impression strengthened by his statement that Kelso had been hired to kill him, and by his inability to show evidence to prove it. A shiver of repulsion, for him and his killings, ran over her.

"I believe you are lying, Randerson," she said, coldly.

He started, stiffened, and then stared at her, his face slowly whitening. She had said words that, spoken by a man, would have brought about another of those killings that horrified her. She watched him, sensing for the first time something of the terrible emotions that sometimes beset men in tense situations, but entirely unconscious of the fact that she had hurt him far more than any bullet could have hurt him.

Yet aside from the whiteness of his face, he took the fatal thrust without a sign. His dreams, that had seemed to be so real to him while riding over the plains toward the ranch-house, had been bubbles that she had burst with a breath. He saw the wrecks of them go sailing into the dust at his feet.

He had gazed downward, and he did not look up at once. When he did, his gaze rested, as though by prearrangement, on her. Her eyes were still cold, still disbelieving, and he drew himself slowly erect.

"I reckon you've said enough, ma'am," he told her quietly, though his voice was a trifle hoarse. "A man couldn't help but understand that." He wheeled Patches and took off his hat to her. "I'll send Red Owen to see you, ma'am," he added. "I can recommend Red."

SHE was on her feet, ready to turn to go into the house, for his manner of receiving her insult had made her feel infinitely small and mean. But at his words she halted and looked at him.

"Why should you send Red Owen to see me? What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Why, you've made it pretty plain, ma'am," he answered with a low laugh, turning his head to look back at her. "I reckon you wouldn't expect me to go on workin' for you, after you've got so you don't trust me any more. Red will make you a good range boss."

He urged Patches on. But she called

to him, a strange regret filling her, whitening her cheeks; and Patches came again to a halt.

"I—I don't want Red Owen for a range boss," she declared with a gulp. "If you are determined to quit, I—I suppose I cannot prevent it. But you can stay a week or two, can't you—until I can get somebody I like!"

He smiled gravely. "Why, I reckon I can, ma'am," he answered respectfully. "There wont be no awful hurry about it. I wouldn't want to disconvenience you."

And then he was off into the deepening haze of the coming evening, riding tall and rigid, with never a look behind to show her that he cared.

Standing in the doorway of the house, the girl watched him, both hands at her breast, her eyes wide, her lips parted, her cheeks flushed, until the somber shadows of twilight came down and swallowed him. Then, oppressed with a sudden sense of the emptiness of the world, she went into the house.

CHAPTER XX

ONE TOO MANY

TO no man in the outfit did Randerson whisper a word concerning the result of his visit to the ranch-house—that he would cease to be the Flying W range boss just as soon as Ruth Harkness could find a man to replace him. He went his way, thoughtful, silent, grave, filled with somber thoughts and dark passions that sometimes flashed in his eyes, but taking no man into his confidence. And yet they knew that all was not well with him. For in other days his dry humor, his love of wholesome fun, had shortened many an hour for them, and his serenity, in ordinary difficulties, had become a byword to them. And so they knew that the thing which was troubling him now was not ordinary.

They thought they knew what was troubling him. Kelso had been hired to take his life. Kelso had lost his own in the effort. That might have seemed to end it. But it had become known that Kelso had been a mere tool in the hands of an unscrupulous plotter, and until the plotter had been sent on the way that Kelso had gone, there could be no end. Already there were whispers over the country because of Randerson's delay.

Of course, they would wait a reasonable time; they would give him his "chance." But they did not know what was holding him back—that deep in his heart lurked a hope that one day he might still make his dreams come true, and that if he killed Masten, Ruth's abhorrence of him and his deeds, already strong, could never be driven from her. If he lost this hope, Masten was doomed.

And during the second week following his latest talk with Ruth, the girl unconsciously killed it. He met her in the open, miles from the ranch-house, and he rode toward her, deeply repentant, resolved to brave public scorn by allowing Masten to live.

He smiled gravely at her when he came close—she waiting for him, looking at him, unmoved. For she had determined to show him that she had meant what she had said to him.

"Have you found a new range boss, ma'am?" he said gently. He had hoped that she might answer lightly, and then he would have known that she would forgive him, in time.

But her chin went up and she looked coldly at him. "You will be able to leave the Flying W shortly, Randerson," she said. "I am going to leave such matters for Mr. Masten to look after."

She urged her pony away and left him, staring somberly after her.

TWO hours later he was riding down the declivity toward Chavis' shack, in the basin. He had ridden first to the outfit, and had talked with Owen. And his appearance had been such that when he left the foreman the latter sought out Blair.

"If I don't miss my reckonin', Masten's goin' to get his'n to-day."

Randerson rode, straight as Patches could carry him, to the door of Chavis' shack. No one appeared to greet him, but he had seen horses, saddled, hitched to the corral fence, and he knew that some one was about. Chavis, Kester

and Hilton were inside the shack, and when they heard him ride up, they came to the door, curious. And when they saw him they stiffened and stood rigid, with not a finger moving, for they had seen men, before, meditating violence, and they saw the signs in Randerson's chilled and narrowed eyes, and in the grim set of his lips.

His lips moved; his teeth hardly parted to allow the words to come through them: they writhed through:

"Where's Masten?"

Three pairs of lungs sighed audibly in process of deflation.

It was Chavis who answered; the other two looked at him when the question came, silently. Chavis would have lied, but the light in Randerson's eyes warned him not to trifle, and the truth came from his lips:

"Masten's gone to the Flyin' W ranch-house."

"I reckon that's all," said Randerson shortly. "I'm thankin' you."

He rode away, grinning coldly back at them, guiding his pony toward the declivity on the other side of the basin. The three men watched him until the pony had climbed to the mesa. Then Chavis turned to the others.

"I reckon he's goin' to see Masten about that Kelso deal," he said. "Somebody ought to put Masten wise."

Kester grinned. "It's bound to come," he commented. "Let's finish our game; it's your deal."

On the mesa, Randerson urged Patches along the edge, over the trail that Ruth had taken when, months before, she had come upon Chavis and Kester at the declivity.

"Nothin' would have happened, if it hadn't been for Masten," he told himself as he rode away. "Pickett wouldn't have got fresh, an' Kelso would have kept himself mighty shady. We'd have fought it out, square—me an' Masten. I reckon *I* didn't kill Pickett and Kelso; it was Masten that done it."

He came, after a while, to the rock upon which he had found Ruth lying on the night of the accident. And he sat and looked long at the grass-plot where he had laid her when she had fainted.

"She looked like an angel, layin' there," he reminded himself, his eyes eloquent. "She's too good for that sneakin' dude."

He came upon the ruined boot, and memories grimmed his lips. "It's busted—like my dreams," he said, surveying it, ripped and rotting. "I reckon this is as good a place as any," he added, looking around him.

And he dismounted from Patches, led him out of sight behind some high bushes that grew far back from the rocks, came back, stretched himself out on the grass-plot, pulled his hat over his eyes and yielded to his gloomy thoughts. But after he had lain there awhile, he spoke aloud:

"He'll have to come this way, if he comes at all."

WITH the memory of Randerson's threat always before him, "If I ever lay eyes on you ag'in, I'll go gunnin' for you," Masten rode slowly and watchfully. For he had felt that the words had not been idle ones, and it had been because of them that he had hired Kelso. And he went toward the ranch-house warily, much relieved when he passed the bunk-house, to find that Randerson apparently was absent. He intended to make this one trip, present to Ruth his excuses for staying away and then go back to Chavis' shack, there to remain out of Randerson's sight, until he could devise another plan that, he hoped, would put an end to the cowpuncher who was forever tormenting him.

His excuses had been accepted by Ruth, for she was in the mood to restore him to that spot in her heart that Randerson had come very near to occupying; she listened to him calmly, and agreed, without conscious emotion, to his proposal that they ride, on the Monday following, to Lazette, to marry. She had reopened the subject—a little wearily; for now that Randerson was hopeless, she wanted to have the marriage over with as soon as possible. She saw, now, that it had been the vision of Randerson, always prominent in her mind, that had caused her to put off the date of her marriage to Masten when he had mentioned it before. That vision had vanished now, and she did

not care how soon she became Masten's wife.

On the porch of the ranch-house they had reached the agreement, and triumphantly Masten rode away into the darkness, foreseeing the defeat of the man whom he had feared as a possible rival; seeing, too,—if he could not remove him entirely,—his dismissal from the Flying W and his own ascent to power.

"On Monday, then!" he had said softly to Ruth, as ready to leave, he had looked down at her from his horse. "I shall come early, remember, for I have waited long!"

"Yes, Monday," she had answered. And then, dully: "I have waited, too."

MASTEN was thinking of this exchange of words as he rode past the ford where the Lazette trail crossed, into the broken country beyond it. He had not liked the tone of her voice when she had answered him; she had not seemed enthusiastic enough to suit him. But he did not feel very greatly disturbed over her manner, for Monday would end it, and then he would do as he pleased.

He was passing a huge boulder, when from out of the shadow surrounding it a somber figure stepped, the star-shot sky shedding sufficient light for Masten to distinguish its face. He recognized Randerson, and he voluntarily brought his pony to a halt and stiffened in the saddle—fear, cold and paralyzing, gripping him. He did not speak; he made no sound beyond a quick gasp as his surprised lungs sought air, and he was incapable of action.

Randerson, though, did not make a hostile movement and did not present a foreboding figure. His arms were folded over his chest; and if it had not been for Masten's recollection of those grim words, "I'll go gunnin' for you," Masten would have felt reasonably secure. But he remembered the words, and his voice caught in his throat and would not come, when he essayed to bluster and ask Randerson the cause for this strange and dramatic appearance.

But there was no thought of the dramatic in Randerson's mind as he stood there—nothing but cold hatred and determination—nothing except a bitter wish that the man on the pony would reach for his gun and thus make his task easier for him.

The hoped-for movement did not come. And Randerson spoke, shortly:

"Get off your cayuse!"

Masten obeyed, silently, his knees shaking under him. Was it to be another fist-fight? Randerson's voice broke in on this thought:

"I promised to kill you. You're a thing that sneaks around at night on its belly, an' you ought to be killed. But I'm goin' to give you a chance—like you give me when you set Kelso on me—that'll let you die like a man—which you aint!" He tapped the gun at his right hip. "I'll use this one. We'll stand close—where we are—to make your chance better. When I count three, you flash your gun. Show your man, now, if there's any in you!"

He dropped his hands from his chest and held the right, the fingers bent like the talons of a bird of prey, about to seize a victim. He waited, his eyes gleaming in the starlight, with cold alertness for Masten's expected move toward his gun. But after a long, breathless silence, during which Masten's knees threatened to give way, he leaned forward.

"Flash it! Quick! Or you go out anyway!"

"I'm unarmed!" Masten's voice would not come before. It burst forth now, hysterically, gaspingly, sounding more like a moan than the cry of a man pleading for his life.

BUT it stung the stern-faced man before him to action, rapid and tense. He sprang forward with a low, savage exclamation, drawing one of his big weapons and jamming its muzzle deep into Masten's stomach. Then, holding it there, that the Easterner might not trick him, he ran his other hand over the frightened man's clothing, and found no weapon. Then he stepped back with a laugh, low, scornful and bitter. The discovery that Masten was not armed seemed to drive his cold rage from him, and when he spoke again his voice was contemptuous:

"You can hit the breeze, I reckon—I aint murderin' anybody. You're safe right now. But I'm tellin' you this: I'm lookin' for you, an' you don't run no blazer in on me no more! After this, you go heeled—or you hit the breeze out of the country. One of us has got to go. This country is too crowded for both of us!"

Masten got on his pony, trembling so that he had trouble in getting his feet into the stirrups. He rode on, hundreds of yards, before he dared to turn, so great was his dread that to do so would be to bring upon him the wrath of the man who had spared him. But finally he looked around. He saw Randerson riding out into the darkness of the vast stretch of grass-land that lay to the south.

CHAPTER XXI

INTO WHICH A GIRL'S TROUBLE COMES

UNCLE JEPSON and Aunt Martha had not seen Masten when he had visited Ruth, for they had gone in the buckboard to Red Rock. And Masten had departed when they reached home. Nor did they see Ruth after they arrived, for she had gone to bed. But at the breakfast-table Ruth told them of the visit of Masten and of her plans to advance the date of the marriage.

Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha received the news in silence. Aunt Martha did manage to proffer a half-hearted congratulation, but Uncle Jepson wrinkled his nose—as he did always when displeased—and said nothing; and he ate lightly. Ruth did not notice that she had spoiled his appetite; nor did she note with more than casual interest that he left the table before she or Aunt Martha did. She did not see him, standing at the corral fence, scowling, and she could not hear the old-fashioned profanity he used.

"Aren't you glad?" Ruth asked Aunt Martha when they were alone, for she had noted her relative's lack of enthusiasm.

"Why, yes, honey!" Aunt Martha smiled at her, though it seemed forced. "Only—" She hesitated eloquently.

"Only what, Aunt Martha?" Ruth's voice was a little sharp, as with all persons who act in opposition to their better judgment and who resent anyone's understanding them.

"Only I was hoping it would be Randerson, my dear," said Aunt Martha gently.

"Randerson!" Ruth's voice was scornful. But it sounded insincere to her, and she would trust it no further.

"Honey!" Aunt Martha's arm was around her, and Aunt Martha's sympathetic and knowing eyes were compelling hers; her voice was ineffably gentle. "Are you sure, dear, that *you* don't wish it were Randerson? It is a great event in your life, dear, and once it is done, it can't be undone. Don't be hasty."

"It can never be Randerson," Ruth said firmly—not, however, as firmly as she had intended. "Randerson is a murderer—a reckless taker of human life!"

"He *had* to shoot, they say," defended Aunt Martha. "I don't believe he would harm a living thing except in defense of his own life. Defending themselves is their way out here, girl—they know no other way. And he is a man, dear. I don't know when I have met a man who has impressed me more!"

"Please don't talk about it any more." Ruth's face was pale, her brows contracted, for Aunt Martha's reference to Randerson had brought back haunting sensations that, she thought, she had succeeded in putting out of her life. She was ready to cry, and when she thought of Randerson—how calmly he had accepted his dismissal, with what manliness he had borne her insult, a chill of sympathy ran over her. She believed she would never forget him as he had looked on the night he had ridden away after telling her that he would leave the Flying W—riding into the darkness of the plains, with his hopes blasted, bravely making no complaint.

SHE got her pony, after a while, and rode far and long, coming in to the ranch-house about noon. After she had turned the pony into the corral and was coming toward the house, she saw

Uncle Jepson sitting on the porch, puffing furiously at his pipe. She spoke to him in greeting, and was about to pass him to go into the house, when he called to her:

"I want to talk to you a minute, Ruth." He spoke rapidly, his voice dry and light, and she could see his facial muscles twitching. Wonderingly, she sank into a chair near him.

"You're sure thinkin' of marryin' Masten, girl?" he said.

"Yes," she declared firmly.

"Well, then I've got to tell you," said Uncle Jepson decisively. "I've been puttin' it off, hopin' that you'd get shet of that imp of Satan, an' I wouldn't have to say anything."

"Uncle Jep!" she protested indignantly.

"That's just what he is, Ruth—a durned imp of the devil. I've knowed it from the first day I saw him. Since he's come out here, he's proved it." He swung his chair around and faced her, and forgetting his pipe in his excitement, he told her the story he had told Randerson: how he had gone into the mess-house on the day of the killing of Pickett, for a rest and a smoke, and how while in there he had overheard Chavis and Pickett plotting against Randerson, planning Pickett's attack on her, mentioning Masten's connection with the scheme. She did not open her lips until Uncle Jepson had concluded; and then she murmured a low "Oh!" and sat rigid, gripping the arms of her chair.

"An' that aint all—it aint half of it!" pursued Uncle Jepson vindictively. "Do you know that Masten set that Watt Kelso, the gun-fighter, on Randerson?" He looked at Ruth, saw her start and draw a long breath, and he grinned triumphantly. "Course you don't know; I cal'late Randerson would never make a peep about it. He's all man—that feller. But it's a fact. Blair told me. There'd been bad blood between Randerson an' Kelso, an' Masten took advantage of it. He paid Kelso five hundred dollars in cold cash to kill Randerson!"

"Oh, it can't be!" moaned the girl, covering her face with her hands and shrinking into her chair.

"Shucks!" said Uncle Jepson derisively, but more gently now, for he saw that the girl was badly hurt, "the whole country is talkin' about it, Ruth—an' wonderin' why Randerson don't salivate that durned dude! An' the country expects him to do it, girl! They'll fun him out of here, if he don't! Why, girl," he went on, "you don't know how much of a sneak a man can be when he's got it in him!"

SHE was shuddering as though he had struck her, and he was on the edge of his chair, looking at her pityingly, when Aunt Martha came to the door and saw them. She was out on the porch instantly, flushing with indignation.

"Jep Coakley, you're up to your tricks again, aint you? You quit devilin' that girl, now, an' go on about your business!"

"I've got some things to say, an' I cal'late to say them!" declared Uncle Jepson determinedly. "I've kept still about it long enough. I aint wantin' to hurt her," he added apologetically, as Aunt Martha slipped to her knees beside Ruth and put an arm around her; "but that durned Masten has been doin' some things that she's got to know about, right now. An' then, if she's set on marryin' him, why, I cal'late it's her business. It was Masten who was behind Pickett kissin' her—he tellin' Pickett to do it. An' he hired Kelso to kill Randerson."

"Oh, Ruth!" said Aunt Martha, her voice shaky, as she nestled her head close to the girl's. But her eyes shone with satisfaction.

"There's another thing," went on Uncle Jepson, to Ruth. "Did you notice Randerson's face, the night he come to hunt you, when you hurt your ankle? Marked up, kind of, it was, wasn't it? An' do you know what Masten went to Las Vegas for? Business, shucks! He went there to get his face nursed up, Ruth—because Randerson had smashed it for him. They'd had a fight; I saw them, both comin' from the same direction, that night. I reckon Randerson had pretty nigh killed him. What for?" he asked as Ruth turned wide, questioning eyes on him. "Well,

I don't rightly know. But I've got suspicions. I've seen Masten goin' day after day through that break in the cañon over there. A hundred times, I cal'late. An' I've seen him here, when you wasn't lookin', kissin' that Catherson girl. I cal'late, if you was to ask her, she'd be able to tell you a heap more about Masten, Ruth."

Ruth got up, pale and terribly calm, disengaging herself from Aunt Martha and standing before Uncle Jepson. He too got to his feet.

Ruth's voice quavered. "You wouldn't—oh, you *could* not lie to me, Uncle! Because you like Rex Randerson! Is it true?" She put her hands on his shoulders and shook him, frenziedly.

"True? Why, Ruth, girl, it's as true as there's a Supreme Bein' above us! Why—"

But she waited to hear no more, turning from him and putting out her hands to keep Aunt Martha away as she passed her. She went out to the corral, got her pony, saddled it, mounted and rode over the plains toward the break in the cañon wall. Uncle Jepson had one quick glimpse of her eyes as she turned from him, and he knew there would be no Monday for Willard Masten.

RUTH had no feelings as she rode. The news had stunned her. She had only one thought—to see Hagar Catherson—to confirm or contradict Uncle Jepson's story. She came to the break in the cañon after an age, and rode through it, down across the bed of the river, over the narrow bridle-path that led to the Catherson cabin.

The dog Nig did not greet her this time; he was stretched out on his belly, his hind legs gathered under him, his forelegs stuck out in front, his long muzzle extending along them, while he watched in apparent anxiety the face of his master Abe Catherson, who was sitting on the edge of the porch, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands, in an attitude of deep dejection. The dog's concern was for Catherson's future actions, for just a few minutes before, he had witnessed a scene that had made his hair bristle, had brought ugly growls out of him, had plunged him into such a state of fury that he had, for one wild instant, meditated a leap at his master's throat. He had seen his master leap upon his mistress and raise his hand to strike her. If the blow had been struck—Nig would have leaped, then, no matter what the consequences.

Catherson had not struck. But a great passion was in his mind at this moment—the yearning to slay! The dog had seen him, twice during the last half-hour, draw out his heavy six-shooter and examine it, and each time the dog had growled his disapproval of the action. And on both occasions Catherson had muttered thickly: "I wish I knowed, for sure. A man can't do nothin' if he don't know. But I reckon it was him!"

He looked up to see Ruth coming toward him. The girl had seen him twice—had spoken to him. He was a bearded giant, grizzled, unkempt, with hairy arms, massive and muscled superbly, and great hands, burned brown by the sun, that were just now clenched, forming two big fists.

HE got up when he saw Ruth, and stood on the sand at the edge of the porch, swaying back and forth, and Ruth's first thought was that he had been drinking. But his first words to her revealed her mistake. It was the light, dry voice of a violent passion that greeted her, a passion that was almost too great for words. He ran to her pony and seized it by the bridle:

"You know, ma'am. Tell me who treated my li'l gal like that?" His great hands writhed in the reins. "I'll twist his buzzard's head off his shoulders!"

"What do you mean?" Ruth's own voice startled her, for the spirit of a lie had issued from her mouth; she knew what he meant; she realized that Uncle Jepson had told the truth.

"Don't you know, ma'am?" There was wild derision in his voice—insane mirth. "You've been comin' here; she's been goin' to your place! An' you don't know! You're blinder than me—an' I couldn't see at all!" He went off into a gale of frenzied laughter, at which the dog began to bark. Then Catherson's

eyes glared cunningly. "But you've seen who's been comin' here; you know the man's name, ma'am; an' you're goin' to tell me, aint you? So's I c'n talk to him—eh?"

"I dont know, Mr. Catherson." Ruth got a firm grip on herself before she answered, and it was to save a life that she lied again, for she saw murder in Catherson's eyes. "Where is Hagar?" she asked.

At his jerk of the head toward the cabin door Ruth got down from her pony. She was trembling all over, but at Catherson's words all thought of self had been banished. The effect of Masten's deed on her own life—his duplicity, his crimes—all were forgotten. Here was her friend who had been sinned against, needing the comfort of her presence. And in an instant she was inside the cabin, leaning over the little figure that was curled up in a bunk in a corner, speaking low words of cheer and forgiveness.

OUTSIDE, Catherson paced back and forth, his lips forming soundless words, his big hands working as though the fingers were at the throat of the thief that had stolen into his home. His mind was going over certain words that Hagar had answered to his questions, just before Ruth's coming. He dwelt upon every slight circumstance that had occurred during the past few months. There were the tracks of horses' hoofs about the cabin, in the paths and trails leading to it. Hagar had refused to tell him. But he figured it all out for himself, as he walked. When had this thing started? At about the time that Randerson had taken Vickers' place at the Flying W! Why had not there been trouble between him and the Flying W, as under previous range bosses? What had Randerson given him money for, many times? Ah, he knew now!

"The black-hearted hound!" he gritted.

He reeled, and held to a corner of the cabin to steady himself, for this last access of rage came near to paralyzing him. When he recovered he drew back out of sight, and leaning against the wall of the cabin, with a pencil and a small piece of paper taken from a notebook in a pocket, he wrote. He laid the piece of paper on the edge of the porch, ran to the corral and caught his pony, mounted, and rode drunkenly down the narrow path toward the break in the cañon.

CHAPTER XXII

BANISHING A SHADOW

RANDERSON could not adjust his principles to his purpose to do Masten to death while working for Ruth; and so, in the morning following his meeting with the Easterner on the trail leading to Chavis' shack, he announced to the men of the outfit that he was going to quit. He told Red Owen to take charge until Ruth could see him.

Glum looks followed his announcement. They tried to dissuade him, for they did not know his thoughts, and perhaps would not have given him credit for them if they had.

"Don't the outfit suit you?" asked one gently. "If it don't, we'll try to do better!"

"Your conduct has been amazin' good—considerin'," grinned Randerson, light-hearted for the time; for this mark of affection was not lost upon him.

"If there's anybody in the outfit that's disagreeable to you, why, say the word an' we'll make him look mighty scarce!" declared another, glancing belligerently around him.

"Shucks; this outfit'll be a blamed funeral!" said Blair. "We'll be gettin' to think that we don't grade up, nohow. First Vickers packs his little war-bag an' goes hittin' the breeze out; an' now you've got some fool notion that you ought to pull *your* freight. If it's anything botherin' you, why, open your yap, an' we'll sure salivate that thing!"

"I aint mentionin'," said Randerson. "But it aint you boys. You've suited me mighty well. I'm sure disturbed in my mind over leavin' you."

"Then why leave at all?" said Owen, his face long.

But Randerson evaded this direct question. "An' you standin' in line for my job?" he said in pretended astonish-

ment. "Why, I reckon you ought to be the most tickled because I'm goin'!"

"Well, if it's a go, I reckon we'll have to stand for it," said Blair a little later, as Randerson mounted his pony. Their parting words were short, but eloquent in the sentiment left unsaid.

"So long," Randerson told them as he rode away. And "So long" came the chorus behind him.

They stood in a group, watching him as he faded into the distance toward the ranch-house.

RANDERSON rode on his way. He felt a little relieved. No longer was he bound by his job; he was now a free agent and could do as he pleased. And it would please him to settle his differences with Masten. He would "go gunnin' for him" with a vengeance.

It was about noon when he rode in to the ranch-house. He did not turn his pony into the corral, but hitched it to one of the columns of the porch, for he intended to go on to the Diamond H as soon as he could get his belongings packed. If his old job was still open (he had heard that it was), he would take it—or another, in case the old one had been filled. In any event, he would leave the Flying W.

Dejection was heavy in his heart when he crossed the porch to go to his room, for he had liked it here; it had been more like the home of his ideals than any he had yet seen. For his imagination and affection had been at work, and in Aunt Martha he had seen a mother—such a mother as he could have wished his own to be, had she lived. And Uncle Jepson! The direct-talking old gentleman had captivated him; between them was respect, understanding and admiration that could hardly have been deeper between father and son.

But he felt reluctant to tell them of his decision to go; he wanted to delay it—if possible, he did not want to let them know at all, for he could come here, sometimes, to see them, when Ruth had gone. And so he was much pleased when, entering the house, he did not see them. But he looked for them, to be certain, going into all the rooms. And finally from a kitchen window he saw them out in the cottonwoods back of the house, walking arm in arm away, deeper into the wood. He turned with a gentle smile and went upstairs to his room.

SHORTLY after Abe Catherson's departure from the cabin, Ruth came to the door and looked out. Her face was whiter than it had been when she had reached the cabin; she was more composed, and her eyes were alight with mingled resignation and thankfulness. For Hagar had yielded her secret, and Ruth had realized how near she had come to linking her life with that of the despicable creature who had preyed on her friend. The son of this great waste of world loomed big in her thoughts as she stood in the doorway; she saw now that those outward graces which had charmed her, in Masten, had been made to seem mockeries in contrast to the inward cleanness and manliness of the man that she had condemned for merely defending himself when attacked.

She went back into the cabin and sat beside Hagar, a queer sensation of joy possessing her, despite her pity for Hagar and her disgust for Masten, for she knew in this instant that she would never allow Randerson to quit the Flying W. Her joy was infectious; it brought a fugitive smile to the face of the nester's daughter, and as Ruth led her out upon the porch, her arms around her, Hagar looked at her worshipfully.

Out at the edge of the porch, Hagar shot a dreading glance around. She started, and her eyes filled with anxiety as her gaze rested on the corral. She seized Ruth's arm tightly.

"Dad's gone!" she said gaspingly.

"Well, perhaps it is all for the best, Hagar," consoled Ruth. "He will ride for a while, and he will come back to forgive you."

But the girl's eyes grew wide with fear. "Oh, I'm afraid he'll do somethin' terrible!" she faltered. "Before you come, he asked me if—if it had been Randerson. I told him no, but he didn't seem satisfied, an' when I wouldn't tell him who it was, he went out, cursin' Rex. I'm afraid, Ruth—I'm afraid!" She glanced wildly

around, and her gaze rested on the piece of paper that Catherson had left on the edge of the porch. In an instant she had pounced upon it.

"He's gone to kill Randerson!" she screamed shrilly. She did not seem to see Ruth; the madness of hysterical fear was upon her; her eyes were brilliant, wide and glaring. She was in her bare feet, but she darted past Ruth, disregarding the rocks and miscellaneous litter that stretched before her, reached Ruth's pony and flung herself into the saddle, her lips moving soundlessly as she wheeled the animal and set its head toward the narrow path.

"You stay here!" she shouted to Ruth as the Flying W girl, stunned to inaction by the other's manner, watched her. "I'm goin' to ketch Dad. Oh, durn him, the mis'able hot-head!"

She hit the pony a vicious slap with a bare hand. It lunged, as the reins loosened, reaching its best speed within a hundred yards, but urged to increasing effort by voice and hand and heel, the girl leaning far over its mane, riding as she had never ridden before. But up at the Flying W ranch-house, a tall, grim, bearded giant of a horseman was just dismounting. And the legs of his pony were trembling because of the heart-breaking effort that had been required of him.

RANDERSON had not seen Ruth, of course. But he had wondered much over her whereabouts when he had been looking through the house for Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha. And when he had seen them out in the cottonwoods, back of the house, he had supposed her to be with them. He was glad she was not here, to make these last moments embarrassing. He didn't want to disturb her.

He found pencil and paper and wrote his resignation, sitting long over it, but making it brief. It read:

I'm going. I've left Red Owen in charge. I'm wishing you luck.

"There, that's settled," he said, rising. "But I was hopin' it would be different. Dreams are silly things—when they don't come true. I'll be soured on girls, hereafter," he told himself morosely.

He packed his war-bag. While engaged in this work he heard the sound of hoof-beats, but he paid no attention, though he colored uncomfortably, for he thought he had been wrong in thinking that Ruth had been in the cottonwood grove, and that she had been away and was just returning. And when he heard a soft tread downstairs he was certain that it was she, and he reddened again. He stopped his work and sat silent, when he caught the sound of footsteps on the stairs, for now he would have to face her. When he saw the door of his room begin to swing slowly back, he got up, his face grave, ready to deliver his resignation in person. And when the door swung almost open, and he saw Abe Catherson standing in the opening, his heavy pistol in hand, cocked, a finger on the trigger, he stiffened, standing silent, looking at the intruder.

Abe's eyes still wore the frenzy that had been in them when he had been speaking with Ruth. If anything, the frenzy was intensified. His legs were trembling; the big finger on the trigger of his weapon was twitching; his lips, almost hidden by the beard, were writhing. He was like a man who had been seized by some terrible illness—fighting it, resolved to conquer it through sheer effort. His voice stuck in his throat, issuing spasmodically:

"I've got you—Randerson!" he said, "where I want you! I'm goin' to kill you—empty my gun in you! You mis'able whelp!" He took two steps into the room, and then halted, tearing at the collar of his shirt with his free hand, as though to aid his laboring lungs to get the air they demanded.

Randerson's face was white and set, now. He was facing death at the hands of a man whom he had befriended many times. He did not know Catherson's motive in coming here, but he knew that the slightest insincere word, a tone too light or too gruff, the most insignificant hostile movement, would bring about a quick pressure of the trigger of Catherson's pistol. Diplomacy would not answer; it must be a battle of the spirit: naked courage alone could save him, could keep that big finger on the trigger from movement until he

could discover Catherson's motive in coming to kill him.

He had faced death many times, but never had he faced it at the hands of a friend, with the strong drag of regard to keep his fingers from his own weapons. Had Catherson been an enemy, he would have watched him with different feelings; he would have taken a desperate chance of getting one of his own pistols to work. But he could not kill Catherson, knowing there was no reason for it.

HE had no difficulty in getting genuine curiosity into his voice, and he kept it to just the pitch necessary to show his surprise over Catherson's threat and manner:

"What you reckonin' to kill me for, Abe?"

"For what you done to my Hagar!" The convulsive play of Catherson's features betrayed his nearness to action. His gun arm stiffened. He spoke in great gasps, like a man in delirium: "I want you to know—what for. You come sneakin' around—givin' me money—"

"Steady, there. Abe!"

Randerson's sharp, cold voice acted with the effect of a dash of water in Catherson's face. He started, his big hands trembling, for though he had come to kill, he unknowingly wanted to hear some word from Randerson's lips in proof of his innocence. Had Randerson flinched, he would have taken that as a sign of guilt, as he now took the man's sternness as an indication of his innocence. He stepped forward until he was no more than a foot from Randerson, and searched his face with wild intentness. And then, suddenly, the weapon in his hand sank down, his legs wavered and his chin dropped to his chest.

"You didn't do it, Rex—you couldn't do it!" he muttered hoarsely. "No man who'd done a thing like that could look back at me like you looked. But I'm goin' to git—" He stopped, for there was a rapid patter of feet on the stairs, and a breathless voice, crying wildly:

"Dad! *Dad! Dad!*"

And while both men stood, their muscles tensed to leap into action in response to the voice, Hagar burst into the room, looked at them both, saw Catherson's drawn pistol, and then threw herself upon her father, hid her face on his breast and sobbed: "It wasn't Rex, Dad; it was Masten!"

Catherson's excitement was over. The first terrible rage had expended itself on Randerson, and after a violent start at Hagar's words he grew cold and deliberate. Also the confession seemed to make his resentment against his child less poignant, for he rested his hand on her head and spoke gently to her:

"It's all right, Hagar—it's all right. Your old dad aint goin' to hold it ag'in' you too hard. We all make mistakes. Why, I was just goin' to make a mighty whopper myself, by killin' Rex, here. You leave this to me." He pushed her toward Randerson. "You take her back to the shack, Rex. I reckon it wont take me long to do what I'm goin' to do. I'll be back afore dark, mebbe."

THE girl clung to him for an instant. "Dad," she said, "what *are* you goin' to do?"

"If you was a good guesser—" said Catherson, coldly. And then he grinned felinely at Randerson and went out. They could hear him going down the stairs. They followed presently, Hagar shrinking and shuddering under Randerson's arm on her shoulders; and from the porch they saw Catherson, on his pony, riding the trail that Ruth had taken on the day she had gone to see Chavis' shack.

Randerson got Hagar into the saddle, recognizing the pony and speaking about it. When she told him that Ruth was at her cabin, his face lighted. He thought about the written resignation lying in his room, and he smiled.

"I come mighty near not havin' to use it," he said to himself.

CHAPTER XXIII

REALIZING A PASSION

RUTH stood for a long time on the porch after Hagar's departure, gripped by emotions that had had no duplicates in all her days.

Never before had she thought herself capable of experiencing such emotions. For the man she loved was in danger; she knew at this minute that she loved him, that she had loved him all along. And she was not able to go to him; she could not even learn—until Hagar returned—whether the girl had been in time, or whether he had succumbed to the blind frenzy of the avenger.

Thinking to divert her mind, she at last went into the cabin and began to walk about, looking at various objects, trying to force herself to take an interest in them.

She saw, back of a curtain, a number of the dresses and other garments she had given Hagar, and she could not disperse the thought that perhaps if she had not given the clothing to Hagar, Masten might not have been attracted to her. She drew the curtain over them with something near a shudder, considering herself not entirely blameless.

She endeavored to interest herself in Catherson's pipe and tobacco, on a shelf near the stove, wondering over the many hours that he had smoked in this lonesome place. What a blow this must be to him! She began to understand something of the terrible emotions that must have seized him with the revelation. And *she* had brought Masten here, too! Innocent, she was to blame there! And she unconsciously did something, as she walked about, that she had never before attempted to do—to put herself into other persons' positions, to try to understand their emotions—the motives that moved them to do things which she had considered vicious and inhuman.

BEFORE her trip around the interior of the cabin was completed, she came upon a six-shooter—heavy, cumbersome, like the weapon she had used the day Randerson had taught her to shoot. It reposed on a shelf near the door that led to the porch, and was almost concealed behind a box in which were a number of miscellaneous articles—broken pipes, pieces of hardware, buckles, a file, a wrench. She examined the weapon. It was loaded, in excellent condition. She supposed it was left there for Hagar's protection. She restored it to its place and continued her inspection.

She had grown more composed now, for she had had time to reflect. Catherson had not had much of a start; he would not ride so fast as Hagar; he did not know where, on the range, he might find Randerson. Hagar was sure to catch him; she *would* catch him, because of her deep affection for Randerson. And so, after all, there was nothing to worry about.

She was surprised to discover that she could think of Masten without the slightest regret, to find that her contempt for him did not cause her the slightest wonder. Had she always known, subconsciously, that he was a scoundrel? Had that knowledge exerted its influence in making her reluctant to marry him?

Standing at a rear window, she looked out at the corral, and beyond it at a dense wood. She had been there for about five minutes, her thoughts placid, considering the excitement of the day, when at a stroke a change came over her—at first a vague disquiet, which rapidly grew into a dread fear, a conviction, that some danger lurked behind her.

She was afraid to turn. She did not turn, at once, listening instead for any sound that might confirm her premonition. No sound came. The silence that reigned in the cabin was every bit as intense as that which surrounded it. But the dread grew upon her; a cold chill raced up her spine, spreading to her arms and to her hands, making them cold and clammy—to her head, whitening her face, making her temples throb. And then, when it seemed that she must shriek in terror, she turned. In the doorway, leaning against one of the jambs, regarding her with narrowed, gleaming eyes, a pleased, appraising smile on his face, was Tom Chavis.

HER first sensation was one of relief. She did not know what she had expected to see when she turned—certainly something more dire and terrible than Tom Chavis. But when she thought of his past actions, of his cynical, skeptical and significant looks at her, of his

manner at this minute, and reflected upon the fact that she was alone, she realized that chance could have sent nothing more terrible to her.

He noted her excitement, and his smile broadened. "Scared?" he said. "Oh, don't be." His attitude toward her became one of easy assurance. He stepped inside and walked to the rough table that stood near the center of the room, placing his hands on it and looking at her craftily.

"Nobody here," he said, "but you—eh? Where's Catherson? Where's Hagar?"

"They've gone to the Flying W," she answered, trying to make her voice even, but not succeeding—there was a quaver in it. "You must have seen them," she added, with a hope that some one at the ranch-house might have seen *him*. She would have felt more secure if she had known that some one *had* seen him.

"Nothin' doin'," he said, a queer leap in his voice. "I come straight from the shack, by the Lazette trail. How does it come that you're here, alone? What did Catherson an' Hagar go to the Flyin' W for? How long will they be gone?"

"They will be back right away," she told him, with a devout hope that they would.

"You're lyin', Ruth," he said familiarly. "You don't know when they'll be back." He grinned maliciously. "I reckon I c'n tell you why you're here alone, too. Hagar's took your cayuse. Hagar's is in the corral. You see," he added triumphantly as he saw the start that she could not repress, "I've been nosin' around a little before I come in. I wasn't figgerin' on runnin' into Abe Catherson." He laughed thickly, as though some sort of passion surged over him. "So you're all alone here—eh?"

She grew weak at the significance of his words, and leaned against the window-sill for support. And then, with the realization that she must not seem to quail before him, she stood erect again and forced her voice to steadiness.

"Yes," she said, "I am alone. Is there any need to repeat that? And being alone, I am in charge, here, and I don't want you here for company."

He laughed, making no move to withdraw.

"I'm here on business."

"You can't have any business with me. Come when the Cathersons are here."

"The waitin's good," he grinned. He walked around to the side of the table, and with one hand resting on its top, looked closely at her, suspicion in his eyes. "Say," he said in a confidential whisper, "it looks peculiar to me. Catherson an' Hagar both gone. Hagar's got your cayuse, leavin' you here alone. Has ol' Catherson tumbled to Masten bein' thick with Hagar?"

"I don't know," she said, flushing. "It is no affair of mine!"

"It aint—eh?" he said with a laugh, low and derisive. "You don't care what Masten does—eh? An' you're goin' to marry him, Monday. Masten's lucky," he went on, giving her a look that made her shudder. "He's got two girls. An' one of them don't care how much he loves the other!" He laughed as though the matter were one of high comedy.

His manner, the half-veiled, vulgar significance of his words and voice, roused her to a cold fury. She took a step toward him and stood rigid, her eyes flashing.

"You get out of this cabin, Tom Chavis!" she commanded. "Get out—instantly!" No longer was she afraid of him; she was resolute, unflinching.

BUT Chavis merely smiled—seemingly in huge enjoyment. And then, while he looked at her, his expression changed to wonder. "Holy smoke!" he said. "Where's Masten's eyes? He said you didn't have any spirit, Ruth, that you was too cold an' distant. I reckon Masten don't know how to size up a girl—a girl, that is, which is thoroughbred. Seems as though his kind is more like Hagar!" He grinned cunningly and reached into a pocket, drawing out a paper. He chuckled over it, reading it. Then, as though she were certain to appreciate the joke, he held it out to her. "Read it, Ruth," he invited; "it's from Masten, askin' Hagar to meet

him, to-morrow, down the crick a ways. He's dead scared to come here any more, since Randerson's aimin' to perforate him!"

Only one conscious emotion afflicted her at this minute: rage over Chavis' inability to understand, and her own failure to *make* him understand, that she was not of the type of woman who could discuss such matters with a man. Evidently, in his eyes, all women were alike. She knew that such was his opinion when, refusing to take the paper, she stepped back, coldly, and he looked at her in surprise, a sneer following instantly.

"Don't want to read it—eh? Not interested? Jealous, mebbe—eh?" He grinned. "Sure—that's it: you're jealous." He laughed gleefully. "You women are sure jokes. Masten can't wake you up—eh? Well, mebbe Masten—" He paused and licked his lips. "I reckon I don't blame you, Ruth. Masten aint the sort of man. He's too cold-blooded himself to make a woman sort of fan up to him. But there's other guys in this country, Ruth, an'—"

She had seized the first thing that came to her hands,—a glass jar that had stood on the window-sill behind her, —and she hurled it furiously and accurately. It struck him fairly on the forehead and broke into many pieces, which clattered and rang on the bare board floor. The sound they made, the smashing, dull impact as the jar had struck Chavis, caused her heart to leap in wild applause—twanging a cord of latent savagery in her that set her nerves singing to its music. It was the first belligerent act of her life. It awakened in her the knowledge that she could defend herself, that the courage for which she had prayed that night when on the rock where Randerson had found her, was lurking deep, ready to answer her summons. She laughed at Chavis, and when she saw him wipe the blood from his face and look at her in bewilderment, she challenged him, peremptorily:

"Go—now—you beast!"

His answer was a leering grin that made his face hideous. He looked like a wounded animal, with nothing but concentrated passion in his eyes.

"I'll fix you—you hussy!" he sneered, cursing.

SHE saw now that he was aroused past all restraint, and when he came toward her, crouching, she knew that other missiles would not suffice, that to be absolutely safe she must get possession of the big pistol that reposed on the shelf near the door. So when he came toward her she slipped behind the table. He grasped it by its edge and tried to swing it out of the way, and when she held it he suddenly swooped down, seizing it by the legs and overturning it. As it fell he made a lunge at her, but she eluded him and bounded to the door. The box holding the miscellaneous articles she knocked out of its place, so that it fell with a tinkling crash, throwing its contents in all directions. Her fingers closed on the stock of the pistol, and she faced Chavis, who was a few feet away, leveling the big weapon at him. Her voice came firmly; she was surprised at her own calmness:

"Don't move, Chavis—don't dare to take a step, or I'll kill you!"

Chavis halted, his face a dirty, chalkish white. Twice his lips opened, in astonishment or fright—she could not tell which; but no sound came from them. He stood silent, watching her, furtive-eyed, crouching.

In this interval her thoughts rioted in chaos, like dust before a hurricane. But a question dominated all: could she carry out her threat to kill Chavis, if he took the step?

She knew she would. For in this crisis she had discovered one of nature's first laws. She had never understood, before, but in the last few minutes knowledge had come to her like a burst of light in the darkness. And a voice came to her also—Randerson's; she mentally repeated the words he had spoken on the day he had told her about the rustlers: "I reckon you'd fight like a tiger, ma'am, if the time ever come when you had to."

Yes, she would fight. Not as a tiger would fight, but as Randerson himself had fought—not with a lust to do murder, but in self-protection. And in this instant the spirit of Randerson seemed

to stand beside her, applauding her, seeming to whisper words of encouragement to her. And she caught something of his manner when danger threatened: his cold deliberation, his steadiness of hand and eye, his grim alertness. For she had unconsciously studied him in the few minutes preceding the death of Pickett, and she was as unconsciously imitating him now.

HER thoughts ceased, however, when she saw Chavis grin at her, mockingly.

"It's a bluff!" he said. "You couldn't hit the ground, if you had ahold of the gun with both hands!" He moved slightly, measuring the distance between them.

Plainly, she saw from his actions, from his tensed muscles, her threat would not stop him. She was very pale, and her breast heaved as though from a hard run; Chavis could hear the sound of her breathing as he set himself for a leap; but her lips were pressed tightly together; her eyes glowed and widened as she followed the man's movements. She was going to kill: she had steeled her mind to that. And when she saw the man's muscles contract for the rush that he hoped would disconcert her, she fired, coolly and deliberately.

With the deafening roar of the weapon in her ears, a revulsion, swift, sickening, overcame her. The report reverberated hideously; she seemed to hear a thousand of them. And the smoke billowed around her, strong, pungent. Through it she saw Chavis stagger, clap one hand to his chest and tumble headlong, face down, at her feet. The interior of the cabin whirled in mad circles; the floor seemed to be rising to meet her, and she sank to it, the six-shooter striking the bare boards with a thud that sounded to her like a peal of thunder. And then oblivion, deep and welcome, descended.

COMING down through the break in the cañon, riding slightly in advance of Hagar, Randerson heard the report of a pistol, distant and muffled. He turned in the saddle and looked at Hagar questioningly.

"That come from your shack!" he said shortly. "Ruth there alone?"

He caught the girl's quick affirmative, and Patches leaped high in the air from pain and astonishment as the spurs pressed his flanks. When he came down it was to plunge forward with furious bounds that sent him through the water of the river, driving the spume high over his head. He scrambled up the sloping further bank like a cat, gained the level and straightened to his work. Twice that day had riders clattered the narrow trail with remarkable speed, but Patches would have led them.

He was going his best, when within fifty feet of the shack he heard Randerson's voice and slowed down. Even then, so great was his impetus, he slid a dozen feet when he felt the reins, rose to keep from turning a somersault, and came down with a grunt.

In an instant Randerson was inside the cabin. Ruth lay prone where she had fallen. Randerson, pale, grim-lipped, leaned over her.

"Fainted!" he decided. He stepped to the man and turned him over roughly.

"Chavis!" he ejaculated, his lips hardening. "Bored a-plenty!" he added, with vindictive satisfaction. He saw Ruth's weapon, noted the gash in Chavis' forehead—and smiled mirthlessly. "I reckon she fit like a tiger, all right!" he commented admiringly. And now he stood erect and looked down at Ruth compassionately. "She's killed him, but she'll die a-mournin' over it!" Swift resolution made his eyes flash. He looked again at Ruth, saw that she was still in a state of deep unconsciousness. Running out of the cabin, he drew one of his six-shooters. When he had gone about twenty-five feet from the edge of the porch, he wheeled, threw the gun to a quick level, and aimed at the interior of the cabin. At the report he ran toward the cabin again, to meet Hagar, just riding up, wide-eyed and wondering.

"What's goin' on?" she demanded. "What you doin'?"

"Killin' a man," he told her grimly. He seized her by the shoulders. "Understand," he said sternly: "I killed

him, no matter what happens. I'd just got here."

WITH Hagar at his heels he entered the cabin again. While the girl worked with Ruth, he went to the rear wall of the cabin and examined it. When shooting from the outside he had aimed at the wall near a small mirror that was affixed there, and his eyes gleamed with satisfaction when, embedded in one of the logs that formed the wall, he found the bullet.

Five minutes later he and Hagar led Ruth out on the porch. The girl was shaking and cringing, but trying hard to bear up under the recollection of her terrible experience. She had looked, once, at Chavis, on the floor of the cabin, when she had recovered, and her knees had sagged. But Randerson had gone to her assistance. She had looked at him, too, in mute agony of spirit, filled with a dull wonder over his presence, gaining no knowledge from his face, sternly sympathetic. Outside, in the brilliant sunshine, a sense of time, place and events came back to her, and for the first time since her recovery she thought of Abe Catherson's note, which Hagar had read.

"Oh!" she said, looking at Randerson with luminous eyes, joy flashing in them, "he didn't shoot you!"

"I reckon not, ma'am," he grinned. "I'm still able to keep on range-bossin' for the Flyin' W."

"Yes, yes!" she affirmed with a gulp of delight. And she leaned her head a little toward him, so that it almost touched his arm. And he noted, with a pulse of pleasure, that the grip of her hand on the arm tightened.

But her joy was brief; she had only put the tragedy out of her mind for an instant. It returned, and her lips quavered.

"I killed Chavis, Randerson," she said, looking up at him with a pitiful smile. "I have learned what it means to—to take—human life. I killed him, Rex! I shot him down just as he was about to spring upon me! But I had to do it—didn't I?" she pleaded. "I—I couldn't help it. I kept him off as long as I could—and nobody came—and he looked so terrible—"

"I reckon you've got things mixed, ma'am." Randerson met her puzzled look at him with a grave smile. "You didn't kill Chavis. It was me, ma'am."

SHE drew a sharp breath, her cheeks suddenly flooded with color; she shook Hagar's arm from around her waist, seized Randerson's shoulders, gripping the sleeves of his shirt hard and staring at him, searching his eyes with eager, anxious intensity.

"Don't lie to me, Randerson," she pleaded. "Oh!" she went on, reddening as she thought of another occasion when she had accused him, "I know you wouldn't—I know you *never* did! But I killed him; I know I did! For I shot him, Randerson, just as he started to leap at me. And I shall never forget the look of awful surprise and horror in his eyes! I shall never get over it—I will never forgive myself!"

"Shucks, ma'am, you're plumb excited. An' I reckon you was more excited then, or you'd know better than to say you did it. Me an' Hagar was just gettin' off our horses here at the door—after comin' from the Flyin' W. An' I saw Tom Chavis in the cabin. He was facin' the door, ma'am," he said at a venture, and his eyes gleamed when he saw her start, "an' I saw what he was up to. An' I perforated him, ma'am. From outside, here. Your gun went off at the same time. But you aint learned to shoot extra good yet, an' your bullet didn't hit him. I'll show you where it's stuck in the wall."

He led her inside and showed her the bullet. And for a short space she leaned her head against the wall and cried softly. And then, her eyes filled with dread and doubt, she looked up at him.

"Are you sure that is my bullet?" she asked, slowly. She held her breath while awaiting his answer.

It was accompanied by a short laugh, rich in grave humor:

"I reckon you wouldn't compare your shootin' with *mine*, ma'am—me havin' so much experience, an' you not bein' able to hit a soap-box proper?"

She bowed her head and murmured fervently: "Thank God!"

Randerson caught Hagar's gaze and looked significantly from Ruth to the door. The girl accepted the hint, and coaxed Ruth to accompany her to the door and thence across the porch to the clearing. Randerson watched them until, still walking, they vanished among the trees. Then he took Chavis' body out. Later, when Ruth and Hagar returned, he was sitting on the edge of the porch, smoking a cigarette.

To Ruth's insistence that Hagar come with her to the house, the girl shook her head firmly.

"Dad will be back, 'most any time. He'll feel a heap bad, I reckon. An' I've got to be here."

A LITTLE later, riding back toward the Flying W,—when they had reached the timber-fringed level where, on another day, Masten had received his thrashing,—Ruth halted her pony.

"Randerson," she said, "to-day Uncle Jepson told me some things that I never knew—about Masten's plots against you. I don't blame you for killing those men. And I am sorry that I—I spoke to you as I did—that day." She held out a hand to him.

He took it, smiling gravely. "Why, I reckoned you never meant it," he said.

"And," she added, blushing deeply, "you are not going to make it necessary for me to find another range boss, are you?"

"I'd feel mighty bad if you was to ask me to quit now," he grinned. And now he looked at her fairly, holding her gaze, his eyes glowing. "But as for bein' range boss—" He paused, and a subtle gleam joined the glow in his eyes. "There's a better job—that I'm goin' to ask you for—some day. Don't you think that I ought to be promoted, ma'am?"

She wheeled her pony, blushing, and began to ride toward the ranch-house. But he urged Patches beside her, and reaching out, he captured the hand nearest him. And in this manner they rode on—he holding the hand, a thrilling exultation in his heart, she with averted head and downcast eyes, filled with a deep wonder over the new sensation that had come to her.

Uncle Jepson, in the doorway of the house, eagerly watching for the girl's return, saw them coming. Stealthily he closed the door and slipped out into the kitchen, where Aunt Martha was at work.

"Oh, Jep!" she exclaimed when he had told her, "aint that wonderful!"

"I cal'late I've been expectin' it," he observed.

CHAPTER XXIV

A MAN IS BORN AGAIN

THE meeting between Catherson and Randerson had taken the edge off Catherson's frenzy, but it had not shaken his determination. He had been in the grip of an insane wrath when he had gone to see the Flying W range boss. His passions had ruled him, momentarily. He had subdued them, checked them; they were held in the clutch of his will as he rode the Lazette trail.

He did not travel fast, but carefully. He followed the trail Randerson had taken on the night he had found Ruth on the rock.

Reaching the hills and ridges beyond, Catherson halted his pony and scrutinized the country around him. When he observed that there was no sign of life within range of his vision, he spoke to the pony and they went forward.

When he reached the declivity where Ruth had overheard Chavis and Kester, he dismounted and led his pony down it, using the utmost care. He was conserving the pony's strength. For he knew nothing of what might be required of the animal, and this thing which he was about to do must not be bungled.

He was still in no hurry, but he grew cautious now, and secretive. He made a wide circuit of the basin, keeping out of sight as much as possible, behind some nondescript brush, riding in depressions, going a mile out of his way to follow the sandy bed of a washout. His objective was Chavis' shack, and he wanted to come upon it unnoticed. Or if that failed, he desired to make his visit appear casual.

BUT in Chavis' shack was a man who of late had formed the habit of furtive watchfulness. He wore a heavy six-shooter at his waist, but he knew better than to try to place any dependence upon his ability as a marksman. A certain meeting with a grim-faced man on the Lazette trail the night before, a vivid recollection of the grim-faced man's uncanny cleverness with a weapon, demonstrated upon two occasions, worried him, as did also some words that kept running through his mind, asleep or awake, and would not be banished. He could even hear the intonations of the voice that had uttered them: "This country is too crowded for both of us."

Since he had sent Chavis with the note to Hagar, Masten had been uneasy. He had not stayed inside the shack for more than a minute or two at a time, standing much in the doorway, scanning the basin and the declivity carefully and fearfully. And he had seen Catherson lead his pony down. He went inside and took a rifle from its pegs.

He had a hope, at first, that it might be Kester or Linton. But when he saw that the rider did not come directly to the shack, a cold sweat broke out on his forehead and he fingered the rifle nervously. When he saw the rider disappear in the wash-out he got a chair from inside, and standing on it, concentrated his gaze at the point where the rider must emerge. And when, a little later, he caught a glimpse of the rider's head, appearing for just an instant above the crest of a sand-ridge, noting the beard and the shaggy hair, his face turned ashen and the chair rocked under him. For he knew but one man in this country who looked like that.

He got down and glared around, his eyes dilated. Catherson's actions seemed innocent enough. But what could he be doing in the basin? And once here, what could he mean by prowling like that, instead of coming directly to the shack?

MASTEN slipped outside and crept along the wall of the shack to a corner, from which, screened by some alder, he watched breathlessly, a nameless disquiet oppressing him. Did Catherson know anything?

That question his conscience dinned in his ears. It was answered many times as he stood there—an insistent affirmative, suggested, proven, by Catherson's actions, supported by the fact that he had never seen Catherson in the basin before.

As he watched, he saw Catherson again. He was closer, riding behind a thicket of gnarled brush, which was not high enough entirely to conceal him, and he was bending far over in the saddle as though he did not want to be seen. But Masten could see him, and this last evidence of the man's caution convinced Masten. Obeying a sudden impulse, he threw the rifle to his shoulder. The muzzle wavered, describing wide circles, and before he could steady it enough to be reasonably certain of hitting the target, Catherson had vanished behind a low hill.

Masten wiped the cold moisture from his forehead. For an instant he stood irresolute, trembling. And then, panic-stricken over a picture that his imagination drew for him, he dropped the rifle and ran, crouching, to the corral. With frenzied haste, urged by the horrible conviction that had seized him, he threw saddle and bridle on his pony, and clambered, mumbling incoherently, to the animal's back. Twice the reins escaped his wild clutches for them, but finally he caught them and sat erect, to look for Catherson.

The nester was not visible to him. Gulping hard, Masten sent the pony cautiously forward. He skirted the corral fence, keeping the shack between him and the point at which he divined Catherson was then riding, and loped his pony into some timber near the river.

His panic had grown. He had yielded to it, and it had mastered him. His lips were twitching; he cringed and shivered as, getting deeper into the timber, he drove the spurs into the pony's flanks and raced it away from the shack.

He rode for perhaps a mile at breakneck speed. And then, unable to fight off the fascination that gripped him,

doubting, almost ridiculing himself for yielding to the wild impulse to get away from Catherson,—for now that he *was* away his action seemed senseless,—he halted the pony and turned in the saddle, peering back through the trees. He had followed a narrow trail, and its arching green stretched behind him, peaceful, inviting, silent. So calm did it all seem to him now, so distant from that dread danger that he had anticipated, that he smiled and sat debating an impulse to return and face Catherson. The man's intentions could not be what he had suspected them to be; his conscience had played him a trick.

But he did not wheel his pony. For as he sat there in the silence he heard the rapid drumming of hoofs on the path. Distant they were, but unmistakable. For a moment he listened to them, the cold damp breaking out on his forehead again. Then he cursed, drove the spurs deep into the pony and leaning forward, rode frantically away.

COMING out of the timber to a sandy plain that stretched in seeming endlessness toward a horizon that was dimming in the growing twilight, Masten halted the pony again—but only for an instant. In the next he was urging it onward furiously. For looking back fearfully, he saw Catherson bestriding his pony, a dread apparition, big, rigid, grim, just breaking through the timber-edge, not more than two or three hundred feet distant. Masten had hoped that he had distanced his pursuer, for he had ridden at least five miles at a pace that he had never before attempted. There had been no way for him to judge the pony's speed, of course, but when he had halted momentarily he had noted that the animal was quivering all over, that it caught its breath shrilly in the brief interval of rest. And now as he rode on again, bending far over its mane, he saw that the billowing foam on its muzzle was flecked with blood. The animal was not equal to the demands he had made upon it.

But he forced it on, with spur and voice and hand, muttering, pleading with it incoherently, his own breath coughing in his throat, the muscles of his back cringing and rippling in momentary expectation of a flying missile that would burn and tear its way through them. But no bullet came. There was no sound behind him except, occasionally, the ring of hoofs. At other times silence engulfed him. For in the deep sand of the level the laboring ponies of pursued and pursuer made no noise. Masten could hear a sodden *squish* at times, as his own animal whipped its hoofs out of a miniature sand-hill.

He did not look around again for a long time. Long ago had he lost all sense of direction. For twilight had come and gone, and blank darkness, except for the stars, stretched on all sides. He had never seen this sand-level; he felt that it must be far off the Lazette trail. But he knew, before he had ridden far into it, that it was a desert. For as twilight had come he had scrutinized it hopefully in search of timber, bushes, a gorge, a gully—anything that might afford him an opportunity for concealment, for escape from the big, grim pursuer. He had discovered nothing.

THEY raced on, the distance between them lessening gradually. Masten could feel his pony failing. It tried bravely, but the times when it spurted grew less frequent; it made increasingly hard work of pulling its hoofs out of the deep sand; it staggered and lurched on the hard stretches.

Masten looked back frequently now. The grim, relentless figure behind him grew grotesque and gigantic in his thoughts; and once, when he felt the pony beneath him go to its knees, he screamed hysterically. But the pony clambered to its feet again and staggered on, to fall again a minute later. It got up again and went doggedly on. Catherson's pony, its strength conserved for this ordeal, still full of stamina, came on steadily, its rider avoiding the soft sand, profiting by Masten's experiences with it. It was not until he saw Catherson within fifty feet of him that Masten divined that he was not to be shot. For at that distance he made a fair target, and Catherson made no movement toward his gun. The nester

was still silent; he had spoken no word. He spoke none now, as he hung relentlessly to his prey, seeming, to Masten's distorted mind and vision, a hideous, unnatural and ghastly figure of death.

Catherson had drawn much nearer. He was not more than thirty feet away when Masten's pony went down again. It fell with a looseness and finality that told Masten of the end. Masten slipped his feet out of the stirrups, throwing himself free and alighting on his hands and knees in front of the exhausted animal. He got up and started to run, desperately, sobbing, his lips slavering from terror. But he turned, after running a few feet, to see Catherson coming after him. The nester was uncoiling a rope from his saddle-horn, and at this sight Masten shrieked and went to his knees. He heard an answering laugh from Catherson, short, malevolent. And then the rope swished out, its loop widening and writhing. Masten shrieked again, and threw up his hands impotently.

LATER, Catherson brought his pony to a halt, far from where the rope had been cast, and looked grimly down at his fellow being, prone and motionless in the deep sand at his feet.

Unmoved, remorseless, Catherson had cut short the pleadings, the screaming, the promises. He had not bungled his work, and it had been done. But as he looked down now, the muscles of his face quivered. And now he spoke the first words that had passed his lips since he had left the Flying W ranchhouse:

"I reckon you've got what's been comin' to you!"

He got down, unfastened the rope, deliberately re-coiled it and looped it around the saddle-horn. Then he mounted and rode away. Grim, indistinct, fading into the blackness of the desert night, he went—half a mile, perhaps. And then, halting the pony, he turned in the saddle and looked back, his head bent in a listening attitude. To his ears came the sharp bark of a coyote, very near. It was answered, faintly, from the vast, yawning distance, by another. Catherson stiffened; lines of remorse came into his face.

"Hell!" he exclaimed gruffly.

He wheeled the pony and sent it scampering back. A little later he was kneeling at Masten's side; and still later he helped Masten to the saddle in front of him and set out again into the desert blackness toward the timber from which they had both burst some time before.

Many hours afterward they came to the river, at a point where a level intersected. At this place, in the shallow water of a ford, Masten washed from his body the signs of his experience, Catherson helping him. Outwardly, when they had finished, there were few marks on Masten. But inwardly his experience had left an ineffaceable impression.

After washing, he staggered to a rock and sat on it, his head in his hands, shivers running over him. For a time Catherson paid no attention to him, busying himself with his pony, jaded from the night's work. But after half an hour, just as the first faint shafts of dawn began to steal up over the horizon, Catherson walked close and stood looking down at his victim.

"Well," he said slowly and passionlessly, "I've got you this far. I'm quittin' you. I reckon I've deviled you enough. I was goin' to kill you. But killin' you wouldn't have made things right. I expect you've learned somethin', anyway. You'll know enough to play square, after this. An' wherever you go—"

Masten looked up at him, his face haggard, his eyes brimming, but flashing earnestly.

"I'm going back to Hagar," he said. He shivered again. "You're right, Catherson," he added, his voice quavering. "I learned a lot to-night. I've learned—" His voice broke, and he sat there loose-lipped and white, shuddering as a child shudders when awakened from a nightmare. He almost collapsed when Catherson's huge hands fell to his shoulders, but the hands held him, the fingers gripping deeply into the flesh. There was a leap in Catherson's voice:

"You're almost a man, after all!" he said.

They got on the pony after a while,

riding as before, Masten in front, Catherson behind, steadying him. And in this manner they went on toward Catherson's shack, miles down the river.

IT was late in the morning when they came in sight of the shack, and seeing them from afar, Hagar ran to them. She stopped when she saw Masten, her eyes wide with a wonder and astonishment that changed quickly to joy when she saw a smile gathering on Catherson's face.

"I've brought you your husband, Hagar," he told her.

Hagar did not move. Her hands were pressing her breast; her eyes were eloquent with doubt and hope. They sought Masten's, searchingly, defiantly. And she spoke directly to him proudly, her head erect:

"If you've come ag'in' your will—if Dad had to bring you—" She paused, her lips trembling.

"Shucks," said Catherson gently, "he's come on his own hook, Hagar. Why, he asked me to bring him—didn't you, Masten?"

And then he dismounted and helped Masten down, leading the pony toward the shack, but turning when he reached the porch, to look back at Masten and Hagar, standing together in the shade of the trees, the girl's head resting on the man's shoulder.

CHAPTER XXV

A DREAM COME TRUE

ON the edge of the mesa from which, on the day of her adventure with the injured ankle, Ruth had viewed the beautiful virgin wilderness that stretched far on the opposite side of the river, she was riding, the afternon of a day a week later, with Randerson. She had expressed a wish to come here, and Randerson had agreed joyfully.

Seated on a rock in the shade of some trees that formed the edge of that timber grove in which he had tied Ruth's pony on a night that held many memories for both, they had watched, for a long time, in silence, the vast country before them. Something of the solemn calmness of the scene was reflected in Ruth's eyes. But there was a different expression in Randerson's eyes. It was as though he possessed a secret which, he felt, she ought to know, but was deliberately delaying the telling of it. But at last he decided, though he began obliquely:

"I reckon there's a set plan for the way things turn out—for folks," he said gravely. "Things turn out to show it. Everything is fixed." He smiled as she looked at him. "Take me," he went on: "I saw your picture. If I'd only seen it once, mebbe I wouldn't have fell in love with it. But—"

"Why, Rex!" she reproved with an injured air, "how can you say that? Why, I believe I loved *you* from the minute I saw you!"

"You didn't have anything on me *there!*" he told her. "For I was a gone coon the first time I set eyes on *you!* But is it the same with pictures? A picture, now, has to be studied; it aint like the real article," he apologized. "Anyway, if I hadn't kept lookin' at your picture, mebbe things would have been different. But I got it, an' I looked at it a lot. That shows it was all fixed for you an' me."

She looked mirthfully at him. "Was it all fixed for you to take the picture from Vickers, by force—as you told me you did?" she demanded.

HE grinned brazenly. "I reckon that was part of the plan," he contended. "Anyway, I got it. Vickers wouldn't speak to me for a month, but I reckon I didn't lose any sleep over *that!* What sleep I lost was lost lookin' at the picture." The confession did not embarrass him, for he continued quietly:

"An' there's Masten." He watched the smile go out of her face with regret in his eyes. But he went on: "I intended to kill Masten, one night. But he had no gun, an' I couldn't. That would have spoiled the plan that's fixed for all of us. I let him live, an' the plan works out." He took hold of the hand nearest him and pressed it tightly.

"Have you seen Hagar since?" he asked.

"No," she told him, looking quickly at him, for she caught an odd note in his voice. "I just couldn't think of going back there."

"Well," he said, "Hagar's happy. I was over there this mornin'. Masten's there." He felt her hand grip his suddenly, and he smiled. He had talked with Catherson; the nester had told him the story, and it had been agreed between them that the real story was not to be told. "They're married—Hagar an' Masten. Catherson met Masten. Masten was comin' to the shack to take Hagar over to Lazette, to marry her. He'd had an accident, an' Catherson brought him to the shack on his pony. An' Catherson had been figgerin' to kill him. I reckon it was planned for Masten to have a change of heart. Or mebbe it was gettin' married changed him. For he's a lot different, since. He's quiet, an' a heap considerate of other folkses' feelin's. He's got some money, an' he's goin' to help Abe fix up his place. He asked my pardon, for settin' Pickett an' Kelso on me. I shook his hand, Ruth, an' wished him luck an' happiness. Don't you wish him the same, Ruth—both of them?"

"Yes," she said earnestly, "I do." And now she looked at him with luminous eyes. "But it was very manly of you to forgive him!"

"I reckon it wasn't so awful manly," he returned, blushing. "There was nothin' else to do, I expect. Would you have me hold a grudge against him? An' spoil everything—nature's plan included? It was to happen that way, an' I aint interferin'. Why, I reckon if I wasn't to forgive him, there'd be another plan spoiled—yours an' mine. An' I'm sure helpin' to work *that* out. I've thought of the first of the month," he said, looking at her expectantly. "The justice of the peace will be back in Lazette then."

"So you've been inquiring?" she said, her face suffused with color.

"Why, sure! Somebody's got to do it. It's my job."

A little later they mounted their ponies and rode along the edge of the timber. When they reached the tree to which he had tied her pony on the night she had hurt her ankle, he called her attention to it.

"That's where I lost the bandanna," he told her. "It fell off my neck an' got tangled in the knot."

"Then you know!" she exclaimed.

"Sure," he said, grinning. "Uncle Jepson told me."

"I think Uncle Jep has been your right-hand man all through this," she charged.

"Why shouldn't he be?" he retorted. And she could give him no reason why it should have been otherwise.

"It was a rather mean trick to play on me," she charged with pretended indignation.

"If you'd have thought it mean, you'd have told me about it before now," he answered. "Patches was reliable."

"Kester an' Linton have sloped," he told her as they rode away from the trees. "This climate was gettin' unhealthy for them."

WHEN they came to the rock upon which he had found her, he halted Patches and regarded it gravely.

"You had me scared that night," he said. "Patches almost run his head off. I was mighty relieved to see you."

"I treated you miserably that night," she confessed.

"Did you hear me complainin'?" he asked with a gentle smile at her. "I expect, some day, when we're together more, an' you get to lovin' me less than you do now, you'll get peevish again. Married folks always do. But I wont notice it. I'll get on Patches—if he's alive, you wantin' to put off the marriage so long—"

"Until the first!" she laughed, in gentle derision.

"Well," he said, with pretended gravity, "when a man has waited as long as I've waited, he gets sort of impatient." He grinned again, and gave her this last shot: "An' mighty *patient*, after!"

And they rode on again through the white sunlight, close together, dreaming of days to come.

THE END

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Of THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for April 1st, 1916.

State of Illinois, } ss.
County of Cook. }

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Charles M. Richter, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of The Blue Book Magazine and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 443, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:
Publisher, The Story-Press Corporation.....
.....1912, North American Bldg., Chicago, Ill.
Editor, Ray Long.....
.....North American Bldg., Chicago, Ill.
Managing Editor, None.
Business Manager, Chas. M. Richter.....
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2. That the owners are: (Give names and addresses of individual owners, or, if a corporation, give its name and the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of the total amount of stock.)
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3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

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

CHARLES M. RICHTER.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 23d day of March, 1916.

[Seal.] LOUIS H. KERBER, JR.

(My commission expires Jan. 4, 1917.)

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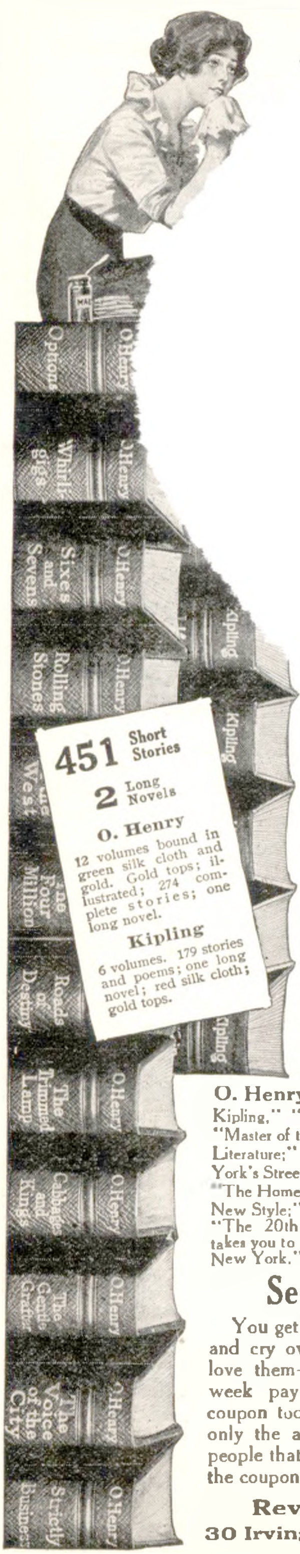

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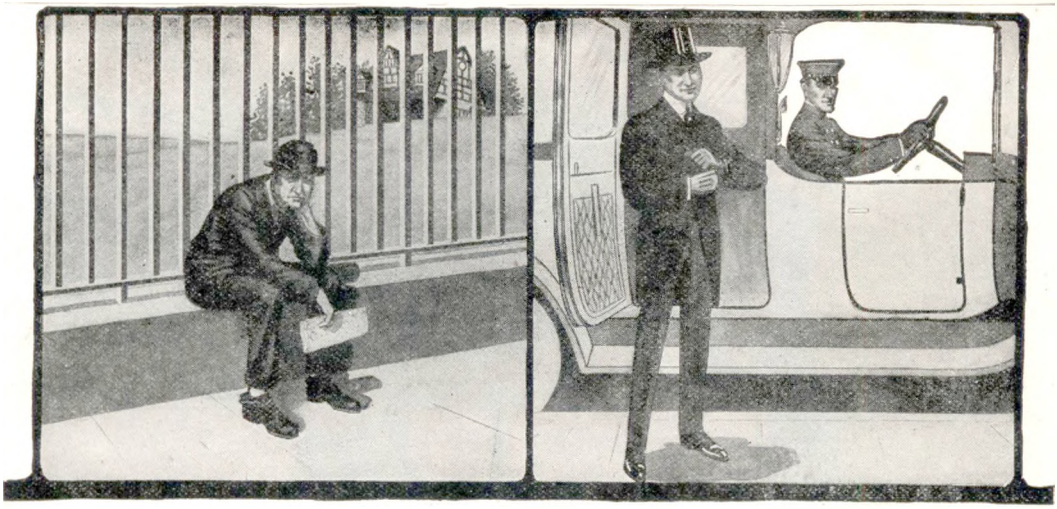

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